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The Word on ‘Wife-Beater’

Stanley Kowalski wore ‘em. Kid Rock wears ‘em. Some take offense at this hip fashion term, but snooty language experts soon will officially give it definition.

By Alyson Ward, Star-Telegram Staff Writer

Coming soon to a dictionary near you: “wife-beater.”

Not the abusive husband, mind you – but the sleeveless, white undershirt. The “wife-beater” – frequently spotted on Kid Rock, available at your neighborhood Gap – is soon to be immortalized in the Oxford English Dictionary. It’ll likely be added, somewhere between “whip” and “women’s lib,” next month.

For at least three decades, the controversial term has been used to describe the ribbed tank top made famous by violent movie stereotypes and the Fox show *Cops*. Men who beat their wives, the thinking goes, like to spend their spare time drinking beer in thin white undershirts.

The shirt has traveled far beyond its blue-collar roots; celebs have made it sexy. Paris Hilton wears hers with itty-bitty skirts. It’s hard to spot Eminem or Kevin Federline (Britney Spears’ husband) without one. “Most nights I end up wearing a wife-beater T-shirt and boxers,” Jessica Alba told the leering men’s mag *Maxim*.

Newspapers have been claiming since 2003 that “wife-beater’s” inclusion in the OED is imminent. But in its February issue, *GQ* – a magazine that oughta know its men’s fashion terms – swears the word will be added next month in the OED’s quarterly online update.

Jesse Sheidlower, the OED’s North American editor at large, confirms this. Well, sort of.

“It’s very likely that this is going to appear,” he says.

Sheidlower says the dictionary accepts about 250 new words per quarter. The third printed edition of the mammoth OED won’t be published for several more years, but the online version – available by subscription – serves as an official, ever-expanding substitute in the meantime.

So what makes “wife-beater” a contender? “If something is really common and relatively widespread, it’s likely to go in,” Sheidlower says.

Sheidlower says “wife- beater” has meant “tank top” to people all over the country for at least a decade; it first appeared in print – in a *Boston Globe* story – more than 10 years ago. But, people remember hearing the term as early as the 1970s.

But gosh – isn’t there, like, a taste factor in the dictionary business? Isn’t the OED going a little cave man?

“Our purpose is not to only include appropriate words or approved words,” Sheidlower says. The dictionary reflects the way we use the language; the OED isn’t out to police our vocabulary.

The word certainly does hit a nerve, though. Just ask James Doolin, the Dallas man who launched www.wife-beaters.com five years ago to sell tank tops that read “Wife Beater” in bold letters.

His Web site got lots of attention in 2001, when feminist and anti-violence organizations denounced Doolin’s shirts. But today, he says, “it’s pretty much died down.”

Doolin, who’s 34, says this discomfort with the word “wife-beater” is a generational thing.

“Most people over the age of 30 don’t know what a wife-beater T-shirt is,” he says. “They’re not hip to the word or to the meaning. The first thing that comes to their mind is a person who commits domestic violence.”

Besides, he says, wearing a “wife-beater” shirt doesn’t mean you’re violent or pro-violence. It’s just a part of our culture.

But other T-shirts have taken the term “wife-beater” and, um, punched it up a little. At www.outspokenclothing.com, you can order shirts that read “Wife Beater Beater,” accompanied by a drawing of a woman kicking the snot out of a guy in a white sleeveless shirt. And young celebs such as Avril Lavigne and Haylie Duff have reportedly worn tank tops that say “Boy Beater.” (In fact, plenty of clothing sellers have taken to calling *all* women’s tank tops “boy-beaters.” Ask for one at the Gap or American Eagle and they’ll know exactly what you’re talking about.)

Of course, people who have devoted their careers to stopping domestic violence would like to point out that all this lighthearted fun isn’t harmless.

First, it encourages stereotypes. “There’s a myth out there anyway that domestic violence is only about rednecks or lower-class [people] or minorities, and this sort of feeds into that,” says Christina Walsh, communications director for the Austin-based National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence.

Walsh puts the organization’s executive director, Debby Tucker, on the phone to provide a dose of good, healthy outrage. But Tucker isn’t shocked by the term anymore. You can practically hear her rolling her eyes.

“This is so ancient,” she says. “It’s so Marlon Brando now.” (Brando starred as the abusive, tank-top-wearing Stanley Kowalski in the 1951 film version of *A Streetcar Named Desire*.)

But, that doesn't mean she's not offended by the term.

"I'm not hip enough to know what people think, or if they're even thinking," she says. "That's what I worry about – folks believe they're just making a fashion statement and not even considering what it means."

Meanwhile, Doolin – the Dallas T-shirt seller – doesn't see the OED's recognition of "wife-beater" as vindication. Heck, it won't even boost sales.

"I doubt it will help me sell a single T-shirt," he says.

Word on the street

We don't have to wait for the next Oxford English Dictionary. Here are some less-official definitions of "wife-beater."

- The 2002 book *Hip Hoptionary: The Dictionary of Hip-Hop Terminology* by Alonzo Westbrook (Harlem Moon) was a little faster than the OED; it lists "wife-beaters," too. The book's definition: "white cotton tank-top shirts that expose the arms. . . . The name 'wife-beater' is associated with big belly spousal abusers who always seem to be wearing one when they are arrested – see any episode of *Cops*."
- Google the term and you'll get a good idea of what the term means to a lot of Americans.

"What is a wife beater?" some curious person asked recently on an online bulletin board. The responses were quick and definite.

"Those thin white tank-top undershirts – called wife-beaters 'cause you always see sweaty nasty men in movies wearing them who beat their wives," says one response.

"They live in trailers in Texas," says another. "Often with several cars in the front yard that don't run, and at least five dogs under the porch. You can always spot them by the dirty white tank top undershirt they have on."

And finally: "Those cheap-a-- white tank tops from Wal-Mart or Target. Most white trash put these on then beat their wife up till the cops come. LOL."

LOL?

We'll wait for your chill bumps to go away.

'Wife-beater' timeline

1951: Marlon Brando sets the stereotype in the film version of Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*. As Stanley Kowalski, he shouts at his wife and rapes his sister-in-law – and he wears a ripped, white, sleeveless shirt.

1955: *The Honeymooners* debuts, featuring Jackie Gleason as blue-collar bus driver Ralph Kramden. He's loudmouthed and sarcastic and likes to fight with his wife, Alice. And he often walks around the house in a white undershirt.

1980: Robert De Niro plays middleweight boxing champion Jake La Motta in *Raging Bull*. De Niro's La Motta may be shirtless in the ring – but he wears a white sleeveless shirt when he terrorizes his wife at home.

1988: *Cops* premieres on Fox. Seventeen years of police chasing after beer-bellied law-breakers wearing white undershirts will follow.

1993: Long before we'd ever heard of Google or WiFi, someone out there on the Internet uses the word “wife-beater” to describe a shirt. It's the first time the word can be cited, according to the Oxford English Dictionary.

1994: “Wife beaters” – referring to the shirts – appears in a newspaper for the first time, according to the Oxford English Dictionary's editor at large, Jesse Sheidlower. It's a *Boston Globe* profile of a 25-year-old youth marketing exec who's an expert on Generation X fashion preferences. Wife beaters, she says, are out; bowling shirts have taken their place.

2000: James Doolin of Dallas launches www.wife-beaters.com, a Web site that sells sleeveless white shirts with the phrase “Wife Beater” printed on the front. He offers a tongue-in-cheek, half-off discount to customers who can prove they are convicted domestic abusers. By 2001, it sets off a firestorm of media attention and condemnation from women's groups.

2002: Rapper Eve and Alicia Keys hit the Top 40 with the song *Gangsta Lovin'* from Eve's album *Eve-Olution*. Eve describes herself: “Hair done, outfit crazy, skirt fits just right / Wife-beater with a bangin' tan / Walk in demandin' all eyes / Baby, here I am.” No one confuses the fashion-forward rapper with the shirt's stereotypical wearer. Ever.

2004: A weekend anchor at New York's WNBC is demoted, then fired in 2005 for a handful of on-air faux pas. The most offensive gaffe, according to the station? She referred to a tank top as a “wife-beater” during a fashion segment. “It was my misperception, thinking New York was MTV and hip,” she later tells *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. “WNBC is very conservative.”

2005: *GQ* reports that in March, the Oxford English Dictionary is likely to include “wife beater” – meaning the shirt – in its online edition.

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