Socio-semantic lexical variation in the homosexual community: using identity terms to create gender roles

Tom McClive
State University of New York at Buffalo

In the last thirty years, the homosexual community has undertaken semantic shifts in its identity markers, similar to some archetypal women’s language use and to identity terms for other minority American groups. Having an absence of, or an incomplete, gender knowledge and tradition, homosexuals have used group identity terms to assist in creating their roles. The constantly changing view on homosexuality leads to changes in preferences among the different terms, such as a reclaiming of certain lexical domains and a rejection of some initially negative-marked terms, like “dyke” and “queer.” The uses of these terms will vary according to the desired result, marking differences not only between homosexual and heterosexual discourse but also among inter-hetero and homosexual discourse. The status of the homosexual community within the larger dominant straight community, along with the use of their language, resembles the particular situation of women and women’s language within their larger community.

1. A Search for Time Periods

Identifying trend-producing time periods is difficult but helpful in identifying the social reasons behind changes in language use. Much of the production of non-medical and non-psychological literature on homosexuals occurred in the 1970s and the 1990s. We can see the different approaches to homosexuality reflected in these two time periods, and the different subjects examined. In the 1970s, the literature focused on the creation of homosexual identities and the emerging and recently visible social differences between mainstream society, including language use differences. The 1990s literature probes further into how homosexuals are perceived and portrayed by mainstream society, particularly in the media. Language, especially identity terms, is usually a factor within all of these studies.

Jandt and Darsey (1981) note a study of the period between 1948 and 1977 that identifies six separate periods of homosexual awareness. It is suggested that homosexuals viewed themselves in six distinct ways that categorized these divisions. The period between 1977 and today could easily contain a number of divisions marking changes in perception, both inside and outside the homosexual community that could be reflected in
language use.

The main change in attitude within the homosexual community was due to events in 1969, marked by an incident at the Stonewall Inn, a club on Christopher Street in Greenwich Village, New York City. It seems that after this incident most of the identity terms or started changing or were invented. Various Mattachine (homosexually orientated newsletters) publications described the scene of June 28, 1969 when the NYC police entered the club as a type of harassment/bust operation that had become normal in the homosexual clubs of the area. Instead of eliciting the usual passive response, the evicted patrons started throwing rocks and bottles, chanting ‘Gay Power’. Stonewall today is regarded as a landmark occasion, similar to incidents involving Rosa Parks or the Greensboro lunch counter representing the civil rights movement in the United States.

Since 1977, Gallup polls reveal that people are becoming less tolerant of homosexual behavior, even while awareness of homosexuals increases. Fewer people think that homosexual relationships should be legal (only 36% in 1991, compared to 43% in 1977) and more people think they should be illegal (54%, compared to 43% in 1977). The percentage of people with no opinion on the subject has dropped from 14% to 10% (Chesebro, 1991). These attitudes can help explain why some terms have become negative, why continued use of some negative terms is defiant, and why many homosexuals have rejected their stereotypes, including aspects of their language.

2. Changing of Identity Terms

Almost every well-known minority group in the United States has seen its identity labels undergo semantics shifts in the last thirty years, usually increasing a positive or negative connotation. For the homosexual community, the terms have also switched from within smaller subgroups of the community, along with a male/female distinction.

The ancient Greeks did not have a name for homosexuality, since they were usually ambisexual. Instead, their terminology covered various types of homosexual behavior (Bardis, 1980). The word ‘homosexual’ itself is a nineteenth century invention, coined in the medical community to describe a condition. It quickly acquired a negative connotation which it has never really lost. The term has only become descriptive of a person, instead of a condition in the twentieth century.

Before ‘homosexual’ was adopted, words like ‘invert’ or ‘unspeakable’ were employed. For example, when trying desperately to inform his old family doctor of his distress, the lead character in E.M. Forster’s novel *Maurice* finally blurted, “I’m an unspeakable of the Oscar Wilde sort.” Other common terms were: *sodomist, pathic, catamite, androgenic, homogenic, morphadite, Platonist, shame, and urning.*

‘Homosexual’ eventually gained currency over similar terms invented around the same time: *contrasexual, and similisexual.* Hayes, writing in the late 1970s, wrote that, “there is opposition to the use of the term ‘homosexual’ by gays, who see it as a pejoration, connoting illness, criminality, and an overemphasis on genital relations,” (Hayes 1981). Ashely (1979) predicted that ‘gay’ would be the term to replace ‘homosexual’ for both sexes. Jandt and Darsey (1981) noted that men who came out before 1969 sometimes
called themselves ‘bisexual’ rather than ‘homosexual’ as a way to decrease the effect and maintain a link to the straight community. Many years later, some men could still not accept the ‘homosexual’ label; the negative connotations remained too strong for them.

Similarly, the word ‘gay’ had powerful negative connotations during the 1970s, one point, the Village Voice newspaper refused to print advertisements containing the word, claiming that it was ‘obscene’, equatable with ‘fuck’ and other four-letter words” (Ashely, 1979:276). After the 1970s the word ‘gay’ eventually settled into a reference for men, though it still retains a slight gender-inclusive meaning similar to some other (non-homosexual) terms, such as the way that ‘man’ or ‘everyone should bring his book’ is sometimes used to refer to both men and women. This comprehensive use of ‘gay’ is changing into the compound ‘gay and lesbian’.

3. Different Types of Homosexuals

It would be erroneous to assume that all homosexuals share the same feelings towards their identity terms, just as it would be to assume that they feel the same about their own identity. Other minority groups in the United States reflect this. For example, some members adopt the new term ‘African-American’ while some retain ‘Black’, just as some adopt ‘Native American’ while others retain ‘Indian’. However, when multiple terms are present, groups are often as to those terms that are not to be used, such as ‘Afro-American’ and ‘coloured’.

Hayes makes a distinction in language use by homosexuals by describing three different speech situations: the ‘secret’ setting, the ‘social’ setting, and the ‘radical-activist’ setting. While these roughly conform to three subgroups of homosexuals, they more closely describe various situations of language use.

The ‘secret’ setting refers to the speech of a homosexual while interacting within the dominant, or straight, society. The use of the term ‘secret’ indicates that in this setting, homosexuals do not want to draw undue attention to themselves, even if they are not ashamed to admit their identity. (Hayes 1981).

The separation, or break, from the dominant society is often painful. Jandt and Darsey (1981) write that homosexuals often assimilate society’s view of their stigma before they realize they are homosexual. Consequently, the process of re-identification is almost a necessity. New social constructs are found by interaction with other homosexuals.

The secret setting does not eliminate homosexual references entirely; it can include subtle self-identifications such as:

1. Person X: “You certainly have on a colorful tie.”
   Person Y: “Yes, I really like gay apparel.”

According to Hayes, the information ‘I am gay and I believe you are, too,’ has been transmitted in what amounts to a code. While I believe the example to be somewhat archetypal, his point is made. The secret setting also affects the way homosexuals interact with each other, again using a non-overt form of reference. For example, the simple
sentence ‘Is she?’ could be a shorthand for ‘Is she a lesbian?’. Other examples include ‘Can I speak freely (switch to a social-type setting) in her presence?’, ‘Do you want her to know that you (or both of us) are lesbians?’, ‘Is she straight but hip to the scene?’, or ‘Would she be available?’

The ‘social’ setting is within the group, stereotypically occurring at a club or a bar (always referred to as a ‘gay bar’; I have never seen reference to a ‘lesbian bar’), but also whenever a homosexual feels able to express herself or himself using any type of homosexual-particular jargon. Hayes posits several possible discourse snippets for both settings.

In this setting, language works in much the same way as in the straight community: people are often judged by their language use and are subjected to conformity pressure. The jargon changes rapidly, and people are expected to keep themselves current. Since much of the jargon emphasizes differences from the straight community using sexual references or by changing gender-specific terms, many homosexuals disdain its use. Other homosexuals enthusiastically embrace the jargon. Concentrating on the differences from the straight community is the prime motive of Hayes’ third setting, ‘radical-activist’. This setting refers to situations where homosexuals are involved in confrontations. ‘Radical activist’ can also be used to refer to a subgroup of the homosexual community. This is the type that is at the forefront of any liberation movement, but seeks no large separation from the dominant straight culture.

4. Defining Their Own Gender

As mentioned previously, it was only in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that a homosexual identity came about, before which there were no homosexuals (regardless of the term used) per se, just homosexual behavior. The identity came into being when the behavior became a person with a case history: a past, a childhood, a type of life, and a variation of the assumed gender. Thus the homosexual was like a new species or a new race. Control over the definition and the identity then moved from the theological sphere (which had defined the homosexual by referring to deviant behavior) to the scientific (medical) sphere. The homosexual was invested with a personality which could be labeled as deficient and in need of repair, moving the identity to that of a social condition (Radel 1991).

In most works on Women’s Language ‘sex’ is defined as biology, while ‘gender’ is defined as a construction, and therefore can be altered. In some societies, gender can be a choice, but one that always seems binary. Moreover, gender seems to be relational: the definition of one is based on that of the other. If this is true, then each gender has some ‘not like you’ aspects. Different identity terms will display what differences are important. Not only do homosexuals interact with both straight and homosexual communities, but there is a time when each homosexual does not realize or admit that his or her homosexuality, and thus communicates, interacts, and develops a position exclusively with the straight community. Once a part of the homosexual community, the relations and identity are altered, even reversed, and they must, in effect, reacquire a
gender. Jandt and Darsey (1981) put it succinctly by saying that coming out means being one of ‘them’ instead of one of ‘us’.

Hayes quotes a source who asserts that saying ‘I am gay’ has the important element of self-definition to it. It lacks the negative connotation of terms like *homo, lezzie, queery, pansy, fruit* ‘them’; ‘gay’ is a positive term that homosexuals can call their own, asserting solidarity with ‘we’. This is probably the main reason why terms are adopted or rejected. The effect on the construction of a positive gender leads to suspicion of a term like ‘homosexual’, which was given by a medical source that has generally not been kind to the group. Therefore, it does not comply with the need for self-definition. What seems to contradict this hypothesis is the process of reclaiming terms like ‘dyke’ and ‘fag’, terms that were created with the worst pragmatic purposes.

How the homosexual gender(s) can fit in with the straight community’s already binary construction is the subject of another paper, but the findings of Day and Morse (1981) indicate that sex roles, as previously conceived in the 1970s, are disintegrating, with a trend toward masculinity. Ashely (1980) notes that ‘butch dykes’ are taking masculine names, or at least sexually-ambiguous ones, such as Lee, Terry, Tracey, and Robin. A lesbian-oriented movie called *Go Fish* has a running gag where new characters with archetypal female names would provide a gender-neutral name by which to call her.

2. Character 1: “Who is this?”
   Character 2: “This is Julie.”
   Julie: “Jules.”
   Character 1: “Hi, Jules.”

These types of activities could either be a reflection of the gender redefinition, where switching out of the straight female role may lead to a more opposite construction, or a reflection of the masculine default of the larger society. One of Lakoff’s (1975) basic assertions is that women are not taken seriously, or allowed to be individuals, and that they are defined more by their husbands than men are by their wives. This would apply to lesbians as well; the historical roles of women, along with the absence of a husband.

5. Use of their own Language

Lakoff (1975) asserts that women experience linguistic discrimination in two ways. First, in the way they are taught to use language and second, in the way general language use treats them. Homosexuals, not being part of the larger mainstream community, also experience these effects. Apart from the identity labels given to the homosexual community from outside, other common reference terms can be inadequate. For example, terms such as ‘boyfriend’ and ‘girlfriend’ are not adequate and even gender-neutral terms such as ‘date’ and ‘lover’ come with an assumed reference to the opposite sex. However unintentional, there is still a form of language discrimination.

Kramarae (1975) states that a group is known by its speech; you cannot know it any other way. Language has been shaped mainly by men, and is therefore inadequate for
women. It does not reinforce a positive gender role for women. A gender seems to be self-monitoring, bringing each member into the behavioral pattern. Lakoff noted that men get positive results from their language, and that women are ‘dead’ socially if they do not learn theirs. Women are encouraged to learn theirs, but it hurts them. Homosexuals are the opposite; they would be rejected socially if they used their language in the straight community, and they are restricted to their internal subgroup by their adaptation of, or lack of, their language. Since any role in the mainstream community is generally not accepted, they have a lower status than women.

Bruce Rodgers (1972) declares that “Slang is social protest, used to deflate the hypocrisy of nice-sounding labels that mean nothing to the people who use them. Slang is also the expression of the underdog.” Lakoff (1975) notes that women’s speech is the one that is marked not men’s. Thus, women have to be bidialectal, so do homosexuals: one dialect for their created gender and another for the mainstream community.

There are many articles and even a few books on the homosexual slang lexicon. Most lexical items have to do with sexual acts or labels for people, and are terms related to males. Ashley (1979) notes that homosexuals are still part of larger society in that they follow the same slang patterns, including the use of ethnic slurs (for instance, ‘French postcard’ means a handsome man). They also use slang to reinforce divisions: in gay slang, straights are called commoners and civilians.

6. Rejection of Homosexual Stereotypes

Davidson (1991) studied personnel ads in the Village Voice over a ten-year period ranging from 1978 to 1988. He found an increase in rejection of the stereotyped presentations of self displayed in the ads. Some of the common keywords were straight-acting, straight lifestyle, no gay monotypes, no queens, not a flame, and no fems.

For various reasons, some already detailed, such as the desire to stay in the secret setting or the avoidance of the negative connotations, many homosexuals do not embrace a separate language or a separate gender. The act of rejecting the homosexual stereotype is a phenomenon that has occurred throughout the last three decades and beyond, but what constitutes the homosexual stereotype, and therefore the language, is in constant flux.

A study by Karr (1981) finds that when a male is labeled (by others, not himself) homosexual, he tends to act in a manner opposite from the current homosexual stereotype. Ashely (1980) finds that increasing masculinization of gays may be making them more socially acceptable. The same may be true for lesbians. Clearly the new gender is not generally popular with the dominant community, and homosexuals must decide how much to reveal. Jandt and Darsey (1981) address this problem with information control, finding that homosexuals reap social rewards by passing as part of the dominant culture.

The Radical-Activist setting, mentioned previously, can seek to avoid using almost all homosexual jargon. This is done not to retain secrecy, but to separate themselves from the other social homosexual community and not create any difference
from dominant straight culture. This setting considers most homosexual labels and terms to be ‘sexist, classist, and racist’. As such, they reject terms like ‘sister’, ‘dyke’, and ‘queen’, regardless of their current standing (Hayes 1981 b).

It seems that most homosexuals choose their identity terms based on the current connotations of the words. Despite some expectations, I have not found many instances where homosexuals will deliberately use a currently negative term in a social setting, as other ethnic groups sometimes do to show defiance. While African Americans might employ the word ‘nigger’ in certain unmarked situations within their group, studies have not shown a group of homosexuals using the word ‘faggot.’ The deliberate use of negative terms seems to be mostly restricted to a pragmatic use in a normally secret setting, as a type of confrontation with the straight community.

7. Taking Back Negative Terms

Hayes (1981) puts the Radical-Activists at the forefront of trying to reclaim negative words, noting a group called ‘dyke patrol’ and a journal called ‘Fag Rag’. This may serve a stated goal of not having such a strong division between the two communities, though this does seem to contradict his characterization of Radical-Activists as eschewing most homosexual terms.

The reclaiming of negative terms can largely be seen as successful, even if it is difficult to determine how much of the success can be directly attributed to deliberate actions. While the term ‘homosexual’ remains somewhat clinical and largely unused, the words ‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’ clearly used to have negative connotations and are now the most accepted identity terms. Similarly, ‘dyke’ and ‘queer’, while not as largely accepted, were also very negative at one time and are now used in certain situations and within certain subgroups.

The struggle for an acceptable term has seen many words disappear entirely. Ashley (1979) reports that ‘freak’ was almost legitimized in the rebellious sixties, and that ‘queen’ was widely used as a defiant slogan button. A style called ‘camp’ was widespread in the 1970s, though mainly associated with men. Ashely reports that, “For a long while ‘camp’ was a way for some homosexuals to ‘have a style’; effeminates flaunted their difference…” (1980:225). Clearly, a limitation to ‘homosexual’ or other terms accepted by the dominant community was not adequate for ethnicity purposes. Hayes quotes a man speaking on self-identity: “The term ‘homosexual’ does not comply with the need of self-definition, because the term was given to use by doctors and other ‘scientists’ who have not generally been our friends. ‘Faggot’ and ‘dyke’ are used in a special way, turning terms of put-down into proud affirmation.” (1981:52). As Vicki Nogle put it, “The words lesbian and dyke are examples of wimmin (sic) evolving their own meaning for words that have been used against them in the past” (Nogle 1981:271).
Ceris Kramarae (1981) notes that the perception of women by others (men) and their perceptions of themselves do not match. We have already seen how homosexuals have at least two clearly defined domains: the secret setting and the social setting, which is outside and inside the group. Although we have also seen that many homosexuals deliberately cross the two boundaries for pragmatic purposes, most alter their language at least somewhat, the same as anyone in the dominant culture would change their speech patterns and lexicon for different speech settings. Terms of identity may change the most, and may account for a parallel in the homosexual community of Kramarae’s observation for women.

I have already given an example from Hayes of a way the secret setting affects identity (‘I really like gay apparel’). He details other ways that homosexuals communicate to each other and to others within the secret settings, particularly related to identity terms. The common themes seem to be giving double meaning to commonly used words, avoiding any word choice that sounds unusual and therefore marked. A homosexual may use the word ‘friend’ to refer to her or his lover, ‘kids’ to refer to her or his immediate circle of homosexual acquaintances, and may refer to homosexuals in general as ‘members of our book club’, or ‘people of our faith’. Most of these choices are not meant to deceive as much as may be suspected; they will be not only understood by other homosexuals but also understood by some non-homosexuals. The purpose then is to formulate communication strategies for use in the secret setting, a strategy that would not necessarily deceive, but would avoid unwanted and unproductive confrontation while facilitating normal discourse. Giving double meanings to common words, along with other tactics such as avoiding gender references, would achieve those goals. A response to a question like, ‘When are you going to settle down and get married?’ when posed to a lesbian, would clearly be answered awkwardly in the secret setting if the response was ‘I haven’t found the right woman yet,’ but may be considered a betrayal if answered with ‘I haven’t found the right man yet.’ The selected response would probably eliminate any reference to sex, saying ‘I haven’t found the right person yet.’ Hayes notes that references to other homosexuals can sometimes employ stereotypical qualities, referring to them as ‘artistic’, ‘liberal-minded’, ‘understanding’, or ‘sensitive’. Some other code words may refer to more historical terms, such as ‘tendencies’ (saying ‘artistic tendencies’, or ‘unusual tendencies’), from the rote phrase once used on employment or security-clearance forms, ‘Have you ever had homosexual feelings or tendencies?’ (Hayes 1981b)

Kramarae also notes that women have group-internal informal and formal support that maintains group vitality and the speech forms. The social setting for homosexuals has produced a multitude of jargon, enough to fill several books. Many of the reference terms for lesbians used in the social setting do not follow the secret setting pattern of using common terms or phrases, but rather use new constructions (‘daughter of Adam’, for example) or new words (such as ‘tribade’ and ‘urnide’).

In the social setting, rarely is occupation, status within the dominant society, or family used as elements of reference constructions. Rather, the references are often
linked to various attributes within the homosexual lifestyle, such as:

3. i. The type of sex preferred (ex: bottom boy, suck queen).
   ii. Intimacy of relationship (ex: uncle, brother, wife).
   iii. Rank within the subculture (ex: queen bee, nelly number).
   iv. Eccentrics within the norm of the subculture (ex: leather, drag).

Common terms such as ‘queen’ are used freely to provide a wide variety of compound constructions linking the homosexual status to any attribute about a person, whether it is a allusion of a sexual nature (‘Dinge queen’ = one who prefers African-Americans) or not (Chippendale queen = one who like antiques).

It is not surprising that different speech strategies occur within and outside the homosexual community. Kramarae writes that speakers pragmatically alter or choose their speech patterns according to their situation. She claims that the development of western society (with current norms such as work patterns) has led to the current division of labor and of classes, and this parallels, or carries over, to the male/female dichotomy. This model assumes that everyone wants some degree of power and independence, and some control or influence over others.

We could probably extend this illustration to the homosexual/straight communities. Still, Radel (1991) suggests that the emergence of a homosexual community in the 1960s can be seen as a way of reaffirming the separation of society; perhaps gays were becoming too accepted into the mainstream and therefore people felt the need to give them their own culture to keep them separate.

This desire for separation affects not just the homosexual and straight communities but also subgroups within each community. Karr (1981) finds that a mixed homosexual-straight group has less inter-communication and less effective problem-solving ability when, and only when, the mix is made known to the group. Jandt and Darsey (1981) find that men who label themselves ‘bisexual’ have a low rate of identity with the terms ‘homosexual’ and ‘gay’, but women who label themselves ‘bisexual’ have a higher rate of identification with ‘homosexual’ and ‘gay’, and also have a higher rate identifying themselves with ‘homosexual’ than women who call themselves ‘lesbian’ have identifying themselves with ‘homosexual’.

9. Conclusion

The parallels between women’s and homosexual’s language will surely continue for some time, but may diverge as English drops more of its sex-specific terms and attitudes toward women change. It may be safe to predict that equality between the biological sexes will precede equality between sexual preference. Still, homosexuals are not going away, any more than females are, and their increased visibility may lead to augmented prominence, and possibly to a greater division between those who seek to craft their own specific gender.
References


