

11

The power of language

by

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Homophobia, heterosexism and heterosexual dominance – what’s the difference? Does it matter anyway? Navigating the sometimes stormy and always changing sea of language is not easy. But for those of us who are impatient for change, the journey can be both a creative and a necessary adventure.

Over the last 20 years, feminists, anti-racists and others have restated an old truth – language is power. The terminology of the powerful routinely demeans the powerless (women are ‘girls’, men of colour are ‘boys’). Women, people of colour and others accustomed to the sharp end of belittling or abusive language have therefore argued for words which reflect the choice of people to describe themselves.

These new ways of thinking about language have of course been pilloried by those who love to condemn what they call ‘political correctness’. It provides endless creative fun for the ostrich defenders of the status quo, who miss the point with their ‘politically correct’ parodies (‘Snow Unpigmented and the Seven Differently Sized Male Persons’ is the most recent jibe I’ve seen).

Less fun for writers and editors in the media circus is the concept of ‘political awareness’, a life-affirming faculty which employs heart and mind and spirit. It is this, not political correctness, which can understand and discriminate between offensive, appropriate, respectful and silly language.

All the world’s queer ...

The debates around language are alive and well in queer politics, as elsewhere. In 1990s North America, the word *queer* has been reclaimed and is the new *bon mot* for the urban, young, activist and academic.

This practice of reclamation is not new. When I was younger it felt daring and politically fashionable to call ourselves *dykes*. *Faggot*, a term of abuse originating when gay men were used like faggots to fuel the flames which burnt witches in medieval Europe, is now claimed with pride by gay men. We can also deduce from the definitions of ‘witchlike’ behaviour which were used at the time that the ‘witches’ themselves were probably often lesbians.

Queer as a term has the advantage of being inclusive of all non-dominant sexualities, and avoids the clumsiness of having to repeatedly list lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transsexuals.

It avoids the fraught term ‘gay’, which some would argue has reached its use-by date. (Does *gay* include women? A murky question which has seen many groups over the last five to ten years change their names to include the words *Lesbian and Gay*). It also avoids problematic categorisation, and is therefore preferred by those who argue that sexuality should be understood as a spectrum, not a finite category.

However, in Australia *queer* is not widely recognised beyond inner city politics and the world of urban chic and many people in the lesbian and gay communities would not identify as queer.

The love that dares to speak its name

The importance of creating a language that describes our diverse non-heterosexual identities should not be underestimated. The oppression of gay men and lesbians in the West has been unique in the level of silence that surrounded us. It’s not just that the words were not of our own choosing – they hardly

existed, and certainly weren't allowed to be spoken. For lesbians in particular, this linguistic absence encouraged those who, like Queen Victoria, denied our very existence.

This is why visibility is so crucial an act for lesbians and gay men – and why we have to 'go on about it'. To adapt an old feminist adage: *The power of heterosexual dominance is the silence of the queer.*

Finding the language to describe oppression is an act of power as important as finding words to describe our own sense of self. The use of the term patriarchy, for example, shifted the whole territory on which 'the Women's Question' was debated.

Homophobia

The term *homophobia* has been used for the last 30 years to cover all manner of hatred, discrimination and bigotry towards gay men and lesbians. It has been a useful tool in the attempts of lesbian and gay activists to move the locus of evil from the object of hatred to the perpetrator of hate. The term articulates the belief that prejudice, not homosexuality, is the problem.

However, like the word *homosexual*, it is arguably problematic. For most people the image conjured up by both words is that of gay men.

In fact, the root of both is *homos*, Greek for equal or same, not *homo*, Latin for man – but this unfortunately doesn't change popular perception, and the inherent exclusion of lesbians.

For others, *phobia* seems inappropriate, more reminiscent of the fear of spiders than of the hatred and contempt that causes virulent verbal attacks or gay bashing.

Another difficulty is that *homophobia* sounds like *homosexuality*. It therefore doesn't do much to point the finger towards dominant heterosexuality as the source of the problem, or towards those who benefit from and have the upper hand in perpetuating heterosexuality as naturally superior.

In addition, *homophobia* is often used in a context which suggests that the problem belongs to a particular, especially bigoted individuals or groups. Unlike the concept of *heterosexual dominance*, it does not encourage a vision of the whole system which perpetuates heterosexuality as the naturally 'right' and desirable mode.

Heterosexism or heterosexual dominance?

The concept of heterosexism has its roots in feminist thought, and in particular we owe much to that powerful poet and radical thinker, Audre Lorde. In *Sister Outsider* she articulates the problem as *a belief in the inherent superiority of one pattern of loving over all others, and thereby its right to dominance.*

More recently, Joseph Neilsen (1990) provided the following useful analysis:

Heterosexism is the continual promotion by major social institutions of heterosexuality and the simultaneous subordination of all other lifestyles (that is, gay, lesbian and bisexual). It is based on unfounded prejudice, just as racism and sexism are. When our institutions knowingly or unknowingly perpetuate these prejudices and intentionally or unintentionally act on them, heterosexism is at work.

Heterosexism is not limited to institutional oppression. Individual acts of heterosexism occur when individuals discriminate and institutions passively allow or foster the continuation of such discrimination. Heterosexism manifests itself in blatant discrimination against gays and lesbians, as well as in more subtle forms of exclusion or lack of recognition.

Heterosexism is alive when individuals refuse to rent to gays or lesbians, when the military discharges someone for homosexual behaviour or the mere suspicion of being homosexual, and when governments prohibit gays and lesbians from marrying legally.

Heterosexism also works in more subtle ways, as when television programs and advertisements show only heterosexual couples, when mainstream media under report gay and lesbian events ... and when obituaries fail to acknowledge the life partners of gay men and lesbians.

We may see ourselves as tolerant, kind and opposed to all forms of discrimination, and still find ourselves being subtly or perhaps even blatantly heterosexist. Lesbians and gay men aren't magically exempt either, although it's harder for us not to notice when we're the ones being excluded.

If you sit and think for a bit, it won't be hard to remember a time when you've done a bit of inadvertent exclusion or made an assumption. Have you ever assumed a colleague's partner is the opposite sex? Asked whether your friend's daughter has a boyfriend yet? The list goes on and on.

Finally we come to *heterosexual dominance*. Many prefer this term to *heterosexism*, which is actually a misnomer for something that would more accurately be called *sexual orientationism*, that is, assigning a superior value to a single sexual orientation (wait til the PC bashers get a hold of that one!).

Heterosexual dominance, although an unwieldy mouthful unlikely to catch on in the school playground, has the advantage of pinpointing the process whereby heterosexuality is not only assigned superior value, but dominates and is actively asserted over all others. It refers to a system in which inequities of power are produced and maintained, and helps create an understanding that it is this systematised inequity that has to be challenged if we are to create any real change. It's not just about being nice to gay men and lesbians, though the rhetoric of this, the International Year for Tolerance, might lead you to think so.

If you're left wondering which terms to use, I'd suggest all three. I do. Yes, *homophobia* has a shelf life, but it's a term that's much more readily understood than *heterosexism* or *heterosexual dominance* (which has been confused with the top position in heterosexual SM sex!).

Homophobia also for me comes closer to expressing the virulent contempt, violence, or personal attacks I have experienced in my life. *Heterosexual dominance* is somehow too conceptual a term to catch the essence of being spat at in the face, or having fires lit on your doorstep, or reading graffiti down your street that says 'Get out you AIDS fuckers – gay men and lesbians are killing our kids!'

Having said that, the terms *heterosexism* and *heterosexual dominance* will be crucial in attacking the power systems which fuel this sort of homophobia. Without implicating all the structures of heterosexuality we cannot create lasting political and social change. So until someone comes up with something catchier than *heterosexual dominance*, I'm practising getting my tongue round it!