Anna Taché

Hist. & Politics of the English Lang.

December 16, 2022

Language and Queerness: How The Relationship Between Language and the LGBTQ+

Community is a Double-Edged Sword

For thousands of years, language has been an integral part of human communication, self-expression, and identity. Language has been a crucial tool within the LGBTQ+ community for centuries, as it allows queer people to express themselves and their identities while helping them to build communities worldwide. However, language is also often used as a mechanism for promoting anti-LGBT ideologies, causing real-world harm to queer people. This essay will examine the complex relationship between language and the LGBTQ+ community, and how language is used by, for, and against queer people and queerness as a whole.

In order to fully understand the relationship between the LGBTQ+ community and language, it is important to first understand the rich history behind queer language, one of the most significant positive aspects of the relationship between language the queer community. Throughout history, language has been an immensely important part of the queer experience, often being used as a tool for survival during times in history when being openly queer was taboo and even illegal. For hundreds of years, the language used between queer people in certain spaces was a sort of secret code, "providing the in-group ('those of us in the know') protection and safety while keeping outsiders at safe distance," (Leap, 2020, p. 14). One of the oldest secret codes is Polari, "the lost language of British gay men," (Baker, 2004). Polari, which originated in England in the 1600s (Moore, 2016), is a combination of "Molly slang (Regency England men who dressed in drag and coined words like 'bitch' and 'trade'), thieves cant (the Elizabethan

rigmarole of criminals, circus travelers, and other undesirables), East London cockney slang, and Italian brought home by sailors in the Mediterranean," (Moore, 2016). Polari allowed gay men in England to communicate with each other and express their opinions in a safe way, as many of the Polari linguistic materials were unfamiliar to outsiders (Leap, 2020, pp. 82-83).

Even though there were communities of queer people who relied on using secret language as a survival mechanism, there were also queer communities who used language to openly express themselves and their queerness, especially after the historic Stonewall riots. The Stonewall riots, more commonly referred to as simply "Stonewall," occurred on June 26, 1969, at the Stonewall Inn in Manhattan's West Village, a bar that was popular among New York's queer community (Leap 2020, 2). The events at Stonewall began after police had entered the bar and began to harass patrons and even arrest some patrons for "disturbing the peace," (Leap, 2020, p. 2). As the police attempted to take the arrested patrons away, the others at the bar fought back in protest, deciding that they were done with the constant harassment from police at gay bars (Leap 2020, 2). The events at Stonewall gathered attention from queer people and allies all over New York City, as they crowded outside the bar to lend their support and protest, with the events of Stonewall spanning three days (Leap, 2020, p. 3).

Despite the fact that Stonewall was not the first case of queer people retaliating against harassment, oppression, and violence, it was undeniably the most famous and impactful one. Stonewall had a monumental effect on the queer community, functioning as a catalyst for the modern LGBTQ+ rights movement, while also greatly influencing the relationships between language and sexuality. Stonewall is widely considered "the point where new practices and new forms of social and personal awareness entered the history of modern sexuality—with new

relationships between language and sexuality and new connections between language, sexuality, and history figuring prominently in the entering materials," (Leap, 2020, p. 6).

With new relationships between language and sexuality becoming more prominent and recognizable in both queer spaces and general society, the use of queer language and slang also gained traction. The language that originated in subcommunities of LGBTQ+ culture gained more attention and became adopted by people outside of the communities in which they originated. An era in LGBTQ+ history that significantly influenced modern queer language is the blossoming of the ballroom scene in the 1970s and 1980s (LGBTQ Nation, 2022). The ballroom scene originated during the Harlem Renaissance in the first half of the twentieth century (Hart & Robinson, 2021) and grew to prominence in the early 1970s with the founding of the House of LaBeija, the very first "house," formed by drag queen Crystal LaBeija. (Brathwaite, 2018). A "house" is a chosen family with appointed "mothers'" or "fathers" who acted as mentors to their "children" (Hart & Robinson, 2021), and they acted as surrogate families for young queer black and Latinx people that were often "estranged from their biological families" (Braithwaite, 2018) and "otherwise struggling to get by" (Brathwaite, 2018). After houses became more common in ballroom culture, there was a rapid rise in the overall popularity of ballroom culture and drag shows, which led to a rise in the popularity of the language that originated in these spaces.

Another positive aspect of the relationship between the LGBTQ+ community and language is the evolution of terms used for self-identification. One of the most important uses of language for queer people is the use of language as a means of explaining and labeling their identities, so language had to evolve and change over time in order to accommodate those who felt that the previous, more basic terms did not accurately describe their identity. An example of this evolution can be found in the word "queer," as in the early-to-mid 20th century, the word

"queer" was used as an insult against LGBTQ+ people, but towards the latter half of the 20th century, became reclaimed by the LGBTQ+ community (Swartz, 2018), and can now often be used as an umbrella term for people who identify as "anything other than heterosexual and/or cisgender," (Davis, 2021, p. 8). The evolution of language for self-identification has led to the creation and use of many terms that describe identities that are more complex than just "gay," "lesbian," or "transgender." Some examples of newer self-identifying language commonly used within the LGBTQ+ community include:

- Agender: does not identify with any gender (Davis, 2021, p. 19)
- Aromantic: experiences little to no romantic attraction (Davis, 2021, p. 23)
- Demisexual: experiences sexual attraction only after developing a strong emotional connection (Davis, 2021, p. 87)
- Genderqueer: does not identify with the conventional labels of female or male; may relate to both genders, express gender ambiguity, etc. (Davis, 2021, p. 144)
- Gender nonconforming: expresses gender in a way that does not fit within the gender binary (often abbreviated as GNC) (Davis, 2021, p. 144)
- Transfeminine: used to describe a transgender, nonbinary, or GNC person who identifies as feminine (Davis, 2021, p. 298)

Along with language as a mechanism of self-identification, queer language has created a plethora of terms and slang that have become heavily prevalent in contemporary society. As the internet has evolved, so has the language used by its users, and within recent years, Generation Z has incorporated queer-originated slang into their everyday lives. It is becoming increasingly common to go on the internet and see words such as "slay" (which means to "impress or amuse")

(Davis, 2021, p. 281), and "serving," (which means "displaying high levels of self-confidence, attitude, behavior or style") (Davis, 2021. p. 273) being used in a multitude of online spaces. There are several phenomena that can account for this rise in the prevalence of queer language. Firstly, the percentage of adults in the United States that openly identify as queer has risen over the years, hitting a record high of 7.1%, with 1 in 5 Generation Z adults identifying as a member of the LGBTQ+ community (Jones, 2022). Another reason for the rise in the usage of queer language is the increasing popularity of queer media, such as *RuPaul's Drag Race*, which has gained a massive audience, while still educating its viewers about drag history and its exposing them to drag lingo such as "realness," "hunty," "kiki," and "gagging" (Pandell, 2018). As much as the popularization and normalization of queer language is a positive outcome, it is important to recognize that such slang and expressions were created in the ballroom scene by black and Latinx queer and trans folk and that losing sight of that history can lead to misappropriation (Pandell, 2018).

As mentioned previously, there are many positive aspects to the relationship between language and the LGBTQ+ community. However, there are also aspects of the relationship that negatively impact the queer community, and have caused queer people significant harm. In recent years, there has been a substantial increase in anti-LGBT language and rhetoric within the far-right, from neo-Nazi extremists to Republican politicians. Such language has been used to attack and harass a multitude of people and organizations associated with th LGBTQ+ community, going so far as to send them death threats and leak their private information. This rise in hate speech has repopularized within right-wing spaces the word "groomer," a decades-old insult against queer people, which refers to the act of grooming, which is when "adults take advantage of a child's vulnerability to manipulate and coerce the child into sexual

abuse" (Block, 2022). The word "groomer," which is often used online interchangeably with "pedophile," feeds into a popular right-wing conspiracy theory that LGBTQ+ people have "entered mainstream institutions to prey on children, recruit them to 'transgenderism' and divide them from their families" (Wilson, 2022). A report by the Human Rights Campaign revealed that the use of anti-LGBTQ+ language and content surged by over 400% on social media in 2022, with the average number of tweets per day that used the words "groomer" and "pedophile" when discussing LGBTQ+ people surging over 406% (Berg-Brousseau, 2022). These extreme surges occurred after the passing of Florida's Parental Rights in Education act, commonly known as the "Don't Say Gay (or Trans)" bill (Berg-Brousseau, 2022), which states that "'classroom instruction by school personnel or third parties on sexual orientation or gender identity may not occur'" (Lavietes, 2022) in Florida classrooms.

This rise in hateful anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric has led to harassment, slander, and even physical violence against queer people. Experts and politicians alike are drawing the connection that as "speech targeting LGBTQ people increases among some far-right influencers and others online…extremist groups may see the rhetoric as a call to action" (Boone, 2022). A recent example of such physical violence occurred on November 19, where a 22-year -old man committed a mass shooting at a gay club in Colorado Springs (Wilson, 2022). The shooting in Colorado Springs was not a unique event, as other threats of violence have been increasing all over the country. In June, 31 members of the neo-Nazi group Patriot Front were arrested in Idaho and charged with "conspiracy to riot at a Pride event" (Boone, 2022).

Language has the ability to be used as an instrument for survival, community-building, and self expression; but is also often used as means by which hate, ignorance, and violence is fueled. This is seen through the queer community's use of language to empower themselves and

each other, and through the right-wing's use of language to spout homophobic and transphobic dog whistles and enable violence. Because of this, as previously stated, the relationship between language and the LGBTQ+ community is complex and tumultuous. There can be no definitive answer to whether language's influence on the queer community is positive or negative, as picking one would discredit the impact of the other. Therefore, the best way in which the relationship between language and the LGBTQ+ community can be described is as a double-edged sword.

References

Baker, P. (2004). *Polari - The Lost Language of Gay Men*. Taylor & Francis.

    https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203167045

Berg-Brousseau, H. (2022, August 10). *NEW REPORT: Anti-LGBTQ+ Grooming Narrative*

    Surged More Than 400% on Social Media Following Florida's 'Don't Say Gay or Trans'

    Law, As Social Platforms Enabled Extremist Politicians and their Allies to Peddle

    Inflammatory, Discriminatory Rhetoric. Human Rights Campaign.

    https://www.hrc.org/press-releases/new-report-anti-lgbtq-grooming-narrative-surged-mor

    e-than-400-on-social-media-following-floridas-dont-say-gay-or-trans-law-as-social-platfo

    rms-enabled-extremist-politicians-and-their-allies-to-peddle-inflamatory-discrimin

Block, M. (2022, May 11). *LGBTQ advocates fight the homophobic 'grooming' narrative*. NPR.

    https://www.npr.org/2022/05/11/1096623939/accusations-grooming-political-attack-hom

    ophobic-origins

Boone, R. (2022, June 14). *Experts: Anti-LGBTQ rhetoric could galvanize extremists*. AP News.

    https://apnews.com/article/crime-arrests-riots-race-and-ethnicity-religion-a22a3e11521df

    d398778d4820f484c50

Brathwaite, L. F. (2018, June 6). *'Pose' on FX: New York City Ball Culture, 'Paris Is Burning,'*

    Vogue. Rolling Stone.

    https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/striking-a-pose-a-brief-history-of-b

    all-culture-629280/

Davis, C. O. (2021). *The Queens' English: The LGBTQIA+ Dictionary of Lingo and Colloquial*

    Phrases. Clarkson Potter/Ten Speed.

Hart, B., & Robinson, M. (2021, February 26). *Why Voguing and the Ballroom Scene Matter Now More Than Ever*. TIME. https://time.com/5941822/ballroom-voguing-queer-black-culture-renaissance/

Jones, J. M. (2022, February 17). *LGBT Identification in U.S. Ticks Up to 7.1%*. Gallup News. https://news.gallup.com/poll/389792/lgbt-identification-ticks-up.aspx

Lavietes, M. (2022, March 16). *What Florida's 'Don't Say Gay' bill actually says*. NBC News. https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-politics-and-policy/floridas-dont-say-gay-bill-actually-says-rcna19929

Leap, W. L. (2020). *Language Before Stonewall: Language, Sexuality, History*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-33516-8

LGBTQ Nation. (2022, August 27). *LGBTQ slang: Exploring outdated & modern queer slang*. LGBTQ Nation. https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2022/08/lgbtq-slang-exploring-outdated-modern-queer-slang/

Moore, C. (2016, August 17). *Lavender Language, The Queer Way to Speak*. Out Magazine. https://www.out.com/out-exclusives/2016/8/17/lavender-linguistics-queer-way-speak

Pandell, L. (2018, March 22). *How 'RuPaul's Drag Race' Fueled Pop Culture's Dominant Slang Engine*. WIRED. https://www.wired.com/story/rupauls-drag-race-slang/

Swartz, A. (2018, June 18). *LGBTQ identity is shaped by language. So what words will describe "queer" in the future?* Mic. https://www.mic.com/articles/189433/what-will-queer-language-look-like-in-2030-we-tried-to-find-out

Wilson, J. (2022, November 22). *Colorado Springs: Far-Right Influencers Made LGBTQ People Into Targets*. Southern Poverty Law Center. https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2022/11/22/colorado-springs-far-right-influencers-made-lgbtq-people-targets