

MISCELLANY

GAYS AND LESBIANS

MORE AND MORE IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN ENGLISH, particularly on signs carried by demonstrators, one sees male and female homosexuals differentiated by the designations *gay* and *lesbian*, respectively. These words are used more commonly than *homosexual* because the latter is perceived to be both too “clinical” (tending, therefore, towards a pejorative connotation; cf. the abbreviated version *homo*) and imposed on gays by heterosexuals. It is understandable, therefore, why gays have come to avoid the word *homosexual* as a self-designation.

What is peculiar, however, is the gravitation of *gay* toward the designation of male homosexuals, as in the binomials *lesbians and gay men* and *gays and lesbians*. The substantival constituent *lesbian* can only refer to a female, but *gay* is generic—as in *gay rights*, *gay people*, and *gay men*—so why the differentiation as to sex in the binomial?

The distinction between *gay* and *lesbian* has become part of common usage since the early 1970s (Dynes 1985, 58). It is a linguistic sign of the change from the earlier movements of the '50s and '60s to gain public tolerance and certain civil rights for homosexuals to the movements of the '70s and '80s, including the feminist movement. It was the emergence of lesbians through the latter that forced the word into the gay-rights movement. It is a tribute to the power of lesbians within the gay-rights movement and also to the consciousness-raising done among gay men that most major organizations now use these two terms. Even so, it is still the case that *gay* used without morphemes that specifically indicate women is typically assumed to be male in the first instance.

The ensuing feeling of separatism between men and women homosexuals reflects divisions with regard to specific issues that affect them (including self-evaluation). From this point of view, it is natural, for instance, for women to insist on *lesbian* as a way of avoiding subsumption under a designation that is both generic and routinely appropriated by men. The use of *lesbian*, because of its restriction to females, has the effect of preventing (linguistically, at least) the dilution of the entire real-life congeries of meanings that attach to this word. Given the nature of sexual politics, particularism is just as much (if not more) a value as the need to make common cause with homosexuals of the opposite sex, hence the visibility of *lesbian* alongside *gay*.

Conversely, differentiation by sex can be equally a desideratum from the male point of view. Linguistically, this tendency may be superseded by the

need for a univocal designation that is easier to use because of its brevity. Hence either *gay* or *lesbian* is better from the standpoint of linguistic economy than any phrasal compound such as *male/female homosexual*—whatever other drawbacks (such as particular evaluative connotations) such longer items might have. Beyond brevity, however, *gay* and *lesbian* have the important advantage of differentiating male from female referents, a function frequently made necessary by the communicative (social) context.

The social and semantic conditioning is not the entire answer to the question posed by the binomial *gays and lesbians*, however. In saying that *lesbian* is restricted in its referential scope to females, we are also recognizing a formal universal that attaches to all linguistic oppositions, namely that of markedness. Whereas the generic member of an opposition in semantics is relatively unrestricted in scope and hence unmarked (as in *man* in the opposition *man* versus *woman*), the specific member is limited to a narrowed range of referential potential and hence marked (as is *woman*). The unmarked formal value of *gay* is reflected in its applicability to both men and women as a substantive and as an adjective.

Given the avowed goal of the gay-rights movement of sexual equality between men and women, the persistence of *lesbian* and of the very opposition *gay* versus *lesbian* in contemporary American English can be regarded as a sign of the power of traditional linguistic structure to reassert itself regardless of the ideological intent of its users. As represented linguistically, the male/female opposition comports a difference in valuation such that words designating the male are generic and unmarked, while the corresponding designations of females are specific and marked. In maintaining the distinction between the sexes, the widespread use of the binomial *gays and lesbians* is an adherence to general linguistic usage that not only undercuts some fundamental ideological positions but demonstrates the abidingly marked status of females in our society—regardless of sexual orientation.

REFERENCE

- Dynes, Wayne. 1985. *Homolexis: A Historical and Cultural Lexicon of Homosexuality*. New York: Gai Saber.

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