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Social changes reflected in specialized languages: lexical re- /deconstruction in Lesbian Studies

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Abstract

One of the most important factors of recognition, belonging and identification in scientific communities is their specialized language: doctors, mathematicians and anthropologists feel they are part of a group with which they can interact because they share a common “language”. While ideology is present in all academic registers, it is in human sciences where its presence (or absence) leads to more visible linguistic phenomena. An interesting example is that of lesbian studies: as non-heterosexual members of society have become less stigmatized, lesbian studies have developed a language of their own. In our paper, we shall explore the mechanisms used in the creation of specific vocabulary in this academic area, paying special attention to the refashioning or deconstruction of meaning of established terms as a result of changes in social perception or the challenging of pre-determined meanings.

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1. Introduction

Even though there is an apparent increase in tolerance and decrease in discrimination towards homosexuality in our societies, especially in Western ones, and, consequently, an upsurge in studies devoted to issues related to non-heterosexuality from different fields, no attention has yet been paid to the academic language or language used in research devoted to this specific area. The language used by gays and lesbians themselves has been largely studied (see Chesebro, 1981; Coates, 1996; Cory, 1965; Cox and Fay, 1994; Darsey, 1981; Hayes, 1978-9; Kulick 2000, p.

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243; Land and Kitzinger, 2005; Zeve, 1993) and, similarly, other matters or issues related to them have been the focus of attention of literary studies, women's studies, anthropological studies, etc. (see, amongst many others, Dynes, 1985; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992; Edgar, 1994; Eisner, 1995; Goodwin, 1989; Harris, 1997; Van Haitsma, 2014). In spite of this, and probably as a reflection of reality, lesbianism and lesbian-related linguistic features have received considerably less attention than gay men's homosexuality. As Shapiro (1990: 191) remarks, "lesbians become subsumed and rendered invisible under the generic gay or homosexual". However, quite similarly, the academic language used in both lesbian and gay men's studies has received scant, if any attention.

In general, while the general and basic notions of English for Academic Purposes have been largely studied not only due to its implications for English language teaching but also for its importance for research, the academic language used in specialized research has often been disregarded. It is to be noted here that the language of Lesbian Studies is, in principle, different from the language used by lesbian communities (which has largely been studied, as seen above) and, as a corollary, from lesbian slang (on homosexuals' slang, see, for example, Cory and LeRoy, 1963; Doyle, 1982; Farrell, 1972). This does not mean, however, that they may share lexis, that is, word elements or terminology, especially because the language of Lesbian Studies may include the language of lesbians themselves or also because Lesbian Studies focus on any aspect of lesbian communities, be this, their situation, their marginalization, their language, etc. In fact, although more research may be necessary, it appears that the academic register may feature many traits from the one used by lesbians themselves.

According to Butters (1989), the first academic work which deals with gay language use is Read's (1977). After that and up to the present day many studies have focused on describing linguistic functions, behaviours, features, etc. proper to homosexuals and as opposed to heterosexuals. This study, nevertheless, is to some extent new and unique in that it aims at analysing the language used in academic works to describe not only the language but also issues (behaviour, literature, cinema, media presence, etc.) related to lesbians.

The motivations behind this study go beyond the awareness of the fact that the Academic Language of Gender Studies and, particularly, of Lesbian Studies has been completely disregarded. In spite of the fact that gender studies are gaining ground, we still consider that this field of research still suffers a certain degree of marginalization, probably as a mirror of lesbians' situation in real life. Within English Studies and University language departments, for example, gender studies, and more specifically, lesbian studies, have often been looked down upon (or feared) by those engaged in more "canonical" cultural or literary studies (see, for instance, Twombly 1998, Wilton 2002) and even ignored by publishers (Lykke 2001). Apart from that, we consider that the role of language and, particularly, the language of the academe in disseminating knowledge but also, in our case, in providing and challenging individuals and communities' status and meaningfulness is of primary importance. In fact, as we shall see below, it may be observed that in Lesbian Studies, as in many other walks of life, words are used to reclaim and deconstruct. For instance, words or terms used in other contexts as insults are used in our sample in such a way that the negative connotation is subverted and their unfairness is exposed (e.g. *pervert*, *deviant*, etc.) or simply the word is reclaimed by depriving it of its negative connotations (e.g. *queer*, *butch*, *dyke*, etc.) in such a way that it becomes neutral and even a token of pride and self-respect.

2. The Study

The study that follows is part of a larger research project on the language of Lesbian Studies, which has revealed itself to us as a very interesting field within English for Academic Purposes or rather, within Academic English.

Due to space restrictions we cannot reproduce or describe here many of the linguistic features which characterize the language of Lesbian Studies. For this reason, we shall focus only on the intentional use or deconstruction of words, which have apparently been skilfully arranged to reflect and reinforce ideological changes in society towards a better understanding of this sexual orientation and to make it more visible and less marginalised.

2.1. Methodology

In order to analyse the deconstruction of lexical items in Lesbian Studies, we have collected a sample of about 46,000 words from the most popular and most read articles of *the Journal of Lesbian Studies* as reported in the Journal's web page in August 2013.

2.2. Analysis and Discussion of Results

The analysis of our sample has discovered a highly powerful and conscious use of words and word meanings by scholars and researchers working in Lesbian Studies. Words are given a new meaning, sometimes meaning or connoting the opposite to what they usually and generally do, creating a new reality, making people's views change, claiming that a change in society is required, etc. This is exactly what we mean by "deconstruction"; as explained above: the negative connotation of some words (e.g. insults) is subverted so that the unfairness is exposed, as in *pervert*, *deviant*, etc. Similarly, some other words, as we shall see below, may be stripped of their negative connotations, e.g. *queer*, *butch*, etc.

In the following subsections we will pay attention not only to nouns, verbs and adjectives related to deconstruction and interpretation but also to those items which have undergone deconstruction and which we have called "deconstructed" nouns, verbs and adjectives.

2.2.1. Lexical items related to deconstruction

The language of lesbian studies often resorts to nouns and nominalizations related to deconstruction and reinterpretation; such lexical items, to a greater or lower extent, contain in their definition the idea of "meaning", or "change of meaning". Some of these words have that implication in their basic dictionary definitions, as is the case with *construal*, *construction*, *critics/criticism/critique*, *meaning* or *stereotypes*. Others, however, maintain a discourse topic in the text through their metaphorical use associated to meaning, such as *decentering*, *destabilization*, *disarticulation*, *reappropriation*, or *reclamation*; this would include those metaphors which combine the idea of reinterpretation with that of struggle, such as *rebel/rebellion*, *resistance*, *subversion*, amongst others. All these metaphors are not necessarily born in the language of Lesbian Studies; as one can see in the cases of *subvert* or *question*, their figurative use goes back to the Renaissance or the Middle Ages. Indeed, it is to be noted that, with very few exceptions, these words do not have a different meaning in Lesbian Studies from that which one would encounter in general language, or in academic discourse, although it is worth noting how in this language (and probably, in all discourses attempting to change the *status quo*), *destabilization* or *subversion* are deprived of their negative or disruptive connotations with which they are generally employed in general and everyday language, and become a positive element, a desirable component of any cultural activity.

Similarly, adjectives do also expand the notion of deconstruction and reinterpretation to the whole text, either literally or metaphorically: *alternative*, *axiomatic*, *conventional*, *converse*, *critical*, *deviant*, *disruptive* ("The disruptive nature of Swoopes' renderings was tempered by competing discourses"), *frail*, *iconoclastic*, *normative*, *peculiar*, *perverted*, *prevailing*, *provocative*, *rebellious*, *resistive*, *stereotypic*, *stereotypical*, *subversive*, *transformative*, *transgressive* ("Why does the representation of transgressive female desire become a political, cultural, and national issue?"), *unnatural*, etc. The power of these adjectives lies in their application to nouns like *position*, *view*, *approach*, etc. The same may be said about verbs related to deconstruction and reinterpretation, such as *challenge*, *complicate*, *construe*, *construct*, *criticize*, *critique*, *de-center*, *deconstruct*, *demythifying*, *destabilize*, *disrupt*, *expose*, *fetishize*, *interpellate* ("It re-stabilizes gender relations and the heterosexual matrix as defined by Butler by interpellating women repeatedly and ritualistically [...]"), *interrogate*, *misrepresent*, *question*, *re-stabilize*, *re-think*, *reclaim*, *redefine*, *re-fashion*, *reformulate*, *reframe*, *re-inscribe*, *reinvent*, *renegotiate*, *renew*, *reorient*, *resist*, *rethink*, *revolutionize* ("[...] gays and lesbians promise to revolutionize queer theory, challenge cultural binarisms, and promote new culturally sensitive paradigms of sexual expression"), *subvert*, *stereotype*, *transform*, *transgression*, *unlearn*, etc.

2.2.2. Deconstructed lexical items

By deconstructing and reinterpreting lexical items (be these specialized terms or general words) in research articles like the ones in our sample, scholars and researchers join the attempt to re-shape reality, change the still marginalized situation of lesbians and, therefore, join a controlled rebellion through language in order to contribute towards social changes.

Among the nouns which have been deconstructed, reclaimed or reinterpreted, initial mention must be made of the traditional derogative terms applied to homosexuals. The most visible example is *queer*, now widely –though not without controversy– reclaimed and used as a neutral and even a proud label of academic endeavour, as in *queer theory* or *queer studies* (in fact, the *OED* no longer labels this use as “derogatory”). The same applies to *dyke* and *butch*, which many lesbians now use without a self-deprecating tone (see, for instance, <http://www.butchovoices.com>), or other pejorative labels like *sissy* (“the term tomboy evolved to be an acceptable, even celebrated, gender identity (her male counterpart, the sissy, does not enjoy the same status”) or *tomboy*/*“tomboi”* (“The reappropriating of the phonology of tomboy, but subversion of the spelling “tomboi” indicates that even this way of claiming a masculine identity in lesbian communities is not equivalent with a tomboy identity claimed in the larger societal context”). Other terms are carefully used in such a way that their patriarchal connotations are questioned and exposed, such as *breadwinner*, or *deviancy* and *disease*.

Adjectives and verbs are also similarly used for this purpose, like *deviant*, “*natural*” (the quotations referring to the dominant use of the term which is questioned here), “*nymphomaniac*” (“The double standard around sexual behaviour derogates girls who like too many boys or women who have multiple partners or sexual encounters as “slut” or “nymphomaniac” among other negative terms”), *odd*, *straight*, and “*unviable*”. Verbs like *deviate* have also been deconstructed, as in “This article explores whether messages about the body from lesbian media deviate from mainstream, heterosexually focused media” or “Tomboy protection that allows White women to deviate from the strictest version of a feminine role”.

Special mention may be made of the converted verb *to queer*, which is both a deconstructed lexical item (“[...] Mehta keeps alive questions of sexuality as well as the possibility of *queering* the emerging expression of sexuality within a hetero-patriarchal structure”) and a deconstructing one (like those in 2.1.2): it reclaims the adjective *queer*, but also implies a reinterpretation of previous models, as in “Recognizing the centrality that the internet in general and online social networking sites in particular have played in the construction of the queer community during the opening decade of the new millennium [...]”, “West has been at the forefront of theoretical debates over queer identity and at the vanguard of human rights activism”, or “the adoption of queer theory as a model for inclusive social justice”.

3. Conclusions

The results have revealed the vocabulary of Lesbian Studies as an area for the deconstruction of previous meanings, where, although lexical creation may occur, the most common phenomenon is that whereby previously existent words are re-captured and divested of undesirable connotations and associations.

Furthermore, it is here believed that people working in this discipline are very conscious of the importance of language and terminology. Thus, they make a conscious and militant use of words (and of word-formation mechanisms and spelling, as we have seen in some of our examples), either resorting to already existent vocabulary or metaphors, or attempting to deconstruct or reclaim terminology (including taboo words), and they also tend to the specialization of words from either general language or other genres.

In the previous lines we have shown how language may not only be the linguistic mirror of society but also become a powerful means of social and/or ideology changes. In spite of this, much work remains to be done in this field from a linguistic point of view, which could encompass lexical, semantic, pragmatic or other types of research. Needless to say, larger corpora or larger samples are required, which could provide both quantitative and qualitative information and also specific information on potential word-formation processes (specifically conversion and constraint-breaking derivation).

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