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Knowledge Organization and the Power to Name: LGBTQ Terminology and the Polyhedron of Empowerment

Abstract

This paper uses Hope Olson's concept of "the power to name" to explore the terminological practices of the LGBTQ community in the Cariri region of Brazil in the years between 2006 and 2013. LGBTQ communities can seize back the "power to name," traditionally exerted by a heteronormative society upon marginalized groups, by organizing their cultural and practical knowledge from within, and by exercising the power to name themselves and their specific domains and cultural practices. The study showed that knowledge organization—the act of defining entities and categories and assigning specific names to them—is a gesture of self-empowerment on many different levels. The "power of self-naming" in this LGBTQ community is a polyhedron in which some facets are frequent, such as the power to empower or affirm an identity. On the one hand, the names and categories break through gender, geographical and temporal specificity to embrace terms, names, and idioms drawn from a range of different countries, traditions, languages, and time periods. On the other hand, these names and categories work to reinforce and affirm the geographical and cultural specificity of the Cariri region itself, embedding its pride and self-affirmation within the varied languages and heteronormative history of Portuguese colonization in that region. In selecting terms and categories to name, organize and celebrate their identities, the LGBTQ people of Cariri have taken the power to name: not as information intermediaries striving for objectivity and neutrality, but as committed members of a marginalized but vital community.

Introduction

The need for an ethical commitment in knowledge representation is a recurrent concern in the LIS literature (Berman, 1993; Beghtol, 2002, 2005; Fernández Molina & Guimarães, 2002; García Gutiérrez, 2002; Guimarães et al., 2008; Hudon, 1997; Olson, 1998, 2002; Pinho, 2010, among others). Considering this stream of publications, this paper explores Olson's notion of "power to name" (2002), originally conceived as a power that the librarian has when creating surrogates for documents in knowledge organization systems (KOS), and adding another dimension: the "power of self-naming," exerted when specific and marginalized communities decide to represent specific subjects using new terms that can serve as a communication code among the members of the community, also including other purposes such as identification and protection. One example of this is the LGBT environment, whose distinct features lead

not only to a richness of specialty vocabularies but also to a tension between aboutness and meaning, as studied by Campbell (2000). In this sense, we explore the terminological practices within LGBTQ communities in the Cariri region of Brazil in the years between 2006 and 2013, based upon an ongoing study of the knowledge organization dimensions of the terminological patterns of LGBTQ people from that region (Guimarães, Nascimento & Pinho, 2016).

The “power to name” has been traditionally exerted by a heteronormative society upon marginalized groups. This research analyzes how LGBTQ communities seize that power back by organizing their cultural and practical knowledge from within, and by exercising the power to name themselves and their specific domains and cultural practices. In this sense, queer research can be characterized as a contingent, multiple and unstable subject (Browne & Nash 2010) that is always struggling between the need for recognition and the avoidance of essentialism. Queer scholars also claim that “what we mean by queer, we argue, is and should remain unclear, fluid and multiple” (Browne & Nash 2010, pp.7-8). Eventual mutations and incorporation of new terms is a strategy of survival of the community. Terms must be understood and shared by the community as a code, but at the same time they must be overcome when the risk of essentialism is near.

LGBTQ vocabularies constitute specialized languages that include rich figures of speech, and that work on multiple levels. These levels of meaning allow speakers both to limit the understanding of their vocabulary to their members, and to revel in the richness of imagery that populates the LGBTQ universe (Pinho & Guimarães 2012). The richness of the imagery of a given vocabulary can be evidenced especially by the presence of a vivid and innovative metaphorical dimension (Konrad, 1958; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Black, 1981; Pinho, 2010).

The study of these metaphors inevitably involves consideration of time. LGBTQ terminology is ever-shifting and heavily relies in metaphors, metonyms, metaphonymies (Bustos 2010; Goossens 1990), and other figures of speech that have historical connotations and add even more complexity for knowledge organization processes.

In addition to this temporal variation of terms (an aspect that has been recently studied, for instance, in Fox 2016), this paper also suggests another axis for the analysis of the complexity and strategies of the LGBTQ and queer communities’ power to name: space. Although many of the terms that are used by these groups are imported and adapted from English, and more specifically from the United States (Bustos 2010; Trim 2007), local communities also propose regional variations and terms, using metaphors and other figures of speech too, as a reflection of their mundane reality, and as a partial reinforcement of their cultural identity. This second axis, space, is another dimension that methodologically opens many possibilities for the study and research of the LGBTQ’s organization of knowledge.

In this paper, we furnish and analyze an example of how a LGBTQ vocabulary can be committed to its cultural background and, at the same time, to the international terminological configuration of the field.

Objective

The paper aims to verify to what extent this “power of self-naming” is present in this

community, as well as the categories that are used in the knowledge representation process that this power entails.

Methodology

The Cariri region, originally occupied by the Kariri Indian tribe, is located in the south of Ceará State in Northeastern Brazil, and was the destination of many migratory cycles of pilgrims. Its cultural identity has, therefore, been shaped since early times by religious and heteronormative concepts: concepts which gave no place to alternative sexualities. The records and experiences of LGBTQ people living in this region have historically been marginalized, forgotten, or excluded from the history of this region. Nonetheless, LGBTQ people are there, and in the late 1990s, they found their voice and began to advocate for minority rights. In the years that followed, their actions and, equally important, their language, was captured in the proceedings of various Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs).

This paper is based on a documentary analysis of 25 meeting minutes published between 2006 and 2013 by two NGOs: Grupo de Apoio a Livre Orientação Sexual (Supporting Group to the Free Sexual Orientation, GALOSC) and Associação de Apoio, Defesa e Cidadania dos Homossexuais (Association for the Support, Protection and Citizenship of Homosexuals, AADECHO). The minutes are usually composed of the following structure: 1) Title; 2) Opening; 3) Identification of the members present; 4) Agenda; 5) Closing. The methodological procedures included the following steps (Nascimento, 2015): a) domain analysis (Hjørland & Albrechtsen, 1995; Hjørland, 1997; 2002; Tennis, 2003, 2012; Smiraglia, 2013) in order to understand the extension and scope of the domain to analyze according to the discourse community; b) selection and reading of the minutes; c) identification and extraction of metaphorical terms; d) categorization of the terms using content analysis (Bardin, 1989). For the step of identification and extraction of metaphorical terms, we used a technique of continuous reading of empirical materiality in order to try to grasp the meanings that have not been noticed or not said. This phase of continuous readings allows the analyst to find repetitive words and phrases that may represent situations more or less coherent and of similar meaning, metaphors which may involve specific images or words with particular meanings.

Results and discussion

A study of these minutes and an extraction of the relevant terms produced 815 metaphorical terms that allow the definition of three major categories: Women's Names, Body Parts, and Actions. Within these categories, two sets of contrasts emerged. First, the variety of metaphors serves both to hide and to reveal. On the one hand, the many euphemisms for body parts and sexual acts enables a marginalized community to have its own language, with terms that those outside the community would not understand. On the other hand, the terms provide a rich and variegated means of identifying, and celebrating, body parts and sexual acts that are often silenced through overt censorship or through self-censorship.

The naming patterns within LGBTQ communities in the Cariri region suggest that knowledge organization—the act of defining entities and categories and assigning specific names to them—is a gesture of self-empowerment on many different levels.

The study showed that the “power of self-naming” in this LGBTQ community is a polyhedron in which various facets appear. Three facets appeared with particular frequency:

- **the power to empower/to affirm an identity.** Examples include: Watusi (reference to a very famous Brazilian actress/singer, member of the Moulin Rouge’s cast); Wonder woman; Free the chicken (for coming out of the closet); Alice (a gay dreamer);
- **the power to ironize/to criticize.** Examples include: Nefertite (a very old gay who keeps an aura of mystery); Truck driver; Diesel, Tank panzer (a lesbian with very masculine manners); Dragon (very ugly person); Bread with egg (very poor gay, named after the cheapest sandwich in Brazil); Greta (a shy and mysterious gay, in allusion to Greta Garbo’s personality); Banho de Cleópatra (activities that involve copious amounts of a substance reminiscent of Cleopatra’s fabled baths of milk);
- **the power to self-protect.** Examples include: Alibã/Aliban (Police); Papapum (onomatopoeic reference to revolver, gun); Philips (for civil police car); Africa (something hard, painful, referencing to the African slaves); Emma Thompson (for hematoma, homophones in Brazil), and more.

This empowerment follows two surprisingly different trajectories. On the one hand, the names and categories break through gender, geographical and temporal specificity to embrace terms, names, and idioms drawn from a range of different countries, different traditions, different languages, and different time periods. The widespread use of female names, in particular, draws from a richly varied set of times and places and cultures both within and beyond Brazilian mainstream culture. Many of the terms derive from French and English traditions, including popular gay linguistic hybrids such as “Lesbian chic.”

On the other hand, these names and categories work to reinforce and affirm the geographical and cultural specificity of the Cariri region itself, embedding its pride and self-affirmation within the diverse languages and heteronormative history of Portuguese colonization in that region. The language of these minutes is full of words, not only from Portuguese, but from African languages such as *bajubá*.

Implications for practice

For professionals in knowledge organization, the implications of this study are ambiguous: to what extent should the naming practices of marginalized communities be incorporated into standard retrieval tools and knowledge organization structures? On the one hand, keeping up with the constantly shifting terminology within marginalized communities is difficult, expensive, time-consuming, and ultimately futile. Even as indexers discover fresh concepts and terms and lead-in terms, the community abandons them for even newer terms, unknown to established institutions and law-enforcement bodies. On the other hand, the richness of these terms suggests a valuable opportunity: the opportunity to ground subject languages within the unique vitality of specific temporal and geographical regions. This opportunity should not be wasted.

- **Empowerment:** Terms of empowerment are clearly the most important for KO professionals, since they indicate the terms most appropriate for inclusion in standard tools, either as preferred terms or as lead-in terms.
- **Irony and criticism:** The ironic appropriation of terms for ludicrous or satiric effect often requires a knowledge of the specific context in order to be either informative or effective. While they are unlikely to serve much use in the context of a standard KO tool, professionals may find lists of such terms useful in the process of document analysis for indexing purposes. In addition, some may serve a useful collocating function: both “Banho de Cleopatra” and “Nefertiti,” for instance, allude to a fascination in various gay cultures with the extravagances of Egypt in popular entertainment, and could provide a meaningful means of access to plays like Michel Tremblay’s *Hosanna*.
- **Self-protection:** We anticipate that the LGBTQ community’s terms of self-protection will continue to be their own, as long as its members feel the need to resort to protective measures within their own community. Such terms will mutate quickly, to remain unknown outside the community. For such terms, the professional KO community’s role will primarily be an historical one: preserving the record of such terms, to remind later members of the community of that community’s history.

Conclusion

In selecting terms and categories to name, organize and celebrate their identities, the LGBTQ communities of Cariri have taken the power to name: not as information intermediaries striving for objectivity and neutrality, but as committed members of a marginalized but vital community. In the years of growing liberation and self-affirmation, the people represented in these documents wielded their power to define themselves; in so doing, they created a metaphorical system of great variety and diversity, which both broke through limitations of their specific time and place, and paradoxically drew on that specific time and place to create a vocabulary, and a world view, that belongs uniquely to themselves.

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