

Comparison of International Queer Semiotics

Queer people exist everywhere. In the “Progressive West”, we are more perceptive of queer people because it’s generally more open and safe for them to exist, while people are *more* oppressed elsewhere.

Through this oppression, queer culture ends up producing covert signs to communicate one’s own queerness to each other. Typically, this happens through fashion and language.

This essay focuses on the history of various ways that queers across the world have used symbols to signal their identity to others, and the similarities in the methods by which they arise, and what they result in.

Information presented in this essay is not solely from literature; I’ve interviewed several of my online queer friends on the domain of slang, themselves hailing from (but not limited to):

Poland, Czechia, Greece, Italy, France, Spain, Portugal, Romania, Hungary, Estonia, Finland, Turkey, Tamazgha, Brazil, Costa Rica, China, the Philippines, Indonesia, and of course the Anglophone world;

concerning their own specific regions and their neighbouring regions.

Citations from these conversations will be marked (p.c.), though names will not be provided.

Research

Semiotics is the study of *signs*; and a *sign* is anything that communicates a meaning that is not the sign itself. Words represent objects or concepts; visual symbols can indicate identity, status, or affiliation; and gestures can convey messages and emotion.

Language itself is a semiotic system through which we exchange signs and communicate.

Queer semiotics, thus, is the study of signs used by the queer community.

In particular, flags, fashion, and language are the three most prominent methods of signaling or “flagging” oneself within the queer community.

In his photo-text project *Gay Semiotics*, Fischer (1977) mentions three signifiers used within American '70s gay cruising culture, viz. earrings, keys, and handkerchiefs.

In these semiotic systems, the body is bisected into left (*aggressive/active*) and right (*passive*) sides. Earrings are the most vague in nature, ostensibly having feminine connotations, but oftentimes being a simple object of fashion.

Keys, which were hung from metal clasps on belt loops, appeared to have been a signifier that one, without specificity, is queer. Its placement also used to indicate being a top (left) or bottom (right).

Handkerchiefs or *hanky*, folded into the back pockets, were color-coded to show what sexual activities they want to engage in. In contrast to the other two objects, it communicated way more information, thus it was the most common system in cruising, but especially the leather community where it originated.

Red (*anal/fisting*) and blue (*non-specific*) handkerchiefs have the oldest color-coded meanings in its system; dating to before the San Franciscan erotic department store *The Trading Post* started promoting their own in 1971 alongside cards with the meanings of the colors in their expanded system.

Camp (2003, p. 41) recites that the system originated in the mid-19c. at local dances, where tying a handkerchief around one's arm signified that one preferred to lead (left) or follow (right); and that it experienced a resurgence in the disco bar scene. The phenomenon also took hold in Canada, Australia, and Europe during the late '70s; but in South Africa, it did not take off due to gay men already using bandanas as a fashion accessory.

Lace code arose in the '80s punk scene, where the color of one's boot laces (specifically, ladder-laced combat boots, typically Doc Martens) signaled their identity. Although the system wasn't exclusively queer, queerness (or allyship) could be signified through wearing purple laces.

In modern times, the connotation of the earring has mostly faded and is broadly a fashion accessory.

Carabiners are still a common object found in queer circles, especially among sapphic people.

Handkerchief code is less common, and specific meanings vary from region to region.

The wearing of a singular earring is broadly “taught” or “heard” to mean that that person was gay, though disagreement on whether it was the left or right ear is universally prevalent (p.c.).

“In speaking a common tongue, members signal ingroup ties and outgroup separation”
(Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012, p. 121)

Across the globe within localized queer communities, common sociolects arose, consisting of slang that the layperson may adopt themselves. For example, a lot of modern '20s slang, like *slay* or *shade*, originated in ballroom culture (which in turn got a lot of its slang from AAVE).

Given the oppression of gay and trans people in history (still continuing to this day), the need to communicate with each other, obscured and unintelligible to the surveillance placed upon them, led to the development of *argots* (or cant, cryptolect).

Examples of these argots include: Polari (UK), Lubunca (Turkey), Pajuba (Brazil), SwardSpeak (Philippines), Kaliarda (Greece), Bahasa Binan (Indonesia), Gayle (English/Afrikaans), isiNqgumo (South African/Zimbabwean Bantu), and Loxoro (Peru).

The lexicons of these languages vary greatly in origin.

Polari is a mixture of Romance, Romani, and various slangs (Baker, 2002); whilst Kaliarda primarily adapts Romani, Italian, and Turkish, among others (Montoliu, 2005). Pajuba primarily inserts words from various Volta-Congo languages into Portuguese as it originated among Afro-Brazilian religious practitioners.

Gayle evolved from *Moffietaal* (which originated in the 1950's) uses “a large number of female names as common nouns, verbs and adjectives” (Cage, 2003, p. 19), while isiNqgumo “subverts” and “replaces with a new meaning that is connected to the imagery or action of the noun” (Ntuli, 2013).

Bahasa Binan has various word formation strategies, such as *-in-* infixation or *(-e-)-ong* suffixation onto the bisyllabic roots (Boellstorff, 2004).

Loxoro utilizes *sV(rV)*-insertion for word formation, and *-cuti* as a diminutive (Rojas-Berscia, 2016).

SwardSpeak uses a lot of different tactics, such as similar-sounding celebrity names; non-standardized sound alterations; and loans from Romance, Germanic, Japanese and Chinese.

Various of these argots are not solely exclusive to the LGBTQ+ but also used by sex workers, performers, and are related to other cryptolangs used by minorities.

Terms for sodomy and pederasty frequently lend themselves to slurs against homosexual people.

Hungarian *buzi*, French *pédé/pd/pédale*, Vietnamese *pê đê*, Polish *pedał*, and Estonian *pede*, have all seen reclamation of these slurs amongst queer people themselves, though all of them still retain their derogatory statuses (p.c.). Swedish *bög* has been normalized however, and English *bugger* is now a more generic expletive.

Languages often loan or calque English terms: Estonian *kväär*, Georgian *კვიარი* (*kviari*), and various unadapted borrowings come from “queer”; French *transgenre*, Dutch *transgender*, from “transgender”. Costa Rican Spanish *playo*, derived from “pliers”, is used to refer to lesbians. Lebanese Arabic *فاميلي*, a transliteration of “family”, is also a way for queer people to refer to themselves. Most Arabic dialects also heavily loan words from French (Mubayi, 2024).

Subversion of gender roles also lend themselves to slang for gay or lesbian, such as Italian *camionista*/Portuguese *caminhoneira* (trucker) for lesbian, or English *stud* referring to dominant Black

lesbians. *U-Haul* is also a term for lesbians who move in together after a short period of time.

Transvestite is a dated term in English for crossdressers, sometimes used as a slur against trans people; Brazilian Portuguese *travesti* is a normal term for trans women, and often times its own gender role (p.c.), though *traveco* is a derogatory slur derived from that term. Costa Rican Spanish *trana* (similar to English *tranny*, a slur) has been reclaimed.

Places also tend to get connotated with homosexuality. Aside from the biblical *Sodom(ite)*; Syrian Arabic إدلبی (Idlibi), Palestinian Arabic نابلسي (Nabulsi), Brazilian Portuguese *do vale* (from the valley), Dutch *Utrechtenaar* (obsolete) get used as slang for gay.

Costa Rican Spanish uses *yigüirro* (a type of bird) as a term for gay men, with *yigüirradas* being used as “gay shit [sic]” (p.c.).

38% of the world population speaks a gendered language (Jakiela, 2018), though a lot of people desire to use gender-neutral pronouns for themselves. Gender-neutral language in professional contexts is also important as it might exclude groups of people unintendedly.

English primarily lost its gender system, to the exclusion of a few words such as *blonde*. *He*, *she*, and *it*, are the three normative third person singular pronouns, being masculine, feminine, and neuter (objects) respectively. *They* is normatively a plural pronoun, though it has a lot of usage by people in the singular, in fact, singular *they* was used in the works of Chaucer, the first English-language author after the Normans. For a long time, the generic *he* was used as an epicene pronoun in style guides, but this is controversial nowadays due to it being an application of the *male-as-norm principle*. *He-or-she/his-or-her* is also frequently used as a “gender-neutral” pronoun, despite its obvious binary gendering.

Although most other languages do not have a documented history of using their plural or neuter pronouns as an epicene personal pronouns in the singular, it is a practice applied in the modern-day by queer people.

Dutch for example, has *die/diens* and *hen/hun*, respectively being a neuter and plural pronoun. *Die(ns)* was a dated neutral/masculine pronoun that sees significant usage, though it usually gets combined with the plural *hen/hun* rather than using its pre-existing conjugations. *Ze* also sees usage.

Speakers of languages that do not contain a neuter pronoun at all (and even speakers of those that do), will tend to create new pronouns, either by combining pronouns (French *iel/lea* < *il/le* + *elle/la*), giving a pronoun a different suffix (Polish *onu*), or creating them ex nihilo (various *neopronouns*).

Gender-neutral pronouns can also arise naturally in communities, such as *yo*, which was found amongst Baltimorean middle-schoolers who spoke AAVE (Elrod, 2014).

Reflection

It was very fun to go around to my queer friends and ask them if they know local slang, because more often than not, if they don't, they're interested to go learn about it themselves and do research. Though googling is absolutely horrible. The search engine tends to immediately provide an "AI-overview" with incorrect information.

When I was googling *dutch queer slang*, and it gave a list which contained the following item:

"**Utrechtenaar**: A playful historical slang for a gay man (a nod to the city of Utrecht's large gay scene"

Which is absolutely incorrect. *Utrechtenaar* originated in 1730 due to the sodomy trials that were held there. It in no way was "playful" or "a nod".

Anyhow, through this endeavour of interviewing people, some of my friends actually asked their friends for information as well; after which, I've made a few new friends myself! Which is a nice side effect.

Broadly, I've interviewed so many people, I actually lost track of everybody.

The true reason for extensive interviewing is that it provides me with a feel of what slang is actually in use. Dictionaries can only bring you so far, and don't give you a feel for current active usage.

I think the reason that, the side one wears a singular earring to mean that one is gay, is universally disagreed upon, is because it would have been an outgroup observation.

Members of the ingroup (homosexual cruisers), would have been aware of the left-right dichotomy and thus signified one's preferred role in sexual activities.

In the same vein that a woman can wear a suit without anyone batting an eye, yet a man wearing a dress stands out; the feminine earring stands out to outgroup observers who do not know that it has a specific meaning.

Femininity is oftentimes associated with male homosexuality, and therefore the assumption passed down generations. When I was small, my mom told me that it was the left ear to mean homosexuality; and similarly, a lot of people have been taught that the singular earring is "gay".

Generally, slurs placed upon people have a tendency to get reclaimed by that community over time.

I personally enjoy referring to myself as a *faggot*, *queer*, and *dyke*.

In fact, *queer* was a slur in the past, meaning "weird"!

In English, I personally like to use neopronouns. Alongside the *she/her* and *they/them* pronouns, I use, in the format of [subject/object/possessive determiner/possessive pronoun/reflexive]:

- pup/pup/pups/pups/pupself

is my favourite set to use, even more so than *she* and *they*. In the past I've also used

- nya/nyan/nyans/nyans/nyanself
- bit/byte/bits/bits/bitself
- voi/void/voids/voids/voidself
- cog/cog/cogs/cogs/cogself
- wy/wir/wire/wires/wirself
- pix/pix/pixel/pixel/pixelself
- ðey/ðem/ðeir/ðeirs/ðemself
- ai/ai/ais/ais/aiself
- soul/soulo/souls/souls/soulself

- per/per/per/pers/perself
- one/one/ones/one's/oneself.

In Dutch, I primarily use [die/die/die/diens/diense], though I also enjoy the usage of *dier*, which is a feminine form of the genitive.

Using neopronouns also leads to fun interaction, and among some friends we have the in joke of “pronoun collection”.

For my French oral presentations in my 6th (and last) year in secondary, I even presented an article concerning the usage of the *iel* pronoun, and got to talk about gender and what it means to me. I personally am a transfeminine non-binary individual, and I do really enjoy talking about it.

Cage's book on Gayle also mentions a few other semiotic systems by name, namely: Twink Code, Smurf Code, and Bear Code. Though I couldn't find what they meant.

Conclusion

In the conclusion of the essay, Fischer (1977) ends with the following lines:

Like any other cultural group, gay people have developed a semiotics intended both for identification and/or invisibility within the larger culture, as well as communication among themselves. As economic, political and social levels of interaction fluctuate, the uses of the language will broaden and new, more evolved -- overt as well as covert -- terms will come into use. As the gay community is polarized on some issues and cohesive around others, the semiotic process which helps locate in the larger culture will flourish with the interesting and undoubtedly provocative results. (p. 2)

Semiotics is a living system. It develops and evolves, gets passed down from one generation to the next, misinterpreted then reinterpreted, accepted and rejected. Such is the nature of signs.

Being queer is generally more acceptable now than it was even two decades ago in the west; yet anti-queer laws are still being passed globally.

As long as there are queer people, there will be queer semiotics; albeit covert when necessary.

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