Gays on the vocabulary vanguard

By Sean McLennan

Let's face it. As a demographic group, we have a great burden to bear—we're social innovators whether the rest of the world chooses to acknowledge our fabulousness or not. They borrow our fashion, they borrow our hairstyles, they even borrow our words. Take piercings for example: it used to be that men couldn't get away with them at all, but both numbers and—ahem—acceptable locations are increasing, seemingly on the heels of gay fashion.

None of this is surprising. It's a natural direction of social change: the practices of a small demographic group that help define its identity are seen as refreshing or new or radical by the population at large, and so they are adopted. Oh, come on! Who *wouldn't* want to be us?! It is a little frustrating, though, that when I walk across campus all the probably-straight fratboys are tingling my slightly out-of-date gaydar. (I'm in a grad program majoring in Linguistics and Cognitive Science at Indiana University—one of those American universities complete with a Greek system *à la Animal House*).

The irony is that, for the kind of diffusion of gay culture that goes on, there must be some sense of social prestige attached to our kind—but it seems pretty well concealed to me! They must be repressing.

Language is, and has always been, a very strong factor in defining social groups. Without consciously adjusting your speech, you can't open your mouth without betraying all kinds of personal information through accent, choice of words and other linguistic characteristics. And, just like any other social phenomenon, language is just as susceptible to borrowing.

Take Valley Girls: they had enough distinctions in their infamous use of "like" to be able to immediately tell which social circle an unfamiliar face belonged to (and, therefore, whether to embrace, tolerate, sneer at, or bitch-slap 'em). One usage, the most common and prestigious, won out and spread throughout nearly the entire North American English speaking population (much to the dismay of many an English teacher—although chances are, they use it, too). Despite what the literary elite might try to claim, "like" is firmly entrenched in standard North American English and is pretty linguistically interesting in its own right. Funny, I didn't think that Valley Girls were held in particularly high esteem by the general public either...

The gay community, too, has had an inevitable and lasting linguistic effect on Standard English—one that continues to strengthen and develop even as we speak. There are some obvious vocabulary items, like "come out of the closet," that every native English speaker would now know. It's even been co-opted and used in many other contexts too (closet smoker; coming out as a *Star Trek* fan, etc). "Transgendered," "queen," "bi,"—to name but a few—are all examples of how our increased exposure has expanded the vocabularies of straight English speakers.

But vocabulary is really only the most superficial of the linguistic changes taking place; other much more subtle stuff is going on, too. Through usage and the activist process of "reclaiming" the words that define us, we are slowly improving their connotations (officially a linguistic process called "ameliorization"). By using words like "queer," "fag," "dyke," and "queen" to refer to ourselves and each other—using them in positive contexts—we alter their meanings and dissolve their power to denigrate us. Although such subtle shifts don't usually have an obvious effect on individuals, collectively and given time, that's how language changes.

I believe that the gay equality movement has also had a strong influence on the increasing trend towards non-sexist language. We can't claim to have initiated the push to purge misogyny from the language, but we *do* provide a unique context that supports the movement in several ways.

Linguistic sexism is intimately tied to stereotypical gender-roles, which the queer community has had a tendency to neutralize, reverse or just completely shatter. Within our subculture both men and women can span the entire spectrum from "butch" to "fem"; from construction workers to hair-dressers, you can get it all in one glorious package! The traditional labels give no indication of what to expect; biological gender loses its power to categorize and explain behavior in a relevant real-world way. When that happens, the language will inevitably follow—albeit at a slower pace.

Such changes are already exhibited within the language of the gay community. Who among us is not an expert at the "pronoun game," using "them" to refer to a partner? Or just carefully wording speech to hide explicit gender references? We unfortunately sometimes have a vested interest in hiding, or at least maintaining, ambiguity in the gender of our mates. As it happens (despite what our teachers tried to teach us), using "they" as a gender-neutral, singular pronoun to deal with ambiguous reference has been a strategy in spoken English since the 1600s. The widespread use of generic "he" (as in "Everyone should wear *his* tiara to the ball") was artificially imposed by upper-class grammarians in the late 1800s, and unfortunately it became the learned norm. "They" has never been eliminated from spoken English, though, and with the feminist movement it gained a great deal more written acceptance. The pronoun game expands the usage of "they" to situations in which gender isn't ambiguous, but intentionally obscured, which increases its acceptability as a gender-neutral singular.

Most importantly, the usage spreads beyond us—I've seen sensitive straight people use the pronoun game with individuals of uncertain orientation whom they've just met. It's safe! And in a culturally charged environment where people are more likely to challenge you if you get it wrong, it's a good way to go.

Other words that hold gender-specific connotations are increasingly being used in gender-neutral ways, some of which probably originated in the gay community. "Bitch" is a likely candidate for this category. Another possibility is "boy" ("boi?"), referring to an adult man and/or "boyfriend." Twenty years ago, if you asked someone "How's your boy?" they'd likely respond quizzically, "I don't have any children...". Others are still confined to gay speech: "Hey *girlfriend*!", "sisters," and "Evening, *ladies,*" as spoken by a gay male in reference to their cohorts, for example.

This neutralization is mirrored in the English-speaking community at large, indicating a strong social pressure towards non-sexist language. It's not uncommon for teens nowadays to use "dude" for males and females alike. "Guys" is another somewhat more controversial example, and the male connotation of "guy" is by no means gone—"The guy down the hall went into labour" is unambiguously odd, but "When you guys go into labour..." spoken by a Lamaze coach to an all-female class is perfectly natural. "You guys" is particularly noteworthy because it's encroaching into the English pronoun system as a plural pronoun equivalent to the much derided Southern "y'all."

Gay men and women (of all orientations) have a common cause that isn't always acknowledged. There are areas of English that are extremely resistant to change, where reform is badly needed. Primarily, they have to do with misogynistic attitudes towards sex that denigrate the receptive end of intercourse. For example, phrases like "I got f**ked/screwed over" or "cocksucker" place straight women (and by assuming heterosexuality, *all* women) and gay men in an extremely negative light. Some have even claimed that these attitudes are responsible for lesbianism being more historically tolerated than male homosexuality. I personally don't find it acceptable to refer to acts I believe to be my most intimate expressions of unity and love to imply insult. When I hear people use these ugly words, I have no doubt that the speaker had no intention of conveying the literal meaning and, most often, they don't even *notice* the literal meaning. But isn't that an indication of how deeply ingrained the bias is within us, collectively, if not individually?

What should you take home from this discussion of "lavender language"? Rail against linguistic injustice when you can, but feel safe in the fact that even if you don't, you are making a mark. Be proud of the fact that every word you say helps enact social change. And whether or not the straight world wants to admit it, we're cultural innovators—fashion and language speak louder than actions sometimes! And imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, after all.