

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18454/RULB.2021.27.3.25>**СЕМАНТИКА ГОМОСЕСУАЛЬНЫХ НОМИНАЦИЙ: ДИАХРОННОЕ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЕ**

Научная статья

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Аннотация

Статья посвящена диахронному исследованию гомосексуальных номинаций в рамках концептуальной семантики. Автор выделяет фокусы концептуальной структуры, заложенной в основание номинации лексических единиц, и анализирует их распределение с XIV века до настоящего времени. Отмечаются специфические модели семантического развития гомосексуальных номинаций. Полученные данные показывают, что в определенный исторический период имеется ограниченное количество номинативных фокусов, которые доступны для образования исследуемых лексических единиц. Под влиянием социокультурных факторов наблюдаются изменения в распределении гомосексуальных номинаций и продуктивности фокусов. Выявлено, что прежние лексические выражения, отражающие неприязнь и презрение, заменяются на более смягченные и размытые единицы.

Ключевые слова: гомосексуальный, фреймовая семантика, номинативный фокус, диахронический анализ, дисфемизм, пейоратив.

THE SEMANTICS OF HOMOSEXUAL NOMINATIONS: A DIACHRONIC STUDY

Research article

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Abstract

The article aims to conduct a diachronic study of homosexual nominations within the framework of conceptual semantics. The author identifies the foci of conceptual structure underlying the nomination of lexical items and analyses their distribution from the 14th century to the present day. Specific patterns of semantic development of homosexual nominations are outlined. The findings show that at a certain historical period a limited amount of nominative foci is available for coining lexical items under study. The distribution of homosexual nominations and the productivity of foci are prone to change under the influence of sociocultural factors. It is shown that former lexical expressions of dislike and contempt are replaced with milder and more ambiguous items.

Keywords: homosexual, frame semantics, nominative focus, diachronic analysis, dysphemism, pejorative.

Introduction

Heterosexuality has been historically regarded as the norm and homosexuality as deviation or even perversion. Homosexual relations used to be a major subject of psychiatry and psychology which considered attraction towards the same sex to be a pathological disorder. With the growth of political correctness and interpretation of the phenomenon in terms of human rights and lifestyle choice homosexuality shifted from the domain of medicine to the area of linguistics.

The development of conceptual structures that could reflect dynamics in social attitude to the phenomenon of homosexuality still remains outside linguistic research, and we therefore intend to fill this gap.

Method

As to the methodology applied in the research, the lexical items are analysed from the viewpoint of frame semantics. The lexical meaning is viewed as a microframe, i. e. a hierarchically organized block of knowledge about the referent which is recorded by language means [1, P. 5]. According to E. G. Belyaevskaya, the essential feature of a human brain is the potential ability to focus (concentrate) on any section of the frame or retract from it, depending on what is currently highlighted as the most important.

The speaker's intention determines which part of the knowledge block will serve as a thought centre and which one will be its background [1, P. 12-14].

The purpose of this work is to conduct diachronic cognitive analysis of lexical units referring to the nominative sphere "Homosexuality". The main sources used in this study are etymological and lexicographical data from Oxford English Dictionary [9], the Routledge Dictionary of Historical Slang [10], the Dictionary of Word origins by J. Ayto [2] (14th – early 20th century), the New Partridge Dictionary of Contemporary Slang and Unconventional English [14], the Dictionary of Contemporary Slang by T. Thorne [15], the Dictionary of Euphemisms by R. Holder [5] and Urban Dictionary [16] (late 20th century – early 21st century).

Discussion and results

Throughout English language history multiple lexical items have been used as identifiers of the frame "Homosexual". Original terms either became obsolete or acquired a derogatory emotional charge to be replaced by other substitutes. Pejoration of semantic meaning is likely to have been caused by constant social discrimination against individuals with non-conforming

sexual behaviour. According to J. Hughes, the word-field of homosexuals is characterized by two large groups: the scholarly items and the low-register slang terms [6, P. 236].

Although homosexuality could be applied to both genders, there is a significant lexical imbalance for female terms. Reticence over explicit nominations of lesbians could be explained by the fact that female homosexuality was often overlooked and mistakenly related to other categories, e.g. prostitution, whereas male homosexuality was regarded as a criminal offence and lead to heavy penalties [6, P. 235-238].

The diachronic analysis shows that some nominations of homosexuals tend to undergo a similar semantic shift, which consists in the extension of the idea of homosexuality to **“any annoying individual”**: *sod(omite)* (XIV, coarse slang since the 19th century) [9], *bugger* (1555, a coarse term of abuse and insult since the 18th century) [9], *fag(got)* (1590, a taboo word since the early 20th century) [2]. The mentioned lexical items used to be loose terms in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance and could refer to all kinds of sexual and moral misdemeanours. The development of pejorative sense was reinforced by emotional charge (contempt or dislike for the referent).

In the Middle Ages homosexuality was viewed as an abomination that violated the Bible's teachings and the principles of human nature. For instance, the meaning of the medieval dysphemism *bugger* (1555-1700s) was shifted from **heresy**, or non-traditional (unorthodox) beliefs to non-traditional sexual practices. The expressions *unnatural (filthiness, familiarity)* (XVII) [11, P. 294], *freak* (1896) [9], *degenerate* (1997) [5] have a **“deficiency”** nominative focus.

The contextual analysis shows that lexical items generated by the focus **“low value”** are equally dysphemistic, i. e. are used as a slur to denote a person. The lexical item *poof* (1850, from “puff”) [9] was inspired by the notion that there is something insubstantial about homosexuals [7, P. 202], hence the idea of worthlessness. The most probable motive for the semantic shift from “brushwood” to a “homosexual man” is a metonymical use of “a bundle of sticks” in reference to an old woman [2, P. 208].

Despite being available, pejorative lexical items (e. g. *bugger, sodomite*) denoting homosexual behaviour were often avoided and replaced by milder equivalents. For example, G. Chaucer's “Canterbury Tales” feature a pardoner (seller of indulgencies) carrying typical traits of a homosexual: a high-pitched voice, hare-like eyes, a beardless face, beautifully groomed yellow socks. The author intended to create a hypocritical image of the man who sells forgiveness for people's sins by implying that he was womanlike: “I trowe he were a gelding or a mare”. (I imagine he was a eunuch or effeminate.) [3, P. 277].

The **“effeminacy”** focus could be traced in later nominations of effeminate partners in a homosexual relationship, such as *wife* (1810) [10], *fairy* (1838) [9], *sissy* (1891, from “sister”) [10], *queen* (1924) [9] and diminutives of proper names, e. g. (*Milly*) *Molly* (1709), (*Miss*) *Nancy* (1824) [P. 236], *Mary Ann* (1880) [9], *Jessie* (1923) [9], *Nelly* (1945) [14]. The nicknames represented a cowardly or silly girl and suggested that the referent is weak-spirited or hypersensitive.

The motives for the terms *fairy* and *queen* may seem imperceptible and need explanation. The noun *fairy* suggests the idea of “an imaginary woman”, i. e. whose femininity is fictitious and illusory. The original meaning of the noun *queen* referring to a female ruler or the wife of a king was generalized to a woman who has importance or authority in a particular sphere (*queen of the house, queen of the feast*). The “important woman” nominative focus of *queen* and its homonymy with the medieval noun *quean* referring to an immoral woman are likely to have contributed to the occurrence of the “male homosexual” meaning (1920s) [6, P. 318], [9].

Contextual analysis of historical data confirmed various instances of the “effeminate” focus group: (1) mild or euphemistic (1929, “Hangover” by M. Lief) “What's those?” “You know – all those *queens*.” [9]; (2) humorous (1930, “Vile Bodies” by E. Waugh) “Where's my *Fairy* Prince? Powdering hisself again, I suppose. . . Come here, *Nancy*, and put away the beauty cream” [18, P. 36]; (3) derogatory (1945 “Brideshead Revisited” by E. Waugh) “Come on ... said one to the other, ‘we're wasting our time. They're only *fairies*.’” [17, P. 102]. According to modern dictionaries, the words *fairy, queen, nancy, jessie* are regarded as offensive and inappropriate for homosexuals, i. e. are dysphemistic [13].

Alongside with the “effeminate” group we can trace a range of nouns with **“young servant/slave”** idea. The first attested words having the mentioned focus are borrowings from Arabic, Greek and Latin correspondingly: *bardash* (1542-1721, Arab. “slave”) [9], *Ganymede* (1591-1708) [9] and *Catamite* (1593) [9]. The mythological names are related to a young cup-bearer who belonged to the god of the sky and thunder (Zeus or Jupiter). The lexical items suggest that the referent was kept for unnatural purposes or maintained in a homosexual relationship. The “young servant/slave” nominative focus was later assimilated in English, which gave rise to new homosexual nominations, like *minion* (1593) [6, P. 238], *kept-boy* (1963) [9], *rent-boy* (1969) [9].

Being unproductive in modern-day English, the idea of servitude was supplanted by the focus **“follower/companion”** with a conceptual shift from slavery to cooperation: *suiterer* (1720) [9], *companion* (1932) [5], *a friend of Dorothy* (1950s, derived from ‘the Wizard of Oz’) [7, P. 207], *petit ami* (1977, from French “little friend”) [5]. The fact that the mentioned items can refer to either sex (both male and female) added to pragmatic advantage of the “follower/companion” focus.

The “young servant” focus contributed to the emergence of nominations with the component **“back”** to describe passive partners in a homosexual relationship. The mentioned focus is marked as stable: *backgammon player* (late XVIII) [7, P. 202], *backdoor man* (2nd half of XX) [15], *rear-gunner* (1980s) [15].

The turn of the 20th century marked the emergence of new nomination foci. The English language developed a few nominations for a male homosexual who adopts an active role with a partner: *wolf* (early XX) [15], *chicken hawk* (1980s) [15], *bear* (1989) [9]. The idea underlying the nouns is **“danger”**, hence the metaphor of predators. Conversely, being **defenceless**, “passive” partners would be referred to as “prey”, e. g. *gunsel/gonsil/gunshel/guntzel* (1914-1946, from Yiddish “little goose”) [9], *chickens* (1940s) [7, P. 199].

The progression from speaking in an affected manner and using exaggerated (theatrical) gestures to homosexual behaviour is reflected in conceptual structure of the frame “homosexual”. The lexical item *camp* emerged from theatrical slang into general use in the 1960s [15] being inspired by the idea **“exaggeration”**, i. e. actions and gestures of exaggerated emphasis.

The association between theatre and effeminate manners is likely to date back to medieval times when female clothes were worn by male actors. The word *drag-queen* (1940s) refers to a male homosexual who frequently wears women's clothing. It has overtones of flamboyant, exhibitionist 'femininity' rather than mere cross-dressing [15].

In addition, exaggeration may be linked with loose and immoral life. It should be noted that diachronic analysis reveals a regular semantic shift from **promiscuity** to homosexuality: *lavender* (XIV, "a washerwoman; a prostitute" > 1928, "a male homosexual") [9], *punk* (1596, "a harlot" > 1904, "a male homosexual") [9], *queen* (1820, "a prostitute" > 1929, "a male homosexual") [9], *gay* (1825-1885, "a prostitute" > 1935, "a homosexual") [9], *tart* (1887, "a female of immoral character, a prostitute" > 1935, "a catamite") [9]. Overlapping of the frames "prostitute" and "homosexual" is achieved by highlighting the semantic components "low moral standards" and "low reputation". In terms of conceptual mapping the disapproval of anyone who leads a loose and immoral life is indicative of the metaphor "a male homosexual = a promiscuous woman".

Another focus that has been attested since the 20th century is **the purple/pink colour** which is detected in names of plants, like *lavender* (1928) [9], *pansy* (1929) [2], *daisy* (XX) [15], *lilac* (XX) [15]. The motive is a metonymic reconsideration of femininity and long-standing feminine associations in dressing and clothing, such as using perfume or wearing purple/pink colour (opposed to "masculine" blue). For instance, the lavender plant was used as a bath perfume or as a material to scent washed fabrics. The other plants of purple colour seem to have been introduced by analogy. The "purple" focus is currently productive and is reflected in the adjective *pink* (1950) [9], which is applied to anything perceived as having connection with homosexual relationship (*pink community*, *pink pound/dollar*, *pink newspaper*). A small number of lexical items retract from the colour type, highlighting bright and pretty appearance: *flamboyant* (XX) [5], *flower* (XX) [5], *butterfly* (1984) [5], hence the nominative focus is "**colourful**".

A large number of lexical items indicate eccentricity in appearance or character that is caused by divergence from traditional ideas about sex and gender, e. g. *odd* (1890s) [10], *queer* (1914) [14], *peculiar* (1963) [5], *curious* (1965) [5], (*having*) *alternative sexuality* (1979) [5], *funny* (1981) [5]. Thus, the homosexual nominations are united by the integral nominative focus "**anomaly**", which has been highly productive since the 20th century. The following lexical items contain a more specific semantic component – "**divergence from being straight**", e. g. (*sexual*) *inversion* (1895) [9], *bent* (1940s, the opposite of "straight") [15], *oblique* (1983) [5]. Despite the fact that the "anomaly" items were intended as euphemisms, strong association with homosexuality occasionally supplanted other meanings (e. g. *queer*).

In comparison with male homosexual nominations, very few names are available to sexual relations between women. The etymologically original words used for the designation of female homosexuality were literary borrowings from Latin and Greek: *tribade* (1601) [6, P. 236], *lesbian* (1870s) [9], *Sapphist* (1902) [6, P. 236] and *Uranian* (1893) [9]. The noun *tribade* alludes to a specific sexual technique suggesting an idea of "**rubbing**" (Greek *tribein* "to rub, wear away"). *Uranian* (from Greek "heavenly") served as an epithet of Aphrodite as born of Uranus and was distinguished from the vulgar Venus of commonplace lust, hence the idea of "**divinity**". The names *Lesbian* and *Sapphic* refer to the ill-reputed isle of Lesbos that became notorious for sexual initiative and shamelessness among women, hence the idea of "**eroticism**". The term *lesbian* has supplanted the other three words and still serves as a source for informal derivatives: *les*, *lez(zie)*, *lesbo*, etc.

The mentioned feminine nominative foci are not currently productive. To name a female homosexual with masculine tendencies a novel nominative focus was introduced: "**aggressiveness**". The examples *bulldyke/bulldike* (1931) [14], *butch* (1941, "a tough youth") [14], *diesel(dyke)* (2004) [16] evoke an image of a tough, mannish, or aggressive person. The "**masculinity**" focus in reference to a lesbian playing the male role is a logical response to the "effeminate" masculine block – *old Tom* (1978) [14], *Magnus Pike* (2003) [14]. Conversely, the "**effeminacy**" focus was transferred to a female context to name a passive and more feminine partner in a lesbian relationship: *femme* (1961, from French "woman") [7, P. 206], *lipstick* (1984, metonymic sense, related to female accessories) [14].

The lexical items *homosexual* (1892), *same-gender (oriented)* (1978) [12] could be united by the integral semantic feature "**same/one**". The term "homosexual" (from *homos* "same" and Latin-based *sexual*) coined by C.G. Chaddock in his translation of Krafft-Ebing's "Psychopathia Sexualis" [6, P. 235] serves as the identifier of the frame under study. The lexical items in the group have a true euphemistic sense. The euphemistic potential is attained by retraction from abnormality or manifestation of sexual passion and by highlighting homogeneity and affiliation with individuals of the same gender. Since the 1950s the entries from "anomaly" and "same/one" group have been increasingly extended to refer to both men and women. It was influenced by the sexual revolution, women's liberation movement and the rise of youth popular culture.

The sexual revolution of the 1960s challenged the former gender norms and brought a new understanding of sexual orientation (bisexuality and transsexuality). P. Hart-Brinson argues that there has been a change in social imagination of homosexuality for the last three decades. Younger Americans coming of age after 1990 view homosexuality as identity, whereas older informants characterize it as behaviour [4]. The social changes contributed to creation of new nominative foci.

Bisexuality was reflected in the semantic components "**doubleness**" – *bi* (1956, from "bisexual") [8], *bicoastal* (1990s) [7, P. 207] and "**switching**" – AC/DC (1959, from "alternating/direct current") [8], *switch-hitter* (1950s) [7, P. 207].

The 'anomaly' idea brought about adjacent nominative foci: "**illness**" – *English disease* (1980) [5], *unhealthy* (1983) [5]; "**left**" – *left-footer* (1960s) [15], *left-handed* (1997) [5]. The lexical items have a euphemistic potential, since an excuse for not conforming to the majority is implied: the lexical meaning suggests abnormal physiological characteristics that can't be altered at a person's will.

Those who were embarrassed to make their sexual preference public could be referred to as *closet case/queen* (1970s) [15], *down-low* (1991) [9]. The motive for the "**hidden**" focus is secrecy that homosexuals have to maintain in order to avoid embarrassment and public disapproval.

The conceptual metaphor "woman as tasty food" was reinterpreted to fit non-traditional sexual relations. Although a woman is usually conceptualized as an object of desire or admiration, reference to a homosexual man with the "**tasty**" focus underscores lack of masculinity: *ginger-beer/ginger* (1959-1968, rhyming slang for 'queer') [9], *twinky/twinkie* (1980, from "twinkie cupcake") [9], *cupcake* (1982) [5], *cake boy* (1990s) [16].

The analysis of the second half of the 20th century revealed an emergence of a large dysphemistic share of phraseological units pertaining to male and female homosexuality. Lexical units vary from mild allusions to anal intercourse (brown) to pejorative nominations of human waste and reproductive organs, e.g. 1) “**brown**” – *brown-hatter* (1950s) [15], *brownie-hound* (1980s) [15], *fudgepacker/ fudgenudger* (1980s, from “fudge”, creamy brown food) [15]; 2) “**feces**” – *turd burglar* (1996) [12], *dung-puncher* (2003) [16]; 3) “**buttocks**” – *anal astronaut* (2004) [15], *ass bandit* (2006) [12]; 4) “**penis**” – *dick smoker* (2003) [16], *cock surfer* (2006) [16]; 5) “**pudendum**” – *muff muncher* (1972) [14], *pussy bumper* (2008) [16]. The “pudendum” focus demonstrates diffusion of homosexual and heterosexual nominations, since the expressions can be applied both to homosexual women and heterosexual men.

Table 1 summarizes the evolution of nominative foci in the lexical field under study. The historical periods correspond to the conception time of a particular nominative focus.

Table 1 – The evolution of nominative foci in the lexical field “Homosexuality”

XIV – XIX	late XIX – early XX	1940s-1960s	1970s – the present
effeminacy (M*)	anomaly	effeminacy (F)	brown (M)
young servant/slave (M)	anomaly (divergence from straight)	masculinity (F)	feces (M)
anomaly (deficiency) (M)	purple/pink colour (M)	tasty (M)	buttocks (M)
heresy (M)	colourful (M)	left	penis (M)
rubbing (F**)	aggressiveness (F)	switching (B***)	pudendum (F)
promiscuity (M)	one/same	doubleness (B)	illness
follower/companion (M)	danger (M)	defencelessness (M)	hidden
back (M)	eroticism (F)	exaggeration (M)	
	divinity (F)		
	low value (M)		

* (M) lexical items referring to male homosexuality only

** (F) lexical items referring to female homosexuality only

*** (B) lexical items referring to bisexuality

Conclusion

The diachronic analysis demonstrated a constant inflow of homosexual nominations, with the majority carrying a pejorative sense. Some lexical items were originally derogatory from the point of their creation due to the place origin (e.g. prison slang) or negative ideas underlying the nomination, while others became subject to dysphemisation due to their frequent use.

As to the distribution of ideas underlying the nominative foci of the frame “Homosexual”, we can conclude that XIV-XIX centuries are characterized by predominance of “effeminacy” and “young slave/servant” ideas with reference to male homosexuals.

The decriminalisation of sodomy and the sexual revolution had an impact on the distribution of nominative foci, which resulted in the following: firstly, reinterpretation of homosexuality through other frames and specification (effeminacy > pink colour, tasty food; young slave/servant > companion) or extension of nominative foci (deficiency > anomaly); secondly, diversification of lexical items for naming specific homosexual types (active / passive homosexuals, gay / lesbian / bisexual); thirdly, forming conceptual oppositions (effeminacy – masculinity); lastly, shift from personal characteristics (weakness, promiscuity) to physiological attributes and processes (body organs and human waste). Taking these tendencies into consideration, we expect further multiplication of nominative foci referring to female homosexuality.

Конфликт интересов

Не указан.

Conflict of Interest

None declared.

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