9

‘Queering’ Semantics: Definitional Struggles

SALLY MCCONNELL-GINET

In a famous passage from Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*, Humpty Dumpty explains to Alice why un-birthdays should be celebrated.

> ‘... and that shows that there are three hundred and sixty-four days when you might get un-birthday presents-’
>
> ‘Certainly,’ said Alice.
>
> ‘And only ONE for birthday presents, you know. There’s glory for you!’
>
> ‘I don’t know what you mean by ‘glory’,’ Alice said.
>
> Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. ‘Of course you don’t – till I tell you. I meant ‘there’s a nice knock-down argument for you!’’
>
> ‘But ‘glory’ doesn’t mean ‘a nice knock-down argument’,’ Alice objected.
>
> ‘When I use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean--neither more nor less.’
>
> ‘The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you CAN make words mean so many different things.’
>
> ‘The question is,’ said Humpty Dumpty, ‘which is to be master--that’s all.’

Many students of language have drawn their own morals from this passage. In this paper, I argue that both Humpty Dumpty and Alice are partly right. Alice understands that we can’t make words mean whatever we want them to: there are substantial constraints that arise from past history and from what is involved in trying to mean something. At the same time, there

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is room for shaping and reshaping word meanings. Humpty Dumpty understands that tugs over meaning can be struggles for power. But the stakes go far beyond who wins. Different meanings promote the pursuit of different kinds of social action, cultural values, intellectual inquiry. Meanings, I argue, can indeed facilitate mastery in a variety of arenas.

1 'Queer'

The word *queer* is my starting point. I highlight this particular word because it is such a powerful example of semantic indeterminacy, shift, and, most important, contestation. The word *queer* has figured prominently in recent years in political and theoretical discourse centered on issues of sexuality, especially sexual diversity, and its complex relation to gender. Annamarie Jagose (1996: 1) puts it quite nicely:

> Once the term *queer* was, at best, slang for homosexual, at worst, a term of homophobic abuse. In recent years, *queer* has come to be used differently, sometimes as an umbrella term for a coalition of culturally marginal sexual self-identifications and at other times to describe a nascent theoretical model which has developed out of more traditional lesbian and gay studies. What is clear is that queer is very much a category in the process of formation. It is not simply that queer has yet to solidify and take on a more consistent profile, but rather that its definitional indeterminacy, its elasticity, is one of its constituent characteristics. ... [P]art of queer's semantic clout, part of its political efficacy depends on its resistance to definition, and the way in which it refuses to stake its claim.

In a real sense, I want to argue, many words are queer; that is, they resist definition and it is their definitional intractability that gives them much of their real bite, their efficacy as tools for thought and action. What is the source of such malleability? Like all words, *queer* figures in discursive history, a history that is never fully determinate and that looks back to sometimes conflicting assumptions and forward to a range of alternative possibilities. Noting the importance of the history of its deployment, Judith Butler (1993: 228, 230) claims that the semantic indeterminacy of *queer* is essential to its political utility.

> If the term *queer* is to be a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings, it will have to remain that which is ... never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes ... [T]he term *queer* has been the discursive rallying point for younger lesbians and gay men and, in yet other contexts, for lesbian interventions and, in yet other contexts, for bisexuals and straights for whom the term expresses an affiliation with anti-homophobic politics.

As the passages from Jagose and Butler demonstrate, queer theorists are unlikely to be surprised by my two main claims. (1) Particular meanings are better or worse suited for various kinds of enterprises: to use Jagose's language, 'semantic clout' can be significant but it is variable. To put it a different way, questions of semantics are often not 'just' semantics. (2) The historically contingent character of meaning--its dependence on discursive practice in a range of contexts--is critical to its power. Many linguists and philosophers of language, however, may find these claims initially puzzling, indeed quite queer. In this paper, I sketch a skeletal framework for thinking about the interconnections of linguistic meaning and discourse. The aim is to further understanding of the role language plays in human plans and projects, especially but by no means only those of our plans and projects that connect directly to gender and sexuality.

Let us begin by examining some sample attempts to define *queer*. Table 1 has definitions from several different dictionaries or similar volumes, slightly abridged in some cases.

For many speakers of English, the word *queer* seems pejorative, and several of the entries describe its application as 'derogatory'. Random House puts no such label on any of the uses it describes, and in 1985 *A Feminist Dictionary* noted that the word was sometimes used 'appreciatively', though also noting its 'depreciative' uses. Obviously, what is derogatory depends on who is using the word of whom and from what kind of position. The citation in *A Feminist Dictionary* is from a 1975 piece by Charlotte Bunch:

> One of the ways to understand better [what heterosexism is] ... is to 'think queer,' no matter what your sexuality. By 'think queer', I mean imagine life as a lesbian for a week. Announce to everyone — family, roommate, on the job, everywhere you go — that you are a lesbian. Walk in the street and go out only with women, especially at night. Imagine your life, economically and emotionally, with women instead of men. For a whole week, experience life as if you were a lesbian, and you will learn quickly what heterosexual privileges and assumptions are, and how they function to keep male supremacy working.

There is a long tradition of disagreement over whether *queer* is a label to embrace or to shun. Historian George Chauncey (1994) reports that *queer* was the preferred term of self-reference in New York City in the early part of the twentieth city for men whose primary identification was their sexual interest in other men. And yet the *Encyclopedia of Homosexuality* (Dynes 1990) forecast the imminent death of the word *queer*. The encyclopedia did note that *queer* was still the preferred self-designator for some gays, although its entry indicates some incredulity that the term could be seen as 'value-free'.

queer adj. 1. Deviating from the expected or normal; strange. 2. Odd or unconventional in behavior; eccentric. 3. Arousing suspicion. 4. *Slang.* Homosexual. 5. *Slang.* Fake; counterfeit. -n *Slang.* 1. A homosexual. 2. Counterfeit money. -tr. v. 1. To ruin or thwart. 2. To put into a bad position. [Perhaps from German *quer*, perverse, cross. ... See *terkw-* .]

terkw- To turn. 1. Variant form **t(w)erk-* in Germanic **thwerh* , twisted, oblique, in a. Old High German *dwerah, twerh*, oblique: QUEER. *American Heritage Dictionary* (1969).

queer adj. and n. A. adj. 1. Strange, odd, eccentric; of questionable character, suspicious. early 16th c. 2a. Bad; worthless. mid 16th. b. Of a coin or banknote: counterfeit, forged. *Criminals' slang.* mid 18th c. 3. Out of sorts; giddy, faint, ill. 4. Esp. of a man: homosexual. *slang, derog.*, late 19th c. B. n. 1. Counterfeit coin. Also (US), forged paper currency or bonds. *Criminals' slang.* early 19th c. 2. A (usu. male) homosexual. *slang derog.* Early 20th c. Special collocations and combinations [of particular relevance]: **queer-basher** *slang* a person who attacks homosexuals; **queer-bashing** *slang* physical or verbal attack on homosexuals; **queerdom** n. (*slang, derog.*) the state of being a homosexual mid 20th c. **queerness** n. (a) strangeness; (b) (*slang, derog.*) homosexuality: late 17th c. *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (rev. ed., 1993).

[Note: the 1971 edition of the full OED gives nothing explicitly connected to sexuality in either the main entry or the appendix. It gives essentially the etymology of the AHD, though expressing some skepticism as to the validity because of *queer*'s early 16th c. appearance in Scots]

queer adj. 1. strange or odd from a conventional viewpoint; unusually different; singular. 2. of a questionable nature or character; suspicious; shady. 3. Not feeling physically right or well; giddy, faint, or qualmish. 4. mentally unbalanced or deranged. 5. *Slang* a. homosexual. b. bad, worthless, or counterfeit. v.t 6. to spoil; ruin. 7. to put (a person) in a hopeless or disadvantageous situation as to success, favor, etc. 8. to jeopardize. n. *slang* 9. a homosexual. 10. counterfeit money. *Random House Dictionary* (1966).

queer almost archaic The word's declining popularity may ... reflect today's visibility and acceptance of gay men and lesbians and the growing knowledge that most of them are in fact quite harmless ordinary people. [Although in 20th c. America] *queer* has been the most popular vernacular term of abuse for homosexuals, even today some older English homosexuals prefer the term, even sometimes affecting to believe that it is value-free. *Encyclopedia of Homosexuality* (1990)

queer Perhaps from German *quer*, 'crosswise' in the orginal sense of 'crooked,' 'not straight,' to modern English via Scots beggars cant. Means singular, strange, odd, differing from what is 'ordinary.' Generic slang term used depreciatively and appreciatively to mean homosexual (also means 'counterfeit' as in *queer as a two-dollar bill*). *A Feminist Dictionary* (1985)

Table 1. 'Queer'

Certainly, until the late 1980s *queer* as a positive term was nearly invisible to people outside communities with a focus on same-sex desire. Before the term *gay* spread widely as a non-clinical designator of homosexuals, *queer* did have some currency among some American heterosexuals as 'politer' than words like *faggot, fruit, fairy, dyke*, or *butch* and, of course, less clinical than *homosexual.* This is not to say that it was positive in those uses. In the early 1970s, a former colleague of mine, a straight-identified woman, described another former colleague, a man, as 'queerer than a two-dollar bill.' In doing so, she was certainly condescending and homophobic, and I recall vividly my shock that she would say *queer* rather than *homosexual.* At the same time, however, she clearly saw herself as simply 'telling it like it is' as opposed to engaging in overtly hostile 'name-calling' as she would have been if she'd used *faggot* or *fruit* or *fairy*. Her use of *queer* probably reflected a growing discomfort with other available terms, a discomfort that was manifest both among anti-homophobic activists and among vaguely 'progressive' straight-identified people. Jagose (1996: 75) quotes James Davidson, writing in the London Review of Books in 1994: '*Queer* is in fact the most common solution to the modern crisis of utterance, a word so well-traveled it is equally at home in 19th-century drawing-rooms, accommodating itself to whispered insinuation, and on the streets of the Nineties, where it raises its profile to that of an empowering slogan.'

As the Random House entry in Table 1 indicates, the term tended to be used primarily for men. One fear many self-described lesbians and other nonstraight women have expressed is that this androcentric pattern will persist even as other features of the term's use shift. Certainly the related term *gay* has often not been construed gender inclusively, as the frequent conjunction *gays and lesbians* in all kinds of public discourses indicates. In spite of such fears, however, *queer* has become very widespread in self-reference among political activists as an umbrella term for gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, transgender and transsexual people and others who challenge heteronormative views of sexuality. A turning point was the birth of Queer Nation, with its in-your-face politics and its defiant and memorable slogan: 'We're here; we're queer; get used to it.' Interestingly, definitions of *queer* are missing from some places one might expect to find them. For example, Part IV of *Bi any other Name: Bisexual people speak out* (Hutchins and Kaahumanu 1991) is entitled 'Politics: A Queer among Queers,' and the overview to that section begins with the following quotation from Autumn Courtney, a bi-activist speaking in 1988 at the San Francisco Lesbian Gay Freedom Day Parade Celebration. 'Hey queer! Hey you are queer aren't you? What kind of queer are you? QUEER – you know what it means – odd, unusual, not straight, gay. I am queer, not straight. And ... I am odd. Odd in the fact that I have been an *active open out-of-the-closet Bisexual* in the lesbian and gay world for the last seven years.... We must unite to fight common enemies; we must not squabble among ourselves

over who is more queer or more politically correct.' The editors and other contributors to this very interesting book clearly recognized *queer* as a word applicable to self-identified bisexual people. In spite of that, the short glossary at the end of the book does not include *queer*, even though it does tackle such difficult to define expressions as *bisexual, homophobia, patriarchy*, and *sexism*. Part of the problem for the editors in defining *queer* might have lain in the tension between the kind of identity politics represented by some contributors to the volume and the dis-identity politics that theorists have so often associated with *queer*. Queer theorists tend to emphasize difference and to challenge the ideological processes that help constitute identity, even 'queer' identities.

2 'Gay'

How does *gay*, now probably the most widely used 'umbrella' term, differ from *queer*? To 'outsiders', *gay* was somewhat less familiar than *queer* as a label for a sexual identity until the gay liberation movement began in the late 1960s. It became increasingly prominent in both speech and print during the 1970s and 1980s as gay liberation became a real political force. As a label of self-identification for men, Chauncey (1994) reports that *gay* entered the New York City scene in the 1920s and 1930s and became increasingly common during the wartime period. Kennedy and Davis (1993) report that it became more prevalent as a generic term for lesbians in Buffalo, NY during the 1950s than it had been earlier. Table 2 contains some dictionary entries for *gay*.

> **Gay** a. 1. Showing or characterized by exuberance or mirthful excitement. 2. Bright or lively, especially in color. 3. Full or given to social or other pleasures. 4. Dissolute; licentious. 5. *Slang*. Homosexual. [Middle English *gay, gai*, from Old French *gai*, from Old Provençal, probably from Gothic *gaheis* (unattested), akin to OHG *gahi*, sudden, impetuous.] *American Heritage Dictionary*, 1969.
>
> **Gay** a.,adv., & n. ME [(O)Fr. *gai*, of unkn. origin.] A adj. 1. Full of, disposed to, or indicating joy and mirth; light-hearted, carefree. ME. b. Airy, offhand, casual. late 18th c. 2. Given to pleasure; freq. *euphem.*, dissolute immoral. Late ME. b. Leading an immoral life; *spec.* engaging in prostitution. *slang*. Early 19th c. 3. Good, excellent, fine. Now chiefly *dial.* Late ME. b. Of a woman: beautiful, charming, debonair. Long *arch.* & poetic. Late ME. c. In good health, well. *dial.* Mid 19th c. 4. Showy, brilliant, brightly colored. Also, brightly decorated *with*. Late ME. b. Finely or showily dressed. Now *rare*. Late ME. c. Superficially attractive; (of reasoning, etc.) specious, plausible. Late ME-Late 18th c. (now obsolete) 5. Of a quantity or amount: considerable, reasonable, fair. Chiefly Sc. Late 18th c. 6. Of an animal: lively, spirited, alert. Early 19th c. b. Of a (dog's) tail: carried high or erect. Early 20th. 7. (Of a person, sometimes *spec.* a man) homosexual; of or pertaining to homosexuals; (of a place, etc.) intended for or frequented by homosexuals. Chiefly *colloq.* Mid 20th c. *Special collocations & phrases*: ***gay cat*** *US slang* (a) a hobo who accepts occasional work; (b) a young tramp, *esp.* one in company with an older man. **gay dog** a man given to revelling or self-indulgence. **gay deceiver** (a) a deceitful rake; (b) in *pl.* (*slang*), shaped pads for increasing the apparent size of the female breasts. **Gay Lib, Liberation** (the advocacy of) the liberation of homosexuals from social stigma and discrimination. **gay plague** *colloq.* (sometimes [!] considered *offensive*) AIDS (so called because first identified amongst homosexuals), **get gay** *US slang* act in an impertinent or overfamiliar way. C. n. 3 A homosexual; sometimes *spec.* a male homosexual. Chiefly *colloq.* Mid 20th c. *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (rev. ed., 1993).
>
> **Gay** is a Middle English word derived from the Middle French term GAI (gai). It is defined in British dictionaries as 'joyful, akin to merry, frivolous, showy, given to dissipated or vicious pleasure.' GAI became popularized in the Middle French burlesque theatre's description of effeminate, pretentious male character roles. ... English theatre began to use the word GAY to describe 'saucy, prostituting, or sexually promiscuous' characters. Since women were not at that time allowed on stage in either country, these mock feminine roles were always caricatured by men. The Scottish tradition of the word GAI (guy) was more distinctly used to describe someone different ... an astrologer, forester, or recluse. (E.g., 'I say, he is a bit gai!'). This tradition originally was not negative, but merely implied 'different or queer from the norm'. ... It is interesting to note that the word GAY was not used to describe 'homosexual' women until it found its way to the Americas. Today the terms LESBIAN and SAPPHIC are still the tradition in Europe. In the 1920s and 1930s the word GAY surfaced in the underground homosexual subculture as a term of identification among homosexual men. Expressions such as 'You're looking gay tonight,' or 'That's a gay tie you have there' were used to establish mutual identity in social situations. Finally, in the late 1990s, the term GAY was taken up by the Gay Liberation Movement in its attempt to affirm 'a truly joyous alternative lifestyle' and throw off the sexually objectifying term 'homosexual'. Entry quoted from Jeanne Cordova (1974) in *A Feminist Dictionary*, 1985.

Table 2. 'Gay'

Gay as a designator for homosexuals had many fewer negative associations in the minds of those outside the homosexual community than *queer*. This is partly because it was less familiar in such uses and partly because its other uses were generally more positive than the other uses of *queer*. It is probably for such reasons that it very quickly established itself as the most general 'polite' form for outsiders to use in referring to self-identified homosexuals. By the 1990s even mainstream politicians were talking publicly about 'gays,' especially in contexts where they wanted to be seen as inclusive. Even in 2000, however, *queer*, though widely used by academic theorists and political activists, was still taboo in contexts like presidential candidates' speeches. And large numbers of people who do not identify themselves as belonging to sexual minorities still assume that *queer* is funda-

mentally 'derogatory', although they might use it among familiars as a 'milder' form than some others available.

3 'Lesbian'

In contrast to *queer* and *gay*, the term *lesbian* has no generally familiar uses outside the domain of sexual identity and politics. It has, however, for a very long time been used in speech and in writing as the least marked way to refer to women whose sexual desires are primarily directed towards other women. More accurately, *lesbian* has been the least marked designator outside communities of such women. Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis (1993: 6-7) comment on terms of self-reference among the women they interviewed for their groundbreaking ethnohistorical study of the working class lesbian community in Buffalo, NY from the 1930s through the 1950s.

> We use the term 'lesbian' to refer to all women in the twentieth century who pursued sexual relationships with other women. Narrators, however, rarely used the word 'lesbian,' either to refer to themselves or to women like themselves. In the 1940s the terms used in the European-American community were 'butch and fem,' a 'butch and her girlfriend,' sometimes a 'lesbian and her girlfriend.' Sometimes butches would refer to themselves as 'homos' when trying to indicate the stigmatized position they held in society. Some people ... would use ... 'gay girls' or 'gay kids' to refer to either butch or fem. In the 1950s, the European-American community still used 'butch' and 'fem' [but other] terms became more common. Sometimes butches of the rough crowd were referred to as 'diesel dykes' or 'truck drivers.' They sometimes would refer to themselves as 'queer' to indicate social stigma. In the African-American community 'stud broad' and 'stud and her lady' were common terms, although 'butch' and 'fem' were also used. . . The term 'bull dagger' was used by hostile straights as an insult, but was sometimes used by members of the African-American community to indicate toughness. . .[L]anguage usage was not consistent and a white leader in the 1950s says that she might have referred to lesbians as 'weird people.'

(This discussion makes it clear that it is within particular communities of practice that patterns of language usage develop and that it is important to consider localized as well as broader patterns; see Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992, 1995 for discussion of the notion 'community of practice' in application to language and gender research.)

As Kennedy and Davis point out (p. 7-8), at least four distinct kinds of erotic relationships existed between women in the 19th and 20th centuries: (1) women who passed as men, some of whom were erotically involved with other women; (2) middle-class married women with intense passionate friendships with other women, some erotic (though few genital); (3) middle-class unmarried women who 'built powerful lives around communities of women defined by work, politics, or school'; (4) 'women . . . who socialized together because of their explicit romantic and sexual interests in other women.' Does/should *lesbian* apply to all these women? For some, the word was unavailable; only those in group (4) were likely to think that the word might apply to them (although they may not actually have used it). Such questions are among those that have animated discussion of the term during the past several decades.

Standard dictionary entries don't go much beyond the Isle of Lesbos, where Sappho lived in the 6th c..BC, and the idea of same-sex desire among females. There has been, however, considerable dispute about how to construe *lesbian*. Is it a sexual or a political identity or does it point to a continuum of woman-identified practices and attitudes? Does it allow for diverse sexual practices or is it normativizing? Are fems *really* lesbians–or, conversely, are they the only *genuine* lesbians? Is there a transhistorical notion of *lesbian* or does the term presuppose consciousness of sexual preferences and practices being constitutive of personal identity, a consciousness that arguably developed as a real possibility only in the late 19th century? Table 3 includes a number of entries from *A Feminist Dictionary* which give some idea of the range of these disputes. As with *gay*, the entry leads off with a quote from Jeanne Cordova's 1974 article 'What's in a Name?'.

Although the choice between *gay* and *homosexual* certainly has political overtones, neither of those words has been the site of as much ideological struggle as *lesbian*, with its connections not only to anti-homophobic but also to anti-sexist politics. Indeed, there is a tendency, as noted in some of the citations in Table 3, to conflate feminism and lesbianism. The quotes from Mary Daly and from Marilyn Frye take being a lesbian to require not only defiance of male dominance but also a focus of attention on women in all areas of life. On this kind of view, *lesbian* certainly resists assimilation into some gender-neutral 'gay' category. Some lesbian theorists (e.g. Jeffreys 1993), have even seen gay men as more invested in patriarchy than straight men, arguing that their erotic preference for men stems from a thoroughgoing misogyny. In my view, although gay men, like some women, are not immune from misogyny, this particular charge seems profoundly misguided. Not only have many men active in gay liberation also been active in anti-sexist efforts. It is also clear that erotic preferences are far more complex than the equation of a man's male-directed desires with his disdain for women would allow.

This is not to deny that gender and sexual oppression are linked in many different ways. Heterosexual desire (or at least norms promoting such desire) can lead women to cooperate in their own subordination, especially in cultural contexts that eroticize female vulnerability and male strength. These connections are part of what has led some to see lesbianism as the only path to female emancipation. Opting out of what Barrie Thorne (1993)

and Penelope Eckert (1996) call the 'heterosexual marketplace' can be a liberating move for some girls and young women. And being not dependent on men sexually can make it easier to avoid other kinds of dependence on them (and also the deference that dependence often brings). But equating lesbianism and feminism risks obscuring the specificity both of sexualities and of gender dynamics. The equation can be particularly problematic because it resonates all too well with persisting conflation in the dominant culture of heterosexual eroticism with male dominance and female subordination. Many feminists, among them many lesbians, want to open up more discursive space for sexual desire and erotic activity involving strong female agency no matter whether the sexual object might be female or male. Farwell (1988) treats definitions like Daly's and Fry's as 'simply' metaphoric since they treat genital sexual activity between women as insufficient for applying the label *lesbian* and require a certain (feminist) stance toward men and male dominance. I return below to this and other metaphoric uses of identity labels, but at this point I simply want to note that such uses, even if seen by all as special and 'non-literal', are nonetheless often implicated in attempts to promote certain kinds of social norms and values or pursue certain kinds of political strategies.

lesbian

'The word LESBIAN comes to us as a British word derived from the Greek 600 BC Isle of Lesbos and 'the reputed female homosexual band associated with Sappho of Lesbos'. (*Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary*). Etymologically speaking, the word LESBIAN, rather than the word 'gay', is the more correct term when speaking of women-identified women.' (Jeanne Cordova, 1974)

Mary Daly ... prefers 'to reserve the term LESBIAN to describe women who are woman-identified, having rejected false loyalties to men on all levels. The terms *gay* or *female homosexual* more accurately describe women who, although they relate genitally to women, give their allegiance to men and male myths, ideologies, styles, practices, institutions, and professions.' (Mary Daly, 1978)

'A lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion.' (Radicalesbians, 1970)

'I, for one, identify a woman as a lesbian who says she is.' (Cheryl Clarke, 1981)

'Lesbian is the only concept I know of which is beyond the categories of sex (woman and man), because the designated subject (lesbian) is *not* a woman, either economically, or politically, or ideologically.' (Monique Wittig, 1981)

Those who 'have a history of perceiving them Selves as such, and the will to assume responsibility for Lesbian acts, erotic and political.' (Janice Raymond, 1982)

One who, by virtue of her focus, her attention, her attachment is disloyal to phallocratic reality. She is not committed to its maintenance and the maintenance of those who maintain it, and worse her mode of disloyalty threatens its utter dissolution in the mere flicker of the eye. (Marilyn Frye, 1983)

Lesbian continuum includes 'a range — through each woman's life and throughout history — of woman-identified experience; not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman.' Adrienne Rich wants to expand the concept of lesbian to 'many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support.' (Adrienne Rich, 1980)

Lesbianism means that 'you forget the male power system, and that you give women primacy in your life — emotionally, personally, politically.' (Rita Mae Brown, 1976).

'Feminism is the complaint, and lesbianism is the solution.' (Jill Johnston, 1975)

Joan Nestle challenges this slogan, on the grounds that it invalidates lesbian herstory. Pre-Stonewall lesbians, though not lesbian feminists as currently defined, were nevertheless feminists. 'Their feminism was not an articulated theory, it was a lived set of options based on erotic choice.' Further the playing out of butch-fem roles, now considered oppressive, was actually a mode of adventuring produced by their social and sexual autonomy from mainstream culture. (Joan Nestle, 1981).

'For most women – especially of my age – it is not a choice. Being attracted to women sexually is a unique and precious response.' (Chrystos, 1981)

lesbian politics of naming

'The attempt to criminalize lesbianism through a clause in the 1921 [UK] Criminal Law Amendment Bill (to place it on a par with the 1885 criminalisation of male homosexuality) foundered on the conviction that drawing attention to the existence of a practice unknown to most women might itself incite the practice.' (Lucy Bland, 1983)

'The denial of lesbians is literally Victorian. The Queen herself was appalled by the inclusion of a paragraph on lesbianism in the 1885 Criminal Law that sought to penalize private homosexual acts by two years' imprisonment. She expressed a complete ignorance of female inversion or perversion and refused to sign the Bill, unless all reference to such practices was omitted.' (Blanche Cook, 1977)

'It is not ethical to call yourself a feminist when you mean lesbian, or to use those words interchangeably.' (Thyme Siegel, 1983)

Table 3. 'Lesbian'

Even if we stay with sexualities, the citations make clear that there have been many disputes on just what being lesbian might amount to. Is it a matter of sexual behavior or of sexual desire or of sexual identity? Is it im-

possible to be lesbian if one does not embrace that identity whole-heartedly? Can someone whose sexual fantasies include both other women and men be lesbian? Can someone who engages in sexual activity with both women and men be a lesbian? Can a woman become a lesbian at the age of 50 or stop being a lesbian at the age of 30? Questions like these have been actively debated and were particularly prominent during the 1970s and 1980s. They have faded somewhat in importance as activists have tended to move away from identity politics, although they are by no means dead.

4 Comparisons of *Queer*, *Gay*, and *Lesbian*

Both *gay* and *lesbian* have tended to focus on identities, often modeled on ethnic identities. In contrast, *queer* has been mobilized in the past decade or so to cut across a range of sexual identities. One aim has been to bring together those who *dis*-identify with heteronormativity; i.e., those who challenge sexual norms that assume potentially reproductive sexual encounters as a standard, with other kinds of sexual activity at best a substitute for the 'real thing' or, more often, somehow distasteful or morally wrong. Unlike the self-affirming uses of *gay* and *lesbian*, however, the reclamation of *queer* is pretty much limited to gay-affirmative groups or to academic contexts like this book. As noted earlier, the word is not used by presidential candidates in their speeches or in New York Times reporting on gay rights issues. A number of my students have reported not knowing that *queer* could be used to speak about diverse sexualities without thereby derogating them. Thus the reclamation of *queer* is certainly still not a complete one, being limited to certain communities of practice.

In contrast to *queer*, both *gay* and *lesbian* are widely seen as non-judgmental terms, quite useable in contexts where they might be heard by those they designate. Of course, this does not mean that there is no 'taint' of homophobic attitudes associated with these words. Those of my students who thought that *queer* was always somewhat negative and that *gay* and *lesbian* were the preferred neutral terms were nonetheless familiar with the relatively recent use of *gay* as an all-purpose derogatory descriptor, roughly glossable as 'uncool' or 'gross'. This use, very common among elementary school kids, is not reflected in the dictionary entries above. It seems quite likely, however, that the third graders' sneering 'That's so gay' ultimately has arisen from contemptuous talk about gay sexuality, even though the third graders themselves generally do not make a connection to sexual orientation (and may never even have heard the kind of homophobic talk that gave birth to their own usage).

So we have here a cluster of related words – *queer*, *gay*, and *lesbian* – each of which has a cluster of (more or less) related senses or patterns of use, and each of which has a history not just of change from earlier patterns but of ongoing tension among them. There are many more words that are related to these: e.g., *homosexual*, *heterosexual*, *monosexual*, *bisexual*, and *straight*. In his influential *Keywords*, social theorist Raymond Williams pointed to the sociocultural significance of distinct but connected interpretations for particular words. His entry for the word *culture* contains the following discussion (Williams 1983: 91, 92):

> Faced by this complex and still active history of the word, it is easy to react by selecting one 'true' or 'proper' or 'scientific' sense and dismissing other senses as loose or confused... It is clear that, within a discipline, conceptual usage has to be clarified. But in general it is the range and overlap of meanings that is significant. The complex of senses indicates a complex argument about the relations between general human development and a particular way of life, and between both and the works and practices of art and intelligence. . . [T]he range and complexity of sense and reference indicate both difference of intellectual position and some blurring or overlapping. These variations, of whatever kind, necessarily involve alternative views of the activities, relationships, and processes which this complex word [i.e., *culture*] indicates. The complexity, that is to say, is not finally in the word but in the problems which its variations of use significantly indicate.

Similarly, the complexity we find in *queer* and its kin points to the wide array of issues involved in thinking about sexual practices, sexual identities, sexual norms and values.

5 Word Meaning and Social Practice

What I want to do in the rest of this paper is explore some of the mechanisms through which the shaping and reshaping of word meanings emerge as part and parcel of the shaping and reshaping of social and political practices. There are four independent but related ideas about language and word meaning I want to draw on. (1) Natural languages are in important ways like formal linguistic systems or logics in which basic expressions—the word-like units—are not given fixed meanings but must be assigned interpretations when the system is used. (2) The cognitive structure underlying the concept a (content) word labels is less like a definition or a prototype than like a theory (or family of theories) in which that concept plays a key role. (3) Interpretations draw on preceding discourse understandings and on projections of future plans. (4) Linguistic communication involves bringing about some kind of change in the discourse-produced picture of how things are (or might be or should be or ...).

5.1 Words as 'empty' forms

The first idea—that a natural language is in many ways very like a formal linguistic system—is common to a number of approaches to semantics in linguistics and philosophy. Formal semantic theories offer considerable insight into combinatorial semantics—how word meanings fit together to express thoughts. There is significant work done on the semantics of function words like *and*, *not*, *if*, *every*, and *the*. From a slightly different but also relatively formal perspective, there is very illuminating investigation of such features of word meaning as the argument structure of verbs—e.g., the role of a verb's direct object or its subject. Formal semantics has also offered insight into the meaning of plurality, tense and aspect, possessives, and other grammatical morphemes and constructions. But formal semantics has rather little to say about the meanings of the basic content-ful expressions, about words like *woman* or *tree* or *water* or *laugh* or, of course, expressions like *queer*, *gay*, and *lesbian*. There may be some things to be noted about truth-conditional relations among words; e.g., perhaps *Kim is a lesbian* entails *Kim is a woman* which in turn entails *Kim is not a man*. Such connections, however, are limited and do not offer us much insight into the conceptual complexity of basic vocabulary items. (I will return to the question of why and how sometimes even such entailments seem to be missing.)

Among the more content-ful analyses of lexical items are those that identify semantic features on the basis of contrasts: e.g., *woman* contrasts with *man* in being +female, with *girl* in being +mature, and so on. The idea that what a word means is, at least in part, a matter of how it contrasts with certain other words in the same semantic field is an important one that informs many empirical explorations of word meaning. The status and utility of semantic features or components is a matter of some dispute, but there is no question that lexical contrasts have to figure in any guide to word usage and that speakers must incorporate them somehow in their understanding of linguistic practice.

There are also, of course, other ways to shed light on word meanings. So-called cognitive semantics looks less at particular words and more at metaphorical patterning, at the recurrence of certain abstract identifications. For example, Caitlin Hines (2000) explains the evolution of dessert terms to refer to women in terms of such identifications as WOMEN ARE SWEET, ACHIEVING A DESIRED OBJECT IS GETTING SOMETHING TO EAT. And George Lakoff (1987) has an interesting discussion of the complex and changing conceptual structure(s) associated with the word *mother* as reproductive technologies and women's increased participation in the waged labor force allow more varied kinds of relations between women and children. The evolving and competing meanings he identifies are, of course, embedded in evolving and contested social practices of reproduction and parenting. (Note that the recent emergence of *parent* as a verb is part of feminist-inspired moves to involve men more actively in responsibility for childcare.)

An approach in which word meaning is relatively empty and is filled in as part of ongoing discursive processes can indeed draw on insights from cognitive semantics or from componential analysis into semantic features. What is important is that the empty vessel view of words does not assume that there will be available anything like a necessary and sufficient set of conditions for applying the word. Nor does it assume that the word's meaning is somehow encapsulated in something like a prototypical exemplar. On the view I am proposing, words do not really *have* (much) meaning—word meanings are underspecified—but they are given meaning as they are deployed to do things in ongoing discourse. Humpty Dumpty was on the right track.

5.2 Words anchored by 'theory'

But now we must turn to the remaining ideas I mentioned. Of course, words are as not completely 'empty' as I may have seemed to suggest, free to be used in just any old way. People do attach some kind of concepts, some sort of cognitive structures, to the content words of their language. And, just as important, people often take their uses of those words to be 'regulated' in certain ways that may go beyond what is in individual users' heads, their individual lexical concepts. What has been called the 'theory-theory' of lexical concepts draws on recent work in psychology and also on some ideas from the philosophy of language. In his influential 'The Meaning of "Meaning",' philosopher Hilary Putnam (1975) posited a 'linguistic division of labor' for regulating our use of words. Putnam notes that many English speakers might have both the words *elm* and *beech* in their lexicons, knowing nothing about them other than the fact that they are trees. To know whether someone has spoken truly if she says 'Hildegard's yard has two elms in it,' speakers turn to those with botanical expertise. We use others to access the scientific theory that elucidates the distinction between elms and beeches. In this attenuated sense, then, tree-theory underlies these lexical concepts, but particular individuals may know only that there is a relevant tree-theory, whereas others may have some mental representation of this theory (though perhaps even then deferring to experts on fine points). At the same time, Putnam suggests, individual language users may access a 'stereotype' that guides them fairly well in regulating their own usage. For example, even people who believe that certain bodily features are 'really' criterial for applying the terms *woman* and *man* to individuals may rely on things like clothing, hairstyles, facial hair, and linguistic and behavioral style to guide their own labelling of people as women or men. Putnam's

basic idea has been adopted by a number of cognitive and developmental psychologists. Keil (1989), e.g., notes that the child seems to shift from an early belief that the stereotypical features are what counts to later recognition, at least for biological kinds, that there is stuff 'below the surface' that counts more than what is readily apparent.

What neither Putnam nor the psychologists influenced by him point out is that the stereotype may be allied with a theory of social norms: this is how women 'should' dress, wear their hair, speak and act. Such norms can then be drawn on for helping to interpret expressions like *womanly*. Even generic statements about *women* are often not simple statistical generalizations but generalizations that mark those who deviate from them as somehow deficient as women, as not 'true' women, as 'queer' in some way or other. Socially normative theories may be in competition with one another, and language users may recognize a number of alternative uses of a word, each of which 'fits' better with some theories than with others. The standard 'theory-theory' does not consider the possibility of competing theories. It might be that for some lexical concepts like tree names, ceding semantic authority to scientific experts is unproblematic. Who is master matters much more, however, when we turn to words and concepts that play a more central role in our informal, everyday theories of ourselves and our social worlds, our cultural values and ideologies. What I propose is that words may be associated with a family of theories, some of which are in direct competition with one another, others of which are simply deployed for alternative purposes. 'Theory' may weight the balance too much towards notions of scientific expertise. Perhaps it might be better to say that words are associated with families of discursive practices that give them their real force.

5.3 Words shaped by history

The third idea is that interpretations draw on the past and project to the future. One might be introduced to the word *lesbian* by being told that it's a term for female homosexuals, but the concept would be enriched and complicated in many different ways. Social stereotypes of various kinds can get added. As one of my self-identified lesbian students said sarcastically, 'Of course we're all Birkenstock-wearing vegetarian dykes with extremely short hair who hate men.' And, as the citations in Table 3 show, political and moral attitudes of various sorts also get loaded in. The lexical concept in some sense organizes potentially accessible discursive history. Some parts of the history are seen as grounding 'literal' meaning (perhaps quasi-scientific theories of women's erotic attraction to other women) and others are seen as having a different kind of connection, relating to the role the word plays in various other kinds of theories and debates.

Where Humpty Dumpty went astray was in assuming that he could do anything at all with any word. When Humpty Dumpty says something to Alice, he is entitled to assume that they can both access (1) a linguistic system and certain words in it, (2) patterns of using those words to do particular things, (3) background beliefs and other attitudes, (4) assumptions about the current situation and some of its likely developments. It is through a (more or less) shared discursive history that (1)-(3) are guaranteed—it is a common past that is important. If Humpty Dumpty and Alice have not had much prior personal contact, the assumptions they can make about access to patterns of word use and to background beliefs and other attitudes will be limited to what they have reason to think is relatively conventional or at least very widespread in discursive practices in the larger society to which they belong. On the other hand, if they are long-time coparticipants in some local community of practice, they may well be able to assume access to many more distinctive word uses and particularized attitudes. What (4) involves includes not only standard assessments of current surroundings and why linguistic exchange is occurring but also appraisals of interlocutors' social relationship to one another and their relevant capacities and interests and resources. So, for example, even though *queer* might have long carried a presumption of derogation and an air of gay-bashing in the discursive history of most interlocutors, those who heard activists chanting 'We're here, we're queer, get used to it!' were not thereby misled into thinking that these folks using *queer* to refer to themselves were abjectly confessing to self-hatred. Rather it was clear that by publicly and assertively using the term in self-reference queer activists were explicitly challenging the contempt and the attempts to control them that had fueled others' use of *queer* as a term of abuse. Indeed, the challenge would not have been so insistently issued had they used a word that did not have a readily accessible history of use in gay-bashing. 'We're gay; get used to it' or 'We're homosexual; get used to it' or 'We're not straight; get used to it' would have been far less effective. And of course it was not just the history of *queer* in homophobic practices but also its suggestions of 'strange' and 'odd' and 'not ordinary' that helped give the slogan its punch, its in-your-face effectiveness. *Queer* can insist on the 'specialness' of those so labeled. (Some may have also appreciated the fact that English *queer* sounds a lot like French *cuir* 'leather', creating a bonus joke for those in the know; my colleague Nelly Furman reminded me of this crosslingual wordplay.)

Examining a very different cultural context, Andrew Wong and Qing Zhang (2000) discuss the appropriation of the word *tongzhi*, widely employed in Chinese revolutionary discourse and usually glossed as 'comrade', as a term for members of the 'imagined' queer community being constructed

by a Chinese gay and lesbian magazine. The word *tongzhi* brings its Chineseness and its revolutionary associations with it; it does not have the clinical feel of the medical term *tongxinglian zhe* 'homosexual', allowing it to emphasize ties with others rather than some kind of deviance. Its use in the magazine creates a quite different sense of community than would the use of imported western terminology like *queer*, translated into Chinese as *ku-er*, literally something like a 'cool person'. The word *tongzhi* did have some negative associations from its history in Communist discourse, but the new uses managed to ameliorate the word and reclaim it as an appropriate self-designator for members of a home-grown queer community. But amelioration was by no means completely successful. As Wong (this volume) shows, the term in its recently acquired sexual identity uses is undergoing new pejoration. The word *tongzhi* is now also used in the mainstream press to apply to Chinese gays and lesbians, but a large proportion of those uses are negative. Not only is sexual orientation often highlighted inappropriately, but there is frequently a kind of 'mocking' of the *tongzhi* and their relationships to one another. These detailed case studies illustrate beautifully that what words can convey and the impact they can have is firmly rooted in their connection to past histories and to conceptions of future possiblities. It also shows how different and competing perspectives on social practices and values affect linguistic practice. The pejoration of *tongzhi* occurs in opposition to attempts to push toward a future of sexual tolerance and inclusiveness and get beyond the still predominant idea of deviance that infects talk and thinking about Chinese sexual minorities.

5.4 Words as tools for acting

This gets us to the final and central idea—namely, that linguistic communication is a kind of action. More specifically, to say something is generally to attempt to bring about a change in the mutually available picture of how things are or might be or should be. This important insight is at the heart of the picture of meaning and communication developed by the philosopher Paul Grice (Grice 1989 collects most of Grice's papers on meaning and related issues). Humpty Dumpty claims that when he said 'There's glory for you' he meant 'There's a nice knock-down argument for you'—i.e., that he intended to get Alice to recognize that the possibility of 364 gift days rather than just a single one provided an irrefutable argument in favor of celebrating unbirthdays. Unlike the Queer Nation activists, however, Humpty Dumpty was not able to draw on a rich context that would make it clear that this is what he intended to do. Just wanting *glory* to mean 'nice knock-down argument' is not enough to endow it with that meaning: the past history plus the present context must support what a language user tries to do with words. Of course, Humpty Dumpty is right that we do occasionally

simply stipulate that we are using old words in new ways, but if stipulation is needed a reliable communicator will preface her comments with the stipulation. Without stipulation, which is always a rather special move and of course a part of establishing the current context, interlocutors must rely on what can be accessed from discursive history and readily accessible features of the current context. These features include assumptions about the others' knowledge, cleverness, and so on. It is clear that Humpty Dumpty did not think Alice could actually figure out what he had meant (nor could he reasonably have done so). On the Gricean account of what it is for a speaker to mean something to an addressee, Humpty Dumpty could not really have meant to Alice 'there's a nice knock-down argument for you'. Humpty Dumpty can expect Alice to ignore past discursive history only if he has explicitly asked her to do so for purposes of the current exchange. And even then, it's pretty hard to get interlocutors to stick to a stipulative definition of a familiar word. But the Queer Nation slogan shows that there are indeed questions of 'mastery' or power involved. To use *queer* both to affirm difference from heterosexual norms and to refuse efforts to eliminate or reduce such differences is to claim a kind of 'mastery', to refuse the conjunction of abuse and attribution of homosexuality so prominent in the discursive history of the word *queer*. At the same time such moves typically meet with resistance. It is hardly surprising that we do not find a general 'acceptance' of *queer* as affirmative.

Notice that we can have metaphorical interpretations that arise contextually and contribute to discursive history but do not have the same kind of effect on default interpretations as, e.g., the gay-affirming uses of *queer*. For example, when Monique Wittig says *a lesbian is not a woman* (see Table 3), she is not really challenging earlier discourses that put particular lesbians in the category *woman*. She is not, e.g., saying that a lesbian does not have two X chromosomes or does not have ovaries or a vagina. As she goes on to say, her point is that 'economically, politically, … a lesbian is not a woman.' Similarly, Lord Baden-Powell is reputed to have said, after meeting with a group of African political leaders one of whom was female, 'the only man in the room was that woman.' His point, of course, was that she was the only one who showed the kind of courage and intelligence he took as characteristic of men and not of women. He was not commenting on her bodily configuration or that of her male companions. So we might still maintain that language users 'know' that *being a lesbian* entails *being a woman*, which entails *not being a man*, even though we can understand Wittig and Baden-Powell when they deny those entailments. We recognize their uses of *woman* and *man* as somewhat special, as non-literal and metaphorical, mainly because their utterances do have something of a shock

value--and are clearly intended to seem paradoxical. Wittig is forcing us to confront various aspects of men's control over wives and female lovers and to see lesbianism as breaking such bonds. Baden-Powell is heaping contempt on the African men who did not seem to live up to his standards and doing so by comparing them invidiously with their female compatriot, whom he lauds but in a somewhat problematic way. Such metaphorical uses can, of course, become literalized , as in the words *womanly* and *manly*.

Marilyn Farwell (1988) has discussed *lesbian* as a metaphor for female creative energy. As Farwell says (p. 110), the metaphor 'remains within the tradition that highlights sexuality as the core of creativity, but because it privileges a female sexuality that does not need or want male energy, it radically revises the symbolic order.' Adrienne Rich's writings have been especially influential and also very controversial in developing this metaphor: 'It is the lesbian in us who is creative, for the dutiful daughter of the fathers in us is only a hack' (Rich 1979: 201). This use is not far from the definitions of Daly and Frye, discussed earlier, which see the lesbian as the one who has turned attention towards women and away from 'the fathers'. In her very important article introducing the notion of the 'lesbian continuum', Rich highlights 'forms of primary intensity between and among women' (see Table 3) and seems at times to erase sexuality from the picture. We take Wittig's claim that a lesbian is not a woman as metaphorical in the sense that it is supposed to have a certain shock value and to direct us to the pervasive and debilitating dependence of women upon men in all kinds of realms. Similarly, we take Rich's focus on the non-erotic to be intended to direct our attention to a positive kind of ideal of women-centered activities and concerns and, at the same time, to infuse fresh and positive meaning into the term *lesbian*. Is it also an exhortation to women whose sexual desires center on other women to pay more attention to women's needs and interests in other domains? Probably, though it is probably more widely addressed and intended to push all women towards increased concern for one another. Can we read Rich as exhorting women who care about women's welfare to direct their erotic energy only towards other women? This seems much less clear and interpreters have not agreed (nor have they always read her as 'exhorting' rather than 'describing').

Ferguson, Zita and Addelson (1981) each discuss what Farwell has called Rich's metaphoric lesbian. Ferguson seems to take Rich to be speaking literally and criticizes her use of *lesbian* as ahistoric and problematically desexualized, rendering it unable to discriminate among contemporary forms of sexual identity. Zita agrees that Rich may have strayed too far from sexuality in her conception of the lesbian continuum. At the same time, Zita thinks that Ferguson fails to appreciate the power of heterosexism

as an institution and has missed the challenge that Rich's notion offers to polarized heterosexist conceptions. Like Rich, Zita takes women's bonding to be crucial to their resistance to male dominance. Addelson (p.195) finds the notion of the lesbian continuum useful for examining 'the past (and present) not in terms of hierarchical institutions but in terms of women's own understandings within the historical contexts of life patterns they were creating,' although she disagrees that effective resistance to male dominance has always involved women bonding with one another. She points out that by its nature *lesbian* will be understood from (at least) two perspectives. In the dominant culture, it (still) designates a 'deviant' identity, one that is institutionalized as 'abnormal', whereas lesbian communities themselves have a positive perspective and a critique to offer of the dominant view. But she also offers a cautionary note (p. 199): 'the terms defining willingness to [engage politically in resistance to both heterosexism and male dominance] should not be made into a procrustean bed against which to measure the resistance of women throughout history or throughout our own society.'

As Addelson makes clear, disputes over interpretations show the ways in which alternative theories and ideologies and strategies get enmeshed with how words are understood. It is because words are used to do things, to have effects, that people often endorse or promote one construction of a word over alternative ways that they also recognize of construing it. So though some people use *queer* as simply equivalent to 'gay male or lesbian,' politically there can be real utility in creating alliances with other people outside heterosexual norms: e.g., those who identify themselves as bisexual or transsexual. Queer activism promotes such alliances. What seems an obvious difference of the word *queer* from compound designators like 'lesbian and gay' or 'lesbian, gay, bisexual' or 'lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual' is that it does not draw definitive boundaries. It leaves room to welcome those who identify with none of the standard categories of sexual minorities but nonetheless feel excluded by dominant heterosexual norms. In some contexts it even embraces those who just want to promote sexual tolerance or non-restrictiveness though their own sexual dispositions might seem to categorize them as *straight*. Such inclusiveness is often seen as a political advantage. It can, however, also be seen as a shortcoming: namely, such a sweeping use of *queer* obscures the special burden born by those whose sexual inclinations are heavily stigmatized. A rather different political objection to *queer* as an umbrella term is that it does not fit well with an assimilationist gay politics since it seems to insist on the peculiarity, the difference, of those who do not identify as straight.

Queer theory grew out of lesbian and gay studies, and several of the papers in this volume address its relevance to linguistic inquiry. Teresa de

Lauretis is often credited with coining the term in a special 1991 issue of *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, but the thinking it embodies goes back considerably further. Queer theory questions – queries? – the notion of essential or innate sexual identities. It points to the historical and cultural specificity of sexual practices and categories, criticizing the assumption that the world 'naturally' splits into homosexual and heterosexual people. It treats both gender and sexual identities as 'performative', constituted through discursive histories of repeated acts of self- and other-identification. It often emphasizes the ongoing 'polymorphous perversity' of sexual desire and practice. It examines the constraining effects of naming and the effects of identity formations. There is, of course, not a single queer theory but a family of related queer theories. And the possibility of accessing these theories is part of what underlies the lexical concept of *queer* for many of us academics who are trying to explore productive ways for feminism and queer theory to 'meet.'

I have emphasized the elusiveness and elasticity of *queer*. Do we always want such fuzziness in our concepts? For certain kinds of purposes, rigidifying interpretations can be useful. This is why we find specialized uses of everyday words so often in theoretical discourses. In linguistics, e.g., we try to impose on our students an understanding of *dialect* in which everyone speaks a dialect, even though in ordinary uses *dialect* is reserved for language varieties that are seen as either defective or at best suited only for certain kinds of informal uses. Sometimes of course new terminology is introduced for technical purposes, but even when this happens there can be an ongoing process of trying to develop definitions that will elucidate the patterns in which the investigators are interested, with one way of marking out the patterns often more useful than another. A classic article of the 1930s is called 'On Defining the Phoneme.' For both *lesbian* and *feminist*, there have been extensive arguments about what kind of 'definition' best fits both the needs of intellectual (esp. historical) inquiry and of current political strategizing. (For *lesbian*, see, e.g., Rich 1980; Ferguson, Zita, and Addelson 1981; Farwell 1988. For *feminist*, see Offen 1988.)

6 Defining

Defining is often an attempt to direct thought along certain theoretical lines, to push a particular strategy for political action. Definitions draw boundaries around a concept. When the concepts involved are ones connected to personal identities, some people are included and others excluded by defining. Defining is seldom 'just' semantics but is consequential precisely because words are key resources for thought and action, central players in theory and in politics. Kulick (2000) argues that 'queer linguistics' is too slippery a notion to be useful in sociolinguistic inquiry, that the elasticity so celebrated by queer theorists promotes confusion and equivocation when used in studies of linguistic phenomena. Certainly, any particular study that aims to enrich our understanding of how talk enters into the construction of sexual identities will need to offer some explicit discussion of the people and practices being examined. But that kind of particularized explicitness is not inconsistent with seeing the study as part of a broader (and not clearly bounded) inquiry into 'queer linguistics'.

Queer certainly does in many of its uses recognize openness and indeterminacy in interpretation. At the same time, it recognizes the need to continue questioning names and strategies as they change their directions in the course of discursive history. Humpty Dumpty's dream of being fully 'master' is illusory, but shifting alliances can indeed use words to mean and to do new things.

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10

The Semantic Derogation of *Tongzhi*: A Synchronic Perspective

ANDREW WONG

1 Introduction

In the last few decades, many studies have examined the social processes through which semantic derogation takes place. For instance, Schultz (1975) suggests that prejudice is the main reason why the female pair of many English terms (e.g., *mister* vs. *mistress*) gained negative connotations. Furthermore, McConnell-Ginet (1989) proposes a discourse-based theory to explain how the micropolitics of daily discourse between ordinary individuals can lead to the semantic derogation of women. However, since the object of study is diachronic change, it is often difficult to recapture the discourse conditions under which semantic derogation occurred. As a result, few studies have provided concrete evidence on how language use contributes to semantic derogation. To address this issue, this study examines the on-going semantic change of the Chinese term *tongzhi.* The original meaning of this term is 'comrade.' By looking at change in progress, I believe it is possible to gather enough language-use evidence to show the social mechanism underlying semantic derogation. *Tongzhi* was a general address term in Communist China, but it has become disfavored due to its original political connotations (Fang and Heng 1983). Nevertheless, since the late 80s, it has been appropriated by the gay and lesbian communities in Hong Kong and Taiwan as a reference term for 'gay and lesbian Chinese,' and it

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