

OCCASIONAL PAPER 5

**A PRELIMINARY NOTE ON THE USE OF WORDS SUCH AS “GAY”, “LESBIAN” OR
“HOMOSEXUAL” AND TERMS SUCH AS “SAME-SEX” OR “LGBTI”**
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this brief report is to examine the use of words such as “gay”, “lesbian”, “homosexual” and terms such as “LGBTI” and “same-sex”. Some observations are made on the historical use of such terms. This note is especially appropriate in relation to the debate on same-sex issues and sexuality education. It is argued that the promotion of a euphemism such as “gay” to hide the reality of men-who-have-sex-with-men is at best deceptive and consistent with the meaning of propaganda.

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A PRELIMINARY NOTE ON THE USE OF WORDS SUCH AS “GAY”, “LESBIAN” OR “HOMOSEXUAL” AND TERMS SUCH AS “SAME-SEX” OR “LGBTI”

The homosexual and related communities are particularly sensitive about the terminology that is used to describe them and their related issues.¹ The reasons for this are because language conveys meaning, intention or purpose. The use of language influences acceptance or rejection. It is also useful in marketing an ideology or world view. Nowhere is it better manifested than in the use of a term, such as “gay”, that has dominated the social discourse.

There are, however, problems in our expressions about sexuality since “no universal agreement exists on terminology, and because language and culture continually change...”.²

The purpose of this brief report is to examine the use of five words: “gay”, “lesbian”, “homosexual” and terms such as “LGBTI” and “same-sex”. Some brief comments are made on the historical use of such terms. This note is especially appropriate in relation to the debate on same-sex issues and sexuality education.

The historical use of such terms

The use of the words can be plotted with *Google Books NGram*. This tracks the appearance of a word in a sample of English books over the period 1800-2008.

In 2007, “gay” was the most frequent of the five terms, followed by “lesbian” and “homosexual”. The words “same-sex” or “LGBTI” were much less commonly used. The frequency is summarised in Table 1.

The trends for the appearance of these words over time are portrayed in the following figures: Figure 1 - gay; Figure 2 - lesbian; Figure 3 -

¹ GLAAD Media Reference Guide, <http://www.glaad.org/reference/offensive> Retrieved May 2016

² American Psychological Association (1991) Avoiding heterosexual bias in language. *American Psychologist*, 46(9), 973-974.

homosexual; Figure 4 - same-sex; and Figure 5 - LGBTI. The time periods have been varied wherever possible in order to reflect the period just before the introduction of the term and its subsequent appearance.

Table 1. Frequency of the use of terms in 2007

Word	2007 - % frequency
gay	0.0021491%
lesbian	0.0006893%
homosexual	0.0005652%
same-sex	0.0000686%
LGBTI	0.0000013%

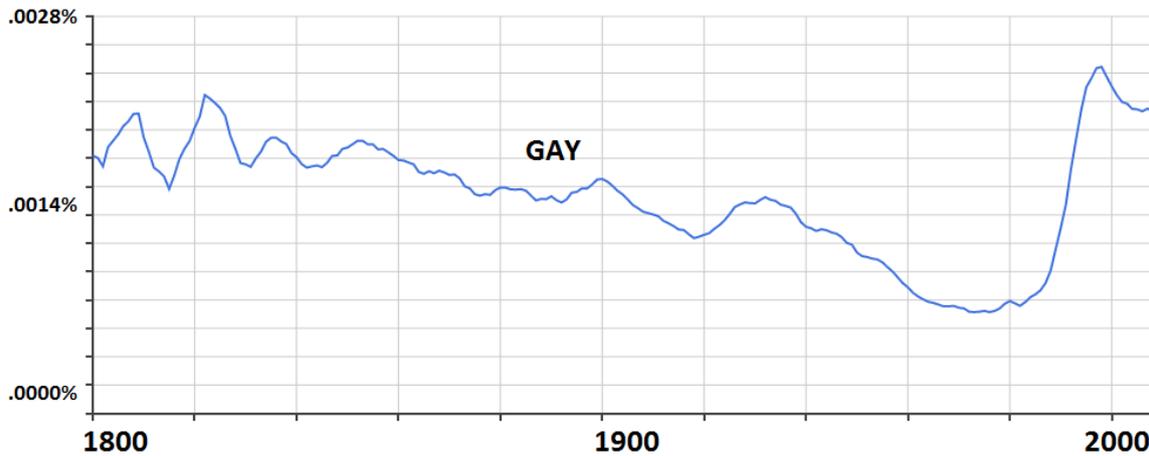


Figure 1. Trend for the use of the word “gay” 1800-2008

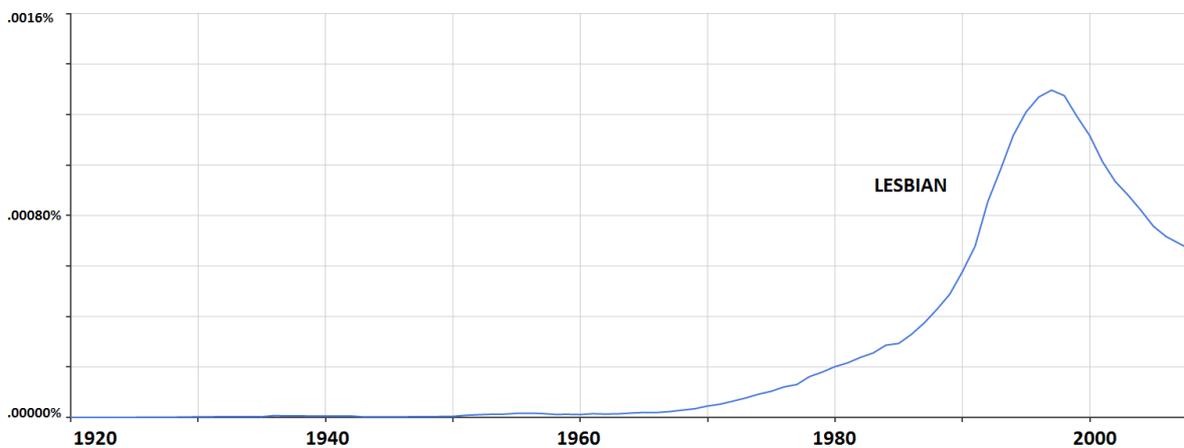


Figure 2. Trend for the use of the word “lesbian” 1920-2008

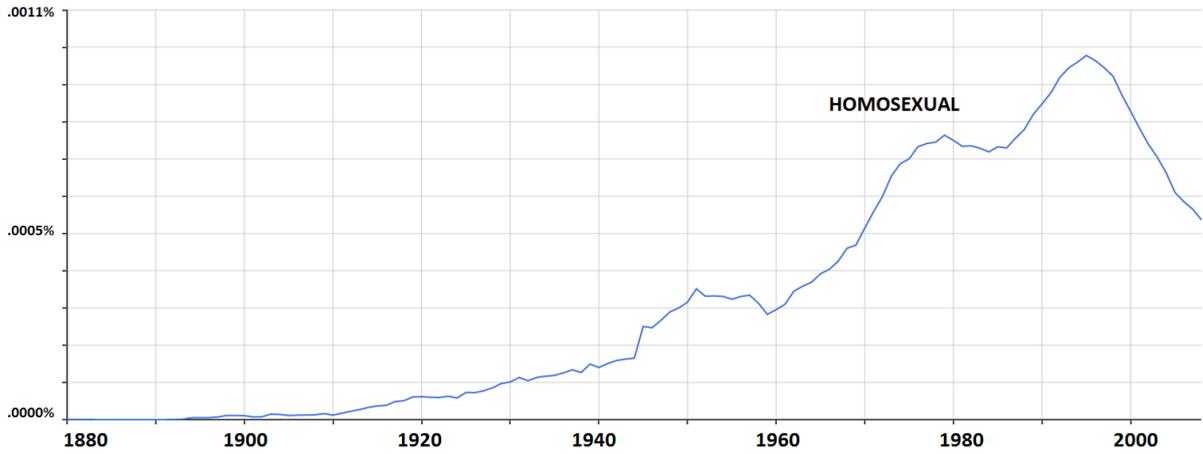


Figure 3. Trend for the use of the word "homosexual" 1880-2008

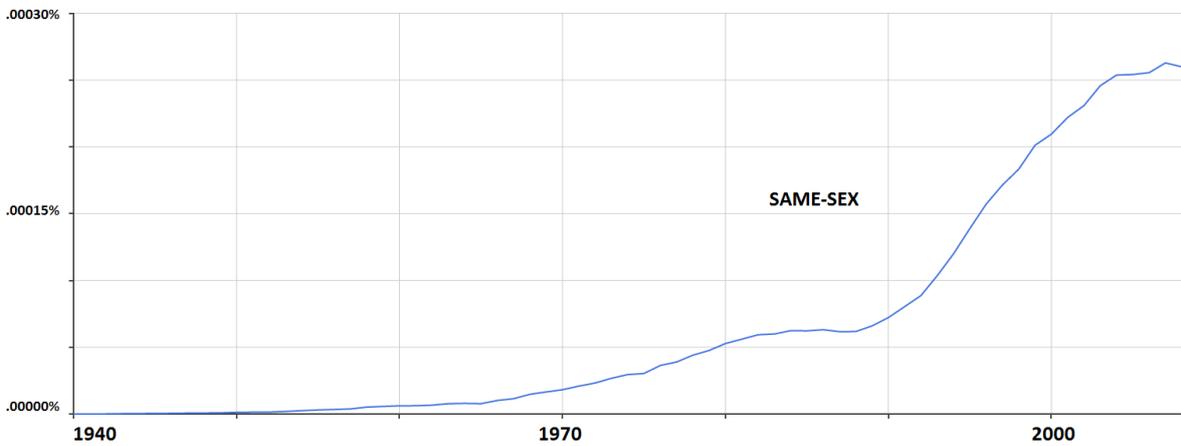


Figure 4. Trend for the use of the word "same-sex" 1940-2008

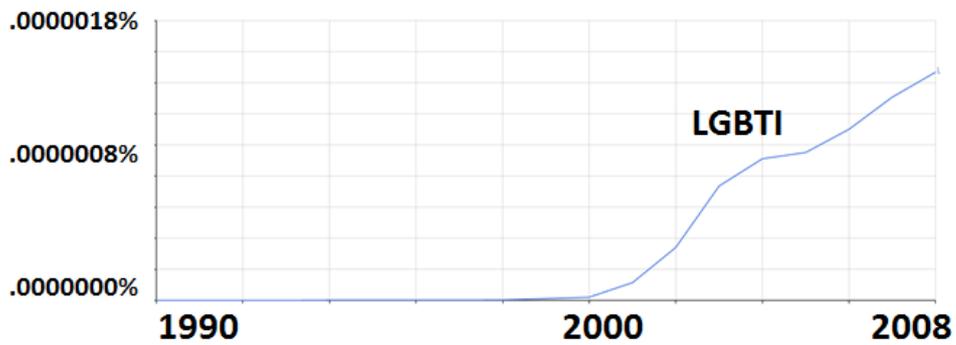


Figure 5. Trend for the use of the word "LGBTI" 1990-2008

With the exception of “gay”, all these terms are of recent origin in the lexicon. In order of appearance there is: homosexual about 1890; lesbian about 1950; same-sex about 1950 -1960; and LGBTI about 2000.

“Gay”

The word “gay” differs from the other four terms. It has been adapted for use in relation to homosexuals.

Gay once meant something like a merry or lively mood. Gay now typically refers to a person whose primary emotional and sexual attraction is toward people of the same sex. The term is most commonly applied to men, although some women use this term.³

Accordingly gay is strictly a euphemism. It is the substitution of a commonly, mild term for another less desirable term. For instance, the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation now known as GLAAD, has recommended that “gay” be used in preference to formal terms such as “homosexual”.⁴



The change accompanied the movement of homosexuality from a psychiatric diagnosis and an illegal act to wider acceptance in the community in the late 1960s. A modern view is that the term gay is a sociocultural description.

Some activists assert that even “gay” will not be required one day. Writing in the Guardian in 2006, the gay rights activist Peter Tatchell proposed that a term such as “gay” is a temporary identity. It will be replaced over time by a bisexual identity:

³. *Writing Themselves in 3*, p. vii.

⁴GLAAD Media Reference Guide, <http://www.glaad.org/reference/offensive> Retrieved May 2016

defining oneself as gay is a relatively modern invention and is unlikely to prevail in perpetuity... The boundaries between hetero and homo will merge and blur, with a greater incidence of bisexuality.⁵

Changes in language

The change over 200 years and especially the increased use of “gay” and “lesbian” since the 1980s has not occurred by chance.

Firstly it has been selective and this is indicated in Figure 6 where “gay” has been given prominence. Secondly, there has been an inexorable increase in these terms overall.

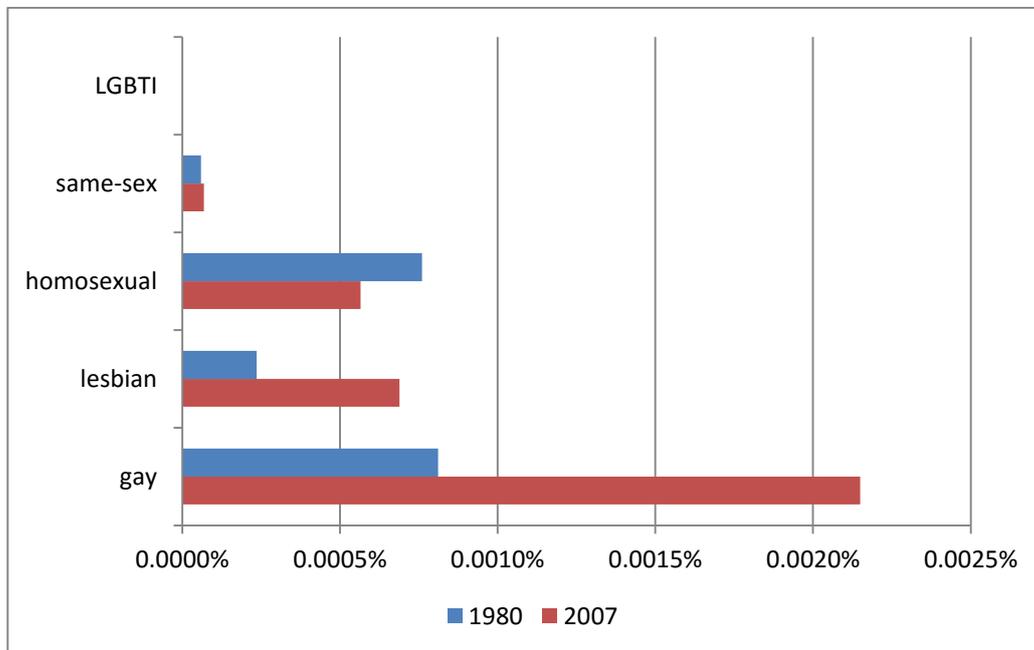


Figure 6. Changes from 1980 to 2008 in the use of the five terms

Figure 7 highlights the presence of five terms since 1980. Overall, there has been a consistent increase if all the five lines were totalled.

The reasons for this increase in Figure 7 are beyond the scope of this report. The consequences rather than the causes of this change are probably of greater importance.

⁵ Tatchell, P. (2006). Just a phase. *The Guardian*, Tuesday 28 November 2006. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2006/nov/27/isgayjustaphase> Retrieved May 2016.

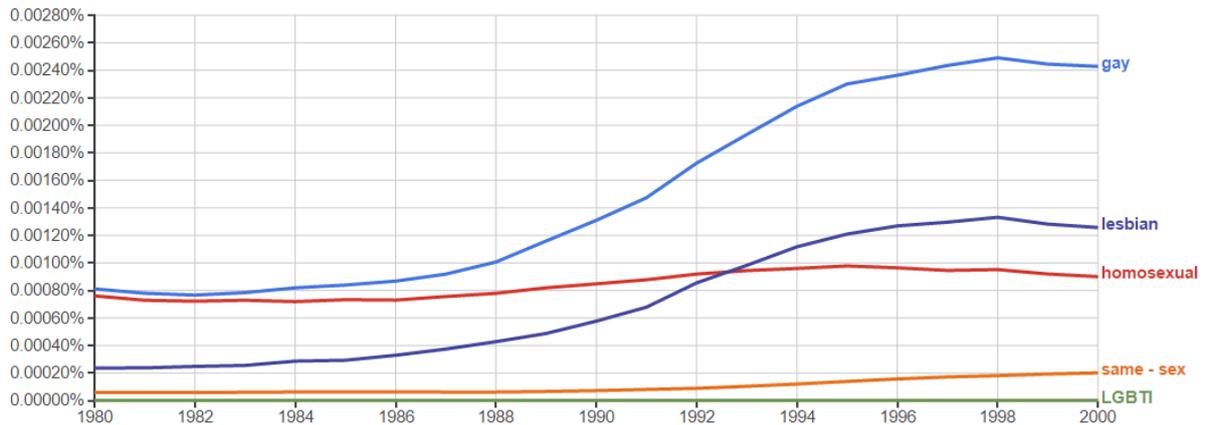


Figure 7. Trend for the overall use of the five terms 1980-2008

Concluding comments

This report has documented some changes in language. One of these changes was the development of a euphemism such as “gay”. It built upon the original positive meaning of “gay” as a social pleasure and is now used to encompass men-who-have-sex-with-men.⁶

But it did more than this. In essence, it involved the presentation of what were considered abnormal⁷ behaviours in ways that are benign or more acceptable.

In the case of “gay”, it is essentially propaganda. In the formal dictionary sense of the word, propaganda is considered as information or ideas that are deliberately spread widely to help a person, group or movement.

The overall use of these five terms has increased since 1980 even though they relate to a small spectrum of the population (i.e., homosexual male or homosexual female). The increased use of “lesbian” and the reduction in the use of “homosexual” are consistent with the GLAAD agenda.

⁶ Athanasou, J. A. (2016). The practices and behaviour of men who have sex with me: A summary of “Sexual health and behaviour of men in New South Wales 2013-2014”. *Occasional Paper no. 3*. Sydney: Author.

⁷ It is abnormal in the sense of being irregular or nonstandard or atypical.

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