

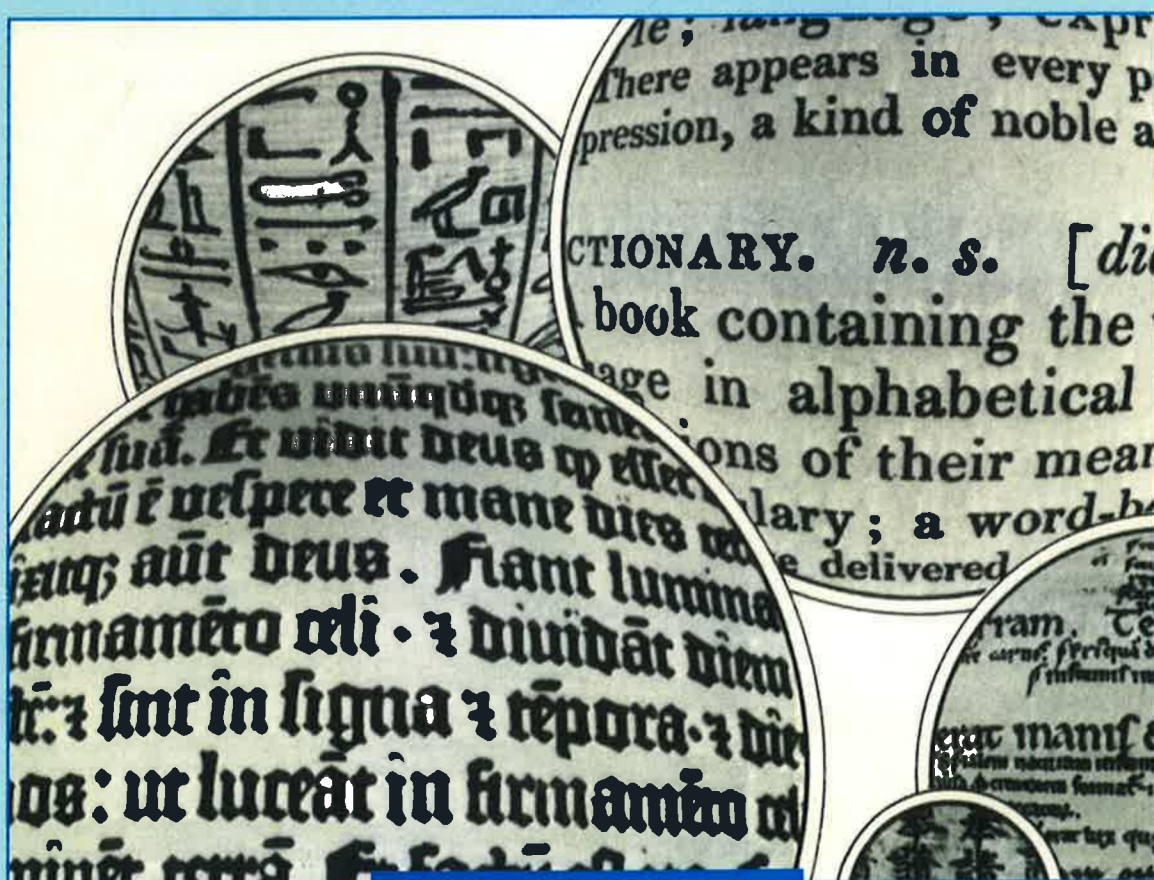
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The Queen's English: Metaphor in Gay Speech

BARRY ZEVE

*A report on the dominant images and
expressions in contemporary American
homosexual usage*



THROUGH language, Gays have reconstructed their world to accommodate their affectional and sexual selves. On coming to sexual awareness, Gays are faced with the necessity of redefining reality, i.e. the nature of homosexuality, in order to free themselves from the stigmas of society. Examination of the Gay communication system reveals substantial evidence that metaphors in Gay Speech depict new sets of constructs to replace those provided by society at large. As Gays explore and uncover their identity, they redefine language through metaphor to accommodate their new selves. Gay metaphors can be characterized as belonging to one or both of the following categories:

- (1) Disruption The metaphor disrupts some Straight concept of reality, e.g., heterosexual constructs of gender-role definition.
- (2) Redefinition The metaphor redefines gender roles in light of Gay thought.

Metaphors of disruption are reactions to public perceptions of Gays as members of the world community. They serve to denounce societal judgments about Gays, while often releasing anger at Straights. Disruptive metaphors will often illuminate problems in Gay/Straight relations while suggesting or implying a solution. They may stress the breakdown in the Gay/Straight relationship, or they may focus instead on the image Gays

present to the outside world.

Metaphors of redefinition are an internal exploration of Gay identity. They are metaphors of the personal knowledge Gays have ascertained about themselves as well as Gay qualities and purpose in life. They are created as the result of the emergence of a Gay consciousness, quite apart from anything associated with Straights or their world. Metaphors of redefinition are by Gays and for Gays. They are the result of Gay experience, Gay culture and community, and even the inspiration of a Gay God. Their primary function is to answer the questions of who Gay people are and what function they serve

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Societal interpretation of Gays as outsiders

1



This diagram is the heterosexual view of Gays, depicting Gays as outside and excluded from the heterosexual world. Because the metaphor of the *closet* had not yet come into being, Gays are portrayed as mere words which have no interrelationship or cohesion. The concept of being "Gay", a politicized and socialized homosexual, had not yet taken root.

in society. As in the case of the *closet*¹ metaphor, a secondary purpose of metaphors of redefinition is to provide new metaphors in Gay speech which will help elucidate the Gay experience. If they are understood beyond the Gay world, that is less important.

The Closet

The metaphor of the *closet* is the most important and pervasive metaphor in Gay speech because it describes an important aspect of self-acceptance in Gays. Prior to the metaphor of the *closet*, Gays were only measured by the values and standards of Straights who considered them to be social deviants and sexual outlaws. It was necessary for Gays to disrupt this view and supplant it with a new view that could encompass a wide range of meanings. Gays intuitively chose the image of the *closet* with which to do this. They needed to provide themselves with an identity which was both free from prejudice and versatile in meaning. The concept probably took root in the primary characteristic of closets, which is their small space. If the world is viewed metaphorically as a *house*, then Gays saw themselves as having been relegated to the smallest room in the house. The secondary characteristics of closets are their dark, confining qualities. These characteristics of confinement and lack of light were also attractive as further descriptors of the intellectual and emotional damage caused to Gays who con-

tinued to exist under Straight domination in the closet.

The Gay meaning of the word 'closet' views Gays as fugitives escaping a Straight world where they are unwanted. Anyone described as *in the closet*, still lives under the influence of a Straight – and therefore distorted – impression of oneself. Clarity on one's sexuality is the only force that can bring someone out of the *closet* into an (unnamed) place where she is internally freed from society's prejudices. *Coming out of the closet* disrupted how Gays were perceived by Straights by answering the primary question for Gays of, "Where do I belong?" The *closet* did this simply by separating Gays from Straights. Instead of the view of Gays as "social deviants" or "sexual outlaws," the metaphor of the *closet* described Gays simply in terms of a place which defined them as "other than Straight," rather than as "disturbed Straights."

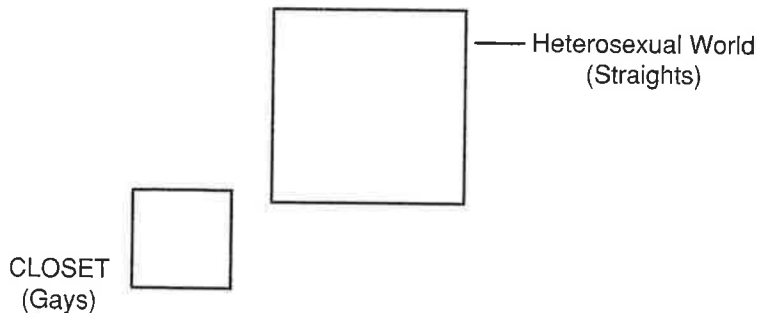
The metaphor of the *closet* began as a metaphor of disruption. The *closet* disrupted the heterosexual constructs of gender-role definition which claimed that everyone is heterosexual and that any other behaviour is a deviation. The entailments of the metaphor of the *closet* claimed that when Gays *came out of the closet* they became truly distinct from Straights. Anyone who claims to be *out of the closet* by definition distinguishes himself as sexually different from Straight. In effect, the *closet* drew a line between Gays and Straights where there had been no line before, a line that divided and disrupted Straight constructs of gender-role definition.

Mark Thompson mixes the metaphor of

¹ Overt and underlying metaphors will be italicized in this article.

First Gay interpretation of the closet – the disruption

2



This diagram is the first Gay viewpoint, depicting Gays and Straights as non-intersecting sets. Although the terms “Gay” and “Straight” are being used, they are almost exclusively used by Gays. And, although the metaphor of the *closet* has been created, there is no comparable term to describe the heterosexual world.

the *closet* with the underlying metaphor of the *cycle* to describe a transformation of awareness of death and rebirth which goes beyond the metaphor of the *closet* as disrupter. He proposed that “(the) symbolic cycle of death and rebirth is intuitively understood by any Gay person who has gone through the *coming out* process – claiming an identity from the shadow realms of a false self.” (16:1)² He describes the *coming out* process as a cycle or a spiral which inevitably returns all Gays to the *closet* to confront the false identities under which they have so long been conditioned by society. His redefinition of the *closet* has an interpretation which views the *closet* as the place where one’s false self resides.

This slight transformation in meaning is important because it marks a turning point in the definition of the *closet* from a place one leaves to discover one’s identity, to a place one returns to, to discover one’s identity. Thompson concludes his thought with the observation that by returning to the *closet* Gays go through a process of self-recovery which is comparable to the death and rebirth cycle. In effect, he compares the *closet* experience to a rebirthing process, a redefinition which goes far beyond the *closet* as a disrupter of Straights.

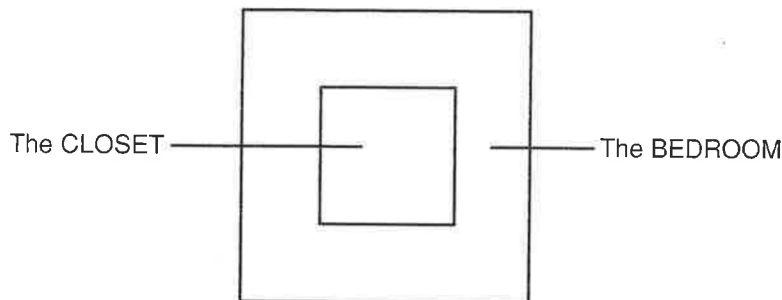
Through the metaphor of redefinition, the *closet* can describe someone whose identity is not ever-present, but changing. Gay consciousness and sexual awareness are more accurately understood as a process of emergence rather than fixed for all people. The *closet* combined with the metaphor of the *cycle* demonstrates that Gays recover their identity, in part, through a cyclical process in which they move *in* and *out* of the *closet* to strengthen their sense of self and dispel their false self. Gays take ownership of the *closet* as the place they go to, in the process of confronting their false self. The *closet* metaphor has been applied to a concept which goes beyond the disruption of Straights – the redefinition of Gays – proving that it has universal Gay application for the redefinition of Gay thought.

The reason it became possible for Gays to *return to the closet* is because the *closet* underwent a transformation to become a Gay space owned by Gays, rather than a Straight space Gays flee. The closet no longer only disrupts the Straight view of a Straight world in which anyone who doesn’t conform is a pervert; the *closet* becomes a familiarized and personalized space which provides a positive marker of identification for Gays. It redefines Gays as the owners of their space. It gives Gays a “home.”

Today it is possible to live in the *closet* without necessarily being in denial of one’s sexuality. The expression, to *accessorize your closet*, which means to make yourself at home,

² The number *before* the colon is used to locate the source of this quotation in the bibliography. The number *after* the colon indicates the page from which the quotation was taken.

Second Gay interpretation of the closet – the redefinition 3



The redefinition of the *closet* is a Gay viewpoint which sees Gays as a subset of the Straight community, emotionally and politically equal to Straights. It provides Gays with a name for their space. The redefinition of the metaphor of the *closet* makes it possible to create the term *bedroom* to describe the Straight space. I believe this was only possible for me to do since the foundation of equality had already been laid in my mind between the Gay and Straight communities. Lastly, the metaphor of the *closet* began by viewing sexuality as a human characteristic which emerges in cycles and spirals. Gays discovering their sexual identity frequently go *in* and *out* of the *closet* in pursuit of their true selves. The new definition of the *closet* is flexible in that it allows Gays to remain in one metaphoric place as they explore the identity of their past and present lives.

can also have the interpretation of displaying one's identity in the same way that clothing can be used as a symbol of personality traits. The T-shirts which say, *coming out is coming in* intuitively recognize that the *coming out* process no longer refers to Gays leaving the *closet*. It now refers to Gays entering the new Gay home which includes a Gay community and a Gay personal and social consciousness. Another example of the *closet* as a redefining metaphor is "*Closet space for Sexual Minority Youth: A safe space to talk or hang out for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth up to age 18.*" (3:13) This metaphor perceives the *closet* as a space which can be divided into sections for the various factions of Gay society.

The creation of the metaphor of the *closet* made it possible to describe Gays as *out of the closet* – in other words free from judgments of society. However, when Gays did "*come out of the closet*," as a disruption to Straights, they really had nowhere to "go," metaphorically speaking. Although, as more and more Gays *came out*, they developed a sense of community and began to share political, social and cultural goals, the metaphor of the *closet* as a place to leave did not provide them with a term for a place to "be." The only term Gays had to indicate where they were as members

of a Gay community, was the word "out" which still defined them in terms of the *closet*. Rather than create a whole new term, the *closet* was transformed in meaning to include a redefinition of Gay identity which occurs within the individual in the context of a Gay community.

Out is also a verb in Gay speech, e.g. "She *outed* him at work" meaning that someone caused a Gay person to face his true sexual identity and caused others to face it as well. The underlying metaphors in *outing* are the metaphors of the *closet* and the *bedroom*. It is impossible to conceive of forcing someone *out* without having first conceptualized that thought as the underlying metaphor of *Identity as a Container* (Gay identity is contained in the *closet*). Then, when one's identity is made public, a new metaphor for a new container is provided (Gay identity is contained in the Straight world). But, because *outing* is an entailment of the *closet* as disrupter, the two worlds, *closet* and *Straight* are non-intersecting worlds. Being forced out of the *closet* does not insure the redefinition of one's identity. Quite the contrary. *Outing* disrupts one's identity. Regardless of one's opinion on the topic of *outing*, having the metaphors allows one to analyze and understand the concepts.

Coming in (13:67) is a new term which refers to support for friends and family of Gays who have just learned that their loved one is Gay. When others learn about a Gay person's identity, the assumption is that they *go into the closet* rather than the Gay person *coming out*. It suggests that the closet is not a Straight place of denial, but a Gay place of self-discovery. This metaphor is an entailment of the *closet* as redefinition which views the *closet* as the Gay home. *Coming out inside* (13:242) is another entailment of the same metaphor, suggesting that the process of Gay identification is a personal transformation each Gay must make in coming to terms with her sexual identity. *Coming out inside* exemplifies the fact that homophobia exists in the Gay community as well.

Names

The characteristic of names are that they are chosen by one party and used against another. Name-calling is almost always derogatory, asserting the superiority of one group over another. There have always been derogatory names to describe Gays, but those words are the products of Straight speech, a topic outside the domain of this thesis. Gays have taken the language of their oppressors to describe themselves, terms which have not just been enculturated into Gay speech; they have been appropriated into Gay speech.

Perhaps because Gays have suffered a long history of name-calling, their response to name calling is somewhat unorthodox. Rather than responding with denials that the insults are untrue, Gays adopt the name as a nickname and own it as their own. This process of turning insults into nicknames is highly disruptive to Straight speech. It has little effect to try to insult someone if the meanings of the words are being turned inside out.

Radical members of the Gay political body have therefore appropriated pejorative terms like 'queer' and transformed them, giving them the meaning of powerful, proud and strong. This semantic shift was a conscious move on the part of some members of activist organizations like Act Up and QueerNation who came along in the mid 1980's. Initially, there may have been an intention to eroticize the Gay identity which had been de-eroticized for a while with the initial shock of AIDS.

Ultimately, however, they inverted the value markings of Straight slurs against Gays, renaming the "Gay" community as the "Queer" community.

The theory behind this move was a commitment to the notion that "language uses us as much as we use language." (4:53) Many radical Gays feel that "Gayspeak" holds them to the ghetto, either because Gays subsume in their dialect the contempt manifested by the Straight world or because Gayspeak reflects the oppressive values of its own world. By remaking pejorative terms such as "queer", "faggot" and "dyke", radical Gays are attempting to turn these terms into symbols of defiance of the dominant culture. Radical Gays have learned to put their special dialect to use as a focus of pride and identification.

This appropriation of language not only has a powerful effect in its defusion of derogatory terms, but also has a powerful effect on the Gay community. It is one thing to claim unity and pride; it is quite another to appropriate the language of your oppressors and turn their words into symbols of unity and pride. *Naming* began as a stickering movement and later expanded into posters, T-shirts and sidewalk art. "Stickers took back the slights – the hate words of the homophobes – and claimed them for their own use . . . What earthly good does it do a teen bigot to call another boy on the bus a *fag* if that boy is already wearing the label *fag* across his chest?" (6:10) Stickering makes the environment a billboard on which to advertise one's views in a way that parallels the personal advertisement which occurs in clothing. Both methods of expression use metaphor to disrupt and reorganize meaning and values.

We're here, we're queer, get used to it (2:1) is a positive phrase changed by Gay activists. Without understanding the new underlying metaphor, *pejorative label as symbol of pride*, it must be something of a shock to Straights to hear Gays proudly announce that they are *queer*. A pun was played on the old and new meanings of the word *queer* when it was publicly announced that "(California governor, Wilson) would find something kind of *queer* here and it's not going away." (2:14) The expression must have provoked and confused the Straight community since the new use of *queer* is not, as yet, understood by many Straights. Another pun intended to

provoke Straights is the expression "making it perfectly queer" which alludes to a popular expression made by ex-U.S. president Nixon. (2:69)

Names, whether they are positive or negative, hold power. Gays appropriated the names *queer* and *fag* and redefined them with positive meanings, but they are names nevertheless. How and when language is used affects our beliefs and assumptions strongly. As Gays step further out of the *closet* they disrupt Straight language to a greater and greater degree. Gays who stage a "kiss-in" in a shopping mall or a "marry-in" at city hall redistribute language and metaphor, disrupting Straight values and Straight language in the process. Through political and social processes, Gays introduce new meanings to words which undermine previously held beliefs.

Conclusion

Rejection of society's perception of them led Gays to the creation of a new conceptual system through which they were, for the first time, linguistically free to explore and define themselves. Gays needed to challenge the Straight definition of male and female "roles" of appropriate gender behaviour in order to survive both physically and psychologically. They required a lexicon of new terms which would name their ideas and a metaphoric conceptual system in which to organize and express these ideas.

Gays may be considered the prototype of all ostracized groups; the use of pejorative Gay names by Straights has demonstrated that Gays are the *yardstick* of xenophobia in society; to be called "queer" or "faggot" is done to set *anyone* apart, Straight or Gay, who deviates from the norms society perpetuates. Thus, an adversarial relationship exists between the two cultures that is clearly evident in language. Gay speech disrupts Straight speech as a means for Gays to disassociate themselves from the Straight semantic system that disapproves of Gays, as exemplified by the derogatory term "het" for "heterosexual." Gay speech allows Gays the opportunity to explore creative ways to expand their own views of gender role definition. Gay speech also attempts to reeducate Straights as can be seen by the metaphors of *queer*.

The metaphors of Gay speech help Gays construct the circumstances under which they can find freedom from domination and oppression as exemplified by the *closet* metaphor. In numerous cases, Gay metaphors have proven to be unique linguistic tools of expression from which Gays have further developed other constructs of thought that would not otherwise have been possible to create, such as *outing* from the metaphor of the *closet*.

Gays have a thought construct which departs from and often conflicts with the conventional pattern of speech. The value markings of many conventional words in English are not agreed upon by Gays, which helps to explain why Gays departed from Straight speech. Since meaningful communication can only occur when people agree on the meanings of the words, and since Gay value markings do not concur with those of Straight speech; there are times when semantic gaps occur between the two cultures.

Julia Stanley states that "One of the fundamental functions of language is self-definition, naming ourselves; naming our lives; naming our actions. Without language, I am nameless. I am invisible, I am silent. If I refuse language, I refuse myself. Through my language, I define myself to myself: I can 'see' myself. My language always goes before me, illuminating my actions; through my language, I create myself, for myself, and for (others)." (8:17)

The work I have done in the area of Gay metaphors is far from completed. There are many questions which have arisen from my research which have yet to be answered. Among them are:

(1) What other linguistic processes are involved in the speech of the Gay community? (2) How does the use of metaphor in Gay speech compare to the use of metaphors in other minority groups? (3) What other mappings can be discovered that may reveal unconscious dynamics of the mind in the formation of metaphors? **ET**

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A Gay glossary

4

AC-DC Bisexual. The underlying metaphor is that sexual identity is the physical force of electricity. By extension, sexual attraction is a current, which can go in either of two directions. This metaphor disrupts the idea that one must be Gay or Straight and fit into the roles of sexual orientation that have been expounded upon both by Gays and Straights alike. Bisexuality is perceived of as a force which, like electricity, can flow in two directions. This metaphor disrupts the metaphors of the *closet*.

Butchfemmelezziedykefag The title of a one-woman show by Lea Delaria which incorporates several names into one, further deactivating the power in the original slurs.

Clitzspah A pun involving the word clitoris and the Yiddish word Chutzpah, which means nerve, cheek or unmitigated gall. This is the female equivalent to "balls" in males, disrupting the notion that only males can talk about courage in terms of anatomy.

Closet case A gay term for someone who is still in denial over his Gay sexual identity. This metaphor disrupts the view of Gays as perverts and outsiders of Straight society, giving Gays a new way to describe themselves in terms of the dominant society.

Cocktales Stories about penises.

Dishonorable discharge Masturbating at home after unsuccessfully going out in search of a sex partner.

Gladiola seedling A youngster who is growing up to be Gay. By extension, all Gays are gladiolas, a flower known for its sword-shaped leaves and spiked flowers.

"I'll Be A Homo For Christmas": Lesbian disruption of a popular Yuletide melody, perhaps in defiance of the fact that so many Gays of Christian origin are estranged from

their families. Another example is the song "Silent Dyke".

Lavender liturgy A Gay religious service.

Meat A Gay man in the armed forces; the vagina; the penis.

Missionary work An attempt by a Gay man to seduce a Straight man or a Lesbian to seduce a Straight woman.

Pansy without a stem A Lesbian.

Pussy queer A femme (passive Lesbian).

Queen A term used to associate Gays to a particular quality or behaviour as in the expression *drama queen*, which refers to someone who is over-emotional. But *Queen* can also mean that someone is practiced or skilled in a particular field. A *computer queen* is skilled with computers, for example. An *erector set queen* is a construction worker and a *rice queen* is a Caucasian who is sexually attracted to Asians.

Royal ballet Police raids. Gays are portrayed as participants in a grand scale performance in which the police create the choreography to which the Gays are forced to dance. This metaphor disrupts the view that the police are controlling Gays for the sake of decency in society.

Royal opera The courtroom. This is a metaphor of disruption which compares our justice system to an opera, of vehicle of entertainment rather than justice.

Seafood A Gay sailor.

Set the table To make the bed.

Snack bar An orgy room.

Stinkfinger bulldyke A masculine and sexually charged Lesbian.

Tiny tuna A Gay sailor.

Tulip sauce This is a pun for "two lips" or a "French kiss."

Vegetarian A Gay man who does not perform fellatio (and thus will not *eat meat*).

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