

Politically correct language of labeling in Taiwanese Mandarin:
A case study of gay and lesbian lingo

Abstract

The present study investigates the distributions of diverse labels for the gay and lesbian community in Taiwanese newspapers in the last decade and further attempts to illustrate how their usages are modulated by the ideology of Political Correctness (P.C. for short). For the purpose of this study, P.C. is defined as “the avoidance of forms of expression or action that are perceived to exclude, marginalize, or insult groups of people who are socially disadvantaged or discriminated against” (Pearsall 1998).

The results of diachronic key-term search in the newspaper corpora indicate that just as *gay* supplanted *homosexual* in English in the 1960s and 1970s (Haggerty 2000), so has *tong-zhi* gradually superseded *tong-xing-lian* in Chinese in recent years. The gay people in Taiwan embrace *tong-zhi* as an in-group label, and meanwhile spurn the more clinical title *tong-xing-lian*, showing that the P.C. campaign endows the sexual minorities with language rights for self-definition. In addition, the emergence of *ku-er* in Mandarin discourse in the 1990s, derived from English *queer*, is motivated by the fact that distinct terms of naming advance different claims about sexual politics and identity. While *tong-zhi* stresses the commonness of the gay and lesbian community, *ku-er* accents the distinctiveness among non-heterosexual individuals. Nevertheless, *tong-zhi* has also been accused of sexism, resulting from its generic use as well as its unmarked reference to gay men. Thus, to avert such sexist label, the local lesbians employ alternative terms, *lei-si-bian* or *la-zhi*, which are transliterations of *lesbian* and *lez*, for naming lesbian-related activities and communities.

It is worth noting that contrastive analysis of the English and Chinese gay/lesbian lingo further manifests that the usages of various labels are conditioned by different social and cultural contexts. To illustrate, with *tong-zhi* serving also as a political title to refer to members in the same party, the political aspiration embedded in *tong-zhi* rendered its connotative meaning different from its English counterpart *gay/lesbian*. Likewise, due to the young nature of the imported concept of “sexual orientation,” the opposing position of *ku-er* and *tong-zhi* does not appear as transparent as their English counterparts in Taiwanese social context in which the two Chinese terms can co-exist and hybridize into a new identity (Chi 1997). In brief, the findings of the present study shed more light on the influence of the ideology of P.C. within Taiwanese gay/lesbian culture specifically and within Taiwanese society generally.

References

- Chi, Ta-wei (ed.). 1997. *Queer archipelago: A reader of the queer discourses in Taiwan*. Taipei: Yuancheng Cultural Enterprise.
- Haggerty, George E. (ed.). 2000. *Gay histories and cultures: An encyclopedia*. New York: Garland.
- Pearsall, Judy. 1998. *The new Oxford dictionary of English*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Names of authors: Ben Pin-Yun Wang and Eric Po-Chung Lin

Institutional affiliation: Graduate Institute of Linguistics, National Taiwan University

Email-address: bensmiley720110@yahoo.com.tw ; r94142005@ntu.edu.tw

Title of proposed paper: “Politically correct language of labeling in Mandarin Chinese:
A case study of gay and lesbian lingo”

Keywords: political correctness, sexual politics, gay/lesbian, queer