Faggots, punks, and prostitutes: the evolving language of gay men

Joe Jackson’s 1982 hit Real Men was the first time I had heard gays referred to as faggots. I was just out of the closet and in my first gay relationship in London. Jackson’s lyrics about how only our friends and other gays could call us faggots was encouraging, coming as it did from a straight man singing a song just before AIDS hit.

Faggot, often-considered a slur, has been reclaimed many times over by gay men, including in a new play by Declan Greene, The Homosexuals, or “Faggots”, currently showing at the Malthouse in Melbourne. The play looks at gay male relationships and their politics, and is apt as middle-class gay men and lesbians struggle with acceptance all over again in the face of their call for marriage equality.

My friends and I called ourselves fags because it was a way of turning the abuse on its head and laughing at the straight bullies.

And in merry-old-England there was abuse: one night when leaving gay club Heaven, a bunch of lads called us and our female friends “pooh jabbers”. It was graphic and offensive (“bum bandit” being a similar, anal-fixated term from about the same time) and it occurred to me how deeply, viscerally they hated us.

Language defines who you are. But words used by others to define gay people can say a great deal more about them than us.

From prostitutes to gays

Let’s begin with the most common term, “gay”, which baby-boomer homosexuals appropriated for their liberationist cause in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Its pedigree is longer and according to Edmund White originally applied to women and meant loose or immoral, as in a prostitute. And “gay-house” was the term for a brothel. “In the past one asked if a woman was "gay," much as today one might ask if she “swings,”” wrote White.

“Homosexual” (or “homosexualist”) has similar 19th-century origins and was originally coined in 1869 by a Hungarian doctor, Karoly Maria Benkert.

“Faggot” has had different meanings according to where and when it was used. In eighteenth-century London it was first a term for prostitute then for homosexual. In 1920s New York, it described an effeminate homosexual who sought social/sexual relations with “normal men”, according to George Chauncey while a “flaming faggot” was an extremely obvious, flamboyant gay man.

In 1970s Australia, the ubiquitous “poofter” covered all forms of deviancy including men who had sex with other men, poor-performing sportsmen, politicians and motorists. Meanwhile, as the documentary Deep Water revealed, the literal bashing and killing of poofters caught at it in public parklands was something of a pastime.

“Cat” from “catamite” is ancient Roman with connotations of effeminacy, prostitution, and the passive role in a sexual encounter. “Fruit” was, like faggot, according to US historian Randolph Trumbach, a term first used in the 18th century for a prostitute and then a sodomite. “Fairy” and “queer” had similar origins between the world wars.

Why the fixation on prostitution? As Trumbach explains, there is a “long tradition in English usage” of words that are used to designate a prostitute being appropriated one generation later to describe sodomites.

This tendency for the words for prostitute to be later used for homosexual dates from 18th-century England when they often shared common social spaces, argues gay historian Rictor Norton.
Much later, historians such as Chad Heap and George Chauncey found similar intermingling in the underground bars that operated in New York and Chicago during Prohibition in the US.

**The words gays use for themselves**

Because of the sardonic nature of gayness, all of the above would have to be included also in the vocabulary of gay men and queers.

As well, there are community-specific terms, such as “clone”. Historically-specific, it connotes the style of gay men mid-1970 to mid-1980s (moustache, short hair, faded, baggy Levis and pocket and/or neck handkerchief) as exemplified by the lead singer of the Bronski Beat at the time of their hit single, Smalltown Boy.

More arcane terms include “ganymede” (a young male) which was used by Oscar Wilde and his contemporaries and “Marianne” and “Molly” from the earlier 18th century, again connoting an effeminate (or passive) male.

“Nance” and “nancy boy” as well as “Nelly” and “nellies” were terms used by both gays and straights also connoting effeminacy or youthfulness. According to one of writer Keith Vacha’s interviewees, nellies were “common queens” by which he meant: “ones with bleached blonde hair and plucked eyebrows”.

And finally, perhaps to the consternation of some of today’s toughs, there is “punk,” which according to Rudolph Trumbach was once the slang term for both prostitute and sodomite.

**Terms of abuse and endearment**

Terms of abuse are a way of distinguishing those whom we choose to marginalise because we do not like the look of them or because we were there first. In other words, they are the “outsiders” of sociologist Norbert Elias’s important work from the mid-1960s.

Humans have been doing this from the outset. Gangs and groups, them and us, and in the case of sexual preference, there are the straights, the “normals”, if you like, and the others, the sexual outcasts.

The terms I’ve illustrated were used by the majority to exclude prostitutes and homosexuals from “polite” society. While these terms were used to mark their difference, this did not prevent males from that same polite society from using the good services of prostitutes and homosexuals when it suited them. And as they did so then, they still do so now.

What is also interesting is the way in which sexual outcasts could adopt terms of abuse used for them and turn them into terms of endearment for each other — as my friends and I did in the 1980s when we called ourselves fags. And so, self mockery becomes a form of defence against the strictures of the priests and preachers.

It was literally the priests and the preachers, and later doctors and lawyers, who sought to demarcate “useful” sexual activity from wasted sexual activity. According to historian Michel Foucault the monogamous heterosexual couple produced new workers; those erotic and sexual activities that detracted from or weakened it were identified, categorised, and punished by law.

That young, gay men are now starting to reclaim these words is significant. It could mean that they are becoming interested in finding out where they have came from, that is, what are the origins of the culture they inhabit?

Twenty-one years ago, AIDS, which was then the dominant concern for gay men and culture, ceased to be a death sentence and instead became a manageable disease. Young men who have grown up since then could feel that other aspects of gay life can now be explored with greater freedom.

If this is so, it would suggest a strengthening of gay culture and community because people can only start exploring their past, warts and all, when they feel safe.

_The Homosexuals, or “Faggots” will be showing at Melbourne’s Malthouse Theatre until March 12._