

**A SEMANTIC LOOK AT FEMININE SEX AND GENDER TERMS  
IN PHILIPPINE GAY LINGO**

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Gayspeak, like any other language, is constantly changing. But unlike other languages, words and terms in this colorful tongue undergo change so quickly that it would be impossible to come up with a dictionary of the language that wouldn't become obsolete within a matter of months, weeks, or even days. In spite of this, there is a thread that holds this language together, and that is freedom, freedom from the rules and dictates of society.

Murphy Red, in his article *Gayspeak in the Nineties*, gives a background on this vibrant language in the Philippines:

The centuries-old bigotry against homosexuals...exiled [them] away from the mainstream. On the margins gays saw, though only through rose-tinted glasses, a semblance of freedom in terms of self-expression.

Even in their language, the gays observed no rules at all. Thus blossomed a language that some gay activists even found to be an effective code in front of the "enemies." (1996: 41)

According to Montgomery's *An Introduction to Language and Society*, anti-languages are "extreme versions of social dialects" which tend to "arise among

subcultures and groups that occupy a marginal or precarious position in society... (1995: 96).” Given this definition, gay lingo is an anti-language. Or at least it used to be.

A lot has happened since the gay community in the Philippines felt the need to fight against a homophobic culture. Because of the use of gay lingo in print, film, television, and radio, this formerly marginalized sector has found acceptance. Red even says that “the faggotification of television gave homosexuals (and gay lingo) a good chance at re-penetrating (and menacingly for the minions of patriarchy, re-dominating) the mainstream culture (42).” So pervasive is this re-penetration that many non-gays from different walks of life can now speak or at least understand gay lingo. What formerly served as a marginalized sector’s way of alienating the people that shunned it is fast becoming the means through which the same sector is being readmitted into mainstream society.

There are, however, some words or phrases that have not been used extensively in Philippine popular media. The representation of feminine sex and gender in gay language, for example, is something that the general public is yet to be exposed to.

Since language is a manifestation of culture, studying the language of a particular community means taking a look at how it views the world. By analyzing gay terms for feminine sex and gender, we will be able to see the particular world view of the Philippine gay community with reference to the female sex.

Part one of this paper gives the definitions and etymological backgrounds of certain feminine sex and gender terms in gay lingo. Part two compares the reactions of the gay community to these words with the reactions of the mainstream society to the English or Filipino counterparts of these words. Part three examines how the use of

feminine sex and gender terms in gay lingo reflects and reinforces the Philippine gay community's attitude towards women.

This paper will not cover how words are formed. Suffice it to say that the “semi anti-language” of the Philippine gay community is replete with words formed through *relexicalization*, which Montgomery defines as “substituting new words for old” (96).

The meanings of the gay terms included in this paper were gathered from interviews with people who use the gay language, both homosexual and non-homosexual. Many of the resource persons are students from the University of the Philippines. A gay journalist from one of the major broadcasting networks in the Philippines was also interviewed.

### **I. Definitions and Etymological Backgrounds**

It is not the dictionary that determines the meaning of a word, but the people who use that word. This semantic principle is, perhaps, more obvious in gay lingo than in any other language. This is because gayspeak uses words that are part of a mainstream language (e.g. Filipino or English), but applies them metaphorically. As a result, the words acquire core or sense meanings very different from that of their roots. Here are just a few examples:

Anaconda (n.): In English, this is a term for a huge snake but in gayspeak, it literally refers to women and gays who deliberately seduce committed men. This meaning stems from the Filipino idiom *mang-ahas* which means the same thing. Nowadays, the shortened version *ana* is the more common term.

Burol, Hidden Valley, Sierra Madre (n.): These different terms for landforms are used to describe the female mammary glands. *Burol*, a Filipino word for hill, refers to

breasts that are small; *sierra madre* stands for big breasts; and *hidden valley* describes breasts that are just about to develop. Any word that denotes mountains can literally mean breasts in the gay language. *Twin Peaks*, for example, can stand for breasts in general.

Magic (n.): This is a word that refers to female homosexuals. According to sources, lesbians call themselves such because they are like “magicians with wands” (i.e. fingers) that they use in giving pleasure to their sexual partner.

Manicure (n): In English, a manicure means getting one’s nails cleaned, shaped, and painted. When one speaks of a manicure in Philippine gay lingo, it still has something to do with the hands but only because it stands for female masturbation.

Pechay (n.): The local name of a green, leafy vegetable, this is a play on the Filipino word for female genitalia (*pekpek*). In gay lingo, it can stand for both the vagina and women in general. Some derivatives of *pechay* are *kepyas*, *kipchi*, *kipay*, and *keps* but these refer solely to the female sexual organ.

Thunderbelle (n.): This doesn’t really mean anything in English or Filipino but it has its roots in the 80s cartoon series *Thunder Cats*. In gayspeak, *thunder cats* (also *tanders*) is a general term for old people. It is a play on the Filipino word “tanda” meaning old. The suffix *belle* can be added to a word to make it feminine. *Thunderbelle* means old woman.

Another characteristic of meaning is although mental images may represent meaning, these images vary from person to person. Thus one person might think of a sparrow when asked to picture a “bird” while another might think of a parrot. This semantic principle also lends itself well to the study of gay lingo. This is because the

mental representations that certain words bring to mind among speakers of a mainstream language are very different from the images that are thought of in gayspeak. Again, here are some examples:

Gander (adj.): The word gander brings to mind a mental picture of a male goose but talk of *gander* in gay circles and physical beauty is what people would think of. *Gander*, which is rooted in the Filipino word for beautiful (*ganda*), is used to describe not just people but also things of beauty.

Hammer (n.): Most people would think of a tool for carpentry when they hear the word hammer. In gayspeak, however, this word would evoke the image of a slut or a woman with loose morals. In Filipino, the word *pokpok* is a slang expression for such a person; *pokpok* is also the Filipino onomatopoeic representation of the sound of a hammer. Thus, in the Philippine gay language, hammer was made to describe “slutty” women.

Pocahontas (n): Outside the gay community, *Pocahontas* would bring to mind the Disney cartoon character based on a Native American historical figure. In gay lingo this word is synonymous to, and indeed has the same root as the word *hammer*. It comes from *pokpok*.

More words and definitions:

### Terms for Women

Bilat: This is the term for the vagina in the Philippine language Visaya. Like *pechay*, it can refer to both the female sexual organ and women in general. (derivatives: *bilastrabel*, *milat*, *merly*, *merla*)

Reglabelle: *Regla* is the Filipino term for menstruation and *belle* is a suffix added to a word to make it feminine. Literally, *reglabelle* means a person who menstruates.

#### Terms for Female Masturbation

Dukit: This probably stems from the Filipino word *dukut*, a verb which means *to get something with the use of one's fingers*. It was appropriated by the gay community to stand for female solo sex for obvious reasons.

Piningarcia: This word was derived from English *finger* which many Filipinos pronounce with an initial [p] instead of [f]. Garcia is a common surname in the Philippines.

#### Terms for cunnilingus

Lulu: This term is onomatopoeic in origin. Think about it. What sound comes from the mouth of a person giving cunnilingus?

Muro ami: Muro ami is an illegal fishing practice in the Philippines. Children divers drop rocks on coral reefs, pounding the reefs and crushing them in order to lure the fish into nearby nets. In 1999, a movie about these “reef hunters” was made and thus the term muro ami became familiar to Filipinos. It is easy to see how this term acquired a metaphorical meaning in gay lingo. Both muro ami and cunnilingus involve diving, one in the literal sense and the other in the figurative sense.

#### Other terms for breasts

Boobas, borbas, jorbas, boobelia, boogie – these terms were all derived from the English slang word *boobs*.

## II. Reactions to Feminine Sex and Gender Terms

In an attempt to paint a picture of how the Philippine gay community views women, a comparison between the way the homosexual community uses and reacts to feminine sex and gender terms, and the way the mainstream society uses and reacts to the English or Filipino counterparts of these words was made. The words and terms for this comparison were chosen due to their “sensitive” nature at least as far as the general population is concerned.

The typical Filipino would think twice about mentioning the word *vagina* or any of its Filipino counterparts (*pekpek*, *puke*) in public. Usually, Filipinos only mention these aloud as interjections and even then, they would often blush in embarrassment. This is because the words are seen as “dirty”. In an attempt to water down the offensiveness of these words, euphemisms for *vagina* were coined such as *flower* or the Filipino word *bulaklak*. Members of the gay community, on the other hand, will not even bat an eye if they hear someone say *bilat* (or any other term for *vagina*). Even sentences such “*Ang kati ng kipchi kesh!*” (My *vagina* is itchy!) would cause hardly a stir.

Terms for masturbation also elicit different reactions from mainstream and gay cultures. Edward Sagarin, in his book *The Anatomy of Dirty Words*, notes that although the word *masturbation* is a technical word understood by many people, it still has its “euphemistic circumlocutious synonyms” such as *to play with oneself* (1962: 116). Many Filipinos would recoil in horror if they heard people talking about wanting to masturbate, but the Philippine gay

community can make this a topic of everyday conversation without any hint of embarrassment or shame.

The technical term cunnilingus, like masturbation, is understood by many. Yet talks about oral sex would be considered taboo in mainstream Philippine society even among people who practice it. In fact, cunnilingus is so unutterable that it doesn't even lend itself to euphemisms that the general Filipino populace would understand. A friend told me that the term "*sisid*" (dive) was used to refer to oral sex but this word is not a widely understood euphemism for it. *Muro ami* and *lulu*, the gay terms for cunnilingus, have no negative connotations attached to them. Because of this, the gay community can openly and freely talk about oral sex without the fear of being castigated.

The Filipino term for menstruation, *regla* is another taboo word. Despite the fact that all women of child-bearing age go through this natural process, the word *regla* is viewed as a foul, distasteful word. Mention this "unclean" word and many Filipinos would wince. The euphemism *bisita* (visitor) was coined to avoid mentioning *regla*. If you ask a woman in the Philippines to go swimming with you and she answers "*Meron ako*" (literally *I have*), what she means is that it is that "time of the month." Even "that time of the month" is a euphemism for menstruation. But in gay circles, nobody flinches at the mention of the word *regla*. Add to *regla* the suffix *belle* and what results is a general term for women as mentioned earlier. The word *reglabelle* has no negative undertones. It is merely a word that reflects one of the main biological differences between men and women.

Even breasts, a part of the physiological make up of all women, are not free of euphemisms. Suso, the Filipino word for breasts, sounds very vulgar to the typical Filipino's ears. Thus the euphemism *hinaharap* was coined. *Hinaharap* literally means *future* but it also means *that which is in front* (*harap*). In gay lingo, words for breasts are not considered vulgar at all; they are merely labels that may be descriptive in nature.

### **III. Language as a Reflection and Proponent of Culture**

It is common knowledge that language mirrors culture. To illustrate, the Filipino people have many different words for rice because rice is a staple in our country: *bigas* (uncooked rice), *tutong* (burnt rice), *sinangag* (fried rice) to name a few. But a language does not merely reflect culture; it also perpetuates it. *The Whorf Hypothesis* or the hypothesis of linguistic relativism states that “the worldview of a culture is subtly conditioned by the structure of its language” (Jannedy 1994: 414).

Sagarin comments on this dual nature of language:

Language is both a reflection of how we look at the world and at the same time determines how we shall look at the world. The universe around us is there for each of us to see, but different individuals and peoples will see this universe in divergent ways. Not only will this determine the development of language, but the latter will itself determine how peoples look at the world; that is to say, how they structure reality in their own minds (20).

How does the Philippine gay community differ from the mainstream society in its view regarding women?

In the introduction to Sagarin's book, Allen Walker Read asserts that "obscenity emerges out of unhealthy attitudes towards sex and bodily functions. Not only are 'dirty words' a symptom of those attitudes, but they serve to perpetuate the attitudes" (10). Filipino culture regards terms for vagina, masturbation, cunnilingus, menstruation and breasts as obscene, although there is nothing inherently immoral in them. This obviously shows an anti-sexual and puritanical bias in certain words and terms for feminine sex and gender. To borrow Sagarin's words, "the more obscene [the word] is, the more it reinforces the puritanical codes that are reflected in the idiom and internalized in the minds of users, writers, speakers, and readers" (173). This anti-sexual bias in language is what makes a perfectly natural process such as menstruation, seem abhorrent to conservative Filipinos.

The Philippine gay community, in stark contrast, does not shrink from the use of feminine sex and gender terms that the mainstream society views as repulsive. Its own expressions for these terms do not carry negative emotional associations. Some conservative groups say that the reason why gays are not appalled by these terms is that they are advocates of hedonistic abandon in the guise of sexual freedom. But is this really the case? I think not.

Gay lingo does mirror and reinforce the culture of freedom in the gay community but this is not to say that it encourages hedonism. In its refusal to attach negative or dirty images to feminine sex and gender terms, the Philippine

gay community actually shows and promotes a greater respect for women than the mainstream society does.

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