

THE LAST WORD

A Queery... ■■■

BY FRED HASHAGEN

People often underrate the importance of the language they use. At the risk of sounding insipid, words have power. They shape minds, impact policy, and can occasionally make or break careers. If you don't believe me on that last bit, just ask intellectual dynamo Dan Quayle what the word "potato" did to his political career.

Rhetoric has fascinated me for a long time now; indeed, it was probably this interest which drove me to write this column, so it saddens me that the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender communities are disregarding the bias currently present in GLBT discourse.

The GLBT communities' embrace of the word "queer" is one way in which we have ignored rhetorical significance. The American Heritage Dictionary defines the word queer as: "being of a questionable nature or character; suspicious" and "a disparaging term for a homosexual."

Why, then, do we use it to describe ourselves?

Some would argue that the word "queer" serves as a good umbrella word for all gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgenders, but to be legalistic about things, queer is a disparaging term for homosexuals only.

My problem with this choice in wording, though, goes beyond my concern for expressing inclusiveness. The problem is that we have chosen to define ourselves as "being of a questionable nature." Now, I'm all for self-degradation. In most cases I think it's pretty funny. However, laughs should not come at the expense of self-respect. By telling others that we are "suspicious," we disrespect ourselves and consequently allow others to undermine us.

At the same time, we must be wary of changing our terminology too drastically. We must be sure to stress that we are different.

As I write this, I am reminded of one of my trips up to Insomnia. On this particular Friday night, I found myself becoming increasingly aware of my dance partner's inebriety. To put it bluntly, the

amount of alcohol that must have been in his blood supply would have made Boris Yeltsin drool. In any event, when this guy introduced himself to me for about the fifth time, he added, "I'm straight-gay. How 'bout you?"

Looking back, I probably should have said, "Yeah, I'm straight, except for that whole part about liking women. That just never seemed to stick." Instead, I just nodded my head and told him that I had to "take a break." And I did take a break—for the rest of the night.

Straight-gay! What the hell does that mean?! That must be like intelligent-conservative.

Our challenge, therefore, is to find terminology which will classify us as dif-

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ferent but unworthy of suspicion. That being the case, why not be as specific as possible? What's wrong with the terms "gay," "lesbian," "bisexual" and "transgender?"

In ensuring that the dialogue on GLBT issues is specific and respectful, we should pay even more attention to those terms which pose an outright threat to us. So, while we quash the acceptability of "queer," we should also hammer away at "homophobia."

In cases of bigotry other than homophobia, the word used to describe the prejudice clearly connotes hate. A person who discriminates based on race is a "racist." One who discriminates based on sex is a "sexist." Discrimination on the basis of religion may reflect the beliefs of an "anti-Semite" or an "anti-Catholic" or any number of other things following the prefix "anti." The point is that the names assigned to other forms of bigotry clearly imply that the bigot should be loathed.

What, though, does "homophobia" imply about how homophobes should be viewed?

The answer lies in the most common connotation of the suffix "phobia." In almost every other use of "phobia," the implication is that an individual is irrationally fearful of something. In other words, implied behind the word "homophobia" is the understanding that a homophobe is fearful not hateful.

The difference between hate and fear may at first seem trivial. Expressions for bigotry may initially appear suitable as long as the word implies an unreasoned aversion to a group of people. However, one of the greatest threats that we face right now is the paradigm that it is acceptable for heterosexuals to fear us.

This threat has manifested itself most clearly in what has come to be known in legal circles as the "gay-panic defense." This is a tactic used by unscrupulous defense attorneys which argues that violence targeting gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgenders is understandable, because the abuser had insecurities about his or her own sexuality which made him or her lash out when confronted by an alternative lifestyle. Essentially, the defendant argues, "Yeah, I did it, but I was afraid of the guy I killed, because he was gay, and he asked me out."

Fear is now being used to justify violent acts against us. Hate could never be used for this purpose, or at least if it were, it would not earn sympathy for anyone.

Consequently, we must delete "homophobia" from our dialogue. It should be replaced with "heterosexism—a term that implies oppression and makes the oppressor hateful by definition.

The current state of the terminology describing alternative sexualities makes it incumbent upon the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender communities to keep each other abreast of the character of dialogue on GLBT issues.

Should we fail at this, then we will have allowed bigotry to permeate the minds of otherwise reasonable people.

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