

The Violence of Heteronormative Language Towards the Queer Community

by Jessica King

Introduction

The old adage goes, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me;” however, most people know this to be untrue.. Words have the unique power to create reality: they can be used both to empower and create change, and to form stereotypes and breed mistrust. More sinister uses of language include directly doing violence to others, or indirectly supporting violent societal structures through the normalization of the marginalization of some groups.

One social group particularly vulnerable to the violent effects of heteronormativity is the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning/queer, intersex, and asexual/aromantic, (LGBTQIA) or queer, community—though the violent effects of heteronormativity are far-reaching.¹ This article examines several different examples of heteronormative violence towards the LGBTQIA community through language: heteronormative violence inherent in the structure of the English language, the erasure of asexuals and bisexuals, and the violence of misgendering transgender people. The article will also address the effects of heteronormative language towards the cisgender heterosexual community, which in many ways parallels the effects on the LGBTQIA community; however, the article’s main focus will be on the queer community.

The Limitations of the English Language

According to Katrina Kimport, heteronormativity is:

The institutionalized expectation that bodies are constructed into oppositionally situated (sexual and social) categories... It is premised on the assumption that sex, gender, and sexuality are fixed and immutable. It assumes an a priori existence of sex, gender and sexuality that induces particular forms

of expression (signs) that are interpreted as evidence of a subject’s sex, gender and sexuality (the signified). Further, one’s identity in one category is linked to one’s identity in another... Evidence of a body’s gender is taken as evidence of the body’s sex and sexuality as well (3-4).

Many American (and, more broadly, Western) cultural institutions are based on heteronormative assumptions—they are so pervasive as to not even be noticeable in daily life. One of the reasons that heteronormativity has such a strong influence on how our culture behaves and constructs itself is that the language we use to create reality is inherently heteronormative.

The English language itself creates the expectation that sex ought to be on a binary through the use of “he” or “she” to describe human beings. This usage leaves no room for other options and makes it difficult for English speakers to conceive of any middle ground. While this is of little consequence to cisgender individuals—those whose assigned gender based on their biological sex at birth matches their gender identity—there are enormous consequences for gender non-conformists. Some people identify as agender (without a gender), as genderfluid (their gender identity is mutable and might change over a period of time) or as transgender (their gender identity is not the same as their assigned gender based on their biological sex at birth). With the English language as it is, these individuals are limited in their ability to express their identity. In circumstances where one is unsure of a subject’s gender, modern English dictates that one should write “he or she” (Cruz 215)

Such language limits and excludes other identities and is a form of heteronormative violence, forcing everyone necessarily into the gender binary. These limitations take away autonomy from the

individual to decide how they would like to present to the world and how they think about their own identity. The ability to express a gender outside of heteronormative standards enables an individual to defy gender roles with ease; after all, why conform to the roles and standards of a gender you do not identify with? Using “he or she” does not allow for the full expression of some individuals’ identity, and thus limits their potential to self-actualize. Furthermore, the use of the gender-neutral “them” is often not accepted in formal writing in place of “his or her.”

Though some alternatives have been offered—for instance *zie* and *hir* (“Need” 1)—these are not commonplace. The alternative to linguistically assuming a person’s gender, as the English language stands right now, is to call someone an “it,” a title usually reserved for the non-human, especially inanimate objects, as we will generally assign animals genders. Addressing someone in such a way is equally as violent and disrespectful as assuming someone’s gender; the implication of using these words is that those who do not conform to heteronormative gender expectations are less than human. If our language does not allow for divergent identities, how can we expect society to accept or respect such identities?

Heteronormative Violence in Media and Towards the Heterosexual Cisgender Community

Aside from the gendered limitations of the English language, there also exist very obvious ways of doing violence through words that embody and encourage violence. As Kristin Myers points out in her 2012 study, a common form of humor that appears early in the cultural life of an individual via media directed at children is the presentation of males in feminized ways.

Such a presentation leads to “fag talk;” that is, insults based on the degradation of males by calling them females or homosexuals. This language by extension is also degrading to women and the queer community. The use of words like “fag,” “pussy,” “gay,” and “girl” to police boys’ gender performances both explicitly and implicitly encourages sexism and homophobia, and what Myers calls “compulsory heterosexuality” (127). This language simultaneously creates, reifies and indicates heteronormativity in American culture.

Myers’ study of children’s television programming revealed that this problem is extensive. It found that ideas of compulsory heterosexuality were presented rapid-fire in a space of between 20 and 30 minutes. The most sinister aspect of compulsory heterosexuality revealed by the study is the presentation of violent ideas of women as weak beings to be preyed on and of men as natural predators. One character on a children’s television show describes approaching women with the following metaphor: “When the lions are out hunting gazelles, they don’t attack the strong healthy ones. Oh no. They attack the weak ones. The ones crying and eating ice cream” (135). By putting the language of violence in the forms of jokes, not only is heteronormativity enforced, but also the social norms that arise from such language are trivialized and normalized. By joking about the hunting of women and the jeering at boys who fail to live up to masculine standards, media tells children “This behavior is what is normal and acceptable.”

Kristin Myers and Laura Raymond’s 2010 study demonstrates that elementary girls are also aware of heteronormative pressures and create heteronormative spaces and roles amongst themselves. In their study, Myers and Raymond found that the girls used words such as “appropriate,” as well as “gay” and “lesbian” pejoratively to police each other’s behavior in a way similar to the media norms described above. The use of the word “appropriate” is indicative of how our culture creates femininity in opposition to masculinity.

The cultural use of the word “appropriate” is violent in that it can delegitimize or stigmatize girls’ feelings or desires, especially if those break with heteronormativity—for example, homosexual feelings or desires or a desire for sex that is considered uncharacteristic of someone performing femininity properly. Discussions of what is “appropriate” is closely related to slut-shaming, a form of violence in which women who have a number of sexual partners deemed too high are mocked and degraded. The discussion of “appropriate” is violent on the individual level, but also has consequences as far-reaching as the political discussion of birth control and abortion. Beginning at a young age, women are told what are “appropriate” ways to conduct themselves, particularly sexually (where women are expected to be chaste and men are encouraged to be

sexually predatory), which creates an environment where rape is allowable and, I would argue, encouraged through the language used to teach young girls and boys. By bringing the conversation around to whether women's actions, dress, et cetera were "appropriate," our culture takes the onus of blame for violence away from the perpetrators and places it on the victim.

Similarly, the use of violent words like "crush," "hit on" and "mine" to describe romantic relationships with others exemplify violence that is condoned in society, and which promote a culture of violence, often against women, as women are expected to conform to someone else's prescribed standards of behavior (Myers and Raymond 176-8). These words create relationship dynamics that use physically violent words to describe romantic feelings towards another, and then a dynamic of ownership after a couple has formed. This use of language has the effect of normalizing violence or the idea of violence in the context of a romantic relationship. Rape follows from this, as violence (particularly against women) is normalized and seen as permissible, especially if the woman was not behaving "appropriately."

Bisexual Erasure

Another way heteronormative language is violent is its erasure of asexuals and bisexuals. Bisexuality is better known from popular media than asexuality; however, both are often overlooked when referring to non-heteronormative sexualities. Because of the aforementioned tendency of the English language to divide abstract concepts into binaries, English speakers can easily conceive of a gay/straight binary. It is more difficult for them to understand sexualities that fall in-between or outside of that binary, who I will refer to as "non-binary" sexualities. The erasure of bisexuals is evident in the way broader society discusses the queer community. The fight for equal treatment for the LGBTQIA community is often termed "gay rights," with homosexuality being the "natural opposite" of heterosexuality (Yoshino 389-391). There is little discussion of rights for bisexuals, and almost no discussion of asexuality at all.

Kenji Yoshino's 2000 study posits that one explanation for the invisibility of bisexuals is that all monosexuals (that is, those who are attracted to only one sex) are threatened by bisexuals because by being attracted to both sexes, bisexuals deconstruct

the idea of sex. Sex distinctions are inherently tied to sexual orientation, and both heterosexuals and homosexuals benefit from having labels. The label of heterosexual, for instance, is useful in a court of law. Yoshino's study finds that in sexual harassment suits involving two males, if one can present his behavior as homosocial (read: just "horseplay" or "boys being boys"), rather than homoerotic, he is unlikely to face punishment (49). By destabilizing the distinctions between hetero- and homosexuals, bisexual visibility in law would eliminate this exception. This example is interesting because it is an instance of heteronormative language (the language used to describe cisgender heterosexual men's violence towards one another as playful and in good fun, even though the other individual feels harmed) that erases bisexuals harming not bisexuals, but heterosexuals. The elimination of such language, and the visibility of bisexuals in the language of the law would have benefits beyond the queer community.

The label of homosexual is equally as important. Heterosexuals may erase bisexuals' experiences by calling bisexuality "trendy." For example, in 2008, Katy Perry's popular song "I Kissed a Girl" expressed bicuriosity on a national platform. At nearly the same time, Lady Gaga announced her bisexuality publicly. Homosexuals and heterosexuals will also sometimes argue that bisexuals have "one foot in the closet," implying that bisexuals' experiences are not real, and that bisexuals are all actually just homosexuals who have not embraced their identity. A 2013 Pew Research Center study showed that only 28% of bisexuals had come out to most or all of the important people in their life, compared to 71% and 77% for lesbians and gay men, respectively (Alpert 1). Alpert's article in the Los Angeles Times features a number of bisexual individuals who have had their identity invalidated by both the heterosexual and homosexual community. This erasure helps homosexuals by swelling their numbers in their movement to be treated equally, according to Yoshino (20-7).

However such erasure of bisexuals' existence is violent in that it effectively silences bisexuals and delegitimizes their experiences. By saying "you do not exist," whether saying so results from the straight/gay binary that is taught to us or whether saying so results from an explicit or implicit desire

to retain privilege, society does violence to the bisexual and the rest of the non-binary group within the LGBTQIA community (Asexual 1). By not including bisexuals and other non-binary sexualities in our cultural discussions of sexuality, our culture effectively says to those individuals, “You are unimportant and your experiences as you explain them did not happen. You are incorrect, and we will tell you what actually happened.” Such a narrative is harmful and suppresses individuals who have a non-binary sexuality.

Asexual Erasure

Asexuality is a spectrum that is characterized by a lack of sexual attraction to other people; asexuals might still experience romantic attraction to others, or they might not, in which case they would also be aromantic. In attempting to “explain” their sexuality in ways that fit heteronormative standards, asexuals can unintentionally contribute to their own erasure.

Common ways of trying to make asexuality accessible to a heterosexual audience include saying that “asexuals are just like everyone else, but without the sex” or explaining asexuality in terms of food—for example, some people like and crave cake, while others do not. This metaphor is problematic as it implies that asexuality is only a minor aspect of one’s personality, as easily removed or overlooked as one’s food preferences. Similarly problematic are discussions of sexual attraction in society at large (particularly in the context of masculinity) that assert that attraction is a necessary part of the human experience.

These kinds of definitions put asexuals in an uncomfortable spot. Under heteronormativity, they would not be considered “normal” and might not easily fit into other heteronormative categories (for example, an asexual could be transgender and homoromantic, and thus would not easily fit into the heteronormative mold). For this reason, asexuals feel the need to liken themselves to heterosexuals and prove that they are “normal” and can fit in. The implications of such statements are that everyone else in the queer community is somehow abnormal or not like “everyone else.”

Such analogies present asexuality as a watered-down version of another sexuality—heterosexuality lite, so to speak—erasing asexual experiences. This

is a form of heteronormative language violence, as it can cause asexuals to be pushed away from the broader queer community because their deviance from the heteronormative standard may not be as immediately obvious as, for example, a homosexual transgender person’s might. In addition, as a result of the language above, “gate-keeping” within the asexual community can arise, where some are excluded because they do not seem “queer enough”—for example, a heteroromantic demisexual (a sexuality on the asexual spectrum where one can feel sexual attraction to another ONLY after a strong emotional bond has been formed) could “pass” as straight, and thus might be seen as not needing the support of the community (Asexual 1). After all, if they were “just like everyone else” then why would they need a special community for support?

Though isolated from the LGBTQIA community (a community perhaps best suited to understand the experience of living in a world that sets a certain pattern of behavior and feelings that they do not share as “normal”) asexuals will not necessarily find the support they need in the broader heteronormative context of society.

Heteronormative language is violent, as it diminishes the identity of bisexuals and asexuals while limiting their ability to find support within the communities that are best suited to their experiences. Heteronormative language also denies asexuals the ability to express their experiences without being questioned, and invalidates the asexual identity—a form of violence. Similar to the argument that bisexuals are “confused” or “halfway in the closet,” the oversimplification of the asexual identity through cute analogies implies that asexuality is a quirk or a phase, rather than a valid identity and a major part of a person’s personality. Language that trivializes asexuality limits the ability of asexuals to express themselves, their experiences and their sexuality without fear of repercussions, whether that is not being taken seriously or being treated as an outsider. It normalizes the idea that heterosexuality is “normal” and preferable to any other orientation, to the point where those who identify differently must prove how like heterosexuals they are to be afforded respect. Thus, the erasure of asexuals and bisexuals is a form of heteronormative language violence. (Asexual 1)

The Violence of Misgendering Transgender Individuals

Misgendering transgender people by calling a transgender person anything but their preferred gender pronouns is violent in much the same ways that asexual and bisexual erasure is violent—misgendering invalidates their identity. The implication inherent in misgendering is that personal identification as a certain gender is ultimately meaningless and gender is a truth that can be discovered by discerning a person's biological sex at birth (Schilt and Westbrook 453). This limits a transgender person's ability to decide independently how they would like to present to the world and how they would like to identify. Such word choice reifies the idea that gender is fixed, immutable and decided at birth, a biological fact rather than a social construction. The limiting of a person's ability to be who they would like to be is a form of violence.

The misgendering of transgender individuals in casual conversations has effects beyond the possibility of hurt feelings of the individuals involved in the conversation. The way society comes to a consensus about certain truths necessarily has an impact on the way the judicial system addresses those truths. The misgendering of transgender individuals perpetuates the myth that gender is a "truth" that one can suss out if given information about an individual's biology. This is a violent way of thinking, as evidenced by the case of Karen Ulane (Cruz).

Karen was an Eastern Airlines employee who openly transitioned to female. After her transition, she was fired from her job. She attempted to sue Eastern Airlines for sex-based discrimination, but she was found to have been fired not because she was female, but because she was *transgender* (206). Ulane's story exemplifies how the court punishes those who do not conform to their assigned gender based on their sex at birth. By deciding to allow Eastern Airlines to discriminate based on gender identity (in that Karen's clearly did not match the one she was assigned based on her biological sex at birth), the courts have ensured that transphobia is not only socially encouraged, but also institutionally sanctioned. The distinction between cisgender female and transgender female is made clear through the court's decision, and by saying that Karen Ulane's case was not one of sex-based discrimination, the courts have said "trans women are not women."

Heteronormative Violence in Court Language

Through the heteronormative language of their decisions, the courts pass judgments on what lifestyles, identities, and experiences are valid and acceptable. Those who fall outside of what the court has interpreted to be acceptable, such as gender nonconformists, are unable to enjoy full legal rights as US citizens. Heteronormative language violence in the courtroom is not, of course, restricted to transgender individuals. The language of one court decision, which Cruz's study examines, says:

Sex is clearly an essential determinant of the relationship called marriage because *it is and has always been* recognized as the union of *man and woman*. It is the institution on which family is built, and in which the capacity for *natural* heterosexual intercourse is an *essential element* (205, emphasis added).

The court's language raises the question of what constitutes a man and a woman—a question which the court seems to have answered with "only those whose gender identity matches the biology they were born with and very occasionally those who have had sex reassignment surgery."

In addition to raising the question of what qualifies one to be a man or woman, the court's language also does violence to other groups. The first way it does so is by asserting that marriage is an unalterable institution, rather than a changeable social construct ("is and has always been"). The court's language also defines legitimate marriage by the capacity for and actual occurrence of heterosexual intercourse, which is violent to those in the LGBTQIA community are or can be married but who may not have heterosexual intercourse. This constitutes a large portion of the LGBTQIA community, as it includes any gay cisgender couples, some bisexual couples, some transgender pairings and asexuals. These strict definitions of what constitutes an acceptable gender identity and the policing of what a relationship should look like are violent because they punish those who do not conform by denying them legal protections offered to their conforming peers.

Conclusion

Heteronormative violence is present in the cisgender heterosexual community beginning from a young age. The gender policing and the teaching of strict gender roles to children have harmful effects for cisgender, heterosexual children by establishing gender roles that create violent, hypermasculine men. Importantly, this policing and teaching also have violent effects on the queer community. The erasure of asexuals and bisexuals, the misgendering of transgender individuals, and the violence done to the queer community in the courtroom can all be connected to the language we use to enforce heteronormativity in our everyday lives.

Just as violence is connected to heteronormative language, violence has the potential to be undone through the use of sensitive and inclusive language. Taking steps such as not assuming others' gender pronouns, including categories like asexual and bisexual when discussing sexualities and being aware of the gendered connotations and implications of words we use daily can help to reduce the violence of heteronormativity. I, personally, am a strong proponent of defying English norms—if you want to be gender-inclusive and use “they” (which I tend to favor over zie or hir simply because “they” is already a broadly accepted English word and therefore is easier to work into most contexts) to refer to an individual, do it. The incredible thing about language is its flexibility; language use and grammar rules change all the time; however, this change does not happen without speakers being active and intentional in their word choice. “All members of a violent society, not only the topdogs, contribute to its operation and hence are all responsible as they can shake it through their non-cooperation” (Galtung, 180). We are all implicit in heteronormative violence; the good news is that we each have the ability to end it.

¹ Violence will here be defined using Johan Galtung's definition, provided in his article “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research”: “Violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations... Violence is here defined as the cause of the difference between the potential and the actual, between what could have been and what is” (168).

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