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## From queer to gay to Queer.pl:

The names we dare to speak in Poland

**COMPARED TO THE** days of Oscar Wilde, we more often dare to speak the names of our non-normative loves and desires. We also do it with more care. While rejecting derogatory terms such as "faggots," "dykes" or "queers," in the 1960s and 1970s, US activists proudly renamed themselves "gays and lesbians" (adding "bisexual" and "transgendered" or "trans\*" people later on) (Weeks 2011). The new labels, in turn, were soon accused of being normative and exclusive and were frequently replaced with the reclaimed term "queer." This well-circulated narrative of the movement and academic thought in the USA often functions as an example for activists (Hayes 2001, 94) and scholars (Giffney 2009, 3) in other countries. While acknowledging the global dominance of mainstream US gay culture and activism (together with the growing popularity of English names for sexual minorities) as well as the worldwide influence of the US academic tradition, we still may ask: Is the story necessarily very much the same elsewhere and at other times? What are the consequences of using English labels (or their localized variants) for sexual minorities in non-English-speaking contexts? Do names

in other countries follow the Western path of rejection and reclamation?

While these questions have been recently addressed in queer studies with reference to different cultural and national contexts, especially Asian and African ones (see e.g. Hawley 2001, Hok-Sze Leung 2008), much less has been written about Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) (some notable exceptions include Štulhofer and Sandfort 2005; Kuhar and Takács 2007; Baer 2009, Kulpa and Mizielińska 2011a). This paper addresses these questions in relation to Poland. First, I discuss the importance of English self-descriptions for sexual minorities both in the USA and in non-English-speaking contexts with special focus on CEE. Next, I enquire into the names used by and for Polish sexual minorities, such as Polish offensive self-descriptions, code names and euphemisms, but also popular English terms employed in Poland. Finally, drawing on my analysis of an online discussion about the recently announced name change of the biggest Polish LGBT portal from *Innastrona.pl* [Different-page.pl] to *Queer.pl*, I examine why self-descriptions matter to Polish sexual minorities and what challenges we face while adapting English names, and in particular "queer," in Poland. The online discussion is the main focus of this article because it provides a unique perspective on the politics of naming: While, traditionally, it was mainly activists and academics who discussed the names for sexual minorities, on the Internet we also find less politically engaged people who are more readily able to present their views on the topic.

### **(Which) language matters**

That non-normative loves and desires dare not speak their names is no longer a pressing concern, at least for the West and CEE. The issue at stake is rather the choice of particular words, for particu-

lar words position people within particular discourses. The term "sodomite," for instance, placed homosexual acts in the domain of temporary aberrations, sinful or criminal deeds, while a "homosexual" made the "sodomite" into a kind of species understood in medical and psychological terms (Foucault 1998 [1976]). Because of their negative connotations, such older terms were abandoned by the gay liberation movement, formed after the Stonewall riots in 1969, as were other "old denigratory self-descriptions of 'queer', 'faggot', 'poufter'" (Weeks 2011, 65). The new term "gay people" was appointed to indicate an affirmative gay identity, which marked, in Weeks' words, "a dramatic transformation in sense of self – from victimhood to full agency" (64). Yet, soon after Stonewall, lesbian activists protested against the new name, which, although intended to include both men and women, in practice usually indicated men exclusively. Consequently, a new collective expression was coined, "gay men and lesbians," later extended to include bisexual (LGB) and transgendered or trans\* people (LGBT) but also, though less frequently, for example intersexual or inter\* (LGBTI), queer (LGBTIQ) and questioning (LGBTIQQ) people.

However, none of these acronyms has satisfied all parties. The shorter ones have been found too exclusive and the longer ones too obscure. Their constitutive parts have also been criticized for their normative and essentialist character. This is especially the case with the term "gay," which was accused of favouring a particular type of identity, "metropolitan gay identity" (Sinfield 1998), which boils down to white, urban, middle-class gay men. To oppose these tendencies, but also as a result of intensified discrimination against sexual minorities after the outbreak of HIV/AIDS in the 1980s, the old offensive term "queer" was reclaimed by more radical activists as a new form of self-description. Love explains, "the word queer

like fag or dyke but unlike the more positive gay or lesbian, is a slur [...] it was chosen because it evoked a long history of insult and abuse” (2007, 2). Additionally, “queer” was adopted to oppose essentialist approaches to identity: “It signifies the messiness of identity, the fact that desire and thus desiring subjects cannot be placed into discreet identity categories, which remain static for the duration of people’s lives.” (Giffney 2009, 2) But it was also used to oppose exclusionary practices within the LG(BT) movement: “[I]ts non-specificity guarantees it against recent criticisms made of the exclusionist tendencies of ‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’ as identity categories.” (Jagose 1997, 76) Most recently, researchers have also pointed out “the commercialization of queer, a term that once was seen as derogative and now is represented as a niche market” (Velázquez Vargas 2008, 121), for which they usually refer to the use of the term in popular TV productions such as *Queer as folk* and *Queer eye*.

The love that once dared not speak its name now speaks it in affirmative labels (“LGBT”) or refuses to speak it at all, at least in clear-cut terms (“queer”). It may also prefer to hide its name, or to speak it in more subtle words. Scholars point out the use of code names and euphemisms by sexual minorities to discretely indicate their non-heterosexuality. Weeks, for instance, notes that in the early twentieth century the term “gay” “evolved to become a covert name for homosexual activity” (2011, 64), and back in the 1970s Hayes reported that “the secret gay may eschew gay terminology, preferring to call his lover of many years his ‘friend,’ his circle of gay acquaintances the ‘kids,’ and all gays ‘members of our book club’ or ‘people of our faith’ (1976, 257).

Such issues of offensive versus affirmative, exclusive versus inclusive, and explicit versus discreet names for sexual minorities, although discussed most extensively with reference to English-

speaking contexts, may, and do, arise in other places too. This is partly due to the growing popularity of English in a so-called "global gay culture" (Altman 1997). The adaptation of English terms in other languages is at times justified by the lack of appropriate vocabulary in those languages. Reflecting on her interviews with Lebanese activists, Mourad notes that "the lack of positive Arabic terminology on sex in general and queer sex in particular leads to the use of English to discuss sexual practices and identities." (2012) Similarly, Altman reports that during the 1996 AIDS conference in Morocco "participants complained that despite an attempt to ensure equal use of Arabic it was 'easier' to talk about sexuality in French." (2001, 98–9) This is surely not the case for all languages in which English terms have won great popularity. Even in Arabic, the use of English or French terms is usually more a result of international power relations (including the history of colonialism) than of insufficient vocabulary, or a lack of linguistic creativity. Heinz et al. reach similar conclusions when comparing US, Chinese, Japanese and German websites for sexual and gender minorities. They acknowledge that, although the analysed websites "reflect strong national cultural characteristics [...] the hierarchical placement of English as the 'other' language, the *lingua franca* of the Internet, and the language of a global or U.S.-based gay rights movement, appears unquestioned." (2002, 122)

The adaptation of English terms to non-English speaking contexts is never straightforward, as it entails an intercultural translation of concepts. New problems emerge, which are most easily understood if we apply two additional qualifications: those of place and time. Regarding the former, in different countries, and thus also in different cultures and usually languages, the global dissemination of English names for sexual minorities may be perceived as a form of neocolo-

nialism. Altman argues: "It is precisely this constant dissemination of images and ways of being, moving disproportionately from north to south, which leads some to savagely criticize the spread of sexual identities as a new step in neocolonialism." (2001, 94) Although CEE has never experienced western colonialism per se, people living there may be aware of and oppose international power relations. For example, Bettina, a Polish interviewee in Binnie and Klesse's study, recognizes the cooperation with German activists in organizing the 2008 Krakow Festival for Tolerance as "patronising and domineering": "It was like the fifty-year-old German gays come and tell the young, Polish lesbian feminist women what to do" (quoted in Binnie and Klesse 2011, 123-4). Conversely, the global dissemination of English names may also be recognized as the promotion of international solidarity and universal LGBT rights. Writing about neocolonialism, Altman further notes that "given that many anti/postcolonial movements and governments deny existing homosexual traditions it becomes difficult to know exactly whose values are being imposed on whom." (2001, 95) Similarly, Phillips in his study on southern Africa points out: "These 'gay/lesbian' names for identities might originate in North America and Western Europe, but they have been appropriated by people the world over as they imply a claim to the protection and rights guaranteed under international treaties, and a way out of an almost universal form of marginalization." (2000, 34)

These two perspectives recognize either negative (neocolonialism) or positive (international solidarity) consequences of the adoption of English names for sexual minorities in non-English speaking contexts. Yet, they both share an assumption that travelling names and concepts are unproblematically imposed on people in other places. Binnie (2004) opposes this view and encourages us to recognize the

agency of the local language user. He refers to Tan's "hybridization whereby selected elements of gay culture and politics have been adopted from the USA, but domesticated by Taiwanese *tongzhi* to form a hybrid sexual culture and politics" (Tan 2001, 124 in Binnie 2004, 39). This suggests that the concepts the names bring with them are not simply imposed upon, but rather adjusted to new contexts.

The second qualification, which is that of the different time at which particular names and concepts (re)appear, is usually addressed exclusively with reference to one particular cultural context. In the USA, for instance, the narrative of the development of names for sexual minorities goes from queer to gay and back to queer. These name changes mark the progress achieved in both activism (from no activism to assimilationist activism to in-your-face activism) and academia (from no studies to gay and lesbian studies to queer studies). This trajectory often functions as a model for people in other countries as well, again both among activists and academics: "[T]he history of US lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer resistance holds a monopoly on inspiration for a global queer politics" (Hayes 2001, 94). And: "[A]n unvoiced assumption circulates within LGBT studies that queer theory is produced in North America and to a lesser extent Britain, and then exported as a form of neo-imperialist rhetoric to other parts of the world" (Giffney 2009, 3). These claims may be even more apt with reference to CEE, as the main difference between CEE and the West tends to be explained not so much by a different localization (culture) as by a different chronology (stage of development). Tlostanova argues:

The almost overnight vanishing of the second world led to a typical Western understanding of the post-Soviet as time not as space. It is



the time after socialism and not the dozens of millions of rendered irrelevant lives of those who inhabit the post-communist space. (2011, 2. On the Western European imaginations of CEE, see also Wolff 1994; Bakić-Hayden 1995; Todorova 1997; Hammond 2004 and Melegh 2006)

Additionally, Kulpa and Mizielinska relate this discursive strategy to the "Western progress narrative" and insist that the Western framing of the CEE is not just as post-Soviet, but also that it is always by definition behind the West, in transition, lagging behind or even dragging back the progressive West: "In a sense the West is always already 'post' [...] whatever CEE became/is/will be, the West had become/has already been/will have been." (2011b, 18) This explains why we may easily argue for the incompatibility of the US queer model of politics to, for example, Scandinavia (Dahl 2011, 147) or China (Altman 2001, 96), but tend not to think the same may also be true in the case of CEE: CEE is simply not there yet. Kulpa and Mizielinska present an alternative to this temporal relation between CEE and the West. While they admit that "after the collapse of the 'Iron Curtain', CEE countries quite unanimously adopted a Western style of political and social engagement" (2011b, 14), they emphasize that these countries do not simply follow the USA in a step-by-step development. They compare what they call the "western time of sequence" to the "eastern time of coincidence," which is characterized by "the protuberance of clutching ideas," the mix of gay and queer politics (2011b, 15–6). Elsewhere, Mizielinska (2006, 124–5) points out that this mix of different ideas and terms arriving at one particular moment in history is also characteristic of Polish academia, where the concepts that originated in different waves of feminism or in gay and lesbian studies and in queer theory have been introduced at the same time.

## The names we speak in Poland

A mix of Polish and English self-descriptions employed by sexual minorities can be found already in the late communist period. The two most popular words used for self-naming in the first Polish gay zine *Filo* (1986–1990), partially reprinted in the 8<sup>th</sup> issue of *DIK Fagazine* (2011, 55–63),<sup>1</sup> are *pedały* [faggots] (an offensive word similar to French *pédé* or *pédale*, as it associates gay men with pederasts), for example 'nowe organizacje pedałów' [new organizations of faggots], and *cioty* [poofsters] (also similar to English "fairy" or "pansy," as it is an offensive word indicating especially effeminate gay men), for example "wzywano cioty na przesłuchania" [poofsters were called for hearings]. This use of offensive words for self-naming is similar to the use of "queer" by men in USA and UK in the early twentieth century. However, at the same time the editors of *Filo* used the Polish equivalents of "gay" and, to a lesser extent, "homosexual." These two terms, though, were almost exclusively employed as adjectives related to political or cultural matters rather than as nouns used for self-description: "Międzynarodowy Dzień Geja" [International Gay Day], "książka gejowska w Polsce" [gay literature in Poland], or "działacze homoseksualni" [homosexual activists]. Interestingly, the definition of the word *gej* seems not to be clear at that time, as a letter to the editor entitled "O słowie gej" [About the gay word] confirms:

We have this opportunity to introduce a new word, which is unknown to the general public, so we can assign a positive meaning to it. Not every faggot [*pedał*], not every poofster [*ciota*] is a gay [*gej*], but only the one who accepts himself and tries to come out or has already done it. (Reprinted in *DIK Fagazine* 8, 2011, 62)<sup>2</sup>

Additionally, the mysterious title of the zine *Filo* suggests that the editors used the latter word as a code word. Indeed, Ryszard Kisiel, the founder of the zine, explains the origin of the title as follows:

In a letter to my friend, my lover, I once addressed him as a "friend" [*przyjacielu*]. My aunt somehow intercepted the letter and she told me, "It sounds so ambiguous, as if you two were lovers." From that moment on I stopped addressing him as "my friend" and started using the word "*filo*." I think this word has various meanings in Greek as well – admirer, friend, enthusiast. (Radziszewski and Kubara 2011, 30)

While the word *filo* was used in Poland as a code word probably only by single individuals, the term *przyjaciel* [friend] has become a popular euphemism for gay men. Gruszczyńska additionally points out that such euphemisms as *przyjaciółka* [a female friend] and *lubienie* [to like<sup>3</sup>] have also been used in Poland by and with reference to lesbians:

It is the peak of sophistication when women in several-year-long relationships ensure each other, and others at the same time, that they are not lesbians [*lesbijkami*], but they simply like [*lubią*] women and it just so happens that this liking resulted in living together [...] Two women may at most like [*lubić*] each other, never desire [*pożądać*] each other. (Gruszczyńska 2004, 234–5)

Another popular Polish euphemism is the expression *kochający inaczej* [those who love differently]. It is reflected in the titles of the most popular Polish magazine for sexual minorities in the 1990s, *Inaczej* [Differently], the first, and currently the biggest Polish, LGBT portal, *Innastrona.pl* [Differentpage.pl] (1996), and the

first Polish lesbian website, Inny Kraków [Different Krakow] (1997) (Gruszczyńska 2007, 102). The expression clearly emphasizes the difference between heterosexuals and homosexuals, positioning the former as a norm and the latter as an aberration of the norm. At the same time it rejects universalism and encompasses diversity (not all people are hetero), though it risks essentializing the categories of heterosexuals and homosexuals and thus suppressing the diversity within each of them (Scott 1988). Alternatively, Basiuk notes that the phrase "those who love differently" may communicate that "although differently, they still love, so they do not fundamentally differ from others who love." (2000, 30)

At the beginning of the 1990s, after the fall of communism in Poland, gay and lesbian activists started organizing a professional and officially recognized movement (Szulc 2011). This is when they adopted and promoted the most popular English terms such as "gay" [*gej*] and "lesbian" [*lesbijkka*], but also the abbreviations *LGB* or *LGBT*. Interestingly, Mizielińska notes:

Unlike in the West – where transgender and bisexual groups had a long history of struggle for inclusion within lesbian and gay politics (LG to LGBT) [...] – [in Poland] "bisexuality" and "transgender" were included alongside lesbian and gay beforehand, discursively, without any signals from bisexuals and transsexuals claiming their rights to be included. (2011, 92)

Even if Polish activists have been mainly occupied with lesbian and gay issues, they were clearly aware of US, or international, discussions and discourses on the inclusiveness of the LG(BT) movement. Additionally, it was not clear from the beginning how to adopt these English terms. While the words "lesbians" and "homosexuals" were

usually translated directly into Polish (*lesbijki*, *homoseksualiści*), the word "gay" was first adopted in its original English version, which was adjusted to the regimes of Polish grammar. This resulted in interesting forms, which appeared, for example, in the first issues of *Inaczej*, such as "*prasa gayowska*" [gay press], "*ruch gayowski*" [gay movement], "*równouprawnienie dla lesbijek i gayów*" [equal rights for lesbians and gays].<sup>4</sup> Later "gay" was converted into *gej*. These terms (*geje*, *lesbijki* and *homoseksualiści*) started to be more frequently used as nouns and are currently the most common words used in Polish with reference to sexual minorities. They are generally considered as neutral, though some scholars point out the prejudices they convey. For instance, Krzyszpień (2010, 140) notes that the English adjective "gay" is currently used in Polish mostly as a noun (*gej*), thereby losing some of its subtlety (the adjective "gay" in "gay men" recognizes homosexuals primarily as men with a unique qualification of their sexuality). Krzyszpień (2010, 143) also recommends that we use the word *homoseksualność* instead of *homoseksualizm* (both mean "homosexuality"), since the former possesses more positive and less medical connotations (compare e.g. *seksualność* [sexuality] and *reumatyzm* [rheumatism]).

Interestingly, while the words *geje* [gay men] and *homoseksualiści* [homosexuals] function in Polish as near synonyms, where the latter may also include lesbians, some nationalists and conservatives conceptualize them as significantly distinct categories. For instance, Janusz Korwin-Mikke, the leader of the Polish Congress of the New Right party, has explained his views in a national TV news programme as follows:

[H]omosexuals are normal. They've been here for four thousand years not bothering anyone. While gays *tfu* [a sound of disgust]

are a bunch of cads imported from abroad. They are not homos [*homosie*<sup>5</sup>] at all, but they pretend to be homos [*homosie*] [...] for the money. They are people imported from abroad, who [...] receive money for breaking up society and instilling odd values. (TVN<sub>24</sub> 2009)

The right-wing journalist Rafał Ziemkiewicz (2007), in turn, has argued in a newspaper article that "gayness [*gejostwo*] is a political homosexuality [*homoseksualizm polityczny*], a specific application of traditional slogans of the leftist ideology." In both quotes, the word "homosexuality" designates "real," usually male, homosexuals, whose core feature is to be satisfied with their current social and political position. When those homosexuals fit this description, they may be considered (patriotic) Poles. However, as soon as they organize themselves, participate in gay prides or speak up for equal rights, they become "gay men" and their Polishness or patriotism (in some cases also the authenticity of their homosexuality or even their humanity) are denied. Such a choice of words to designate "proper" and "improper" versions of male homosexuality is far from accidental. The word *homoseksualista* is better integrated in Polish whereas *gej*, although currently much in use, is a more recent word and thus sounds more foreign than *homoseksualista*. The choice of the less Polish sounding word to indicate "improper" homosexuality works to position combative sexual minorities as aliens to the nation, a strategy often employed in Poland (Czarnecki 2007; Graff 2008; Chetaille 2011), but not unique to the Polish case (Stychin 1998, 9). Because of this, Graff argues "it seems to be a dead end to constantly refer to the 'civilized world' and 'EU standards' [in Polish activism], as if women and minorities lived in their own country in the role of guests" (2008, 29).

Thus, the adoption of the new English word "queer" in Poland may pose the risk of further positioning Polish sexual minorities as aliens to the nation. "Queer" has only recently been introduced in Poland, mainly by academics (e.g. at annual queer conferences started in 2000 by Polish academics Basiuk, Ferens and Sikora or in a Queer studies course organized yearly by the Campaign Against Homophobia, that started in 2006) or by particular activist groups (e.g. UFA, which calls itself "a women-queer social and cultural Centra [female form of 'centre']", [www.u-f-a.pl](http://www.u-f-a.pl)) but also, in one case, by a commercial TV station, which broadcast *Queer as folk* under the original title. Additionally, some have come to adopt "queer" in the localized spelling *klir* (e.g. in the name of the festival *Klir Szyft*, organized in 2008 in Warsaw). *Klir* Polonises "queer" (as much as *gej* Polonised "gay" and *lesbijka* Polonised "lesbian") and thus reduces the anglocentrism of the term "queer." Even so, neither "queer" nor *klir* are terms, which are currently easily recognized by the Polish general public. Mizielinska, discussing key problems with "queer" in Poland, points out that the word is often so desexualized that it loses the confrontational character and subversive potential of the original English term: "The word itself is deployed precisely because it means 'nothing'" (2008, 123). Thus, "queer" is often used as a safe word which provokes little or no controversy, unlike the public use of *gej*, *lesbijka* or *homoseksualizm*, let alone the use of offensive words *ciota* [poofter], *pedał* [faggot] or *lesba* [dyke]. Paradoxically, therefore, to use *gej* in Poland is more queer than to use *queer* itself. There have been some attempts to translate "queer" into Polish but the task seems to be extremely difficult, if not impossible. Any translation made so far masks at least one important signifying dimension of "queer," for example *lesby i pedały* [dykes and faggots] (identity-based and exclusionary for all but gay men and lesbians), *odmieńcy*

[freaks] (still desexualized and not very confrontational), *kochający inaczej* [those who love differently] (euphemistic). An interesting solution might be to mix different translations within one text, a strategy employed by Nazaruk (2011). In his translation of a famous manifesto, entitled *Queers read this/Lesby i Pedałcy Czytajcie To*, Nazaruk replaces the original use of *queer* with such Polish words as *lesby i pedały* [dykes and faggots], *lesby i cioty* [dykes and poofters], *zбочeńcy* [perverts], *odmieńcy* [freaks] and *nieheteroseksualni* [non-heterosexuals] interchangeably (2011).

### From Innastrona.pl to Queer.pl

Despite the attempts just described, however, "queer" is usually left untranslated in Polish. This is also illustrated by the case of the recently announced name change of the first and currently biggest Polish LGBT portal from Innastrona.pl [Differentpage.pl] to Queer.pl. The editors of the portal justified their decision in a short apologetic note and allowed the registered members of the website (whom I will call patrons) to comment on it. The result was a heated discussion about the advantages and disadvantages of different names (158 patrons indicated that they liked the change and 93 that they did not like it).<sup>6</sup> The discussion started on February 1, 2012 and included 131 comments, 117 of which were added in the first week of the discussion. In total, 52 patrons posted their comments. Table 1 presents self-reported characteristics of the patrons with respect to age and gender. Clearly, males under 30 were most active in the discussion, while the least involved group (statistically speaking) appears to be that of trans-identified patrons. According to the website's profile search engine, there were 46,524 registered users on September 7, 2012 (57% females, 41% males, 2% trans\* and 24 users who did not state their gender). The



website's profile registration options do not ask users to specify sexual orientation.

**Table 1: Patrons who took part in the analysed discussion with respect to age and gender**

AGE	GENDER				TOTAL
	FEMALE	MALE	TRANS	NOT STATED	
19 and younger	6	9	1	–	<b>16</b>
20–29	5	18	–	2	<b>25</b>
30–39	2	4	–	–	<b>6</b>
40 and older	1	–	1	–	<b>2</b>
Not stated	1	1	–	1	<b>3</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>52</b>

I conducted a thematic analysis of the comments with the prime focus on posts discussing different names for sexual minorities and for the website. The apologetic article and comments were publicly available at first, but later only after registration or for a fee. As I have long been a patron of the website myself, I had access to all data. I obtained permission from the website's editor-in-chief to engage in a scholarly analysis of both the article and the comments. I did not inform any of the patrons about my analysis or ask for their consent as I found this to be too disruptive. Instead, I decided not to reveal their nicknames and to quote their comments only in English translation, although I have kept all original words that function as self-descriptions or are crucial for the politics of naming (they are indicated in the quotes by using the italic font).

As indicated, the change of the website's name from Innastrona.pl

[Differentpage.pl] to Queer.pl is justified by the editors in a short note. First, they explain why the old name needs to be changed: it limits the editors' plans with LGBT media as they do not want to restrict their services to an online webpage but wish to expand it to, for example, a radio station. In addition, they find the old name "both phonetically and graphically not optimal". This somewhat bizarre statement reveals a fundamentally economic reasoning behind the decision. The website seems to follow broader trends towards a commercialization of popular LGBT websites (Gamson 2003; Campbell 2005). Next, the editors justify the choice of the word *queer* by arguing that the new name will encompass a greater diversity of people: "'Queer' is now an umbrella word for 'non-heterosexual' people", "QUEER.PL indicates our great diversity, which we are proud of!" This reason provided for the name change is also reflected in the change of the website's subtitle from *pierwszy polski portal gej&les* [the first Polish gay&les portal] to *portal ludzi LGBT* [portal of LGBT people]. Thus, "queer" is used here as an umbrella term, a synonym for LGBT, rather than as an open, anti-essentialist self-description. Additionally, the editors briefly inform users that "'Queer' is also an academic term related to gender identity" and that "the Polish LGBT community knows the word from the TV series *Queer as folk*".

The first fifteen comments, posted on the same day the name change was announced, are rather general, brief and mainly positive. Thematically, they are often inspired by the editors' justifications and discuss, for example, the visual advantages or disadvantages of the new name: "I somehow prefer the current logo," (P47, F, 19)<sup>7</sup> "the new logo is pleasing to the eye; subdued colours, simplicity and the right message." (P19, M, 17) Later in the discussion, one patron explicitly connects the name change with the commercialization of

the website: "IS is a portal which must bring in money so if they change anything it's surely not only for ideological but primarily for commercial reasons, and the transformation to 'queer' aims to attract more people, including those from abroad." (P51, T, 45) This patron posts one more similar comment, but neither comment is picked up by other commentators. Still, six other patrons express their hope that the portal will not change its nature after the name change, that is, they hope it will not transform into a mere dating site. The editor-in-chief dispels these fears as follows: "Don't worry about it :) For dating, there's Kumpello.pl [the new service of the same company]." (P41, M, 37)

During the first day of the discussion, one patron also picks up the topic of the term "queer" ideally encompassing a greater diversity of people: "'Queer' indicates all the colourful diversity of our community and not only the black and white division between gay men and lesbians." (P1, F, 19) Again, however, this topic does not attract much attention during the next days. Some patrons who do comment on it, compare the new name to the current subtitle *gej&les* and argue that Queer.pl is "too broad" (P39, F, 19) and less accurate: "I don't know what you're thinking, but I associate 'Queer' only with sh\*\* [*g\*\*nem*]. Such a mix of everything." (P29, M, 19) In turn, other patrons juxtapose "queer" with the current name Innastrona.pl and argue that Innastrona.pl is actually a broader and more positive term: "I think Innastrona is a name which includes LGBT people and many others. It is very broad, only not so negative... [as Queer.pl]." (P27, M, 22) "How can you say that the new name 'expands' the range of the current name? It obviously narrows the group of possible members. *Inny* [Different] may have many meanings but it sounds really nice and positive." (P5, M, 24) *Inny* is indeed a broader term than "queer" as it may indicate not only sexual but any other

kind of difference. The term was also suggested by Basiuk (2000) more than a decade ago as a possible translation of "queer" because it has long functioned in Polish as a euphemism for homosexual people ("those who love differently"). However, one patron argues that *inny* is a vague and not an accurate term:

In my opinion, the name [Innastrona.pl] is totally vague and says absolutely nothing about what kind of people this website brings together – and the main characteristic of *InnaStrona* is that it brings together people who identify with the term *LGBTQ/friendly*. (P22, F, 17)

While the theme of sexual and gender diversity is thus somehow addressed in the analysed discussion, it is almost exclusively focused around the question which term is broader: "different", "gay and lesbian" or "queer?" No comments about possible exclusions or misrepresentations of words (e.g. with respect to bisexual or trans\* people) appear. This may be because few trans\* (and probably bisexual) patrons took part in the discussion (or, in general, are members of the website), confirming the often only nominal use of the LGBT abbreviation in Poland. Additionally, a recent report about Polish sexual minorities also indicates rather negative attitudes towards bisexual and trans\* people within the Polish LG community (Krzemiński 2009). More popular than the discussion threads of commercialization or diversity, clearly, are themes about various words' offensive versus positive connotations and their explicit versus discreet denotations. These topics were both introduced in a comment made on the second day of the discussion: "'Queer' means also 'ciotka' and 'faga'. It's only to the website's advantage that it doesn't have a gay name [*branżowej nazwy*]." (P33, M, 23)

### Offensive connotations of names

Many patrons commenting on the connotations of the word "queer" agree that this is a negative and offensive, or at least "suspicious," word; for example:

I wouldn't like to be associated with the word "queer". Yes, I totally agree that the word is understandable in our community but outside of it the word is still associated with (excuse my language) "*ciota*" [poofter] [...] I asked many of my friends what they associate the word with... they immediately answered: *CIOTA*. (P21, n/s, 25)

Other patrons also often associate "queer" with such offensive words as *ciota* or *pedał* and therefore find the new name ridiculous: "Make a step forward! *Pedały.eu* or *Pedały.pl* are still free too." (P33, M, 23), "[B]ecome a member of *CIOTA.PL*' – honestly a fantastic idea, I always wanted that :/" (P44, M, 22) After some further discussion, one commentator concludes "the result will be that *homo* will be named in three ways: an elegant way (*gej, lesbijka*), a suspicious way (*queer*) and an offensive way (*pedał, lesba*)." (P51, T, 45) Importantly, the patrons who recognize the negative connotation of "queer" all feel personally offended by it, to the extent that some declare they will stop using the website after the name change: "I may admit that I'm different [*inny*] to some extent but I won't declare myself as a member of a 'queer' community (weirdos [*dziwaków*] in literal translation)." (P27, M, 22) "I'll frankly admit that the word 'queer' insults me a bit, that's why I opt for leaving the portal." (P37, n/s, n/s)

At this point the editor-in-chief also joins the discussion and responds to the patrons' objections:

I think you exaggerate a bit with this "ciota" :) I don't know the meaning of the word ["queer"] in all countries but in the UK and USA the negative connotations of the word is past history. Nowadays, there are many LGBT organizations, companies and media, which incorporate the word "queer". In Poland, we have a course entitled "Queer studies." (P41, M, 37)

Some patrons agree with the editor, attesting that "in America, it's a popular term for homosexuals, totally neutral and non-offensive." (P4, F, 20) However, others undermine his claim: "Both in Canada and in the USA 'queer' is used mainly as a soft version of *ciota*, like *ciotka* [diminutive form] – maybe milder in tone but still pejorative." (P7, M, 22) Thus, patrons start qualifying the negative connotations of "queer," especially with respect to the country of use. Some reject the new name because of the sheer fact that it is not Polish: "Let's go the whole hog and declare English the new national language in Poland." (P36, M, 21) "I'll say it outright, it's a stupid idea to change the name. I don't know what it's motivated by... Maybe by a strange trend of anglicization of everything that's possible..." (P48, M, 33) Simultaneously with this objection, some other English words commonly used in Polish (such as "user", "event" or "e-book") are disapproved of as well (P52, F, 30). This suggests that an uneven flow of words and concepts from the West to the East does matter to at least some of the patrons and that it has the ability to arouse aversion to English self-descriptions. To be sure, none of the patrons thinks of using the Polonized variants of "queer" (e.g. *kliir*), but we should remember that they are commenting on the editors' apologetic article introducing "queer" in its original English version.

Nevertheless, it seems that there is one thing about which all commentators agree: the choice of an offensive name for self-description

is unacceptable. Thus, the key tension emerges around the question whether "queer" is offensive or not, with more patrons inclining towards the former opinion. One of the major reasons for this perception is that "queer" is transported and translated literally, without acknowledging the history behind it. Unlike in the USA, in Poland the word has not been used before so it cannot be reclaimed. Yet, "queer" is usually translated by patrons as *cioty* or *pedały*, which are offensive terms and it would also be possible to argue for their reclamation. This argument, however, does not emerge in the discussion. No reason is put forward for why we should embrace an offensive term. The general assumption is that words' negative connotations will be ascribed to the people named by these words. Only a few patrons challenge this nominalistic and deterministic view, arguing that people can shape the meanings of words: "Although the term 'queer' is linked to diversity, in Poland it was paradoxically annexed by radicalism, so it is a lot of work for IS/Q editors to disenchant it." (P26, M, 24) "We can create the meaning of the word 'queer,' because the word refers to us." (P10, M, 23) These quotes resemble the previously discussed argument made in a letter to the editor in *Filo* regarding the term "gay," at the time this was a new word. Yet, while in the case of "gay" it was argued that the new word would indicate a new quality (proud men who want to or have already come out), no reason is given, in the analysed discussion, for why the new term "queer" might be needed and which unique qualities it is supposed to signify.

### **Online and offline (in)visibility**

The same comment which provokes the discussion about the connotations of names also introduces the second most popular theme: the (in)visibility that is gained with the use of specific self-descrip-

tions. This starts with the opinion that "[i]t was only to the website's advantage that it didn't have a gay name" (P33, M, 23), and is followed by a couple of posts agreeing that the older name is more discreet than the new one, for example, "'innastrona' was a very good, inconspicuous name. It suited some of us, those not willing to come out, very well. When logging on IS at work, one could avoid nosy looks and the magic words 'gej&les.'" (P43, F, 22) Unlike the discussion about the offensiveness of "queer," this theme does not provoke strong opinions, such as announcements about leaving the website. In fact, patrons usually point out that the explicitness of "queer" might be a problem for others, not for themselves:

[T]hose who do care whether people know if they're *homo* or not (see mainly youngsters) may not like the change to "queer" because it will immediately define them as *homo*, while visiting IS could be associated with broadly defined alternativeness, without a clear indication of *homo*. (P51, T, 45)

Another patron (P19, M, 17) challenges this argument, arguing that the subtitle of Innastrona.pl: first Polish gej&les portal, clearly indicates homosexuality. The response is that this subtitle as it appears on the screen "is faintly visible and, besides, when your friends look at the list of websites you visited, they see only www.innastrona.pl and this is unlikely to attract their attention if they aren't *homo*." (P51, T, 45)

Interestingly, some patrons, both female and male, explain they use the abbreviation of the website's name, IS, as an offline code word, which helps them to "discreetly find out the orientation" (P5, M, 24) of newly met people: "[W]ell, that'll be the end of asking folks 'hey, you got *iesaa?*' to pick them up or sound them out." (P32,



F, 91) This strategy is similar to the use of "gay" as a code word in the USA and UK in the first half of the twentieth century, but also to the use of the term "friend" in Poland or *filo* by the editor of *Filo* zine. The new name, some patrons argue, will not allow this:

Sometimes you're in the city centre and meet somebody whom you fancy. You'll ask them "you got a profile on *inna strona*?" And if they don't know what that is about, you know you're helpless. Or they say "yes, I have" and smile [...] What will happen now when we ask "are you on *queer*?" Well, I don't believe in the quality of tolerance in our beautiful country. (P5, M, 24)

Although many patrons criticize the greater explicitness of the new name, some argue it is a positive development. The strongest counterargument is provided by the editor-in-chief: "[O]f course 'queer' more than '*Inna Strona*' indicates *LGBT* but this is precisely what we wanted. It should indicate it because we're *LGBT* and there is nothing to be ashamed of." (P41, M, 37) Some patrons agree with the editor and add that the new name is more accurate (P22, F, 17) or explain that "maybe *IS* wants to simply come out of the shade?" (P19, M, 17) A key tension emerges between the politics of affirming visibility and people's will to control when, where and to whom they reveal their alternative sexual identification (what today increasingly goes by the name of visibility management). It is striking, though, that for the majority of patrons, as well as for the editor, it seems clear that "queer" indicates non-heterosexuality more explicitly than *innastrona*. This assumption is contrary to Mizielinska's (2008) argument about the word "queer" not being understandable in Poland, at least until a few years ago. Indeed, few patrons raise the issue, for example: "In reality 'queer' is usually not understand-

able in Poland [...] and this is why the new name isn't good" (P42, F, 30), but their ideas are not picked up by others. "Queer" is now a word in transition in Poland, just as "gay" was some time ago. It still may not be understandable to the majority of Polish citizens but it clearly indicates non-heterosexuality for most of the patrons, even if there is no consensus about its connotations.

## Conclusions

Although self-naming has long been a subject of intense debate among LGBT/queer activists and academics, the analysed online discussion surrounding the new name (Queer.pl) for what has become the biggest Polish LGBT portal (Innastrona.pl) allows us to hear also the voices of less politically engaged people (even if these are admittedly still people who are engaged enough to visit the portal and post their comments there). When the editors explain the reasons for the name change in a short statement, they argue that the new name is more attractive in marketing terms and that Queer.pl better reflects the diversity of their community. However, these two themes, of commercialization and diversity, attract only limited attention from patrons. In response to the former, a few patrons either assess the attractiveness of the new name or express their fears about a possible decrease of the website's quality after the new name is applied. Furthermore, one patron points out that the name change is primarily a commercial move made to attract new visitors. With regard to the theme of diversity, patrons focus on discussing which terms possess broader meaning ("different," "gay and lesbian," or "queer") but do not raise the issue of the exclusion of bisexual or trans\* people.

The most popular theme appears to be that of various words' offensive versus positive connotations; this topic is introduced by pa-

trons of the website during the second day of the discussion. Interestingly, all commentators seem to agree that it is unacceptable to choose an offensive word for self-description. The main tension and disagreement thus arises around the question whether "queer" is a positive or negative term in Poland, with more patrons inclining towards the latter view, even if they might agree that "queer" has more positive connotations elsewhere. Such a qualification in terms of the cultural environment into which the word "queer" travels also appears in opinions insisting on the rejection of the word simply because its an English one. An analogous historical qualification is not addressed anywhere in the discussion. There are no comments explaining that "queer" is an originally negative, reclaimed name in English, why it was reclaimed or which new quality "queer" could indicate for Polish sexual minorities.

The second most popular theme in the debate, also raised by the patrons themselves, concerns various words' explicit versus discreet denotations. Here a key tension emerges between a politics of affirming visibility, supported by the editors and some of the patrons, and the will of other patrons to control when, where and to whom they reveal their sexual orientations, both offline and online. An interesting finding is that although some authors suggest that *queer* is usually not understood by the Polish general public, the word seems to be quite clear in indicating non-heterosexuality for the patrons of the analysed website. Additionally, most patrons assume that the Polish public at large can also connect "queer" with non-normative sexualities, which becomes a problem for some and a positive development for others.

More generally, my findings show that although English names for sexual minorities often become popular in non-English-speaking contexts, they do not therefore signify in the same manner.

Most often, the original meanings of self-identification categories are neither fully adopted nor entirely dismissed in the new context into which they are imported. The process always involves an active negotiation and resignification of meaning. Certainly, Queer.pl does not retain any of the historical trajectory with which we currently associate "queer" in the English-speaking academia, from queer to gay and back to queer. The adoption of "queer" by Queer.pl is neither a backward move, as it fails to reclaim anything in the Polish cultural context, nor a forward move, as it indicates no shift towards either a more in-your-face form of activism or a more post-structuralist kind of thinking.

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## NOTES

1. Selected pages of *Filo* are now also available at <http://www.innahistoria.pl/muzeum-start/prasa/77-filo> (accessed June 26, 2012).
2. All translations from Polish were made by the author.
3. Unlike in English where "to like" may also mean, "to find somebody attractive," in Polish the verb means nothing but "to like somebody as a friend."
4. The first two issues of *Inaczej* are now available at <http://www.innahistoria.pl/muzeum-start/prasa/61-inaczej-1990-2002> (accessed September 4, 2012).
5. *Homosie* is a diminutive form of *homo*. It is a neologism created probably by Korwin-Mikke himself, not commonly used in Polish.
6. All data provided here were last consulted on June 26, 2012 unless stated otherwise.
7. Patrons are identified by an assigned patron number, gender and age.

## ABSTRACT

The Western narrative of the development of names for sexual minorities often goes from queer to gay and back to queer. These name changes mark the progress achieved in both Western activism (from no activism to assimilationist activism to in-your-face activism) and academia (from no studies to gay and lesbian studies to queer studies). Additionally, this trajectory often functions as a model for people in other countries. While acknowledging the global influence of the US "gay" culture and activism as well as US academic tradition, we still may ask: Is the story necessarily so much the same elsewhere and at other times? This paper addresses the question in relation to Poland. Do Polish terms for sexual minorities follow the Western path of development? What challenges do we face while adapting English names, and in particular *queer*, in Poland? Drawing on the analysis of an online discussion about the recently announced name change of the biggest Polish LGBT portal from Innastrona.pl [Differentpage.pl] to Queer.pl, I examine how different factors influence the choice and perception of specific self-descriptions. In the conclusions, I argue that the adoption of *queer* by Queer.pl is neither a backward move, as it fails to reclaim anything in the Polish cultural context, nor a forward move, as it indicates no shift towards either a more in-your-face form of activism or a more poststructuralist kind of thinking.

## SAMMANFATTNING

Den västerländska berättelsen om hur beteckningar för sexuella minoriteter utvecklats går vanligen från "queer" till "gay" och tillbaka till "queer". Dessa förändringar i beteckningarna avspeglar framstegen som gjorts både inom västerländsk aktivism (från ingen aktivism alls till assimilationsinriktad aktivism till konfrontativ aktivism) och inom akademien (från ingen forskning alls till homosexualitetsstudier till queerstudier). Dessutom fungerar denna allmänt spridda berättelse ofta som modell för aktivister och forskare i andra länder. Även om man erkänner såväl den breda amerikanska gaykulturens och -aktivismens globala

dominans (tillsammans med att engelska ord för sexuella minoriteter blir allt populärare), som den amerikanska akademiska traditionens inflytande världen över, kan vi ändå ställa frågan: Är denna berättelse nödvändigtvis den samma på andra håll och i andra tider? Denna artikel behandlar den frågan i förhållande till Polen. Följer polska termer för sexuella minoriteter det västerländska mönstret med avvisande och återtagande? Vilka utmaningar ställs vi inför när vi anammar engelska ord, och i synnerhet "queer", i Polen? Inledningsvis diskuterar jag den blandning av självbeskrivningar som polska sexuella minoriteter använder, som kränkande tillmälen (t.ex. *pedały* [bögar] and *cioty* [fikusar]), eufemismer och kodord (t.ex. *filo*, *przyjaciele/przyjaciółki* [manliga och kvinnliga vänner] eller *kochający inaczej* [de som älskar annorlunda]) samt populära engelska termer (t.ex. "gays", "lesbians", "homosexuals", "LGBTs"). Utifrån en analys av on-linediskussionen kring den nyligen aviserade namnändringen på Polens största LHBT-portal från *Innastrona.pl* [*Andrasidan.pl*] till *Queer.pl*, undersöker jag hur skilda faktorer påverkar valet av, och uppfattningen om, olika självbeskrivningar. Resultatet visar att hemsidans författare lanserar *Queer.pl* som ett mer ekonomiskt attraktivt namn och som omfattar en större mångfald än *Innastrona.pl*. Dessa teman, kommersialisering och mångfald, uppmärksammas dock bara i begränsad omfattning av hemsidans besökare. Det är uppenbart att de två teman som är mest populära bland besökarna är trädor om olika ords kränkande eller positiva konnotationer (t.ex.: "Är 'queer' ett kränkande ord?"), och deras explicita eller diskreta betydelser (t.ex.: "Beskriver 'queer' uttryckligen folk som homosexuella?"). Avslutningsvis hävdar jag att anammandet av "queer" i *Queer.pl* är vare sig en bakåtriktad gest, eftersom det inte återtar något i den polska kulturella kontexten, eller en framåtriktad gest, eftersom det inte indikerar en förskjutning vare sig mot en mer konfrontativ aktivism, eller mot ett mer poststrukturalistiskt tänkesätt.

**Keywords:** queer, Poland, politics of naming, self-naming, discourse, international power relations, Western hegemony, world wide web