
History of gender concepts

Contingency, change and action

Tuija Pulkkinen

This article will consider the historically contingent nature and the power of concepts like 'lesbian', 'gay', 'bisexual', 'transsexual', 'transgender', 'queer', and also of others such as 'man' and 'woman'. For the lack of a better word, let us call all of them gender concepts, although we know that 'gender' itself has a very interesting and recent history as a concept. All these concepts function to organize the field of gender, that is, to discipline various orders of access, exclusion, and hierarchy, whether concerning bodily pleasure and emotion, or economic structures of household arrangements and social class. It is particularly informative to consider the history of such concepts, because paying attention to their history disconnects them from the assumption of there being an original or natural order. Rather, it makes one reflect on the power of concepts, of what these concepts achieve through managing the possible experience.

After what is known as the linguistic turn in philosophy, which also informs what we understand by "the postmodern" in the field of theory, one would expect there to be little need to persuade theorists to pay even more attention to language. However, although there is a widespread conviction that the "limits of our language are the limits of our world", language too often remains an abstract notion and is not 'taken seriously' in concrete terms and taking into account the plurality of languages. Taking language seriously does not only mean paying attention to the "natural languages" in opposition to the "formal language". It also calls for focusing on the difference created through the fact of the multiplicity of languages, and consequently, drawing attention to the conceptual *Spielraum*, the conceptual contingency, that is created by this difference.

Likewise, even if it is commonplace to refer to "doing things with words", the implications of linguistic performativity are not fully played out, and action through language use in different languages does not receive detailed attention. Words indeed do things: it matters whether politics is discussed in terms of "rights" or in terms of "system of law," as "*Recht*" (Gr), "*Rätt*" (Sw) or "*Oikeus*" (F), for example. It matters, whether there is the word 'gender' in a language, as we doing women's studies in Scandinavian countries and Germany have learned during the recent decades when this English word has been looking for its translation. Moreover, it matters, and it concretely changes peoples lives, whether

there is the word 'transsexual' in the vocabulary of a language. New words and expressions in a language do not merely conceptualize pre-existing experiences in new ways, or follow from new ways of experiencing things, they also render new types of experiences possible, they create new possibilities, they do things. 'Queer' definitely is no exception. We might ask what does "queer" do? What is its politics like? Where does its performative power lie?

Conceptual history research

Conceptual contingency and conceptual change as political action is currently studied intensely within the field of history of political concepts. We know, for example, much of the history and ultimate contingency of concepts that inform our political imagination and intelligibility such as 'the state', 'civil society' or 'the people' or 'the nation'. We know that they did not always exist as concepts and as words, they have come into being at some point of time in some place, have very different histories in different language realms, and consequently 'things' referred to through them could be conceived of and lived in a very different manner. The idea in conceptual history research is that it does not confine itself to "language" in an abstract sense, or to "ideas" in an abstract sense, but instead looks at the very materiality of language, the concrete words used combined with their semantic analysis.

In the realm of gender concepts there is room for similar work. Despite the abundant talk on the deconstruction of the category of woman in recent literature, the category 'woman' is, nevertheless, still often taken as fundamental and natural. Looking at the history of gender concepts in a concrete way, that is, concentrating in words and expressions in languages, reveals a contingency which surpasses the convenient expectations of naturalized gender and connects it to the history of gender order. At the level of very concrete language use, a much more diversified past of various "sameness" and "differences" is revealed and the very recent appearance of the concept of 'woman' becomes apparent.

This statement involves more than merely acknowledging that it is problematic to assume something like "women's experience" just because there are different kinds of women with different experiences. Or, analogically, that it would be problematic to speak of 'lesbian experience' because at different times the same-sex experience might have been lived out differently. Rather, here the attention is directed to the simple fact that there clearly are periods of time when you could not *talk* of something like 'women's experience' because there were no words operating in the way that our word "woman" does. You would not talk in terms of such a category and you would not conceive of the world as divided primarily into "women" and men, because the meaningful lines of division were drawn in another way.

For example, in Swedish language as it was used in early 19th century texts in Finland '*kvinnå*' (woman) was not used to refer to gentry women, who were instead referred to as '*fruntimmer*'. To call a '*fruntimmer*' a '*kvinnå*' at that point would have been as wrong as, I would assume, it would have been to call 'a lady' a 'woman' in English. It appears as though 'woman' as a general concept was fairly rarely used up until around 1800 – the various terms of guardianship-status or marriage-status and class being much more common.

In the Bible, for example, there are plenty of references to 'wives', 'widows' and 'virgins' – but rarely the word 'woman'. A typical phrase in which it occurs is, for example "there was a woman in that town that lived in sin". Shakespeare's texts point in the same direction: 'woman' is used fairly rarely and only when the terms 'wife', 'widow', 'maid', 'gentlewoman' or 'lady' are not applicable. It is used pronouncedly to refer to 'bad' women, prostitutes, sick people, unmarriageable females, those not belonging to any male, and totally unknown or strange female persons, people who live outside the regular order: regular household order and regular sexual order.

The story of the term 'woman', transmuted from a marginal into a central category of gender order, from referring to a minority group of odd people into signifying/denoting the central category is a story of political work – change of language, and of order. It is also a contingent story, in that it could have gone in another way. 'Women's' position could not be discussed or written about in terms of 'women' in general until a linguistic change had been completed, that is, until it became possible to speak in such a language. It is an interesting task to trace the history and the agents of this conceptual change. The universal category 'woman' as opposed to 'man' was a precondition to and the result of 'the woman question,' 'women's movement', and feminism in the 19th century. Those who prefer to anchor female/male distinction in universal biological or organic nature, or human condition and gendered experience, just lack insight into the historical contingency and the *Spielraum* there is in the story.

It is, therefore, worth remembering that 'woman' – particularly in relation to 'wife' – is a political concept, that it achieves something. In multiple ways, so is, of course, 'lesbian'. Stating that 'queer' is political, and does something, probably does not need as much defending. The history of all of these concepts is intertwined with mastering and with enabling lives to be lived differently, and with struggles – struggles for political rights, struggles over ways of living, over household order, and sexual licence: who you may or who you should touch and how, and what is imaginable and nameable as desire.

'Lesbian'

As a topic of historical research, then, it is interesting to approach the lesbian

experience and the concept of lesbian as it appears concretely as a matter of politics of words within different language spheres. Instead of talking about when the *idea* of lesbian emerged historically in Nordic countries, or speculating on how persons in the past *felt*, a much more interesting and a more precise task, is to follow in the texts, both semasiologically and onomasiologically, the word-families around 'lesbian' and to do research on the conceptual changes based on concrete language use. The focus on differences in place and time is achieved through focusing on language. The new words starting to circulate really do something: they are not only a sign of change but they also change and make possible things that were not possible before. They, therefore, can be seen as making possible entire ways of life, different orders of things.

In terms of lesbian research, focusing on particular languages helps to avoid simply universalizing phenomena to all times and places. It also helps to avoid personalizing the "qualities" which are results of complex discourses in interaction. It is not infrequently that the qualities are seen inherently in particular persons, in their "birth", and not in the historical-social-linguistic conceptual possibilities, the *Spielräume*, that are available for individual persons to 'experience' and 'to be' something.

My favorite example of the difference in time and place and of the problems involved in locating the origin of qualities in individual persons is inspired by Leslie Feinberg's novel *Stone-Butch Blues* and its description of the childhood and youth of the main character. Jess Goldberg, a cross-dressing child whose gender and sexual identity Feinberg goes to some lengths to trace back to Jess's birth. According to the narrative, Jess was born different from those around her. Her/his original identity unfolds and is disclosed to others in the course of the story. The narrative describes Jess as laboriously finding her/his real self, first as a butch lesbian and then, later, as an FTM transsexual.

A reader inclined to deconstruction, however, easily recognizes several discourses in Jess's surroundings that were available for creating the differences and identities that are purportedly there in this person's *original* make-up since birth, in a way that they would have followed her wherever s/he was born. First, Jess's childhood cross-dressing alarmed the working-class parents who were informed by popularly available psychoanalytical knowledges, on the basis of which they were able to label the cross-dressing child different and in need of treatment. As a consequence Jess was diagnosed as disturbed, taken for a short period into a mental institution and forced to meet a psychiatrist regularly. Confirmed with her/his new sense of difference Jess encountered the flourishing bar culture and the well-developed roles of butch and femme lesbians. The author describes tenderly how the newcomer was shown the ropes of the butch role.

Jess Goldberg was born in 1949 and lived in Buffalo. In comparison, for a Finnish working-class girl born in 1949, say, in the industrial town of Tampere, a girl similarly fond of cross-dressing, the experience would probably have been very different. It would have been quite improbable for parents in Finland – where psychoanalysis was not common knowledge – to distinguish between a disturbed and a normal child on the basis of cross-dressing. Extremely very few parents from educated classes would have been likely to do so. A working class girl would not have been labeled different, let alone sick in any convincing enough way to build up an identificatory category strong enough to actuate a search for others with similar experiences. Even if a cross-dressing girl would have looked for others, there would not have been any bars to go to and no women called ‘butches’ to provide fatherly coaching and to identify with. The concept was not there, there were no words for this. In this context, fondness of cross-dressing was simply not such a fact that you would build an identity on. Neither those practicing cross-dressing nor those observing it from outside were envisioning such identity.

As Tuula Juvonen has shown in her studies, there were certainly women in Tampere in the 1950s and early 1960s who had sexual feelings toward women, and there were certainly women who thought of themselves as men rather than women. Women who took over a male role to a degree, and women who formed couples with women. But, these women did not keep contact with each other, they were not considered as a particular group. They did not form an identity either to themselves or to others; they were not called any one name.

It is not irrelevant that Jess found the terms ‘lesbian’ ‘butch’ and ‘femme’ in her environment, not to mention some years later the term ‘transsexual’. In a striking contrast, the women in Tampere whom we are interested in here, were referred sometimes by others and by themselves as “like that”, “such,” or “us” – terms used also to refer to many other people who were different in various other ways. Somewhat different but not disturbing in any big way. In other words, there was no vocabulary for exactly this difference. These women would not be perceived as one group, one identity by themselves or by others. A respectable female schoolteacher and her partner would not be likened to, or categorized by anyone as belonging to the same group as a couple of working women in a factory, or a shady character on the streets frequently arrested for bootlegging, and therefore mentioned in police documents as having had sexual relationships with women. They were not all referred to with one word, let alone with a specialized vocabulary specifying their roles in a same sex relationship until much later. In principle this vocabulary could have not evolved; it is a contingent history.

Of all the possible ways to organize “experience” our retrospective gaze now picks up “the lesbian experience”, “transsexual experience” or even “queer

experience” that some of these women had according to our present concepts, but they did not have “lesbian” experience, “transsexual” experience or “queer” experience, literally taken, in these words. And if we had some other concepts now, they would probably have had some other experience. It is very good to be aware of this, and it is very interesting to trace the story of the change of the words that made this possible, and the actors who changed the words.

As we know the change of discourse referred to here has been studied for quite a while as a universal phenomenon. We know that the language around the topic of ‘homosexuality’ was shaped through medical literature and institutions; through religious discourse, through criminological discourse, as well as through literature, novels, poetry, the press, movies, and media in general. All of this, in various ways has created the vocabulary in which we now talk about lgbtq experience. But, apart from this story that is told as a general/universal/transnational one, there are the particular stories as well. It is not enough to say that this is how it has gone generally, it has also gone in different ways in different places. It is to this contingency of the conceptual framework, and the *Spielraum* within it that I want to draw attention. Paying attention to the *Spielraum* in particular places means not just being mindful of “national differences in development,” within the general pattern of the story of conceptual modernization, it also means paying attention to the contingency of the *general* story, to the fact that it could really have gone otherwise. Differences in the particular stories remind us that there is no universal necessity behind the evolving vocabularies of experience, that they are not implanted in universals (like the human body, or the ‘modern’), but that there is plenty of *Spielraum* there too, and that it is exactly this *Spielraum* that we call the politics of life. Therefore paying attention to local stories in terms of the vocabulary around, say lesbianism, adds to the realization of the extent of conceptual contingencies and exceeds merely the interest in the particular vs. the universal.

The study of vocabulary around lesbianism in Finnish

The historical study of vocabulary around lesbianism in Finnish is one of these particular stories. There is serious and interesting work done in this area by several scholars, such as Kati Mustola, Antu Sorainen, Tuula Juvonen and Virva Hepolampi who all study the Finnish history of ‘the lesbian’.¹

In drafting the narrative of the vocabulary there are two temptations which are difficult to avoid but which should be avoided:

1) The first one is to think that these are the experiences (lesbian, bisexual, queer) that have always been there, everywhere, and, then, at different places the vocabulary has evolved at a different tempo to express the experience. The story involves two problems: the assumption of an original experience and the

assumption of the inevitable process of its expression. The story of modernity is one version of this, of the inevitable triumph of the modern vocabulary. Instead of drafting a story of, first, the lack of expression for a particular experience, and, next, of finding the expression for that particular experience, i.e. a story of coming to awareness, there is a much more challenging task: to keep the contingency, the *Spielraum* in mind. The story is much more interesting if you start the mental exercise from point zero, thinking that it could have not happened, that the vocabulary for the experience 'lesbian' could have not appeared. Each particular story of the vocabularies around lesbianism provides a chance of relativizing the universal story. Instead of writing the history of a particular place and language as if its progress were prefigured in the general course of events, reaching the same points just a little bit later, you can keep your eyes open for the contingency that is present at each moment. You miss the interesting part; the actual differences if you just draft the success story. It has become commonplace to see the future as open and as a field of politics, but to see the past also as politically open and as a field of conceptual contest is more difficult.

For example, it would be possible to argue on the basis of Kati Mustola's findings that the very lesbian-like character of Lucina Hagman and the portrayal of the fictive person in Alma Söderhjelm's early short story bear witness to there being a clearly lesbian experience before any terms were available for it in Finnish, and that this experience was there just waiting to get its proper expression in Finnish. The assumption is that this is one and the same thing, merely adopting equivalent expression in one particular language after the other. However, as Kati emphasizes, there would not have been Lucina Hagman's personal style, there would not have been these portraits depicting her as a particular type of a person, and there would not have been a description of the person in Alma Söderhjelm's novel in these easily identifiable "lesbian" terms, if there had not already been somewhere else the precise terms available for this difference. Discourses in which Lucina Hagman and the character in the novel absolutely made sense and were identifiable as something nameable. Their performances did not, so to speak spring from "nature", on the basis of their original pre-linguistic "experience", but were built on the interaction with other languages, as Mustola emphasizes.

In a similar vein, the sexual experiences of the women belonging to the religious sect that Antu Sorainen studies were not experiencing the "same lesbian experience" springing from the natural lesbianness of these women, but probably something altogether different, intelligible in terms of their very specific religious vocabulary. The interesting aspect is, as Sorainen emphasizes, the procedure of their being read as a case of "homosexual acts between women", a reading which, again, is contingent, that is, might have not happened. Who knows how we

now might perceive what was done if some other language, some other vocabulary, had been the winning one.

In the emerging vocabulary there were interesting peculiarities too, as Tuula Juvonen has shown, such as the expression "Swedish disease" which points to local rather than universal understandings. Virva Hepolampi has also suggested that the conceptualization of and modes of expression on lesbianism in Finnish were very different from the supposedly universal one, not least because the most influential works of lesbiana remained untranslated and unknown to Finnish-language readers. As she points out, the linguistic analysis should not stop with the precise terms, but we should pay equal attention to the withholding of such terms, to the secrecies and obscurities created through omissions and evasions. How the available conceptualizations support or fail to support translations is a contingent fact, which, again, opens up new opportunities for things going in a different way.

These kind of particularities and contexts, and the possibilities for conceiving the matter at issue differently, as discussed in connection to the linguistic change of Finnish gender concepts, go unnoticed if they are diluted to an unspecified lesbian experience which is one and the same in the past as in the present, or if historical change is seen as universal modernization.

2) The second temptation or danger in drafting the story of lesbian vocabulary is to exaggerate the uniqueness of a language in relation to other languages, the self-containment of a culture in view of other cultures.

As Mustola emphasizes, educated women in Finland at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century were connected in multiple ways to other European cultures and languages. The supposedly generic masculinity of someone like Lucina Hagman needs to be mapped against this intense cultural exchange. Exactly the same holds for the religious community of women studied by Sorainen: it was an international sect based in Switzerland. As Juvonen shows in her survey of the 1950's popular press, interaction with Scandinavian discourses played a crucial role in the introduction of the new vocabulary, to the extent that the phenomenon was established in popular discourse by the name "Swedish disease". Hepolampi, who tackles the linguistic exchange directly in the crucial field of translations, traces how significations in practice are carried over and how certain significations fail to come through, indicating discrepancies and creating openings for revised meanings. Translation is the concrete site of conceptual change: that is where languages meet.

Writing history today

In writing history, we operate in close proximity to these two dangers and temptations. On the one hand, there is the danger of writing the story of gen-

der vocabulary as a story of universal modernization, and forgetting the *Spielraum* within it. On the other hand, there is the danger of exaggerating the distinctness of a particular linguistic area.

The point that I have been arguing here regarding genealogical reconstructions of gender concepts carries a more general message: exactly the same caution is to be exercised with the concepts used today. Language matters, words do things. There is reason to pay attention to what is done with the concepts in use. What do concepts do?

The most effective way to analyze concepts is to pay attention to their counter concepts. 'Woman' used to be a counter concept for 'wife, widow and maid'. These days the counter concept of 'woman' is clearly 'man'. A significant change of the concept. What does it do? It fades out the differences between 'wife', 'widow', and 'maid' and creates a primary difference between 'woman' and 'man', a pronouncedly heterosexual difference.

What did 'lesbian' do when it appeared? Did it erase some former distinctions? Not really, it rather created a new one. What is its counter concept? What is 'lesbian' distinguished from in texts? Is the counter-concept 'woman' as in Monique Wittig's famous statement "a lesbian is not a woman"? Rarely. More often it is 'hetero' within the category woman. 'Lesbian' seems to act in a way that keeps the categorical distinction 'man/woman' intact and creates within the category 'woman' the distinction 'hetero (woman)' – 'lesbian (woman)'.

More recently, the counter concept of lesbian has sometimes also been 'queer', as when 'queer politics' is talked of as distinct from 'gay- and lesbian identity politics'. What does 'queer' do? What is the counter concept of 'queer'? Often in popular discourse 'queer' creates an aura of being outside of power, not excluding anybody, not demanding anything – a welcoming category. If it is against something, it is against the very demand, the normative. In a way, the counter concept of 'queer' is 'normative', or is it more precisely hetero-normativity? "Farewell to heteronormativity" could be translated as "Welcome queer". Yet queer – like everything else – cannot escape creating its own norm, which is why it always is an interesting question what the non-queer is. And, what does queer do besides creating a 'queer' vs. 'normative' divide? This can be studied by taking a close look at the actual language use, how does 'queer' act in texts? What is the relation of 'queer' to 'man, woman, hetero, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual'? A very important function of 'queer' is, that it works to fade out these differences, including them all under the same 'queer'. Is this for good or for bad, that is for everybody to decide, but in any case, it is very good to be aware of that. For 'queer,' as I said, is too often treated as being an innocent concept outside the conceptual power, and working against any power. No concepts are innocent, all concepts are powerful. That is why it is good to keep talking about them.

Note

¹ At the “Farewell to heteronormativity” conference this talk was accompanied by brief presentations by Kati Mustola, Antu Sorainen, Tuula Juvonen and Virva Hepolampi on their work on this topic, given at this point.

Tuija Pulkkinen is associate professor in philosophy and a senior research fellow at Christina Institute of Women’s Studies in the University of Helsinki.