UNIVERSITY OF GÄVLE

FACULTY OF EDUCATION AND BUSINESS STUDIES
Department of Humanities

The Power of Words

How the use of words reflects societal opinion

David Brodin

2023

Student thesis, Bachelor degree, 15 HE
English
Teacher Education Programme
English (61-90)

Supervisor: Kavita Thomas
Examiner: Henrik Kaatari

Abstract

This essay examines the ways that the underlying meaning of the keywords *queer* and *gay* had changed between, and during, the time periods of 1989-1991, 1999-2001 and 2009-2011 within the medium of written American English as collected by the Corpus of Historical American English across multiple written genres. The examination of the two chosen keywords was conducted by sorting the list-results of respective COHA queries into each time period, and then conducted by a systematic sorting of the query results into one out of four categories depending on how the key words were primed, framed and used. These categories are pejorative, sexuality, identity and lastly if the word was used in its historical context of meaning either something odd and/or strange in the case of queer, or to imply happiness in the case of gay. The essay concludes that over this 30-year span there is a clear indication that there has been a shift, moving from pejoratives and firmly cementing gay and queer as terms used by and to be attributed within the LGBTQ+ community.

Keywords: Gay, Queer, Corpus Linguistics

Table of Contents

1. Aim & Introduction 1
1.1 Research Questions 2
1.2 Hypothesis 3
2. Literature Review 3
2.1. An online etymological database 3
2.2. Gay 4
2.3. Queer 4
2.4 Priming audiences, how mutual understanding of a word changes with context 4
2.5 Examining shifting meanings via corpus linguistics. 6
3. Method 7
3.1 Material 7
3.2 Procedure 8
3.3 Qualitative analysis 11
3.4 Reliability & Validity 12
4. Results & Discussion 13
4.1 Queer across the decades 13
4.2 Gay across the decades 15
4.2 Discussion and analysis 18
4.2.1 The flaws of COHA 19
5. Conclusions 20
References 22

1. Aim & Introduction

Words have meaning, sometimes one word can have many meanings with different interpretations. There is power in the meaning of these words, power to sway attitudes and to display opinion on a large scale (Hamilton et al., 2007, p. 166), all determined by how a group can collectively agree on the meaning of a word (Hamilton et al., 2007, pp. 163-165). There are words which at one point were used as insults or have had strong negative connotations attached due to social norms, which today has become a common and standardized label for a group which once suffered the negative stigma associated with these labels (Harper, 2001[c]) (Harper, 2001[b]). One of those words that are commonly used today is *queer*, which could mean strange or odd, but also as a slur for people who did not conform to heteronormativity (Harper, 2001[c]). The other word, *gay*, is a word for happy, but could also be used to describe something flamboyant, colourful, or pretty (Harper, 2001[b]), but has in more modern times come to be associated with specifically male homosexuality, both as a label but also as a slur (Harper, 2001[b]). This study of the words' usage will consist of empirical research, and mixed method analysis of the use of both *queer* and *gay* through the periods of 1990, 2000 and 2010 to ascertain if a linguistic shift has occurred by analysing the frequency of use as well as the social context of the words' usage.

In the modern day there are several examples of words which has been used in a derogatory manner regarding individuals of certain groups or with certain individual tastes in the past, but then had their meaning altered over time and thus evolved and changed, eventually coming to mean something completely different (Hamilton et al., 2007, pp. 163-165). An example of this linguistic phenomenon is the words *gay* and *queer*, as they have historically had several meanings that changed over time (Hendricks & Oliver, 1999, pp. 42-44). Language is an ever-shifting web of unlimited combinations of complex individually tailored linguistic patterns (Kaufer et al., 2004, pp. 48-49), subtle undertones and shifting meanings all being affected on the metaphorical, allegorical, and cultural levels based entirely on social cues given by whoever is talking, and slurs are particularly sensitive to these contexts (Hendricks & Oliver, 1999, pp. 42-43). Hendricks and Oliver wrote about this idea, calling it contextualism, a method of discerning the underlying meaning beyond the literal (Hendricks & Oliver, 1999, pp. 43-45, 48).

One might reasonably ask why the selection of words for this essay were specifically *gay* and *queer.* Debates of sexuality, gender identity and individuality are

more prominent and public in the collective consciousness than ever before in human history, leading to massive changes in status quo regarding who is referred to as what, and the author of this essay and much of the literature referenced to herein has made the argument that word usage has a large role in this. How a word is understood impacts how it is used, and if a large group uses a certain word a certain way, that will become the new status quo.

This new default then sets a precedence for those following generations, with the benefit of hindsight. Words like *gay* or *queer* has gone from being very negative or even something one would rather not be publicly associated with can go to something many associate with willingly in only a decade. The meaning of a word can drift substantially, within a matter of years (Hamilton et al., 2007, pp 166, 171, 174). It is also one of the reasons for how the social implications of using both *gay* and *queer* in and of itself may trigger different reactions, because that transition period is gradual, as is all linguistic changes. This all boils down to one simple statement: One of the most important rules of a functional language is the mutual understanding of meaning. After all, if there is no shared mutual understanding then the idea of a shared language is unattainable.

1.1 Research Questions

The research questions this essay poses as follows:

1. Has the usage of the words *queer* and *gay* respectively shifted over time between the periods of 1989-1991, 1999-2001 and 2009-2011?
2. If so, how has it shifted?

These questions will require a lot of linguistic data to answer properly, and thus the methods used will be a mixed method approach. The methodology will entail quantitative and qualitative analysis of empirically gathered data via COHA, the data gathered will then be subjected to discourse analysis, and deduction will be made to conclude if the use of *gay* and/or *queer* has changed in the 20-year span between 1990 to 2010.

1.2 Hypothesis

The hypothesis for this essay is that there will be a noticeable change in how the words *gay* and *queer* are used between 1989 to 2011, with a clear increase in *gay* usage the closer to the end-year of 2011 the corpus-results gets. *Queer* will instead decline over time, having a relatively widespread usability despite a much smaller amount of instances overall.

2. Literature Review

In the literature review the various sources used in the research conducted for the research questions, whether a shift in the meaning of *gay* and *queer* has occurred and what has changed, are listed.

They are then explained and elaborated upon, with arguments made for why they are used. Some important concepts are introduced, such as priming, the idea that a words' underlying meaning shifts the meaning of an entire sentence or argument and how a word can intrinsically be connected to a positive or negative tone by repeated framing of a positive or negative tone, the etymology of *queer* and *gay* is explained in brief and lastly, an explanation of linguistic studying methods KWIC, Key Words In Context, and frame semantics.

2.1. An online etymological database

The primary purpose of *Etymonline* is to be a database of etymological origins of all manner of words, basing its research in a myriad of sources, the primary ones being pointed out as the *Oxford Dictionary*, the *Barnhart Dictionary of Etymology* (1988), *Weekley's Etymological Dictionary of Modern English* (1921) and Ernest Klein's *Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* (1971). *Etymonline* merges these various etymological explanations of words to make an easily available database which has been updated and improved on a nigh-on daily basis since it started (Harper, 2001[a]). *Etymonline* will mainly be used for the purpose of establishing the etymology of the words *queer* and *gay* but can also give valuable insight into how the words shifted so drastically.

2.2. Gay

The word *gay* has had many meanings in the past and has been recorded to have been in use since as early as the 12th century as a last name (Harper, 2001[b]). Eventually the word found its overall use of the word moving back to roots older than familial names by being tied to rich coloration, eye catching qualities such as shining or glittering and fancy clothing, which later came to tie it to promiscuity and sexuality(ibid). The term has been used to describe bright and happy feelings and has been used both for the meaning of happy and joyous as well as homosexual from around the 1830s and onwards, mainly in the form of slang aimed towards male homosexuals, only to find itself in the common parlance within the span of two decades (ibid). Once *gay* gained a connection to male homosexuality it also started being used as a derogatory term, or insult, given the conservative views of homosexuality during the middle-to-late 19th century and then later its meaning shifted slowly. The LGBTQ+ community then started using the term exclusively for homosexuality, more particularly so male homosexuality (ibid).

2.3. Queer

Similarly to *gay*, *queer* started out meaning something completely different compared to what the English-speaking world associates it with today (Harper, 2001[c]). However, unlike *gay* which has its etymological roots in the 12th century, *queer* did not start being used until the 1500s (ibid). Originally, it was a word used to describe something strange, peculiar, odd or eccentric. The word continued along a similar etymological branch all the way through the following 300 years, only coming to be associated with homosexuality around the 1920s. Its meaning had transitioned from *queer* meaning a negatively connotated form of behaving strangely, to specifically indicate homosexuality. Queer also appeared to overall indicate negative or dishonest qualities prior to the word transitioning from slang to a label for the HBTQ community.

2.4 Priming audiences, how mutual understanding of a word changes with context

The Power of Words is a book discussing the idea that there is an underlying pattern of symbolism behind words. This symbolism can then be used to influence whoever is on the receiving end through something as simple as word choice, which can be used to change the opinions of the listeners or readers (Kaufer et al., 2004, pp. 10-13). Kaufer et al argues that words are influential, and yet their meaning may shift depending on subtle

details simply through implication and word usage (Kaufer et al., 2004, p. 11). These details range between examples such as where the words are spoken and with whom the conversation in question is being had, or in what social context the conversation is held (Kaufer et al., 2004, p. 29).

Priming is a great example of how the English language can change, because the concept of priming something is a term used to explain how certain words makes other words sound or mean different things based on training, or suggestion (Kaufer et al., 2004, p. xvii). According to Kaufer et al a reader can have their brain rely upon primed words to essentially complete the meaning of the sentence itself on a preconditioned remembered interpretation of words. However, priming can also, in a vernacular sense, be used to predispose an audience or a group of readers by well chosen words. They can essentially use priming to make sure their keywords, the main meaning-carrying word of the sentence like *queer* or *gay*, will end up interpreted the desired way (Kaufer et al., 2004, p. xvii). This is a technique used in everyday conversations, albeit most are not doing so intentionally.

The importance of Kaufer et al's research is that they also go into further detail regarding how a word is used to showcase the importance of priming (Kaufer et al., 2004, pp 163-165). A topical example for the sake of context would be using the term *gay* in a derogatory fashion or akin to an insult, which in turn would prime the writer or speakers' audiences' expectations of the meaning of the word *gay*. The way a word is used will influence the meaning of the entire sentence (Kaufer et al., 2004, pp. xi-xii), so if a word is expected to be considered an insult the meaning behind the sentence will be different than if the word was used as a label. This means that if one studies the overall usage of a word in a medium which has a large userbase the researcher can in turn interpret the collective idea behind the meaning of a word, based on data alone.

The question of whether one can determine the objective meaning of the words' use is answered via contextual clues in the samples. Kaufer argues for why context sensitivity is critical to the priming process (Kaufer et al., 2004, pp 24-26), and thus is vital for determining the meaning behind *queer* and *gay* in the corpus query results. Mautner is a good example for how to conduct a qualitative approach to quantitatively acquired data (Mautner, 2007, pp. 55-56). *COHA* has the context-sensitive search tools required to accurately determine the way the word is presented, allowing this essay to use similar methods as Mautner did with his corpora.

2.5 Examining shifting meanings via corpus linguistics.

Hamilton et al.'s article shows a clear connection between the everyday usage of the word and how the meaning behind the word has changed (Hamilton et al., 2007, pp. 165-166), in which Hamilton et al., used empirically gathered data provided by various corpora to shine light on the everyday meaning of their chosen word, *risk*.

This is meant to provide a base for sociologists and linguists to conclusively assert a more definitive way to use the word in a stable and unified way across various social contexts and in turn is a study of how the underlying meaning of words is one of the major factors of how linguistic research showcases societal change.

The authors also theorize that the meaning of *risk* is circumstantially shifted or manipulated by the ideology or agenda of the speaker or writer, arguing that the stability of the meaning of *risk* within various groups primes the word in a favourable or unfavourable light depending on the audience or the readers disposition towards the meaning of *risk* (Hamilton et al., 2007, pp. 165-166). A technique utilized in their hunt for the true meaning of *risk* was the idea of frame semantics, where a key way to sort the various interpretations of *risk* was to take a closer look at which words ended up appearing in the same sentence as *risk*, either directly preceding or coming after the word itself or commonly enough being used in the same sentence. This so-called framing technique allowed for a more in-depth look at how the word was being used and how it was being primed (Hamilton et al., 2007, pp. 167-168). This will in turn showcase a clear change of meaning both in terms of how the word is primed and how its meaning shifts. To explain frame semantics in brief, it is a theory stating that words can influence other words based entirely upon contexts (Hamilton et al., 2007, p. 166). In the context of Hamilton attempting to understand *risk* and to find a clear definition for the underlying meaning of *risk*, Hamilton and his co-authors used the KWIC method to single out the various words' most commonly found alongside *risk* and determine whether their meaning could alter the context of their chosen keyword or not. Hamilton and their fellow researchers concluded that *risk* is influenced by the framing words *chance* and *harm* (Hamilton et al., 2007, p.167), since the word risk is usually used to either consider a risky chance or how someone could risk harm (Hamilton et al., 2007, pp. 166, 167, 169), so hypothetically if someone takes the word *gay* and finds it framed by frames like *joy* and *emotion* rather than *sexuality* and *LGBTQ+* there would be an emerging pattern indicating the meaning leaning more towards *gay* being associated with being happy than specifically being homosexual. Combining frame semantics with

KWIC, which is an indexing technique Mautner used, which would easily help identifying emerging patterns of use within vast quantities of data. *COHA* comes with a built-in KWIC tool.

The mixed method approach to corpus-based linguistic research is a combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis, it is commonly used when examining large amounts of data (Mautner, 2007, p. 54). The way that Mautner uses a combination of a quantitative as well as a qualitative approach to using a corpus' large collection of words showcases how to ideally use corpora for extracting information on social views. Mautner works on establishing the various uses of the word *elderly* to form a conclusion based on a combined quantitative and qualitative approach by tallying results of corpus queries and then utilizing the KWIC method to display exactly how their findings reveal the use of *elderly*, one frame interpreted from a priming perspective at a time. The same can be done in turn for *gay* and *queer*.

3. Method

In the method section the various materials gathered to answer the questions of whether there has been a change in the usage of *gay* and *queer* and if so, what change occurred.

Due to the sheer volume of use the words *queer* and *gay* has seen over the years some restrictions have to be established. The corpus will be used within the parameters of written American English, and within the 20-year timeframe of 1989-2011, split into three segments: 1989-1991, 1999-2001 and 2009-2011.

3.1 Material

For the intents and purposes of this paper, the The *Corpus of Historical American English* was chosen. *COHA* has a reputation as one of the largest corpora that documents the written American English language. There is also information provided regarding the reliability and validity of the research provided in this section.

The idea of contextualism, how a words' socio-linguistic context changes over time, is critical to the chosen words' use. The COHA is a monolingual corpus, focusing on the English language, and is the largest structured corpus of historical English as of 2023 with over 475 million words of text ranging between the 1820s until the 2010s. Due to the structure of the corpus it can easily be used to discern a change of word usage one decade at a time, allowing for clear and precise data with several variations of the form of language used, as *COHA* uses a wide range of sources, acquiring spoken

words from television and movies, and written English from a myriad of sources, be it fiction, newspapers or tabloids, and news. It also has access to a category of academic works. Words are defined by their literal meaning just as much as they are by their contextual use, and given how the *COHA* delivers its query results with context by default, as well as having a built-in option for KWIC-style analysing opening the possibility for easy framework analysis when examining the priming.

3.2 Procedure

The process of extracting data from the corpus itself is very straightforward, by gaining access to the *Corpus of Historical American English* and then entering a query each for *gay* and *queer* the data will be provided with contextual sentence strings. There will be four KWIC analyses made, one per genre offered by the corpus: Fiction, Magazines, Newspapers and one for scientific works, which *COHA* dubs NF/Acad, each split into the three years of 1990, 2000 and 2010. It is notable that the overall use of *queer* and *gay* might yield various amounts of entries. The results will be cumulative from the year chosen, so if the picked year is 1990, then the corpus query will limit itself from 1989 to 1991 as to get as much information from the chosen year as possible whilst still sticking to the parameter of 1990, since all the relevant information is in when the results were written for it to contribute to the results of this study. It will be the same from 1999 to 2001, and lastly from 2009 to 2011. By the end of the study there is going to be data representing the use of both words per category per period. After this, there will be examination and analysis of the results and the second research question becomes relevant, through the results of the research it will be concluded whether meaningful change in the use of *gay* and *queer* has occurred or not. The categories that the KWIC results will be sorted into, for ease of analysis, each entry shall have an example from the corpus provided, and goes as follows:

Gay – Happy, which will represent if the word is used to describe happiness or being joyful.

(1) “Good character, be intelligent, learned, beautiful and gay. " (COHA, Gay 1989-1991. 2023)

(2) “By the beginning of 1873, he had settled in Paris and” (COHA, Gay 1989-1991. 2023)

Gay – Identity, which will represent whether the word is used in relation to phrases regarding personality and behaviour. This includes generally stereotypical

behaviour and mannerisms, the phrase “He behaves like a gay man.” Would fall under this category.

(3) “[W]ere queer -- " # " Gay. We say gay now, Hap. You straights need to learn that. When we're[…]” (COHA, Queer 1989-1991, 2023).

Gay – Sexuality, which will categorize when the word is used specifically in regard to male homosexuality, rather than when addressing what could be considered as stereotypically gay mannerisms, as that would fall under the Identity category.

(4) “Ken is also aware of certain harsh facts: For gay men, the average latency period is ten years from initial infection […]” (COHA, Gay 1989-1991, 2023).

Gay – Pejorative, which is for when the word is uttered in a negative context, such as an insult or when the word is primed in a negative fashion or used as a slur. As with most words that are considered negative, there are replacement words which are exclusively used as slurs. In this category there will only be instances where the word *gay* is used as a slur in and of itself.

(5) “The heterosexual celebration' line and Me, gay? No way!' chorus in the joys-of-bonin' number Naz-Tee May'en.” (COHA, Gay 1989-1991, 2023).

(6) “We know that he's a fag, or gay, or whatever you want to call it...” (COHA, Gay 1989-1991, 2023).

Besides gay, there is also *queer* which uses the same categories:

Queer – Strange, *queer* has been associated with the odd and unusual and this category will bring it to anything where queer is used as a substitute for *strange* and similar phrases.

Queer – Identity, it follows the same basic principles as Gay – Identity, where words referring to things such as personal behaviour comes into use.

(7) “[S]ix of them. We're here. We're queer. Get used to it.” (COHA, Queer 1989-1991, 2023).

Queer – Sexuality handles the use of Queer when used to indicate homosexuality. However, it is notable that queer and gay were used in very similar contexts in this regard.

(8) “[F]act he disowned you when he found out you were queer -- " (COHA, Queer 1989-1991, 2023).

Queer – Pejorative, see the description of *gay* – pejorative.

(9) “What do you think you're looking at? You fucking queer. Fucking scum.” (COHA, Queer 1989-1991, 2023).

Since the different categories have been established, the chosen form of analysis will be explained. The data will be examined qualitatively: Mautner wrote that by examining a word changing over time through a qualitative approach lets a linguist break down corpus data into their corresponding evaluative meaning. In other words, each example for the semantic preferences will be examined, have the key words identified and the sentence shall be analysed as to show how the opinions of the general public changes the words:

“Hunston (2004:157) refers to as "evaluative meaning," defined as "an indication that something is good or bad," and what Channell (2000:41) […] Through semantic preferences […] it is possible to identify both the social domains that lexical items are associated with (Orpin 2005:49) and the societal value judgments they carry. With both factored in, the collocational profile of a keyword is semantically enriched and acquires the potential to contribute to sociolinguistic investigations.” (Mautner, 2007, p. 56)

An example of what Mautner described would be if one takes the word *gay* in its use as a slur: “We know that he's a fag, or gay, or whatever you want to call it...” (COHA, Gay 1989-1991, 2023), which was used previously, the reader should be able to identify not just the keyword but also how certain words in a string of words affect one another by merely being uttered in the same sentence. In this specific example they would note that the writer being quoted in the COHA chose to use both *gay* and *fag* interchangeably, implying via that conscious choice that the slur for homosexuals is comparable to the keyword despite its negative tone and how it sets a societal value judgement over the whole sentence.

Once the words have been accounted for the frequencies of the instances of the words needs to be tallied, as to give a clearer picture of the final results. This will be done by dividing the instance of words within a certain category against the number of total instances found within the search parameters and then multiply that result to achieve a percentage. This allows for tallying of both raw frequencies and normalized frequencies.

3.3 Qualitative analysis

To analyse qualitatively is to examine how a word is used, presented or how it is influenced by the other words around it, which can imply context or certain tone used by the speaker which culminates in the keyword in question. Different types of text writes with different mannerisms, and thus this approach would be needed to determine in which category each instance of *gay* and *queer* belongs to. However, as qualitative analysis lets the analyst take a set of data, such as the quotes found in *COHA,* and can then go over systematically in an entry-by-entry thorough comb-through of the entries come to determine how different mediums and sources expressed themselves about *gay* and *queer*. This means since qualitative corpus analysis lets the reader discover contextual factors which in turn determines the meanings of words and the socio-linguistic implications these new word-meanings imply, leading to language shifts. These language shifts then alter how many words fall in various categories each decade. The categories discussed in the procedure section were all chosen because they are clear definitions for various uses of the keywords, but not too specific as to limit the research in its scope.

Step one in quantitative analysis is finding a corpus that can has data which can answer the query, and then applying KWIC to the query results. this will provide both a listing of the instances of keywords as well as concordances, words in the same sentence that directly influence each other both semantically and contextually. From there, identify the frames of the sentence. Frames are words that when used infer a certain meaning or connection to other words.

A frame does not necessarily need to occur directly next to a word to change it, as it can be anywhere in the same sentence or paragraph and still have the same effect. These frames can then be used to extrapolate meta-level interpretations from the concordances, i.e. the underlying meaning of the frame and thus the context and meaning shift when the word is used, since it dictates the overall sentence.

Whilst qualitative analysis the details that allows for in-depth contextualization and meta-level interpretation, quantitative analysis in turn focuses on the raw data, the study of numbers and statistics. When engaging in a corpus, a large sample of data will be acquired and processed by using KWIC and then categorize the aforementioned data. The most direct way of explaining it is that the quantitative part of the study is the data gathering, processing and then examining based on the categorical numbers. If there is

an indication of change based on the statistics, then there is a result indicating that the meaning of the word has changed. Once these words have been identified in the corpus results, they can be slotted into the various categories, which then lets the researcher format a graph or statistically showcase the frequencies of various words surrounding the keywords. This frequency data will then be used to show how the social linguistic structures around *gay* and *queer* are altered depending on what type of sentences the words are used in. Once a substantial amount of data has been processed, analyzed for keyword-relevant frames and then sorted accordingly there will be a result, based on statistic evidence, showing whether or not the change of *queer* and *gay* has occurred, and what that might be an indication of socially.

3.4 Reliability & Validity

When it comes to validity and reliability any researcher should take the utmost precaution to adhere to both as closely as possible, for research done without either is neither complete nor scientifically valid. When it comes to research like this it is important that all aspects of the method correspond to the aim of the aforementioned research, and could the data be considered precise enough to provide an accurate answer as well as if the data has been compromised via the means of acquisition (Denscombe, 2010, p. 142). The validity of a research project such as this essay can best be explained in two ways, internal and external validity: External validity is best determined by if the results of the study can be generalized into other contexts, such as other works or research questions, and still hold up (Denscombe, 2010, pp. 142-144). Internal validity on the other hand is how factors within the research might affect the result, such as which genres the linguistic data was focused on, what could be extrapolated by looking at the primer, and are the research questions relevant enough to accurately answer the query posed by the study overall. However, all researchers should be aware of the flaws of their approach, so whilst this research is based on empirically gathered data distributed from a credible and diverse corpus, as well as research techniques provided in several well-regarded scientific publications with the goal to show an accurate depiction of the use of *gay* and *queer*, there are aspects of the study to take into account. One of the major things that can affect the validity of the study is the fact that it is solely focused upon Written American English as a focus group, limiting the scope of the data examined. The main reasoning behind this decision is to avoid certain aspects of spoken English, such as repetition of phrases or words, thus adding more instances to the

corpus results than there'd need to be if the word is repeated with the same meaning several times in the same dialogue. It is notable that some words are used far more in spoken or written language, so that may come to effect the results. Another limitation is the approach of examining priming and using KWIC, which can come down to author interpretation, which is subjective, as with almost all things tied to the human factor of a research topic (Denscombe, 2010, p. 123). Another flaw might be how over or underrepresented certain forms of written English or sources within said genes might be, as the corpus itself has only provided what was found and is definitively not the foremost authority and representation of American English usage overall.

Reliability is slightly different, rather than discussing the whys and hows of the research of the study, the reliability of any scientific work goes over how repeatable the undertaking is. A reliable research design is important to any study, especially so if the same or similar results are to be reached (Denscombe, 2010, p 151). Thus consistency is key, and this is why the study is built upon well-tested and re-tested research methods that can be repeated as the corpus is very likely to yield similar results when asked the same query. These categories are just broad enough to allow for ease of categorisation and yet they are precise enough to allow for interpretation of meaning when analysed by using KWIC to identify concordances and thus also important word-frames which is what steers the meaning of the keyword. From that string of words meaning can be extrapolated, and then tallied into easy-to-read graphs which depicts the various changes in terms of usage.

4. Results & Discussion

In the results and discussion section the question if there has been a change in the use of *gay* and *queer* will be answered, as well as what that change might be. Firstly, the overall results will be presented and analysed. There will be commentary on the method as well as how to take inconclusive or vague results into consideration.

4.1 Queer across the decades

To start with, the results of the corpus went as follows in the timespans of 1989-1991, 1999-2001 and 2009-2011. The COHA results for written American English in 1989-1991 numbered 11 instances of the keyword in total, and is shown in the following graph:

Table 1: Queer between 1989-1991

Word categories	Raw frequencies	Normalized frequencies
Strange	4	36.6%
Identity	2	18.1%
Sexuality	2	18.1%
Pejorative	3	27.2%

Q*ueer* in the earliest years selected, 1989-1991, the most common source of the usage of *queer* was fiction as well as magazines at the time. Examining the results of the queries when put through KWIC the overall theme of framing words used in these instances were overall in relation to behaviour, the inner workings of the mind, as well as anything queer being out of the ordinary or not belonging.

The number of written instances in the 1999-2001 bracket numbered 47 in total.

Table 2: Queer between 1999-2001

Word categories	Raw frequencies	Normalized frequencies
Strange	17	36.17%
Identity	10	21.27%
Sexuality	12	25.53%
Pejorative	8	17.03%

Ten years later, the early 2000s saw a large increase across the board for both *gay* and *queer*. When compared to the results of the 1989-1991 inquiry, there is already a noticeable increase in the overall use of queer as a key word by 1999. The biggest change is how there is a strong emergence of queer being used as a way to reference homosexuality, as there is a noticeable increase in homosexuality as a topic of discussion amongst the results, both in terms of identity and sexuality.

Table 3: Queer between 2009-2011

Word categories	Raw frequencies	Normalized frequencies
Strange	3	75%
Identity	0	0%
Sexuality	1	25%
Pejorative	0	0%

Lastly for the results in the *queer* categories the use of *queer* in the written English sources has almost completely been reduced to almost nothing, only 4 entries outside of the spoken sources. The only non-spoken sources were one study on the use

of *queer* theory and a fictional story set in the past emulating the use of *queer* from the past. When analysed using frame semantics and KWIC, the results were largely related to sexuality and self-identification such as *self-described*, *same-sex, intimacy*, and *marriage*.

4.2 Gay across the decades

Now, it is time to follow up with *gay*, which had undergone a significant change in how the word is used, starting in 1989.

Table 4: Gay between 1989-1991

Word categories	Raw frequencies	Normalized frequencies
Happy	6	10%
Identity	21	35%
Sexuality	19	31%
Pejorative	14	24%

Numbering 60 results in total, the 90s interpretation of the underlying meaning of the word *gay* was used to describe and identify someone as a homosexual, but this could be both in a positive and a negative light, given a fair few results used *gay* as an adjective with the intent to insult or outright dehumanize the intended target. In the instances of pejorative *gay* usage the word was used with the intend of insulting someone by either calling them out for being a homosexual, or accusing someone of being homosexual, usually with the intent of ínsinuating someone of being effeminate and lacking masculinity. But the discussion about homosexuality would not emerge fully until a decade later, as shown with the 345 written American English entries of the early 2000s:

Table 5: Gay between 1999-2001

Word categories	Raw frequencies	Normalized frequencies
Happy	15	4.5%
Identity	140	40.5%
Sexuality	155	44.9%
Pejorative	35	10.1%

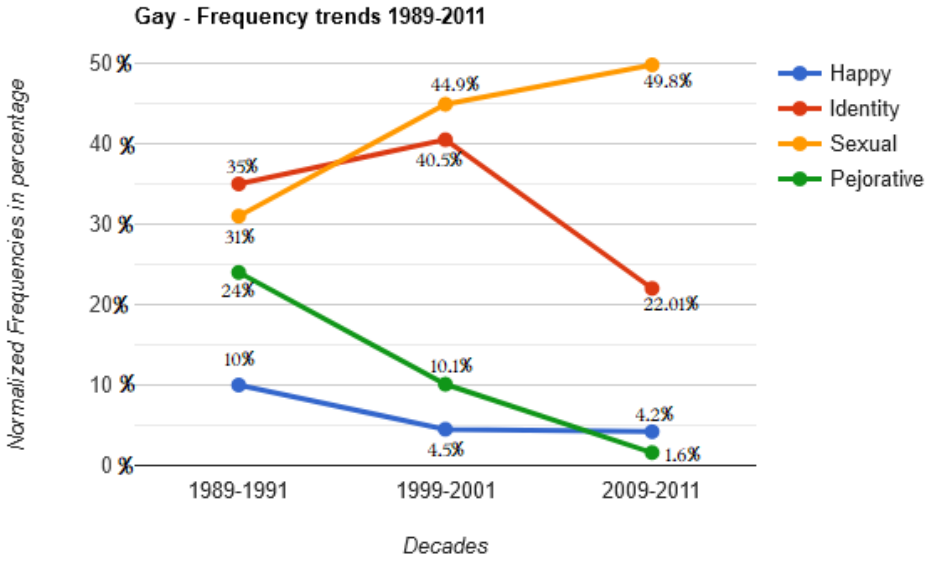
The 90s was an introspective time for many members of the LGBTQ+ community, as most scientific journals and magazines discussed the emerging public lives of homosexuals. The fiction scene focused more on what it meant to be a *gay* individual in a world that was only starting to see homophobia as a thing of the past. A KWIC analysis yields the frames *openly*, which has the connection to someome either behaving like what others interpret as being *gay*, specificly in ties to sexuality and personality rather than happiness, even if the latter was not unheard of either. The amount of written instances of the keyword then dwindles from 345 to 187 in the coming decade, and so does the majority of the preserved use of *gay* in COHAs database:

Table 6: Gay between 2009-2011

Word categories	Raw frequencies	Normalized frequencies
Happy	8	4.2%
Identity	83	44.4%
Sexuality	93	49.8%
Pejorative	3	1.6%

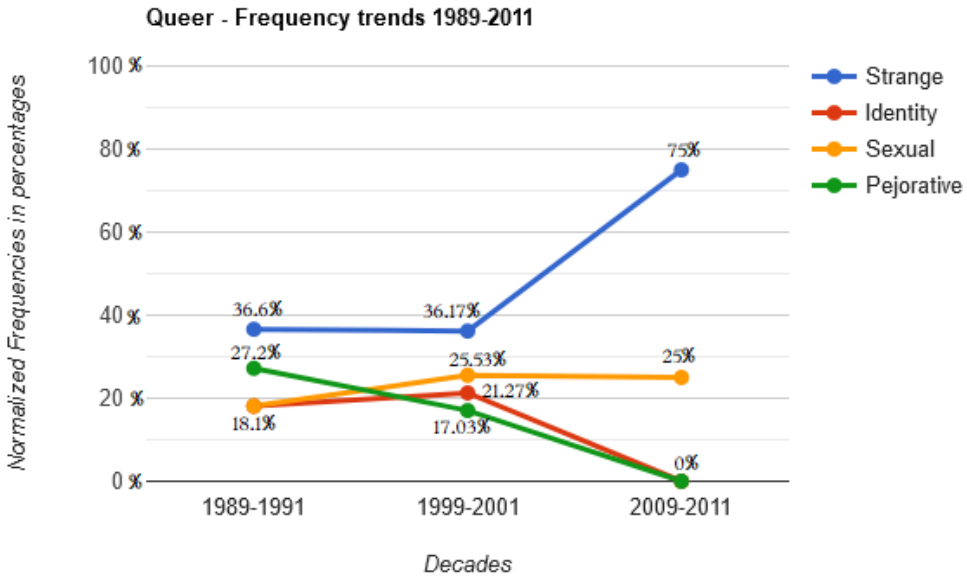
The frames had changed very little when comparing KWIC results of 1999-2001 and 2009-2011, but the main focus had overall shifted to *couples*, as the debate of whether or not gay couples should have the same rights as straight couples is heavily discussed in the news sector. This means that *gay* saw widespread coverage in both news and magazines across the US. Other frames were *activists* and *opposes*, both of which ties into the debate on the topic of *gay* rights. The use of rights has been taken into context with other frames in the use of *gay* and sorted accordingly, as rights is a topic associated with being homosexual, rather than a categorical way to sort the meaning behind *queer* and *gay*. The pejorative uses of *gay* was mainly within the news and magazines categories, related to crime committed against *gay* individuals, as well as within arguments against *gay* rights. Following the analysis are two graphs visualizing the rising and falling normalized frequency trends of the various categories across the three represented periods.

Figure 1, gay frequency trends from 1989 to 2011:



As shown with these graphs, the sole frequency trend to end with its end-value being lower than its starting-frequency amount, going from 24% in 1989 to 1.6% in 2011, was for the keyword being a pejorative, in other words a slur.

Figure 2 Queer frequency trends from 1989 to 2011:



Whilst queer had a far lower frequency overall it also had a far more clear increase, peak-of-use and decrease across the board when compared to gay, it also points out just how there can be a clear rise and fall in the use of a word, like showcasing how queer had a relatively low usage in 1989, but then spiked in use around the same time as gay in 1999-2001, only to then once more dip back into nearly

remaining unused in the written form across all of COHA in 2009-2011 in regards to homosexuality.

4.2 Discussion and analysis

To make a long research answer short, the results are conclusive: there is an overall shift in how the words are used both contextually as well as in terms of meaning. The use of *queer* deteriorated rapidly and had almost fully ceased to be mentioned in written media collected by the COHA around the turn of the decade, 2009–2011. Starting with queer in the earliest set of years for this study, 1989–1991. The most common source of the usage of *queer* was fiction as well as magazines at the time, and after examining the results of the queries when put through KWIC the overall theme of framing words used in these forms of medium were overall in relation to behaviour, the inner workings of the mind, as well as anything *queer* being out of the ordinary or not belonging. However, by the turn of the decade, 1999–2001, the foremost change lies in how there is a strong emergence of *queer* being used as a way to reference homosexuality. Despite the fact that *queer* saw its largest use in the 1920s, there is a slight resurgence in use around the start of the 21st century, at least in the terms of written sources.

Queer as a pejorative in the 1990s mainly came to be associated with homosexuality, but the way the identified frames primed the keyword led to a myriad of interpretations. Some of the most common frame words when put under a KWIC analysis were *behaviour* which now could both mean strange as well as being homosexual when used in the context of an individual, *looks* which ties back to behaviour but with a focus on *queer* under the Identity category. In the case of *looks* a majority of instances implied that someone looking *queer* was looking like a stereotypical homosexual. In the 90s one could do a *queer* thing, which was far more commonly discussed, than to be *queer*. However, according to COHA change was undergoing as the stance on queer individuals came to change at the end of the decade.

One reason for the larger use of *queer* in such a manner is attributable to the fact that in the early 2000s the most common category COHA found is fiction rather than magazines, which brings the four categories chosen for this essay into the forefront. The focus of this work is to examine the ways the words are used across the decades, rather than determine which genre of written English spoke about the topic the most, but that does not mean that these genres, such as fiction and magazines, are

irrelevant to the results, different texts writes in different ways, even if their words still have the same underlying meaning. The argument can be made that what is interpreted as fiction is freer in terms of expression than a magazine would be, as magazines have a much more direct relation between the stances and opinions of their readers in the short term than books and similar written fictional texts has. As previously stated, there is also a chance for the Fiction category to be slightly misleading, as it could be instances of stories being set in the past and thus emulating speech patterns that are not relevant to the current times. Finally for *queer* there is the 2010s, 2009-2011. Besides the obvious lack of pejorative and identity, the large majority of non-spoken alternatives were found in fiction, 12 texts and entries in total on COHA. The results showed the same signs of a shift in meaning as noted in 1999-2001. The majority of uses for the key word had shifted, the meaning no longer tied to negativity in the pejorative category, but rather focusing wholly on the themes of homosexuality and the adjective form of being strange.

Moving on to *gay***,** the importance of primers becomes more and more apparent. A great example is *marriage*, as well as the more and more prevalently featured *rights*, the *gay* rights movement started picking up in earnest going into the 21st century. M*arriage* as well as *rights* when used as a semantic frame has led to the meaning of the keyword *gay* fluctuating between identity and sexuality, as both frames are relevant to each category. However, for the purpose of these results being clear and as to not bloat the results of the COHA queries with repetitions of each word instance for multiple categories, the instances are given one category each, built upon other frames as well as context-sensitive reasoning.

4.2.1 The flaws of COHA

COHA may be the biggest currently maintained collection of written sources of American English, but it is important to acknowledge that the COHA is not perfect. As shown in the results, when maintaining a strict adherent to only written sources, thus refraining from using transcripts of spoken American English, it limits the COHA in its results. Then there is the problem with objectivity: As interpretation of text is a very subjective linguistic challenge, there is always a chance of disagreements, so using only written sources can make it hard to interpret a meaning as the writer intended it to be interpreted or take several re-readings to get it right.

When it comes to the complexities of internal logic, predisposition and presumptions, as well as personal interpretation of sociolinguistics, for questions like the meaning of words like *queer* or *gay* it is important to remember that one should always read between the lines, and this is where the qualitative analysis comes in. There are several things a large collection of answers in a corpus can tell you, as each source handles information differently. A news bulletin writes about matters like *gay* rights, reports on crimes and conducts interviews, whilst fictional works showcases a more commonplace generalised view of how a word may be used. The opposite is also true, information can be drawn from a lack of query results overall. A good example of that is how *queer* faded from use outside of the LGBTQ community using it to address themselves, slowly but surely, as is shown by the smaller and smaller pool of results that are not sorted into the sexuality or identity categories. However, it is worth noting that the categories chosen for the research conducted in this paper are meant to give a broad yet generalized view of word usage, and if one wishes for a more detailed or insightful look into the complexities of language-use with regards to these keywords, further categories are recommended. The more extensive these categorisations are, the more they will help reinforce the project's validity.

5. Conclusions

The first research question was if the usage of the words *queer* and *gay* respectively shifted over time between the periods of 1989-1991, 1999-2001 and 2009-2011, and the second follow-up question was that if a change had occurred, then how could that be determined. The answer is a resounding yes. There has indeed been noticeable change between the periods of 1989-1991, 1999-2001 and 2009-2011. Using the COHA database with a focus on written American English across the various selected time periods and then sorting the results into the selected four categories allows for a relatively thorough examination of trends of use. The COHA entries were examined via the use of the Key Words In Context search method provided by COHA and thus examined for concordance data, so that frames could be established, and the metadata drawn from those logical conclusions could then be used to determine how the keywords in question, *gay* and *queer*, were used.

The changes in the use of *queer* and *gay* were good examples of how language changes with time, and how it is a good indicator for public opinion regarding the chosen topic. There is a clear shift around the turn of the century in how both *gay* and

queer is used, especially in regard to male homosexuals. *Queer* in particular shows this, in how its use gradually shifts into the LGBTQ+ debate rather than its original etymological use in the early 90s, and alongside the results provided from *gay* the two show that just 30 years can mean a lot of change.

References

Davies, M. 2010. The Corpus of Historical American English (COHA). Available at: https://www.english-corpora.org/coha/ (Accessed 2023-11-17)

Denscombe, M. 2010. *Ground rules for social research: Guidelines for Good Practice* 2nd edition, Open University Press.

Hamilton, C. Adolphs, S. Nerlich, Br. 2007. The meanings of 'risk': a view from corpus linguistics. *Discourse & Society*, 18(2), 163-181.

Harper, D. 2001[a] . "Introduction and Explanation" *Etymonline- Online Etymology Dictionary.* Available at: https://www.etymonline.com/columns/post/abbr (Accessed 2023-12-08)

Harper, D. 2001[b]. "Gay" *Etymonline – Online Etymology Dictionary.* Available at: https://www.etymonline.com/word/gay (Accessed 2023-11-17)

Harper, D. 2001[c]. "Queer" *Etymonline – Online Etymology Dictionary*. Available at: https://www.etymonline.com/word/queer#etymonline_v_3174 (Accessed 2023-11-17)

Hendricks, C. & Oliver, K. 1999. Language and Liberation: Feminism, Philosophy, and Language. *Choice Reviews Online*, 37(03), 37–1478.

Kaufer, D. Ishizaki, S. Butler, B. Collins, J. 2004 *The Power of Words – Unveiling the Speaker and Writer's Hidden Craft*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. London.

Mautner, G. 2007. *Mining Large Corpora for Social Information: The Case of Elderly*. Language in Society 36(1), 51-72.