

Book Review

William Leap & Tom Boellstorff (eds.) *Speaking in Queer Tongues: Globalization and Gay Language*. Urbana and Chicago: Illinois University Press. 2004. 288 pages. ISBN: 0-252-07142-5.

Reviewed by **Aous Mansouri**

“Speaking in Queer Tongues: Globalization and Gay Language” (Leap and Boellstorff, eds.) focuses on the language approaches that different non-heterosexual groups around the world use in order to identify themselves within their local and indigenous contexts. It also demonstrates how these groups simultaneously attempt to identify as part of a larger, worldwide community of sexual minorities. In the introduction, the editors, William Leap and Tom Boellstorff, state that this is by no means an exhaustive look at all the different cultures around the world. However, the book does an impressive and thorough job with the areas of the world that it does cover, including France, Germany, Montréal, Israel, South Africa, New Zealand, Indonesia, Thailand, and various minority groups within the U.S. In this regard the editors state that their aim is “to use a more modestly selected series of essays to show how persons who have same-sex desires, subjectivities, and/or communities mediate and renegotiate linguistic process and product under conditions of the ostensible ‘globalization of gay English’ (p. 4). This quotation reflects yet another of the book’s themes: the authors are concerned with how gay English comes into play within these different groups and how speakers conceptualize its use as indexical of a transglobal society.

The book is generally a pleasant and easy read without an abundance of overtly scholastic language, making it accessible to a wider audience. Each of the chapters was thoroughly researched, and the authors’ personal involvement within the local cultures enhances the accessibility of the presented material by clearly portraying the local perspective of language use within a global frame. The book’s most obvious shortcoming is noted by the editors themselves. Early on in the introduction, they express regret that most of the material is directed primarily towards male same-sex attractions and identities. In the editors’ own words, it is their “hope that the issues raised in this collection will encourage more researchers to examine women’s experiences with gay English globalization and trace the linguistic consequences of those experiences in site-specific terms” (p.5).

In the book’s first chapter, Denis Provencher discusses the influence that American language and media has had on French gay identity. Specifically, he examines how the print media’s adoption of gay English lexemes, as well as semantic ideas (such as “coming out”), affects the “frenchness” of gay identity. Provencher questions whether “a certain authentic French element [...] still persists despite the hegemonic presence of both U.S. language and culture?” (p. 25). Provencher then offers an insightful analysis of a magazine, *Têtu*, which largely caters to gay men, analyzing the use of English within its pages. He argues that the discourse reflects a strong French identity despite Anglophonic hegemony. For instance, he demonstrates how homosexuals’ use of language in

France emphasizes a national identity within the republic. He contrasts this discourse with the development of gay discourse in America, which often carves its niche only by separating the gay community from the larger American public.

In the following chapter, Heidi Minning focuses on the differing functions and roles that English plays for Germans who identify as part of a non-normative sexuality group. Using examples such as the acronym CSD ‘Christopher Street Day’ (which stands for the Berlin pride parade named after the street in New York where the Stonewall riots occurred), Minning illustrates how German speakers code-mix in English for different pragmatic reasons: in print advertisements, in HIV/AIDS campaigns, and when discussing the politics surrounding sexual minorities. She explains: “When an English expression is selected, it tends to index queer identity in a less ambiguous manner than when either expression is used in a monolingual context” (p. 59). Finally, Minning argues that English code-switching, code-mixing, and borrowings into German are in fact part of *Lavender German*, a term she uses for a style of speech that is used to index membership in a non-heterosexual community. Thus, for Minning, speakers do not code-switch between German and English, but rather between German and *Lavender German*.

Ross Higgins discusses the language practices that sexual minority members use in Montreal, Canada. He does a superb job in bringing to light the different sociopolitical issues that arise in a bilingual community such as Quebec, which has had an active history in dealing with language conflicts. The chapter raises numerous questions and issues, including the fact that members of this community must have a deep understanding of both Franco- and Anglophonic culture in order to navigate and understand each culture’s nuances and references to gay culture. Higgins also raises the question of whether or not it is even appropriate for members within a bilingual society to have a unified language practice.

Liora Moriel’s chapter talks of a trend within Israel whereby the LGBT community (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transsexual) is turning to English because it “seems to provide not only (the perception of) a gender-neutral language but also access and connection to the (imagined) worldwide LGBT community” (p. 107). Because Hebrew grammatically marks gender on nouns and adjectives, speakers are forced to reveal their sexual identity when asked about their partner or significant other (an act Moriel represents as a courageous undertaking). English, on the other hand, does not mark gender grammatically, making it a more appealing language to those who want to hide their sexual orientation in certain interactive contexts. The second part of Moriel’s quotation highlights another function English has for this group of Israelis: it indexes their identification into a larger, transnational gay community.

William Leap turns to language use and sexual identity within post-apartheid South Africa. Because the post-apartheid constitution prohibits any kind of discrimination, including discrimination based on sexual identity, the South African situation is a unique one when compared to other surrounding countries. Leap offers multiple examples from print media (ranging from the names of local bars to the linguistic choices in a national gay newspaper), language practice, and

personal narratives to illustrate the diversity of code-switching practices in the South African context, including code-switching between local languages, such as Zulu and Afrikaans, and English. Not only does this diversity reflect the different attitudes each speaker has towards his/her target audience, the very act of code-switching is also utilized to illustrate a (perceived) connection to a more global gay culture.

David Murray then approaches the political struggles that indigenous minorities face within larger Euro-centric communities. He examines how such struggles matriculate linguistically in the Maori society of New Zealand. Ambivalence toward the dominant English-speaking majority translates into different linguistic practices, ranging from comfortable acceptance of the English term *gay* to a rejection of that term through adoption of the Maori term *takatāpui*. Diachronically, Murray shows us that the original meaning of this Maori term was an “intimate companion of the same sex” (p. 169). In recent times, however, the semantics of the term has been extended to include transgenderism and same sex attraction (whether to men or women), thus making it a more inclusive term than the English *gay*.

Tom Boellstorff discusses “bahasa *gay*” (p. 182) ‘gay language’, a form of slang used by *gay* men in Indonesia. An interesting aspect of Boellstorff’s writing style is his decision to italicize the term *gay* when referring to men within this group. In doing so, he illustrates that “when [he] speaks of “*gay* men,” [he] refers to Indonesian men who call themselves *gay*, in other words, not based on [his] own determination of who is *gay*” (p. 185). This italicization, then, serves as a reminder that the term is used in its indigenous Indonesian sense, and not in the American/North Atlantic constructed sense. Unlike most of the other authors in this book, Boellstorff claims that English does not play a significant role within this group. When it does, in addition to creating an alliance with the global imaginings of a non-heterosexual community, the borrowed term assimilates to fit local concepts (of that group). Boellstorff then introduces the reader to bahasa *gay* by exemplifying the basic patterns and ways that this slang is created (mostly) from Indonesian words. In contrast to the use of lavender slang in other countries, where language has been utilized by nonheteronormative groups for discretion, Boellstorff shows that the emergence of this slang “for secrecy is subordinate to uses linked to belonging that are not always apparent to bahasa *gay*’s speakers” (p. 189). For example, local media and popular culture have appropriated and assimilated different terms from bahasa *gay* in ways that conform to local culture. Boellstorff is clear in stating that even though the mainstream culture has acquired bahasa *gay*, it is not necessarily more tolerant towards the identities of bahasa *gay* speakers.

The reader is then introduced to Thailand where Peter Jackson talks about the historical categories of *phet*, a term that has been roughly translated as meaning gender, sex, or sexuality. Jackson provides a history lesson on the different Thai identities that have emerged or disappeared within the last century. He supports his claims by using print media as a diachronic resource. We are then shown some of the effects of English on Thai vocabularies of sexuality: e.g. *gay*, *tom* from ‘tomboy’, and *dee* from ‘lady’. But Jackson also illustrates that these

English borrowings are too narrow for the complex identities that pre-existed gay globalization:

When members of Thailand's diverse gender/sex cultures have engaged Western discourses, they have appropriated foreign categories to local understandings rather than abandoning their society's dominant gender-based view of human eroticism (p. 227).

Jackson argues that only gay men and transsexuals identify as part of a larger imagined community. The concept of same-sex female love in Thailand has no counterpart in global discourses of sexuality because it is based on gender and not sexuality, as are the previously mentioned *toms* and *dees*.

In the first of two chapters that focus on minority experiences within the U.S., Susana Peña discusses the history, culture, and society of gay Cuban Americans in Miami. The author first brings up the clash between Latin America's concepts of gender/sexual identity and its North American counterpart. She explains that in Latin American cultures, the "sexual aim" (p. 235), and not the gender of one's sexual partner, is the deciding factor for one's identity (i.e. whether one was the active or passive partner). She illustrates how English terms (specifically the term *gay*) are redefined to fit into the localized gender identities of this Latin American gender identity system. For example, a fifty-one-year-old man uses the word *gay* to refer exclusively to the person playing the passive role in a sexual act. In the end, Peña shows us that this common linguistic culture helps unite first and second generation gay Cuban Americans.

In the final chapter, E. Patrick Johnson describes how African American gay men in the United States carry conflicting black and gay minority identities. This conflict results from the fact that gay English is spoken by mostly Euro-centric sexual minorities with a history of inflicting black oppression, while black vernacular English is spoken in an African-American heterosexual culture that has a homophobic history. This chapter's main point is to illustrate how "through vernacular appropriations of heterosexual domestic tropes, black gay men ultimately resist monolithic notions of blackness and gayness and provide space for community-building and sexual agency" (p.253). These men resort to subverting heteronormative terms that are significant within black culture during everyday speech. A perfect example of this surfaces when a member of the group explains the dual meanings of the term *family*, extending the semantics of the term to include gay men and the familial bond that this sexual community shares.

Ultimately, this book does an excellent job at introducing the reader to different (male) same-sex cultures and societies around the world. The concepts of globalization and transnational sexual identity are a recurring theme in several chapters. The authors illustrate how the adoption of (mostly) gay English terms helps speakers from different parts of the world identify with a larger, albeit imagined, world-wide community of sexual minorities. The other achievement the book can boast is that it clearly illustrates that the borrowing of a term does not necessitate the borrowing of the concept behind that term. Many chapters reveal

how cultures and languages appropriate foreign terminology into local concepts of sexual identity, whether it be national identity as conceptualized among bilingual speakers in Montreal or the gender-based eroticism of *toms* and *dees* in Thailand. With everything that it covers, this book should appeal to an audience with a variety of interests, including linguistic anthropology and queer studies. Moreover, the editors did an excellent job of making the material accessible to people who have little or no background in any of these fields. Hence, I would recommend this book to anyone who has an interest in learning about different cultures of the world and how these cultures interact.

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