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Review of doctoral dissertation
“Fictional Gay Men and Gayspeak in Twenty-First Century British Drama”
by Davide Passa

1. Summary and overview of the research project

The dissertation comprises front matter, an introductory chapter, six body chapters and a concluding chapter and is accompanied by almost 25 pages of bibliographic references for primary and secondary material and six appendixes. Despite the complexity of the material, spanning from historical background and theoretical considerations underpinning Language and Sexuality Studies, through cultural and literary criticism of the British drama, to sociolinguistic literature on gayspeak and the thorough reporting on analyses carried out with technological support of corpus linguistics, the dissertation can be applauded for its very clear composition and signposting throughout. What follows is a more detailed review of each chapter with evaluation of the organization of the contents and arguments, and with suggestions for improving the clarity of the line of exposition and the overall readability of the dissertation.

As such, the thesis is a valuable study of gayspeak, conducted on the basis of a solid literature review, and with a sound method and convincing presentation of results and conclusions.

2. Evaluation of contents, argument and structure

Chapter 1: Introduction is a lucid and convincing introduction to scope, structure and corpus of the study with precise delimitation of terminological choices and justification of decisions for selection of specific angles and perspectives. Even though it is dealt with later, it would be useful to explain here whether the degree of “characters’ out-of-the-closetedness” is a characteristic that is given by playwrights in stage directions or opening (and if so, for how many plays) or, by contrast, in how many plays it had to be “induced” and approached through “text analysis.”

Another terminological issue that some readers might have is the opposition between “corpus-assisted” and “manual.” In many studies “manual” analysis is the opposite to “automated” analysis, whereas “qualitative analysis” is the counterpart of “quantitative” analysis. If “manual analyses” mean that some categories that automation does not identify are explored, so do some types “corpus-assisted” analysis. A footnote in the introduction could be spared to make the Author’s terminological choice clearer, although, admittedly it does become clear later on.

Chapter 2 is appropriately drawing on sociolinguistics for an understanding of language for self-representation, and fictional language as written-to-be-spoken, prefabricated and inauthentic, and yet sufficiently representative of a characters’ identity (persona construction).

This chapter elaborates succinctly on character types/functions in a narrative and explains the simulated authenticity of the performance (suspension of disbelief). The chapter is well written and the line of reasoning is convincing.

Later in the chapter (pp. 35-37), the correlational approach (saying that language spoken by gay people is distinct on account of their sexuality, identity and social positioning) is criticized and priority seems to be given to the constructivist approach (saying that gay sexuality is performed (partly) through language, so language is indexical of sexuality). This, in turn, is followed by an appraisal of emergentist approach – highlighting context dependency and activation of meaning potential in linguistic encounters and not by essential quality. By placing the last paradigm as the coda of the section, the Author seems to imply that he embraces the last paradigm in the analysis, and yet in the subsequent parts of the dissertation he reverts to referring to gayspeak as the ways to “construct gay male sexuality” (e.g., p. 44). It would be advisable to clarify the standpoint on the preferred approach in 1-2 sentences.

Apart from that, the chapter includes a very good exposition of triangulation and corpus-assisted language studies and an adequate review of literature on fundamental concepts and on advantages and limitations of corpus linguistics. The tone shows that the Author is aware not only of the potential but also of the limitations of the methods and is explaining his choices with modesty and reserve.

Chapter 3 discusses the historical, regulatory (obscenity laws) and cultural (revolution) context of British theatre and drama as a place of progressive ideas and avant-garde forms of their expression. Excerpts from social commentary on increasingly complex and sometimes conflicting factors underpinning perceptions of homosexuality in Britain are used to trace the gradual evolution of the representations of gay characters almost decade by decade of the 20th century. The presentation is aptly interwoven with literary criticism, which is opinionated and argumentative, regarding the failings of British drama to keep in touch with dominant sentiments and addressing the problems (e.g. AIDS epidemic) adequately. Meanwhile, the 21st century contexts of British drama are dominated by the same-sex marriage legislation, anti-homophobia campaigning and liberalization of attitudes.

It is most useful to learn how gay drama can be put against the backdrop of New Writing with its formal experiments and thematic preoccupations – military interventionism, globalization, precariousness, youth angst and social alienation. Indeed, the latest plays gave space to new issues that backgrounded sexuality as a less and less controversial topic, but nevertheless they testify to homosexuality shown as inherently problematic. This overview has been concluded with the presentation of the staging aspects, and the corpus of plays has been described from the angles of story geographical settings, story timelines and common topics. The chapter gives a good overview how varied the source material is and how diverse the character of gay fiction is. I strongly believe that this chapter is a self-standing critical overview that could be published as a separate article in a literary/cultural studies journal.

The core of Chapter 4 is a classification of the types of gay characters (187) in the 61 plays, having considered the ontological prerequisites of fictional character creation and the double-layered nature of dramatic messaging. The reading is somewhat impeded by an inconsistent colour coding for class in figures 4.2 and 4.3. Also numerical references to figures starting from p. 79 in the text do not match the numbers assigned to figures in captions.

Nevertheless, it is interesting to follow how the Author aims to tease out meaning from English varieties – accents and dialects used by gay characters, offering a conclusion that regional/urban dialects and “fictolinguistic” non-standard sociolects are stereotypically correlated with class, education, even personality and used for their added connotation in the portrayal of fictional characters. My personal feeling is that figure 4.9 is not necessary – it is not hard to process a 61 vs. 39 percent split into primary and secondary characters. By the way, the definition of “ficto-Linguistics” (note the difference in spelling) is introduced only later on p. 104 in Chapter 5.

Regarding Chapter 5, one can have an impression that some of the points, e.g., those made in section 5.2 that reviews past research, have already been discussed earlier in the theoretical chapter on fundamental terms and the distinction between Queer Linguistics and Language and Sexuality Studies, or in the sections on sociolinguistics and anti-languages. My strong feeling is that Chapter 5 could have ended with a clear list of linguistic categories for both corpus-assisted and manual analysis that is coming in Chapters 6 and 7. Such a list, however, appears later in the “results-oriented” chapters. Placing it earlier would give Chapter 5 a solid closure and relevance. Specifically, what is listed in section 6.4 as features of gayspeak to attend to could be moved there instead, especially since the features identified apply not only to Chapter 6, but also to Chapter 7.

Chapter 6 is well previewed with explanations of the protocol for compiling the GayCorpus2000-2020 and the methods of analysis. The results are described appropriately and clearly. The tables and figures visualize the findings and most of the following interpretations are convincing. Indeed, the “historical” nature of the “stereotypical” features of gayspeak taken from previous research and the contemporary nature of plays in the modern corpus may be on a collision course, which was proved on several counts with statistically based insights. I would like to offer three additional ideas for future work with some findings:

First, how to explain the higher ratio of offensive or debasing words in the speech of gay characters. Is this feature of gayspeak related to the lack of hedging and being direct and assertive? These interrelations would be interesting to tease out in a future publication, as they cumulatively may project a generic and artificial, yet authenticated, stylization. It would be extremely interesting at this point to have a possibility to compare secretive vs. social/activist gay characters’ language varieties.

Second, the explanation of sexual vocabulary on p. 134 may be more mundane than the playwrights’ intentional self-ghettoization thesis. Drama, as the name suggests, is about the more intense encounters between speaking humans which differs from the casual spoken conversation captured in the reference corpus.

Third, there might be a need for a caveat regarding vocatives, which are typical in interaction in intimate/close relationships, such as the ones recreated on stage. It is rather obvious to me that the reference corpus is rather broader and includes instances of spoken English that are not limited to expressions uttered in the context of such interpersonal relations.

Chapter 7 explains very well the sampling method for the close-reading approach and offers justification for the chosen framework. P. 167 compares mentions by gay and non-gay characters in the plays, but since we do not know the ratios of their speaking-time, or whether there was any normalization adjusted, it is only interpretable as an artistic choice by

playwrights. It is useful that the Author confirms such intuitions on p. 171. It seems that all, if not most, language characteristics identified through manual analysis can be claimed to cumulatively reinforce stereotypical features of gayspeak, perhaps to give viewing audiences a stronger signal how to interpret staged encounters and narrative twists.

3. Minor technicalities

- Unify spelling of Stanislavskij vs. Stanislavski
- “et al” is italicized in body, but not in footnotes
- p. 38/97/110 unnecessary initials with surnames Cameron and Kulick
- missing from bibliography: Cameron et al (2006). Should it be Cameron and Kulick (2006)
- pp. 52-54; 99-101 – paragraphing could be introduced for better readability
- p. 54 – variety of notations that could be aligned “the 1960s”, “the Eighties”
- p. 80 vs. pp. 85/95 - first lower-case then upper-case notation (working/Working class)
- bibliography – italics lacking for some book titles
- p. 209 – Queen Elizabeth II – reign ended 2022
- p. 212 - mental (not metal) disorders
- p. 214 - Is it necessary to have Boris Johnson in the list if there is nothing to report?
- Appendixes – consider systematizing the notation of playwrights’ names in 2 and 3, perhaps drop playwrights’ names in 5 and 6 and remind readers what the abbreviations at the top of the columns stand for.

4. Conclusion

As has been stated above, the dissertation offers systematic insights into the speech of fictional gay characters in a representative sample of literary material. Given the diversity of characters, settings, storylines, the Author managed to find interesting correlations and tendencies of playwrights’ stylization of gayspeak. The major conclusions – that stereotypical linguistic features may be deployed by writers to signal to the audience how the characters are to be perceived, but, for the sake of authenticity, recent plays avoid highly marked “stereotypically queer” features – were arrived at in a systematic manner and corroborated with sufficient evidence. As for further insights, it would be extremely interesting to have a possibility to compare secretive and social or activist gay characters’ language varieties.

Having reviewed this highly original dissertation, I have all the confidence that the Author has demonstrated the necessary theoretical knowledge, analytic skills and academic competences that are required of doctoral candidates in Language and Literature Studies.

With an understanding that minor corrections can be introduced to any future publication of this dissertation or its fragments, I hereby positively evaluate this version of dissertation as is, and propose to admit the Author to the next stage of doctoral proceedings.

Urszula Koralkowska

Opole, 15th March 2023