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How do we learn what a successful gay and lesbian relationship is (and needs)? The discursive construction of gay and lesbian relationships in dating and relationship guides

In Western societies there has been a change in gay and lesbian politics from identity issues to relationship acceptance and recognition (cf. Weeks 2000: 213). The focus in linguistic analyses of gay and lesbian discourses has been mostly centred on identity and community construction (e.g. Baker 2005; Koller 2008), which needs to be complemented with a view on how relationships are constructed. This paper aims to shed more light on the way same-sex relationships in contemporary society are discursively formed, setting them apart from or putting them on a level with heterosexual couples.

Dating and relationship guides prove to be a fruitful source for that endeavour. They tell the reader how to meet and recognise an appropriate partner, how to turn a date into a lasting relationship and how to lead and maintain a good and healthy relationship. Three corpora containing online dating and relationship guides/advice for gay men, lesbians and a heterosexual readership have been compiled and semantically tagged, using the software Wmatrix. A comparison of the tagged corpora results in key semantic concepts for each corpus. The automatic semantic tagging is completed with a manual categorisation of keywords into semantic sets (e.g. words referring to aspects of time in building relationships or expressions denoting emotional or sexual satisfaction). These emerging semantic sets serve as a starting point for a more detailed collocational and contextual analysis.

What can be demonstrated, among other things, is that depending on the sexual identity of the readership, the focus of the guides is different. This difference underlies the constructed nature of the need for diverse advice for gay, lesbian and heterosexual people. It indicates that gay, lesbian and heterosexual dating behaviour and relationships are commonly regarded as facing different issues (e.g. how to find Mr or Mrs Right, how to turn a fling into a lasting relationship or which role to play in a relationship).

References

Baker, P. 2005. *Public Discourses of Gay Men*. Abingdon & New York: Routledge.

Koller, V. 2008. *Lesbian Discourses: Images of a Community*. London: Routledge.

Weeks, J. 2000. *Making Sexual History*. Cambridge: Polity Press.