

I. RESEARCH ARTICLES

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SELECTED TERMS FOR GAY MEN
IN CONTEMPORARY POLISH:
CULTURAL CONNOTATIONS*

Abstract. The article deals with the sociolect of Polish gays and the lexis of homosexuality. It compares two Polish terms for homosexual men (*ciota* and *ciepły*) with their counterparts in selected European languages: English, German, French, Italian, Czech, Slovak, and Slovenian. In the context of (covert) gay culture, the relationships between these lexemes, including their derivatives, form a network that unites the gay community beyond and across national boundaries.

KEY WORDS: sociolect; slang; gay; homosexuality; gay culture; cultural linguistics

The first decade of the 20th century in Poland was a turning point in the expression of homosexuality. Prior to that, public discourse on homosexuality had been practically non-existent: it was a taboo subject apparently without any real-life manifestation in this part of the world. In order to distinguish between what was then considered the norm from what transgressed the norm, the community of homosexuals, together with their emerging culture, were “locked away in a closet”¹ – which in Polish reality was more of a water

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¹ Cf. the expression *to come out of the closet* in the sense of publicly revealing one’s non-heteronormative sexuality (Kita 2014: 323). Incidentally, back in 2002 Błażej Warkocki proposed that the English idiom *living in the closet* be rendered in Polish as ‘being in the toilet’, on account of the role of the latter in (gay) culture (cf. Warkocki 2013: 25–26).

closet and – paradoxically – a public one. This is because gay culture developed in *cottages*, in the slang sense of a public lavatory,² i.e. in public restrooms in urban areas, railway stations and parks, which became new, alternative meeting places for “poofs” (Polish: *cioty*), hidden from general public awareness (Nowak 2016: 175–179).

In his work on written vocabulary of sexual minorities, Andrzej Dyszak claims that “language [...] unifies people who belong to [those] minorities, regardless of their nationality” (Dyszak 2015: 214). Such is at least the contemporary situation, the days of gay clubs and queer virtual spaces, in which the sociolect of the gay community abounds in Anglicisms, derived mainly from English gay slang. Dyszak’s observation has been a major inspiration for this study, whose aim is to examine the relationships between selected names for gay persons in Polish and in selected other Indo-European languages, with the influence of LGBTQ culture on their coinage. Given the multitude of names for gays and the complexity of the gay community, I limit my description to two lexemes: *ciota* ‘poof, auntie’ and *ciepły* ‘warm brother’ (along with their derivatives), comparing them to their counterparts in English, German, French, Italian, Czech, Slovak, and Slovenian. This is a pioneering effort: coupled with Dyszak’s work, it will hopefully be inspirational for authors ready to inquire into the still unexplored Polish gay sociolect from a novel perspective.

Ciota

Ciota is an augmentative of the noun *ciotka* ‘aunt’. It is ambiguous, with its connotative meaning depending on the context and social relationships (among others, the communicative setting, the intentions of the speaker, and the kind of social group to which the speaker and the hearer belong). Lexicographers label the word as “contemptuous” or “vulgar”, due to the aversion and disrespect it projects towards the referent.

According to Dyszak, (for a heteronormative person) *ciota* may either refer to ‘any homosexual male’ or (for a homosexual person) ‘a homosexual male who clearly tries to attract the attention of others by his appearance or unnatural behaviour’ (Dyszak 2012: 65–66). A more precise description of what such behaviour may involve is found in Rodzoch-Malek (2012), who defines *ciota* as “an effeminate male, who behaves in a theatrical manner, exaggerates his movements; often someone with homosexual tendencies”

² The Polish term, *pikieta*, means here ‘a place [...] where homosexuals meet to make contact’ (PSWP 2000: 374–375). More on the subject in Nowak (2016).

(Rodzoch-Malek 2012: 84). It is worth noting that in the gay sociolect, this odd, exaggerated behaviour is (literally) referred to as *przeginanie* (*się*) ‘bending, twisting’ (also ‘going over the top’), which is an inherent element of that culture. Witkowski explains this characteristic gay comportment in his novel *Lubiewo bez cenzury* as “pretending to be women – as [poofs] imagine them to be – waving their arms about, squealing, saying ‘Stop it!’ and ‘Oh, my gosh!’” (Witkowski 2014: 15), although in actual fact, poofs “do not want to be women at all. They [simply] want to be twisted men” (p. 16).

It should be remembered that before *ciota* as a neosemanticism spread in colloquial Polish,³ it had already existed (alongside its use in the gay sociolect) in prison slang (Rodzoch-Malek 2012). Klemens Stępniański in his Dictionary of Criminal Cant (1993) defines *ciota* as ‘a passive homosexual’, a man who is deprecated by criminals and who is not only an object of ridicule and contempt, but, above all, an object of sexual gratification to his inmates. In the gay sociolect, the emotional load of the word *ciota* is different still, and is related to homosexual emancipation, whose main phase in Poland came in the early 1990s (Warkocki 2014: 123).⁴ It was at that time that authors writing for gay fanzines started to use the neutral (i.e., devoid of sexual connotations) lexeme *gej* ‘gay’: “We have this opportunity of introducing a new word which is unknown to the general public, and we have the possibility of building a positive meaning around it”.⁵ Before that time, homosexuals had been referred to as poofs (*ciota*, sing.) and fagots (*pedał*, sing.); therefore, in the gay vernacular, the word *ciota*, depending on the context,⁶ had either a neutral meaning (and was more often used in the diminutive form *ciotka*) or a negative one – just as in colloquial Polish and in prison slang. Pointing out the differences between *gej* and *ciota*, Witkowski stresses the fact that:

Gays are a product of the late phase of liberal, consumerist capitalism in the United States and Western Europe, and now also in Poland. Their culture is basically American

³ Polish nomination in non-normative identities and sexual behaviours is also discussed in Rejter (2013: 129–140).

⁴ Warkocki (2014: 122–123) regards the emancipation of 1981–1990 as the initial emancipatory phase, an emancipation of “others”.

⁵ And further: “One can even define a gay as a conscious fagot who wants to fight for his rights and spread tolerance” (Placyd 1988: 12).

⁶ No attempt to define or mark the range of the lexemes *ciota*, *pedał*, and *gej* in the gay community has ever been successful. Sometimes, in trying to establish the term with the weakest connotations of homosexuality, a new term was being concocted, e.g. “I was advised not to refer to myself as *gej* because it means a twisted *ciota*, and ‘you are a regular man, so you should refer to yourself as a man who happens to fancy other men’”, and further: “I was a fagot for some time, and then I grew out of being a fagot [...], and am now an MWLM [man who likes men]” (Wnioski na 10-lecie 2000: 28–31).

pop culture. These people do not stand out as individuals, but rather follow models established by the group (regarding fashion, behaviour, even facial expressions, clothing brands, etc.), which is why they are an obvious marketing target, similarly to DINKs (dual income, no kids). Gays – in contrast to poofs – fully accept the capitalist society they are a product of, they adhere to bourgeois values and shun rebellion. Poofs, on the other hand, are a thorn in the side of society, or at least they see themselves as such. They are scum, punks, rebels, relegated to the margins of society and accept this situation. (Witkowski 2014: 397)

In the gay communities of the late 1980s and early 1990s, *ciota* was most often used to refer to elderly, lonely men who spent whole days *cottaging*, trying to hook up with younger boys or heterosexual men, so-called *luje* (pl.), “*Ciotka* [dimin.] did not mean a worse sort of gay, it meant his way of life” (Krzyk 1990: 18).

In English, the same category of men (elderly, lonely gays) are called *aunties*. The name itself was originally only used in the slang of prostitutes for homosexual men prostituting themselves in brothels. Currently, the English word *aunt* (unlike Polish *ciota*) also denotes lesbians who take on the role of so-called mentors and guardians of gay men, and often also their body guards.⁷ This usage can be explained as being inspired by the analogous role played by pimps in the world of prostitutes or as an attempt to conceal lesbian sexual orientation from people outside the LGBTQ community. Similar relationships between gays and lesbians in the Polish gay sociolect are called *cooperative marriages* and *cooperative arrangements*, their goal being to prevent speculations and gossip about the identity of the persons involved; cf. the advertisements: “Gay, 24 years old, WLTM a lesbian up to 50 years old from Poznań for friendship and cooperative marriage”; “29-year-old, cultured and educated gay, [...] seeking a lesbian friend, [...] for a relationship, an arrangement of convenience” (Ogłoszenia 1991: 12).

In the Polish gay sociolect, homosexual men are often referred to with diminutive forms of the word *ciota* (*ciotka*, *ciotencja*, *ciocia*, *ciotunia*) and the community itself often categorises its members as various types of *ciota* (e.g. *Ciotka Pikieciarka* ‘a cottaging auntie’⁸). An analogous usage is found in English gay parlance, where the word *aunt* is used interchangeably with its diminutive forms, *aunty* and *auntie*, and in noun phrases such as *Aunt Mathilda*, *Aunt Mame*, and *Aunt fancy*.

Aunt Mame denotes a middle-aged gay. Etymologically, the phrase goes back to the movie *Auntie Mame* (dir. Morton DaCosta, 1958), in which

⁷ See *Aunt* at www.moscasdecoulores.com (accessed 10 May, 2016).

⁸ Cf.: “And it turned out rather soon that the reason for closing the honourable comfort stations was not the activities of the cottaging aunties, although there had been some complaints about those, too” (Serwis Filo 1990: 12–13).

an elderly woman takes in her orphaned nephew and introduces him to an eccentric lifestyle. The fact that the heroine's character was overdrawn and theatrical turned the film into an icon among LGBT audiences, the more so because, despite its homosexual allusions, the movie was not censored at the time. It is also worth emphasising here that the sensibility of poofs has been shaped by camp aesthetics.⁹ Aunties "live in the world of TV series, soap operas, and fashion catalogues. They love *Dallas*, *Return to Eden*, *North and South*, *Dynasty* [...]" (Dimoski 2012: 41). For example, Poznań gays, inspired by *Les Gens de Mogador*,¹⁰ a TV series popular in late 1970s and early 1980s, referred to a cottage in Marcinkowskiego Park as *Mogador* and the poofs who went cottaging there as *damy* 'ladies' or *panny* 'maidens', creating in this way their own, exaggerated camp reality (Nowak 2016: 177–178).

In *Alfabet gejowski* (1994) we read: "An almost obligatory referent for this noun [*ciota*] is an ageing, bent guy who cruises, prancing, around parks and cottages, swings his handbag and, pouting his lips in a dramatic way, drools over young, innocent, and naive boys" (Alfabet gejowski 1994: 40). *Aunt Mame* and *Aunt Mathilda*¹¹ are, by definition, middle-aged or older homosexuals – they are *cottaging aunties* and *Ladies of Mogador*. The diminutive noun *auntie* itself is – on the one hand – a negative name for an effeminate gossip-auntie. On the other hand, it can have the opposite meaning of an amiable, elderly, and not necessarily feminised gay.¹²

The opposite of the above is *auntie queen*, a slang word for a young, often teenage gay, who engages in (sexual) relationships with older men.¹³ A corresponding word used by Polish aunties is *efeb* 'ephebe'¹⁴ (in ancient Greece, an adolescent male who has gone through a period of military training): "[...] waiting for the arrival of the train, we found ourselves under the intense scrutiny of some ephebe – a boy, perhaps eighteen years of age, who was strolling [...] tightly wrapped in a tracksuit that showed off his possessions" (Taka sobie znajomość 1989: 22–23).

⁹ The problems with defining camp, its origin and types, are dealt with in detail in Parys (2014). In the simplest understanding, one should probably treat camp as an esthetics based on overstatement, theatricality, intended artificiality, or (and in the context on hand: mainly) on crossing the boundaries of one's sex.

¹⁰ A French-German-Swiss-Canadian TV series (dir. Robert Mazoyer 1972), with a new, extended version produced in 1995 (cf. Pamiętnik Łodzi 1995: 68).

¹¹ Cf. *Angielskie ciocie*, in *Unleashe English*, www.englash.org/angielskie-ciocie (accessed June 6, 2016).

¹² Cf. *Gay Slang Dictionary* (access 20 May, 2016).

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ Cf. *Efeb*, in *Słownik języka polskiego PWN* (access May 25, 2016).

The English *aunties* and the Polish *ciocie* have the same denotative meaning as the French *tata*, *tante*, and the augmentative *tantouze*. All three are tagged in dictionaries as negative and offensive, the last one being additionally described as vulgar, its pejorative meaning reinforced by the suffix *-ouze*. Each of the French lexemes denotes a homosexual man, sometimes a *queer*.¹⁵

There is a degree of linguistic subversion involved in the French lexeme *tata*.¹⁶ As is the case with the German *der Schwule* and the English *queer*, *tata* has been appropriated by the gay community, i.e. the individuals it refers to. This negative, offensive, and depreciating word has been recontextualised and redefined to yield a new linguistic unit, stripped of its original, pejorative meaning. In France, the names of many places dedicated to homosexual communities are modified not only with the international adjective *gay* (*a gay club*), but also with the originally depreciating word *tata* as in *Tata Burger* (*Gay Burger*)¹⁷ or *tata beach*...

As a side note, let us appreciate the fact that *tata* also gave rise to the Italian slang word *zia*, which denotes a homosexual man. The word emphasises the man's passivity in relationships with other men or his solitude and old age. *Zia* was widely used in the 1950s and 1960s, when it evoked the stereotype of the unmarried aunt.¹⁸

Ciepty

The best known linguistic subversion is that of the English lexeme *queer*, an originally offensive word which has been adopted by the LGBTQ community as a term of self-reference. In the process of recontextualisation and re-evaluation, the words *queer* and the German *der Schwule* (in contrast to the Polish *ciota* and *pedał*) have been adopted by gays and are currently used not only by LGBTQ activists, scientists, specialists in cultural studies, etc., but also by ordinary language users to identify persons or to name public spaces in everyday communication (e.g. *queer theory*, *queer studies*, *New Queer Cinema*, *Schwules Museum*, *Schwule Bars*, *Schwule Sauna*).

¹⁵ Cf. *Tante*, *tata*, *tantouze*, in: www.moscasdecoulores.com (access May 20, 2016); *tante*, *tata*, *tantouze* in www.fr.wiktionary.org (access May 20, 2016).

¹⁶ In Judith Butler's (1990) understanding of subversion as the citing of language contrary to its original version.

¹⁷ Cf. the website of the Parisian restaurant *Tata Burger*: www.facebook.com/tataburger-paris (access May 20, 2016).

¹⁸ See *Zia* (*omosessuale maschile passiva*), in: *Treccani. La cultura italiana* (access May 20, 2016); *Zia*, in www.moscasdecoulores.com (access May 20, 2016).

The coinage of the de-adjectival noun *der Schwule* (from *schwül* ‘stuffy, sultry’) is associated with the theory of the sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld, today more of an anecdotal curiosity than a serious research hypothesis. Hirschfeld argued that the skin of homosexual men is warmer than that of heterosexual men.¹⁹ In turn, Adolf J. Storfer (1937: 131–140) believed that gays have “warm feelings” for one another, at the same time being indifferent to women (i.e. warm, rather than hot or cold). A third theory was proposed by Heinz Küpper, who associated the warmth of homosexual men with the hot atmosphere in gay clubs and restaurants. It is worth noting that in People’s Republic of Poland (i.e. before 1989), gay meeting places were referred to as *ciepłownie* (pl.) ‘thermal power plants’, although not so much because their atmosphere was warm but because they were frequented by *ciepli* (pl. of *ciepły*) ‘the warm ones; warm brothers’ (Chaciński 2005: 62). However, the semantic origins of *der Schwule*, as in the case of the Polish *cieplak*, the Czech *teplouša*, and the Slovak *teploša*, should rather be sought in the German phrase *warmer Bruder* ‘warm brother’.

Miejski słownik slangu i mowy potocznej [Urban Dictionary of Slang and Colloquial Speech]²⁰ defines *cieplak* as ‘a person who likes physical contact with another person of the same sex, often a male’. The lexeme is tagged as very offensive and negatively charged. A very different evaluation is proposed by Rodzoch-Malek, who treats it as an evidently euphemistic dialectal synonym of a homosexual person, which evokes pleasant, positive associations (Rodzoch-Malek 2012: 151). The author draws attention to the fact that *cieplak* (as well as the related *ciepły*, *cieplaj*, and *ciepluch*) are semantic calques of the English *warm brother*: “A warm brother. A boy by the minute. A boy by the hour, to roll around with in the bushes or a riverside thicket” (Wszystkie dzieci nasze są 1994: 29). Andrzej Dyszak points out that the word *cieplak* has long been used in the sense of ‘gay’ in Bydgoszcz city dialect (Dyszak 2012: 65). He also suggests that it may have been formed as a result of shortening the phrase *ciepły brat* ‘warm brother’ (Dyszak 2012: 71), which – in contrast to Rodzoch-Malek – he takes as a borrowing of the German *warmer Bruder*, given that the Bydgoszcz dialect has been strongly influenced by German (Dyszak 2012: 71).

The Czech adjective *teplý* ‘warm’ has been used in a similar way to form the colloquial and offensive word *teplouš* by adding the suffix *-ouš*.²¹ Definitions of the Slovak lexeme *teplý* ‘warm’ say that it is used synonymously

¹⁹ See *Schwul*, in www.de.wiktionary.org (access May 21, 2016).

²⁰ Access May 21, 2016.

²¹ See *Teplouš* and *Teplý* in www.cs.wiktionary.org (access May 21, 2016).

to the phrase *teplý brat* ‘warm brother’ and the slang word *teploš* (with its lesbian analogue *teploška*) (Oravec 2014). A similar origin can be traced for the Slovenian *toplovodar*, a vulgar word derived from the phrase *topli bratec* ‘warm brother’.²²

As an interesting side note, Hungarian (a language from outside the Indo-European family) also has a word that literally means ‘warm, hot’ and is used in reference to a gay person. The Hungarian *meleg*, however, differs from its Slavic contemptuous and aversive counterparts in that it has been used from the very beginning as a politically correct and neutral substitute for the internationalism *gay*. For example, it features in the translation of the international acronym LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender), which in Hungarian is LMBT (Leszbikusok, Melegek, Biszexuálisokés, Transzneműek).²³

On the map of relationships. A conclusion

When one considers the relationships among the selected Indo-European terms for homosexual men in the light of the cultural elements that influence their use, one can observe certain similarities. This confirms Dyszak’s claim, cited in the introduction to this paper, that the gay community enjoys a certain degree of linguistic unification that goes beyond national boundaries. In the present study, we have identified two groups of semantically identical lexemes with different geographical distributions: on the one hand, there is the culture of “aunties” (the Polish *ciota*, the Italian *zia*, the French *tata*, the English *aunt*, and the Luxembourgish *tatta*), whose lives centre around *cottages* (in Polish: *pikiety*; in French: *pissoirs*) (Silverstein and Picano 2003). On the other hand, there is the group of words used in Slavic and Germanic languages, which are counterparts of the English *warm brother*: the Polish *cieplak*, the Czech *teplouš*, the Slovak *teploš*, the Slovenian *toplovodar*, and the German *der Schwule* (an equivalent of the Polish *pedał* ‘fagot’, though derived from the adjective *schwüle* ‘stuffy, sultry’). Interestingly, the names in the second group have a distinctively negative or even vulgar meaning, doubtless because they have been coined outside the gay community, in an attempt to identify the medically (and, sometimes, socially) distinctive features of homosexuality. The German, *der Schwule* is the only one of those

²² See *Toplovodar*, in www.list.wikia.com/wiki/List_of_terms_for_gay_in_different_languages (access May 21, 2016). Cf. www.moscasdecoulores.com and www.bos.zrc-sazu.si (access May 21, 2016).

²³ *Meleg*, in www.hu.wikipedia.org (access May 22, 2016).

words to have been subverted, stripped of its contemptuous connotations, and redefined by the gay community for their own purposes.

Finally, it should be emphasized once again that the present article has only focused on two lexemes (and their derivatives) referring to gays, selected from the rich vocabulary of the gay sociolect. Although contemporary understanding of homosexuality has its origins in the linguistic evolution of this concept and the sociolect of homosexual people has been broadly analysed by Western researchers (among others within the field of so-called *lavender linguistics*), in Polish linguistics this issue is still awaiting comprehensive investigation.

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