"BI" NO MEANS: BISEXUALITY AND THE INFLUENCE OF BINARISM ON IDENTITY

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This article examines the difficulties surrounding the formation of authentic bisexual identities by locating the dominating cultural influences of binary-based language. The experiences of Turkish men serves as the overarching framework for understanding how rigid gender attributes are reproduced through language in the construction of sexual identity.

INTRODUCTION

This article is not about bisexuality as identity. Rather, the topic of exploration is the lack of language choices that are available to bisexuals when trying to communicate their reality with others in the social world. The English language, as expressed in present-day North America and elsewhere globally, is dominated by an overarching structure that locates words through opposition. It is easiest to define words through comparison to other words and concepts, as words are inherently connected to one another. One cannot provide a definition of *concept* without using other words in the description. As a result, present-day society sees the social world through a semantic filter based on binary divisions that become the metaphor for how the social world is organized: male or female, young or old, feminine or masculine, Western or Eastern, subject or object, heterosexual

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or homosexual, aggressor or victim, butch or femme, top or bottom. By organizing language according to categories of oppositional difference, one part of the duality is favored and preferred over the other, such that one word reflects dominance and the other word indicates subordinate status.

As a result, those who fall outside binary categories are marginalized and made invisible, unable to speak about their reality due to the lack of representative language from within their own cultures. As this article argues, in this linguistic world of binary divisions, bisexuals do not fit in, and they cannot honestly speak to their realities due to the predominance of binary encoded language. More specifically, the structuring of the social world such that sex and gender are interconnected, and the framing of sexuality as a duality between heterosexuality and homosexuality, negate bisexual realities. To try and speak about a social world that rejects these artificial connections between sex and gender is near impossible. Binary opposition in language removes the opportunities for people to speak outside these organizing dichotomies.

Relying on the voices of 20 men who were originally interviewed as part of a broader study on the social organization of Turkish male sexual minorities, this article outlines the re-creation of binary gender and sex roles through the use of language in "invisible" bisexual communities (for details on the research methodology, see Bereket & Adam, 2006). Although bisexuals may seek to resist these cultural formations of sex and gender, the dominance of binarism in language forces bisexuals to articulate their sexuality and identities through a frame that is not representative of their reality.

MAN-MADE LANGUAGE

Language can be generally understood as any verbal or nonverbal communication engaged in by humans, animals, or machines. Words are constructed by the assigning of societal meaning to essentially arbitrary and meaningless signs that have been created. According to Dos Santos (1994), "words are not reality, 'reality' is not reality, words are symbols used to represent or evoke an image of reality in the listener's mind" (p. 86). Language is created by the human need to communicate and share ideas, thoughts, and emotions.

Language has several functions in that it establishes social relationships between individuals, groups, and organizations; conveys information about the speaker; and conveys information about the society and culture. It is with the final function this article is focused. Language as a tool reflects the prevalent culture of a society, and the dominant ideas and power

relationships can be understood by analyzing the language of that society. Language mirrors social locations and divisions in society, and the use of language indicates one's location to a situation as an insider or outsider or between, within, and beyond this hierarchical binary. Thus, language is also connected to power in society because those with social power have the power to create and shape language. As a result, language reflects the reality of those in dominant social positions, and those who are posited as outsiders or subordinate in society have their reality described using language that is not of their own making and choosing, as described by Rothbowman (1973): "Language is one of the instruments of domination. It speaks only for the world of the oppressors, from their point of view." (pp. 32–33).

Language is never neutral—language reflects social values, beliefs, and norms. The words that make up language carry emotional and societal overtones and are at once descriptive and evaluative. Furthermore, language may be used as a tool of cultural resistance to mainstream discourse, where those who are limited in access to social power may create their own language or reappropriate negative dominant language to be more representative of their reality, as in the use of the word *queer* in North America. Moreover, words such as *aktif* (active), *pasif* (passive), *gey* (gay) or *biseksüel* (bisexual) are new borrowings from the West that have been appropriated into the Turkish language. These words contribute to the reproduction of a language of gender-inscribed sexuality that circulates through men's understanding of themselves, and how it provides a language of desire (see Bereket & Adam, 2006).

Furthermore, there is frequent use of words that come from what Tapınç (1992) calls "gypsy slang" (p. 42) among Turkish sexual minorities (see Table 1). The heterosexual population cannot interpret or is simply not familiar with these terms, which are a major sign of one's "insider" status within the Turkish queer community. It is a "private language" that helps men to communicate among themselves and find prospective sex partners.

Feminist researchers and scholars have argued that men, as the dominant social force in society, have historically created a language that reflects their world. Language is shaped by patriarchy, and the everyday language people use is man-made language that reflects the interests and issues for men and men's lives. This constructed language, in turn, shapes the way in which people think and experience the world and values masculine activities and beliefs. Mary Daly (1987), Cheris Kramarae and Paula A. Treichler (1992), Anne Pauwels (2003), and other feminists addressing language change/reformation argue dominant patriarchal language silences women and argue for ways in which sexist language can be challenged successfully. This argument can be applied to Turkish men themselves who are positioned outside of heterosexual Turkish masculinity, where

Table 1. Turkish Sexually Related Slang Words and Definitions

Slang Words	Definition
Balamoz	An older male
Manti	A younger male
Laço	A heterosexual male
Lubunya/Lubun	An (effeminate) gay male
Koli alıklama	Trying to pick somebody up, or making a pass at some-one
Koli	A sex partner
Gullümleşmek	To have fun
Sipet alıklama	To give a blowjob
Naşlama	To run away especially when there is a chance of getting caught
Madi	A thing or person that/who is bad

patriarchy also imposes hierarchies of masculinities and sexualities and situates how men identify themselves and relate among one another.

Dorothy Smith (1987) explored how institutions and structures in society are controlled by men and express male experience. Women, in turn, are excluded from the production of thought, images, and symbols. The societal quest for knowledge is not neutral and objective, but subjective from the standpoint of men, as Smith (1987) indicated: "There is a gap between where we are and the means we have to express and act. It means that the concerns, interests, and experiences forming 'our' culture are those of men in positions of dominance whose perspectives are built on the silence of women (and of others)" (pp. 19–20). Power relations under patriarchy means that the subjectivity of men's knowledge and ideology is made invisible and normalized as an unquestioned practice in society—one of the semantic rules of language is male as norm. This is reflected in male resentment and ridicule of planned changes in language to remove sexist bias. Extreme hostility towards changes in language use is based on the argument that language is neutral, unbiased, and unchanging, without recognizing it is inherently biased in the favor of men's realities. Although women and men share a common cultural vocabulary, women's use of language does not have the same social power compared to the use of language by men. Women may be able to articulate themselves through this shared language, but their voices are positioned as being less powerful and thus less able to have an impact upon wider social, political, and economic issues. Language itself is malleable, and the meaning of words

change over time, and between cultures, and new words arise into being to express new values and concepts as older words change or disappear. Contrary to the arguments for maintaining language as it currently exists, language is not fixed and static.

As a result of the queer civil rights movement, language has changed to become more reflective of the diversity of sexualities and sexual orientations. Prior to this, those with same-sex attractions, or desires to gender cross or blur, were given negative labels and identities using language from those in dominant social positions. For example, the heterosexism of present-day language privileges heterosexual culture and marginalizes non-heterosexuality in all its diversity. As a term, *homosexual* is often thought to originate from an anonymous pamphlet attributed to Karoly Maria Benkert (Karl-Maria Kertbeny) in 1869 (Haeberle & Gindorf, 1989). In this pamphlet, he criticized the sodomy laws that made same-sex activities illegal. Within a year, the term was being utilized by medical practitioners to negatively define same-sex relations. As a result, being labeled homosexual had real-world negative consequences to those who engaged in same-sex practices.

However, challenges to society through the civil rights movement have resulted in changes to language to be more representative of queer culture and identity, arising from within these communities. Yet even within this queer movement, language has come to reflect the reality of lesbian and gay identity and continues to ignore and make invisible bisexual persons. For instance, although the use of the new word *biseksüel* (bisexual) is heard of in urban areas of Turkey, it is yet a word that is to be adopted by men or women for self-identification of one's real-life experiences. This calls for a need to give bisexuality (*biseksüellik*) as a word and experience, heightened access in more mainstream normative discourses. The dominance of binary divisions continues to occur within queer language that supports the belief system that sexuality is an either/or experience and identity. Language continues to reflect the biphobia that exists in gay, lesbian, and heterosexual communities.

REPRODUCING BINARY LANGUAGE IN BISEXUAL COMMUNITIES

Humans live in a multisexed, multigendered, and multisexual world that is far more complex than how contemporary hetero-normativity positions human sexuality. But people are constrained by the norms of language that are based on dualities of difference. This is manifest in the data acquired from personal interviews conducted with 20 Turkish men, some of whom engage in sexual practices with men and women. Conducted in

the Turkish language, in Ankara, Turkey, respondents were asked about their own sexual behavior, and their responses offered insight into how and why they place themselves inside or outside certain sex and gender categories, and what that identification means in terms of their interactions with other men/women. The study documents the meanings ascribed to sexual behavior with other men by the male participants themselves and clarifies how sexual desire is structured by the existing gender structure in Turkish society as a whole, which also demonstrates how it has an influence on how men identify themselves to others in public. The cultural misconception and invisibility of bisexuality (*biseksüellik*) is interwoven with the polarized gender definitions within Turkish society at large. With the emergence of newly *gey*-identified Turkish men coming to the forefront, identifying oneself as *biseksüel* is not an available option within the Turkish queer community.

In Turkey, within the traditional model in which same-sex relationships are organized, there is a clear distinction between the *aktif* (apparent inserter during anal intercourse) and *pasif* (apparent insertee during anal intercourse) partner, and this rigid division emulates the symbolic structure of male/female relations in Turkish society, where the *aktif* and *pasif* participants are "masculinized" and "feminized', respectively—reflecting the overall gender norms for men and women. In the Turkish language, the two words *vermek* (to give) and *koymak* (to put) are frequently used to define the position of those involved in a sexual encounter, whether heterosexual or homosexual (Tapınç, 1992, p. 41). This, of course, refers to the male's active role of penetration, as opposed to those who offer themselves up to be penetrated in vaginal or anal intercourse. Women are always the receiver and men may "give" or "put" depending on whether they get penetrated or do the penetrating during anal sex. Although women and men may be "active" in their roles as receiver and enjoy mutual pleasure, it is the very binary framing of language that encodes these practices as being passive and subordinate. Other sexual practices, such as women who take pleasure in penetrating men, are thus negated by this binary framing of sexuality. As Kippax and Smith (2001) explained: "If one's subjectivity is masculine and masculine practice is to penetrate (and not be penetrated), being 'active' in anal intercourse reinforces that subjectivity. But if the same person is also 'passive', [his] masculinity is potentially threatened" (p. 420).

Just as *koymak* is used to describe various forms of domination through reference to the relations of gender, *vermek* can be used to imply submission and passivity in many settings (adapted from Parker, 1999, p. 30). Thus, by means of these categories, as indicated by Parker (1999):

> **The sexual universe is continually structured and restructured, in even the simplest and most common verbal exchanges, along the lines of a**

> rigid hierarchy: a distinction between sexual [activity] and [passivity]
> that is translated into relations of power and domination" between the
> aktif and pasif male engaging in homosexual relationships. (p. 30)

The structure of this hierarchy is used to organize and conceptualize sexual relations between members of the opposite sex, and between members of the same sex. As a result of the patriarchal social order, the symbolic and binary structure of male/female interactions seems to function as a model for the organization of Turkish homosexualities. As part of this model, what is primarily important are the social roles occupied by the participants, rather than the shared biological gender in organizing and structuring same-sex interactions. In other words, masculine and feminine gender roles are reproduced through language, regardless of the sex and sexuality of the participants.

From this vantage point, the negative label of homosexual or even *gey* (gay) is attached only to the person who is assumed to take the passive role with another male, and usually there is much less social stigma attached to active same-sex relations. Especially in relation to the Turkish context, there is rarely anything insulting about being the active person: "[T]he active phallic aggressor gains status; the passive victim of such aggression loses status" (Dundes, Leach, & Özkök, 1972, p. 147). Thus, in Turkish culture, the conception of homosexuality originates around the schema of penetration, and it is the individual who is penetrated or thought to be penetrated that is conceptualized under the label *homosexual*, and subject to stigmatization (Tapınç, 1992, p. 42). Consequently, it becomes clear that societal factors play a role in the relationship between homosexuality and the gender one associates himself with, because on identifying oneself as "homosexual," a person may accept the cultural expectations that he will be feminine. Hence, gender definitions persist not only as important elements in the determination of one's sexual practices, but also one's gender/sex identity.

Owing to the sharply dichotomized gender system of Turkey, men are left with nothing but dichotomous gender definitions, as the prevalent system prevents the emergence of alternatives in identity for people (Tapınç, 1992, p. 45). Bisexuality is hard to exist in a society where the language enforces gender roles, regardless of sex. This is one of the reasons why the majority of homosexually interested men start to accept the socially contracted effeminacy/*pasif* sex-role through identifying themselves with women and the images of womanhood, or the masculinity ascribed to *aktif* men who only penetrate. Therefore, once a man abandons his culturally defined manhood by allowing himself to be anally penetrated, femininity seems to be the only safe harbor in which to seek refuge. Although

penetrating a man is also potentially stigmatizing, the *aktif* man is still able to keep his place in the men's world as long as he announces that he "gives it like a man," signifying his *aktifness*. In conclusion, the effects of penetrative sex manifest themselves in relation to the gender definition each person holds for himself, or as described by Tapınç (1992): "the strict division of sexual roles among participant individuals, in fact, perpetuates the myth of heterosexuality as well as that of masculinity" (p. 47).

The cultural importance of gender-based notions of activity and passivity in structuring sexual interactions between men is clearly evident from interviewee responses. Although some of these men engaged in same- and opposite-sex relations, bisexuality (*biseksüellik*) was not discussed as a valid sexual orientation or identity. Instead, the respondents maintained the rigid binary divisions between masculine and feminine. Ziya, a 20-year-old behaviorally bisexual man, used the term *laço* ('real" man), instead of *aktif gey* (gay man who is exclusively active) or *biseksüel* (bisexual), for self-identification. For Ziya, using *laço* indicates he is a companion, partner, friend, or husband to a *pasif* or *lubunya* (effeminate man)—he is the authentic man in the relationship. In his mind, *aktif gey* or *biseksüel* connoted the lack of masculinity or being more feminine due the new inclusion of the words *gey* and/or *biseksüel* in the Turkish language.

Similarly, Tarkan, another *aktif* (*laço*) man, did not use *biseksüel* as his preferred label, calling himself hetero, though he has relationships with women and men and is presently with men. For Tarkan, same-sex relationships in the past or present do not make him homosexual because he is masculine looking and acting and takes the *aktif* role. Masculine and feminine are recreated and reproduced as markers signifying differences of gender in a homosexual relationship, regardless of sex. These men are products of a culture that promotes conventional definitions of gender, and each member simply emulates the power relations inherent in heterosexual bonding. It is apparent that these depictions reveal that any homoerotic alliance is just another extension of a man's perceptions of his masculinity or manliness as long as he maintains his role of being the sole penetrator during anal coitus.

What is fascinating to note is that it is the public perception of being masculine and *aktif* that dominates in terms of importance. As other interviews revealed, a man may appear to be *aktif* (*laço*) when meeting others in public, yet he may have a preference to be *pasif* in private. In his interview, Deniz argued that though he may look and act feminine and *aktif* men choose to be with him, they may be masculine and still wish to be penetrated by him. The private *pasif* identity and sexual desires are kept secret due to the intense social pressure to maintain dominant masculinity. Arda

and Birol reinforced this point in their interviews, maintaining that there are many masculine-looking men who locate themselves as *aktif* in public yet wish to be penetrated within the privacy of the bedroom. As Arda, who is a sex worker, articulated in his interview, "For about 75% of my clients, I'm the one who 'screws.'" As the public *pasif* who is effeminate, they serve as perfect camouflage for such hidden sexual activities that transgress the binary divisions between masculine and feminine. In response to societal disapproval, men who do not openly reveal their *pasif* tendencies instead assert that they are *aktifs*, or simply consider themselves as being heterosexual, irrespective of their actual sexual performances. It becomes clear that these "top pasifs" seek to avoid social stigmatization and preserve their masculine status in Turkish society at the same time. Otherwise stated, the "masculine lie" is used to maintain a public sense of masculine integrity, despite a hidden desire to be the receptive partner in anal intercourse (see Irwin, 2000, p. 369).

From the interviews, it was evident that for the men who engaged in same- and opposite-sex relationships across their lives, *bisexual* was not a term that was used for self-identification. Beliefs surrounding bisexuality seem to be filtered out for being inconceivable (or even unintelligible) due to cultural reasons. As a Turkish man who yearns to be recognized as *biseksüel*, Murat constantly experiences the imposition of gay (*gey*) as an identity even though he is still interested in women. He indicated in his interview that he accepts *gey* identification to avoid prolonging further discussion of his sexuality. It is his *gey* peers who find it ludicrous to associate gayness with heterosexuality, who impose their language upon his self-identification. Sexual preference is so dichotomized that "there is no positive social category of the bisexual, no well-defined intermediate identity that the men can take up" (Connell, 1995, p. 154). Murat mentioned that he dated many women until he was age 24 and that he later on had a 3-year relationship with a man who was "like himself." Yet he struggles to authentically locate himself as bisexual: "I'm actually bisexual. When I go abroad, people don't make fun of me. Sometimes I feel that I don't belong here. In the past I used to confront individuals, and react strongly, but now I feel that it is useless to respond. I don't try to explain things anymore." As this quotation illustrates, *biseksüel* may exist as a new word within the Turkish language, but it is not a term that is used to publicize one's experiences and sense of self.

The language available for Turkish bisexual men is representative of rigid gender/sex roles. *Aktif* and *pasif*, *laço* and *lubunya*, and even *vermek* and *koymak* are words grounded in binary opposition. The cultural reliance upon these Turkish words surrounding sexuality and gender roles essentially make it challenging to have a discussion or validation of bisexuality. All in all, the broader social and sexual culture within which discourses

around anal intercourse are articulated show connections between homosexuality and heterosexuality, masculinity and femininity, and eventually, sexual penetrability and receptivity—in which all binary based categories are based upon specific gendered power relations.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In many ways, bisexuality threatens the binary norms of society by its resistance to prestructured gender and sexual identity roles. Contemporary language surrounding sexuality and identity is based on the belief that sexual desire is directed strictly towards the sex of a person. Heterosexual is opposite-sex attraction, and homosexual is same-sex attraction. Both assume one is attracted to persons of the male or the female biological sex. Gender, as with sex, is also based on binary division that locates masculine and feminine as defined by separately encoded attributes for men and women. The sex/gender system only allows for men to be located as having masculine attributes, and women to be encoded as having feminine attributes that are set in contrast to the male norm. Yet *masculine* and *feminine* are socially manufactured terms to describe characteristics shared by all people; they are not innate or biological in origin.

By rejecting the binary model that suggests that one is either homosexual or heterosexual, bisexuals challenge the dominant construction of sexuality as being attracted only to the same or the opposite sex. Although this is theoretically empowering, the modern physical world is structured by patriarchy and the framework of language that surrounds gender and sexuality maintains these rigid oppositions. For those who seek to blur gender boundaries, or define themselves outside of gender roles, language does not exist that speaks outside of the preformed female or male roles. This is clearly evident in the interviews conducted with the Turkish men who engage in sexual relationships with men and women. The intense social pressure to conform to the preexisting categories of masculine and feminine makes a bisexual self-identification for these men less desirable and in some cases hard to achieve. In the Turkish language, although there are recently emerging words that can be used and are made available to articulate the complexity of one's sexuality, it is more about a widespread public awareness of their existence, self-ascription in regards to how these words can be useful and meaningful, and how we make these words available through popular culture, the media, and other mainstream discourses such as in health and education, that matters. How can bisexuals speak of the diversity of their experiences and identities when the surrounding language being used insists upon gender as being masculine or feminine, and sexuality as homosexual or heterosexual? For bisexuality to be validated and recognized, the bisexual movement, and the queer movement in

general, must begin to work towards challenging dominant language norms, encourage the usage of new words that open up new spaces in which one can describe cultural identities that reject binarism, and develop ways and strategies of dissemination, publicity, and promotion of the newly made available language into the mainstream.

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