

# Queer as Folk

## Representation of Gay Language in Popular Culture

Mats-Erik Augustsson  
English, C-level  
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Supervisor: Joe Trotta  
University of Gothenburg

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*Author:* Mats-Erik Augustsson

*Supervisor:* Joe Trotta

*Course:* EN1C03, spring 2011, Department of languages and literatures, University of Gothenburg

## **Abstract**

This study investigates how gay vocabulary and code-switching is portrayed in the North American television series Queer as Folk. The search for gay vocabulary was conducted through viewing the entire series searching for words and expressions documented in previous research. The gay vocabulary contains many sexual terms and references and the lexicon are ambiguous depending on user and addressee and can be used as markers of solidarity or as derogation. The most important results are that gay speech is self-managed and used as an identity marker for both homosexual and heterosexual members of the in-group. Gay men seem to be well aware of their speech and mannerisms and code-switch depending on context.

**Keywords:** self-managed, code-switching, gay speech, gay vocabulary, in-group, out-group.

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## 1. Introduction

In the television series *Queer as Folk* the character Ted says to the flamboyant Emmett: “he [Michael] is not like you, he is not an obviously gay man”. Emmett answers: “Are you accusing me of being obvious? I could be a real man if I wanted to. Just lower my voice, stop gesturing with my hands, and make sure my face is expressionless. Never, never use words like fabulous or divine” (*Queer as Folk* 102<sup>1</sup>).

Sociolinguists have discussed the relevance of queer linguistics and if there is such a thing as *gay speech*. Some claim that there is such a language and that it does in fact differ at lexical, phonetic and discourse levels from heterosexual speech. Others claim that it is just part of creating linguistic markers like in any other network in society. For example, previous research has shown that gay language is self-managed (see section 3), something people learn because they want to be part of a group they associate and identify with. Given the fact that gay language is self-managed, it is highly relevant to conduct research on the television series *Queer as Folk* which shows the lives of gay men in a more authentic way than many other television series, films and sit-coms ever before.

Heterosexual speech is often equated with gender-appropriate speech, and *gay speech* is often looked upon as gender-inappropriate (Hayes in Cameron and Kulick 2006:74). Several times in the series the characters say that they are different from heterosexuals, they have to change their mannerisms and speech in order to fit in and be accepted. Having said that, how do the characters actually make these transitions and what are these words and expressions that they use and what do they represent?

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<sup>1</sup> References to the TV show *Queer as Folk* has the following format, 102 = season 1 episode 2, 411 = season 4 episode 11 and so on.

## 1.2 Aims

In this essay the lexicon of the gay characters in the North American television series *Queer as Folk* will be explored. Previous studies show that people change their speech in order to fit in and be accepted at work or in the local neighborhood network or amongst friends. Scholars have shown that gay language is self-managed and that *gay* men tend to code-switch, depending on the context. This study has been guided by the aims listed below which are to:

- investigate how male gay language is portrayed in the television series *Queer as Folk*
- deepen the understanding of self-managed language
- understand the functions of code-switching

## 1.3 Previous Research

In “Language and Sexuality” Deborah Cameron and Don Kulick argue that research on language and homosexuality, so far, has gone through four main phases. From the 1920’s to the 1940’s homosexuality was regarded as pathology, a perversion and a criminal offence. Early research was carried out by doctors and focused on perverted patients’ confessions and not how they articulated their perversions. It was thought that perverts spoke a particular language, intonated words in a particular way and used linguistic features that could give them away as homosexuals. For a long time a man’s lisp became synonymous with homosexuality and if a man with a lisp also spoke about “flowers” and used words like “lovely” or “fabulous” he would most definitely be considered gay. It was thought that homosexuals used a secret code to attract other homosexuals (Cameron and Kulick 2003:75-77).

In the 1950’s and 1960’s, around the time when the struggle for gay rights emerged, research on gay language was carried out by gay and lesbians scholars. There was a struggle to create a new gay identity that differed from the previous one of homosexuality being a pathology and perversion and therefore there was a division between the “old-fashioned and misguided homosexuals, who used the language and the politically progressive gays and lesbians, who avoided it” (Cameron and Kulick 2003:77).

During the 1970’ and 1980’s homosexuals were seen as an oppressed minority similar to other racial and ethnic minorities. Inspired by research on Black English Vernacular and women’s language scholars once again argued there was a homosexual language but not a language that reflected a pathology but that homosexuals like other minorities had markers that were definable (Cameron and Kulick 2003:77). In 1981 Joseph Hayes wrote an essay on

*Gayspeak* dealing with the social functions of language in the gay subculture and he divides *Gayspeak* into three social contexts: the secret, the social and the radical-activist settings. The secret setting meaning that the homosexual will eschew gay terminology in an unsafe environment and refer to his lover as his friend or avoid gender references and, for example, not tell who he went on vacation with. In the social setting the pride of being gay is shown through a gay lexicon and in the radical activist setting, speakers politicize social life and, for example, reclaim words such as *faggot* and *dyke* and make them symbols of defiance (Hayes in Cameron and Kulick 2006:68-77).

By the 1990's research shifted from looking at how gay identity is reflected through language to investigating how this identity is created through language (Cameron and Kulick 2003:76). During this phase Rudolf Gaudio conducted an analysis of the acoustics of recorded male speech and then studied the listeners' perception of eight gay and straight men and found that the listeners were, generally, able to identify the sexual orientation of the speaker based on the stereotypical ideas of voice pitch and so on. However, the differences were not statistically significant and did not occur in all speech contexts. In other words "Not all gay men have 'the voice' and not everyone who has 'the voice' is gay" (Cameron and Kulick 2003:90).

According to William Leap, gay men learn to speak gay by learning from others, going to the library and watching television series such as *Queer as Folk*, *Will & Grace* and *Six Feet Under* and according to homosexuals themselves this is a self-managed socialization (Betsch 2008). Leap gives an example of a heterosexual male student who is fluent in the "lavender language" (lavender linguistics is a term used by linguists, most notably by William Leap to describe LGBTQ<sup>2</sup> language). According to the straight student, *gay* men were attracted to him. He grew up with his mother who was an artist and worked with homosexual men, hence his knowledge and usage of gay speech made *gay* men attracted to him (Betch 2008).

Several features have been proposed as markers of gay male identity such as vocabulary, high pitch voice, female expressions and code-switching, or more accurately, white middle class American gay identity since that is the group that has been the topic of most research. Having said that, Rusty Barret (1998) has conducted research on African American *drag queens* and found that they used stereotypical white woman style co-occur with over sexual references and switch to stereotypical African-American Vernacular English. According to Barret the drag queens' gayness was not signaled through discrete linguistic codes and

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<sup>2</sup> LGBTQ is an abbreviation for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer

discursive moves. Instead the drag queens became gay through manipulation of contradictory identities (Cameron and Kulick 2003:98-99).

In 2002 Paul Baker published his book on Polari (*Polari – The Lost Language of Gay Men*) which is a British example of gay lexicon which derives from a variety of sources such as travelling entertainers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and cant, a code language among criminals. It is unclear how widespread Polari actually was among homosexuals, however Baker shows that it was well-known in the 1940's and 1950's in larger British cities, but after increasing exposure through the BBC radio show "Round the Horne" it lost its specifically gay code. For many people who knew Polari, it was not a language per se, but a lexicon of mainly nouns, verbs and adjectives that could be used in place of English words. Baker does, however, suggest that some speakers used it in a way that began to suggest a language with a grammatical system "It was originally a weapon and a shield against a repressive atmosphere in the 1950's, but by the 1970's it was viewed as trivializing or limiting. Its eventual demise was partly the result of the ambivalence of the gay subculture towards it" (Baker 2002).

## **2. Material and Methods**

### **2.1 The Corpus**

The primary material of this study is the complete DVD collection of all the five seasons of *Queer as Folk* (comprising 83 episodes, equivalent to about 64 hours of viewing time), together with the closed-caption transcripts of the show (available in srt format from tvsubtitles.net), except episodes 301 and 502, which were not available on tvsubtitles.net. The collected transcripts were converted into text documents and then organized into a corpus of approximately 466 000 words.

Due to the limited scope and the specific aims of this paper, not every gay-marker in *Queer as Folk* could possibly be presented. Duration of onset /s/, duration of /æ/, /ei/, lisp or other known gay markers are excluded since this paper will only show some of the most noticeable and frequent phenomena in vocabulary and a few examples of code-switching. The search for gay vocabulary was conducted through viewing the entire series searching for words and expressions documented in previous research. The study will in its first part focus on isolated elements of gay vocabulary and in the second part focus on segments where two of the characters change their speech, and mannerisms in order to be accepted and what they consider is gender appropriate speech or behavior for heterosexual men.

## 2.2 Background on the Television Series *Queer as Folk*

*Queer as Folk* is set in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, and revolves around the lives of a group of six gay men and a lesbian couple in their 30's and one of the character's mother and uncle and a *straight* teenage boy. As mentioned above, previous research in this field has been conducted, mostly on white middle class gay men and this study is no exception, even though some of the characters are supposed to be working class. Three of the male actors have stated that they are homosexual and one of the female actors that she is bisexual. Since gay language, according to previous research, is self-managed it is interesting to note that the characters are very different in terms of backgrounds, education and professions from the promiscuous; alpha-gay and advertising executive Brian to the flamboyant, effeminate working class Emmett, there is the young art student Justin, Ted the accountant and Michael the son of Debbie the waitress, Vic the HIV positive uncle, the college professor Ben, Melanie the lawyer, Lindsay who works at an art gallery and Hunter the teenage hustler. However, they are all close friends and family and they share the same worries and struggles of life.

The series had and still have a major impact on many homosexual people's lives all over the world and the series and characters are enormously popular. By May 5, 2011 there were many pages on the social networking website *Facebook* paying tribute to *Queer as Folk* and the most popular one had 109,355 members.

The series contains many groundbreaking scenes and for the first time on American television the pilot showed explicit sex scenes between two men, the 29-year old man (Brian) and the 17-year old boy (Justin). Before the pilot aired Charles Kaiser wrote on New York Entertainment: "[the] pilot features the most outrageous language you have ever heard, [and] some of the most compelling characters you have ever met" (Kaiser 2000). Gay characters were no novelty in American television series at the time but "no one has ever seen gay characters quite like these, characters just as real and nuanced and hedonistic as many of their real-life counterparts" (Kaiser 2000). Gay characters and gay vocabulary became more and more frequent during the 1990's with *Ellen* and later *Will & Grace*, but never had gay speech or gay sex been as explicit as when *Queer as Folk* aired. Until then, gay characters on television had for the most part been cute and ambiguous features and never had two men been shown in bed together like this (Becker 2006:175).

The title *Queer as Folk* derives from the old Yorkshire saying "*There's nowt so queer as folk*", meaning there is nothing as strange as people (Kaiser 2000) which sums up the series or in the words of the character of Michael: "in many ways, my life is nothing like yours.

Why should it be? In the gay community, we have drag queens and leather daddies and trannies and couples with children, every colour of the rainbow. [...] But being different is what makes us all the same. It's what makes us... family” (Queer as Folk 513).

*Queer as Folk* is an American and Canadian television series co-production that was broadcast 2000-2005, produced by Showtime and Temple Street Productions and based on the British series with the same name created by Russell T. Davies.

The main authors and creators of the North American series are the openly gay couple Ron Cowen and Daniel Lippman who are also executive producers together with Tony Jonas, former President of Warner Brothers Television (Queer as Folk 2011, Wikipedia [online]). According to Cowen and Lippman the series was “designed to shake people up, [and] get them talking. We tried to show the truth, blemishes and all” (Grant 2010).

### 2.3 A Note on Scripted Speech

Using a television series can, of course, be seen as a problem; the actors have been given lines and have been told what to say and how to act. Scripted texts are not spontaneous and have been constructed and edited to be entertaining. However, the interesting thing is to see how the script writers and directors of *Queer as Folk* have chosen to portray gay men’s use of language in gay and straight situations. The series may reveal interesting features of gay language and how gay men are portrayed in popular media.

## 3. Results and Discussion: Vocabulary

Certain words and expressions can be used to signal and mark personal, group and network identity (Chambers 2009:39 pp) and *gay* men have used certain words and expressions, as previous research has shown, for centuries to protect them in their search for partners and hide from a non-approving surrounding (Baker 2002). On the following pages the results of the present study will be shown with a focus on vocabulary and how it is employed by *gay* and *straight* characters in different contexts.

There is a wide variety of epithets referring to homosexual men in the material such as *queer*, *queen*, *fag*, *faggot*, *flame*, *fairie*, and *nelly* and many other terms such as *top*, *bottom*, *versatile*, along with the verbs *cruise* and *ogle*, which focus “around sexual evaluation and conquest” (Baker 2002:157). Some labels or epithets are used positively and some in a negative way, many times depending on the speaker being gay himself or not. In research on Polari, it was also found that homosexual men in different geographic locations gave conflicting meanings to words such as the ones above (Baker 2002:11). The terms can be used

to conceal sexuality and as a way of interacting with other *gay* men, function as an identity marker to a group of people from many different backgrounds, and also function as in-group insults (Baker 2002:157).

### 3.1 Reclamation of Queer

According to Brontsema (2004), the word *queer* was first used to refer to strange objects, places and persons. *Queer* later changed meaning to refer to homosexuals, usually a man, and then later became associated with non-normative sexuality which has persisted to the present. In the 1910's and 1920's, *queer* co-existed with *fairy* to refer to homosexuals, but the terms were used in very different in-group connotations. *Fairies* referred to effeminate and flamboyant homosexuals while *queer* referred to more masculine homosexual men. Heterosexuals, however, did not make any distinction between *queers* and *fairies*, regardless of femininity/masculinity or self-identification.

In the 1920's the effeminate homosexual men began referring to themselves as *gay*. "A safe word, *gay* originally denoted lighthearted pleasantness, yet was given a double meaning when used by homosexuals. Only those familiar with this specific use of *gay* would understand it, and therefore, there was initially very little risk in using it with men whose sexuality was unknown" (Brontsema 2004:3). At first *gay* was used by the effeminate men but later also by the masculine and after the Second World War, *gay* eventually replaced *queer* since *queer* was viewed as a derogatory and pejorative label. Especially younger homosexual men found it derogatory and later also the *queers* (masculine homosexuals) started using *gay*. The word "*Gay* grouped all men sexually involved with other men into the same homogenous group; as such, *gay*, like the out-group usage of *queer* only a few decades earlier, ignored important differences among those men [...]" (Brontsema 2004: 4).

In the 1990's homosexuals began their reclamation of *queer* through the *Queer Nation* which was formed in New York as a discussion group and later a coalition committed to fight homophobia. *Queer* became a term that included gays and lesbians to fight homophobia and later included also bisexuals and transsexuals. There are people who oppose and support the reclamation of the once very derogatory word. The opponents think that it can only be self-degrading and disrespectful and a repetition of intolerance and hate. The debate continues and *queer* has ended up with co-existing meanings in the same way as the African-American Vernacular English label *nigga*. Both *queer* and *nigga* are used differently, by the in-group as a signal of solidarity and friendship and by the out-group members as a pejorative (Brontsema

2004:1-7). Examples of the *QAF* characters' usage of *queer* are discussed in section 3.2 below.

### **3.2 Queer: *The queer's going. The queer is out the door. The queer is gone***

The data show that *queer* is applied by both homosexual and heterosexual people and usually in a derogatory and demeaning manner by both. When used by heterosexuals, or the out-group, the word is used as name calling or hate speech, by homosexuals themselves *queer* is employed as a self-degradation or when repeating what they have been called by people of the out-group. In many cases *queer* is simply a synonym for homosexual or *gay*.

- 1) a. The queer's going. The queer is out the door. The queer is gone. (Justin 116)
- b. But in... case you haven't noticed, I'm queer. (Michael 209)

In (1a) one of Justin's bullies calls him *queer* in the classroom and Justin asks if the teacher is not going to make the bully apologize. The teacher pretends not to have heard the insult and in a fury Justin leaves the classroom while repeating what he has been called.

In (1b) Michael is talking to Ben and not knowing anything about football or basketball he calls himself *queer* in the sense that homosexual men, stereotypically, do not know anything about sports.

In the material there is never a reference to women as *queer*, which is also true regarding *gay* which is for the most part used only for male homosexuals and not female homosexuals who are referred to as *lesbians* or *dykes*.

### **3.3 Queen: *He's either a total crystal queen, or a supermodel***

In the material it was found that *queen* is often connected with premodifiers for fetishes such as *drag*, *scat*, *leather*, *size* and epithets such as *drama*, *old*, *label*, *demented show-tune*, *nasty*, *opera* and *crystal*. The label holds several meanings dependent on user, the addressee and situation.

*Queen* "could be used by Polari speakers to refer to any gay man, but it could also just refer to a subcategory of men who were effeminate, or who took the passive role in intercourse. When premodified by another noun, queen could simply denote someone who is 'into' a particular fetish: for example a drag queen" (Baker 2002:43).

Consider now example 2 below.

- 2) a. Upstairs bathroom. The one for guests and drama queens. (Debbie 104)

- b. I know you all just think of me as this nelly retail-queen. (Emmet 110)
- c. He's either a total crystal queen, or a supermodel. (Emmet 118)

In (2a) Debbie uses the expression *drama queen* and throughout the show Debbie, who is Michael's mother and works at the gay Liberty Diner, knows how to use the vocabulary. This is only one example of many of her abilities to apply *gay speech* appropriately. She is very witty and knows how to play the *gay* vocabulary which is interesting and shows that you do not have to be *gay* to know the language. "Possession of a gay identity is not necessary to be part of a gay subculture. For example the concept of *fag hag* – heterosexual female friend of gay men – challenges the notion that the gay subculture consist entirely of gay males" (Baker 2002:7).

On a road trip to New York (2b), Brian's car gets a flat tire and the only one who knows how to fix it, to everybody's surprise, is Emmett, because they think he is *nelly* meaning effeminate gay man (Baker 2002:183) and a *retail-queen* meaning works in a shop or simply frivolous.

In (2c) Ted's love is addicted to crystal meth and on one occasion he is too "tweaked-out" to dance with Ted and walks off. Emmett says that Ted's love must be a *crystal queen*, a gay man using crystal meth, or a supermodel, since they are known for using drugs.

### 3.4 Fag: A fag is a sissy

Moving on to the derogatory term *fag*, which is generally employed by out-group members as a pejorative, but can also be used by the in-group as a way of emphasizing the out-group members' view of them. However, *fag* is also used as expressing solidarity or endearment among the in-group. When Justin is surrounded by bullies at school the material shows that the bullies use *fag* as hate-speech (Queer as Folk 117).

In the example below (3), Michael and his partner Ben have been taking care of a 15 year old male prostitute, Hunter. They have taken him off the streets and given him a loving home. Now, Hunter's mother has found him and wants him to come home, but Hunter wants to stay with Michael and Ben since they love him as their son and his mother was the one who made him sell his body. Hunter's mother and the police are outside the apartment when Michael says to Ben:

- 3) She is his mother and we are the two fags. (Michael 314)

Here Michael uses the word *fag* (3), in a pejorative way about himself and his partner Ben. In the eyes of the law they are nothing but two *fags*.

Example (4) below is an excerpt from a conversation between Emmet and his lover Drew. Once after Emmett and Drew Boyd, the famous star quarterback, had sex at a motel, Emmett asks Drew if his girlfriend knows he is *gay*. Emmett's question makes Drew nervous and he answers the question as follows:

- 4) a. Drew: Hey, I'm not a fag.  
 b. Emmett: Did I use that word?  
 c. Drew: A fag is a sissy, girl, pansy. You think I'm that?  
 d. Emmett: Hardly.  
 e. Drew: A fag can't even throw a ball. Do you know how far I can throw?  
 f. Emmett: I reckon a country mile.  
 g. Drew: I'm a hero, to millions.  
 h. Drew: Name one fag who's a hero.  
 i. Drew: Name one fag who's got a call from the president saying, "great game."  
 j. Drew: Name one fag that's fucked every Dallas cheerleader, and I don't even play for Dallas.  
 k. Drew: Name one fag every kid wants to grow up to be.  
 l. Emmett: Harvey Fierstein?  
 m. Drew: So why would anyone think I was a fag?  
 n. Emmett: Maybe because you had your dick up my ass? (410)

Drew has a very clear picture of what a homosexual man is like. A *fag* is a *sissy* a *girl* and a *pansy* and according to him it is impossible to be homosexual if you are manly and play sports and have sex with women. Drew also emphasizes his arguments by repeatedly using the word *fag* to degenerate all that he is not. Even though he enjoys having sex with other men he is making clear that he is at least not *gay*, it is impossible considering how manly he is. Having difficulties accepting who he is, Drew uses the word *fag* to distance himself from Emmett who is effeminate and takes the passive role at their secret meetings. Drew is not like Emmett; he acts, speaks and looks like a stereotypical heterosexual man's man. Drew knows that *fag* is a derogatory term and he uses the label to distance himself and to convince himself and others that he cannot possibly be homosexual.

### **3.5 Flame: *That famous flame of yours is just about out***

The data show that when describing a person who is obviously *gay* and flamboyant, *flame* is the chosen frequent term. However, *flame* is not used as a label like *fag* or *queen*, but more as an adjective referring to a personality that is flamboyant, vibrant and full of life. The material shows that Emmett is the only one of the characters who has a *flame* and the only one who is flamboyant enough to have a *burning flame*.

- 5) But I'd rather my flame burn bright, than be a puny, little pilot light. (Emmett 102)

In this excerpt (5) Emmett, Michael and Ted are talking about having to act straight at work, Emmett says he can be a real man if he wants to but he would rather let his “flame burn bright” than act straight.

### **3.6 Cruising: *Not just cruising, he’s in maximum overdrive***

*Cruising* is an expression meaning walking or driving around looking for casual sexual partners. The word most probably came into practice as the car, in the twentieth century, made it possible to drive around cruising for sex (Baker 2002:47). By the characters in *QAF* it is applied as shown below.

- 6) a. Oh, him. He has been cruising me all night. (Michael 101)  
 b. You can’t cruise all night on an empty stomach. (Debbie 102)

A cute guy (6a) has been looking at and followed Michael around at the gay club Babylon all night.

Debbie is working late at the diner (6b) when Michael and Justin come in and Debbie tells Justin he needs to eat since ha cannot go hungry while searching for guys.

### **3.7 Dyke: *Never send a fag to do a dyke’s job***

As previously mentioned there is a Lesbian couple in the series, Lindsey and Melanie, who are in a committed relationship and raising two children together. The lesbians are very good friends of all the gay male characters. When referring to their lesbian friends the gay characters label them *dykes*. The data show that *dyke* is used as a synonym for lesbians in a neutral manner in the same way as the lesbians would use *queer* or *queen* when talking about or to their *gay* male friends. The epithet *dyke* is mostly used by Brian who never gets along with his friend Lindsey’s partner Melanie. However, it is difficult to say if the gay characters use *dyke* in a derogatory way or not since they are all members of the same in-group. If an out-group person, such as a heterosexual man, calls them *dykes* it would most likely be perceived as hate-speech. *Dyke* like *queer*, is undergoing reclamation and is in a state of ambiguity (Brontsema 2004:14).

It is worth noting that *dyke*, like *queen*, is applied with premodifiers and in this case premodifiers such as *bull*, *career* and *political*. A famous expression is *dykes on bikes* – lesbians riding motorcycles usually at pride parades - which is an expression used with great pride by the in-group (Brontsema 2002:14).

- 7) a. Never send a fag to do a dyke's job. (Brian 513)  
 b. Why? With all those bull dykes around, is there a shortage of bottoms. (Brian 103)

In excerpt (7a) Brian is telling Michael that a *fag* cannot do a *dykes* job since *dykes* are looked upon as very manly and masculine by the other gay characters. The *queens* know fashion and interior design; the *dykes* know cars, motorcycles and carpentry.

In (7b) Brian asks Michael why he has to go to Lindsey's and Melanie's party and employs *bull dykes* in the same fashion as *nelly bottom* about gays. *Bull* meaning very masculine lesbian and *nelly* effeminate *gay* man.

### 3.8 Campy: *Emmett can be a little campy*

In the opening scene of the first episode (8) Michael introduces Emmett as *campy*, someone who speaks and acts flamboyantly, noisily and acts in a calculated way to express his homosexuality (Legman in Cameron and Kulick 2006:22). However, there are very few references to *camp* or *campy* in the series which can be interpreted that this word is outdated or only used by or for people like Emmett since he is the only one of the characters that fits this description.

- 8) Emmet can be a little campy. (Michael 101)

### 3.9 Top and Bottom: *Are you a top or a bottom?*

The gay vocabulary is filled with sexual labels and references and the two most frequently used labels are *top* and *bottom* which refer to who takes the active or the passive role in sexual intercourse. It is also worth noting that there tend to be more words describing feminine *gay* men and they are more talked about and mentioned more often than masculine *gay* men. But if the character is *straight acting*<sup>3</sup> as Brian, he is acting gender appropriately and perhaps there is no need for labeling. Even so, there are at least three epithets for masculine *gay* men such as *tops*, *daddies* and *bears*.

The example below (9a) show that a *bottom* does not have to be effeminate and therefore *nelly* works as a premodifier to make clear that a *nelly bottom* is someone who is effeminate and also passive in sexual intercourse.

- 9) a. You're a disgrace to Nelly bottoms everywhere. (Debbie 414)  
 b. Are you a top or a bottom? (Brian 101)

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<sup>3</sup> Straight acting: is a term used to describe a gay person who does not exhibit the appearance or mannerisms of the gay stereotype (straight acting 2011, Wikipedia [online]).

- Top... and bottom. (Justin 101)  
 Oh, you're versatile, then. (Brian 101)  
 c. Who wishes he were a beefy brutal top? (109)

In (9a) Emmett and Ted just got back from a charity bicycle race and are now at the diner where Debbie works. Debbie asks them to sit down, but their “bums are a little battered” after the race and Debbie in one of her usual witty ways says that Emmet is a disgrace to all *nelly bottoms* not being able to sit down after a bicycle race.

In (9b) Brian has brought Justin home to his apartment for the first time. Justin lies about his age and is clearly very nervous, but tries to be confident. They end up in bed and Brian asks him if he is “a top or a bottom”. Justin does not know what Brian is talking about. Justin has no homosexual friends and has never been to gay clubs at the time. As mentioned previously, according to William Leap, gay language is a self-managed socialization (Betch 2008) and Justin has not learned the *gay* language yet. But his vocabulary will grow quickly as he becomes Brian's lover and friends with the other characters. On this particular night he has no idea what *top*, *bottom* or *versatile* mean.

In (9c) Emmett and Ted are talking about Emmet's fantasy of being a *brutal top*, being a masculine *top* in sexual intercourse, instead of a *nelly bottom*.

### 3.10 Ogle: *Pour yourself a Martini and ogle the Mexican boys*

During the viewing process of the series many words and expressions documented in previous research were noted. One word that is mentioned only twice in the entire series is *ogle* which, according to Paul Baker, was a common Polari word used by homosexuals in Britain. (Baker 2002:184). However, the expression is a word used in common speech nowadays, with the same meaning, i.e. to glance with amorous invitation or greedy interested at someone (Ogle 2011, Merriam-Webster [online]).

*Ogle* is used once by (10a) Michael, a guy in his early 30's, in an argument with his older boyfriend and once (10b) by a man in his mid 60's at a gay hair dresser's talking about aging with Ted who is worried about getting older.

- 10) a. Michael: Well how would you feel if your boyfriend was being ogled by every fag in town? (Michael 120)  
 b. Older man: Or move to Palm Springs. Pour yourself a Martini and ogle the Mexican boys. (Older man 502)

Perhaps *ogle* was a frequently used word when the older man was young, but now it has gone out of fashion in *gay language* as many of the Polari words have.

To summarize sections 3.2 to 3.10, the labels and epithets discussed above are only a minor selection of words used by the group of friends in *QAF*. However, another phenomenon worth mentioning is the fact that the characters use the *gay lexicon* to different extents. The college professor Ben (who is played by a gay actor) is *straight acting* and compared to the flamboyant Emmett (also played by a gay actor), Ben uses less *gay* vocabulary even if he is familiar with it, possibly because his personality and choice of profession differ, which is then reflected in his speech.

Hunter, the straight, troubled and former prostitute teenager who moves in with Michael and Ben is an example of a heterosexual person, who knows the *gay* vocabulary which he has learned on the streets while being a prostitute. As previous research has shown, the *QAF* material also shows that the vocabulary is self-managed and not only known and used by *gay* men.

## 4. Code-switching

### 4.1 Emmett

It is said that many *gay* men are bilingual and can choose whether to sound *gay* or *straight* depending on the situation. Scholars compare this to African-American individuals who switch from Ebonics to Standard English and vice versa. There are several different theories as to why *gay* men code-switch, but according to Joseph J. Hayes there are three major ones; 1) for protection in an unsafe environment, 2) to project sexuality and 3) show a sense of pride and solidarity or political statement (Hayes in Cameron and Kulick 2006:69-77).

“Some *gay* men report code switching to *gay* production only when they are in the company of other *gay* men. Indeed, some say that their parents, employers and workmates, for example, have never heard them ‘talk *gay*’” (Bowen 2002).

The flamboyant and effeminate Emmett Honeycutt who has moved to Pittsburg from a working class background in Hazlehurst, Mississippi, works as a shopkeeper on the *gay* Liberty Avenue and is open to everyone about his sexuality. After having several different professions as porn star, maid and party planner, he is offered a job as the *The Queer Guy* on the Channel 5 News teaching straight men how to dress and be romantic. At the premier Emmet is very nervous and wants to appear respectable and serious on TV and therefore lowers his *flame*. In season one, Emmet says that he knows how to be a real man (read “heterosexual”). According to himself, he only needs to lower his voice, stop gesturing with

his hands, make sure his face is expressionless and never uses words like *fabulous* or *divine* and that is exactly what he does on his TV debut.

- 11) a. Jake: Tonight we introduce the newest member of the channel 5 news team, offering life from a different perspective. Our very own, queer guy.  
 b. Emmett: Thanks Jake!  
 c. Emmett: I'm Emmett Honeycutt.  
 d. Emmett: Your queer guy.  
 e. Emmett: Here to give you insights and tips on how to make your life more fab...better.  
 f. Debbie: You didn't tell me he was the queer guy for the 700 Club! (watching TV with Ted and Justin)  
 g. Ted: Shush!  
 h. Emmet: So guys... I mean, men.  
 i. Emmett: Say you're about to lean in and kiss your...girl.  
 j. Emmett: You've brushed your teeth, combed your hair,  
 k. Emmett: even splashed on your aftershave.  
 l. Emmett: But didn't you forget something?  
 m. Emmett: That's right! We're talking about those pesky nose hairs!  
 n. Emmett: Nothing turns the ladies off more, than a jungle coming out of your nostrils.  
 o. Emmett: A handy pair of scissors will do the trick.  
 p. Ted: Nose hairs? That's his big opening number? (Queer as Folk 503)

In example (11e) Emmet is about to say *fabulous* but changes his mind and says *better* instead, since he thinks that heterosexuals will think that *fabulous* is too gay. In (11i) he is about to say *guy* but says *girl*. Emmet is confused in the situation; he is employed to be gay to a straight audience and is unsure of how to act and speak. Even his friends as they watch him on TV (11f) do not recognize Emmet and his speech and mannerisms.

After Emmet's first *Queer Guy* performance the producer threatens to cancel the show since Emmett is not *queer* enough.

When returning to the studio for his second appearance on television, Emmett, at the last minute, decides to play the part of the *Queer guy* in accordance with the producer's wishes. He dresses in colorful clothes, sits on the desk with crossed legs and speaks in a high pitch voice.

- 12) a. Emmet: Hi! I'm Emmett Honeycutt, your queer guy.  
 b. And a certified member of the 4-F club. That's fashion, food, furnishings and...  
 c. we'll save the last F for cable.  
 d. Now, for my final segment, I'm going to show you how a little fairy dust  
 e. can transform even the most hopeless of heteroes. (503)

Emmet is now more provocative when saying that he will "save the last F for cable" (12c). When saying he will use *fairy dust* (12d) to transform the heterosexual man, most likely some of his heterosexual viewers do not know that he does not just mean *fairy* as in fairytales; he will use some *fairy dust* as in *effeminate gay man help* for the heterosexual man.

Emmett manages to keep his employment after being *queer* enough, but only as long as he is as *queer* as the producer wishes. On one occasion he talks about male underwear which becomes too much for the producer. Once again Emmett becomes aware of the fact that to be accepted in the *straight* world he must talk and act in a gender appropriate manner and in this case it means acting *queer* as it is defined by a *straight* producer. Studies on gay representation in media have shown that in the 1990's advertisers and executives were willing to have gays on television as long as they remained out of the bedroom (Becker 2006).

People are often members of multiple communities, but which communities they want to be associated with vary. For some gay men, as Emmett, the primary self-categorization is their identity as gay. In order to achieve this identity they can recognize and imitate forms of language that reflect the social identity of the group they want to be identified with, or which are stereotypically considered to be characteristic of this group (Berret in Livia and Hall 1997). Emmett is the most stereotypical homosexual man of all the characters. He has a high pitch voice, the effeminate mannerisms and uses the *gay* lexicon to a greater extent than the other characters. Emmet works, lives and socializes in the gay area of Pittsburg which places him at the core of the in-group. Emmett is *campy*; he is a *queen*, a *queer*, and a *nelly bottom*.

## 4.2 Michael

Lastly Michael, who is not as obviously and stereotypically *gay* as Emmett, is able to pass for a *straight* guy at work. In the excerpt chosen below, Michael has been invited to a *straight* sports bar for a drink with his colleagues. His older female colleague Marley wants Michael to become interested in their other colleague Tracy. At this time Michael has a boyfriend who is not very happy that Michael is going to this party pretending to be *straight*. At the sports bar Michael is in an unsafe environment and tries to protect his sexuality as is evident in the excerpt below.

- 13) a. Tracy: You're not seeing anyone are you?  
 b. Michael: Me? No.  
 c. Tracy: Well, that's good. I mean....  
 d. Michael: I understand. You don't want to get involved with someone or they're involved already. So are you? (102)

As Hayes (1981) mentions in his research a gay man in an unsafe setting might call his lover a friend or avoid gender references (Hayes in Cameron and Kulick 2006:69). In this case Michael does not even try to explain, but simply denies having a boyfriend in order to hide his sexuality.

The conversation continues and after a while talking about football Tracy says:

- 14) a. Tracy: you got to believe. Right, Mike?  
 b. Michael: like Cher! (Referring to Cher's song Believe)  
 (Everyone around the table stares at Michael)  
 c. Man: you watch football?  
 d. Michael: (hesitantly) constantly  
 e. Man: so, what do you think?  
 f. Michael: what do I think? (Panic in his eyes) I think due to free agency we've lost some of our best players. Still, our defense is strong, but we need a new scheme from our offensive coordinator to move the ball.  
 g. Man: (staring at Michael, then laughing) Just what I'd say.  
 h. Tracy: (kisses Michael on his head) (102)

As if being among his in-group friends Michael immediately thinks of Cher's hit single (14b) when Tracy says *believe*. At the table suspicion arises (14c) and a man asks Michael if he watches football. Michael obviously never watches football and has to come up with a lie (14f) which the man accepts and then Tracy, like a proud girlfriend of her boyfriend's intelligent answer, kisses Michael on his head (14h). In this short conversation excerpt Michael has made several mistakes by referring to a *gay* icon and then displayed his ignorance in football. There is nothing homosexual, of course, about a man liking Cher as an artist or not enjoying football, but as a *gay* man in a situation like this it becomes important to remember the code. Michael is not flamboyant and has no effeminate mannerisms like Emmett and is therefore not obvious, but people around the table are suspicious.

In the third excerpt Michael is aspiring to become manager at the Q-Mart (a department store) and when applying for the position as manager Michael is asked to bring his girlfriend to a party that his boss has arranged. Michael brings Tracy who is flattered and thinks they are going on a real date.

- 15) a. Bob: Glad you could make it, ah (shakes Michael's hand)  
 b. Michael: you remember Tracy.  
 c. Bob: Sure, sure, though I didn't know that you two were an item. Eh, be careful; don't let the boss catch you fraternizing. Listen I want you to meet my wife. Honey, Betty honey come over here! (Betty walks across the room giggling, holding a drink)  
 d. Bob: Betty I want you to meet Mike Novotny, he is one of our assistant managers.  
 e. Betty: Oh, Mikey, oh, it's so nice to meet you.  
 f. Michael: same here Mrs. Barbara  
 g. Betty: Betty, call me Betty. Oh, and this must be your adorable wife (giggles and faces Tracy)  
 h. Michael: Not exactly, I mean....  
 i. Bob: Honey, come on, give them some time, they are still working on it. Probably need to put some money in the bank first. Right?  
 j. Betty: oh, maybe you can help them with that. (108)

Michael's plan works (15) and Bob thinks Tracy is his girlfriend and Bob's wife Betty (15g) assumes that Tracy is Michael's wife. However, Michael tries to explain that Tracy is not really his wife (15h), but since the general assumption is that a young man and a young woman must be a couple and he is desperate for a promotion the act continues.

At the same party Michael runs into his colleague Andrew who has also applied for the position as manager.

- 16) a. Andrew: I see you brought Tracy.  
 b. Michael: yeah!  
 c. Andrew: I didn't know you were going out.  
 d. Michael: Well, we like to keep it discrete, you know, since we work together.  
 e. Andrew: Smart idea considering the way rumors fly.  
 f. Michael: you're telling me.  
 g. Andrew: In fact, you should hear some of the ones about you.  
 h. Michael: like what?  
 i. Andrew: Nothing I'd wanna repeat, but the kinda thing that could hurt someone's chances especially if they were looking for a promotion.  
 j. Michael: Here's my girl (Tracy is back from the ladies') Tracy have you ever met Andrew's wife Liz? (108)

Once again Michael is in an unsafe environment and has to protect and hide his sexuality or he might not make his promotion. Like Bob, Andrew (16c) is also surprised that Tracy is Michael's girlfriend and in (16d) Michael tries to explain the situation without revealing that it is all a lie. Andrew is suspicious (16e) about Michael's sexuality and tries to scare Michael. At the last minute (16j), Tracy comes back from the ladies' and Michael says "here's my girl" in order to kill Andrew's insinuation.

## 5. Conclusions

Scholars have shown that *gay speech* is a self-managed socialization. Homosexual men in their search for an identity study the language of homosexuals by reading books and watching television series such as *Queer as Folk*. The Internet has, of course, made it much easier nowadays to make new friends all over the world and to be part of communities and networks without even being physically present.

The character Emmet has moved to Pittsburg to live the life he wants and to be openly *gay* and Justin the 17-year old boy finds friends and a lover who is *gay* and learns the lexicon and how the *gay* community works. The fact that the *gay* vocabulary is not solely known and used by *gay* men is made clear by the heterosexual characters Debbie and Hunter and the lesbian couple who are all fluent in *gay speech* and members of the in-group.

The characters have very different professional lives, but after work they meet at the Liberty Diner for coffee or at Woody's for a drink and later they go dancing at Babylon and always in the company of other *gay* men and once in a while a *fag hag* or other *straight* in-group members. They are living, one could say, double lives and perhaps these homosexual men would never have met if they were not *gay*. While being out in the *straight* world they use the appropriate language for work and *straight* people and when with other *gay* men who are their friends they use a vocabulary that shows that they are members of the in-group. The examples of code-switching give some clues of the awareness among *gay* men on what is *gay* vocabulary and *gay* mannerisms and what is *straight*. Depending on the situation they try to switch and speak and act *straight* or *gay* appropriately to avoid being too obvious or cause offence among the out-group heterosexuals.

The essay gives some answers to how some of the words of the *gay* vocabulary are used in a television series and some conclusions can be drawn. Having a *gay* lexicon seems to be something homosexual men and others gain through quite a lot of effort. It is self-managed and a result of an ambition to be part of a group and to create an identity amongst *queer* friends and family.

### 5.1 Further research

In order to deepen the understanding of *gay speech*, a study of real life networks of homosexuals is needed. The fact that *gay speech* is self-managed must mean that *gay* men who do not have an ambition of moving to cities where there is a large *gay* community or watch *gay* television or are members of *gay* communities on the Internet are isolated. Do they communicate by *straight speech* or are they still *in the closet* and in denial of their sexuality?

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