

Words, words ... how language can define a city's Pride

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Hamilton Pride has worked hard to avoid the politics of language.

As other festivals shed the term "gay" from their Pride events, the picnics that grew into Hamilton Pride were ahead of the curve, thanks to chair Lyla Miklos.

It has always been the Hamilton Pride Festival, she says, so it didn't need to drop "Gay" or add the alphabet soup "GLBT" (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender) to be inclusive.

"Maybe because I've been involved for eight of nine years, I guess I've made a point of making sure it's not called Gay Pride," says Miklos, who calls herself "queer" instead of gay or GLBT, joking that it sounds like a sandwich.

But she knows how complex the language politics are in the community. In fact, she says some activists add I for intersex (atypical genitals), 2 for two-spirited (First Nations) or Q for questioning to their acronyms.

"A lot of these other words fall under the (GLBT) umbrella, and people get that. That's my control-freak agenda: to keep that consistent," Miklos says on the phone from her TV job in Toronto.

Not everyone agrees, and that's what makes the history of gay, er, queer, well, GLBT language so rich.

Some use GLBT as a feminist statement. Miklos starts with G, because she says gay men were activist pioneers.

We've all heard that the word gay means happy, bright or colourful. But in Victorian England a "gay girl" was a euphemism for a prostitute, reviled for her garish dress and makeup. Gays were considered just as sinful, notes Gayhistory.com.

So, there's nothing new to the use of gay as a derogatory term, notes Douglass St. Christian, a member of the equality rights group Egale and an anthropologist who studies gay and lesbian history in small-town Ontario.

In 1900s New York and Boston, people didn't refer to gay men or gay women, just gay boys and girls, he says.

The first unequivocal written use of gay for sexuality was in 1929, in Noel Coward's musical *Bittersweet*, by his overdressed, 1890s "pretty boys."

In 1938's *Bringing Up Baby*, Cary Grant says he's wearing women's clothing after going "gay" suddenly.

However, St. Christian says by the late '60s and early '70s, activists tried to reclaim the word gay from its use as a putdown. The Gay Liberation Front formed after the 1969 Stonewall riots, which responded to a police raid on a Greenwich Village gay bar.

Today, "gay" is the term much preferred by men to the clinical "homosexual," notes a glossary by the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), which was born in 1985 New York to fight defamatory AIDS coverage in the press.

GLAAD advises reporters that "homosexual" is a clinical term once used to diagnose mental illness, sexual preference implies a choice that is "curable" and talk of a gay "lifestyle" or "agenda" is equally offensive.

"If you go to some of the real far-right websites like the American Family Association, it's all over the place: the homosexual this, the homosexual that, the homosexual agenda," said GLAAD national news director Cindi Creager.

Also on that website under About Us: "Does AFA Hate Homosexuals? Absolutely Not! ... (Biblical love) motivates us to expose the misrepresentation of the radical homosexual agenda and stop its spread through our culture."

Interestingly, Canadian media tend to refer to same-sex marriage; U.S. media often call it gay marriage, perhaps due to brevity. Although not perfect shorthand, it's still preferable to some terms ... like homophile.

St. Christian still isn't clear what a homophile is, despite attending their dances at McMaster in the '70s.

For the record, Gayhistory.com says the homophile movement emerged in the early '50s, and tried to improve the "plight of the homosexual," with talks and literature urging gays and lesbians to "act normal" to fit in.

The Gay Liberation Front and the Gay Activists Alliance dismissed their homophile forebears as accommodationists, and associated with radicals like the Black Panthers.

Even in Niagara, fitting in was not what St. Catharines' first Pride weekend was about. OUTniagara chair Matthew Cutler's opening-day speech announced: "We are not leaving, nor are we changing. We are here, and the world is adjusting to us."

And during the current debate over marriage rights, Egale and Canadians for Equal Marriage have vowed to call it "equal marriage," not "same-sex marriage." (Which can imply a different kind of union.) Smart Dutch activists just call it marriage, St. Christian says.

"One of my bones of contention with mainstream media, like the CBC, is tortuous use of terms like the Same-Sex Bill," says St. Christian, an associate professor at the University of Western Ontario. "Do they not have a style editor? It just makes no sense."