

The Role of Ideology in Semantic Change

Despite advances in research on language ideologies (Schieffelin et al. 1998), few scholars have examined the role of ideology in semantic change. This study fills this gap in research. It focuses on the semantic change of *tongzhi* from ‘comrade’ to ‘sexual minorities’ in Hong Kong. A common address term among Chinese revolutionaries, *tongzhi* was appropriated by gay rights activists in the late 1980s to refer to ‘sexual minorities.’ This study illuminates the actuation and the transmission of the semantic change by examining the labeling practices of gay rights activists and of gay and lesbian Hongkongers not involved in the gay rights movement. It is based on interviews with 15 activists and 22 non-activists, observation of their labeling practices in everyday interaction, and informal discussion through which insights into their ideologies about same-sex desire were obtained.

Activists used mostly the in-group term *mem-ba* ‘member’ in everyday interaction but *tongzhi* in the interview. In the interview, activists exploited the revolutionary connotations of *tongzhi* and its suggestions of respect, solidarity, and intimacy. Like Chinese revolutionaries, they used the term to present a public, collective and political front. Their use of *tongzhi* co-occurred with other linguistic resources: (1) idiomatic expressions; (2) H(igh) forms in lexical doublets (Ferguson 1959); (3) the paucity of utterance-final particles; and (4) expressions such *ngo-dei giu* ‘what we call.’ While (1) and (2) indexed learnedness, (3) and (4) indexed the interview setting and the activists’ role as spokesperson of the gay rights movement. These resources all worked together in activists’ construction of a public persona and their attempt to bring same-sex desire into public discussion.

Unlike activists, non-activists rarely used *tongzhi* in the interview or in everyday interaction. When used, *tongzhi* was prefaced by *so-wai* ‘so-called’ (which disassociated speakers from the label) or *me* ‘whatdoyoucallit’ (which undermined the importance of what it qualified). More common was non-activists’ use of strategies which left same-sex desire unspecified – namely, ellipsis, circumlocutions (e.g. *tung ji-gei yat-yeung ge yan* ‘people like me’), and *mem-ba* (which most heterosexual Hongkongers do not know is used by lesbians and gay men to refer to sexual minorities). Non-activists’ use of these strategies can be accounted for by their belief that same-sex desire is an insignificant part of their identity: despite their sexual orientation, non-activists believe that they are essentially the same as their heterosexual counterparts. They frown upon any identities that highlight sexual orientation and avoid labels that specify sexual orientation explicitly. Thus, their labeling practices are at odds with activists’ use of *tongzhi* to bring same-sex desire into the public domain.

This study shows that what underlies a label such as *tongzhi* is not so much a definition but rather a set of ideologies about the concept that the label denotes. Semantic change sometimes occurs when speakers rework old ideologies underlying a given label and use the label in novel ways to achieve expressive goals. Yet the extent to which semantic change spreads depends on whether these ideologies are compatible with other speakers’ ideologies about the same concept.

(500 words)

References

Ferguson, Charles 1959. Diglossia. *Word* 15: 325-340.

Schieffelin, Bambi, Kathryn Woolard and Paul Kroskrity, eds. 1998. *Language Ideologies: Practice and Theory*. New York: Oxford University Press.