

Queer Linguistics: Exploring Pragmatic Strategy within Gay's Language on Online Dating Apps

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ABSTRACT

A play in meanings can be found within an internal interaction of a secretive and concealed community. In Surabaya, queer individuals, particularly gay men, employ secret codes within their language as a defensive measure against conservative societal norms. The primary strategy of this coded language involves the selection of specific vocabulary and the nuanced meanings embedded within it. Many MSMs (men who have sex with men) utilize these vocabularies for communication, primarily through online dating apps. This study aims to uncover the registers within the gay community and explore how their meanings correspond with their literal meanings in the English language. The research employs a case study method of qualitative approach and applies Leech's seven types of meaning theory (1981) for analysis. The findings reveal that gay registers convey connotative, reflected, social, and collocative meanings. Connotative meaning is the most commonly used, followed by reflected, collocative, and social meaning. Connotative meanings are frequently employed because the gay community assigns codes to various concepts based on their real-world references. The study sheds light on how queer communities, particularly MSMs in Surabaya, use coded language as a tool for navigating conservative societal pressures. This highlights the adaptability of marginalized groups in protecting their identities, emphasizing the importance of language as valid form of expression and resistance. Future research could expand to other regions with similar or differing cultural contexts, allowing for comparative analysis of coded language usage among MSMs in various conservative environments and providing a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Keywords: meaning, queer, gay community, register, online dating apps

INTRODUCTION

Language serves as a crucial medium for societal interaction, enabling individuals to express desires, feelings, and ideas as noted by Chaer and Leonie (1995). The intimate connection between language and society makes it a significant social phenomenon, where linguistic variations arise due to factors like age, gender, occupation, ethnicity, and social roles within communities (Wardhaugh, 2006). These variations contribute to language functioning as a marker of identity within social groups (Edwards, 2009), where specific linguistic choices, known as registers, distinguish one group from another (Holmes, 2013).

The LGBTQ+ community, known for its discretion and concealment in response to societal conservatism, exemplifies such discrete social groups (Cheah & Singaravelu, 2017). Language serves not only as a tool for maintaining identity but also as a means of self-protection among its members (Putra & Aditiawarman, 2019). By developing their own lexicon

or utilizing group-specific registers, they obscure their communication from outsiders. This linguistic phenomenon underscores the importance of pragmatics in sociolinguistics (Robinson, 2012), where understanding registers requires contextual knowledge (Halliday & Hasan, 1989), crucial for interpreting language use within specific social contexts.

The use of language within the gay community extends beyond face-to-face interactions, particularly in the digital age dominated by global social media platforms. Geosocial Networking Apps, such as gay online dating apps (GDAs), leverage language extensively through features like chats, phone calls, and video calls, facilitating virtual interactions among users (Beymer et al., 2016). This study aims to explore how language and meaning intersect within the context of gay language used on GDAs, highlighting the unique functions of language within specific societal groups.

Within the GDAs, several vocabularies in the forms of both word and phrase are found. MSMs tend to use those certain vocabularies while interacting with other users since they already carry the meanings that they need. According to Edwards (2015), the initial stage of dating, or usually called the euphoric stage, refers to how both parties begin to know each other. The same thing goes inside GDAs in which the users try to get to know each other before finally meeting in person. In order to know each other well, an individual needs to introduce themselves, including their preferences and intentions on dating. Thus, gay community's registers contain meanings that are needed to tell others what they look for in dating. However, due to the conservative society surrounding them, they should not be using the vocabularies that everyone understands. That is why gay registers' actual meaning sound nothing alike their literal meanings in English language. Therefore, seven types of meaning theory by Leech (1981) will be used for analyzing what kind of meanings behind gay registers and how they correlate to their literal meanings.

SEVEN TYPES OF MEANING

According to Yuniar et al. (2019), in English, a single word often has synonyms—alternative words that carry similar meanings. However, not all synonyms are interchangeable in every context. The suitability of a synonym depends on the specific context in which it is used. This means that while two words might share a general meaning, their usage can be restricted by factors such as tone, connotation, and the syntactical structure of the sentence. Therefore, the sense of meaning was broken down into the widest sense which consists of seven different ingredients by Leech (1981). These numerous categories of meaning could help people in choosing the right synonym requires attention to the nuances of meaning and appropriateness for the particular sentence or situation. The explanations on each meaning type can be seen below:

1. Conceptual Meaning

Conceptual meaning, also known as denotative or cognitive meaning, is regarded as central to linguistic communication, according to Leech (1981). It is essential to the fundamental operation of language, unlike other types of meaning. Conceptual meaning exhibits a complex organization akin to the syntactic and phonological levels of language, governed by principles of contractiveness (in phonology) and structure (in syntax). In essence, conceptual meaning is seen as the most direct and straightforward type of meaning, as it pertains solely to the literal context without reference to external factors.

2. Connotative Meaning

Connotative meaning refers to the communicative value of an expression beyond its purely conceptual context, focusing on what it implies or suggests rather than its literal definition. Unlike conceptual meaning, which is straightforward, connotative meaning is more nuanced and subjective. It encompasses the associations and implications that a word or expression carries, often reflecting real-world experiences and cultural contexts. These associations can imbue a single word with multiple layers of meaning, shaped by an individual's knowledge, beliefs, and personal experiences. As a result, connotative meanings can vary among individuals. To illustrate, consider the word "man" as an example. Conceptually, "man" is defined by specific traits (+ human, + male, + adult). However, connotative meanings can expand upon this by adding qualities like "brave" or "polite", which reflect broader societal or personal interpretations. For instance, when a woman says, "He is such a man," she may be complimenting his character traits based on her own understanding and experiences. In summary, connotative meaning enriches language by incorporating subjective interpretations and real-world references beyond the literal definitions found in conceptual meaning.

3. Social Meaning

Social meaning in language indicates the social context in which language is used. It serves the function of revealing information about the geographical or social background of the speaker, as well as the relationship status between the speaker and the listener, through stylistic dimensions and levels within the language. Social meaning is determined by six factors: dialect, era, region, social status, modality, and individuality. For instance, the choice between saying "Where is your flat?" instead of "Where is your apartment?" can provide clues about the speaker's national origin. In essence, social meaning in language provides insights into the social circumstances and relationships embedded within linguistic expressions.

4. Affective Meaning

Affective meaning, as the name suggests, pertains to the expression of emotions based on the participants involved in communication. It involves the use of tones and linguistic elements to convey a wide range of human feelings. For example, individuals often adopt a casual or informal tone to express friendliness, or they might use a more abrupt and impolite tone to convey anger. Additionally, interjections play a significant role in conveying emotions within language, serving as expressions that communicate feelings and attitudes effectively. Thus, speakers utilize affective language to effectively communicate their emotional states and attitudes.

5. Reflected Meaning

Reflected meaning occurs when one sense of a word influences our response to another sense, especially in cases where multiple conceptual meanings are involved (Leech, 1981). This type of meaning involves choosing a specific vocabulary term over others with similar meanings based on contextual factors. For example, the word "beautiful" has synonyms such as "pretty", "gorgeous", and "good-looking". However, in professional contexts, "beautiful" might be replaced by "attractive" to better align with the context. In essence, reflected meaning refers to the way in which the choice of language is shaped by contextual considerations, where different words with similar meanings evoke different connotations or responses based on the setting in which they are used.

6. Collocative Meaning

Collocative meaning refers to the associations a word develops based on the words that typically occur in its linguistic environment (Leech, 1981). While dictionaries provide synonymous relationships between words, collocative meanings are more specific, focusing on

the particular words that frequently co-occur with a given term. For instance, words like “strong” and “firm” are considered synonymous, but they differ in their collocative patterns. For example, when describing intense-flavored coffee, “strong” is appropriate whereas “firm” would not be suitable. This demonstrates how words form associations with specific words in their linguistic context. In summary, collocative meaning highlights how words establish connections with other words based on their typical usage patterns, influencing the nuances and appropriateness of their usage in specific contexts.

7. Thematic Meaning

Thematic meaning, as described by Leech (1981), refers to what is conveyed by how a speaker or writer structures their message, including the arrangement, focus, and emphasis. This concept aligns with what is commonly understood as entailment in linguistics. When two sentences support each other, it implies that if one sentence is true, then the other must also be true. For example:

(1) Tasya is the smartest student in the class.

(2) The top position in the class is held by Tasya.

In essence, thematic meaning underscores the significance of how information is organized and presented, ensuring that the relationship between statements supports logical coherence and mutual validation.

REGISTER

According to Wardhaugh & Fuller (2015), every language exhibits internal diversity, meaning that it encompasses various forms influenced by factors such as age, gender, social group, or societal function. Holmes (2013) similarly suggests that language varies depending on its functions and the characteristics of its users. The choice of language variant is influenced by both the intended audience and the specific context of communication. Within social groups, individuals have access to multiple language variants and select the most appropriate one for the situation they are in. In language, there are styles, registers, and genres, each tailored for different contexts of usage. However, for the purposes of this study, the focus will specifically be on registers.

In general terms, registers consist of language elements associated with specific occupational or social groups (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015). Agha (2006) defines registers as linguistic repertoires culturally tied to particular social practices and the individuals who engage in them, requiring insider knowledge of a community for full comprehension. Biber and Conrad (2009) suggest that immersion in a cultural group facilitates learning its register. These linguistic features include variations that allow speakers to select appropriate ways to express themselves, such as vocabulary choices (Holmes, 2013), which are contextually dependent for understanding meanings (Bauer, 1998). Halliday & Hasan (1989) add that successful communication hinges on accurately interpreting contextual models.

Holmes (2013) categorizes the contextual and social influences on registers into four main factors: participants, setting, topic, and function. Participants encompass both addresser (the speaker) and addressee (the listener). The setting refers to the time and place of the conversation, while the topic covers the content discussed. Function relates to the purpose or intention behind the communication. When registers are employed within specific social groups, members share a mutual understanding of these factors. For example, medical professionals may use a specialized medical register among colleagues who are familiar with

medical terminology (Stockwell, 2002). Conversely, they would use more accessible language with patients to ensure understanding, or they would need to provide explanations for technical terms if using medical jargon.

METHOD

This study used a case study methodology of qualitative approach, discussing the analysis of gay registers to find a profound answer based on the research aim. The object of this research is vocabularies found within gay dating apps that are in the form of both words and phrase. The vocabularies chosen for this research are only the ones carrying meanings that are different to the literal meanings. The vocabularies were not only taken from the users' conversation, but also taken from their personal biographies to enrich this study's findings.

Documentation technique was used to collect the data from three chosen online dating apps, including *HeeSay*, *Hornet*, and *Tinder*. There are other gay dating apps existed, such as *Grindr*, *Growl*, and *JackD*. However, as this research took Surabaya as its setting, those dating apps are not very well-known and applicable for MSMs in the chosen region as they require the use of Virtual Private Network (VPN). Thus, only the most frequently used dating apps were used for this research's setting. Since this study's object did not require any respondent, to access the dating apps, one of the user's application account was used with his permission for taking screenshots of the vocabularies. The data were classified into several categories based on Leech's seven types of meaning (1981). At last, the explanation on each vocabulary's meaning was also explained in the form of descriptive analysis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the data collected, there are twelve vocabularies found within the GDAs, consisting of eleven words, and a phrase. The classification on those registers can be seen in Table 1:

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TABLE 1. Gay registers classification using Leech's seven types of meaning (1981)

Vocabulary	Meaning		Classification
	Register/Actual	Literal	
<i>Top</i>	Gay man who prefers to be more dominant/insertive in intimate relationship	The highest point, level, or part of something	Connotative meaning
<i>Bottom</i>	Gay man who prefers to be more submissive/receptive in intimate relationship	The part of your body that you sit on	
<i>Vers/ Versatile</i>	Gay man who does not have a preference in intimate relationship	Able to change easily from one activity to another	
<i>Side</i>	Gay man who chooses not to do anal in intimate relationship	A part of a situation, system, etc. that can be considered or dealt with separately	
<i>Switch</i>	Gay man who does not take a particular role in relationship	To change suddenly or completely, especially from one thing to another	
<i>Twink</i>	Young gay with skinny figure and having little to no facial and body hair	A gay man who is young, slim, and looks like a boy	
<i>Bear</i>	Gay with a beefy physical appearance and often with facial and body hair	A large, strong wild mammal with a thick fur coat	
<i>Chaser</i>	Gay with a small body who is attracted to guys with a bigger size	A person or thing that chases	
<i>Discreet</i>	Gay man who prefers to conceal his sexual orientation	Careful not to cause embarrassment or attract too much attention	
<i>Fun</i>	An action of having sexual intercourse	Pleasure, enjoyment, or entertainment	
<i>Role</i>	Preference in intimate relationship	The position or purpose that someone or something has in a situation, organization, society, or relationship	Social meaning
<i>Can/Can't host</i>	Gay man's place availability or unavailability to have sexual intercourse in	Availability or unavailability to provide the space and other things necessary for a special event	Collocative meaning

CONNOTATIVE MEANING

The reason why the majority of these vocabularies fall into this category of meaning is intriguing. As observed from the table, more than half of the 12 vocabularies carry connotative meanings. Unlike conceptual meanings, which adhere strictly to dictionary definitions, connotative meanings attribute value to an expression based on what it suggests beyond its literal definition (Leech, 1981). Understanding how human perception operates reveals that individuals often imbue words with personal interpretations shaped by their own life experiences. Connotative meanings often arise when people associate different things that share similar characteristics, using one as a reference point.

1. Top



Figure 1. The word “Top” in gay dating app

In the context of the gay community, the term “Top” diverges from its general English meaning of the highest point or level. Instead, it refers to an MSM (man who has sex with men) who typically assumes a dominant and penetrative role in intimate relationships. Despite the apparent dissimilarity between these two meanings, there is a slight connection. This community’s use of “Top” draws on the general English word’s indication of being in a superior position, reflecting how MSMs in this role often take a dominant position over their partner during sexual intercourse.

2. Bottom

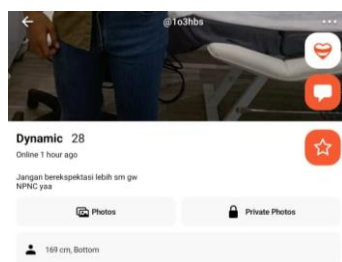


Figure 2. The word “Bottom” in gay dating app

Similarly, the term “Bottom” in the gay community derives from its English meaning referring to the lower part of the human body that is typically sat upon. Within this community, “Bottom” designates an MSM who prefers a more submissive and receptive role in intimate relationships, particularly during anal intercourse, which is predominant among MSMs. The pairing of “Top” and “Bottom” reflects how these terms are used to categorize MSMs based on their sexual preferences. However, it’s important to note that this terminology can lead to misconceptions, as some may mistakenly equate “Top” with the role of a man and “Bottom” with that of a woman in a gay relationship, perpetuating heteronormative assumptions.

3. Vers/Versatile

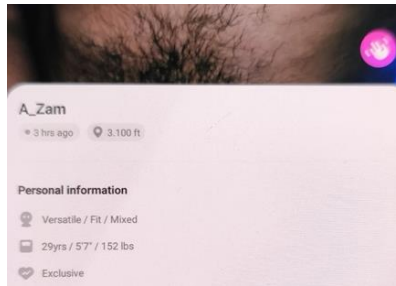


Figure 3. The word “Vers/Versatile” in gay dating app

Amidst two extremes, there exists a middle ground represented by the term “Versatile”. If “Top” and “Bottom” denote specific sexual preferences among MSM, “Vers/Versatile” signifies adaptability. Similar to its meaning in English, indicating the ability to switch easily between activities or serve various purposes, within the gay community, “Versatile” describes MSM who can adjust their sexual roles as needed. Typically, “Versatile” gay men tend to accommodate their partner’s preferences in intimate encounters.

4. Side

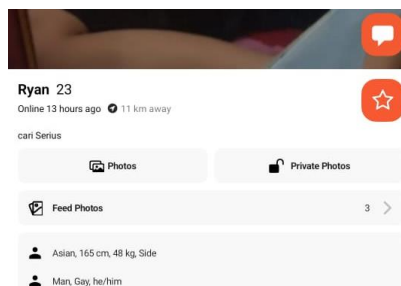


Figure 4. The word “Side” in gay dating app

If “Top,” “Bottom,” and “Versatile” indicate the MSM’s inclination for anal sex, then “Side” is distinct from the other three categories. “Side” is most suited to a subset of MSM who, in contrast to the other three roles, choose not to do anal at all because it implies a part of a setting, system, etc. that may be thought of or handled independently. It functions similarly to how people typically refer to something as “extra,” as in “side-dish,” which describes an additional dish served in addition to the main course, or “side-kick,” which describes an assistant who is subordinate to the main course.

5. Switch

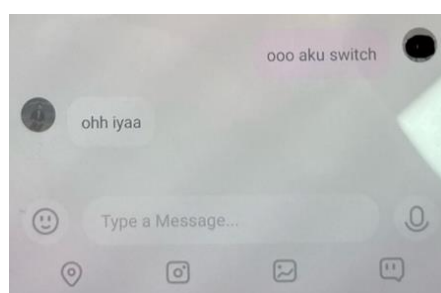


Figure 5. The word “Switch” in gay dating app

Another word that has a quite literal meaning is “Switch”. Simply said, if “Chaser” refers to MSMs who chase, then “Switch” refers to those who switch. Although simple in definition, it requires further explanation to understand how it applies to individuals who can change roles abruptly or completely, particularly from one role to another. Within the gay community, this term describes MSMs who do not adhere to a fixed role in relationships. Essentially, “Switch” denotes gay men who can alternate between being dominant (Dom) or submissive (Sub) depending on their preference or situation.

6. Twink

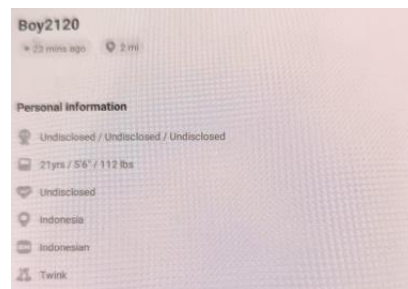


Figure 6. The word “Twink” in gay dating app

Unlike other terms, “Twink” stands out as it is officially defined in the English dictionary. While its meaning describes precisely what a twink is, the origins of why it pertains to a specific category within the gay community remain significant. According to Franta (2018), the term “Twink” originated from the character Twinketoes in a 1919 novel and evolved during the 1970s and 1980s to describe a youthful, effeminate young man. The term was later shortened to “Twink”. Additionally, many associate this term with a certain group of MSMs because it resembles the popular snack Twinkie—a small, slender, crème-filled treat that bears similarities to the appearance of a twink.

7. Bear

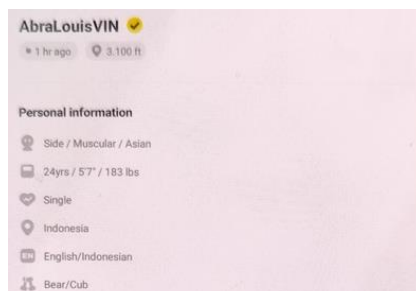


Figure 7. The word “Bear” in gay dating app

In contrast to the characteristics of “Twink,” the meaning of “Bear” in the gay community is quite straightforward. In standard English, “Bear” refers to a large, strong wild mammal with a thick fur coat. When used within the context of the gay community, this term unmistakably describes an MSM who is big and hairy, resembling the physical attributes of the animal. This naming convention serves as a convenient shorthand within the community, allowing individuals to express their preferences succinctly. Rather than stating preferences in lengthy terms such as “I am attracted to men with a beefy and hairy body,” an MSM can simply state, “I like Bears.”

8. Chaser

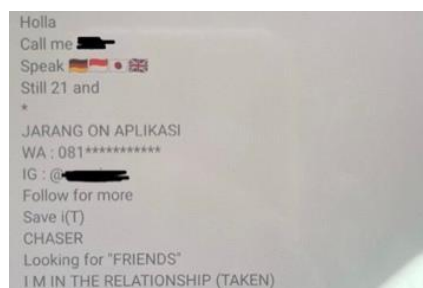


Figure 8. The word “Chaser” in gay dating app

Now turning to a term that is quite literal, “Chaser” accurately describes a specific type of MSM. Defined as someone or something that pursues, “Chaser” aptly characterizes gay men who are attracted to individuals with larger body types. Within the gay community, this term identifies MSMs who are smaller in stature and are attracted to larger-bodied men. Therefore, “Chaser” has a particular significance and usage within this context.

9. Discreet



Figure 9. The word “Discreet” in gay dating app

If terms like “Chaser,” “Switch,” and “Can/Can’t host” relate more to actions typical among MSMs, “Discreet” stands out as a vocabulary that conveys a trait associated with MSMs. In standard English, “Discreet” means being cautious not to cause embarrassment or attract undue attention by keeping things private. Similarly, within the gay community, “Discreet” describes MSMs who prefer to conceal their sexual orientation. Unfortunately, the word’s literal meaning aligns with the reasons why these individuals choose not to openly express their gay identity. Typically, “Discreet” MSMs keep their sexual orientation private to avoid causing embarrassment or discomfort.

REFLECTED MEANING

A single word in a language often encompasses multiple conceptual meanings that are interconnected. However, in selecting the most appropriate conceptual meaning that fits the context perfectly, reflected meaning becomes essential (Leech, 1981). Reflected meaning occurs when several synonymous words are considered, and the best one is chosen to match the context precisely. This is necessary because although synonymous words may share similar

meanings, using a non-matching one can lead to misunderstanding. Reflected meaning is also employed to adjust politeness, a practice observed within the gay community as well.

1. Fun

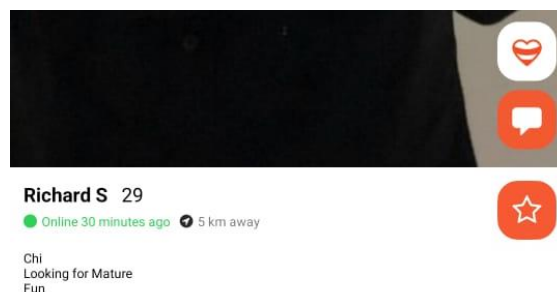


Figure 10. The word “Fun” in gay dating app

Reflected meaning is exemplified within gay registers through the word “Fun”. This term not only shares conceptual similarities with words like “pleasure”, “enjoyment”, and “entertainment”, but it also serves to euphemize its actual meaning. In this context, “Fun” denotes a sexual act, but its use helps soften the explicitness of the intention. On dating apps, for instance, directly stating “I’m looking for sex” can be too direct and potentially off-putting. Therefore, MSMs often substitute it with the more socially acceptable term “Fun”. This demonstrates how reflected meaning can adjust politeness within specific contexts.

SOCIAL MEANING

As it serves the purpose of identifying to which social group an individual belongs (Leech, 1981), it’s evident that only one vocabulary within the gay community aligns with this type of meaning. Typically, registers are intended to shield members of a specific community from outsiders. However, social meaning operates differently by disclosing this membership.

1. Role

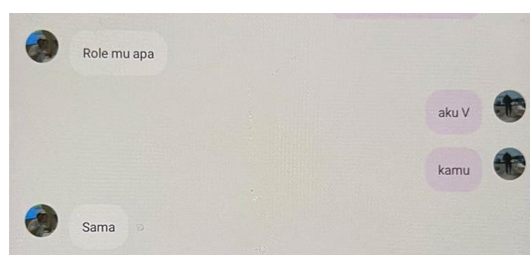


Figure 11. The word “Role” in gay dating app

“Role” is the overarching term employed to encompass the categorizations of men within the gay community. This register is frequently utilized within the community because there is a significant interest among its members to inquire about the sexual and romantic preferences of other MSMs. Such inquiries may appear unnecessary to heterosexual individuals, as the roles in their relationships are generally well-defined, particularly in the context of sexual intercourse. For instance, when a man uses the word “Role,” it indirectly signals his affiliation with the gay community. In heterosexual relationships, it’s uncommon for someone to inquire about another’s sexual preference because the roles in sexual

interactions between men and women are generally predetermined. Therefore, if a man asks, “What’s your role?”, he’s likely addressing another man.

COLLOCATIVE MEANING

According to Leech (1981), each word exists within a specific context that includes other words surrounding it, which are often mentioned in conjunction. In English, certain phrases have established pairs of words that complement each other perfectly and cannot easily be replaced. This phenomenon, where words naturally co-occur despite having synonyms, is known as collocative meaning.

1. Can/Can’t Host

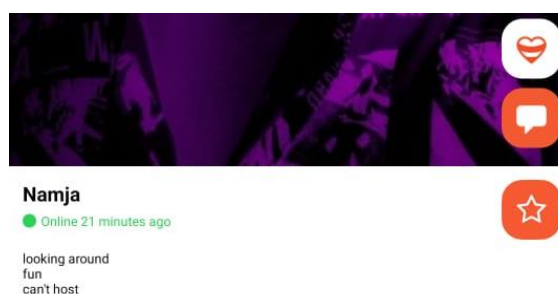


Figure 12. The phrase “Can/Can’t Host” in gay dating app

In the realm of gay registers, a clear example of collocative meaning is evident in the phrase “Can/Can’t host”. Despite alternatives like “provide”, “give”, “hold”, “arrange”, and others for the word “host”, these synonyms do not fit seamlessly into the same phrase. “Can/Can’t host” remains inseparable because altering it with synonyms could alter its specific meaning within the register. For instance, substituting “Can/Can’t provide?” would likely cause confusion, as it lacks the clear implication found in “Can/Can’t host?”, leaving ambiguity about what exactly is being discussed.

CONCLUSION

The findings corroborate the MSMs in Surabaya frequently use a variety of words and phrases in their interactions and personal profiles on gay dating apps. A total of twelve specific vocabularies have been identified, which serve as internal communication tools within the gay community, regarded as registers for their group. These vocabularies may appear unfamiliar to heterosexual individuals because their meanings deviate from or bear little resemblance to their literal definitions in English. This study’s result displays that gay registers primarily consist of connotative meanings, as MSMs often assign names to things based on real-world references. Some registers also exhibit reflected and collocative meanings, serving as replacements for synonymous expressions that fit seamlessly into their community contexts. These vocabularies are deemed indispensable because they align perfectly with the nuances within the gay community. Certain vocabularies within gay registers carry social meanings, serving as markers to determine whether an individual belongs to the gay community. Conversely, while

the meanings of other vocabularies are straightforward, MSMs sometimes deliberately obscure them through morphological alterations like clipping or abbreviations.

In summary, the meanings within gay registers are shaped to suit the specific context of the community. This contributes to the unfamiliarity experienced by individuals outside the community, as these registers were not intended for them in the first place. Future research could expand beyond Surabaya to include other regions and countries with similar or differing cultural contexts. This would enable a comparative analysis of coded language usage among MSMs in various conservative environments, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

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