How Framing Influences Understanding and Acceptance: The Case of Polyamory

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Language is a source of power, as the way in which a message is realised can influence how it will be received (Matlock 2012: 478; Thibodeau & Boroditsky 2013). A society decides which discourses are socially acceptable and which are not (Foucault 1971). As such, language discriminates against minorities, but also, it can in reverse function as a tool to shift power dynamics and to give a voice to minority groups. This project focuses on language used by polyamorous communities in Germany who show considerable effort to rewrite language to tell their stories in their own words (Haritaworn, Lin, & Klesse 2006: 518–519). In western cultures, dual monogamous relationships dominate common discourse (cf. Foucault 1971), with expressions such as "couple", "partner", or "better half " (Ritchie & Barker 2006: 591). The discourse of relationships therefore fails to provide language that reflects the realities of polyamorous people (Ritchie & Barker 2006: 589) which leads to people in these communities "feel[ing] constrained" by language (Ritchie & Barker 2006: 589) and people on the outside failing to understand polyamorous realities and reinforcing "social stigma" (Cardoso, Pascoal, & Maiochi 2021: 1240) around polyamory. Through neologisms, polyamorous communities have started to "actively rewrit[e] the language of love, relationships and emotion" (Ritchie & Barker 2006, 598) to gain visibility and legitimisation outside of the community, and to be able to talk about their experiences in a way that feels right.

The subject of this project is to investigate how successful neologisms arising in the context of polyamory are in promoting understanding and acceptance of polyamorous realities. 50 German speaking participants were tested on their understanding and acceptance of concepts related to polyamory in German depending on the words used to denote these concepts. Split into two groups, they were asked in an interview to describe either the meaning of the neologisms *Polyamorie* ('polyamory'), *Polykül* ('polycule'), *Metamour*, and *shaky* or the terms *Nicht-Monogamie* ('non-monogamy'), *Mehrfachbeziehung* ('multiple relationships'), *Partnerin meiner Partnerin* ('partner of my partner'), and *eifersüchtig* ('jealous') which are either existent as such in mononormative discourse or use terms from this discourse as conceptual scaffold. The participant's understanding and conceptualisations of these terms were multimodally analysed with the video-recorded interview material, considering both speech and gestures. Their acceptance of polyamory was elicited with a questionnaire and an Implicit Association Test (IAT) which is a psychological test designed to indirectly elicit bias. In this test, participant's reaction time is measured when sorting stimuli into categories. One set of stimuli were pictures of monogamous or polyamorous constellations and positively and negatively connotated attributes of relationships. With positive and negative categories on a fixed key, polyamory and monogamy switch sides during the test. A bias towards monogamy shows when participants take longer to sort polyamorous pictures to the side of positive attributes.

The analysis shows that in most cases, the understanding and underlying conceptualisations of the opposed terms differ considerably and there was a statistically significant difference found in acceptance between participants who were exposed to the different terms.

References

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