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Abstract: This paper aims at examining the reception, (g)localization, and also (re)creation of different forms of “queer” in the Italian context. First, I conduct a semasiological analysis of the diachronic semantic and connotative development of the English-turned-global “queer” in order to provide a detailed insight into its palimpsestic meaning. The offensive qualities of the slur, I argue, provide the aggressive power required for self-definition in queer activism. In a next step, I examine the entry of “queer” into the Italian lexicon from a queer lexicographical and lexicological perspective. Lastly, adopting an onomasiological approach, selected emerging local Italian alternatives to the adopted and adapted English “queers” are presented, specifically *frocio* and *frocia*, *femminiellə*, and *ricchione*. My analysis focuses on the Italian linguistic and cultural context not as a passive recipient but brings to light its active and productive role in creating (g)localized “queers” by reappropriating and resignifying pre-existing local terms. It shows the interplay between the English and Italian “queers” and their alternatives, outlining their locatedness on a global to local scale, while at the same time unraveling their interconnectedness and their interdependencies.

Keywords: queer, queer lexicography, queer lexicology, semantics, frocia, glocalization, translation.

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Queer, *Frocio*, *Femminiellə*, *Ricchione* et al. – Localizing “Queer” in the Italian Context

EVA NOSSEM

Introduction

This paper aims to examine the reception, localization, and (re)creation of different forms of “queer” in the Italian context. Rather than delineating how Queer Studies and Queer Theory have been received and disseminated in Italian academe, this article is a lexicological analysis which focuses on the word “queer”: its usage, its meanings, and also its transformations, translations, and localizations or glocalizations in the Italian academic and activist context.¹ This research is part of my larger project, the writing of an Italian queer dictionary. My investigations into the cultural mobility of the word “queer” are rooted in the field of queer lexicography, a new subdiscipline of lexicography developed with the aim of including critical heteronormativity research in the established disciplinary field. Indeed, the analysis offered in this article coincides with the main objects of research in queer lexicography, namely the linguistic manifestation of heteronormativity and the ways in which these are subverted or challenged, as well as related discourses on gender and sexual identity.²

On the one hand, this paper analyzes when, how, in which contexts, in which forms, and with which semantic-connotative potential the English term “queer” has entered the Italian speaking world. This analysis will show which semantic and connotative aspects the English “queer” has brought with it. Juxtaposing the English and Italian “queers” shows that the English “queer” traveled light when it undertook its journey from the U.S. across the Atlantic Ocean. This comparison shows which semantic and connotative aspects were lost during the journey, i.e. how the semantic potential narrowed, or rather, how it was transformed and what was gained. My analysis seeks to go beyond a mere etymological survey of the English and Italian terms “queer.” Instead, I will first trace the historical development of the English “queer,” list the subsequent uses of “queer” in Italian, i.e. focus on the local appropriations and adaptations of the English term, and then juxtapose the semantic content of the English original and the Italian borrowings. In particular, I will emphasize the semantic and affective potential of the English “queer” and its Italian counterparts in their capacity as slurs-turned-self-definitions.

Therefore, instead of merely investigating a unilateral and unidirectional perspective by analyzing how and to what extent the English “queer” has influenced the Italian context, this paper has the goal of exploring which forms and ramifications of “queer” have developed and are specific

¹ Cf. Robertson, “Glocalization.”

In my analysis, I do not explicitly distinguish between different classes of words, but rather only focus on the meanings and etymology of queer in its adjectival forms. While the English language easily allows for a change from adjective to noun (the English “queer” also easily underwent this step when it became an identity category and a slur, i.e. when it took on the meaning of “homosexual”), the Italian examples, on the other hand, are all personal nouns. Nevertheless, I argue that the juxtaposition is justified because the term “queer” that I analyze, which arrived in the Italian language and which was replaced by the alternatives “frocio,” “frocia,” “femminiellə,” and “ricchione,” focuses particularly on the identity-creating semantic potential as a self-definition. The scope of this paper also did not allow me to cover the entire field of verbalization, either in English or in Italian. I felt that a focus on shifting word classes would transform this paper into a discussion of morphological issues, which would have detracted from my goal of concentrating on the semantic contents and their modifications and shifts.

² Cf. Nossem, “Potere e autorità,” for a critical examination of power and authority in the processes of dictionary-making; Nossem, “Queering Lexicography,” for an analysis of the powerful role of the lexicographer, and a special focus on translation as well as multi- and interlingual dictionaries.

to the Italian context. This lexicographical analysis, in turn, is very much in line with recent theories of cultural exchange, accounting for the diverse transnational processes of appropriation and incorporation.³ As a result, the Italian context and the Italian language are not regarded as passive recipients of Anglo-American influences but assume an active and productive role in the process of localizing “queer.” In this context it is interesting to investigate how “queer” has succeeded in finding its way into certain Italian discourses, and particularly which other word forms and other words have (been) developed in its place in Italy. Not only can adaptations of “queer” be found as borrowings but, as I will show, pre-existing Italian (dialectal) terms and slurs also received a particular twist through “queer”-induced reappropriation strategies, and can thus be considered glocalizations of the English “queer.” It is the main aim of this research to search for and bring to light Italian terms offering the same powerful semantic potential and subversive qualities as the English queer, which can be seen to compensate for the lack of subversiveness and the toothlessness of the Italian “queer.”

The collection of lexicographical source data on this particular topic proves difficult: Hardly any evidence can be found in existing lexicographical works, and as it is a process still in development, it remains to be seen which neologisms will prevail, which will turn out to be temporary occasionalisms, and which pre-existing terms will acquire an enduring new semantic-connotative potential. In order to keep pace with the proliferating field of queer activism in Italy, which I consider the most productive playground for emerging new terminology in the eponymous field, I will rely on online sources, mostly from social media, for my analysis.

For my in-depth analysis in this article, I have made an exemplary selection of the Italian words *frocio* and *frocia*, which seem to be spreading more and more widely in the Italian academic-activist context, as well as *femminiella* and *ricchione*, which are (re-) gaining importance especially in activism in the South of Italy. The analysis is limited to these four Italian terms, because these words are currently gaining the most momentum in (online) activism (as a selection of sources such as posts and accounts on Facebook and Twitter show).⁴ Moreover, they are sometimes offered as translations or Italian alternatives to the English “queer,” as suggested e.g. in the Italian Wikipedia entry for “queer” or in the in the explanations on the origin of the term “queer” provided by the Archivio Queer Italia on their website.⁵

For example, *frocia* could be considered a calque of the English “queer”; it could also be seen as a translation of “queer,” or we could look at *frocia* as an Italian localized version of the (American) English “queer.” We could therefore interpret *frocia* as its glocalization – a local, i.e. dialectal term which has added to its pre-existing semantic content the semantic-connotative potential observed in the globally spreading self-identifier “queer.” Alternatively, we could see it as a new concept which is specific to the Italian linguistic and cultural context, rather than an adaption or appropriation of the English “queer,” i.e. some sort of a territorialized post-queer. By juxtaposing the English-turned-global “queer” and Italian “queers” like *frocio*, *frocia*, *femminiello*, and *ricchione*, this paper brings to light their respective strengths and weaknesses, highlighting their processual, non-stable, and contextually constructed character.

On the Origins of “Queer” in Italian

³ Cf. Greenblatt et al., *Cultural Mobility. A Manifesto*.

⁴ Cf. *Parlare civile*, “frocio”; Cepollaro, “Ricchione”; *Contagio antispecista* “rivolta frocial!”; etc.

⁵ “queer,” accessed on July 18, 2019. <https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Queer>; “queer?” accessed on July 18, 2019. <https://archivioqueeritalia.com/about/queer/>.

In recent years, particularly over the last decade, queer has made itself a name within Italian academe. Proof can be found in commercial figures which show a proliferation of texts featuring “queer” on the market of academic publications. While some of these texts focus on queer theory (cf. Bernini, *Le teorie queer. Un'introduzione*, 2017; Arfini e Lo Iacono, *Canone inverso. Antologia di teoria queer*, 2012), some others apply queer theory to specific political, social, philosophical concepts/theories (cf. Bernini, *Apocalissi queer. Elementi di teoria antisociale*, 2013, 2018; Bacchetta and Fantone, *Femminismi queer postcoloniali. Critiche transnazionali all'omofobia, all'islamofobia e all'omonazionalismo*, 2015; Grassi, *Anarchismo queer*, 2013) or focus on the interplay of queer and sexual and gender identity (cf. Monceri, *Oltre l'identità sessuale. Teorie queer e corpi transgender*, 2009; Valentini, *Genealogie queer. Teorie critiche delle identità sessuali e di genere*, 2018). Still others even seem to make use of and play with “queer” as a buzzword in certain socio-activist circles. Moreover, there is one book which entirely focuses on the meaning and use of “queer,” namely Pustianaz' *Queer in Italia. Differenze in movimento*, 2011, a collection of statements by academics and activists in response to the question “What does queer mean to you?” In many of these statements, just as in most of the other publications, the authors provide just a short description and/or explanation of the origins and the historical semantic potential of the word “queer” itself and choose rather to focus on their current appropriation and the usage of “queer.”

An example of such short introductory explanations can be found in the chapter on “I Queer Studies” in Brioschi, Di Girolamo and Fusillo's *Introduzione alla letteratura*, written by Pinzuti:

Quando Douglas Plummer [...] pubblicò *Queer People. The Truth about Homosexual in Britain* (1963) l'aggettivo queer aveva un valore semantico strettamente negativo, indicando ciò che risultava “strano, eccentrico, guasto” (Oxford Dictionary). Un linguaggio chiaramente ostracizzante (hate speech) nei confronti dei soggetti omosessuali è stato a lungo usato sia per ribadire la sostanziale “alterità” rispetto alle norme sociali e sessuali, sia per evidenziarne la “natura” perturbante, sottratta alla prevedibilità del discorso eterosessuale.⁶

In his recently published introduction to *Queer Theories*, Bernini even provides a short overview of the semantic spectrum of the English “queer,” drawing parallels, and suggesting translations into Italian:

A partire dall'Ottocento, nella lingua inglese, il termine “queer” viene utilizzato come epiteto dispregiativo contro le minoranze sessuali; dagli anni novanta del Novecento, prima negli Stati Uniti e poi nel resto del mondo, se ne sono riappropriati provocatoriamente sia alcuni attivisti e attiviste, sia alcuni pensatori e pensatrici, per farne l'indicatore di un'identità politica. Ma già prima di questa risignificazione, esso aveva attraversato una storia di variazioni semantiche. L'inglese “queer” deriva infatti dall'aggettivo germanico “quer,” che significa “transversale, diagonale,” “obliquo,” e che a sua volta proviene dal verbo latino “torqueo” (torcere, piegare, ma anche tormentare): “Queer” può essere quindi considerate il contrario di “straight,” che vuol dire “dritto,” “retto” e – dal momento che, in un regime di eterosessualità obbligatoria, l'eterosessualità è tradizionalmente associate alla rettitudine morale – anche “eterosessuale.” In italiano può essere tradotto con “storto,” “strano,” “strambo,” “bizzarro,” “bislacco,” ma equivale a insulti come “frocio,” “finocchio,” “culattone,” che in inglese possono però essere rivolti anche a una donna.⁷

⁶ “When Douglas Plummer [...] published *Queer People. The Truth about Homosexuals in Britain* (1963), the adjective queer had a strictly negative semantic value, indicating something that was ‘strange, eccentric, rotten’ (Oxford Dictionary). This clearly ostracizing language (hate speech) towards homosexual subjects has long been used both to highlight their substantial ‘alterity’ with regard to social and sexual norms, and to emphasize their disturbing ‘nature’ that evades the predictability of heterosexual discourse.” Elena Pinzuti: “I Queer Studies,” 246. My translation.

⁷ “Since the beginning of the 19th century, the term ‘queer’ has been used in the English language as a slur against sexual minorities; since the 1990s, some activists and thinkers have reappropriated the term to turn it into an indicator of a

In my analysis, I will show that the oft-repeated reductive explanation “queer is English and it means strange or gay” is surely inadequate. It omits many semantic aspects which endow the English “queer” with its enormous flexibility, which, in turn, is the key to its success story and has allowed it to spread all over the world.

A Semasiological Analysis of the English “Queer” – Historical Developments and Semantic Shifts

Before we can come up with a hypothesis about what happened to “queer” when it arrived in the Italian language and cultural context, I first want to lay bare the semantic potential of “queer” in the English language. A reasonable discussion of today’s “queer” cannot be had without providing an overview of the broad range of meanings and uses “queer” has taken on within the English language over the course of the centuries. In order to provide a meaningful semasiological outline of the English “queer” which will serve as the basis of the subsequent analysis and hypothesis concerning “queer” as a traveling concept, a particular focus is placed on the historical semantic developments and shifts within the English language.

Etymology

Today’s “queer” goes back to two main roots, one of which can be subsumed under the meaning of “strange,” the other, under “bad.” Both of these roots can be traced back to the 16th century. The etymology of the “strange” “queer” is not clear. The dominant conviction is that it entered the English language as a borrowing from German and goes back to the German *quer* in the sense of “transverse, oblique, crosswise,” but also “peculiar,” if it refers to a person. The “bad” “queer” is attributed to criminal slang in England; its origin and etymology, though, are entirely unknown.

Over the course of the centuries, both “queers” have taken on a wide variety of written forms. The “strange” “queer” could be found in the following forms:

queer, *adj.*¹

Pronunciation: Brit.  /kwɪə/, U.S.  /kwɪ(ə)r/

Forms: 15–17 **queere**, 15–17 (18 *Eng. regional*) **quere**, 16 **queire**, 16 **quer**, 16– **queer**, 17 **quear**, 19– **querr** (*Irish English (northern)*); Sc. pre-17 **queir**, pre-17 **quere**, pre-17 **queyr**, pre-17 **qweir**, 17– **queer**, 18– **wheer** (*Shetland and Orkney*). See also **QUARE** *adj.*

Fig. 1: Development of word forms “queer” adjective 1, Oxford English Dictionary⁸

In contrast, the “bad” “queer” was written as follows:

political identity, first in the United States and then in the rest of the world. But even prior to this resignification, ‘queer’ had gone through a history of semantic variations. Indeed, the English ‘queer’ derives from the Germanic adjective ‘quer,’ meaning ‘transverse,’ ‘diagonal,’ ‘oblique,’ which, in turn originates from the Latin verb ‘torqueo’ (twist, bend, but also torment): ‘Queer’ can thus be considered the contrary of ‘straight’ in the sense of ‘upright’ and – as in a regime of compulsory heterosexuality, heterosexuality is traditionally associated with moral rectitude – also ‘heterosexual.’ It can be translated into Italian as ‘storto,’ ‘strano,’ ‘strambo,’ ‘bizzarro,’ ‘bislacco,’ but also corresponds to slurs like ‘frocio,’ ‘finocchio,’ ‘culattone,’ which in English can also be directed at a woman.” Bernini: *Le teorie queer*, 118-119. My translation.

⁸ *Oxford English Dictionary*, “queer adj1.”

queer, *adj.*² and *n.*¹

Pronunciation: Brit.  /kwɪə/, U.S.  /kwɪ(ə)r/

Forms:

α. 15 **quyer**, 15 **quyere**, 15–16 **quire**, 15–16 **quyre**, 16 **quier**.

β. 16 **queere**, 17 **quare**, 17 **quer**, 17– **queer**.

Fig. 2: Development of word forms “queer” adjective 2, Oxford English Dictionary⁹

It is indeed these different spellings that serve as an indicator that there are two different roots of today’s “queer,” which is a merged form of all previous spellings and meanings.

At the end of the 17th century, forms like *quyer* or *quire* had fallen out of use and only the forms *quer*, *queere* or *queer* prevailed.¹⁰ This unification or merging of the different forms resulted in a complete identification of the two different, etymologically distinct “queers,” namely the “strange” “queer” and the “bad” “queer,” and the different meanings simply merged into different usages of the one adjective “queer.”

The “Strange” “Queer”

The OED lists as its first definition the meanings of “strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric” and dates the first usage of “queer” in the “strange” sense back to 1513, where it was used in a Flyting, a sort of medieval poetry slam where insults were exchanged in Scotland: “Heir cumis our awin queir clerk.”¹¹ The understanding of “queer” as strange is indeed reflected very well in the quote attributed to Robert Owen, the 19th century English reformer: “All the world is queer save thee and me, and even thou art a little queer.” This quote and the “queer” used herein nicely shows the “strange” meaning of “queer,” leaving room for slightly negative connotations in the sense of “weird.”

Indeed, the use of “queer” as “strange” could sometimes also take on quite negative connotations and could be understood not only as “weird,” but even as “suspicious,” “dubious,” or, as a person, “of questionable character,” as the example provided in the OED from J. Heath from 1663 shows: “That the world may see what queer hypocrites his attendants were.”¹²

In addition to its general meaning of “strange,” with its different possible connotations, this “queer” also took on several minor meanings, particularly in the 18th and 19th centuries, and foremost in different regional varieties of English. For example, “queer” was used as an intensifier in Scottish and Irish English from the 19th century and is still used in this way today. It gave rise to regional variants such as the Irish English *quare*, as for example in Brendan Behan’s first play *The Quare Fellow* in 1956. In addition to representing the Hiberno-English form and pronunciation of “queer,” “quare” also acts as an intensifier, such as in: “Wasn’t I the quare eejit too, for then they would get me to sing all the rebel songs to them and I know now they were taking a hand out of me” (OED *quare*).¹³ This “quare” is often used in a positive sense, such as excellent, in good quantity or quality; frequently in the form of “quare and...” such as “queer and nice,” meaning very nice, “queer and hot,” meaning

⁹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, “queer adj2.”

¹⁰ The information provided in these paragraphs is taken from The Oxford English Dictionary entries for “queer adj1” and “queer adj2.”

¹¹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, “queer adj1.”

¹² *Oxford English Dictionary*, “queer adj1.”

¹³ J. Doran: Red Doran, 1996, in *Oxford English Dictionary*, “quare.”

very hot, and also “queer and bad,” meaning very bad, and the example by Adams, 1977: “Mine ye, A was quare an gled tae get anntae ma settle bed thaat naght.”

Since the mid-18th century, “queer” has also sometimes been used to describe a feeling of malaise or indisposition, taking on the meaning of “out of sorts.” In this sense it could also take on the meaning of “drunk,” as used by Dickens in his *Pickwick Papers*: “Legs shaky—head queer—round and round—earthquaky sort of feeling—very.”¹⁴ While the use of “queer” as “out of sorts, unwell, faint, giddy” still seems to be used every now and then today, the use of the term to mean “drunk” was attributed to slang and is no longer in current usage – which is no surprise given the high changeability and the general ephemerality of slang terms.

The “Homosexual” “Queer”

A milestone in the history of the word “queer” occurred during the period at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, when “queer” took on the meaning of “homosexual.” The OED states that the meaning of “queer” as strange was prevalent until “queer” took on the then new meaning of “homosexual.”¹⁵ The OED sees the origin of this euphemistic use in U.S. English colloquial language and provides the Los Angeles Times of November 19, 1914 as the first written attestation of “queer” in this particular sense: “He said that the Ninety-six Club was the best; that it was composed of the ‘queer’ people... He said that the members sometimes spent hundreds of dollars on silk gowns, hosiery, etc.... At these ‘drags’ the ‘queer’ people have a good time.”¹⁶ This particular example shows an aspect of “queer” used to refer not only to homosexual men in general, but especially to effeminate homosexual men. This new meaning that queer had taken on became so widely disseminated that the previously dominant meaning of “queer” as “strange” moved to the background and “queer” as “homosexual” now moved to the forefront.

The period when “queer” took on the meaning of “homosexual” was not so long after the “birth of the homosexual,” i.e. the period from the mid to the end of the 19th century when a series of new terms were coined to refer to same-sex love and sexuality, thus creating a new identity category, which also included the term “homosexual” itself, which prevailed against all other alternatives that had been put forward.¹⁷ As homosexuality, both as an identity category or as sexual activity, was certainly not widely tolerated or accepted at the time the new terms were coined, also when “queer” took on the meaning of “homosexual,” its use was very often derogatory. Indeed, “queer” was often turned into a slur against homosexual men. This particular use only became possible through the merging of the “strange” “queer” and the “bad” “queer.” Thus, before looking at “queer” as a slur in more detail, I would like to draw the attention to the other “queer,” namely “queer” as “bad.”

The “Bad” “Queer”

The OED lists a second adjective “queer,” which it attributes to slang used by criminals. As stated above, this “queer” also appeared in different forms such as “quyer,” “quire,” etc. and “queer.” Its etymology and origin are completely unknown, but these forms suggest it was a different word to the “strange” “queer” outlined above in detail. This second adjective, the “bad” “queer,” can also be traced back to the 16th century and was used in the sense of “bad, contemptible, worthless, untrustworthy or disreputable,” as an example from the *Fraternity of Vacabondes* from 1575 shows: “A

¹⁴ *Oxford English Dictionary*, “queer adj1.”

¹⁵ *Oxford English Dictionary*, “queer adj1.”

¹⁶ *Oxford English Dictionary*, “queer adj1.”

¹⁷ Foucault, “Birth of Homosexuality.”

Quire bird is one that came lately out of prison.”¹⁸ This “bad” “queer” later on also took on the meaning of “counterfeit” and “forged,” referring to money.¹⁹ Raymond Chandler uses it in this sense: “If it was discovered to be queer money, as you say, it would be very difficult to trace the source of it” (1941) and Dickens mixes these different uses in *Our Mutual Friend*: “Concerning that bill-broking branch of the business... What queer bills are to be bought, and at what prices?”²⁰

The Merging of the “Strange” and the “Bad” “Queers” or the Birth of a Slur

We can therefore summarize that – very generally speaking – today’s “queer” has two main roots, namely the “strange” and the “bad” “queer,” which can both be traced back to the 16th century. The merging of these two originally different “queers” towards the end of the 17th century paved the way for and increased the possibilities of a negative usage of “queer,” as it added the meaning of “queer” as “bad” to the previous “queer” as “strange” or “dubious.” More meanings developed and added up to the previous ones, such as “unwell” or “out of sorts” in the 18th century and the sense of “counterfeit” in the 19th century.

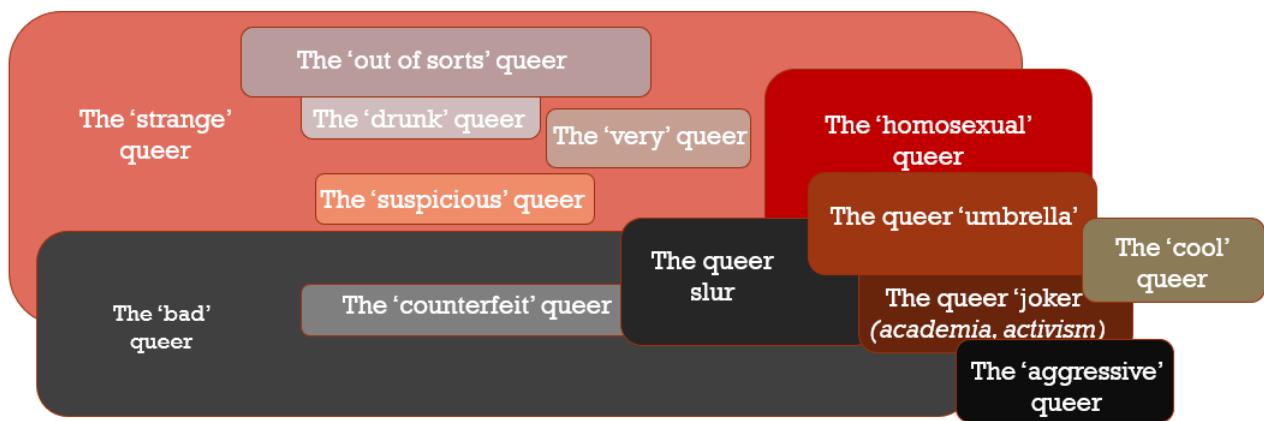


Fig. 3: The palimpsestic semantic development of the English “queer”

By adding the negativity of the “bad” “queer,” this merging of the two “queers” laid the foundation for the pejorative meaning and for a derogatory and offensive use. The newly acquired meaning of “homosexual” at the beginning of the 20th century was thus easily turned into a derogatory and offensive slur. This slur, I argue, became possible and draws its force from the merging of the two previously distinct “queers”: It owes its “homosexual” meaning to the euphemistic transformation of the “strange” “queer,” and its aggressively derogatory force to the negativity of the “bad” “queer.” The meaning of “queer” as “homosexual” and its use as a slur became prevalent over the course of the 20th century with respect to all other previous meanings and uses.

The queer slur and its improbable career in activism and academia

Even though, as outlined above, the prevalent understanding had led to its use as a highly offensive slur, “queer” managed the improbable step forward of ameliorating its meaning and use: towards the end of the 20th century, it started to become used as a self-definition and underwent a process of

¹⁸ *Oxford English Dictionary*, “queer adj2.”

¹⁹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, “queer adj2.”

²⁰ *Oxford English Dictionary*, “queer adj2.”

(re-)appropriation. Activist groups targeted with the slur took on “queer” for themselves and reclaimed the term. This appropriation of the term not only showed a useful means of dealing with and overcoming the offensiveness but overturned and transformed its discriminatory quality into the aggressive power needed in queer activism.

The slur “queer” was taken on as a self-definition in a process of reclaiming and the violent power of “queer” has thus become the force of the new, positive self-identifier, as the following examples show:



Fig. 4: Example of a self-confident use of the English “queer” as an autodefinition

This button shows the chant used by the activist groups Queer Nation and ACT UP New York at the beginning of the 1990s which turned into a rallying cry, namely: “We’re here, we’re queer, get used to it.”²¹ The aggressive potential of queer becomes clearly visible in the following example:



Fig. 5: The aggressive power of “queer” as an autodefinition²²

²¹ “We’re here, we’re queer, get used to it,” accessed on November 19, 2018. <http://queernationny.org/history>.

²² “Not gay as in happy, but queer as in fuck you,” accessed on November 19, 2018. <https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1328126-lgbtq>.

These examples show how the re-appropriation of the offensive slur for self-definition turned the hurtful offensive and discriminatory force into a powerful tool, not only as a form of defense but rather of protest, which allows the targeted person to regain agency. Butler explains this special “superpower” of the re-appropriated “queer:”

The term “queer” has operated as one linguistic practice whose purpose has been the shaming of the subject it names or, rather, the producing of a subject through that shaming interpellation. “Queer” derives its force precisely through the repeated invocation by which it has become linked to accusation, pathologization, insult.²³

The new use of “queer” as a powerful self-definition plays an important role in and emerges from activism, particularly the activism of the 1980s-90s during the AIDS crisis. For example, the year 1990 saw the birth of an LGBT activist organization named Queer Nation, founded out of the AIDS activist group ACT UP: this was the organization that used “queer” in its name as a self-definition, as outlined above, and, more specifically, as an umbrella term embracing lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans activists. The group also devised the chant shown in the example above (Fig. 5).

In her introduction to the *Ashgate Research Companion to Queer Theory*, Giffney explains these comprehensive usages of queer: “Queer can function as a synonym for ‘lesbian and gay’ or as shorthand for members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community more generally; what Gloria Anzaldúa refers to as a needed but ‘false unifying umbrella’ [...]”²⁴ As this quote shows, “queer” had become the object of discussions in the academic world. In 1990, “queer” started its improbable career from a highly offensive slur to a much-discussed academic concept which gave a name to theories and a broad and diverse field of studies. The use of “queer” in academia goes back to de Lauretis who coined it in a talk on the new field of queer theory. For her, queer theory offered a way of thinking about lesbian and gay sexualities beyond the narrow rubrics of either deviance or preference, “as forms of resistance to cultural homogenization, counteracting dominant discourses with other constructions of the subject in culture.”²⁵

Since then, “queer” has opened up its semantic potential in academia, often also moving away from the focus on sexuality. Halperin finds the defining element of “queer” in its relation to the norm: “‘queer’ [...] acquires its meaning from its oppositional relation to the norm. Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant.”²⁶ This very broad, anti-normative understanding and the consequent distance (at least on an emotive level) from the offensive sexual slur offers “queer” the chance of not only a more widespread use, but even of becoming almost a type of buzzword in academic-activist and also artistic circles, up to the point where it acquires a “cool” connotation. This new sense of modern, hip, and cool can be observed for example on the entry “Being queer is cool” on the blog *Beyond the Binary: A Magazine for UK Non-Binary People*.²⁷ Another strong example for the “cool” “queer” can be found in an article right after David Bowie’s death in January 2016, entitled “how david bowie made queer cool”:

With his much discussed insatiable, pansexual appetite, Bowie wiped out the narrative of the tragic queer (always punished in Hollywood films and dying in novels) and replaced it with one of power and pleasure. Simply put, Bowie made being queer look not like something one must suffer but something

²³ Butler, “Critically queer.”

²⁴ Giffney, “The ‘q’ Word.”

²⁵ De Lauretis, “Queer Studies.”

²⁶ David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 62.

²⁷ Charlie Mitchell, “Being queer is cool” *Beyond the Binary: A Magazine for UK Non-Binary People*, accessed on November 19, 2018. <http://beyondthebinary.co.uk/being-queer-is-cool/>.

one could revel in: not only bearable, but desirable. Queer sexuality is always at the vanguard of liberation.²⁸

The Palimpsestic Semantic Potential of Queer

To sum up, it can be observed that the development of the meaning of “queer” as “homosexual” did, however, not erase its prior meanings. The combination of the preexisting meanings of “strange” and “bad” provide the perfect basis for the use of “queer” as a slur, as an offensive, pejorative epithet against homosexuals, mainly homosexual men. And again, this set of characteristics, this semantic potential, led “queer” to become a proud yet also aggressive self-identifier in the 1980s and 90s. These new uses, together with older meanings shining through, laid the foundation for different understandings of “queer” today. The understanding of “queer” as set against norms, as transgressing norms, as offering “strange” alternatives to the norm, would not be possible without the historical semantic developments. As already outlined, the offensive power of the term gives today’s “queers,” especially the self-identifier and the “cool” “queer,” significant force. In many uses of “queer” today, the historic meanings have not died out at all, but shine through and provide “queer” with important semantic and connotative features.

As stated at the beginning of this article, “queer” has not only made a notable career within the English language; it has also traveled and made its way into other languages. In what follows, I will outline how “queer” has traveled into the Italian language and analyze what meanings “queer” carried along on its way and what new meanings and connotations it took on once it arrived there. Furthermore, I will disentangle the interplay between imported and adopted “queers” and the previously existing Italian correspondents with a particular focus on their consideration as localizations of “queer” in Italian.

The Italian “Queer”

Entry into the Italian Lexicon

“Queer” has not only found its way into the Italian lexicon, but it has spread with considerable success, particularly in the academic context. The task of finding out to what extent “queer” has also reached the Italian general public is more difficult. A reliable barometer for the diffusion of terms in mainstream language are usually general-purpose dictionaries. And, indeed, we can observe that “queer” is listed in several general-purpose dictionaries of the Italian language, even though this has happened only rather recently.

It was only in its 2009 supplement that the *Grande Dizionario della Lingua Italiana* by Battaglia, the monumental piece of Italian lexicography and reference tool par excellence, first included “queer” to the lemmary:

²⁸ “how david bowie made queer cool,” accessed on November 19, 2018. https://i-d.vice.com/en_us/article/bjzbe3/how-david-bowie-made-queer-cool.

Queer /kwɪr/, correttamente /kwɪə(r)/, agg. Invar. Che ha un orientamento sessuale o di genere che non coincide con i modelli imposti dalla cultura dominante. – In partic.: omosessuale. – Anche sostant.

La Repubblica delle Donne [3-XI-1998]: Le cyberfemministe chiamano ciò 'il soggetto queer', che per il vocabolario sta per anomalo, strano, bizzarro, svitato e, nello slang, 'checca'; e per loro rappresenta 'il terzo elemento, non solo maschio o femmina, naturale o artificiale, né una via di mezzo, ma l'uno e l'altro insieme e dunque altro e diverso da entrambi'. *Panorama* [29-VIII-2005]: Benvenuti alla lotta per le primarie. Alla conquista dell'elettorato Gltq, ossia gay, lesbo, bisex, transgender, queer, cioè tutto il vasto mondo che non si riconosce nell'ortodossia etero: almeno 3 milioni di elettori, secondo varie stime.

2. Che è proprio, che si riferisce a tale orientamento.

www.arcilesbicafirenze.it [12-VII-2006]: 'Queerforpeace' lavora alla costruzione di una prospettiva di pace e amore queer, non etrocentrica, nella convinzione che solo l'emancipazione da tutte le oppressioni, a partire da quelle che affliggono l'individuo, permetta di annullare la retorica mortifera della guerra. *Diario* [16-II-2007], 46: Il fatto che di recente un quotidiano come 'La Repubblica' abbia dedicato grande spazio alla tesi di un laureando sull'omosessualità significa proprio questo: che si considerino gli studi 'queer' come una notizia. = Voce ingl., propr. 'strano, bizzarro'.

Fig. 6: Entry “queer” in Battaglia: GDLI suppl. 2009²⁹

Here, “queer” is defined as follows: “Che ha un orientamento sessuale o di genere che non coincide con i modelli imposti dalla cultura dominante. – In partic.: omosessuale.” (A person who has a sexual or gender orientation which does not coincide with the models imposed by the dominant culture. – in particular: homosexual.” My translation). The definition given in the Battaglia shows an understanding of “queer” as an umbrella term, though with a strong focus on gender and sexuality matters, and homosexuality is particularly foregrounded. Battaglia indicates 1998 as the first attestation of “queer” in the Italian language and provides *La Repubblica delle Donne* of November 3, 1998 as the source of this first attestation.

The online dictionary Lo Zingarelli, which is updated annually and can thus be considered one of the most up-to-date Italian dictionaries on the market, offers the following entry for “queer”:

queer /ingl.  kwɪə(r)/

[vc. ingl. di orig. sconosciuta ☼ 1992]

A s. m. e f. inv.

• diverso, nel sign. B | omosessuale

B anche agg. inv. (posposto a un sost.): *movimento, cinema queer*

Fig. 7: Entry “queer” in Lo Zingarelli 2019 online³⁰

²⁹ GDLI, “queer.”

³⁰ *Lo Zingarelli 2019*, “queer.”

Lo Zingarelli 2019 online suggests *diverso* (diverse) and *omosessuale* (homosexual) as the definition of “queer.” The definition provided is not only extremely short (one-word definition), but also suggests a very broad “diverse” as a synonym for “queer.” Additionally, it offers “homosexual” as another synonym, which might in turn seem to be a rather narrow definition. Interestingly, Lo Zingarelli 2019 indicates 1992 as the year of the first attestation, unfortunately without supplying any further information.



si dice di chi ha orientamento sessuale e/o identità di genere diversi da quelli canonici

Etimologia: ← voce ingl.; propr. ‘strano, insolito’.

Fig. 8: Entry “queer” in Garzanti online³¹

Another Italian online dictionary, the Garzanti online, defines “queer” as follows: “si dice di chi ha orientamento sessuale e/o identità di genere diversi da quelli canonici.” (“said of someone who has a sexual orientation and/or gender identity which differs from the canonical ones.” My translation)³² The Garzanti also provides information on the origin of “queer” in the English language; here “strano, insolito,” i.e. “strange” and “unusual.” While the Italian definition explicitly limits the meanings of “queer” to fields of sexuality and gender, the supposed original English term only expresses the “strange” “queer.”

The etymological information offered by Devoto-Oli Digitale is slightly different and the definition notably broader:



Definizione

ETIMO Voce ingl., propr. “bizzarro, eccentrico”
DATA 2002.

Che, chi in ambito sessuale, culturale o sociale segue orientamenti o comportamenti che non rientrano nelle definizioni di normalità codificate dalla cultura egemone

Fig. 9: Entry “queer” in Devoto-Oli Digitale³³

³¹ Garzanti online, “queer.”

³² Garzanti online, “queer.”

³³ Devoto-Oli Digitale, “queer.”

(“[a person] who, in the context of sexuality, culture, or society, follows orientations or behaviors which do not meet the definitions of normality as codified by the hegemonic culture.” My translation) In this dictionary, “queer” can also only be found as a loan word without adaptations, but the definition is notably different and broader than those of the other general-purpose dictionaries: While the semantic context of sexuality is mentioned, it is – contrary to the other dictionaries – not exclusive. According to this definition, “queer” is used also for violations of cultural and social norms. It is interesting to note that this definition here is formulated using the terminology of cultural studies, such as Gramsci’s “hegemonic culture.” Devoto-Oli only gives 2002 as the date of the first attestation but unfortunately also does not provide the respective source.

The analyzed dictionary entries show that in the Italian language, it seems as if “queer” could almost exclusively be found as a loan word without adaptations. The definitions given in these four sample dictionaries suggest that the Italian “queer” is used mostly as a synonym for homosexual or as an umbrella term for non-normative identities. The given etymologies trace the Italian “queer” back to the English “queer,” but they limit the semantic range of the English “queer” to “strange,” “unusual” (Garzanti online), or “bizarre and eccentric” (Devoto-Oli) and do not at all mention other meanings such as “bad,” “gay,” the offensive slur, or any other of the semantic content outlined above.

Diffusions, Uses, Meanings, and Transformations

The first attestations indicated by the above-mentioned dictionaries prove the hypothesis that “queer” reached the Italian language in the 1990s. The first attestation given by Battaglia (1998, source provided) can easily be backdated to the 1990s, as also claimed by Lo Zingarelli (1992; source not provided).

My own research at the Cassero in Bologna (Italy) first led to a detailed explanation of the term “queer” and the new field of queer theory, provided by Cavarero in her introduction to the 1996 translation of Butler’s *Bodies that matter, Corpi che contano* by Simona Capelli.³⁴ Indeed, Cavarero goes so far as to suggest the untranslatability of “queer” into Italian, thus putting forward a strong argument in favor of maintaining the English term. For comparative reasons and in order to ensure a better understanding of the English “queer” with both its transgressive and offensive content, she draws a comparison to the Italian “pervertito” (perverse).

“Queer” in the Italian language can, though, be dated back further: In April 1993, the monthly gay and lesbian magazine QUIR was published for the first time in Florence:

³⁴ A heartfelt thank you to Sara from the *Centro di Documentazione “Flavia Madaschi”* at the *Cassero LGBT Center* for her valuable help and assistance; Cavarero, “Prefazione.”



Fig. 10: Cover of the Florentine lesbian and gay magazine “Quir”³⁵

This monthly magazine was published by Arci Gay/Arci Gay Donna Firenze under the responsibility of Franco Grillini with editorial coordination by Nina Bellini. The magazine shows its close connection to and influences from the English-speaking world and is published in a bilingual Italian-English format. Indeed, the first edition no. 0 dated April 1993 opens with a bilingual editorial note about the choice of the title of the magazine, in which Bellini explains:

“Siamo qui, siamo quir...” Questa espressione è nata dopo anni di ricerca di una identità omosessuale che andasse bene per tutte le realtà e diversità che rendono il nostro mondo gay così complesso. Con una parola sola, (queer in inglese) era possibile a descrivere finalmente tutti – gay, gaia, lesbica, omosessuale, frocio, buco, donna che ama un'altra donna, maschio che ama un altro maschio, diverso/a, separatista, leather, camionista, butch/femme, orso, travestito, transessuale, bisessuale; insomma, qualsiasi cosa non eterosessuale. [...] Queer purtroppo non si traduce bene in italiano. L'unica cosa da fare era almeno di scriverlo all'italiana, cioè, “quir.”³⁶ [emphasis in the original]

This detailed explanation underlines the need for new terms in Italian in order to do justice (linguistically) to non-heterosexual diversity. “Queer” is thus used as an umbrella term. Particularly interesting in this case is the need to highlight the Italianization of the term as reflected in the non-

³⁵ *Quir* no. 1

³⁶ “We’re here, we’re queer...” This expression was started after years of trying to find a gay identity that could fit in all the diverse factions that make our gay world so complex. With just one word, “queer,” it is finally possible to describe everyone – gay, lesbian, homosexual, faggot, queen, women who prefer women, men who prefer men, separatist, leather, dyke, butch, femme, bear, transvestite, transsexual, in other words, anything not heterosexual. [...] Queer unfortunately can’t be translated very well in Italian due to the problem of the use of gender in the Italian language. We’ve decided to at least write it in its Italian pronunciation, and that is “quir.” Emphasis in the original. The editorial of the journal is drafted in both Italian and English, i.e. both the Italian quote above and the English version in the footnote are the original texts. It is to be noted, though, that the English version differs slightly from the Italian one, e.g. “bisexual” is missing in the given list, “we’ve decided to” clearly indicates a weaker determination than the Italian “L’unica cosa da fare...” Furthermore, an explanation was added to the English version about the problem of grammatical gender in Italian.

standard spelling. The fact that “queer” is to be considered a new entry to the Italian language is reflected in the decision to begin the editorial with a dictionary-like definition of the new term “queer”:

queer [kwier*] *agg.* 1 strano, bizzarro 2 (*fam.*) omosessuale 3 (*fam.*) svitato // - street, difficoltà finanziare; traffici poco onesti *s.* omosessuale // in -, (*sl.*) nelle peste 4 (*loc.*) quir, il mensile fiorentino di cultura e vita lesbica, gay e non solo.

Fig. 11: Lexicographical entry “queer” at the beginning of the editorial of *Quir*³⁷

Queer in the Italian language, though, can be dated back even further. Already a year earlier, another magazine was published under the title *Padova Queer*, as the bulletin of Arci Gay Padua.

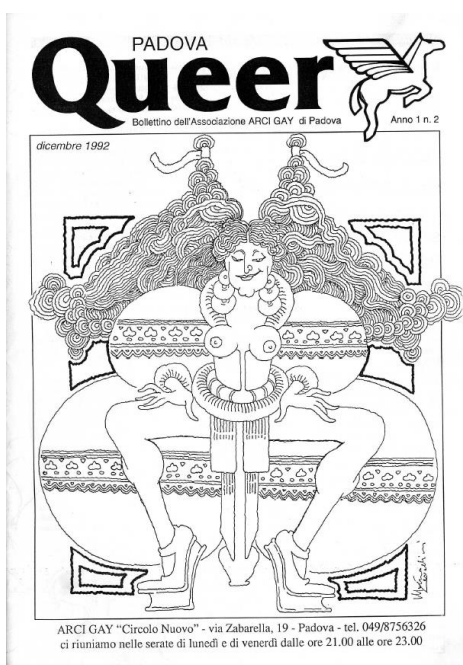


Fig. 12: Cover of the Paduan Arci Gay’s Bulletin “Padova Queer”³⁸

Unfortunately, the very first edition was not retrievable, so it was impossible for me to verify if Arci Gay Padua also provided introductory remarks about the choice of their title and the meanings and use of “queer.”

The fact that both of these magazines were published by local activist groups of the Arci Gay association shows that “queer” initially got access to the Italian context and language through activism; academia followed slightly later on through the first translations of key texts from the new field of queer theory and their introductory remarks, as the examples provided above clearly indicate. Particularly noteworthy are the meanings and uses “queer” brought with it to Italy, namely, on the one hand, mostly in activism, the all-embracing non-heterosexual umbrella, and, on the other, in academia, the anti-normative “queer” originating in the often sexually loaded, aggressive, and reclaimed slur.

The Problem of Translatability

³⁷ *Quir* no. 1, p. 2.

³⁸ *Queer Padova*.

While the previous chapters offered a semasiological analysis of both the English and the Italian “queer,” it is also interesting to change the analytical perspective and investigate an onomasiological approach. The question, thus, is through which lexical items the semantic content of the English “queer,” ranging from the strange and bad homosexual slur to the all-embracing, powerful, aggressive and jolly-like autodefinition, can be expressed in Italian.

In her introduction to *Corpi che contano* (*Bodies that matter*, 1996), Cavarero underlines the untranslatability of “queer” to Italian, but nevertheless tries to come up with an Italian alternative, suggesting *pervertito* as the closest equivalent. Arci Gay Firenze strove to maintain a connection with the English-speaking world, or rather, took into account English as a lingua franca to communicate with the world. However, they nevertheless acknowledged the need for a special Italian, or more precisely Florentine queer identity. For this reason they decided to integrate the English “queer” into the Italian lexicon and to reflect this integration through an explicitly Italian pronunciation, which, in turn, was reflected in the particular spelling of queer as “quir,” as Bellini explains in the editorial: “QUIR is meant to reflect Italian culture or more precisely, Florentine [sic] culture. [...] We want to ‘promote’ our homosexuality, Italian homosexuality.”³⁹ This conscious effort can be considered a first adaptation of “queer” in the Italian language. The detailed explanation of this step highlights the importance for this activist group of a localization of “queer.”

In spite of the assumed untranslatability of “queer,” as suggested by Cavarero, several attempts have been made to nevertheless translate “queer” into Italian. I see the need, though, to draw a line more or less at the beginning of the 1990s and to distinguish between a pre- and post-1990s “queer” when discussing translatability issues, because only then did “queer” make its way into academia and activism, and open up its semantic spectrum. Earlier on, the palimpsestic interplay of its semantic contents was not as complex, and furthermore “queer” had not yet reached the fame that allowed it to travel to other languages. William Burroughs’ novel *Queer* gives a fitting example to prove this point and shows the easier translatability of the pre-1990s “queer.” Written in the 1950s, and published only in 1985, “queer” in the homonymous novel mainly served as a term to denominate a homosexual, maybe effeminate man, and Burroughs clearly plays with its usage as a slur. In its 1998 translation to Italian, “queer” was rendered as “checca,” a term which accentuates exactly these semantic aspects outlined for Burroughs’ “queer,” namely male homosexuality, effeminacy, plus the pejorative use. With their blunt homophobia, both the English “queer” in this sense and the Italian “checca” today seem outdated.

The problem of “queer’s” untranslatability and accordingly the need for “queer” in Italian in the form of a calque or as a loanword in an adapted form thus mainly arises in the 1990s, when the English “queer” opens up its semantic potential and acquires the new semantic force as a self-definition and when it transforms into a key theoretical concept in academia. This double-layered evolution both into a positive and proud self-definition in activism as well as a new, critical, and anti-normative concept in academia fueled its diffusion in other languages and also in Italian, where queer did not encounter strong competitors from within the Italian lexicon (or not yet).

The New Italian Queer: Hip, Cool, Chic – and Toothless?

The question arises as to how it could be possible that “queer,” with its extremely negative connotations in English, managed to cross the ocean and languages and to redefine itself as a hip, chic, cool, and even elitist (self-)definition, losing its offensiveness, together with its aggressiveness, and, again, also together with its political force.

³⁹ *Quir* no. 1, p. 2.

When “queer” entered the Italian linguistic and cultural context in the 1990s, it had just acquired its new meaning(s) in the U.S. English context, and had started to be used as a positive self-definition, and was making its way into academia. The previously existing slur had no real purchase on the international linguistic market, as other languages already offered their share of a broad range of offensive slurs against sexually and gender non-conforming persons. As a consequence, it can be concluded that “queer” made its way into other languages, such as Italian, only with those semantic contents that were missing in the respective context – namely the all-embracing, joker-like self-definition plus the newly acquired coolness factor.

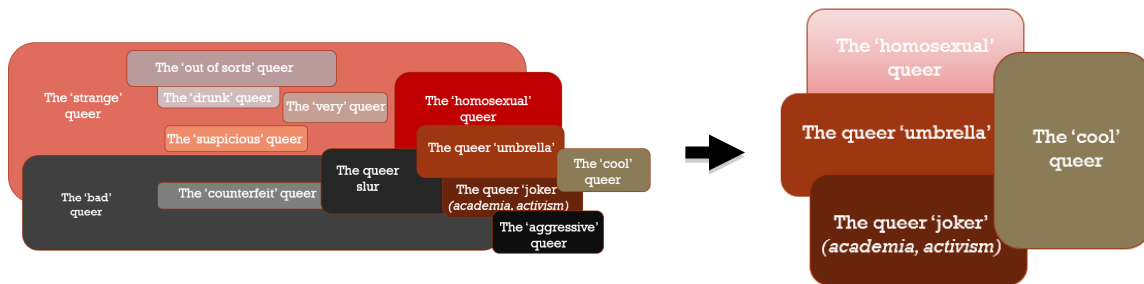


Fig. 13: The palimpsestic semantic development of the English and Italian “queers”

Thus, I argue that “queer” traveled light when it made its transatlantic journey, leaving behind the weight of the “bad” and the offensive slur, and merely brought along the queer umbrella and the joker-like qualities, with the “homosexual” “queer” almost hiding in the background, overshadowed in particular by the “cool” “queer.” Thus it seems that “queer” was deprived of its offensive qualities, and almost even seemed to lose its “homosexual” semantic content.

Criticism of the Italian “Queer”

As such a broad concept, and without any trace of the offensive-turned-aggressive connotational potential, “queer” also left behind much of its political power. Furthermore, as such a comprehensive self-definition, in combination with its opposition to definition and classification, “queer” transformed into such a flexible joker that, as some critics put it, anything goes, and anything can be “queer,” underlining the risk of “queer” turning into a content-free empty shell – albeit with a certain coolness factor.

In contrast, attempts to maintain the offensiveness, aggressiveness, and the political power of the English “queer” in Italian, require either sufficient knowledge of the English “queer” and its historical semantic developments, or additional translational explanations to fill the knowledge gap. It seems particularly its new usage in academia that credits “queer” with a certain elitist connotation, which is further fueled by the role of “queer” as an Anglicism in Italian, a phenomenon often criticized as elitist and even denounced as “linguistic snobbery.”⁴⁰

As the attempt by Cavarero shows, these explanations often draw on parallels from the Italian language in order to illustrate the offensive potential of the word. Indeed, “queer” was not always met with a warm welcome on its arrival on the shores of the Italian language. I will not go into general criticism of queer activism, queer theory, or queer studies, but rather focus on criticism outlining the need for Italian or regionally localized forms of “queer.” Among the most widespread arguments voiced against the use of “queer” in Italian are a) the importance of resisting the dominance of U.S.

⁴⁰ Gualdo, “Dagli sterlini al world wide web.”

language and cultures and of positioning oneself in an explicitly Italian or regional context, and b) the need to oppose the usage of “queer” as cool, chic, and elitist, as deprived of its shocking political force.

Italian Localizations—Semasiological Analyses of Frocio, Frocia, Femminiellø, and Ricchione

In order to avoid the requirement of English language skills and on the contrary to stress a particular locatedness, a variety of Italian regional and dialect alternatives to “queer” have been put forward particularly by activist circles. However, while the regional localization is certainly important, so is the aim of re-establishing the lost political force and aggressive power of “queer.”

In the following, I will exemplarily unfurl some suggested localized alternatives like *frocio* and *frocia*, which seem to be ever more widely disseminated in the Italian academic-activist context, as well as *femminiello* and *ricchione*, which appear to have (re-)gained importance especially in activism in the South of Italy. For these lexical items, which, as I argue, can be put forward as alternatives to the English “queer” in Italian, I will again provide semasiological analyses in order to bring to light their meaning potential. It is the aim of this analysis to carve out the parallels as well as the respective strengths and weaknesses of these lexical items in juxtaposition with “queer,” and to reveal their interconnectedness.

Frocio – Frocia

A series of different interpretations have been suggested as possible etymologies of the word *frocio*, ranging from a dialectal distortion of *français* to *fronscè* and then *frocio*, to an assumed derivation of *feroce*, and to other hypothesis tracing it even back to the German *Frosch* (frog).⁴¹ My research for the etymology of *frocio* led me directly to an article by Massimo Consoli in *Paese sera* del 22 ottobre 1985 entitled “Feroce, foscio o al limite gay,” in which Consoli suggests three theories about the origin of *frocio*: First, originally as *feroci* used as a slur against the Landsknechte, the German soldiers among the imperial troops during the Sack of Rome under Charles V in 1527, who raped women and men in equal measure; secondly, in reference to a non-defined *fontana delle froge*, a fountain in Rome where the Romans met to seek out homosexual encounters; and thirdly, as a derivation from *foscio* (flaccid), hinting at softness and/or effeminacy or referring to the idea that a male *frocio* was not sexually aroused by women.⁴²

Even though some thematic publications such as *L’etimologico. Vocabolario della lingua italiana* (EVLI) seem rather sure that *frocio* can be traced back to the adjective *foscio*, doubt remains (“prob.”) and alternative etymologies continue to be discussed.

frocio s.m. [1914] ~ omosessuale.
FORMAZIONE ITALIANA DI ORIGINE ROMANZA: VOCE roman., prob. da *flòscio* nel senso di ‘molle, effeminato’ con resa popolare *fr-* del nesso *fl-*, proprio delle voci dotte.

Fig. 14: Entry *frocio* in EVLI⁴³

⁴¹ *Parlare civile*, “frocio.”

⁴² Consoli’s explanations could only be retrieved second hand from Dall’Orto’s website: <http://www.giovannidallorto.com/cultura/checcabolaro/frocio.html>, accessed on November 19, 2018.

⁴³ Nocentini: *L’etimologico*.

What appears sufficiently certain, though, is that *frocio* originates in Roman dialect, but spread across Italy, mostly the center and North. Countless examples can be found for the use of *frocio* as a slur for gay men, not only by Romans; it seems that *frocio* has taken on the role of an almost nationwide slur.⁴⁴ The use of *frocio* as a slur can also be found in literature.⁴⁵

As a slur, *frocio* occurs in Italian in the form of a personal noun, ending in the suffix -o as a marker for masculine gender. This also corresponds to its use as a slur targeting homosexual men. This explicit (grammatical) gender marking is of course a feature that distinguishes *frocio* from the English “queer,” which, like most English nouns or adjectives, has no specific gender marker. While the English “queer” in its undefinedness in terms of grammatical gender leaves room to hide the gender, and thus offers immediate possibilities of inclusion, the gender-markedness of *frocio* precludes any possibility of using the slur against women. On the other hand, though, it is exactly this gender marker that opens up a new subversive potential that is unavailable to the English “queer,” namely its new construction as a female-gendered version.

Especially in recent times, and as I argue, as an alternative or Italian version of “queer,” *frocio* also came to be used as a self-definition, as the title of Pini’s book *Quando eravamo froci: gli omosessuali nell’Italia di una volta* clearly shows.⁴⁶

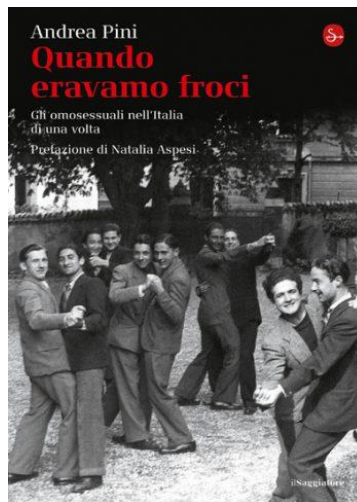


Fig. 15: Andrea Pini: *Quando eravamo froci*

While this title clearly hints at times prior to the arrival of “gay” and “queer” in Italy and the widespread use of *frocio* as a slur in that period, more recent uses of *frocio* and particularly *frocia* as self-definitions can also be found in Italian activist circles. Some examples such as the following Facebook page show a self-confident and aggressive use of *frocia* as a self-definition by a lesbian woman, as can be deduced from the page name “E il fidanzatino? No grazie, sono frocia.”⁴⁷

⁴⁴ For instance, the infamous controversy between the two soccer coaches Sarri (Naples) and Mancini (Milan) in 2016, in which Sarri used the slur “frocio” against Mancini. <https://video.repubblica.it/sport/sarri-insulta-mancini-accuse-di-omofobia-il-momento-della-lite/225474/224737?ref=search>, accessed on November 16, 2018.

⁴⁵ Chiulli: *Maledetti froci*; Benedetti and Giovannetti: *Frocio e basta*.

⁴⁶ Pini: *Quando eravamo froci*.

⁴⁷ “Do you have a boyfriend? No thanks, I’m *frocia*,” accessed on November 19, 2018. My translation. <https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=E%20il%20fidanzatino%3F%20No%20grazie%2C%20sono%20frocia>. (Site is no longer active).



Fig. 16: Facebook page illustrating a use of *frocia*

Another example that shows the (re-)appropriation of *frocia* can be found in the context of the “Lovers Film Festival” in Turin, where graffiti appeared on the walls in order to protest the commercialization and mainstreaming of LGBTQ issues, as proclaimed in the open statement by the self-defined *frocie*:

Mentre il queer diventa l'ultimo termine “sexy,” il transfemminismo l'ennesima etichetta “cool,” l'omosessualità il colorato arcobaleno della “diversità” nel capitalismo, noi frocie incivili e arrabbiate continueremo a ribadire che i nostri corpi e le nostre vite non sono un nuovo colorato prodotto di mercato.⁴⁸



Fig. 17: Graffiti “frocie contro il lovers” against the *Lovers Film Festival Turin* 2018⁴⁹

⁴⁸ “[...] While queer has become the latest “sexy” term, transfeminism the umpteenth “cool” label, and homosexuality the rainbow colors of “diversity” in capitalism, we uncivil(ized) and angry *frocie* will continue to stress that our bodies and our lives are not a new colorful product of the market. [...]” accessed on November 19, 2018. My translation. <https://www.autistici.org/macerie/?p=33109>.

⁴⁹ “Frocie contro il lovers,” accessed on November 05, 2018. <http://gabosutorino.blogspot.com/2018/04/frocie-contro-lovers-il-solito-film-al.html>.

Given its long history and the widespread recognition, *froci** offers an easy morphological adaptability and transformability: especially in activism, a broad range of ironic neologisms and occasionalisms such as *frociara*, *frociarola*, *frocializzare*, *frocialista*, *frocializzazione*, *frocialismo*, etc., and also the adjectival use as in *solidarietà frocia* (*frocia* solidarity), *lotta frocia* (*frocia* fight), *rivolta frocia* (*frocia* revolt), etc. can be found.⁵⁰



Fig. 18: Demonstration “rivolta frocia”⁵¹

The adjectival use in particular has strong political potential, as this example of an LGBTQ activist account on Twitter shows:



Fig. 19: Ironic logo imitating the logo of the Italian nationalist party “Forza Nuova”⁵²

Femminiellə

As is typical of dialect words, many alternate spellings can be found such as *femminella*, *femminiello*, *femmenella*, *fummeniell* or *femmenell*. To do justice to its pronunciation ending in the Neapolitan schwa /ə/, allowing for its positioning also between the two grammatical genders (in -a and -o) in standard Italian, I opted for the spelling *femminiellə* in this article.

Femminiellə was formed as an alteration of *femmina*, which as an adjective can be translated as “female” and which especially in dialects of the South such as Neapolitan is also used as a noun, to which the suffix “-ello” was added to form a diminutive. While this morphopragmatic step of altering

⁵⁰ In order to include both the form in -o and in -a, the suffix is replaced by *

⁵¹ “Rivolta frocia,” accessed on November 05, 2018. <https://contagioantispicista.noblogs.org/post/2018/06/23/contro-il-capitalismo-gay-rivolta-frocia/>.

⁵² “Frocia nuova,” accessed on November 19, 2018. <https://twitter.com/frocianuova>. “Frocia nuova” is the name of a twitter account. Both the similarity of the wording as well as the use of the exact same logo mocks the Italian nationalist party Forza Nuova.

a noun into a diminutive by adding an evaluative affix like -ello usually leads to alternations which are characterized by their temporality (to express the speaker's momentary evaluation), in the case of *femminiellə* the use became stable, and thus a new noun was created.

As a fixed component, the *femminiellə* has been part of Neapolitan culture for centuries, and as such, evidence can be traced back to the 16th century in Giovanni Batista della Porta's *De Humana Physiognomonìa*, 1586:

Nell'isola di Sicilia sono molti effeminati. Et io ne viddi uno in Napoli di pochi peli in barba o quasi niuno; di piccola bocca, di ciglia delicate e dritte, di occhio vergognoso, come donna; la voce debole, sottile, non poteva soffrir molta fatica; di collo non fermo, di color bianco, che si mordeva le labra; et insomma con corpo e gesti di femina. Volentieri stava in casa e sempre con una faldiglia come donna attendeva alla cucina et alla conocchia; fuggiva gli omini, e conversava con le femine volentieri, e giacendo con loro, era più femina che l'istesse femine; ragionava come femina, e si dava l'articolo femminile sempre: "trista me, amara me."⁵³

Nevertheless, the first lexical attestation is to be found much later, in *Uso e costume dei cammoristi* by Abele de Blasio, published in 1897:

Le nostre femminelle di giorno si occupano di faccende domestiche, appunto come fanno le donne, e poi in ora stabilita si fanno alla finestra ed aspettano i loro amanti.⁵⁴

Femminiellə is a unique example in this analysis, because in contrast to "queer" or *froci**, it cannot be considered a slur, but is rather a specific Neapolitan identity category. While sometimes described as a homosexual, effeminate man, and cross-dresser, this explanation does not do justice to a *femminiellə*, but only tries to force them into a Western binary classification system of sex, gender, and sexuality. More accurately, the *femminiellə* can be considered a specific, Neapolitan, non-Western gender expression outside of the dominant binary model. As such, the use of *femminiellə* is particularly linked and also limited to the city (and surrounding area) of Naples.

Thanks to its Neapolitaness and its origin in the Neapolitan dialect, *femminiellə* overcomes the morphologically obligatory ending in -a or -o in Italian by ending in a schwa /ə/, thus also eliminating the grammatical classifiability as masculine or feminine.

Femminiellə can thus take on both the role of a traditional Neapolitan identity and also, especially in recent times in young local activist circles, stand in opposition to the hegemonic Western binary gender system and its sexuality models, serving as a kind of localized Neapolitan "queer" by fulfilling the anti-normative function of disturbing dominant heteronormativity. In this newer use, *femminiellə* can be considered, in a certain sense, as having been appropriated by activism. Also in this appropriation, though, it remains strictly limited to Neapolitans.

⁵³ On the Island of Sicily there are many effeminate [men]. I saw one in Naples, with little hair in his beard or almost none; with a small mouth, with delicate and straight eyelashes, with a shameful eye, like a woman; a weak, thin voice, who could not endure much labor, with a weak neck, with a pale complexion, who bit his lip, and, in short, with a woman's body and gestures. He liked to stay at home, always wearing a robe, like a woman looked after the kitchen and the sewing; fled from the men, and enjoyed talking to the women, and lying with them, he was more feminine than the women themselves; he thought like a woman, and always used the feminine article for himself as in: "trista me, amara me." (sad; me, bitter; me) Giovanni Battista Della Porta: *De Humana Physiognomonìa*. 1586. My translation.

⁵⁴ "By day, our femminelle take care of domestic errands, exactly like the women do, and then at a certain time, they sit behind the window and wait for their lovers." de Blasio: *Uso e costume*.

The locatedness and positioning of *femminiellà* in Naples also highlights its characteristics as an intersectional form of “queer,” by adding the subject position of the subaltern Southerner within the Italian North-South divide.



JUN 10 Mostre, Terrone e Femmenelle
 Öffentlich · Gastgeber: Laboratoria Transfemminista
 Transpecie Terrona Napoli

Fig. 20: The use of *femminiellà* in current activism by *Laboratoria Transfemminista Transpecie Terrona Napoli*⁵⁵

Ricchione

Discussions about the origin and etymology of *ricchione* or also *recchione* brim over with a variety of more or less reasoned and researched hypotheses. Many of those trace *ricchione* back to *orecchio* (ear), in particular to the Spanish *orejon*, which assumedly reached Naples at the time of the Spanish viceroys.⁵⁶

Not only are the etymology and origin of *ricchione* much debated, but its meaning is as well. Different, sometimes even opposing hypothetical understandings can be found: On the one hand, the *ricchione* could be the sexual partner of a *femminiello*- seen from a perspective that imposes the Western binary gender model and considers the *ricchione* as the active, masculine part. On the other hand, a *ricchione* is also otherwise understood as the passive partner in homosexual intercourse/relationships, where, in contrast to the *femminiello* wearing feminine clothing, the *ricchione* dresses in a masculine way.

What, instead, can be said with certainty is that the term *ricchione* emerged from a Neapolitan context but then spread throughout Italy. Today it seems to be part of the passive lexicon of most Italian speakers, and is widespread and actively used, in contrast to the *femminiellà* which remained in Naples. While its form *ricchione* or *recchione* is understood nationwide, it is actively used mostly in the South. In the North, *ricchione* has developed into regional or dialectal variants such as *reciòn*, *oreggia*, *oreggiatt* and also the Italianized version *orecchione*.⁵⁷ What is to be observed, though, is that, unlike the *femminiellà*, the *ricchione* has not managed to keep its neutral connotation but has mostly turned into a slur, especially outside of its hometown Naples. Thus, the different regional and dialectal variants all stand for the use as a slur, indeed for all homosexual men, effeminate or not, crossdressers or not.

While it is rare, the feminine-gendered version *ricchiona* is also used, more frequently as a slur to offend a homosexual man, further denying his masculinity/virility by using the female marker. So

⁵⁵ *Laboratoria Transfemminista Transpecie Terrona Napoli*, “mostre, terrone e femmenelle.”

⁵⁶ For further details concerning possible etymologies, see for example Edoardo Ballone: *Uguali e diversi*. Milan: Mazzotta, 1979.

⁵⁷ Dall’Orto: “recchione o ricchione.”

far, I have not come across any uses of the word to refer to (lesbian) women, so it seems that its use is limited to men. What can be observed, though, is that *ricchione* seems to be ever more present in activism, where it is often transformed and (ironically) used as an adjective, like *ricchionissimo*, and also in humorous appropriations as in *apericchiona* (cf. Baldo).⁵⁸ It remains to be seen, though, if this sporadic use offers the potential of turning *ricchiona* into an empowering self-definition or if it remains a limited occasionalism.

Conclusion

In many contexts, especially in academe or also for non-regionally marked Italian or international understandings without a special regional marker, “queer” surely is the most common option. *Frocio* and particularly *frocia* offer an Italian alternative which shows a parallel development to “queer” in English. *Froci** in Italian has the disturbing and aggressive power the Italian “queer” is lacking due to missing semantic and connotative content. *Femminiellà* and *ricchione* both add a strong regional marker to their non-heteronormative content, thus transforming into a kind of intersectional “queer” which also includes the othered subject position of Italians from the South (*meridionali*). As such, as explicitly linked to the subaltern of the (Italian) South, the latter two terms also succeed in overcoming the criticism of “queer.”

It is not the intention of this article to give preference to one term over the others. The detailed semasiological analyses have brought to light the different strengths and weaknesses of all terms and help to understand their respective advantages in different usage contexts. I argue that the fact that most of the outlined examples of the Italian terms *frocio*, *frocia*, *femminiellà*, and *ricchione*, as self-definitions in activist circles have originated in the last few years clearly shows the interconnectedness with the U.S. English “queer” and its worldwide diffusion. While the Italian terms had been in use before the arrival of “queer” in the Italian academic and activist context, the use of the different slurs and denominations as a self-definition took on a new twist, which I attribute to the diffusion of queer theory, queer studies, and queer activism. The use of the Italian counterparts seems to reflect the powerful impact of “queer” in academia and its self-confident and aggressive positioning in activism.

The increasing usage of the Italian alternatives clearly shows the struggle with the reduced meaning potential of “queer” in Italian. I understand the various re-creations of new Italian (regional) self-definitions as attempts to find alternatives with an offensive and violent potential which can then be transformed into an aggressive political force in activism.

Most of the Italian options I came across stem from the South of Italy and particularly from the dialects of the South. I read this as a consequence of the criticism of the cool “queer” – the cool, modern, and hip connotations locate “queer” in the elitist, highly-educated universitarian-only context. Without the critical-aggressive potential, it is furthermore deprived of its political force and instead risks turning mainstream. Regional varieties and dialects still play a strong role in Italy, and the role of dialects as sociolects, as markers of a social class, cannot be ignored. I understand the use of low-register/low-key dialectal terms as self-definitions as a clear stand against the elitist “queer.” The use of regional Italian alternatives shows the need for an intersectional “queer” which also takes into account the subaltern position of the Southerner. As such, we can see the Italian regional self-definitions as a sort of territorialized, or maybe localized (post-)“queer.”

⁵⁸ “apericchiona,” accessed on November 19, 2018. <https://www.facebook.com/events/1837212263200877/>;

“ricchionissimo,” accessed on November 19, 2018. <https://www.facebook.com/luca.cortinovis.182>;

Baldo: “Frocie, femminelle.”

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