

Realness, fierceness and throwing shade: what is LGBTQIA+ slang and why is it so important?

The Queens' English: The LGBTQIA+ Dictionary of Lingo and Colloquial Phrases is a comprehensive guide to modern gay slang, queer theory terms, and the colloquialisms that define and celebrate LGBTQIA+ culture.

In Word of Mouth its author, Chloe O. Davis, talks to Michael Rosen about “shade”, “fierce”, and the importance of etymology.

LGBTQIA+ slang

Word of Mouth: Listen to Chloe and Michael in conversation.

LGBTQIA+ slang

Author and lexicographer Chloe O. Davis

What do the letters in LGBTQIA+ stand for?

These stand for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (although the "Q" can also represent Questioning), Intersex, and Asexual. The plus sign is used to acknowledge the plethora of identities that fall outside these labels. These include terms like

pansexual, aromantic, non-binary, bigender, fluid, and androgenous.

A celebration of slang

We're in a climate now where we want to embark on conversations about what inclusion, equity and diversity look like, says Chloe. There needs to be a dialogue around the true spectrum of human identity – whether that be your sexual orientation or expression, and gender identity. This dictionary is a tool for all of us – whether we identify as queer or not – to be able to dive deeper into these conversations and to gain understanding.

“But, more importantly, this dictionary is a celebration of the diverse language that is used to describe the spectrum of gay and queer identity,” says Chloe. “It’s a celebration of what true human identity looks like and it is not binary, it is not monolithic, it is diverse.”

Why is etymology significant?

The etymology of these words is important, says Chloe, and that’s because language lays the foundations of culture. We understand culture more when we know the origin of how these words evolved.

For example, in the 1950s and '60s, when homosexuality was illegal, it was common for gay men to use the she/her pronouns or women's names to identify their lovers – because it protected them. About a century ago – when you were ostracised for being black and for being gay – the Harlem Renaissance took place. There were extravagant underground drag balls, created by black and Latinx gay and trans queer individuals to supplement their self-worth, identity and community. They created the phrase, “in the life”, to mean gay or queer – a code used to disguise it's meaning from the mainstream.

So a lot of this language comes from safety, says Chloe. It also comes from a need for expression, wanting to validate an experience and to say I'm not alone, and from the queer community.

How early does gender stereotyping begin?

Can you tell if a baby is a girl or a boy by the sound of its crying?

Words that sprang out of the New York ballroom scene

Many more words and phrases were born out of the ballroom scene, Chloe explains.

At these balls, walkers would walk or compete to win trophies and prizes based on their presentation. Throwing shade was “to insult or blatantly show contempt for” your opponents, undermining their attitude, ability or appearance. It’s a phrase that has since been appropriated by the larger LGBTQIA+ community and mainstream culture.

Realness is “a quality someone possesses when they have the ability to copy and bring to life a specific look or behaviour,” says Chloe. The term is often used in succession with another adjective or noun: “You are giving major Olivia Pope realness in that white coat today.” Within the ballroom scene, it is a competition where a participant is judged on their ability to embody a particular look or persona in a way that is authentic and realistic. Popular categories include femme queen realness, school boy realness, executive realness and thug realness.

The word fierce is praise that a person might get when they are walking in a ball, says Chloe. It’s celebrating when they are giving it their all and enticing the audience and the judges.

Butch queen is a category competition in the ballroom scene for cisgender men. (Cisgender means that the sex a person is assigned at birth is also how they identify.) It means a gay, bisexual or queer man who possesses both masculine and feminine traits.

Crediting the community

We now hear many of these words on TV and social media and in the streets. What often began as underground language has been adopted and appropriated by mainstream culture because it's so "creative and useful and prevalent," says Chloe.

It is disrespectful for other people to give labels to someone who has not self-assigned themselves that label.

But sometimes when it's taken, it's not used correctly, and it can be used with malice. Crucially, says Chloe, when it comes to labels, these are identities that an individual gives themselves. It is disrespectful for other people to give labels to someone who has not self-assigned themselves that label.

And with words that have been adopted by the mainstream – like fierce and realness – proper credit needs to be given to the community that created them.

Chloe hopes her dictionary will help. “Now the world understands that this is language that belongs to a community so we need to respect it and honour it, and hopefully in time we will all learn to celebrate it.”

Asexual- Lack of sexual attraction. Mostly they do not want a sexual relationship with someone.

Aromantic: similar to asexual but with romance. Mostly they do not want a romantic relationship.

Little bonus: anything like homoromantic, heteroromantic, etc probably relates to asexuality. So I'm panromantic asexual. I'd date anyone but I'm not going to have sex.

However it can be used for like homosexual biromantic. They're date anybody but only want to have sex with the same gender in that case. Basically anything-romantic is the same as anything-sexual except it's just. Not sexual. I guess that's the way to put it.

Pansexual- similar to **bisexual** but used to include non-binary genders or just to say “hey I'd date someone regardless of sex or gender”

Genderfluid- you fluctuates between male and female. Basically some days you may feel more like a guy, you want to present that way, etc. Other days you feel more like a gal, you want to present that way, etc.

Cisgender- you identify as your biological sex. Opposite of transgender.

Transgender- you identify as something other than your biological sex. For example I am a trans guy, I identify as male. I was assigned female at birth (AFAB. For trans gals it's AMAB which you can figure out)

Non-binary: not identifying as male or female. This is also can be used as an umbrella term for those who identify as genderfluid. Basically not conforming to either sex.

There's also agender and a few other words which are Basically fall under non-binary. The three main gender terms are Male, Female, and Non-binary at least that's what I use and I know many use. There's also words that go deeper in, like genderfluid and agender which are self-identifying terms to further explain their gender. Like I'm a male, but I call myself a boy more often than not bc I'm young and I look like a boy rather than a man so. That's just that. It's kind of also like how lesbians

might describe themselves as butch or femme or whatever. It's just to explain who they are more in depth.

Also there is intersex which isn't really a gender identity, some may use it but it's mostly because that's literally how they were born. They were born with both sexual characteristics (I believe that is the wording for it. Honestly please ask people who are actually intersex and furtherout anyone who is genderfluid and agender and so on of what those words mean to them. I cannot 100% speak for those identities and those who are associated with those words)

In simpler terms they were born as both sexes. It is real and does happen.