

Deconstructing sexualities in Daniel MacIvor's *A Beautiful View*

Michaela Pňáčková

Abstract

The paper analyses linguistic deconstruction of sexualities on the text by Daniel MacIvor *A Beautiful View*. The author looks into the way the characters' relationship is indexed in their language as well as the deconstruction of their sexual identities by refusing to label them. Linguistically, some speech acts create context, which becomes a crucial factor in constructing sexuality. In the play, the context is their relationship while heteronormative discourse is what forces them to refuse labels like 'lesbian' or 'gay'. However, the relationship itself gradually becomes a problem; it is sabotaged by the pressure of its own definition as well as the pressure of the definition of one's own sexual identity, which is constructed via language here. Yet, does the refusal of defining and labeling sexual identity deconstruct the concept of sexuality itself? The denial of naming one's own sexual identity as well as one's relationship means deconstructing it. Although sexuality might be created in the context outside language, words carry performative force and therefore they co-construct or deconstruct sexuality - they deconstruct the concept itself, which is due to discursive cyclicity. This paper will research this premise on MacIvor's dramatic text as it is an example of linguistic deconstruction of sexuality.

Key Words: Language, context, sexuality, lesbian, heteronormative discourse, discursive cyclicity.

Contrary to the mainstream media, i.e. television and film, theatre has nowadays become an alternative sort of medium that can subvert stereotypes by pointing at them and thus it has also the power to shift viewers' concepts of these stereotypes. This paper focuses on sexuality (de)construction in dramatic discourse¹ based on a study of Daniel MacIvor's *A Beautiful View*, which was chosen because it challenges normative ideas about sexuality.

In *A Beautiful View* the main theme is a relationship between two women, through which feminine gender and homosexuality are addressed. This theme essentially becomes the plot of the play, and as it develops the two protagonists enact various scenes from their relationship from the beginning to the very end, e.g. the first encounter, first love-making, first fight etc. It can be said that the two characters - Liz and Mitch - 'perform' a show about their relationship.

However, the relationship itself gradually becomes a problem; it is sabotaged by the pressure of its own definition as well as the pressure of the definition of one's own sexual identity, which is constructed via language here. Yet, does the refusal of defining and labeling sexual identity deconstruct the concept itself? From the Foucauldian point of view, it could be said that our understanding of sexuality 'is always dependent on the kind of discourse about sex that circulates in a given time and place' (Cameron, Kulick 10). Thus, sexuality is discursively constructed - this is a point where sexuality and language come together. The question that arises is: if a woman has a relationship with another woman, can she deconstruct her sexuality by refusing to use the label of a lesbian? A naturalistic opinion would lead us to the conclusion that no matter how we label ourselves, we are what we are. But is this true? The paper will focus on linguistic features in the dramatic text that deal with sexualities and their labeling and the issue of performativity, as well as on its interaction with heteronormative discourse, which essentially becomes the reason for the characters' break-up.

The paper looks into the way the characters' relationship is indexed in their language as well as the (de)construction of their sexual identities by the refusal to label them. Linguistically, some speech acts create context, which becomes a crucial factor in constructing sexuality. In the play, the context is their relationship while heteronormative discourse is what forces them to refuse labels like 'lesbian' or 'gay' (in positive as well as negative ways). The denial of naming one's relationship as well as one's own sexuality means deconstructing it. This paper will research this premise on MacIvor's dramatic text as it is an example of linguistic deconstruction of sexuality.

For this analysis, there are a few crucial terms that need to be clarified and in what ways they will be used. First of all, let us clarify the terms context and discourse. The discourse is used in both senses – in the linguistic sense (discourse analysis) meaning language in use. 'The way language is used in particular contexts for particular purposes'

(Kulick, Cameron 16). On the other hand, the term 'discourse' will be used in critical sense too, 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault 1972: 149). The above mentioned 'heteronormative discourse' is used in the Foucauldian sense as 'the linguistic apparatus through which the articulation of knowledge becomes an expression of power' (Mackenzie 423). This is how heteronormativity acquires the linguistic element and power-related dimension.

Now let us look at the term context and what it means in dramatic discourse analysis. In Fischer-Lichte's terminology (1983), the dramatic text is divided in *Haupttext* (the main text) - the dialogue itself (speech acts); *Nebentext* - the extra-dialogic text which contextualizes the dialogue. *Nebentext* comprises the names of the characters and stage directions which create extra-linguistic reality of the text being produced on the stage and the context the characters produce by their speech acts (context 1).

Then in Pavis' terminology (2003), there is metatext, which comprises author's and reader's and finally viewer's contexts (context 2). These contexts work dialogically. 'The concretization is not given beforehand *in toto* by the performance text; it is the result of a directorial concretization that proceeds from the directorial metatext, and then is confronted by the spectatorial metatext. Both metatexts have something in common: the socio-cultural context' (context 3) (de Toro 110). In this analysis, context 1 and 3 will be important.

In the play, context is the show itself – two characters 'perform' their relationship; basically they construct the context throughout the play. At the beginning, the reader/viewer does not know what is going to happen; nonetheless she/he is given cues, as in the following example:

LIZ. We should start./MITCH. From where?/LIZ. From the very beginning.
(MacIvor 206)

Hanks says, 'verbal deixis is a central aspect of the social matrix of orientation and perception through which speakers produce context' (44). The two characters are going to depict the

story of their relationship to the audience. In the example above, the three speech actsⁱⁱ presuppose certain context, i.e. their relationship; they index the context via deictical meansⁱⁱⁱ: 'From where?' 'the beginning', thus they create the context of their relationship through language (it is not produced in *Nebentext* only) and consequently the story of their relationship functions as a certain context in which sexuality is constructed.

At the beginning of the play, both characters consider themselves 'straight' and they consider the other one 'lesbian'.

LIZ. (*to the audience*) ...And so she's trying to pick me up. Big deal. Not my thing. But you know, who cares? I'm off people generally, not even hiring in the friend department. Plus I once had a guy I met at a play who came out to the airport "for a drink" and that was a bit strange. And anyway I don't know for sure that she's a lesbian. (MacIvor 213)

Liz explains to the audience that she is not a lesbian and also that she is uncertain about Mitch's orientation. From the heteronormative point of view, it seems that if Mitch was straight, it would be alright if Liz went for a drink with her. If she is homosexual, a problem might arise. However, Mitch 'figures out' Liz's sexual orientation in the same situation:

MITCH. And I think, oh my god, she is a lesbian! (MacIvor 214)

Although Mitch comes to the airport to see Liz, she does not consider herself a lesbian. Though they both feel a certain attraction, they can never call themselves 'lesbians'. It might be said that this reluctance to label one's own sexuality is due to the performative force of labels. And although their sexuality is co-produced in the context, the label would make it 'real'.

Therefore, let us look at speech acts that include labels and their performative force. Every utterance pronounced by the character is a speech act^{iv}; and 'within speech act theory^v, a performative is that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names' (Butler 13). A speech act can thus produce that which it names, however, only by reference to the law (or the accepted norm, code, or contract), which is cited or repeated (and thus performed) in

the pronouncement. The characters arise via speech acts, and thus in drama, speech acts are performative. In Butler's theory of performativity, speech acts construct gender (and sexuality) and reality itself; they not only change the world but also create it. And as theatre is an imaginative system where the characters 'act' and 'the stage is the world', speech acts are acts in their very existence. If we work within these terms, the speech acts constitute dramatic discourse and sexual labels create characters' sexualities. Cameron and Kulick say that 'the classification of sexual desires, practices and identities does two things simultaneously: it produces categories and it labels them, gives them names' (24). Consequently, according to queer theory, gender and sexual identities are performative and therefore it can be said that they are constituted through discursive histories of repeated acts of identification. In that case, does it suggest that not labeling one's own sexuality means deconstructing it?

It can be said that the pronunciation of a character's sexuality is performative and therefore both of the characters refuse to label themselves as lesbian because they do not want to 'produce' their homosexuality. After the 'sexual act' between them, Mitch says:

MITCH. ... The music was a sign that I should, you know, let go, for a second, for a minute, for a night. And so, well, I did and it was... I mean, I wasn't thinking about it, it just was, and it was.... But then when I did think about it later on, at four in the morning, I just couldn't. I mean. I couldn't go getting bisexual on myself. I mean that might work for some people but trust me I do not have the constitution for it. I know people, my friend Jeremy; a second cousin; Anne Heche.... (MacIvor 220)

After sexual intercourse with Liz, Mitch does not want to admit any other sexuality than heterosexuality. Interestingly she mentions 'bisexuality', not 'homosexuality'. However, she refers to Liz as a lesbian (see the example above). Her speech act constitutes certain context (the night they spent together); nonetheless, she does not want to admit that she might be 'bisexual'. Again, this fact demonstrates the performative force labels carry. And here the heteronormative discourse comes into play. Although McConnell-Ginet states that 'lesbian' has been the least marked designator of homosexual women (2002: 144), there are negative

ideological connotations to the 'L' word. These connotations are produced by the heteronormative discourse; and gradually, they can become the core meaning of the word. McConnell-Ginet stresses this social production of meaning when she says, 'meaning is a matter of not only individual will but of social relations embedded in political structures' (1998: 199). Because Mitch is afraid to use the 'L' word, which encompasses the social stigma of negative connotations (e.g. lesbians are frigid and man-haters), she uses the word 'bisexual' - although she cannot identify with that either.

Later on, there are other examples when the characters deny sexual labels. After they sleep with each other, they do not see each other and then they meet again and Liz is married:

MITCH. Have you switched over entirely?/LIZ. To what?/MITCH. ...Men?/LIZ. I never left men, I mean, there was you./MITCH. What do you mean? There was more than me./LIZ No./MITCH. I thought you were a lesbian./LIZ. No. Does that matter?/MITCH. Well. No./LIZ. Do you only sleep with other lesbians?/MITCH. I'm not a lesbian. (MacIvor 222)

In the above dialogue both characters realize that neither of them perceive themselves as a lesbian and that the sexual experience was a first time experience for them both. Although both deny having slept with other women before and therefore they do not have a 'solid reason' to call themselves lesbians, both of them feel desire for other women. There is a female character called Sasha that the viewer never sees. At first, she is just a drummer Liz knows but both of them gradually develop an interest in her:

MITCH. What did Sasha think? What did Sasha think?/LIZ. About what?/MITCH Ukular?/LIZ She said it was fun. (MacIvor 226)

Continuously, they get closer again; they set up a ukulele band and become friends with Sasha. Despite spending more time together, their relationship is ambiguous. Liz tries to be more open about their relationship; she talks about it with Sasha:

LIZ. She wanted to know who seduced who./MITCH. Of whom?/LIZ. Me and you./MITCH. She knows about that?/LIZ A few people know about that. (MacIvor 227)

Interestingly, Mitch refers to their sexual experience (was it only once?) with the deictical demonstrative ‘that’ – which presupposes certain context (the love affair), on the other hand by not naming it, Mitch sabotages it and in the end the relationship is destroyed.

As they are unable to identify their own sexualities, they are unable to identify their own relationship. The next dialogue takes place before a Halloween party and Mitch dresses as Anne Shirley from Green Gables.

LIZ. We're like a couple, aren't we?/MITCH. A couple of what?/LIZ. What are you afraid of?/MITCH. That everyone's going to think I'm Dorothy. (MacIvor 236)

Liz tries to define their relationship, although she hedges it, ‘we’re like a couple’ means not really a couple but something like a couple. Mitch ignores the logical connotation and asks Liz to complete the question (a couple of friends?). However, this time Liz addresses the problem straight ‘what are you afraid of?’ But Mitch changes the subject and responds referring to her Halloween costume. What gradually happens is that by refusing to label their own sexualities, they refuse to label their relationship, to name it in a clear way so that both of them can identify with it. The deconstruction of labels is performative in such a way that it deconstructs the context itself. The relationship ceases to exist. There are no clear rules (is it a friendship, a love affair?) and thus what happens is that Liz sleeps with Sasha in the end:

LIZ. I'm upstairs./MITCH. With Sasha./LIZ. With Sasha./ MITCH. And they're not just talking./LIZ. We ended up having sex./MITCH. "Ended up?" Whatever. And I walk in. It's dark but I can make out two people on the bed. One of them is Sasha and the other one is her. Her hair is a mess and her shirt is pulled way up. And *all* I can think to say is: "Pull your shirt down I can see your nipples."/LIZ. What are you doing in here? Get out. Get out. Get out. (MacIvor 237)

Liz’s behavior is the consequence of not setting up rules, which comes along with defining relationships. Although the original idea is to deconstruct one’s sexuality by not naming it to get rid of the negative connotations the words carry in themselves; it slowly deconstructs the context by which it is originally constructed. This is due to the discursive cyclicity. Liz and

Mitch are literally products of discourse - the dramatic discourse, as well as the socio-cultural discourse - as they are dramatic characters, nonetheless as figures that mirror reality, they seem to fall victim to their own struggle because of the cyclical discursive processes. According to Butler 'the distinction between the personal and the political or between private and public is itself a fiction designed to support an oppressive *status quo*: our most personal acts are, in fact, continually being scripted by hegemonic social conventions and ideologies' (Felluga). Liz and Mitch try to escape the heteronormative discourse by trying not to label their identities on the one hand; on the other hand, they are products of the discourse as they are unable to get out of the vicious cycle – they cannot define their own relationship.

After Liz sleeps with Sasha, Liz and Mitch stop talking (they cannot break up because they were never together). After some time, they accidentally meet again. Liz reproaches Mitch for being quiet then, which was one of the reasons Liz cheated on her:

LIZ. Why didn't you say anything?/MITCH. What did you want me to say?/LIZ. Whatever you were thinking?/MITCH. What did you want me to think?/LIZ. "I wonder if she's lonely"?/A moment./MITCH. I'll see ya./LIZ. See ya. (MacIvor 240)

However, in Scene 12, we hear Liz talking about labels and names and her attempt to stop using them:

LIZ. ...if I had to say something- and since I can, I'd have to say, stop naming things. "I am a," "We are a." "She is a." If we could only let it be what it is and be what it is and be okay with that. "A friendship." "A love affair." "A soulmate." Those are just names so other people can feel comfortable...It's not about other people. Or maybe... I guess for me it was about her, at this point anyway... (MacIvor 241)

All in all, MacIvor's text shows us that trying to escape labels - hence deconstructing one's sexuality - is a complex issue. Although one's sexuality might be created in a context outside language, words carry performative force and therefore they co-construct or deconstruct the identity and thus they deconstruct the concept itself, which is due to discursive cyclicity. The linguistic deconstruction deconstructs the concept in the same way as words can construct concepts. And even though the cyclicity of discursive processes seems

inescapable, there are always attempts to escape the discursive constructs and 'live outside the words and concepts'.

Notes

ⁱ In this case dramatic discourse means written dramatic text, a script to be played. For the lack of space, I am not concerned with the performance aspect although it plays an important role.

ⁱⁱ A speech act is 'a communicative activity, defined with reference to the intentions of the speaker while speaking and the effects he achieves on his listener' (Crystal 285).

ⁱⁱⁱ Deixis is the means by which the relationship between language and context is expressed in the structure of language. The grammatical features it uses are demonstratives, first and second person pronouns, tense, specific time and place adverbs like *now* and *here*.

^{iv} 'The dramatic speech is a performative, executive act, a speech act' (Pavis 51).

^v For more about speech act theory, see John L. Austin

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