Sociolinguists (e.g. Hines 1999, Cameron 2003, 2006) have demonstrated that social and linguistic expectations and practices often remain consistent with power structures assumed to be in the past. Cameron (1991) found that salient cultural stereotypes regarding male and female gender roles were reflected in terms for the penis, as generated by college-aged participants in the study. Cameron found that terms for the penis reflected cultural-cognitive metaphors, which in turn reflected historical gender-based inequality and provided young people with a limited environment in which to define experiences of gender, sex and power. The current study provides an updated look at the use of terms among college students today and extends Cameron’s original study by adding a complementary investigation of vagina terms.

Following Cameron’s methodology, two sex-segregated groups of college-aged students generated penis terms during a student-led task, framed as a competition to ‘list as many terms as possible.’ The male group produced 151 terms, the female group, 90 terms. The lists of terms were sorted into groups, some of which overlapped with Cameron’s categories, including ‘tools’ and ‘food.’ The data required some new categories, including ‘popular media references’ and ‘sex acts.’

Two additional sex-segregated groups generated vagina terms, 171 and 56 terms for the male and female groups, respectively. Since vagina names were not part of the previous discussion, categories were created to accommodate this new aspect of the analysis.

Our analysis of the terms and socio-semantic categories into which they were sorted indicates that social change has taken place, in that the lexical items provided are for the most part different from those provided in Cameron’s (1991) study. On the other hand, we find that the categories in our investigation are underwritten by the same types of assumptions about gender, sex and power that were reflected in the 1991 lexicon.

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