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What's Really at Stake in the Gay Marriage Debate? Part Three

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“We’re talking about really refraining from using things like, husband-wife, boyfriend-girlfriend, those kind of things, and just say ‘partner,’” explains Robin Sinks. She is the health education specialist for the Long Beach Unified School District in California. The point she was making is clear enough. The legalization of same-sex marriage will require a comprehensive change in our language.

Language is, as we now know, integral to a culture. In fact, anthropologists such as the influential Clifford Geertz refer to human culture as a “cultural-linguistic system.” The language and the culture are inseparable. Each influences the other, and together they produce an entire system of meaning.

Until now, at least, words like “husband” and “wife” have been essential to understanding our culture. Some words have been inseparable, forming comprehensive sets of meaning together. “Marriage” goes with “husband” and “wife.” “Boyfriend” goes with “girlfriend.”



With the legalization of same-sex marriage, the only acceptable word is “partner.” Marriage licenses will speak of the union of “Partner A” with “Partner B.” There will be no use for terms such as “wife” or “husband.”

Robin Sinks made her statement with reference to what the normalization of same-sex marriage would mean for the public schools. As [MSNBC](#) reports, the battle over same-sex marriage will reach the schools.

“The opposing sides have debated what, if anything, schools must teach about marriage now that gays have the right to wed,” the network explains.

California mandates that schools teach about marriage, if the schools teach sex education. Surprisingly perhaps, the vast majority of California school districts do not teach sex education. Nevertheless, one state judge recently ruled that the districts “may require” such courses.

California is “ground zero” on this issue because the state’s voters will face “Proposition 8” on the November 4 ballot. This proposition, if approved by voters, would amend the California constitution to limit marriage to the union of a man and a woman. The measure is an effort to reverse last May’s decision by the California Supreme Court to legalize same-sex marriage.

Given the state’s huge population and cultural influence, all eyes are now on California. But so should be our ears. Do we hear a shift in the language coming? If so, the language will change far more than vocabulary and word usage.

Civilizations are built on careful and necessary distinctions. As an institution, marriage has been defined throughout history as a heterosexual union. Marriage is so central to our civilization that its related words have become equally essential. Words like “husband” and “wife” have been necessary to understanding our stories, our laws, our families, our

social arrangements, and our aspirations. Transform marriage into a homosexual institution, and the vocabulary no longer works.

The effects of this linguistic transformation are most acute among the young. Language acquisition is among the most essential tasks of childhood — and this includes everything from early babbling to vocabulary lists at school.

When children acquire a language without the words “husband” or “wife,” they acquire a cultural knowledge that betrays the subversion of the central institution of civilization itself. “Partner” is just not enough to carry the meaning of marriage. Will “husband” and “wife” soon be relegated to the dust-bin of obsolete words? If so, the loss will leave us speechless.

SEE ALSO:

[“What’s Really at Stake in the Gay Marriage Debate? Part One.”](#)

[“What’s Really at Stake in the Gay Marriage Debate? Part Two.”](#)

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