Language and non-normative sexual identities

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Introduction

This chapter looks at the way in which language plays a key role in the representation and expression of non-normative sexual identities, all of which tend to be stigmatised to a greater or lesser degree, and the ways in which this relationship has been theorised. By non-normative sexual identities I refer to the identities of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and those identifying as transgender or transsexual, as well as those identifying as queer (a broad term for a wide range of non-normative sexual and gender identifications) and intersex – hereafter LGBTQI. Collectively these identities represent a challenge to prevailing binary gender norms and the hegemony of heteronormativity, which has been defined as ‘those structures, institutions, relations and actions that promote and produce heterosexuality as natural, self-evident, desirable, privileged, and necessary’ (Cameron and Kulick 2003: 55).

Given the focus on language and identity in applied linguistics in this volume, it is important to clarify at the outset what an applied linguistics perspective entails. Such a perspective is determined by the twofold nature of the field. On the one hand, there is the general subscription to Christopher Brumfit’s (1997: 93) definition of applied linguistics as the ‘theoretical and empirical investigation of real-world problems in which language is a central issue’. On the other hand, there is the increasingly wide acceptance of Ben Rampton’s (1997: 8) case for the reconceptualisation of the field as an interdisciplinary one that ‘brings cultural and social organisation centre-stage, and which construes language in the first instance not as grammar but as a repertoire of ways of speaking shaped through the part it plays in social action and communicative conduct’. This understanding yokes together a problem-focused orientation with a view of language as a set of culturally determined semiotic resources for the making of personal and social meanings. As we shall see later, such a perspective can help shed light on problems that can arise in interactions in settings where speakers’ attempts at meaning-making are perceived as culturally unintelligible or otherwise problematic – particularly when ascribed identities are being negotiated or refused.

The chapter begins with the theorisation of non-normative sexuality by a small number of sexologists in the nineteenth century, and the emergence of ‘the homosexual’ as emblematic
of sexual non-normativity in a recognisably modern sense. The chapter then turns to the rise of lesbian and gay studies in the late twentieth century and the emergence of a specific kind of identity politics in which the role of language received a considerable amount of attention. From there I move on to consider more recent queer perspectives, all of which are hostile to essentialised views of identity and some of the uses to which the concept has been put in relation to non-normative sexuality.

**Overview**

As acronyms such as LGBTQI and terms such as genderqueer, gender fluid and gender questioning suggest, we live at a time in which minority sexual identities are increasingly pluralised. In theorising this development, most scholars recognise the centrality of Michel Foucault who emphasises the power of discourse in the shaping of social life and in the formation of the individual. At its simplest, discourse in the Foucauldian sense refers to:

> a group of statements in any domain which provides a language for talking about a topic and a way of producing a particular kind of knowledge about that topic. The term refers both to the production of knowledge through language and representation and the way that knowledge is institutionalized, shaping social practices and setting new practices into play.

*(Hall 1997: 222)*

But how exactly does this work with regard to sexual identity? Foucault (1978) shows that the pluralisation of non-normative sexualities we are familiar with today began in earnest in the nineteenth century with the identification and the categorisation of certain types of people in terms of their sexual behaviour. This was largely the work of early sexologists, most of whom were sympathetic to the plight of the ‘sexually peculiar’ whose behaviour placed them outside the law or condemned them as sinful (ibid.: 44). Indeed several of the pioneers were themselves members of sexual minorities. Between them they were responsible for the introduction of a new vocabulary which included terms such as ‘transvestite’, ‘fetishist’, ‘third sex’, ‘invert’ and ‘Uranian’ (a nineteenth-century catch-all term for a variety of types of female and male homosexual), along with the concept of a spectrum of ‘sexual intermediaries’. Crucially for many early sexologists, non-normative sexual behaviours were conceptualised as natural, indicative of inherent conditions (however unfortunate these might be deemed) and enduring personality types. Magnus Hirschfeld (2006 [1910]: 37–38) is typical of this kind of essentialist thinking when he states that ‘sexual individuality as such with respect to body and mind is inborn, dependent upon the inherited mixture of manly and womanly substances, independent of externals’. He is also typical in that his discussion of sexual diversity (generally seen at this time as a form of gender variance) is couched entirely in the new medical discourse in which the bodies of case studies, having been probed and measured in the surgery, are described in detail. This literature has a modern parallel with the medicalised discourse surrounding the surgical and hormonal modification of the transgender body (Borba 2015) and the anatomical atypicality of the intersex body, whereby the latter is currently classified as comprising a range of ‘disorders of sexual development’ – although this language is increasingly contested by activist intersex organisations (Organisation Intersex International 2012).

Foucault (1978), somewhat humorously, lists a welter of scientific-sounding terms culled from the work of the early sexologists. These include categories such as zoophiles,
auto-monosexualists, presbyophiles and sexoesthetic inverts. And indeed their work was the subject of parody in the popular press at the time. Graham Robb (2003) describes a cartoon entitled ‘Berlin Census in a Thoroughly Modern Home’, which appeared in 1905 in a German weekly arts magazine. The cartoon featured the following exchange between a census taker and a mother:

Census Taker:  ‘How many children?’
A Mother:  ‘Two daughters, one boy, three homosexual intermediates, and one Uranian.’

(Ibid.: 190)

Although Robb is not a Foucauldian, the text of the cartoon he reproduces makes an important Foucauldian point about the way in which this new medicalised discourse entered the public domain, often via the media, and thus making new concepts and vocabularies available for wider consumption and use. Ultimately, Foucault’s argument, which is critical of these ‘scientific’ developments, is that non-normative sexualities were pathologised through the production of this discourse. For Foucault, this was representative of what he saw as the problematic incursion of medicine into people’s lives – as a way of making them ‘knowable’ and therefore subject to regulation. However, at the same time he states that those classified (and increasingly self-identifying) as sexually different began to make use of this language to describe themselves and to agitate – if not for recognition, then at least for toleration – precisely in the terms set by these new discourses. This is what Stuart Hall (1996: 6) means when he says that identities ‘are the result of a successful articulation or “chaining” of the subject into the flow of discourse’ – namely that people can see themselves as interpellated or hailed by the discourses put into circulation and come to ‘identify with’ and ‘invest in’ the ways in which they are discursively constructed and represented (see Baxter, this volume). Little wonder then that the ‘sexually peculiar’ were increasingly willing to self-identify as sexual intermediaries, transvestites, inverts and Uranians (and crucially as members of the putative collectives these identities implied) when their stigmatised behaviours were discursively repackaged as a condition and a way of being.

The clinical view of non-normative sexualities was to go largely unchallenged until well into the second half of the twentieth century. In 1968 Mary McIntosh published what would become a groundbreaking paper in the sociology journal *Social Problems*; this argued that far from being a pathologised condition, homosexuality was best understood as a social role and a type of behaviour. McIntosh (1968) argued that, when looked at historically and geographically, same-sex relations varied hugely in terms of the forms they took and the social meanings attributed to them. She showed that in some settings the homosexual fulfilled a culturally determined and recognised social role, while in other places and at other times, despite the presence of same-sex relations, no such role existed. As McIntosh (ibid.: 187) put it, ‘there may be much homosexual behaviour … there are no “homosexuals”’. McIntosh’s paper, much as Foucault’s work which it prefigured, would function in Britain and the United States as a foundational text for the emerging lesbian and gay liberation movement. Its message that the form sexuality took was socially constructed opened up the possibility for a powerful reimagining of what it meant to be a member of a stigmatised sexual minority. As Jeffrey Weeks (2007: 82), commenting on the influence of McIntosh’s paper, explained, ‘if the sexual categorizations that were taken for granted were actually human inventions, then they could be reinvented’. In terms of this chapter, McIntosh’s paper is also important for another reason, as it refers in passing to studies which suggest that homosexuals used language in very particular ways – and it is to this that I now turn.
Although the early sexologists were largely uninterested in language, McIntosh (1968) cites a number of eighteenth-century sources that drew attention to the way men in Molly Houses (taverns frequented by transvestites and homosexual men) were said to speak:

[They] adopted all the small vanities natural to the feminine sex to such an extent that they try to speak, walk, chatter, shriek and scold as women do, aping them as well in other respects.  
(Ward 1709, in McIntosh 1968: 188)

It would be a pretty scene to behold them in their clubs and cabals, how they assume the air and affect the name of Madam or Miss, Betty or Molly, with a chuck under the chin, and ‘Oh, you bold pullet, I’ll break your eggs’, and then frisk and walk away.  
(Anon 1729, in ibid.)

Here the assumption is clear that the speech of homosexual men and transvestites is gender inappropriate in terms of the titles and names used to address one another, the variety of stereotypically feminine and camp (see below) forms of talk they engage in, the way they sound, as well as the way in which they move their bodies. McIntosh’s point, which is only tangentially concerned with language, is that there was greater overlap between male homosexuality and transvesticism at certain historical moments and that non-normative sexuality (indeed all sexuality) is always historically, geographically and culturally specific. However, the quotations are a reminder that specific ways of using language have been associated with homosexual men and transvestites (much more so than with lesbians and other sexual minorities) at least since the beginning of the early modern period.

Cameron and Kulick (2003) identify four main phases in the study of language and homosexuality that are helpful for the discussion in this chapter:

1 1920s–1940s;  
2 1950s–1960s;  
3 1970s–mid-1990s;  
4 1990s–the present.

Twentieth-century interest in this area parallels the rise of identity studies across the social sciences and the changing role attributed to language as a key feature of identity. With regard to homosexuality, this was a development in which language (and other semiotic activity) was initially seen as reflective of an ascribed, inherent and pathologised condition (Phases 1 and 2); then as reflective of an assumed, essentialised and non-pathologised identity (Phase 3); and finally as a repertoire of culturally shaped semiotic resources for indexing a range of identifications and performatively producing a non-essentialised identity (Phase 4).

Research in the first two phases was limited mainly to the compilation of slang terms used mainly by North American gay men and the ways in which such language functioned as a means of communication and self-identification. By the 1970s, politically motivated lesbian and gay scholars were starting to look at those identifying as lesbian, gay and bisexual (there was little talk of transgender at this time) in terms of community and specifically in terms of a speech community. Although this is a term with a multitude of definitions, speech community at its most general implies a collective with shared knowledge of a particular language or language variety and whose members are familiar with the ways in which that language (or language variety) is used. These scholars (e.g. Chesebro 1981) were influenced by early sociolinguistic studies of
African American speech (Labov 1972), but also by studies of women’s language (Lakoff 1975). Richard Mohr (1992: 27) provides a flavour of this lesbian and gay linguistic turn:

The gay community cannot be thought of as an artifice like, say, a stamp collectors’ club or Alcoholics Anonymous … Rather, the gay community is a natural community in a way that English is a natural language but the computer languages Fortran and Cobol are not. If one is born in England of English parents, it is not an option to decide not to speak English as one’s mother tongue but to set up linguistic shop instead in some artificial language, in the way one can, if one does not like some computer language, simply make up one’s own.

Although the equation of a ‘natural’ ‘gay community’ with a ‘natural language’ is problematic and the notion of community itself was contested, the overall implication was clear – gay people were born gay and spoke the language of the gay community.

In this way, despite the impact of McIntosh and Foucault, whose work suggested the socially and discursively constructed nature of sexual identity, a new kind of essentialism came to typify lesbian and gay theorising. This kind of move has been described by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) as ‘strategic essentialism’ – namely, the politically necessary mobilisation of a collective identity as part of a rights-claiming endeavour on the part of marginalised groups. For Spivak this strategy would ideally be accompanied by the simultaneous critique of the categories invoked. However, such an apparently contradictory approach proved difficult and some scholars were more than happy to make the case for a new non-pathologised lesbian and gay essentialism. Thus, in the third phase of study (now properly inaugurated as lesbian and gay studies), some scholars sought to identify the ways in which language was used in uniquely gay ways. Joseph Hayes (2006 [1981]) and William Leap (1995) drew attention to the ways in which gay men spoke euphemistically or indirectly in settings where the sexual orientation of interlocutors was unknown and in need of checking, or where interlocutors were presumed to be straight and possibly prejudiced. They also drew attention to the ways in which language was used in homo-social settings; in addition, Hayes referred to language as used in what he called the radical-activist setting. These uses of languages went by the name of Gayspeak and/or Gay English. However, as James Darsey (2006 [1981]) pointed out in his response to Hayes, there is nothing particularly gay about the kind of indirect speech a gay man might use (for example, saying ‘my friend’ instead of ‘my boyfriend’) on meeting a stranger. All competent users of language make use of such strategies as part of their everyday conversations, and the fact that gay men engage in it does not make it gay per se. Similar objections were raised with regard to the use of language in the radical-activist setting. Here Gayspeak referred to the use of politically correct language and the reappropriation of stigmatising terms such as ‘dyke’ and ‘faggot’. But again, as Darsey argued, there is nothing uniquely gay about such practices – reappropriations of terms of abuse are typical of many minority groups.

Initially those making the case for uniquely gay language might seem to be on firmer ground when it came to the social setting. Hayes and Leap saw this as characterised by extensive use of what was termed the lavender lexicon (Leap 1995). This kind of language typically relates to sexual identities, sex roles and sexual preferences. Contemporary examples might include items such as ‘butch’, ‘femme’, ‘top’ and ‘bottom’, as well as the multiple uses of ‘queen’ to form compound words indicating (generally male) sexual preferences such as ‘rice queen’ or ‘size queen’. Hayes (2006 [1981]: 70) also identifies camp as a feature of Gayspeak, which he described as the ‘the art of the put-down’ – although, as we shall see, camp can be understood as being much more than this. At the same time, language as used in the social context was held to go beyond lexis and camp to incorporate a specific interactional style.
Ruth Morgan and Kathleen Wood (1995), in line with earlier analyses of women’s speech by feminist scholars such as Jennifer Coates (1988), argued that lesbian speech was typified by a high degree of collaborative co-construction. In the following extract, a group of friends discuss the contents of a lunch pack:

1 Kathy: What else do you pack in lunches?
2 Mandy: (laughs)
3 Linda: Weeell …
4 Kathy: chips
5 Mandy: bananas
6 Linda: fruit
7 Tonya: and a sandwich.

(Morgan and Wood 1995: 248)

Morgan and Wood suggest that this collective answer to Kathy’s initial question is somehow specifically lesbian – indicative of the women’s mutual supportiveness and designed to produce a sense of group cohesiveness. However, Cameron and Kulick (2003: 95) suggest that ‘an analyst might be hard pressed to identify its specifically lesbian content’ and they argue that the reason this kind of speech is identified as lesbian is simply because the speakers are known to be lesbians. Similar extracts and interpretations are found in Leap (2006 [1999]: 86–87) who concluded that ‘gay men follow any number of linguistic strategies to ensure that conversations with other gay men are cooperative, not exclusionary or antagonistic’. But speech that is indirect and cooperative is characteristic of all human verbal interaction, at least some of the time. And even the lavender lexicon can be and is used by those who do not identify as LGBTQI.

Another kind of Gayspeak is Polari, which comprises a lexicon of about 500 words (Baker 2000). This British variety appears to have flourished in urban centres in the early to mid-twentieth century but was dying out by the late 1960s. One male informant in Matt Houlbrook’s (2005: 152) study of early twentieth-century gay London commented on the use of Polari as follows:

We always said Girl at the end of a sentence … You’d say something like “you all right girl” or “fancy a drink girl” … “ooh will you just vada the bona filiomi ajax” … It was all camp and rather silly. [Translation: ‘look at that good-looking young man over there’]

As Houlbrook points out, Polari was associated with camp talk, which has been defined by Keith Harvey (2000) as relying on four strategies for effect, not all of which would necessarily be present in any instantiation. These are:

- ‘Paradox’ – brought about through incongruities of register and mixing of references to high and low culture;
- ‘Inversion’ – of grammatical gender markers, rhetorical routines or value systems;
- ‘Ludicrism’ – verbal playfulness of all kinds such as puns and double-entendres;
- ‘Parody’ – of stereotypical femininity, through the use of exclamations and vocatives such as ‘My dear’ and of the mannerisms of the upper classes or of those aping them – often through the use of French as a signifier of high culture.

Despite Susan Sontag’s (1966) assertion that camp was not political, Harvey argues that camp performances – particularly noticeable in the speech of drag artists – can serve to disrupt, ironise
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and undermine the prevailing gender and sexual order. That said, campness is not the sole preserve of those identifying as LGBTQI, as scholars such as Pamela Robertson (1996) have argued convincingly. Furthermore, as Houlbrook (2005) notes, Polari was also used by other marginalised groups such as female prostitutes.

Another feature associated with Gayspeak has been termed ‘the voice’ (Zwicky 1997). This refers to the phenomenon whereby some gay men in particular are said to be identifiable by their voice quality, characterised by wide ranges in pitch, extended vowel production as in ‘FAABulous’ (Barrett 1997), breathy voice and sibilant duration. However, research in this area, which tends to involve listeners making judgements about the perceived gayness of voices, suggests that listeners are only right some of the time. This leads Cameron and Kulick (2003: 90) to conclude that ‘[n]ot all gay men have “the voice” and not everyone who has “the voice” is gay’ – something which is confirmed by more recent studies (Levon 2007; Piccolo 2008).

What then are we to make of all this? It is clear that some members of sexual minorities can and do use language in particular ways, but that these are not confined to those identifying as LGBTQI. Ultimately, the notion of specifically gay language proved to be a dead end. It was clear that an exploration of the relationship between language and non-normative sexual identities required an altogether different analytical lens. This would be provided in the fourth phase of the study of language and homosexuality by queer linguistics (Bucholtz and Hall 2004).

Queer perspectives on language and non-normative sexual identities

Two foundational texts of queer theory are Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s (1990) The epistemology of the closet and Judith Butler’s (1990) Gender trouble. It is no coincidence that they both originate in the United States in a historical moment characterised by renewed political activism on the part of sexual minorities against a background of the spiralling AIDS crisis. In many ways the AIDS crisis served to expose gender, class and race divisions within the so-called LGBTQI community, as those living in poverty, in low-paid jobs, with no medical insurance or without appropriate residency documentation found themselves less able to access health care than white, middle-class gay men. Suddenly the ‘community’ looked less seamless and identity politics less sustainable than had previously been claimed. Although queer theory is hardly a unified project, Sedgwick’s and Butler’s texts had two targets in their sights that have remained more or less constant in subsequent queer theorising – heteronormativity and the concept of identity (at least as construed in early lesbian and gay identity politics). Reflecting on the unforeseen consequences of strategic essentialism with regard to homosexuality, Sedgwick (1990: 45) writes:

an unfortunate side effect of this move has been implicitly to underwrite the notion that ‘homosexuality as we conceive of it today’ itself comprises a coherent definitional field rather than a space of overlapping, contradictory, and conflictual definitional forces.

In such a changing environment, the role of language was also being rethought. Instead of seeing language as reflective of an essentialised identity, many LGBTQI scholars took the view that it was more usefully understood as a set of semiotic resources used in contextually contingent ways to index a range of identifications, which might well be overlapping, contradictory and conflictual. Although queer linguistics retains the concept of identity, as Rusty Barrett (2002: 28) explains, ‘identity categories are not accepted as a priori entities, but are recognised
as ideological constructs produced by social discourse’. Key to this rethinking was Butler’s (1990) appropriation of the concept of the performative utterance from the philosophy of language. John Austin (1962) famously categorised utterances such as ‘I now pronounce you man and wife’ as performatives – namely linguistic interventions that brought about a new state of affairs in the world. Butler’s innovation was to apply this to gender. From this perspective an individual’s gender is produced and sustained through its own repeated performance – and what is performed Butler implied is all too often constraining and limiting, given that the blueprint for the prevailing gender norms derive from heteronormativity. Butler’s reconceptualisation of gender as performative allows for the possibility of its subversion, which she explores through her interest in drag. Butler sees drag as an agentive and highly political activity in which the fabricated nature of gender is exposed in the performance of the drag king or queen whose exaggerated and patent falseness undermines and mocks the notion of any true or stable gender. Implicit in the drag artist’s imitation is the suggestion that gender itself is a form of drag:

To claim that all gender is like drag, or is drag, is to suggest that ‘imitation’ is at the heart of the heterosexual project and its gender binarisms, that drag is not a secondary imitation that presupposes a prior and original gender, but that hegemonic heterosexuality is itself a constant and repeated effort to imitate its own idealizations … In this sense, then, drag is subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality’s claim on naturalness and originality. (Butler 1993: 85)

Butler’s concept of performativity and her view of language in general would prove attractive to scholars interested in theorising non-normative sexualities. For Butler (1990: 196), ‘[l]anguage is not an exterior medium or instrument into which I pour myself and from which I glean a reflection of that self’ – rather, holding that there is no pre-existing gender or essentialised self to reflect, she sees it as a medium in and through which speakers (to echo Stuart Hall again) locate themselves within particular discourses and in which they index particular identifications or recognisable identities – in some cases ironically, in some cases not – in ways which are influenced by the range of discursive and semiotic resources that are culturally and contextually available. From this perspective, identities can be seen as being ‘brought about’ in discourse but also, as Mike Baynham (2015) argues, as being ‘brought along’ – in the sense that repeated performance can lead to more sedimented and enduring senses of self.

Such an understanding informs Robin Queen’s (1997) analysis of the language of lesbian comic-book characters who are shown to draw on a contradictory range of styles and Barrett’s (2006 [1995]; see also Mann 2011) analysis of Texan African American drag queens’ language. Barrett (2006 [1995]) shows that the language used in their performances is typified by a considerable amount of switching between what he calls white woman’s style (see women’s language in Lakoff 1975), Gay English and specifically southern forms – as well as limited use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Such switching, Barrett suggests, is indicative of the complex identity work African American drag queens may engage in. In the following extract a drag queen is introducing a white stripper to a largely white gay audience in a club. At line 7 the performer notices one of the few black men in the audience and, abandoning the higher-pitched white woman’s voice she has been using, addresses him directly:

1 Please welcome to the stage, our next dancer,
2 He is a butt-fucking tea, honey.
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3 He is hot.
4 Masculine, muscled, and ready to put it ya, baby.
5 Anybody in here (.) hot (.) as (.) fish (.) grease?
6 That’s pretty hot, idn’t it?
7 (Switch to low pitch) Hey what’s up, home boy? (Switches back)
8 I’m sorry that fucking creole always come around when I don’t need it.
9 Please, welcome,
10 hot, gorgeous, sexy, very romantic,
11 and he’d like to bend you over and turn you every which way but loose.
(Barrett 2006 [1995]: 156)

Barrett suggests that the utterance at line 7 is an expression of solidarity with the black audience member. However, having signalled an identity at odds with the white woman persona being performed, the performer follows this with an apology to the audience. Barrett argues that the packaging of the apology in line 8, which is delivered in the resumed white woman voice, but with the missing –s morpheme typical of AAVE and containing an expletive, creates an ambiguity as to the speaker’s sincerity. This ironises the white woman performance and signals the speaker’s own complex set of identifications – while simultaneously drawing attention to African American social marginalisation and white privilege.

Although clearly informed by a Butlerian/Sedgwickian perspective, Cameron and Kulick (2003) argue that this kind of research, for all its insightfulness into the ways in which those identifying as LGBTQI index their (multiple) identifications, remains rooted in an identity-based paradigm. They take the view that such an approach has limited the study of language and sexuality to the ways in which speakers index claims to or attitudes towards category membership but which has tended to ignore desire. Cameron and Kulick (ibid.: 4) argue that sexuality (understood broadly as ‘the socially constructed expression of erotic desire’ and encompassing the irrational and the unconscious) exceeds many such linguistic acts of identity and that desire (as we shall see below) can exist in tension with identity – whether claimed or ascribed.

So far we have considered the emergence of non-normative sexual identities. In the following section we look at three institutional settings in which language and non-normative sexual identities are central and consider the relevance and applicability of the theoretical perspectives considered thus far to the specific real-world problems they raise from an applied linguistics perspective.

Issues and ongoing debates

Identity can certainly appear to be inadequate as a conceptual tool when trying to make sense of some queer speakers’ talk about how they see themselves and the ways in which they discuss their sexual desires. One illuminating example of this is provided by David Valentine’s (2003) analysis of data gathered in an alternative lifestyles support group in New York. Valentine, who identifies as a gay man, focuses on a series of interactions involving Miss Angel, an African American ex-drug user and sex worker (who some would categorise as a pre-op trans woman). The group was facilitated by Nora, a Latina and ex-drug user who self-identified as a heterosexual transsexual woman.

In a series of excerpts, Angel is shown to use a wide range of identity categories to describe herself, often within the same utterance. Throughout the session Angel describes herself variously as one of ‘these homosexuals’, ‘a pre-op transsexual’, ‘a woman’, ‘a drug addict woman’ and ‘a woman with a large clit’, as well as saying ‘I dunno what I am’ (ibid.: 129–132). At one point Angel
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describes how at the age of 13 she had to make new friends, as she ‘turned gay’. Valentine argues ‘gay’ is an umbrella term among the African American and Latino communities in which he did his fieldwork for sexual orientation and transgender identification (thus conflating two categories held to be separate by contemporary sexual identity politics). Valentine explains that it emerged that Angel had had sex with straight and gay men, and that she had also had sex with women and fathered a child. This range of experiences presents the group, and Nora in particular, with a problem. In the following excerpt involving Ben (another group member), Nora attempts to get Angel to give herself a precise identity label:

1 Angel: I went to bed with my own kind. I tried it once.
2 Ben: How was it?
3 A: How was it?
4 B: Uh huh.
5 Nora: Now what is your own kind mean by definition, because you’re always telling us–
6 A: I’m a woman, well you know.
7 N: You’re a woman, transsexual, you’re gay, you’re homosexual.
8 B: A man.
9 A: Look, me, like me, someone like me. Someone like me … Someone like me.
10 N: [who] changes sexuality, uh huh.
11 B: With breasts.
12 A: With breasts.
13 N: OK.
14 A: I went out with someone like me. Her name was Billie Jean, she lives in Coney Island.

(Ibid.: 131)

Valentine argues that Nora, ventriloquising the identity politics paradigm of social services in which gender is one thing and sexual orientation is another, is here ‘attempting to get Angel to channel her expressions (and experiences) of erotic desire – be it desire for a woman, a man, or for “someone like her” – through identity categories that cannot in the end account for them’ (ibid.). Although originating in a very different historical moment, Guy Hocquenghem (1993 [1972]: 49–50), whose work anticipates much contemporary queer theory, would have had no problem in understanding Angel – as the following comment suggests:

‘Homosexual desire’ – the expression is meaningless. There is no subdivision of desire into homosexuality and heterosexuality. Properly speaking, desire is no more homosexual than heterosexual. Desire emerges in a multiple form, whose components are only divisible a posteriori, according to how we manipulate it.

Angel’s repetition of ‘like me’ is an indication of the difficulty she experiences in being pushed to self-categorise in any one way, thereby queering the whole notion of stable L, G, B or T identities. In fact when Angel does elaborate on her thoughts on sex and desire, she shows that she prefers to eschew completely the identity categories on offer and to talk in terms simply of enjoyment:

When it comes down to sex, I don’t think … it’s two men going to bed with each other, a man and a woman […] or pre-op or nothing like that. I think it’s just two people having
sex, making love to each other, enjoying each other’s company, enjoying each other’s time, when we’re together.

(Valentine 2003: 132)

Valentine recounts that a social worker he spoke to took the view that Angel needed to be ‘educated into a more enlightened understanding of identity’ (ibid.: 136). From this perspective, Angel can be seen as a victim of what has been called the ‘coercive force’ and the ‘terrible singularity’ of identity politics (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 6) that can operate in institutional settings where highly normative understandings of identity hold sway. The very place where she goes for support is unable to make sense of what she says in terms of the discourses within which the group operates. At the same time, identities clearly can be useful and can be claimed in ways which enable us to make sense of our lives and to make them meaningful – but as Valentine’s work suggests, they can also be constraining and serve to render some voices unintelligible, particularly to those who are working within the discourse of stable and discrete sexual and gender identities. Valentine’s argument is essentially one in favour of paying attention to the way in which desire is expressed and of the need for a Spivakian watchfulness with regard to the mobilisation of identity categories in interpreting what is said. Failure to do so he suggests means that people like Angel are unable to make themselves ‘culturally intelligible’ (Butler 1990: 23) and thus do not get a hearing.

A similar case of needing to achieve cultural intelligibility in terms of normative institutional understandings of identity (although with considerably higher stakes) is described by Rodrigo Borba (2015). He explains how, in order to qualify for surgery and hormone therapy, Brazilians who seek gender reassignment must first obtain a psychiatric diagnosis confirming that they are ‘true transsexuals’ – and not ‘travestis’ (i.e. biological males who, despite feminising their bodies through silicone injection and hormone ingestion, generally retain their male genitals). Borba’s (2015: 11) analysis of a series of consultations involving Inês, a psychologist in a gender identity clinic, and Verônica, a pre-op trans woman, reveals the ways in which medical professionals operating on the basis of discrete and non-porous identity categories ‘act as evaluators of clients’ identities’. From the institutional perspective, a ‘true transsexual’ has to present as knowing the difference between a transsexual and a travesti and as hating their own genitals (something which was not Verônica’s case). Borba’s data show how Verônica was coached by Inês over several months until she was able to produce an institutionally acceptable performance of a ‘true transsexual’.

In the following extract from the first consultation, Inês is shown to be clearly at work performing the role of institutionally sanctioned judge and authorised shaper of Verônica’s identity. She begins by asking Verônica to explain the difference between a transsexual and a travesti.

9 Verônica: ah I think they are : : :- they are different people who
10 have the- they think in different ways right=
11 Inês: =>exactly<, they feel different things=
12 Verônica: =right. [they feel-]
13 Inês:  [their <sexualinity is differen-]
14 Verônica: [different] one from the
15 other=

Lines omitted
In a series of moves very similar to a language teacher engaged in instructional conversation, Inês elicits, corrects and instructs simultaneously while managing the interaction. Borba shows how Verônica eventually learned to perform the required institutionally recognised identity to receive the treatment she wanted. But he concludes by arguing that such practices force trans clients to ventriloquise the pathologising knowledge systems on which the diagnosis of ‘true transsexual’ is based – an approach that serves ultimately to deny the complexity of trans experience.

If part of the problem in the case of Angel is a surfeit of the identity categories on offer, none of which fit, and in the case of Verônica it is one of having to learn how to perform an ascribed identity that does not match her experience, in the case of Sam, a gay male student in a Spanish language class analysed by Anthony Liddicoat (2009), the problem is one of the scarcity of identity options available. Much has been written about the pervasive heteronormativity of English and modern foreign language classrooms (Nelson 2010; Coffey 2013; Gray 2013), which, it has been suggested, is such that it tends to silence LGBTQI students. Given that much of the talk that goes on in modern language classrooms revolves around students discussing and sharing personal information about likes and dislikes, leisure time activities and personal relations, LGBTQI students are faced with the problem of whether to come out, lie about their orientation or (thinking back to Hayes and Leap) attempt to dodge the issue by speaking indirectly. However, in languages where gender is marked grammatically, students will have to work harder if they decide on obfuscation. Even if they decide to come out, they may be presented with the problem of having their utterances misunderstood – as the following interaction between Sam and his teacher shows:

T: Y Sam. ¿Cómo es tu novia?
And Sam. What’s your girlfriend like?
Sam: Mi uhm (0.2) novio es alto y:: delgado.
My uhm (0.2) boyfriend is tall (m) and slim (m).
(0.4)
T: ¿Alta y delgada?
Tall (f) and slim (f)?
Language and non-normative sexual identities

Sam: ¿alta y delgada?
Tall (f) and slim (f)?
(0.3)

Mi novio (.) uhm es alta y delgada.
My boyfriend is tall (f) and slim (f).

T: Tu novia es alta y delgada.
Your girlfriend is tall and slim.

Sam: .hh uhm:: (n-)¿novia?
.nh uhm:: (n-) girlfriend?

T: Sí tu novia e::s::
Yes your girlfriend i::s::

Sam: O::h no es novio. Mi novio es alto y delgado. (0.2) Y tiene barba.
O::h no it’s boyfriend. My boyfriend is tall and slim. (0.2) And he has a beard.
(0.7)

T: Lynn. (.) ¿Como es tu novio?
Lynn. (.) What’s your boyfriend like?

Sam: Mi novio es guapo y alto.
My boyfriend is handsome and tall.

T: Muy bien.
Very good.

(Liddicoat 2009: 193)

The heteronormative framing of the initial question, which Liddicoat explains is taken from a textbook, means that Sam has already been positioned as straight. However, his first answer in which he changes the gender of the noun from feminine (novia) to masculine (novio) so that it is true for him is grammatically correct – the adjectives agree in gender and number with the noun. This is taken by the teacher to be a grammatical error (rather than a statement of fact) and the adjectives are echoed back with feminine endings by way of corrective feedback. Sam too appears to think he has made an error as he repairs and repeats the utterance – this time with the masculine noun intact and the adjectives in their (now incorrect) feminine form. The exchange in its entirety shows how hard he has to work to communicate his meaning and how rooted in heteronormativity the classroom is.

It is significant that the opening question originated in a textbook, as published materials tend to be relentlessly heteronormative in terms of their content. In one study of contemporary English language teaching textbooks (which exert a strong influence on the form textbooks for other global languages take) it was shown that there were no reading or listening activities that suggested the existence of sexual diversity and that in none of the activities that students were asked to do was their being LGBTQI or knowing anyone who was LGBTQI in any way implied (Gray 2013). Such practices are a form of erasure that constitute a denial of recognition, which is not necessarily without consequences for those affected. Sociologists such as Nancy Fraser (1998) and Andrew Sayer (2005) have argued persuasively that the denial of recognition to marginalised groups is a kind of harm that can impact negatively on their well-being and ability to function in wider society. Although Sam was able to negotiate his gay identity successfully, not all students have the confidence or the linguistic ability to do so. For them, to borrow a phrase from Sedgwick (1990: 63), the classroom has the potential to become ‘the stigma-impregnated space of refused recognition’. Liddicoat does not speculate on how the issue of heteronormativity might be addressed in such settings. However, lesbian and gay teachers I
interviewed (Gray 2013) suggested that the solution is necessarily multifaceted. They all felt that there should be greater LGBTQI representation in pedagogical materials, but that classroom discussion was best addressed as a set of discourses rather than in terms of personal experiences and disclosures (see Nelson, this volume).

Summary

This chapter has argued that non-normative sexualities came to be seen at the beginning of the lesbian and gay liberation movement in the late twentieth century as social and discursive constructions and that some early theorists such as Hocquenghem (1993 [1972]: 75) went so far as to assert that identity categories such as homosexual and heterosexual were themselves manipulations that served to silence the ‘polyvocality of desire’. But a politics based on desire would prove difficult to implement, and as lesbian and gay activists and scholars began to make the case for their legitimacy they had recourse to identity as a strategy, which in turn led to a focus on community and on language as reflective of community members’ identities. The contemporary turn to queer theory marks in many ways a return to an earlier sexual politics in which language remains central but in which essentialised views of identity are repudiated and in some cases identity itself is seen as a limiting lens for the exploration of sexuality (Cameron and Kulick 2003), if not potentially repressive of the non-conforming (Valentine 2003; Borba 2015), at least in its institutional deployment. The stories of Angel, Verônica and Sam, each in their different ways, suggest that despite the proliferation of identity labels in some settings and their complete absence in others, normativities – both old and new – have the power to create (linguistic) problems for speakers who do not conform to expectations, and it is here that the application of an applied linguistics perspective can be particularly useful.

Related topics

Positioning language and identity: poststructuralist perspectives; Language and gender identities; The significance of sexual identity to language learning and teaching; Language, gender and identities in political life: a case study from Malaysia; Straight-acting: discursive negotiations of a homossexual identity; Intersectionality in language and identity research; Identity in language learning and teaching: research agendas for the future.

Further reading

Nelson, C.D. (2009). Sexual identities in English language education. Abingdon: Routledge. (This volume draws on the experiences of LGBT teachers and students in a wide range of educational settings globally and explores queer pedagogy from a broadly applied linguistics perspective.)
References


