Straight-acting
Discursive negotiations of a homomasculine identity

Tommaso M. Milani

Introduction
Recent sociological work on masculinity has highlighted how *straight-acting* has become somewhat of an obsession among non-heterosexual men across various sociocultural contexts (Clarkson 2005; Payne 2007; Eguchi 2009). Scholars, however, are in disagreement about how to interpret this phenomenon, which is in many ways reminiscent of those traits of hegemonic masculinity that are prerequisites for a heterosexual man to be viewed as ‘normal’ (Connell 1995).

What can applied linguistics offer to this debate? As the contributions in this volume illustrate, applied linguistics is a diverse and developing field that intersects with sociology and anthropology, as well as gender and queer studies, contributing to, as well as borrowing from, these associated fields. Through detailed linguistic analysis, this chapter tease out the ambiguous performances of homomasculinity, and thus seeks to offer a rigorous textual analysis of the ways in which gender and sexuality are discursively constructed and negotiated. Because of the hybrid methodology as well as the queer heuristic that underpins it, however, the chapter perhaps represents a challenge to institutional requirements that we produce strictly delimited disciplinary identities within research.

Against this backdrop, the aim of this chapter is to investigate performances of ‘straight-acting-ness’ both in online and offline environments. More specifically, two data sets will be analysed:

1. A large corpus of profiles downloaded from meetmarket, a South African online community for men who are looking for other men; and
2. In-depth, semi-structured interviews with 10 white, middle-class South African men about their engagement with meetmarket and other social networking sites.

For contextual purposes, it should be highlighted that the choice of meetmarket is not random. This online community is part of a website – Mambaonline – that defines itself as:
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South Africa’s premier (and most stylish) gay lifestyle portal. Mambaonline.com is aimed at the 18-to-45-year-old urban and trendsetting Internet connected gay male. It is important to highlight that South Africa constitutes an interesting case in point of social transformation.

(Mambaonline Facebook page)

Hyperbolic overtones aside (e.g. ‘premier’, ‘most stylish’), the description of Mambaonline encapsulates the ‘politics of aspiration’ (Nuttall, 2004), as has been pointed out by scholars in other arenas of South African consumer culture in a time of post-apartheid social transformation (see in particular Stroud and Mpendukana 2009). As Nuttall (2004: 243) explains it, the politics of aspiration refers to

[h]ow people seek to transform themselves into singular beings, to make their lives into an oeuvre that carries with it certain stylistic criteria [and also refers] to the emergence of explicit forms of selfhood within the public domain and the rise of the first person singular within the work of liberation.

The manifestations of this individualistic project have been illustrated by Stroud and Mpendukana (2009) in a series of analyses of commercial signage in the streets of the township of Khayelitsa outside Cape Town. These public texts, the authors assert, embody forms of consumerist ‘stylizations of the self’ (Foucault 1989) that promise social betterment through identifications with specific products and the lifestyles associated with them. In this sense, Mambaonline and meetmarket are not particularly dissimilar from the commercial signs in Khayelitsa in that they capitalise on Internet users’ aspirations to identify with, and be part of, a ‘trendsetting’ discourse, which, in this specific case, has overtly gendered and sexual connotations.

In sum, meetmarket is a key discursive space in South Africa where men, irrespective of racial categorisation and social class, can come into mutual contact to express their desire for other men. In order to do so, they mobilise different semiotic resources to style themselves and their desired ‘Other’ in a particular fashion, giving rise to an array of different identities, which are differentially valued in this virtual marketplace.

The public visibility of same-sex desire on meetmarket needs to be located in a context where, since the end of the state-sanctioned system of discrimination commonly known as apartheid, equality on the grounds of race, gender, sexual orientation and religious beliefs has been enshrined in the South African constitution. However, attitudes to non-normative sexual and gender performances are not unanimously positive throughout the country. Moreover, in its well-meaning attempt to recognise and thus empower all sexual minorities, the constitutional recognition of equal rights on the basis of sexual orientation did not benefit everyone in the same way but followed specific racial and social class patterns. Such intersectional splits appeared most forcefully during Johannesburg Pride in 2012. There the activist group One in Nine performed a die-in protest in order to critique what they saw as the failure on the part of the middle-class white organisers of Pride to acknowledge and critique the phenomenon of so-called corrective rape – the violence against black bodies that do not conform to sexual and gender normativity.

Having offered the social context in which the data under investigation in this chapter has been produced, I want now to move on to give an overview of queer theory, the heuristics that inform this chapter. I then present the methodology through which the data was collected. The chapter finishes with an analysis of both online profiles and interview transcripts, and a discussion of the ambiguous politics of homomasculinity.
Overview

Together with the notions of discourse and ideology, identity has become one of the most discussed concepts in the social sciences (see Preece, this volume). At the risk of falling into undue oversimplifications, identity has been conceptualised mainly in two ways in sociolinguistics and applied linguistics:

1. As a stable, unified core with ontological status that can explain a particular linguistic behaviour (e.g. women use more tag questions; women’s speech contains fewer expletives); or
2. As a fluid, multifaceted social construct which is itself in need of explanation (see Joseph, this volume).

Informed by the latter, there is now a vast body of work illustrating the ways in which individuals employ a variety of meaning-making resources (i.e. spoken and written language, gestures and other visual modalities) through which they perform different, competing identities that have specific purposes in particular contexts. Put simply, this research illustrates that identity is not a quality one has but emerges through discursive action. Moreover, identity is never in the singular, but is always a compounded nexus of intersecting social axes.

An interest in teasing out how identities materialise discursively should, however, not make us lose sight of the troubles that come with identity. This argument has been made by queer theorists, for whom ‘identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression’ (Butler 1991: 13–14). Identities then are inevitably caught up in power relations even when they are mobilised for emancipatory purposes, such as in the case of sexual minority movements. This is a type of activism that has used specific identity labels – ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ – as standpoints for the achievement of legal enfranchisement.

Why is this problematic? Political theorist Nancy Fraser (1995) would argue that the issue lies in the ‘affirmative’ character of a politics that dispenses benefits to individuals by virtue of belonging to a minority group that share a common and single identity. For affirmation can in the best of cases only produce a temporary recalibration of power inequalities, but does not lead to a more radical transformation of the status quo (Fraser 1995; see also Stroud 2001 for a similar point in the context of linguistic minorities). In brief, through identity politics, power is partially reshuffled, but the system of inter-group divisions remains unchallenged while intra-group divisions are obscured.

Moreover, when minorities seek acknowledgement from dominant institutions, their credibility is measured against the benchmark of norms and values shared by the majority (Munt 2008: 25). So those minority individuals who conform to dominant sensibilities will accrue more symbolic value than those who ‘deviate’ from them. In this way, differentials within one and the same minority group are created in the name of recognition.

So what to do with such an impasse? Queer theorists do not dismiss identity categories altogether, not least because ‘people do self-identify and are labelled by others as male, female, gay, lesbian or heterosexual, etc. These identities “exist” within discourse, shaping the minds, bodies and lives of many people’ (Baker 2008: 194). What is advocated is sensitivity to the ambiguities that identity categories bring with them, as well as their complicities in entwining privilege with oppression (Nash 2008: 12).

Partly due to its disciplinary origins within literary and cultural studies, queer theory has not had a breakthrough in sociolinguistics and applied linguistics until relatively recently (see Livia...
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and Hall 1997, Baker 2008 and Motschenbacher 2011 for useful overviews; see also Pennycook 2001; Nelson 2006; Gray, this volume). And perhaps because of the same disciplinary belonging, studies informed by queer theory have been more qualitative in nature, thus ‘making quantitative research notable by its absence’ (Browne and Nash 2010: 11; see Baker 2008 and Milani 2013 for exceptions). Some scholars would go as far as to endorse a paradigmatic stance according to which

a queer heuristic […] must qualitatively account for its object of inquiry. This is not because of an implicit phobia of numbers but because any attempt to quantify homosexuals, heterosexuals, etc., assumes a commonality between the individual’s desires and lives that is suspect. Qualitative approaches have a better chance of accounting for queer experiences in the same terms as the actual people living these experiences.

(Warner 2004: 321, emphasis added)

Indeed, one of the basic tenets of queer theory is that we should be wary of too facile conflations between sexual processes (e.g. a man desiring and/or having sex with another man) and sexual identities (gay). This is because forms of categorisation and enumeration on the basis of sexual mores are the products of historical processes that work in the interest of modern state power (Foucault 1978). Nevertheless, a suspicion of numbers, especially when employed for the purpose of state statistics, does not necessarily entail that ‘queer epistemologies, methodologically, require the use of qualitative methods only, or must always contest traditional and conventional techniques’ (Browne and Nash 2010: 12). For a categorical dismissal of quantitative methodologies is inherently at variance with the anti-normative attitude of any queer enterprise. A compromise can be reached by recognising that ‘[j]ust as queer theory aims to deconstruct a range of different identity constructions, so, too, are the range of possible sources of data and analytical methods available to queer theorists’ (Baker 2008: 215), including quantitative approaches such as corpus-based discourse analysis, to which I will now turn.

Methodology

In light of the critical deconstructionist agenda of queer theory outlined in the section above, the case study presented in this chapter is informed by the following research questions:

1. How do the members of meetmarket represent themselves and their object of desire?
2. Which identities are valorised and which ones are devalued?
3. How are these identities perceived and understood by other men looking for other men who browse these profiles?

These questions will be answered with the help of an innovative methodology that brings together (1) a corpus-assisted discourse analysis of meetmarket profiles with (2) a discourse analysis of interviews with South African men who desire other men.

Let us begin with explaining how corpus-assisted discourse analysis works. Corpus linguistics ‘utilizes bodies of electronically encoded text, implementing a more quantitative methodology’ (Baker 2006: 1). The size of corpora can range widely from a few thousand to several billion tokens and can include texts from one or several different genres. When the research project on which this chapter is based started in June 2010, meetmarket contained approximately 14,000 profiles. Because of time and financial constraints, it was impossible to analyse this community
in its entirety. Therefore, I decided to concentrate on a sample that included the largest number of profiles in one geographical area, namely the 4,738 profiles registered under the location of Gauteng, Johannesburg. Two research assistants downloaded the textual sections of each profile over a period of three months and saved them as electronic text files (.txt); all screen names were deleted and substituted with a numerical code. This generated a corpus of 428,174 words.

Because of their dimensions, corpora are typically analysed with the help of computer software (e.g. WordSmith Tools) in order to compute the following information:

1. Wordlists – which give frequencies of both function and content words;
2. Concordances – a list of the contexts in which a particular word is used;
3. Collocations – pairs of words that consistently occur near each other; and
4. Keywords – which specific words characterise a corpus versus another, usually larger, corpus.

In the specific case of the data presented in this chapter, the focus is exclusively on concordances (see Milani 2013 for a more comprehensive analysis of wordlists, concordances and collocations). At this juncture, it is also important to highlight that the data was tagged using the identifiers <self>, </self>, <other> and </other> in order to be able to conduct more precise corpus linguistic counts of concordances and collocates related to forms of ‘Self– vs Other’ identification (Baker 2003).

Why use corpus linguistic tools for discourse analysis? According to Baker (2006), the greatest advantage offered by corpus linguistics is that it helps to reduce researcher bias. This is not to say that the quantitative results generated by corpus-linguistic software speak for themselves. An element of subjectivity is always present because a researcher needs to make sense of numerical information. However, corpus-based investigations can be helpful to triangulate qualitative analyses by adding a quantitative layer that buttresses a researcher’s analysis of a specific social phenomenon or a conclusion drawn upon very small data sets (Baker et al. 2008).

Critics of quantitative approaches might counter-argue that the benefits of corpus linguistics are limited to facilitating the analysis, but the overall understanding of discourse patterns can be produced with qualitative techniques on their own. However, it would not have been possible in this research project to read through over 4,000 online profiles in the attempt to find recurrent patterns. Furthermore, the technological affordances of corpus-linguistic software flag up certain categories that would not have immediately been obvious to an analyst’s eyes. Yet, numbers can hardly reveal anything about discursive nuances in specific contexts of usage. Therefore, it is necessary to look in greater detail at a subset of collocations and concordances.

In sum, quantitative techniques of a large set of written data such as the online profiles analysed in this chapter give us insights into which identities are more or less frequent and which ones are more or less valued in the specific data set. What remains uncharted, however, is how such identities are understood, reproduced and possibly contested by the people who browse those profiles. Hence a textual analysis of a corpus of written data can be enhanced with individual or focus group interviews of website users. In this way, we can achieve a more multifaceted picture of how identities are used, understood and negotiated in a specific context at a particular moment in time.

In such a spirit, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 10 middle-class, white English and/or Afrikaans speaking, South African men about their engagement with meetmarket and other social networking sites. Taken together, the interviews generated approximately 15 hours’ recorded material, which was then transcribed using a simplified technique that reflects hesitations, pauses and intonation contours (see Appendix for transcription
The interviews were conducted in English and concentrated on the meaning of some of the main identity categories that had emerged from the quantitative textual analysis. The reasons for the choice of this specific group of participants were manifold. All the participants had formed part of my circle of acquaintances for the last five years. While such a connection could be criticised for bringing a personal bias into the research, it allowed me to gain deeper ethnographic insights into these men’s lives and beliefs beyond the relatively limited space of the actual interviews (see Leap 1996). Moreover, all the men whom I interviewed had spent their childhood living under apartheid but had first-hand experience of the transition to a democratic South Africa during adolescence and early adulthood. As such, they can be viewed as ‘men of social transformation’. Unlike many of their peers who strongly bemoan post-apartheid conditions, they could be defined as ‘liberal’ insofar as they all consistently showed positive attitudes towards the main tenets of the new dispensation, embracing a multiracial South Africa. They would also generally not pronounce overt racist utterances, nor would they make easy racist jokes or gaffes (see Hill 2008). When talking about sex, however, nearly all these men strongly disavowed the possibility of engaging in sexual relationships with black men.

The data

Concordance data

The quantitative element of the study revealed that grammatical words occupied the top position in the word list. This is a fairly familiar result in corpus analytical investigations. However, as Baker (2006: 100) notes, function words do ‘not always reveal much of interest’ because it is difficult to extrapolate discourses from them. Content words are instead the most common entry points for the enterprise of discourse digging. A closer look at content words showed that the lemmas GUY and MAN occupied the first and third place in the top-10 nouns in the corpus. Furthermore, not only were straight/str8 and its compound straight/str8-acting the most common adjectives through which the members of meetmarket presented themselves (N: 218) and described their object of desire (N: 196); these qualifiers also showed a very strong collocation with GUY and MAN.

It goes without saying that the higher frequency of a word does not tell us much about its meaning; nor do frequencies alone reveal whether a word is the carrier of positive or negative connotations in the corpus in question. In order to understand the evaluative aura that words carry, it is important to explore their contexts of use, their collocational patterns with other words, as well as the ‘perspectivation strategies’ (Wodak 2001: 73) – ironic, serious or otherwise.

So what is the meaning of straight/str8-acting on meetmarket? Is it positively or negatively valued? Is this form of Self and Other-identification in collusion with dominant discourses of masculinities? Or is it a resistance to them? A closer look at the concordances below will help to shed light on these questions.

Table 28.1 Concordances of the straight-acting Self

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Str8 acting</th>
<th>Gay couple am 39 my partner is 33. We do enjoy li</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>I am a straight acting guy brown hear blue eyes who enjoys a lot of</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Yung blk str8 acting dude Celebrity: JayZ, Anthony Hamilton, Lira. TV</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Genuine romantic I’m an easy-going, straight acting handsome gay guy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>IM BLK STRAIGHT ACTING BOTTOM GUY honest loving caring .NAUGHTY.adve</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6 straight acting and looking good looking, friendly person who
7 Straight acting in the closet. Opreg en eerlik! Celebrity: Opr
8 AM A 23YRS SLIM, TALL GOOD LOOKING BLACK GUY STR8 ACTING FUN AND SWEET PERSON AM WHAT YOU SEE
9 w to this world, so still finding my way around. I’m a shy straight acting guy who is brutally honest and i don’t take s
10 persuit, My goal is to strive towards it. Where to start?? Straight acting, lead a balanced and systematic lifestyle, n
11 mehow I am interested in doing nice things to sexually. I’m straight looking & acting, versatile, but if you are, then
12 Non-scene, str8 acting, good looking, down to earth guy, love the outdoo
13 Goodlooking straight acting lad Muscular goodlooking straight acting man
14 Instead, I have grown into a down2earth straight acting/straight looking closeted metrosexual who paradoxically happ
15 Dinks and dents included I am boringly normal. I’m not str8 acting … I don’t act. What you see is what you get!

Table 28.2 Concordances of the straight-acting Other

1 m not looking for fats, fems or queens. A well looked after str8 acting man who will sweep my feet off the ground. Cauc
2 Straight acting, straight looking guy, no fems please. Independant. Age betwee
3 Please straight acting guys only!! I want a guy who is intelligent a
4 cute or ugly guys, who are intelligent and must be very very str8 looking and str8 acting as. 8 looking and str8 acting
5 y around. Not into intense gay activity (no f*cking)!~ into str8 (acting) men for clean fun - nothing intense! e!
6 looking for friendly, straight acting & looking, down to earth black, coloured or i
7 m all the love in the world. I am looking for a fun loving, straight acting and open-minded man. He must also be well-sp
8 BLACK, mature, discrete and a good dose of Wit and humour. Straight acting and masculinity is necessary. Strong charact
9 - because then the sex is damn good!! Looking for a decent, STRAIGHT acting man who’s going to be there for me as I am t
10 ing areas the better.pliz no slims,fems or queens.want very straight acting person.da person must be in da closet
11 I am looking for someone that: has the same needs as me Str8 acting guy who enjoys feeling his way around my body and
12 Friends Anyone I would love to meet other str8 acting guys for friendship, and maybe something more
13 thoughtful, respectful, friendly, funny … who accepts me. Straight acting please, as I’m attracted to masculinity. to
14 d liaison or whatever we both feel comfortable with. Only straigh looking & acting lean, defined or muscled guys betw
15 your average gay guy, even the ones that claims to be very str8 acting … are’nt really, so stop kidding yourselves … a
Lines 1–14 in Tables 28.1 and 28.2 seem to suggest that displaying straight-acting traits carry a positive value-judgement on meetmarket. This evaluative aura is testified further by the collocations of straight-acting with typically positive traits such as ‘good-looking’ and ‘handsome’. Moreover, unlike the case of the gay and lesbian personal advertisements in the UK analysed by Thorne and Coupland (1998: 247) in which the expression ‘100% straight […] is identifiable to a gay readership as ironic’, the members of meetmarket seem to be generally serious in defining themselves and their object of desire in these terms. There are however a few exceptions to this general trend, to which I will return below.

It is important to clarify that ‘straight-acting’ is a complex category that has less to do with (heterosexual) identities and practices alone than with a specific nexus of gender and sexuality, namely the kind of ‘attributes stereotypically linked with heterosexual men, which might include the equally slippery “masculine”, perhaps “manly” and “butch”, but also what these attributes are often taken to oppose, such as “feminine”, “queeny” and “camp”’ (Payne 2007: 526; see also Clarkson 2005; Eguchi 2009). That the valorisation of masculinity goes hand in hand with an overt disavowal of femininity is manifest on meetmarket in the negative connotations surrounding the adjectives feminine and fem/fems, of which the cluster ‘NO FEMS’ is an obvious example.

Thus, the promotion of straight-actingness might suggest that meetmarket is characterised by ‘hegemonic homosexuality’ (Baker 2008: 176) in that ‘the most highly-valued identity is traditional heterosexual hegemonic masculinity or an approximation to it’. One could go as far as to suggest that we are witnessing here the manifestation of a form of internalised homophobia, or ‘sissyphobia’ as Bergling (2001) has called it.

Crucially, it has been pointed out that ‘[s]traight acting means more than being masculine: it also means to be undetectable as a gay person’ (Phua 2002: 186). In this sense, men who desire or identify as ‘straight-acting’ are drawing upon a heteronormative discourse that implicitly promotes heterosexuality as the acceptable norm in the public space, while devaluing homosexuality as an inappropriate identity not to be displayed (see Eguchi 2009). From a political point of view, the valorisation of a straight-acting identity could be interpreted as a sign of an assimilationist trend through which South African men might seek to aspire to gain acceptance by conforming or approximating to a heterosexual masculine script (see Clarkson 2005). To this, Sonnekus (2009) would add a racial dimension. His analysis of mainstream gay visual culture would suggest that straight-acting homo-masculinity is overlayered with an exclusively white coating.

The appreciation of masculine attributes in meetmarket, with the concomitant stigmatisation of male femininity, however, should not lead us to draw facile conclusions about South African homosexual men’s collusion in the workings of male hegemony. Neither should too absolute links be posited between a straight-acting identity and whiteness in South Africa. Analogous to other contexts studied in the literature (see Thorne and Coupland 1998; Chesebro 2001; Baker 2008), the emphasis on masculinity on meetmarket could be read as a way through which South African men desiring other men contest widespread societal discourses that stereotype them as intrinsically effeminate, discourses which also contribute to making the very notion of homo-masculinity a contradiction in terms. Second, the fetishisation of masculinity could be interpreted as a form of objectification that reduces hegemonic masculinity to a commodity to be consumed either virtually (just by reading an advert or profile) or really (by having sex) (see Baker 2008: 177). Third, those macho personas so cherished online might just remain a chimera to long for but do not necessarily coincide with the gender performances of the actual people with whom the men on meetmarket have sex or engage in a long-lasting relationship (see Baker
Fourth, the collocations with both ‘white’ and ‘black’ in the corpus do not warrant a reading of ‘straight/str8’ as a bearer of racially uniform connotations on meetmarket. Lastly, straight-actingness is not always unambiguously championed on meetmarket. Line 15 in Table 28.1 is one of the few cases (N: 7) indicating an outright rejection of straight-acting as a characteristic of self-identification. This does not mean, however, that masculinity is fully discarded here. Quite the contrary – the writer dismisses a straight-acting identity on the basis of its theatrical nature of a ‘performance’. By proxy, the writer’s manhood – whatever this might be – is portrayed as a ‘real’, perceivable and verifiable trait (‘What you see is what you get’).

By the same token, line 15 in Table 28.2 illustrates another ambivalent relation to the valorisation of masculine attributes – this time, in relation to a prospective partner. Here, the ambivalence is the effect of a humorous ‘perspectivation’ (Wodak et al. 1999; Baker et al. 2008), that is, a tongue-in-cheek attitude (e.g. Heywood 1997; Thorne and Coupland 1998) on the part of the writer vis-à-vis the propositional content of the utterance (see Benwell 2004, 2005 and Milani 2013 for a more detailed qualitative analysis).

### Interview data

An ambiguous attitude towards straight-acting and masculinity more broadly also emerged very clearly in the interview data. Unlike the online profiles, which tended to be short and therefore did not go into details about what straight-acting entails, in the interviews the participants unpacked more clearly what kind of qualities this identity category encompasses.

While there was no complete agreement among the interviewed men about what being straight-acting involved, certain qualities emerged from the data. Some stated that it was indicative of not ‘being out’ as a gay man, of still being ‘in the closet’. They also indicated that it comprised (1) certain qualities of voice – a dark timbre, and low pitch; (2) specific postures (‘standing around with a finger in the pants’, ‘crossing one’s legs’); or (3) ex negativo by referring to what it is not, namely through the absence of specific bodily and behavioural traits that are perceived as effeminate (‘being flamboyant’, ‘having limp wrists’, ‘waving one’s hands too much’, ‘clutching an imaginary pearl necklace around the neck’). Only occasionally was straight-actingness unreservedly espoused or dismissed outright, inter alia through a questioning of the ‘acting’ part of this compound. As Mark puts it:

### Extract 1

1 Mark: It’s the acting part I don’t like about it. It’s like you should
2 be comfortable with who you are. And that’s how it should
3 proceed from there. If you are like having to put on like a
4 (...) I could, I could also be straight-acting pretty much by
5 pulling my shoulders back, and lower my voice a bit and say
6 ‘hey dude’ ((lowers his voice)) and standing around with
7 my finger in my pants <laughs> that would also make me
8 straight-acting.

Similar to what we saw earlier on line 15 in Table 28.2, what is questioned here is the performance aspect of straight-acting. Once again through ‘denaturalization’ (Bucholtz and Hall 2005), an identity is held up as being inauthentic, and therefore dismissed as unreal (line 1). If one concurs with poststructuralist epistemologies that there is no such thing as an ‘inner’
identity that an individual has, but all identities are ultimately performances, what we see here is a discursive process whereby some identity performances are presented as more ‘authentic’ and ‘real’ than others.

Like Mark, most of the men in the study expressed more or less strong reservations against this category. Unlike him, however, they also at some point showed a fascination with – or even attraction to – the qualities connected to masculinity, recasting femininity into the domain of abjection (Bourdieu 1998). The extract below, taken from an interview with Michael, who identifies himself as ‘radically queer’, is a representative case in point.

Extract 2

9 Tommaso: Are you attracted to the qualities which go under the label straight-acting?
10 Michael: Less than ever, less than than ever. Definitely when I was younger, absolutely. But for me it wasn’t straight-acting, it was straight that I was attracted to.
11 For me straight-acting gay men are sort of suspicious to me. I’m like what are you hiding? […]
12 When I was younger I was attracted to straightness not like straight gayness like actual straightness.
13 I still often fall for straight men. I would always pick a straight man over a gay man.
14 […]
15 Tommaso: Why?
16 Michael: I don’t know. They were the men that didn’t love me at school. They were the boys who were more good-looking.
17 […]
18 Straight-acting gay people especially the ones who say about themselves seem to really be trying to produce some really sad copy, some really really sad imitation.

What emerges most patently here is how heterosexual masculinity is the utmost object of Michael’s desire. Through ‘denaturalization’ (Bucholtz and Hall 2005), straight-actingness is dismissed as something that is not real (lines 25 and 26); it is portrayed as a copy of, or a bad approximation to, an original, ‘authentic’ form of masculinity, one that paradoxically can never be really attained because it can only be embodied by heterosexual men (lines 16–19). In a later part of the interview, Michael does acknowledge that he finds male femininity attractive, but he hedges his standpoint by stating:

Extract 3

26 Michael: It depends on how much or how uhm like a sort of comfortableness like you know I have no problems sitting however I want […] a sort of balance, a sort of natural, uhm, natural. I know don’t want to think about effeminate people. Part of me like just like don’t find them attractive because they are not
masculine enough but more than that uhm most of
I don’t know they also feel like sometime like a cliché
like kind of homonormative it’s like they are
producing themselves as a cartoon maybe I don’t
know but also I don’t underestimate the stress and
trauma and the need that some of those people have
to do what they have done [...]. I don’t devalue that
some people have found their ways to make the
world livable.

The hesitations (‘uhm’ – lines 26, 29 and 32; ‘I don’t know’ – lines 33 and 35–36) are symptomatic here of an uneasiness with settling on a definite position on the matter. On the one hand, Michael’s self-identification as a ‘radical queer’ seems to be playing at the back of his mind, reminding him that it is controversial to completely reject femininity. On the other hand, there is a clear acknowledgement that femininity is not attractive because it is the opposite of masculinity. For Michael, the problem lies again in a perceived inauthenticity that turns feminine behaviour in gay men into an exaggerated parody of itself (‘a cartoon’). That being said, the societal role of those who do not conform to masculine norms is acknowledged.

Having presented the data, in the next section we turn to its relevance for applied linguists who are interested in studies of language and identity.

Discussion

This chapter has illustrated how the men on meetmarket reproduce dominant forms of masculine identification for the ‘Self’ and the desired ‘Other’. Thus, they seem to hyper-conform to normative ideas about what counts as a ‘real man’. In doing so, however, they might not be paying lip service to heterosexual patriarchy but are actually shaking it by making an oxymoron – homo-masculinity – a visible reality. As Ratele forcefully remarks about homosexual practices in African contexts, ‘[m]en who are attracted to men (or both), [...] by the mere fact of their existence, question and potentially mess up the power [...] of ruling heterosexual masculinity’ (2011: 417, emphasis added). By the same token, the men on meetmarket make male same-sex desire visible and heard. In so doing, they are countering oppressive homophobic forces that seek to silence homosexuality in South Africa; they are also resisting marginalising discourses that attempt to exclude any non-heterosexual man from the domain of the masculine.

At the same time, though, their misogynist attitudes towards feminine traits ultimately reinforce dominant societal discourses that valorise masculinity at the expense of femininity. This complication in the reproduction of hegemonic masculinity allows these men to tap into the privilege that comes with ‘passing’ as a man’s man. Whether conformist or subversive, the straight-acting persona – no matter how central it might be on the virtual stage of meetmarket – is not performed alone; it is accompanied by a doppelgänger (Rank 1971 [1914]) that, from the fringes, puts a mirror in front of ‘straight-actingness’, and sneeringly discloses its artificial character of a performance.

It is the performance aspect of straight-acting that constitutes the main object of critique on the part of the South African men interviewed in this study. This is not to say that masculinity is downplayed, however. Quite the contrary – these men might be sceptical about what straight-acting entails but they still valorise the traits connected to masculinity at the expense of femininity, although some of them do recognise the role played by gender-non-normative behaviour in making ‘the world livable’, as Michael puts it.
This is an important concern for applied linguists not least because ‘[c]hanges in conceptions of gender and sexuality, and the future of research into these areas, are central to our understanding of many real-world problems’ (Cook and Kasper 2005: 479). Chauvinism on the grounds on gender – sexism – and prejudices on the basis of sexual identities – heterosexism and homophobia – are well-known social phenomena that have real effects on people’s lives. This chapter has illustrated how other, possibly more subtle, but no less tangible forms of in-group inequities – Bogetic (2014: 334) calls it ‘recursive marginalisation’ – are produced by those very people who are otherwise the target of broader societal discrimination. This is, however, a form of marginalisation that is not always straightforward but operates in ambivalent ways.

**Summary**

In this chapter I examined whether men who desire other men were colluding with hegemonic masculinity through the fetishisation of straight-acting or whether they were instead opposing widespread societal views that essentialise non-heterosexual men as inherently feminine. These are key questions for applied linguistics with its interests in ‘the theoretical and empirical investigation of real world problems in which language is a central issue’ (Brumfit 1995: 27). These problems include but are not limited to issues of marginalisation and discrimination.

Unlike much scholarly work that has privileged either online or offline interactions, the analysis in this chapter used a multi-pronged methodological approach that sought to capture the on/offline dimension of ‘straight-actingness’. Such a dual focus was realised by a mixed methods study that combined textual analysis of a large corpus of online profiles from meetmarket, a South Africa-based website for men who are looking for other men, with audience reception interviews with a sample of South African men who were looking for other men.

The study found that the male participants were countering oppressive homophobic forces that seek to silence homosexuality in South Africa; they were also resisting marginalising discourses that attempt to exclude any non-heterosexual man from the domain of the masculine. At the same time, though, their misogynist attitudes towards feminine traits ultimately reinforced dominant societal discourses that valorise masculinity at the expense of femininity. This complicity in the reproduction of hegemonic masculinity allowed the participants to tap into the privilege that comes with ‘passing’ as a man’s man (i.e. as heterosexual and abiding by the conventions of heteronormativity).

**Related topics**

Positioning language and identity: poststructuralist perspectives; Language and gender identities; Language and non-normative sexual identities; Beyond the micro–macro interface in language and identity research; The significance of sexual identity to language learning and teaching; Language, gender and identities in political life: a case study from Malaysia; Intersectionality in language and identity research; Language and identity research in online environments: a multimodal ethnographic perspective; The future of identity research: impact and new developments in sociolinguistics.
Further reading


Notes

1 Parts of this chapter have appeared in Milani (2013) and have been reproduced with permission of SAGE.

2 All the names used here are pseudonyms.

References


Mambaonline (no date). Facebook page [Online]. Available at www.facebook.com/mambaonline?ref=ts


**Appendix**

The following transcription conventions have been followed:

- **? ! .** intonation contours
- **( . . )** long pause
- **[ . . ]** deleted text not relevant for discussion in this chapter
- **(( . ))** author’s comments
- **< >** paralinguistic features