

Dept. of Linguistics and Modern English Language, Lancaster University

Gender and Language, 2001/2002

Session 10: Language and Sexual Identity

Issues

- What is sexual identity?
- Why study it?
- How do we define terms like gay, heterosexual, lesbian, queer, bisexual, transsexual?
- Is there such a thing as “Gay Language” or “Heterosexual language”?

Debate: essentialism vs. social constructionism

- Are we born with pre-programmed sexual identities, or are they created by society and upbringing?

Derogatory language vs. reclaiming

“Dyke is... a reclaimed epithet, a term of derision that has been to some extent rescued as an expression of pride... The issue for all such lexical items is: For which speakers, in which contexts, and for which purposes has the word been reclaimed?”

Zwicky (1997: 22)

Early Studies

Lexicon building – Legman (1941) no lesbian language - “gentlemanly restraint”.

Bruce Rodgers *The Queen’s Lexicon*.

Julia Stanley – homogenous subculture, core and fringe lexicons, word formation:

- 1 compounds (*closet queen, chicken queen, trick towel*);
- 2 rhyme compounds (*chichi*);
- 3 exclamations (*Mary!, For days!*);
- 4 puns (*Give him the clap*);
- 5 blends (*butch + fluff = bluff*)
- 6 truncations (*bisexual -> bi*)

GaySpeak

1 Secret 2 Social 3 Radical Activist, Hayes 1976

“Hayes has made a basic confusion between the generic and the ideographic. In an attempt to tell us something about the unique behaviours of the gay subculture, he has stumbled into larger areas of behaviour with no compelling evidence that they are in any way uniquely employed by gay persons.... Hayes fails to provide us with any words or word patterns that have a constant

function and usage across settings which might indeed illuminate something uniquely and universally gay.”

Darsey (1981: 63)

Features/Indexes of “Gay Language”

- Gay men tend to use a wider pitch range compared to the speech of heterosexual men. (Goodwin 1989, Gaudio 1994)
- They tend to use hypercorrect pronunciation – so they’ll have phonologically non-reduced forms. For example, saying fishing rather than fishin. (Walters 1981)
- They tend to use hyper-extended vowels (Barrett 1997)
- Longer /s/ and /l/ sounds (Christ 1997)
- They will also use a high to low intonational contour: fAABulous (Barret 1993)
- In terms of lexicon, they may use specific terms such as the ones referenced in early lexical studies, but they’re also liable to use a number of features which were found to belong to Lakoff’s list of women’s language: empty adjectives and hedges. (Moran 1991)

Linguistics of Contact

“Imagine, then a linguistics that decentered community, that placed at its centre the operation of language across lines of social differentiation, a linguistics that focussed on modes and zones of contact between dominant and dominated groups, between persons of different and multiple identities, speakers of different languages... Let us call this enterprise a linguistics of contact.”

Pratt (1987: 60)

Imagined Communities

“The few studies that exist on lesbian language either centre on lexical or topic issues... or come to the conclusion that there are no unique linguistic features used by lesbians... The characterisation of lesbian language does not revolve around a simple binary choice: Either we speak like women or we speak like men. Instead lesbians have a rather broad range from which to draw their linguistic choices. Elements of these choices incorporate the construction and enactment of a lesbian identity, a queer identity, a female identity, an ethnic identity and a class identity, in addition to a variety of other kinds of identity... I propose that it is through the combination of the linguistic resources available from each of the ‘imagined’ communities to which lesbians ‘belong’ that we get a lesbian speech style. Through taking such a contact-based perspective, we may begin to accommodate the vast social and individual ways that lesbians use language as indexical markers of identity.”

Queen (1998: 233, 254)

Anti-Language

- Halliday 1978
- Anti-languages created by anti-societies – people who are stigmatised.

- Stigmatised identities are the most important ones we have
- Anti-languages used for secrecy or to identify others
- More importantly - also used to reconstruct society through the values of an anti-society – creating an alternative reality via language
- e.g. Polari “bona lattie” means “nice house”?

Communities of Practice

“...a set of relations among persons, activity and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice. A community of practice is an intrinsic condition for the existence of knowledge.”

Lave and Wenger (1991: 29)

Gay English

Leap 1996, co-operation.

“Gay English... A distinctive gendered approach... to oral, written and signed text making. [These] texts may include a specialized vocabulary or may be rich in male homoerotic content, but fluency in Gay English involves more than a personal familiarity with those words and phrases.”

(Leap 1996: xii)

“...the presentation of gay message in most Gay English conversations lies somewhere between the two extremes of secrecy-and-silence and flamboyance-outrageousness, which ensures some degree of ambiguity will recur throughout conversations between suspect gays and between gay men and heterosexuals.... Negotiating such ambiguity... is a recurring theme in Gay English discourse.”

Leap (1996: 73).

Queer Linguistics

- Queer vs. “normal”/mainstream/powerful.
- Refusal to name the subject
- Gender Performativity theory (speech acts)

“Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance of a natural sort of being.”

Butler (1990: 33)

“The queer world is a space of entrances, exits, unsystematized lines of acquaintance, projected horizons, typifying examples, alternative routes, blockages, incommensurate geographies.”

Berlant and Warner (1998: 558)

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