

Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	vii
<i>List of Tables</i>	viii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	x
Introduction: Language, Sexualities and Desires <i>Helen Sauntson and Sakis Kyratzis</i>	1
1 Sex Talk: Language, Desire, Identity and Beyond <i>Liz Morrish and William Leap</i>	17
2 ‘Everyone Was Convinced that We Were Closet Fags’: the Role of Heterosexuality in the Construction of Hegemonic Masculinity <i>Jennifer Coates</i>	41
3 ‘This Sex Thing Is such a Big Issue now’: Sex Talk and Identities in Three Groups of Adolescent Girls <i>Pia Pichler</i>	68
4 The Semantics of Desire: Exploring Desire, Love and Sexuality through Metaphor <i>Sakis Kyratzis</i>	96
5 Queering Language: a Love that Dare not Speak its Name Comes Out of the Closet <i>Yvonne Dröschel</i>	118
6 Education, Culture and the Construction of Sexual Identity: an APPRAISAL Analysis of Lesbian Coming Out Narratives <i>Helen Sauntson</i>	140

7	The Transformed Gay Self: the Male Body and its Scenic Presence as Sites of Gay Self-Enunciation <i>Stephan A. Grosse</i>	165
8	The Subversive Effect of the Signals of Erotic Text Patterning <i>Michael Hoey</i>	185
9	Going 'Back to Basics': Moral Panics about Heterosexual Relationships <i>Lia Litosseliti</i>	204
10	Women Like Us: Mediating and Contesting Identity in Lesbian Advice Literature <i>Deborah A. Chirrey</i>	223
	<i>Index</i>	245

1

Sex Talk: Language, Desire, Identity and Beyond

Liz Morrish and William Leap

Introduction¹

The main aim of this chapter is to propose that identity-centred studies of language and sexuality have affirmed the need for context-centred research, and to illustrate how identity-centred research allows the workings of desire to be examined within the domains of lived social and cultural experience. In the first part of the chapter, we chart the development of our main theoretical arguments by reviewing the primary critique offered by proponents of what we term ‘desire-centred research’ regarding identity-centred studies of language and sexuality. We will explain how the primary interest in identity-centred studies was not a simplistic documentation of language/identity bi-uniqueness.² The concern was much more complex: tracing how speakers’ use of language ‘at the site’ conveys context- and culture-specific messages about sexual identity and other topics related to sexuality *within the social moment*, and thereby, demonstrating how certain linguistic practices convey messages about sexuality within that cultural setting. Important to note, audience-centred, interpolative, performative dimensions of these messages, and the linguistic practices conveying them, were acknowledged and explored in these earlier studies, and these iterative themes continue to be addressed in recent, identity-centred research, even as the scope of this work has broadened to incorporate new lines of inquiry – including connections between language and desire.

In the next section of the chapter, we consider several recent examples of such research. In the first set of examples, we consider sexual (and other) identities as forms of practice which emerge through discourse and other signalling structures acquired within a *community of practice*, that is, a nexus of social relations with fluid membership that is

constantly in formation and that becomes a site of struggle as often as a site of solidarity and stability. Echoing Bucholtz's (1999: 209) claim that 'individuals engage in multiple identity practices simultaneously, and they are able to move from one identity to another', this example shows how identity joins desire as a product of iteration, but at the same time, and far from being context-free, that iteration itself is a product of speaker-centred linguistic practice.

In the next set of examples, we position identity and desire within larger relationships between language, sexuality and political economy within township settings in post-apartheid Cape Town, South Africa. In these settings, all iterations of sexuality coincide with reproduction of structures (material and ideological) that mediate access to economic and social opportunity. To consider desire (or identity, or any component of human experience, for that matter) as a context-free semiotic in such instances ignores the broader workings of political economy in terms of which all forms of speaker subjectivity are interpolated, and disguises the extent to which individual speakers claim subject positions in spite of economic and social regulation. Uniqueness of linguistic practices is not at issue here, though the significance of certain practices, as markers of place within a larger regulatory system, *are* relevant to the analysis, just as they are for the speakers and their everyday lives.

All of these examples build on an identity-centred analysis of language and sexuality, but are not limited by concerns with language/identity bi-uniqueness. Similarly, while both examples provide rich documentation for the interactions between linguistic practices, sexuality and desire, they show how much information will be excluded from that documentation, if items other than desire are not addressed on the research agenda. Such exclusions, we conclude, undermine interests in building understandings of language and sexuality relationships relevant to specific cultural settings and in cross-cultural regularities in the sense described throughout this collection.

Revisiting 'uniqueness', exploring identity, intentionality and significance

Some recent discussions regarding language and sexuality have urged that researchers prioritise a general concern with same-sex desire over the particular interests defined and described in terms of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other types of speaker-centred sexual identities (hereafter LGBTQ). Publications articulating this point of

view include Kulick (2000, 2003), Cameron and Kulick (2003a, b), and several essays in Campbell-Kibler *et al.* (2002). The recurring argument in these publications is twofold: first, studies of, for example, 'lesbian/gay language' (including Moonwomon, 1995; Leap, 1996; Livia and Hall, 1997) have failed to identify any structural or discursive features which mark the linguistic practices of lesbians and gay men distinctive from persons in any other sexually based identity category. Second, such an inquiry misses the point entirely, since the only feature that could be characteristic of LGBTQ language is its articulation of desire, not its expression of desire in terms of specific object choices or through specific linguistic formats.

There is no question that desire-centred studies of language and sexuality address research questions very different from those that guided earlier identity-centred studies of language and sexuality, and the authors of this chapter agree that the issues raised by those questions are worthy of further study. One purpose of this chapter is, therefore, to clarify some of the issues surrounding existing work on language and sexuality raised by desire-centred critiques of such work. We are not convinced that centring language and sexuality research entirely around desire is a viable alternative to current practice, if the intended focus for such research is a 'desire for recognition, for intimacy, for erotic fulfillment [...] none of [which] in itself is specific to any particular kind of person' (Kulick, 2003: 123). There is no lesbian, gay or other sexualised subject under this research agenda and, therefore, no reason to pay attention to personal, social or historical context of linguistic or desiring practices.³

Proponents of desire-centred studies of language and sexuality assert, quite correctly, that studies of language and sexuality have largely been synonymous with the language use of sexually minoritised groups like gays and lesbians. Further, and following the argument outlined in Kulick (2000), these scholars claim that studies of, for example, lesbian and gay languages have assumed, but failed to prove, that gays and lesbians use language in a specifically delineable, bi-unique fashion. That is, while these studies find that lesbians and gay men readily use linguistic and other symbolic resources to index identity, these resources also circulate in other contexts among diverse groups to index different identities. The argument concludes that this broader circulation should undermine the claim that markers of sexual identity can be analysable from discursive practice. It is claimed, on the other hand, that desire is much more amenable to discursive analysis – that it is intelligible because it is conveyed through semiotic practices which

are iterable, and whose recursiveness makes them readily amenable to identification and analysis.

Dispelling the smokescreen of *uniqueness*

The fact that studies of LGBTQ linguistic practices do not clearly demarcate the locations of morphological, phonological or other linguistic features that are completely **unique** to the linguistic practices of gay men and lesbians may, at first, appear to be a valid criticism. However, no researcher who studies LGBTQ-centred language has ever claimed to be searching for unique linguistic features – or has ever claimed to have found them. Indeed, when language and desire scholars raise this argument, references are cited generically (e.g. Moonwomon, 1995; Leap, 1996), rarely indicating where in the identified sources claims about uniqueness of linguistic features are to be found. In most cases, as careful reading will confirm, such claims are not part of the original argument, but have been read into it by other researchers. See the discussion of the ‘Brown water pitcher’ (Extract 1.1 below), as a case in point.

What researchers have sought to discover is the LGBTQ-related **significance** of linguistic features, that is, to identify those features within a speech event in terms of which participants are able to acknowledge and confirm references to sexuality as relevant to that context. Such features may include terms with explicit sexual references, but much more frequently those features are not coded for sexual meaning and such meanings must be contextually inferred. Linguistic forms that satisfy this ‘performative effect’ (Leap, 1996: 159–63; 1997) in one context may not do so in another. The issue here is interpreting social actors within social contexts – not meanings of sexuality (or desire!) embedded invariably within the linguistic sign.

LGBTQ language studies have not trawled for evidence of invariable referencing of sexuality within any one area of LGBTQ linguistic practice. Quite the contrary; much work, to date, recognises the great amount of diversity within groups, contexts, cultures and material conditions which together lead to diverse articulations of sexual identity, even within individuals who purportedly share the same, or very similar, sexual orientation. Discussions of this point include Manalansan’s (1994, 1995, 2003) writings on Filipino *bakla* in home and in diasporic settings, Roscoe and colleagues’ (1988) discussions of Native American two-spirit people, Gaudio’s (1997, 2001) discussions of *yan daudu* sexual subjectivities in northern Nigeria, Hall’s (1997) studies of *hijra* and other ‘third gender’ categories in contemporary urban India, and

Johnson's (1998, 2003) reflections on the linguistic practices which African American gay men use to denote racial/sexual solidarity and contrast.

To assume that the object of inquiry in researching language and sexual identity is the search for specific structural features for LGBTQ language (Kulick 2000: 257) is to disregard the importance of contextually, culturally and locally negotiated meanings which have repeatedly proven to be the significant feature for LGBTQ – and all sexualised/gendered – languages. Indeed, we find that LGBTQ language is often as much a part of the linguistic repertoire of persons who do *not* identify as lesbian or gay (Podesva *et al.*, 2002 – and see also the earlier discussion of this issue in Gaudio, 1994). Morrish (2002a, b), for example, demonstrates that the codes of camp are not necessarily owned by homosexuals. Subtle signification of identity is precisely the process which underlies the media's outing of British public political figures like Peter Mandelson and Michael Portillo, and the mainstream press are adept at deploying the codes of camp in order to effect covert, pragmatic outing. And as Boellstorff's (2004) work in Indonesia makes clear, same-sex identified people can claim LGBTQ identities in some settings, then submerge those identities beneath mainstream-based assertions of national belonging in other settings. Whether applied to the speakers themselves, or by the speakers to others, assertions of LGBTQ identity certainly do not always fall within the domain of any single party – linguistic assertions, least of all.

How, therefore, can anyone claim that researchers have identified specifically LGBTQ language(s), if these researchers recognise that the linguistic practices in question are also attested in the discourse of mainstream straight speakers? The fact that those who identify as gay do not always 'talk' gay – and correspondingly, that structures that might be identified as gay on some occasions might wittingly or unwittingly be used by straight speakers – cannot be used to invoke fallacious arguments about language-and-identity bi-uniqueness. At one time, phonemic theory claimed that once a phone was assigned to a particular phonemic class, it would always belong to that phoneme. That artificial argument did not work for phonology, and it certainly does not work in the complex world of human interaction where conditions of culture, register, style, audience, performativity, materiality all pervade the context of communication.

What has happened, however, is that linguistic practices that often index LGBTQ identities (or are believed for various reasons to do so) have entered the general symbolic marketplace, both in response to the

commodification of LGBTQ cultures outside of LGBTQ settings (Evans, 1993; Gluckman and Reed, 1997; Hennessy, 2000), as well as the more general flows of sexual cultures within national boundaries and across them (Altman, 2001; Berry *et al.*, 2003; Boellstorff and Leap, 2004). But while the circulation of these markers of non-normative sexuality has resulted in an enhanced visibility among broader audiences, neither condition has diminished the popularity of these linguistic practices within LGBTQ settings. Some gay-identified men continue to mark their sexual identities, publicly and strategically, in terms similar to the slightly campy, often acidic one-line retorts favoured by characters from American and British television sitcoms like *Will and Grace* and *Queer as Folk*, even if awareness of these codings and their meanings is now foregrounded in public culture. As Moonwomon (1995: 46) is careful to remind us, we should not trace the linguistic basis of social identity exclusively to distributions of linguistic features within linguistic domains, since most of the language-based indicators of identity occur at the level of discourse and are still revealed through a gradual recognition and/or negotiation of culture-specific shared linguistic knowledge.

Engaging intentionality

A second, and related, criticism of identity-centred studies of language and sexuality has to do with connections between identity and intentionality. Unlike the case for discussions of uniqueness, intentionality is central to identity-based studies of language and sexuality, as well it should be; intentionality, like identity and the workings of significance, are all forms of linguistic practices through which speaking subjects affirm their presence within the linguistic moment.

Cameron and Kulick (2003a: 125) maintain that much of the work with intentionality has taken the form of efforts to impute 'what the speaker was *really* trying to say' from a close reading of the speaker's textual product. To our knowledge, no one studying language and sexuality from an identity-centred framework has advocated such a stance. What many have proposed, however, is the close reading of textual form combined with evidence about the speech event gleaned from ethnographic observation and other sources, in order to draw out as much of the ebb and flow of conversation (or narrative) as researchers are able to (re)construct. This is the approach to text analysis which orients Leap's discussion of the language use of gay-identified men in *Word's Out* and related publications (Leap 1999, 2002a, b, 2003), and it is the approach that orients Barrett's (1995, 1997) studies of African American drag queen/audience interaction, Gaudio's (1997, 2001)

studies of the linguistic skills of the *yan daudu*, Kulick's (1997, 1998) exploration of *travesti* sexuality in urban Brazil, and Cameron's (1997) accounting of young men 'performing gender identity' through linguistic practice.

Whether researchers make the position explicit or not, all of these studies assume that speakers are being strategic in their use of language – or, in Halliday's (1978: 109) words: 'Text represents choice. A text is "what is meant", selected from the total set of options that constitutes what can be meant. In other words, text can be defined as actualised meaning potential.' Were such assumptions not to apply, linguistic practices would become arbitrary, haphazard, meaningless, formless activities, yielding arbitrary, haphazard, meaningless and formless linguistic products. Thus, there would be no reason to use conversation or narrative as a focus for linguistic analysis. Where linguistic analysis should turn to find a more reliable database for linguistic inquiry is not yet clear. Desire-centred approaches would benefit from their allegiance to text-centred research being qualified by their broader theoretical claims.

Indeed, it is not obvious how this apparent theoretical quandary regarding intentionality will be resolved by a shift in focus from identities and the intentions of communication to the 'culturally grounded semiotic practices that make them and their communication possible' (Cameron and Kulick, 2003a: 125). Certainly giving attention to the unconscious may enrich the inquiry by allowing studies of sexuality to extend beyond those identities which people consciously claim. But where is the concrete empirical basis in terms of which desire-centred research will explore the unconscious as it mediates the interface of language and sexuality? Even if research adopts a strict Lacanian reading of messages of desire nested within particular forms of linguistic practice and product, close reading of textual evidence is still required. To argue that the speaker speaks, but has no say in what s/he is saying calls to mind the generative grammarian's interests in the deep-structural linguistic competence of the ideal speaker-hearer. This theoretical perspective is eloquent, but real-world experiences remain at distance from the analysis.

Identity gives studies of sexuality a concrete object for inquiry

The advantage of making identity the starting point for inquiry is that at least the object of inquiry is defined, and its range bounded. Hence, when the five college-age young men who were the focus of study in Cameron's (1997) now classic essay, 'Performing gender identity: young

men's talk and the construction of heterosexual masculinity', actively disavowed homosexuality, and worked together to construct a heterosexual, masculine identity in opposition to it, their linguistic and social practices were neither random nor arbitrary, nor without blueprint. Their sense of homosexuality – and of heteronormative masculinity – was not created *de nouveau* within the linguistic moment, but incorporated a broad range of understandings and assumptions about sexual identity and desire. Cameron's close reading of the linguistic turn-taking (whose details resemble those termed *cooperative discourse* in Leap, 1996: 12–48, though certainly not with the gay-affirming outcomes) contains ample evidence of purposeful, intentional linguistic exchange, framed within, but not predetermined by, speakers' assumptions about sexual identity. Foregrounding notions of desire might clarify additional themes (or anxieties) embedded in the young men's remarks; erasing questions of identity from the analysis would remove from consideration the very issues that were of primary interest in their exchange.

A recent conversation in which Morrish was a co-participant provides a second example of how identity provides a defined, bounded focus – though not entirely a predetermined one, for analysis of conversations about language and sexuality. And once again, underscoring the theme of intentionality, the example reminds us that participants in such conversations find identity to be an equally valuable resource in that regard.

When white, middle-class, academic lesbians have what they might consider, in hindsight, a 'lesbian conversation', they only rarely focus around sex, desire or disclosures of attraction. This conversation took place between two lesbians who knew each other quite well, and a third woman of undeclared sexual identity whom the other two did not know well, but was thought to be a lesbian by both other parties (because of dress, hairstyle, etc.). They were all workmates, and were having an extended conversation about the relaxed dress code in the workplace which did not require them to wear dresses or be particularly smart. They talked about their comfort level in trousers and work boots, and how more conventional feminine attire would distract them from doing their jobs. The next day, the two 'out' lesbians had coffee. 'So, what's the story with Tanya?', inquired one. The other confessed she did not know, and was unwilling to make an assumption without the formality of a 'coming out'. 'But that's the kind of conversation you'd have with a dyke', said her friend, referring to the previous day.

This conversation had everything to do with gender, and everything to do with sexual identity as well. Some of the things which dykes talk about when ‘being’ dykes, in Butler’s (1991: 18) sense of ‘being’ or specifically performing lesbian identity, include the constraints of gender normativity and the possibilities of resistance to it, and they frame those remarks in coded and not-so-coded formats accordingly. The point we are making here is not restricted purely to lesbian experience. As Leap (1996: 7–10, 35–9) has explained in his description of two self-identified gay men disputing the colour of a ‘brown water pitcher’, certain features of discursive practice widely attested in the language use of gay-identified English-speaking men (including cooperation, gender non-normative topics and indexing) have a performative effect on the participants’ understandings of the sexual politics of the gendered moment and on those of the audience as well. In all such instances, these performative features may be difficult to decompose structurally, and they may not all be entirely unique to gay or lesbian cultures. But they are significant to the work of communication within those cultural domains, and speakers invoke that significance, sometimes accidentally, sometimes intentionally, as part of their conversational or narrative text-making. Understandably, documenting that context-related significance has been, and remains, the central concern in LGBTQ language studies as we know and engage in them; desire-centred linguistic inquiry can make important contributions to that project, as the examples reviewed in the following section will show.

Studying the significance of desire: two examples

We see many shortcomings in a narrowly focused theorising of language and desire, but we wholeheartedly agree that LGBTQ language research should not neglect this component of human sexuality. Indeed, desire factors richly into the research projects with which we are each engaged – Morrish’s studies of the linguistics of self-presentation and concealment (2002c), Leap’s (2004 and forthcoming) studies of language, sexuality and political economy, Morrish and Sauntson’s (forthcoming) studies of lesbian erotica – however, as our discussions of these projects will show, desire is not the only issue which orients linguistic inquiry in these projects.

Language, desire and *Communities of Practice*

Much of the discussion of language and desire calls to mind a classic version of a Labovian speech community in which all individuals share

the same notion of desire and, thus, the same linguistic codes for expressing it; see, for example, Kulick (2000: 250–1). Most sociolinguists would now argue that such an idealised ‘speech community’ consisting of members with homogeneously detailed verbal repertoires simply does not exist. Hence, Pratt (1987: 51) points out the distance between the sometimes imagined homogeneity of linguistic community and the fractured experience of individuals positioned within them. She argues that a speech community approach does not deal with social relations between groups where ‘language is seen as a nexus of social identity, but not as a site of social struggle or a producer of social relations’ (Pratt, 1987: 56).

From such dissatisfaction with the limits of ‘speech community’, the Community of Practice (CoP henceforth) argument has emerged. It borrows heavily from work in social theory (Wenger, 1998) which asserts the following principles:

- boundaries between subcultures are fuzzy
- relations and influences between them need to be specified
- identities are fluid
- it is difficult to recognise linguistic varieties purely in structural terms.

CoP-centred research understands identities as multiple and fluid, and contends that identities emerge through practice and are not claimed in advance of it. It is, then, an approach which sits easily with the existence of heterogeneous groupings, in which, in the service of creating identity, all kinds of diverse subjects may be brought together for the purpose of mutual endeavour (Wenger, 1998: 75). Bucholtz (1999) asserts that individuals who are part of a community of practice need not all be equally immersed or oriented towards the practice in the same way or at all. As she explains, ‘individuals engage in multiple identity practices simultaneously and they are able to move from one identity to another’, which means that ‘[g]ender does not have the same meanings across space and time, but is instead a local production, realized differently by different members of a community’ (Bucholtz, 1999: 209, 210). Work by Moonwomon (1995, 2000) and Livia (1995) and others has made clear that these discourse practices in the context of creating gender or sexual identity are anything but exclusively sexual or erotic.

The ‘brown pitcher’ exchange (Leap, 1996: 7–10 – presented here below) and other examples of ‘gay men’s English’ in Leap’s *Word’s Out* show how the workings of such recognition unfold in various US-based

speech settings – and, thereby, display the interplay of what Leap terms the twin processes of *cooperative discourse* and *language of risk*.

Extract 1.1 The Brown Water Pitcher

- 1 A can I get a glass of water?
- 2 [Moves toward sink where B is washing dishes]
- 3 B there is ice water in the fridge
- 4 A OK. Thanks.
- 5 [Opens refrigerator door, looks inside]
- 6 B [Notices pause in action] In the brown pitcher.
- 7 A [Continues to look; looks toward Bob] I don't see a brown pitcher in here.
- 8 B Sure. It's brown, and round, and on the top shelf.
- 9 A [Looks inside again] Nope.
- 10 B [Stops washing dishes, dries hands, moves to fridge, removes pitcher,
- 11 pours water]
- 12 A That pitcher is not brown, it is tan. [Pause; B remains silent] It is light tan.
- 13 B It is brown to me. [Slight smile]
- 14 A No, you said brown; so I looked for something dark chocolate.

(Leap, 1996: 7)

In this example, two gay men argue about the exact colour of a water pitcher. Unlike the highly competitive linguistic exchange commonly associated with heterosexual males (Goodwin, 1980; Coates, 2003), the interlocutors in this example recognise the potential for conflict which their disagreement may cause, and once evidence of tension begins to appear in the linguistic exchange (see Leap 1996: 7, lines 6–9) the two men quickly take steps *together* to back away from that undesirable goal, and begin to make fun of their own stereotyping of themselves, as gay men, disagreeing over the fine points of colour, shade and hue. Gay stereotype, applied by both speakers to themselves and to each

other, figures prominently in the linguistic strategies used to redirect the exchange and, thereby, marks the shared familiarity with the stereotype and the broader meanings communicated through building a parody of it. No one would suggest that this exchange illustrates a uniquely gay linguistic strategy, and Leap certainly did not make such a claim in his analysis. That the use of the strategy had a performative effect on the conversation between these men is evidenced repeatedly, or iteratively, in the details of the linguistic exchange.

Extract 1.2, below, makes the same point about the significance of meaning in local production. The conversation is about the notion of a lesbian version of the popular British TV programme *Changing Rooms*, in which couples redecorate and remodel rooms in their friends' houses. Among this small group of white middle-class lesbians, the identities being performed and jointly negotiated emerge through the exploitation of shared cultural knowledge and jokes which invert gender norms as well as play off stereotypic expectations about lesbian tastes.

Extract 1.2 Changing Rooms

- 1 C they're all so straight the people who go on this
- 2 A yeah, I think we should all go on
- 3 B yeah we could do a lesbian Changing Rooms
- 4 A yeah and instead of telling the audience all about our children we could
- 5 tell them about our cats
- 6 All (laughing)
(2 turns)
- 7 C yeah we'd have to have strict guidelines before we went on like
- 8 no wallpaper
- 9 B and no pastels
- 10 All (laughing)
- 11 A we could paint big dyke symbols all over each other's walls
- 12 All (laughing)

(adapted from Sauntson, 2002)

There are no overt appeals to 'lesbian identity' in this passage, so what about the passage might prompt a listener (or a researcher) to identify this exchange as a 'lesbian conversation'? What claims are we making about the text, if we consider this an example of 'lesbian speech'? Moonwomon (1995: 46) supplies an answer to these questions in her discussion of lesbian conversations revolving around domestic and health matters – that authenticity in a lesbian conversation emerges from assumptions of shared knowledge. What Moonwomon (1995) proposes as shared lesbian knowledge is the sense that one's partner will be understanding and supportive, as well as share one's perception of oppression as a lesbian with breast cancer in the face of the medical establishment. Moonwomon-Baird (2000) examined the narrative of a lesbian whose various identities as a black woman, a lesbian, a recovering alcoholic and a political being all coalesce and are variously prioritised to 'describe how a lesbian sense of self is made complexly' (Moonwomon-Baird, 2000: 349).

In a similar vein, in the *Changing Rooms* excerpt, a collective lesbian identity emerges in opposition to norms of heterosexual femininity which are expressed in terms of child-bearing, colour choice and decor preference. Expectations of what usually occurs in such TV programmes are subverted with comedic irony. We notice a rapid flow of information and agreement (multiple occurrences of 'yeah' – lines 2, 3, 4, 7) about how to be a lesbian in that particular co-culture.

It is a lesbian conversation because it is *situated discourse*. Cats, wallpaper and pastels might all evoke different meanings in another culture or situation and with participants who were straight or male. Someone who claims to be a fully paid-up member of a lesbian CoP has inevitably undergone a process of acculturation and *learning*, and the CoP is characterised by Wenger (1998: 214) as 'a privileged location for the acquisition of knowledge'. During the formation of an identity, there is a transformation of knowledge, and symbols and behaviours become invested with meanings in context (Wenger, 1998: 214). The CoP member becomes expert at decoding these meanings, and part of that learning process is acquiring a sociolinguistic competence of making judgements about what constitutes a felicitous act of identity in others (Holmes and Meyerhoff, 1999: 174). And of course the meanings of acts will change in different cultural contexts. Understanding meanings of situated discourse is also what is going on in Leap's 'Brown water pitcher' example, and in the many examples of 'rehearsal' which he has also discussed (Leap, 1996: 125–39; 1999: 267). The men in those examples, like the women in the *Changing Rooms* example here, are able

to participate in the linguistic exchange because they are playing by the same rules for decoding the conversation. As Lemke (2000) writes, 'because practices are not just performances [...] one must learn not just what and how to perform, but also what the performance means, in order to function and be accepted as a full member of a CoP'.

Clearly the performance above is predicated on the assumption of shared lesbian desire, nevertheless that is not the feature of difference which is foregrounded by the participants or even directly indexed. What is on display in Extract 1.2 is the collective will to transgress hetero-norms and resist gender role conformity. The embedded understanding is the ability to decode these in a multivalent way as signifying lesbian identity and lesbian desire.

Language, desire and valued sexual geography

Communities of Practice theory shows how understandings of desire can be co-constructed, as part of the linguistic give and take between participants in a conversation. Understandings of desire, formed through such means within the social moment, can also circulate *outside* of specific conversational settings, thereby assuming a status similar to that assigned to other commodities exchanged within the economic and social marketplace. Desire gains association with persons, places, activities and other 'things' through this process, each of which becomes not only desirable, but valuable through this means.

Place this process of association within a social system that stratifies mobility and restricts economic and social opportunity based on distinctions of skin colour, male vs female bodily differences, and strict allegiance to hetero-normative privilege, and you begin to sense the complex structures that regulate the geographies of everyday life in the black townships in post-apartheid Cape Town, South Africa. This discussion builds on Cape Town area field research reviewed in Leap (2004). The database includes life-story interviews from more than 85 women and men, distributed somewhat evenly across racial/ethnic backgrounds, age ranges, income levels and class positions. Leap conducted his interviews in English; township residents whom Leap trained to work with him on this project conducted interviews in English and Xhosa and worked with Leap to prepare translations of the Xhosa materials. Each interview began with the respondent drawing a map of Cape Town as a gay city, with the depiction of sexual geography presented in each map providing focus for the remainder of the tape-recorded interview. Data on place and location reviewed here come from these sections of the interviews.

Some Cape Town area townships were created during the apartheid era and the forced removal of persons of colour from the City Centre to the Cape Flats. Others began as labour compounds and pre-date the apartheid period. In all instances, townships were domains of enforced residence, where quality-of-life services were often available in limited supply. Since work could be found in the metropolitan area, township residence was preferable to economic conditions in the homelands. Even so, township residence was racialised residence, and the regulation of bodies was, at the same time, a regulation of place. For LGBTQ township residents, coping with the regulation is especially complex, given that the locations that they consider to be the most valued lesbian/gay sites are located in Cape Town's City Centre, at some distance (in some instances, as much as 30 miles) from their place of township residence area. The City Centre was proclaimed as white space under the apartheid period, and since then its associations with wealth and privilege have maintained its identification with whiteness. Underscoring this theme, the bars and clubs which LGBTQ township residents consider most desirable have names with distinctively British and American cultural associations: Manhattan's, Angels, Bronx, Detour, Broadway, Bar Code, Brunswick. Also underscoring this theme are the comments which township residents make, repeatedly, when they describe the difficulties they often encounter when seeking to visit these sites:

Extract 1.3 Sobole (male, 29 years old, who grew up in Guguletu township):

Bronx and Angels is a very nice club music which I like. But recently I stopped going there because I experienced humiliation and discrimination. When you go to Bronx you are searched whether you are carrying weapons or whatever. Or just let in without being questioned or whatever. And when you go to Angels, they want, they ask me one day: 'Are you gay? This is strictly a gay club.' And I said, 'I am aware of that.' And the bouncer quarrelled and quarrelled and I asked him: 'Do I have to wear high heels and a dress and a wig to make sure I am gay and get in here?'

Extract 1.4 Brenda (female, 23 years old, a long-time resident of Khayelitsha township):

On some occasions you are not allowed to go in there with the tekkies [tennis shoes]. We must wear a formal shoe. They say things like that. The other day, we were there, they looked, we were in jeans

and tekkies, so they were like, 'You can't come in, You are wearing sneakers.' Why when the other people are going in wearing sneakers?

Extract 1.5 Rae (male, 24 years old, originally from one of the black townships near Port Elizabeth, and now a resident of one of the multiracial communities in the southern suburbs):

I've known about myself since I was in Standard Seven, [...] but I never had the guts to practise it. Until I almost committed suicide. Then I came to. They had this poster about this place. I decided to go there but they didn't allow me to come in. They said, members only [...] I actually went early, before they opened for the night. I stood at the door and they had the chairs on the tables and I think they were getting ready to open. I stood there. And the manager came running, looked at me strangely like I was some kind of thief. Maybe not a thief but somebody who had invaded some kind of territory.

Extract 1.6 Terry (male, 34 years old, resident of Nyanga township, summarised the sentiments in many other respondents' statements when he observed):

Imagine me catching the last train from Khayelitsha at ten past nine, telling myself that I am getting away from this township situation of humiliation and harassment and all that stuff, trying to get a safe place for myself in Cape Town where I see many gay people being free and wandering about nicely and having good time. I go there and I refused to be entered. There is no train back home. The next train back home will be only at 6 in the morning. So tell me, where do I have to stay for the whole night and what do I have to do.

Given the frequency with which township residents report these experiences of *humiliation and discrimination* (Sobole, Extract 1.3) occurring in City Centre gay sites, and the frustration and anger which they evoke, it may seem curious that LGBTQ township residents assign such prominence to City Centre gay venues in their descriptions of local sexual geography. But these are Cape Town's valued lesbian/gay sites, the sites most closely associated with an authentically lesbian/gay experience – even if they are also sites of frustration and denial.

But increasing the value of the City Centre sites (and, at the same time, increasing the frustration and denial) is the very different inventory of sites subsumed within township (homo)sexual geographies, and the ensuing contrast in opportunities presented by City Centre and

township as (homo)sexual terrains. Key sites within that township inventory are the *shebeens*, privately owned taverns which usually operate out of the owner's home, several of which are known to welcome homosexual as well as heterosexual clientele. But even there, township narratives make clear that 'straight' customers become intolerant or openly hostile when forced to acknowledge the presence of LGBTQ patrons. As Terry's reference to the *township situation of humiliation and harassment and all that stuff* suggests (Extract 1.6), the risk of homophobic violence is ever-present and ever real, even within same-sex friendly *shebeens*.

Township lesbian and bisexual women Leap interviewed report that they respond to the homophobic threat by sitting quietly, trying not to be too obvious about their sexual interests, and otherwise trying to 'keep your safety in your own hands' (as several respondents are fond of saying); if the likelihood of trouble becomes unavoidable, bisexual and lesbian women report that they simply leave the site and move on to another *shebeen*.

Some township LGBTQ men report responding to the homophobic threat with a different strategy: they visit a *shebeen* dressed in 'women's clothes', assume 'female role' in on-site social discourse, and openly display other signifiers associated with a township-familiar *isi tabane* sex/gender status. According to the commentaries of *isi tabane* persons, the idea here is to emphasise the subject's willingness to frame his expressions of same-sex desire in terms that are consistent with township sexual culture and sexual tradition. Their commentaries acknowledge the many contradictions subsumed under this public status (male body vs female attire and mannerisms, 'male' genitalia vs 'female'-related behaviour in erotic practice), all of which ensure that a public claim to *isi tabane* status becomes a transgressive act and renders the subject of that claim a likely recipient of violent attack. Even so, *isi tabane* is male sexual sameness read within the recognised domain of township sexual culture.⁴

Township men who publicly express their interests in other men outside of that domain (e.g. as 'gay-identified' men), without claiming the township-familiar *isi tabane* status, frame their sexuality in less familiar, and, therefore, more ambiguous terms; that renders them an even more likely target for homophobic violence.

Understandably under such conditions, township LGBTQ residents would be led to view the City Centre as Terry did (Extract 1.6): [...] *a safe place for myself where I see many gay people being free and wandering about nicely and having good time*. Homophobic violence may occur in

areas of the City Centre which surround these sites, or during their travel from township to City Centre; and discrimination may occur when they seek entrance to a white-related, lesbian/gay location. But in the interim period, once they reach the City Centre and before they reach the bars and clubs, township residents find what their narratives regularly describe as *safety* and *freedom*.

Being free is an especially important reference in that regard. In township English, *being free* conveys decidedly post-apartheid messages, and draws contrasts with the restrictions on everyday life which were central to apartheid governmentality. Besides calling to mind a similar reference, the corresponding Xhosa phrase builds on a medio-passive construction (*in khululeku*, 'to be loosened or unbound') to suggest that one's freedom is dependent on the agency of others, and that decisions about one's spatial practices need to be constructed accordingly. Hence, when used here as a reference to a *safe place*, *safety* describes a location where the subject has to be mindful of the workings of external agency, and take responsibility for personal safety in the light of those external constraints.

But what are these City Centre locations of safety? As much as value as they assign to the City Centre's gay bars and clubs, township residents report finding freedom and safety within a very different type of City Centre geography, one composed of:

- the hallways (but not the shops and boutiques) of the Golden Acre Shopping Centre; some township respondents also mention the hallways of the nearby Gardens Shopping Centre, and the hallways of the Waterfront Mall, especially on Saturday mornings
- Green Market Square (the site of an outdoor 'flea market', and a great place for sitting and milling around)
- the OK Bazaar, Pickbell's Arcade and other stores on City Centre side-streets
- the benches and chairs lining the walkways of the Company Gardens ('where you can go and it is peaceful and nobody will bother you', explained one township resident; where 'Blacks are everywhere willing to rob you or worse', countered an elderly white gay man explaining why he no longer frequents the Company Gardens)
- the Purple Turtle (a cyber café), Moroka's Café Africaine (a bar and coffee shop), and other City Centre food service locations known to be friendly to black clientele, many of which are operated by persons of colour.

Some, though not all, of these sites are commercial in basis, and none of them are specifically 'lesbian/gay' in clientele or appeal. But *all* of them are locations where access is not likely to be regulated by bouncers or other gatekeepers (where they can *feel free*) and locations where township residents can pursue their own interests, quietly and without interruption (where they can 'keep their safety in their own hands'). And *none* of these sites are included in descriptions of Cape Town's (homo)sexual geography given by Cape Town area white or coloured lesbians and gay men.

One of the themes that stands out repeatedly in our review of the Cape Town data is the contributions that fantasy and imagination make to the LGBTQ township residents' understandings of City Centre sexual geography. These residents know 'where the gay bars are', but they have also internalised a series of cultural assumptions explaining why these sites are desirable, and they maintain those assumptions and the valued status they assign to the bars and clubs, even when entering these sites requires them to endure *humiliation and discrimination*, and sometimes results in denial of admission to the desired terrain.

Yes, we can explore township perspectives on Cape Town area (homo)sexual geographies as concrete expressions – commodifications – of desire, and we should! But the brief discussion of the township residents' comments presented here shows that the analysis cannot be limited to a discussion of fantasy and other imaginative processes. The expression of desire in these instances is very much informed by the social, cultural and historical context of the township setting and by the local and translocal processes that define sexual sameness in similar and competing ways for township and City Centre residents. In other words, while desire can be a topic suitable for analysis on its own terms, the workings of desire are more effectively explored, drawing on a political economy framework, in reference to the material as well as ideological realities through which the desiring subject negotiates desire and subjectivity. Context and culture-specific research focusing attention on the speaking subject and the significance of the subject's linguistics products and practices provides rich opportunities for research directed towards that goal.

Conclusions

When studied in social, cultural and linguistic contexts like the *Changing Rooms* conversation or township residents' discussions of area sexual

geographies, the intersections of language and desire cease being 'culturally grounded semiotic practices' whose details are not '[...] particular to any kind of person' (Kulick, 2003: 123), and the features relevant to the meanings of desires range far beyond the iterability of its coding. Granted, the linguistic practices relevant to articulation of desire include performative and other interactive acts whose details are, in some sense, 'a-historical'. But other, distinctively contextualised linguistic practices are also evidenced in such articulations, as the examples reviewed in this chapter have shown. Studying desire out of context makes it difficult to explore such contextualised dimensions of sexual experience as attraction, enjoyment, *jouissance*, the complexities of emotion, the workings of conformity, privilege and power, and the allure of the transgressive and the forbidden. Doing so makes it even more difficult to trace how linguistic dimensions are relevant to those experiences, either in specific situations or cross-culturally.

Under such circumstances, it is worth asking whether studies of language and sexuality really need an autonomous theory of desire. Indeed, such proposals emerge just at the time when studies of embodiment are disclosing close connections between sexuality, the body, and notions of place and space (Grosz, 1992; Bell and Valentine, 1995; Probyn, 1995; McDowell, 1999; Rasmussen *et al.*, 2003), and when studies of sexual cultures are confronting linkages between sexuality, postcolonial nation-building, global economy, and displacement (Manderson and Jolly, 1997; Aarmo, 1999; Blackwood and Wieringa, 1999; Parker, 1999; Patton and Sanchez-Eppler, 2000; Carillo, 2002; Khoo, 2003; Leap and Boellstorff, 2004). The intent in such scholarship is to move away from positing any single explanations for the sexual, and to propose instead that we view sexuality as a complex, multivalent construction whose particulars have to be disclosed, not assumed *prediscursively*. We see good reason to welcome desire-centred research as an important addition to the analysis of that multivalent complex; but its strength lies in its alliances with other modes of inquiry, not in its misleading assertion of its self-serving totality.

Notes

1. This chapter grows out of a synthesis of two papers presented in a Workshop on Language, Identity and Desire held during the two-day Seminar on Language, Love and Sexuality at Kingston University (UK), 8–9 April 2002. Our thanks to Kathleen O'Mara (SUNY Oneonta), Denis Provencher (U. Wisconsin – La Crosse), Helen Sauntson (U. Birmingham), Sakis Kyrtziz

- (U. Kingston) and other colleagues who have reviewed and commented on this text.
2. Bi-uniqueness was a claim advanced by structural linguists regarding the relationship between sound units (phones) and sound classes (phonemes.) Under bi-uniqueness, a phone could belong to one, and only one phonemic class, and a phoneme must consist of a specified set of phonetic variants. Variation, flexibility, 'coexistent' systems and 'exceptions' – all the features that sociolinguistic theory recognises as fundamental attributes of phonological systems – were not acknowledged.
 3. There is no 'lesbian/gay linguistics' under this framework, either. Indeed, one of the outcomes of desire-centred research is the erasure of 'lesbian/gay' from academic inquiry, an especially ironic move given how long it took to get lesbian/gay studies accepted within the academy.
 4. *Isi tabane* is not, by respondent report, an 'authentic' Xhosa term. Some Xhosa speakers insist that it is a Zulu word; others derive it, without further explanation, from the English word 'stamp'. *Isi tabane* is also one of the terms used to identify the younger man who partners with the older (male) mine worker in labour camp dormitories. Township usage, and the presence of this homosexual category in township sexual culture, may derive from, or coincide with, the homosocial bonding which was formed in those settings.

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Index

- 'academic' sex talk 84
adolescent girls
 good girls and bad girls 73–8
 knowing girls 84–90
 self-determined 78–84
 sex talk 68–95
 sexualities 69–70
adolescent identities 73–90
advice literature 223–44
affect 144–5, 146, 147
agape 104
ageism 174–5
amplification 145
analysis
 appraisal 13, 144–50
 discourse 19
antilanguage 124
appraisal analysis 13, 144–50
appreciation 145, 146, 147
Asian girls
 izzat 77
 sex talk 73–8
 sharam 77
augment 145

bakla 20
Benjamin, Jessica 42
bicultural femininities 76–8
bisexual identity 18, 242
boasts 56–60
Brazil, *travesti* 23
'brown pitcher' exchange 25, 26–7

Cameron, Deborah 46
celibacy 98–103
childhood sex talk 87–90
closet fags 51
cognitive linguistics 96–117
collaborative metaphor 105
collaborative storytelling 60–4

collocation 237–41
coming out 21, 118–39, 140–64
coming out narratives 141–4
Communities of Practice 17, 25–30
compulsory heterosexuality 49
conceptual metaphor 98
conflicting discourse 82–4
Connell, Robert 41–2
conversation
 on homosexuality 46–51
 lesbian 24
 see also sex talk
conversationalisation 211
cooperative discourse 24
crisis of masculinity 206
critical discourse 223
cross-cultural perspectives 8–10
cultural locating 140
culture
 definition of 6
 and identity 7–8
 and language 6–10

desire-arousal 186–90, 194, 196
desire-centred research 17, 19
desire fulfilment 186–90,
 194, 196
desires 5
 and language 25–30
 metaphor of 98–103
 and sexualities 4–6
 significance of 25–35
discourse
 conflicting 82–4
 cooperative 24
 critical 223
 pro-sex 80–2, 91
 situated 29
discourse analysis 19
discrimination 35

- discursive construction
 of desire 19
 of heterosexual relationships 204
 of moral panics 208–9
- education, and sexuality 142–3,
 150–62
- embodiment 170–7
- enrich 145, 146
- eros* 104
- erotic narrative 186–90
- family breakdown 206–7
- female homosexuality *see* lesbian
 femininity
 bicultural 76–8
 denial of 42
 norms of 29
 working-class 82
- Filipinos, *bakla* 20
- focus groups 209–10
- folk devils 213
- Foucault, M. 167–8
- gay 120–1
 gay culture 9
 gay identity 18, 126–36, 170–7
 gay language 12, 22–3, 118–39
 ‘brown pitcher’ exchange 25, 26–7
 gay male body 172–5
 gay marriage 218
 gay narratives 170–81
 gay slang 123–36
 Americanisation of 135–6
 reappropriation of 126–32
- gender *see* femininity; masculinity
 gender identity *see* identity
 gender performativity 3
 gender roles 206
- girls *see* adolescent girls
- goal–achievement 186–90
- good girls and bad girls 73–8
- hegemonic masculinity 46–64
- heterosexual couples, collaborative
 storytelling 60–4
- heterosexuality 14, 41–67, 204–21
 compulsory 49
 narratives 44–6, 54–5
- hijra* 20
- Holloway, Wendy 83
- homo-eroticism 49–50
- homophobia 46–51
- homophobic narrative 46–51
- homosexuality 111–14
 talk about 46–51
see also gay; lesbian
- humiliation 33, 35
- identity 18–25
 bisexual 18, 242
 and culture 7–8
 gay 18, 126–36, 170–7
 and inquiry 23–5
 and language 7–8
 lesbian 18, 29, 142–3, 230–6
 queer 18, 126–36
 and sex talk 73–90
 sexual 19, 111–14
 transgender 18
- impersonal sex talk 84–90
- India, *hijra* 20
- infotainment 209, 211
- in khululeku* 34
- intentionality 22–3
- interpretive sociology 167–8
- invisibility 230–2
- isi tabane* 33
- izzat* 77, 91
- judgement 144, 146, 147, 148–50
- knowing girls 84–90
- Langdon, Julia 211
- language 7
 and culture 6–10
 and desires 25–30
 and identity 7–8
 lesbian/gay 19–22
 of risk 27
 and sexuality 2–4
 uniqueness of 20–2
- languages and intercultural
 communication (LAIC) 166,
 168–70
- lesbian advice literature 223–44
- lesbian conversation 24

- lesbian erotica 25
- lesbian experiences 85–6
- lesbian/gay language 19
- lesbian identity 18, 29, 142–3, 230–6
- lesbian language 28, 29
- lesbians 140–64
- lesbian sexuality 237–41
- lexical signalling 241–2
- liberalism 82–4
- love
 - definition of 104
 - metaphor of 103–11
- male body 165–84
- male narratives 44–6
 - boasting 56–60
 - misogyny 52–6
- marriage 211, 214
- Marsland, David 211, 212–13
- masculinity 42
 - crisis of 206
 - cultural exaltation of 44–6
 - hegemonic 46–64
- materiality of place 177–81
- media 205–7
- metaphor 96–117
 - and argumentation 97–8
 - and the body 98–103
 - and culture 98
 - defining 104
 - and desire 98–103
 - and love 103–11
 - and sex 99–103
 - and sexuality 111–14
- metaphorical chains 105–11
- metaphorical mappings 97
- metonymic definition 104
- Mills and Boon 195–202
- misogyny 52–6
- mitigate 145, 146
- moral code 82–4
- moral panics 205–9
- mother–son relationships 42
- ‘Na Alcova’ 191–5
- narrative, erotic 186–90
- narratives
 - coming out 141–4
 - erotic 186–90
 - gay 170–7
 - homophobic 46–51
 - masculine 44–6
 - stories 44–51
- Nigeria, *yan daudu* 20, 23
- normality 148–9, 150–2, 156–62
- object of desire 194, 195, 196, 200
- opportunity-taking 186–90
- performativity 20, 143, 178–81
- playful sex talk 73–8
- Polari 119, 121, 123–6
 - current terms 126, 127
- post-structuralism 167–8, 205
- prejudice 234–6
- problem–solution 13, 186–90
- propriety 152–6
- pro-sex discourse 80–2, 91
- public debate 205–7
- queer identity 18, 126–36
- queering 127
- queer studies 18
- risk society 204
- romance 82–4
- scenic presence 177–81
- self-determination 82–4
- self-determined girls 78–84
- self-disclosing sex talk 78–84
- self-enunciation 165–84
- self-expression 172–5
- semantics and sexuality 96–117
- sex talk 11, 17–40
 - about others 84–7
 - ‘academic’ 84
 - adolescent girls 68–95
 - childhood 87–90
 - cultural aspects 73
 - and identity 73–90
 - impersonal 84–90
 - playful 73–8
 - types of 71–3
- sexual geography 30–5
- sexual identity 19, 111–14
- sexualities
 - adolescent girls 69–70
 - and desires 4–6

- and education 142–3, 150–62
- and language 2–4
- lesbian 237–41
- sexual orientation *see* gay; lesbian
- sharam* 77, 91
- shifting roles 204
- silent majority 214, 215
- situated discourse 29
- situated linguistic practice 29
- social esteem 148–9, 150–2, 156–62
- social sanction 149, 152–6
- source domain 97
- South Africa 30–5
- speech acts 3
- speech community 26
- stereotypes 232–4
- stigma 234–6
- storyworld 44–51
 - gender of characters in 52
 - women's exclusion from 51–2
- subversion 237
- symbolisation 214, 215, 217
- Tannen, Deborah 71
- target domain 97
- text content 210
- text organisation 210
- third gender 20
- thresholds 217
- transformation 169
- transgender identity 18
- travesti* 23
- two-spaced model 97
- two-spirit people 20
- uniqueness 20–2
- veracity 150, 152, 152–6, 156–62
- yan daudu* 20, 23