

Marginalization of alternative gender and sexual identities: The role of normative discursive practices in Chilean society

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In Chile, a variety of conventionalized metonymic comments and address terms are used in everyday discursive practices as a means of ridiculing gender and sexual minorities. Language provides a tool for associating gender or sexually non-normative males with women, either by alluding to their effeminacy, their sexual passivity, or a combination of the two. By presupposing an intrinsic relationship between gender and sexual orientation, these heterosexist comments play a vital role in maintaining the standard social expectations surrounding gender and sexuality, consequently subordinating individuals who do not adhere to these norms. Although seen as harmless jokes by those who regularly employ them, I argue that by derogating gender and sexual minorities, heterosexist commentary is a powerful force that engenders the reproduction of heteronormative beliefs in society.

1. Introduction

The social construction of gender and sexual identity in Chile emerges from a well-established and thriving system of beliefs surrounding acceptable gender and sexual norms. Discursive practices such as the normative use of heterosexist comments and address terms play a significant role in creating pressure for members of Chilean society to adhere to these rigid social expectations. In this paper, which is a component of a larger project involving language and homophobia in Chile, I address the phenomenon of how discursive practices promote the marginalization of homosexual or gender non-normative males. Specifically, I focus on discourse samples that are ‘heterosexist’, meaning that they align with “the institutionalized assumption that everyone is heterosexual or should be, and that heterosexuality is inherently superior and preferable to homosexuality or bisexuality” (Marrones 2001:26). I would like to show that the conventionalized use of such expressions naturalizes gender-normative heterosexuality, the consequence of which is that gender and sexual minorities are ‘marked’ as abnormal or inferior.

The language samples I examine in this paper, which target males that are gender and/or sexually non-normative (i.e. males that are effeminate and/or homosexual), illustrate that the perception of gays as abnormal or inferior stems from the association of non-normative males with women. As in many patriarchal Latin American countries, women are perceived in Chile to be inferior members of society. By analyzing language samples used in everyday discourse, I show that this association is made primarily in two ways: first, by alluding to

effeminate gender expression of gay males, and second, by alluding to their passive sexual role. By using conventionalized verbal insults and address terms to ascribe feminine gender and sexual traits to men, language is used in society to convey the hegemonic norms of dominant culture. The prevalence of the heterosexist commentary I examine reproduces the hetero-normative ideology that governs linguistic and social practices in Chile. I approach the concept of identity as a social phenomenon by illustrating that the use of heterosexist commentary facilitates the social positioning of both self and other (see Bucholtz & Hall forthcoming), whereby speakers index themselves as heteronormative by labeling someone else as non-normative and as such, subordinate.

2. Heterosexist commentary: implied inferiority of homosexual males

The heterosexist language used in Chile presupposes a direct relationship between gender identity and sexual orientation. In other words, all gender-normative individuals (i.e. feminine women and masculine men) are inherently surmised to be heterosexual. Consequently, anyone who does not adhere to the gender norms prescribed for their particular sex is labeled as homosexual. By derogating individuals that demonstrate non-normative gender traits or sexual orientation, hetero-normative discursive practices in Chile exemplify the importance Chileans place on asserting heterosexuality as part of their normative gender. This phenomenon can be observed in a number of typical Chilean verbal comments. During my research period in Chile, I collected a total of twelve conventionalized heterosexist verbal insults, which I categorized into three distinct but related groups:

Allusion to gender non-normativity:

Se le da vuelta el paraguas. ‘His umbrella gets inverted’

Se le queda la pata atrás. ‘His foot gets left behind’

Se le quema el arroz. ‘His rice is getting burnt’

Se le apaga el calefón. ‘His pilot light goes out’

Reference to effeminate physical gestures:

Se le cae el completo. ‘He drops his hotdog’

El tiene maletas imaginarias. ‘He has imaginary suitcases’

Allusion to homosexual acts or homoerotic desire:

El hace Géminis sesenta y nueve. ‘He does Gemini sixty-nine’

El muerde la almohada. ‘He bites the pillow’

Se le chorrea el completo. ‘His hotdog is dripping’

Le gustan las tunas. ‘He likes cactus fruit’

Le gusta por el camino de tierra. ‘He likes to take the dirt road’

Le gusta por Detroit. ‘He likes it by ‘Detroit’

These comments demonstrate the overlapping conceptualization of gender and sexual orientation in Chile, in that male effeminacy is perceived as inseparable from male homosexuality. The first two categories of phrases rely on allusion to effeminate gender expression to associate gay males with women; the third category of phrases relies on reference to attraction to other men or taking the passive sexual role in order to make this association. I will look at five comments that allude to non-normative gender characteristics of the referent: *Se le da vuelta el paraguas* ‘his umbrella gets inverted’, *Se le queda la pata atrás* ‘his foot gets left behind’, *Se le quema el arroz* ‘his rice is getting burnt’, *Se le cae el completo* ‘drops his hotdog’, and *El anda con maletas imaginarias* ‘he’s walking with imaginary suitcases’. These comments ascribe effeminate gender characteristics to a male in order to convey the conversational message that he is homosexual. Although these comments allude to the referent’s gender non-conformity, albeit in some roundabout way, they are understood in practice to mean simply, “he is gay”. That is to say, the actual conversational meaning these comments convey in practice is that of sexual, and not gender, non-normativity. This indicates that conventionalized heterosexist discourse in Chile often relies on reference to gender non-normativity in order to imply non-normative sexual orientation. I will also examine the three phrases in the third category that position the referent in the passive sexual role: *El muerde la almohada* ‘He bites the pillow’, *Le gusta por el camino de tierra* ‘He likes to take the dirt road’, and *Le gusta por Detroit* ‘He likes it by ‘Detroit’’. These comments position the referent in the passive sexual role of the ‘recipient’, which is typically conceived as the female role. By verbally placing a man in the sexual role that dominant society has reserved for women, these comments derogate male homosexuality, conveying the message that gay males are inferior. All of these comments tend to be used frequently in everyday discourse, principally by gender-normative males.

An aspect of identity in Chilean society that is revealed by these verbal insults can be found in the syntactic composition that prototypically initiates such phrases. Of the eight comments I examine in this paper, four begin with the passive-reflexive construction *se le*, which is an impersonal subject pronoun followed by an indirect personal pronoun. Passive-reflexive sentences are commonly used in Spanish as a way of de-emphasizing a person’s active role in a situation. For instance, a teacher who is accused by her students of forgetting to bring in their graded exams when she had promised to do so might defend herself by saying, “*no me olvidé los exámenes, se me quedaron en la casa*” (“I didn’t forget the exams, they stayed in the house on me”). Stated this way, the teacher implies that it is not her fault that she does not have the students’ exams with her. I argue that this same type of construction, when used in a conventionalized heterosexist verbal insult, conveys the idea that the referent is a ‘victim’ of the unfortunate scenario in which the phrase involves him. For example, *Se le da vuelta el paraguas* literally means ‘his umbrella is getting inverted on him’, and the referent is the victim of the negative event of his umbrella becoming broken.

Likewise, in the phrase *Se le quema el arroz*, which can be more literally translated as ‘his rice is getting burnt on him’, the referent is not actively burning his rice, but is rather the ‘victim’ of the unfortunate event of his rice getting burnt.

I argue that, in conventionalized heterosexist comments, the use of passive-reflexive syntax is indicative that Chileans conceptualize the ‘abnormality’ of alternative gender and sexual orientation as the outcome of something that went wrong. In Chilean society, gender and sexual minorities are commonly described as victims of social or biological misfortunes that render them socially inadequate. Conceptualized as victims by the dominant heteronormative culture, individuals with alternative gender and sexual orientation are in turn placed in a subordinate position within the social hierarchy. The resultant power differential between normative and non-normative individuals comprises the very essence of gender relations in society. Cultural anthropologist Roger Lancaster, who maintains that the negotiation of social relations always involves power, states that the application of normative values to social relations results in, “not only an array of gendered bodies but also a world built around its definition of gender and its allotment of power” (1992:20). The conceptualization of gender and sexual minorities as essentially being rendered ‘woman-like’, which is reinforced by the use of heterosexist commentary in everyday discourse, denies non-normative males of power, social status, upward mobility, as well as the freedom to openly identify as gay.

3. Linguistic mechanisms of verbal insults

Before returning to the sample comments on non-normativity, I would like to illustrate that these comments rely on combinations of a variety of linguistic mechanisms, such as metaphor, metonymy, and imagery. George Lakoff, who has published widely on the subject, defines *metaphor* as “mappings from one domain to corresponding structures in another domain” (Lakoff 1987:114). Within this definition is the notion that speakers use their knowledge about one domain in order to understand and reason about another domain. A difference has been discovered between *perceptual metaphors*, which rely on surface or superficial similarities between two domains, and *nonperceptual metaphors*, in which the similarities between domains may be deeper, more occult, and less obvious (see Vosniadou & Ortony 1989; Winner et al [1979]1993). Winner *et al* provide an explanation of the latter type: “Nonperceptual metaphors are based on relational similarities that cannot be apprehended by our senses. Such metaphors are based on similarities between objects, situations, or events that are physically dissimilar but, often owing to parallel internal structures, function in a similar way” ([1979]1993:432). Several of the heterosexist comments I collected rely on the mechanism of nonperceptual metaphor. Of those that I discuss in this paper, the first four rely on the metaphor ‘homosexuality is an unfortunate situation’, whereby certain nonperceptual qualities of the source (a man in an awkward

social situation), are mapped onto the target (an effeminate homosexual man). Such a metaphor attests that the way in which Chileans perceive gender and sexual non-normativity is by equating it with their understanding of social dexterity, or more specifically, lack thereof. This metaphor shows that the Chilean cultural understanding of homosexuals and effeminate men is that they are deficient and defective.

John Saeed defines *metonymy* as “identifying a referent by something associated with it” (1997:352). Metonymy operates in that an X-like quality of the referent indicates that the referent is X. In the first three phrases I examine in this paper, the quality of social ineptness is identified in order to indicate that the referent himself is an inept member of society, i.e. a gay or effeminate man. It is important to note that, fundamentally, a vital component of being a ‘man’ in Chile (by this I mean adequately fulfilling all of the social expectations of the male gender) includes the ability to be able to dominate certain situations. For example, men are expected to be able to financially support their families, perform sexually with women, solve problems, and excel at all of the other tasks demanded of them by society. Inability to do these things depreciates a man’s masculinity, rendering him incompetent of fulfilling the expected masculine role in society. In the next two comments, the referent is metonymically identified as homosexual by his display of effeminate gesture, which is associated with homosexuality. The last three comments I examine in this paper are metonymic in that they rely on allusion to sexual passivity, which is a trait associated with male homosexuality, to identify the referent as a homosexual male.

Due in part to the creative nature of human speech, many of the comments I collected do not represent canonical examples of either metaphor or metonymy. Because of this, it may be useful to apply the *blend model*, whereby both mechanisms contribute to the phrase’s composition and function. Louis Goossens (1995) has labeled this phenomenon of blending metaphor and metonymy in mental space as *metaphtonomy*. He asserts that, “Although in principle metaphor and metonymy are distinct cognitive processes, it appears to be the case that the two are not mutually exclusive. They may be found in combination in actual natural language expressions” (Goossens 1995:159). The heterosexist comments I collected are replete with multiple strata of semantic and pragmatic minutiae. Goossens’ (1995) theory of metaphtonomy seems applicable to many of the expressions I came across. I examine possible applications of metaphor, metonymy, and metaphtonomy in the following analysis.

4. Analysis of heterosexist comments: metalinguistic meaning and the dissonance between literal and intended meaning

In this section, I expose the metalinguistic meaning of eight verbal insults. Within the phrases in the first category, ‘allusion to gender non-normativity’, the link is drawn between the referent’s social or situational ineptness and his gender non-normativity. As gender non-normativity is equated with homosexuality in

dominant Chilean society, these comments can effectively be used to label someone as homosexual. The first phrase, *Se le da vuelta el paraguas*, ‘his umbrella gets inverted’, positions the referent in an inopportune situation – that of one’s umbrella being blown so that it flips outward, thus ceasing to shield its owner from the rain. The phrase’s nonperceptual ‘homosexuality is an unfortunate situation’ metaphor is easily recoverable. Metonymically, this phrase uses the referent’s involvement in a non-normative and socially awkward situation to assign those very qualities to the referent. Further, the referent’s awkwardness is mapped to his gender and sexuality, and thus the comment metaphonymically conveys that the referent is an effeminate homosexual.

The second phrase in this category, *Se le queda la pata atrás*, which roughly means ‘his foot gets left behind’, is one of the most widely used heterosexist comments in everyday Chilean discursive practices. In this phrase, the referent is again involved in an awkward situation, in which he is lame or walking in an ungainly manner due to a bum foot. The same train of metaphoric and metonymic reasoning with which I analyzed *Se le da vuelta el paraguas* can be applied to this comment: by using the personal quality of social ineptness to indicate that the referent is an effeminate gay male, this phrase illustrates that social non-normativity in the general sense is used in order to conceptualize men with non-normative gender and sexuality.

The next comment, *Se le quema el arroz* (‘his rice is getting burnt’), also aligns with the ‘homosexuality is an unfortunate situation’ metaphor, in that it is a decidedly negative circumstance if the rice you are cooking gets scorched. Participants in my study hypothesized that since cooking rice is typically considered a feminine activity, the phrase references a situation that is socially disadvantageous in the general sense, and also with respect to gender norms. The referent is essentially trying to engage in a feminine activity, which defies normative social gender expectations. This, plus the fact that he is unable to adequately succeed at cooking rice, indicates the referent’s awkwardness both situationally and with respect to ‘appropriate’ gender expression for males. Furthermore, this comment plays on the feminine gender trait of overemotional reaction when small things go wrong. A stereotypical woman might become emotional or upset if her rice gets burnt, e.g. she might shriek *¡ai, se me quema el arroz!* (‘Oh! My rice is burning!’), instead of reacting with indifference as a typical man might (in the off-chance, that is, that he would even be in the kitchen in the first place). Thus, when the comment is applied to a male referent, the implication is made that he, too, would react in a similar, overly emotional way to the type of miniscule misfortunes that women are popularly conceptualized as not being able to deal with. Metonymically, the referent’s involvement in this disadvantageous situation signifies that the referent himself is somehow a disadvantaged member of society; and as ineptness or inadequacy are mapped to the traits of homosexuality and effeminacy, the resultant outcome is that the referent is indicated to be gay.

The first observation that can be made about *Se le cae el completo*, which is in the category ‘reference to effeminate physical gestures’, is that it aligns with the ‘homosexuality is an unfortunate situation’ metaphor. However, cultural knowledge reveals the insight that this phrase also references an effeminate physical gesture. By relying on knowledge of cultural stereotypes, a mental image of the gesture referenced by this comment can be recalled. Let me explain this gesture: imagine a man is holding a hotdog in what I will call the ‘resting position’ between taking bites, and then picture his hand and wrist bending away from him as the hotdog falls to the ground. This motion represents a stereotypically effeminate gesture, and its inclusion in this phrase contributes an element of humor above that provoked by the ‘homosexuality is an unfortunate situation’ metaphor. During my fieldwork in Chile, it became apparent that humor is definitely a key element of Chilean heterosexist discourse. In any case, the imagined gesture allows the phrase to function metonymically, in that the referent is identified as homosexual by something associated with homosexuality: display of effeminate gesture.

Although the other phrase in this category, *El anda con maletas imaginarias*, does *not* rely on the ‘homosexuality is an unfortunate situation’ metaphor, I feel that it takes the previously-mentioned humor component to an even greater height. This comment is metonymic in that again the referent is identified as homosexual by the effeminate gesture he demonstrates. However, the gesture referenced by this metonym is accessed by a different image. To grasp the image of the gesture invoked by this comment, one must visualize a man walking along, but instead of swinging his arms naturally in time with his stride, he holds them extended down the sides of his torso with his fists cocked upward as if each one was clutching the handle of an imaginary suitcase. According to Chilean ideals about gender expression, this fashion of holding one’s hands and arms while walking is effeminate. And since use of effeminate gestures is associated with homosexuality, this comment, like the previous one, metonymically refers to a man as gay.

The comments in the last category, ‘allusion to homosexual acts or homoerotic desire’, are principally metonymic in that they identify the referent as homosexual by calling to mind something that is associated with homosexuality – in this case, participation in a homosexual act or homoerotic desire. Three of the phrases in this category specifically indicate that the referent is the passive participant in a homosexual act of anal sex. The first of these phrases, *El muerde la almohada* (‘He bites the pillow’), invokes the mental image of homosexual intercourse in which one man is being anally penetrated by another. The referent is depicted as the passive participant, and is positioned face down at the head of the bed where he can bite the pillow as he is being penetrated by the man on top of him. The other two phrases that touch upon the referent’s sexual passivity, *Le gusta por el camino de tierra* and *Le gusta por Detroit*, metonymically draw upon the referent’s preference for being the recipient in anal sex acts in order to indicate that he is homosexual. Specifically, they indicate that the referent prefers

to be anally penetrated by another man. Each phrase indicates this preference in a slightly different way. In the first comment, *el camino de tierra* ('the dirt road') is a euphemism for anus or anal cavity. Thus, the comment indicates that the referent likes sexual penetration by way of the anal cavity. The second phrase, *Le gusta por Detroit* ('He likes it by 'Detroit)'), uses a play on words to allude to the referent's preference for anal penetration. The city name 'Detroit' is used as a euphemism for the phonetically similar word *detrás*, which means 'behind'. Thus, this comment alludes to the referent's desire to be the passive participant in a homosexual act, which metonymically indicates that he is homosexual.

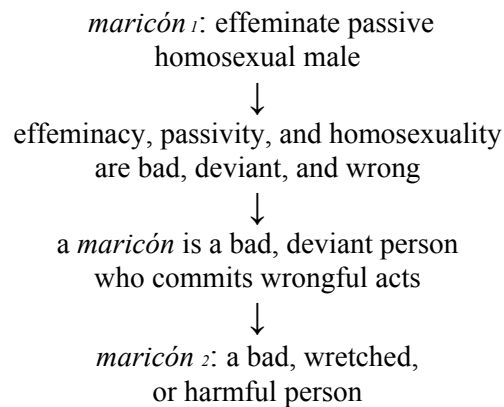
All of these comments are non-literal figures of speech, in that their literal meaning clashes with their intended meaning: what is *meant* differs from what is *said*. Although the phrases are observably complex, their metalinguistic meaning is oftentimes not fully comprehended by interlocutors who use or react to them. When used in discourse as verbal insults, hearers can immediately recognize that the utterance's literal meaning is simply not plausible in the context at hand: in reality, no one's rice is getting burnt, no one's umbrella is inverted, no one is biting a pillow, no one is really walking down a dirt road, and even the imaginary suitcases are being imagined. Sometimes, hearers already possess or are able to deduce the metalinguistic meaning that allows them to draw the connection between the literal and non-literal meaning of the phrase. Other times, however, the hearers bypass the phrase's metalinguistic meaning and only comprehend the intended meaning. By relying on communicative and cultural competence, interlocutors can employ their knowledge of Chilean sociocultural beliefs and practices to navigate non-literal language metalinguistic meaning they possess no awareness of.

5. Address terms

In addition to this type of conventionalized verbal commentary, the equation of homosexual men with women is also commonly expressed in Chile through the frequent use of address terms such as *maricón*, *maraca*, *culiado*, and *hueco*. These terms are loaded with metonymic reference to gender and/or sexual non-normativity, and play a vital role in the continuity of heterosexism's prevalence in Chilean society. The first term I would like to address is *maricón*, which is by far the most frequently used heterosexist address term. A diachronic approach shows that *maricón* is derived from the proper name *Maria*. Accordingly, this female origin qualifies the term to connotatively recall feminine gender attributes such as weakness and submissiveness. Another parallel is that the term indicates submission not only in the social sense, but also in the sense of sexual passivity. In practice, this term is polysemous, and is primarily used to denote an effeminate and/or homosexual male, making it roughly synonymous with 'effeminate sodomite'. I will refer to this primary meaning as (*maricón* ₁).

Additionally, this term can also be used secondarily in reference to a bad, wretched, or harmful person (*maricón*₂).

The relationship between these two senses can be best explained by the chaining approach (see Lakoff 1987), whereby *maricón*₂ developed as a derivative of some of the characteristics of *maricón*₁. The characteristics, specifically, are those that give *maricón*₁ its negative connotation: *maricón*₁, which denotes an effeminate homosexual male, is connotatively negative in that homosexuals are considered bad, wrong, weak, deviant, and contemptible by dominant society. The chaining involved in the relationship of *maricón*₁ to *maricón*₂ can be conceptualized as such:



The resultant polysemous outcome is that a term used for homosexuals can also be used for other people who are disreputable, odious wrongdoers (*maricón*₂), even if they have normative gender and sexual orientation.

Other such labels for homosexual males are *maraca*, *culiado*, and *hueco*. *Maraca* (also sometimes pronounced *marica*) is a more antiquated form of *maricón*, and conveys a similar combination of negativity, effeminacy, and [homo]sexual passivity. The next term, *culiado*, in its most literal English translation, means “fucked”, or more specifically, anally penetrated. (*Culiado* is a past participle of the verb *culiar*, ‘to anally penetrate’, which is derived from the noun *culo*, ‘anus’, or more colloquially, ‘ass’). The term *culiado* is metonymic, and draws upon passive participation in a homosexual act to indicate that the referent is homosexual. Use of this term draws upon the most contemptuous aspect of male homosexuality, namely, sexual passivity. As such, it is loaded with negative connotation, and there are few instances where this term is not offensive. Similarly, the term *hueco* also alludes to anal penetration. This term is polysemous: the primary denotation can be adjectival or nominal, and it means, respectively, ‘hollow’ or ‘something hollow’ (*hueco*₁). The secondary meaning is a homosexual man (*hueco*₂), and there is an underlying implication that he is the passive recipient in an anal sex act. *Hueco*₂ is derived from assigning the perceived qualities of something hollow or cavernous denoted by (*hueco*₁) onto

a physical orifice that possesses those same qualities. In this sense, *hueco*₂ is a synonym for ‘anus’ or ‘anal cavity’. As it denotes a homosexual male, *hueco*₂ is *synecdochic*, whereby a body part is used in place of the whole entity – in this case, a man’s anal cavity is used in place of the man himself. The overall effect is that this term reduces the homosexual male to a vessel for penetration, and is thereby demeaning and derogatory. These four terms circulate prevalently in everyday discursive practices in Chile, thereby keeping the popular conceptualization of homosexual males as effeminate and/or sexually passive intact within contemporary society.

6. Conclusion: Heteronormativity and dominant social values

Normative heterosexist discursive practices demote alternative sexual identities. As such, they provide verbal tools with which speakers can express their adherence to the normative gender and sexual expectations of dominant society. By derogating individuals who do not fall within the inventory of socially acceptable identities in Chilean society, this type of language assigns legitimacy only to gender-normative heterosexuals, thereby denying gender and sexual minorities of social power. In this sense, active validation of socially normative sexual and gender values is synonymous with power in Chilean society. In his article on heterosexual masculinity in college fraternities, Scott Kiesling exposes this negotiation of power in his definition of the discourse of heterosexuality, stating that, “heterosexual identities are not just displays of difference from women and gay men; they are also displays of power and dominance over women, gay men, and other straight men. A discourse of heterosexuality involves not only difference from women and gay men, but also the dominance over these groups” (2002:250). Disguised as a creative variety of joking remarks, Chilean heterosexist commentary reinforces the social structure in which gender- and sexually-normative men maintain their dominant role, causing gender and sexual minorities to be marginalized.

The fact verbal insults are most often used in a joking manner, as normative men poke fun at each other or at other non-normative males, is in and of itself problematic: because Chileans who use these comments consider the practice to be ‘just joking around’ or *hueveando*, they tend to deny all accusations that they are homophobic, or that they discriminate against gays. As one of my research informants stated, *los Chilenos son homofóbicos sin darse cuenta* – ‘Chileans are homophobic without even realizing it’. While it is true that the attitudes towards gays in Chile do not extend to outright legal repression or violent intolerance, they do nevertheless present a very detectable underlying current of discomfort for sexual minorities. Relatively few Chileans disclose their alternative sexual orientation to their family, and even fewer have come forth to publicly identify as homosexual. Sexual minorities who cannot openly identify as such are called *tapado*, which means ‘capped’, ‘concealed’, or ‘covered up’. This

metaphoric label is indicative of the social restraints that cause sexual minorities to feel constricted within the limited confines of a society governed by heterosexist beliefs and practices.

Due to its prevalence in everyday discourse, heterosexist language plays a vital role in the general knowledge within Chilean society of the cultural norms and expectations surrounding gender and sexual identity. This assertion aligns with the opinions of sociolinguists Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall, who stated that, “Language is a primary vehicle by which cultural ideologies circulate, it is a central site of social practice, and it is a crucial means for producing sociocultural identities” (Bucholtz & Hall 2004:512). To this respect, I argue that by positioning non-normative individuals as the butt of jokes that derive their humor from synonymizing homosexual males with women, Chilean vernacular represents one of the most powerful forces that cause the reproduction of heterosexist beliefs in society, resulting in the delegitimization – and consequent marginalization – of alternative identities.

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