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Sexuality Discourses: Indexical Misrecognition and the Politics of Sex

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Keywords

language, sexuality, gender, misrecognition, indexicality

Abstract

This review of research on sexuality discourses directs attention to the patterns of indexical disalignment that have facilitated the global rise of transphobic, homophobic, and misogynist discourses. Over the last two decades, scholarship in the area of language and sexuality has focused primarily on patterns of alignment in the community-based indexical production of social personae, a necessary move for establishing the discursive agency, and indeed humanity, of LGBTQ+ groups. The focus of this review, however, is not alignment but disalignment, for it is in the clash of indexical systems that sexual ideologies take root. Specifically, the article focuses on acts of misrecognition that arise at the boundaries of indexical meaning, identifying practices such as indexical inoculation, indexical presumption, and indexical denial. The review is designed to provoke future research on misrecognition as contextualized social practice, a turn we believe imperative for uncovering the power-laden infrastructure of sexuality discourses.

1. INTRODUCTION

In final preparations for the 2023 joint meeting of the American Anthropological Association and the Canadian Anthropological Society, a panel on “biological sex” as a “necessary analytic category in anthropology” was pulled from the program. In explaining the decision, conference organizers noted that the panel argued against “settled science” in the field and would have been threatening to transgender conference participants. They additionally noted that the panel paralleled discourses of scientific racism in being more about fostering prejudice than actual science. Many of the planned panel members were advocates of what is now called gender-critical feminism, a sex-essentialist platform holding that the fight for women’s rights must return to a presumed biological distinction between men and women. Although the abstracts included in the submission did not mention this perspective explicitly, their focus on the “fact” of binary sex recalled the gender-critical erasure of nonbinary and transgender people. Indeed, one of the panelists was president of a Quebec organization that views gender-affirming surgeries as “mutilations”; another had stated in *Inside Higher Ed* that “trans children do not exist”; and still another had received sanctions from her university for her behavior toward transgender students, which included dismissing preferred pronouns as “ridiculous so needy and so mad” (Quinn 2023).

We begin our review with this controversial event to highlight the ways in which sexuality discourses are sustained and challenged through acts of misrecognition. Shortly after the panel was canceled, the panelists wrote an open letter to the conference organizers expressing shock that their work had been interpreted as causing harm to the trans community, responding that it was the organizers’ actions, not their own, which were “antiscience.” The exchange is of interest to analysts of language in social life for many reasons, not the least of which is the use of “science” to authorize opposing perspectives. For instance, the panelists’ characterization of the conference organizers as “antiscience” is typical of the ways gender-critical feminists “graft” (Gal 2019) their claims to accepted human rights discourses to situate their movement as protecting the rights of (cisgender) women. However, we wish to draw attention to the panelists’ insistence that they were unaware their perspective would be received as transphobic, a highly implausible reaction given their deep involvement with gender-critical feminism in the public sphere. Put in semiotic terms, their response denied knowledge of a contrastive set of indexical meanings now broadly associated with sex essentialism, specifically hatred, violence, and legislation against people claiming identifications beyond the binary. Indeed, the panelists’ subsequent cameo appearances on conservative media outlets such as *Fox News* belie their protestations of innocence in this regard, linking them to a broad right-wing “antigender” political movement that is overtly transphobic.

The panelists’ attempt to bring transphobic discourse into an academic context is an example of context collapse (Marwick & Boyd 2011), the flattening of differences between (previously) distinct social contexts. This concept has been widely used in studies of social media discourse, where scholars distinguish between collusion across contexts and collisions between audiences (Davis & Jurgenson 2014, Wexler et al. 2018). Collision occurs when language users violate the normative register for a given context by projecting a (colluding) singular political ideology across digital platforms, as when Nazi memes are posted to a family-friendly Facebook site or, as in our opening example, when hate speech is smuggled into a scholarly academic conference. The prevalence of collision in social media has led to a growing rift between progressive and right-wing discourses on sexuality, demanding our scrutiny as sociocultural linguists concerned with social justice. In this review, we reinterpret context collision as a clash over indexical meanings. Indexicality has become central to analyzing language in social life because it draws attention to the ways in which the cooccurrence of linguistic forms with social meanings produces normative interpretations at varying scales. To date, studies of language and sexuality have typically focused on patterns of alignment in the community-based indexical production of social personae, a necessary move for

establishing the discursive agency, and indeed humanity, of LGBTQ+ groups. However, recent research in linguistic anthropology on evolving indexical orders invites more attention to disalignments across orders as well. We thus turn the page to consider the patterns of disalignment that have facilitated the global rise of transphobic, homophobic, and misogynist discourses, focusing on acts of misrecognition that occur at the boundaries of indexical meaning.

2. MISRECOGNITION AND INDEXICALITY

Just as language ideologies govern the interpretation of linguistic signs, so too do sexual ideologies govern the interpretation of sexual signs. Formed when sets of related indexical meanings come to be linked to sexual or sexualized contexts, sexual ideologies may be defined as cultural conceptions about sexual practices, desires, and discourses that regulate expectations for what is permitted and what is proscribed, thus restricting individuals' sexual autonomy (Alexander 2005). For instance, a sexual ideology in which sexual practice is associated with private, secretive, or censored contexts will produce different reactions compared with ideologies in which sexual practice is regarded as liberating, spiritual, or natural. Our review of scholarship on language and sexuality takes note of how sexual ideologies influence the evaluation of sexual stance objects. As the evaluation of any object depends on the degree of shared indexical meanings associated with that object, we view stance-taking in terms of indexical alignment, the degree to which language users share a potential indexical meaning in the evaluation process. Our primary interest, however, is not in alignment but in disalignment, for it is in the clash of indexical systems that sexual ideologies take root.

The now vast body of research on queer and trans uses of language assumes disalignment as a departure point, even if it is not the explicit focus of analysis. Language users navigate the restrictive and potentially harmful effects of sexual ideologies by cultivating unique form–meaning relations that protect against cisheteronormative surveillance. For instance, scholars from diverse traditions have focused on intertextuality as a strategy developed by liminal groups to evade and subvert constraints on sexual expression (e.g., Hall 2005). These practices are often highly indirect, pointing not overtly to sexual identity but rather to a matrix of indexical signs recognizable only to those already associated with queer or trans social networks. Early researchers of lesbian and gay forms of interaction labeled such citational practices “covert communication” (e.g., Painter 1981), drawing attention to their role in producing community against a backdrop of censorship. This concern lives on in research investigating the gay male citational practice of camp, even though scholars now focus on a much greater range of semiotic complexity (Calder 2019, Cornelius & Barrett 2020, Harvey 2002, Kelley 2013, Koller 2009). Indeed, the immense literature on specialized argots used by queer and trans groups throughout the world (for a review, see Barrett 2018) reminds us that there is something very special about the kinds of expression that emerge from sexual constraint. Research has typically focused on how argots bring about recognition within queer and trans communities, but it is in the potential for misrecognition that argots become tools of survival. By their very design, argots are intended to be misrecognized.

Covert ways of trying to determine the sexual orientation of an interlocutor typically involve checking for shared knowledge of specific cultural references, as in “Friend of Dorothy” and associated routines, a type of interaction found in many LGBTQ+ communities (Leap 1996, Queen 1998). In gay male discursive traditions in North America, such routines may take the form of asking a man *Are you a friend of Dorothy?* The question builds on the assumption that every gay man would be a Judy Garland fan, a stereotype cultivated across gay networks since Garland appeared as Dorothy in the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*. Yet the question does not simply test knowledge of Judy Garland: In addition to knowing the stereotype linking gay men with Garland and knowing that Garland played Dorothy, a man who emerges as gay through this routine must recognize it as a normative speech event used by gay men. The ability of this routine to “sort” men according to

sexuality requires that straight men fail to recognize these additional indexical associations. In other words, the routine's effectiveness depends on misrecognition: The determination of the man's sexual identity is based on the possibility of his failure to recognize the routine. This possibility also affords other gay men a chance to deny recognizing "Dorothy" if they are not interested in engaging but want to avoid the facework involved in "doing" rejection. Sexual discourses exploit and require forms of misrecognition, here understood as the failure to recognize a potential indexical meaning.

The understanding of recognition that we advance in this review is not easily handled by Austin's (1962) exposition of the performative utterance or Butler's (1990, 1993) theory of gender performativity. We mention the work of these two philosophers in particular because of their mutually implicating importance in the development of queer linguistics and its newer cousin, trans linguistics. Both Austin and Butler assume that performatives, whether circulating through ordinary language (in the case of Austin) or normativity (in the case of Butler), will be invariably recognized. That is, neither theorist considers the possibility of what sociocultural linguists describe as indexical variation, the highly variable and deeply contextualized array of relations between form and meaning that are cultivated within social groups across time and space. Austin's taxonomy of the kinds of things that must be in place for performative utterances to materialize as action (felicitous performatives) assumes that participants taking part in a ritual will share the same metapragmatics and thus recognize the ritual's normative expectations in the same way. Similarly, Butler's theorization of gender as materializing through the reproduction of culturally intelligible scripts of femininity and masculinity (gender performativity) assumes consensus in the way such scripts are recognized. In fact, the assumption of consensus lies behind Butler's (1997) "ambivalence" regarding recognition as the panacea for queer and trans marginalization (as expressed in their influential exchange with Fraser 1997), since in Butler's view it is precisely the recognition of certain gender identities, but not others, that sustains normativity. The expressions that go unrecognized, like failed Austinian performatives, are in fact not gendered acts at all in Butler's (1990, p. 145) account but rather "incoherent configurations that in their multiplicity exceed and defy the injunction by which they are generated." Butler agrees with a long line of philosophers that misrecognition is an institutionalized form of social violence (including Fraser; see Iser 2019), but its resolution cannot be recognition, in their view, since the process of becoming recognized requires complicity with a normative matrix of signification that is by definition exclusionary (for further discussion, see Lepold 2018). Even Butler's influential discussion of drag performance as a kind of gender subversion presumes normative indexicals, though used by the "wrong" performer.

Sociocultural linguists may find Bourdieu's (1977) view of misrecognition more useful for the analysis of indexical complexity in social interaction. Though described in rather different terms, indexical variation is central to Bourdieu's concept of habitus, the sets of class-inflected mannerisms that emerge from lived experience as sites of distinction and evaluation. For a system of social practice to persist, language users must "refuse to know and above all to recognize" (p. 6) the discriminatory symbolics that inform the exchanges in which they participate. Not entirely conscious but also "not [...] entirely unaware" (p. 6), misrecognition, in Bourdieu's view, is what sustains symbolic domination, with the lower classes joining the upper classes in accepting the false evaluations that marginalize them. As an example, Bourdieu refers to counterfeit coins. We know that any given exchange may involve false currency, but we must willfully ignore this truth in order to maintain the social system of commerce:

If the system is to work, the agents must not be entirely unaware of the truth of their exchanges, which is made explicit in the anthropologist's model, while at the same time they must refuse to know and above all to recognize it. (Bourdieu 1977, p. 6)

Misrecognition is here not a lack of recognition, as in Butler's model, but rather meaningful action that is itself worthy of anthropological analysis, a perspective we extend in this review. Nevertheless, Bourdieu joins Butler in presuming that the failure to recognize is uniformly normative, as it is required for symbolic power to persist. Our understanding of misrecognition as arising from differences between indexical inventories considers how this practice can also be used to resist symbolic domination. Inventory differences may lead to failures in recognition (cf. Gumperz 1976), but the reasons for failure are never simple nor singular. In our view, practices of misrecognition reveal as much about subjectivity as practices of recognition, pointing to a speaker's broader experiential knowledge as well as their willingness to engage with other ways of knowing. As demonstrated by our introductory example, language users may falsely claim ignorance of indexical meanings for strategic purposes, a tactic commonly used in political discourses targeting LGBTQ+ identities. Thus, misrecognition plays a central role in establishing individual stances and subsequent alignments between participants in an interaction. Put simply, misrecognition may disrupt as well as uphold forms of social normativity.

Research in queer and trans linguistics has revealed how language users defy norms not only by using norms in new ways but also by creating new in-group norms constituted by distinct indexical inventories. The fixing of identity in time and space may be in some sense normative, but it is neither singular nor static, emerging through the always evolving interplay of production and recognition (Bucholtz & Hall 2004, Hall 2013; see also Silverstein 2023). Consequently, researchers of language, gender, and sexuality have approached gender performativity as a site of indexical complexity that arises from diverse constellations of time, space, and personhood. The misrecognition of some aspect of this indexical complexity must therefore be viewed as a kind of social action. To recall the Friend of Dorothy routine, gendered and sexual acts may be successful even when they are not recognized and often because of that misrecognition. The routine's very design seeks to determine a man's knowledge of the indexical matrix of gay discourse—to test his ability to recognize the set of potential interpretations from which queerly coded meanings emerge. If a straight male interlocutor does not recognize the routine and replies *Dorothy who?*, this lack of recognition is still successful in determining the listener's sexuality (as likely straight). Thus, the routine points to the basic problem of understanding gender performativity through the lens of Austinian felicity, which is presumed to require indexical alignment. One could argue that the routine is unsuccessful in cases where gay men themselves fail to recognize it, but this is the nature of indexicality: It never exactly aligns with any particular social group due to its always evolving nature. Alternatively, the misrecognition of gay indexicals by a stranger does not uphold normativity but rather reveals it, putting it on display as a potential source of concern. In fact, Friend of Dorothy routines often provide queers a safe discursive space where misrecognition is one's only protection from violence. A theory of gender performativity without a robust conceptualization of indexical variation would miss this social complexity, returning us to static, consensus-based formulations of normativity.

In the remainder of this review, we focus on disalignments between indexical inventories as the primary site in which sexual ideologies reproduce forms of power. We outline the ways in which misrecognition, as contextualized discursive action, arises from contrasting interpretations of form–meaning relations whose very instability enables its power-laden effects. Static understandings of alignments across linguistic systems, norms, and varieties have been the bulwark of linguistic theory. After all, the institutionalization of linguistics as a discipline distinct from anthropology hinged on Chomsky's reorganization of the field around the study of linguistic competence, the shared human ability to acquire and produce language. But a focus on competence, even when reformulated as communicative competence (e.g., Habermas 1970), limits inquiry to an imagined homogenous community of speakers who share that same competence (Barrett 1997). We take

inspiration from recent decolonizing research on language, race, and disability (e.g., Canagarajah 2023, Flores & Rosa 2023) to suggest that a linguistic theory based on skill or fluency will always lead to essentialist accounts of language users (Namboodiripad et al. 2023). In fact, the use of competence as a model for understanding social norms in interaction is decidedly asocial: It fails to account for the ways that indexical meaning is always interactive and negotiated, unfolding through interaction rather than a static reflex of individualized cognition or shared socialization. To draw attention to this point, we offer a conceptual vocabulary for capturing the ways that acts of misrecognition gain their power not from the regularity of social meaning but rather from its instability. This observation is relevant to all sociocultural linguistic research and particularly to studies of sexuality discourses, where disalignments across shifting indexical inventories are central to the emergence of queer and trans subjectivities.

3. RELATIVIZING INDEXICALITY

Language users often assume that coparticipants in an interaction will recognize the indexical meanings conveyed in a given context. But this is not always (or even usually) the case, as language users bring different community epistemologies to bear on what signs mean socially (Calder 2021). How should we approach those cases in which indexical meanings are not shared by participants in an interaction? Our answer to this question brings attention to the ways in which disalignments in indexical inventories enter sexuality discourses as points of negotiation and evaluation. As Friend of Dorothy routines demonstrate, indexical meanings are not evenly distributed. Knowledge of particular sets of indexical association (across registers, for example) may be used to enforce or challenge forms of social normativity. In this section, we further describe the grounding concepts that will enable us to outline patterns in acts of misrecognition, specifically indexical inventory, indexical alignment, and indexical relativity. We build on previous research on a variety of indexical processes to explain why the relativizing concept of indexical inventories is needed for understanding the workings of power in sexual discourses.

Indexical inventories can be viewed as individualized sets of the sign–context associations discussed by Eckert (2008) as potentials in indexical fields. An indexical field is the set of potential meanings linked to a given form, while an indexical inventory is an individual's full set of indexical fields. Awareness of indexical meanings depends on the specific experiences of an individual. Each person is exposed to a unique set of speech events across their life, so that the range (or inventory) of indexical meanings inferred from these experiences will vary across individuals. For example, Eckert's influential proposal of an indexical field for word-final aspirated obstruents (p^h , t^h , k^h) mentions a number of potential social meanings for the aspiration that include personal traits (prissy, articulate), stances taken in interaction (angry, polite), and more durable identity structures (gay diva, nerd girl, schoolteacher). Yet language users may recognize other potential meanings: For instance, as colleagues who share roots in the southern United States, we both associate aspirated final obstruents with the pulpit speech of Southern Evangelical preachers, a group not considered in Eckert's account. Indeed, the Southern sermon register extends aspiration to final fricatives, as in the emblematic pronunciation of 'Jesus' as [dʒijəzʊs^h]. The absence of this potential meaning in Eckert's indexical field is not surprising; her own life experiences, including her experiences with academic research, have exposed her to different sets of form–meaning relations. Because of the range of potential indexical meanings associated with any linguistic variable, language users determine which potential meaning should be inferred by attending to the cooccurrence of variables and the extralinguistic aspects of the interaction. Listener interpretation results when multiple signs cohere into a shared indexical meaning.

Differences in indexical inventories allow the same variable to have conflicting interpretations as an indexical. Indexical alignment refers to the degree to which speakers share some (set of)

indexical meaning(s). Our understanding of this term is distinct from the alignment between interlocutors found in DuBois's (2007) research on stance. In his model, interlocutor alignment involves speakers indexing stances toward a particular stance object. As such, interlocutor alignment assumes a shared understanding of the indexical meanings involved. In contrast, indexical alignment centers on the question of whether such shared understanding can actually be assumed. The observation that different communities have distinct sets of normative potential indexical meanings has led researchers of language and sexuality to argue that normativity is best analyzed in the plural (e.g., Hall et al. 2019), departing from queer theory's focus on normativity as hegemony. Accordingly, we are interested in those cases where indexical meanings are not evenly distributed and, more particularly, where individuals deny or resist the normative indexical meanings inherent in a given interaction.

The uneven distribution of indexical meaning may be characterized as indexical relativity, a concept that brings into focus the integration of indexicality into contemporary research on linguistic relativity. While early formulations of linguistic relativity centered on the relationship between lexico-grammatical structures and patterns of thought [e.g., Whorf 1956 (1939)], linguistic anthropologists shifted the focus to emphasize relativity in terms of the indexical relationship between linguistic forms and the contexts in which they occur (e.g., Silverstein 2023). Researchers have extended this interpretation to consider, for example, crosslinguistic differences in structuring interaction (Sidnell & Enfield 2012) and differences in aesthetic evaluations of verbal art (Webster 2015). Such research reveals that linguistic relativity depends on localized language ideologies that support and enforce normative interpretations of signs, leading to divergent epistemologies of morality and even humanity. This observation may be extended to nonlinguistic signs, of course, providing another reason to view relativity as indexical rather than purely linguistic. As suggested by several of our selected examples, community-based knowledge of indexical meaning differs with respect to not only language but also inanimate objects, social practices, and individual acts. These indexical meanings serve as the framework for the competing normativities that establish, uphold, and contest hegemonic social structures, understandings of morality, social inequalities, and what it means to be human.

Our focus on competing indexical inventories hinges on Silverstein's (2003) explication of meaning systems as arising from the reinterpretation of indexical associations within new contexts, as observed in his description of elite consumption registers (such as wine talk) as $n+1$ indexical orders. This has brought researchers' attention to the coexistence of indexical orders as well as the processes that lead to indexical variation. When expressions gain in popularity, as on social media, links to the originating users or contexts may become unrecognizable, leading to alternative indexical associations for the same expression. This process is known as indexical bleaching, the reduction of potential associations with a given form (Squires 2014). Although indexical bleaching may appear innocuous, it may nevertheless serve to uphold forms of social inequality, as when English speakers in the United States anglicize (or entirely change) personal names that do not align with English phonology, such as traditional Spanish or Chinese names (Bucholtz 2016). Changing someone's name because it is unfamiliar erases the indexical links between a name and cultural context, which in turn suppresses the expression of cultural identity. A similar erasure is observed in practices of linguistic appropriation, as when white speakers adopt terms from Black women and Black gay men [such as *shade* (Cornelius & Barrett 2020) and *and I oop* (miles-hercules 2022)]. The loss of cultural associations through this type of indexical bleaching contributes to the enforcement of public discourses as white public spaces (Barrett et al. 2023, Bucholtz 2016). This phenomenon may also occur across international lines, as when K-pop female performers in Korea use US-originating Black and Chicanx cultural signifiers to project "bad girl" femininity (Garza 2021), or when white gay men in the United Kingdom use AAVE signifiers on Twitter

to index a “sassy” persona (Ilbury 2019). In these cases, a much broader set of racialized meanings is bleached to a stereotype that services the goals of global media capitalism, furthering the rhematization of people of color.

In the above examples, shifts in indexical meanings produce contrastive indexical inventories, creating the conditions for the misrecognition practices we identify in the next section. In fact, in some cases a linguistic form may be reduced to a single indexical possibility, as in the use of *diverse* to mean *Black* in US academic contexts (as in “we are looking for a diverse candidate”; Bucholtz & Zimman 2018). Here, the original referential meaning of *diverse* is replaced by the most frequent indexical marker of diversity in North American academia, Blackness. A similar pattern arises in discussions of pronouns related to transgender rights, where the use of the word *pronoun* comes to substitute for the entire LGBTQ+ civil rights movement. Extreme bleaching is evident in the 2022 tweets of failed Florida Republican congressional candidate Lauren Spicer: “You will never catch me using pronouns” (September 14) and “Do not refer to my Lord Jesus Christ with pronouns” (December 14). In examples such as these, which are increasingly common on social media, the meaning of the word *pronoun* is reduced to liberal virtue signaling, bringing into play a much broader right-wing stance against the trans-affirming ideologies motivating inclusive language.

This brings us back to our earlier point that language ideologies regulate potential inventories through forms of normativity. Linguistic anthropologists have shown how multiple language ideologies cohere to compartmentalize inventories to specific contexts of occurrence (Kroskrity 2004; see also Agha 2006). Yet speakers can challenge the association of inventories with a specific context through indexical disjuncture, namely the juxtaposition of indexical meanings that are normatively understood as belonging to different or even contradictory indexical inventories (on US gay male subcultures, see Barrett 2017; on gay Taiwanese celebrities, see Chen 2022; on US queer Muslims, see Thompson 2020). Indexical disjuncture is a special case of appropriation, where individuals in a given context use language that indexes aspects of an identity they do not claim for themselves. Thus, indexical disjunctures typically disrupt hegemonic sexual ideologies that relate indexical associations to specific social contexts. As an example, Barrett (2017) describes the blending of BDSM discourses and hegemonic discourses in the public speeches of gay contestants in the International Mr. Leather contest. One contestant’s hobbies were described as “nipple play and stunt kite flying,” placing nipple play in the same category (*hobby*) as flying kites. The utterance thus presupposes that nipple play and kite flying are similar types of activities, rhetorically lessening the stigma associated with specific sexual practices. Such disjunctures challenge normative interpretations of indexicals by presenting them as equivalent to counternormative interpretations.

4. MISRECOGNITION AS SOCIAL PRACTICE

Because indexical signs always involve multiple potential meanings, as suggested by our examples in the previous section, language users rarely take indexical meanings for granted. On the contrary, language users are deeply involved in everyday contestations of sign–index associations. The processes of indexical bleaching and indexical disjuncture help us see some of the ways that competing indexical inventories come into being. Yet these processes may also be seen through the lens of misrecognition. Meaning contestations typically involve patterns of misrecognition, such as recognizing fewer and fewer indexical meanings (as in indexical bleaching) or refusing to recognize the boundaries that compartmentalize particular indexical inventories (as in indexical disjuncture). In this section, we present three more patterns of misrecognition that commonly emerge in struggles over sexual meanings. Language users may protect themselves from other meanings by creating new meanings (indexical inoculation), uphold meanings presumed to be

normative (indexical presumption), or deny meanings suggestive of contrary epistemologies (indexical denial). We find this triad a useful heuristic for drawing attention to what happens when indexical inventories collide, but we do not intend these groupings to be comprehensive or mutually exclusive (e.g., denial often involves presumption). Rather, we present them as provocations for future research on misrecognition as contextualized social practice, a turn we believe imperative for uncovering the power-laden infrastructure of sexual discourses.

4.1. Indexical Inoculation

Indexical inoculation refers to the process by which individuals recognize or adopt indexical meanings associated with a particular register to disrupt normative form-meaning relations and advance a competing language ideology. Silverstein (2017, p. 156), who introduced the concept, defines it as “the process of summoning members of a cultural community to understand and even to use new register effects.” As an example, he describes the 1970s efforts of second-wave feminists in the United States to disrupt what they perceived to be the sexist use of androcentric generic language (such as using *he* for unknown individuals of any gender identity). Similar challenges continue to occur in diverse national contexts, as new generations of feminists make androcentric grammar a priority (e.g., Abbou 2023 on France, Kuhar & Antić Gaber 2022 on Slovenia, Petrović 2022 on Serbia). In the United States, the shift from a register based on the generic masculine (e.g., generic *he*, *mankind*) to one based in feminist language reform (e.g., *he or she*, *humankind*) involved recategorizing an unreflexive first-order register through second-order indexicals situating the register as sexist. The act of refusing to recognize the register’s previous meaning as a neutral reflex of grammar in effect made the use of this register no longer neutral. Indexical inoculation in this case is thus a process of recategorizing meaning to shield against form-meaning relations viewed as promoting oppressive sexual ideologies.

In the second-wave context outlined by Silverstein, the use or nonuse of the generic masculine, even if motivated by other reasons, came to be regarded as reflective of one’s commitment to feminist ideals. Here, two indexical inventories, one interpreting generic masculines as sexist and the other defending their use as neutral, coexisted in ways that invited targeted contestations of meaning. Indeed, the Harvard linguistics department wrote an open letter accusing feminist language activists on campus of having “pronoun envy” (Livia 2001). This response reminds us that misrecognition can move in both directions, as shown in the letter writers’ refusal to recognize new higher-order indexical possibilities. The letter asserted that generic masculines were purely a question of grammar and not in any way associated with social inequalities between men and women, and thus that the women were expressing little more than (a linguistic form of) penis envy. Some may argue that the department’s response proved the need for such language reform (indeed, this point was made by the feminist activists themselves). Whatever the case, contestations from both sides of the indexical divide illustrate that misrecognition readily takes shape through the positioning of an alternative indexical order (whether n or $n+1$) as ignorant and ill informed.

Over the last decade, meaning contestations over pronoun usage have shifted from sexist to cissexist concerns. In English-speaking contexts, this shift is observed in debates surrounding the use of singular *they* (Conrod 2020) to refer to individuals who identify as nonbinary. Inspired by a third wave of queer and trans feminisms emphasizing the performativity of sex and gender, this new generation of gender-neutral language reform seeks protection from ideologies reducing gender to a binary opposition that licenses transphobia. Resistance to this development has facilitated an unlikely alliance between gender-critical feminists and proponents of the “antigender” movement worldwide (Barrett & Hall 2023, Bassi & LaFleur 2022, Borba 2022, Thurlow 2024, Tudisco 2023), a loose coalition of right-wing populists, political conservatives, and Christian

fundamentalists. These groups argue against the use of singular *they* because it suggests that sex is not binary, thus undermining the most basic tenet of gender-critical and antigender dogma: sex essentialism.

The opposition to language reform acknowledging the rights of transgender and nonbinary people has led to troubling new indexical alignments on the world stage, as shown by the broad circulation of what Borba (2022) identifies as the antigenderism register (see also Barát 2021, Tebaldi & Baran 2023). Gender-critical feminists argue that the biological distinction between men and women must be retained to secure “sex-based” rights for women, while antigender political groups advocate a religiously conservative return to the oppressive “sex-based” distinctions that preceded even second-wave feminism. However, both groups align in positioning gender-neutral pronouns as erasing “real” women and therefore misogynist, even if their motivations for making this argument may differ. The vehemence of their shared opposition is evident in online essays like “Pronouns are Rohypnol” (Kerr 2019), which compares the reality-shifting dangers of using “incongruent pronouns” to taking Rohypnol, a benzodiazepine popularly known as the “date-rape drug.” The implication that trans language activists are somehow similar to perpetrators of sexual assault is another point of indexical alignment between the registers of antigender and gender-critical groups. Another example is the popular canard that transgender women want access to women’s restrooms and prisons in order to commit perverse and violent acts. Ironically, in constructing a positionality in opposition to transgender rights, gender-critical feminists have adopted the indexical inventories of neofascist groups who are adamantly opposed to any form of feminism.

As shown by these examples, indexical inoculation serves in the enregisterment of political ideologies by forging new inventory configurations that are marked for specific political and discursive stances. For instance, even in the face of antigenderism, inoculation strategies based in gender-neutral language reform continue to gain traction as an index of having a cosmopolitan global awareness. Examples include the elaboration of nonbinary grammar in a wide range of languages, including English (Anderson 2022, Conrod 2020, Zimman 2017), German (Waldendorf 2024), Portuguese (Fernandes et al. 2018), Spanish (Urtubey 2023), and Slavic languages (Ivanová & Kysel’ová 2022). The acceptance of new pronouns and their associated grammars runs parallel to the rise of other emergent inventories indexing global awareness. For example, LGBTQ+ groups situated in postcolonial contexts may inoculate themselves against localized articulations of homophobia and transphobia by using the prestige language of the colonizers, as when middle-class groups in India use English to index greater awareness and knowledge of matters related to sexuality (Hall 2019). Alternatively, LGBTQ+ groups may turn to multilingualism to inoculate themselves against constraints on intimacy imposed by political conflict, as when Palestinians and Jewish Israelis make strategic use of Arabic, Hebrew, and English to build romantic relations across border regimes (Milani & Levon 2024).

Strategies of indexical inoculation need not be in the direction of gender or sexual progress, however. White supremacist groups, for instance, are deeply involved in the development of specialized registers that disguise racism, misogyny, and homophobia behind the veneer of humor, thus inoculating against liberal registers calling for the censorship of such discourses. Kosse (2022) analyzes the uses of *cuck* in right-wing online spaces, demonstrating that its deployment, even if cloaked in humor, cannot be divorced from broader white supremacist ideologies. This reminds us that new register effects are brought about by multiple signs that coagulate around a set of related indexical meanings. The circulation of *cuck*, as a case in point, builds on the online popularity of cuck pornography—a porn genre in which a (usually white) man watches another (usually Black) man have sex with his wife—to advance racist conspiracy theories regarding liberal attempts to “replace” white people. Nevertheless, the widespread public use of *cuck* often goes unchallenged

because the term's relationship to white supremacy is largely misrecognized as an apolitical form of humor (giving those "in the know" a sense of superiority).

The cases of indexical inoculation discussed in this section can thus be regarded as struggles over normative sets of indexical inventories. In each instance, diverse forms of misrecognition arise at the boundary between old and new indexical orders, as language users negotiate the political preferability of one set of meanings over another. Often this takes the form of one group imposing a singular set of form–meaning relations to construe the opposing indexical inventory as unrecognizable. This form of misrecognition is typically associated with power, given that the ability to ignore alternative inventories both is licensed by and reproduces forms of privilege. This is what we call indexical presumption.

4.2. Indexical Presumption

Variation in indexical inventories is dependent on individualized experience, as language users have different exposures throughout their life span to form–meaning relations. These experiences also produce different understandings of social norms leading to privilege and exclusion. Indexical presumption occurs when privilege allows one to behave as if one's indexical inventory is shared by all other language users. Microaggressions are a classic case of indexical presumption in that they depend on the erasure of more marginalized inventories (Barrett & Hall 2023). For instance, when someone asks an unknown woman *What does your husband do for a living?*, the question erases the possibility of nonheterosexual existence. The presumption of compulsory heterosexuality enables sexuality discourses such as these to disregard anything falling outside of cisheteronormativity (Rich 1980). These types of microaggressions are especially damaging for transgender and nonbinary individuals (Jones 2023, Zimman 2020).

Indexical presumption lies behind the recent slew of state-based laws in the United States aiming to remove topics related to sexual and gender identity from school classrooms. Although these laws are promoted as protecting children from exposure to sexuality, their primary effect is to discriminate against LGBTQ+ teachers and students (Fields & Wotipka 2022). Notably, this form of legislation becomes intelligible only through the failure to recognize indexical markers of cisheteronormativity. While a lesbian teacher referring to their wife is interpreted as bringing sexuality into the classroom and thus committing an illegal act, a heterosexual teacher introducing herself as Mrs. Zbornak (for instance) escapes the law's purview, even though she is similarly alerting students to her sexuality through her choice of address term. The failure to recognize the form–meaning relations that constitute normativity is thus an indexical presumption that protects heterosexual privilege and erases LGBTQ+ experiences. In this sense, indexical presumption is similar to Bourdieu's misrecognition, yet our interest moves beyond symbolic domination to consider the ways misrecognition is continuously negotiated in interaction.

Indexical presumption is especially common in cases of sexual harassment and sexual violence (Debenport 2020, Ehrlich 2019). Male privilege enables male indexical presumption by disregarding indexical meanings in the speech of women, as in cases of repeated unwelcome advances that presume women's ways of saying "no" are irrelevant or uninterpretable (Ehrlich 1998, Kitinger & Frith 1999). Consider, for example, the widespread problem of women receiving unsolicited pictures of men's genitalia (Amundsen 2021, Jones 2019, Thurlow 2021). The sending of such pictures seems to presume that all women want to see images of strangers' penises, a presumption that persists despite efforts to challenge it, such as Whitney Bell's art exhibit, *I Didn't Ask for This: A Lifetime of Dick Pics*. The exhibit included a reproduction of the artist's living room with roughly 200 unsolicited dick pics that she and other women had received to suggest how a woman, even when alone in her own living room, is not safe from sexual harassment (Stevenson 2016). Such

forms of sexual harassment depend on the misrecognition of the potential indexical meanings that women typically recognize. Likewise, women in customer service positions are often expected to follow scripts to appear cheerful and friendly to customers. Sexual harassment emerges when male customers misrecognize this friendliness as instead indexing sexual attraction (Barrett et al. 2023, p. 297). Here, indexical presumption emerges from male privilege and the ability to presume that one's own indexical inventory is universal.

Indexical presumption is also central to gender-critical feminism, where it is presumed that everyone meeting a biologically restrictive definition of *woman* is oppressed in the same way, thereby rejecting the concept of intersectionality (e.g., Lawford-Smith 2022, p. 146). Although it is widely accepted in feminist discourse that forms of oppression are intersectional, the gender-critical rejection of this concept serves to erase the concerns and perspectives of women who are not white. It presumes that the vagina (or whatever biological metric is seen to determine womanhood) has a singular indexical meaning regardless of context. Well before Crenshaw (1989) coined the term intersectionality, African American abolitionist Sojourner Truth's question "Ain't I a Woman?" made it clear that first wave feminism understood sex through a filter of whiteness. Yet in response to bell hooks's (1984) argument that all forms of oppression are connected, Lawford-Smith (2022, pp. 146ff) asserts that efforts to end oppression need not be. For gender-critical feminists, intersectionality muddies the water and diminishes a sex-essentialist focus on women's oppression.

The rejection of intersectionality ignores the wide range of literature demonstrating the ways that racism influences discourses of gender and sexuality (e.g., Cashman 2017, Cornelius & Barrett 2020, Ehrlich 2021, Lanehart 2021, Makoni 2021, Morgan 2020, Washington 2020). Snorton (2017) outlines the racial nature of scientific understandings of biological sex in the United States, where medical research on women's genitals and reproductive organs has been conducted primarily on women of color. The modern understanding of the female body emerged largely through medical research surgeries conducted on unwilling Black women, often with no anesthesia. The indexical meanings associated with Black and Brown women's bodies have long been racialized in ways that legitimize extreme forms of violence toward Black and Brown women. We find similar cases involving the racialization of men's bodies (Hiramoto & Pua 2019). Given this history, the idea that biological sex naturally transcends and can be separated from other forms of oppression is a form of indexical presumption that disregards the lives and experiences of women of color.

There is ample evidence that local discourses of gender and sexuality cannot be divorced from the racial contexts in which they emerge, as demonstrated by research examining the ways in which intersectionality influences sexuality discourses. Such research includes studies of Native American sexual and gender categorizations (Davis 2014, Pyle 2022); the unique position of Black LGBTQ+ speakers (Canning 2023, Cornelius 2020, Lane 2019, miles-hercules 2022); the place of bilingualism and the reclamation of anti-LGBTQ+ Spanish pejoratives among US Latinx speakers (Cashman 2017, Ferrada 2021); and other ways in which race and sexuality discourses intersect with religion, class, neurodiversity, and place (Barrett 2020, Chun & Walters 2021, Jones 2016, Kibbey 2023b, Lazar 2023, McCleary 2023, Pichler 2021, Steele 2022, Thomas & Boellstorff 2017, Thompson 2020).

Relatedly, as Lugones (2007) has argued, contemporary understandings of gender and sexuality not only are central to colonialism but are actually created by colonialist ideologies of race that dehumanize (and degender) colonized populations (see also Viteri 2021). Multiple historians have demonstrated the ways in which sexuality discourses are intertwined with colonial oppression (Alexander 2005, Macharia 2019, Sigal 2000). A contemporary example of colonial domination influencing sexuality discourses can be found in Chávez's (2013) work with undocumented LGBTQ+ youth, for whom "coming out" as undocumented typically has much more severe

effects than coming out as LGBTQ+. Colonial legacies also persist in class relations linking sexuality discourses to colonizer languages such as English, as in class tensions surrounding English-based postcolonial gender categories like Kong Girls in Hong Kong (Kang & Chen 2014), conyos in the Philippines (Reyes 2017), and fresas in Mexico and the United States (Mendoza-Denton 2007). In such cases, sexual ideologies may emerge as a prerogative of upper-class groups, with Indigenous or other national languages presumed unable to convey sexual meanings. For example, in the postcolonial context of India, upper-class English–Hindi bilingual speakers may misrecognize sexuality when expressed exclusively in Hindi, instead associating such discourses with negative stereotypes related to social class, education, and rurality (Hall 2021).

Finally, indexical presumption lies behind gender-critical and antigender views of sex/gender as binary, specifically in the associated edict that social personae must adhere to a male/female opposition. The rejection of nonbinary gender requires the misrecognition of cultural systems of gender that do not adhere to binary norms, which extend to populations far beyond the Global North. In our work as linguistic anthropologists involved in research and advocacy for gender-variant groups in North America and South Asia, we are stunned to see this form of misrecognition enter academic discourse under the name of feminism. We view gender-critical feminism as the most recent link in a long chain of colonial legacies imposing European gendered categories onto Indigenous populations. The violent effects of such legacies surface in the indexical inventories of intersex individuals (Dauphinais 2022) and marginalized gender-variant groups around the world, as demonstrated by research on the language practices of baklas in the Philippines (Manalansan 2003); fa'afafines in Sāmoa (Worth 2001); hijras, kotis, and jananas in India (Hall 1997, 2005; Nagar 2021, 2022); khwaja siras in Pakistan (Fiazulla 2020, Kanwal 2020); mähūs in Hawai'i (Kirtley 2015); muxes in Mexico (Welker 2023); skesanas in South Africa (Ntuli 2009, Rudwick & Msibi 2016); sworn virgins in Albania (Dickerson 2019); tombois and warias in Indonesia (Blackwood 2014, Boellstorff 2005); travestis in Brazil (Borba & Ostermann 2007, da Cruz & Tito 2016, Lima 2017); two-spirits in the United States (Davis 2014, Pyle 2022); and 'yan daudu in Nigeria (Gaudio 2009), among many others.

The attempt to impose a dehumanizing Eurocentric gender binary erases the rich abundance of gender diversity we see across cultures. This discursive erasure goes beyond indexical presumption to deny the very existence of gender variation, thus nullifying the possibility of human rights for gender-variant people. It is common for those in power to presume that their own indexical inventories are shared by marginalized groups, but gender-critical feminism reminds us that acts of indexical presumption may also be strategic, exemplifying the special case of indexical denial.

4.3. Indexical Denial

The fact that any given form may be associated with multiple indexical meanings allows speakers to claim ignorance of certain indexical possibilities. Doing so enables indexical denial, a form of misrecognition in which language users disavow knowledge of alternative indexical meanings for personal gain. Often surfacing as a defensive measure to counter allegations of criminal acts such as sexual harassment or hate speech, indexical denial may be used to dismiss the sexual ideologies of marginalized individuals. Consider, for example, American stand-up comedian Louis C.K.'s claim that he was unaware a woman would be uncomfortable if he removed his pants and began to masturbate in front of her (Ryzik et al. 2017). Here, it is difficult to imagine that the denial is an honest revelation, instead suggesting more of a feigned ignorance of another's indexical inventory. For this reason, it is common for indexical denials to be accompanied by rationalizations of the claimed ignorance, framed to position the denier as victim (e.g., Bergozza et al. 2024). When New York governor Andrew Cuomo faced an investigative report alleging he had sexually harassed 11 women during his time in office (accusations that included unwanted groping, kissing, and sexual

comments), he protested by responding that he was unaware “the line” constituting sexual harassment had moved: “In my mind, I have never crossed the line with anyone, but I didn’t realize the extent to which the line has been redrawn” (Ferré-Sadurní & Goodman 2021). As with indexical presumption, indexical denial is often associated with a failure to recognize extreme privilege.

The strategic use of indexical denial is observed in “dog whistles” conveying opposition to practices of indexical inoculation, as in right-wing responses to politically correct discourse. As notoriously seen in Donald Trump’s use of gestural ambiguity during his 2016 presidential campaign (Goldstein et al. 2020), dog whistles use prominent indexicals as metonyms for a broader inventory of signs suggestive of supremacist views. When white supremacists use a dog whistle like *cuck*, for example, they evoke long discursive histories of racist, xenophobic, sexist, and homophobic ideologies. Because the metonymy of dog whistles masks the full indexical inventory, it becomes possible to select signs in a way that points to a prejudicial inventory without fully declaring affiliation with that inventory, enabling plausible deniability. Indeed, we saw this pattern in our opening example of the gender-critical panel: A dog whistle like “the necessity of biological sex” is a much easier pill to swallow than “the eradication of trans people.”

However, it is also possible for marginalized groups to use indexical denial as a strategy of resistance, specifically by denying oppressive normative indexical inventories. For example, at a 1988 ACT UP protest against the slow rate of approval for AIDS pharmaceuticals, the police were called in to drag protesters off the steps of the Food and Drug Administration building. Afraid to touch men who might be infected with HIV, the police put on latex gloves for self-protection (a highly unusual practice for the time). In response, the protesters began to chant, “Your gloves don’t match your shoes!” (Masover 2012). The strategy to focus on gloves as an index of fashion instead of hygiene denied normative indexical links, including the police officers’ association of gay bodies with danger and disease. The use of indexical denial as resistance is central to cases of queer resignification more generally, as when derogatory terms are reclaimed in ways that deny their normative potential to cause harm (see Devor 2004 on *dyke*, Ferrada 2021 on *jota*, and Lane 2019 on *ratchet*). That said, it is much more difficult to deny normative indexical inventories with broad recognition than to deny the inventories of those who are already marginalized. For this reason, the use of indexical denial by marginalized groups is often fleeting and restricted to in-group interactions.

5. CONCLUSION

Research on language in social life has generally assumed that language users operate with a shared understanding of how to interpret indexical signs. However, as we have emphasized throughout this review, indexical meanings are not evenly distributed. Language users may have different indexical inventories, leading them to interpret the same sign in radically different ways. Current global sexuality discourses promoting homophobia, misogyny, and transphobia demand more semiotic attention to cases of misrecognition in which speakers do not share (or claim not to share) specific sets of indexical meanings. In our view, research in the area of language and sexuality will be made more holistic by considering not only how indexical meanings are shared but also how and when those meanings are disrupted, presumed, or denied.

Current sexuality discourses involve orthogonal sexual ideologies that serve to promote or deny equality for those who fall outside of white, cisgender, heterosexual normativity. Recent attacks on “gender” presume a static essentialist indexical link between gender identity and antiquated understandings of “biological sex.” These attacks attempt to resist the indexical inoculation of signs that recognize trans, nonbinary, and intersex identities by denying the existence of new inventories linked to queer and trans survival. Understanding the place of such denials within sexuality (and other social) discourses requires closer attention to discursive struggles over the misrecognition of indexical inventories.

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