
"It's a Girl!"

Bringing Performativity Back to Linguistics

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We began collecting articles for this volume in March 1994 while preparations for the third Berkeley Women and Language Conference (BWLC) were at their height. In our own papers for the 1994 conference, we were each grappling with recent developments in queer theory and its uneasy, often antagonistic, relation to feminist theory. So, as it turned out, were several of the other conference participants that year. During the two previous decades, although a substantial body of research had been carried out on language and gender, few of these studies had taken sexuality, or sexual orientation, as a criterion for analysis, and the vast majority assumed gender as an unproblematic category indexically linked to the sex of the speaker or writer.

The small amount of research carried out on language and sexual orientation in the 1960s and 1970s tended to concentrate on the lexical level. During this period, a number of gay glossaries and lexicons were compiled, including Cory and LeRoy, "A Lexicon of Homosexual Slang" (1963), Strait and Associates, *The Lavender Lexicon: Dictionary of Gay Words and Phrases* (1964), Rodgers, *The Queens' Vernacular* (1972), and Farrel, "The Argot of the Homosexual Subculture" (1972). Although most of these works spotlighted white gay male speech in the United States, a few, like Giallombardo's *Society of Women: A Study of a Woman's Prison* (1966), presented the language of lesbians, while others included terms from languages other than English, such as the tongue-in-cheek "Gay Girl's Guide to the

U.S. and the Western World" (published as early as 1949), which has sections on French, German, and Russian.

The narrow range of gay-focused linguistic scholarship stands in stark contrast to the blossoming of interest and research on (heterosexual) men's and women's language in the same period, a topic that has been studied at every linguistic level from phonology and phonetics to morphosyntax, semantics, lexicon, and discourse. This research has covered such different areas as silencing and verbosity; topic choice and topic take-up; gaps and overlap; use of diminutives, superlatives, and hypocoristics; hedges and indirect speech acts; stress, pitch, and intonation patterns; semantic derogation; code-switching; and ethnic speech patterns. In the absence of explicit statements as to why sexuality was not included as a criterion of analysis in these studies, one is left to suppose that gay male speakers were included among the class of male respondents, while lesbians were placed with the women, a classification based on the unspoken assumption that shared gender provides a commonality that overrides considerations of sexual orientation.

One of the earliest gay glossaries, Gershon Legman's "The Language of Homosexuality: An American Glossary" (1941), listing 329 terms, appeared as appendix 7 to *Sex Variants: A Study of Homosexual Patterns* by one George Henry, M.D. Legman's glossary includes only gay male slang, and the author's explanation for this focus is interesting. Legman imputes the absence of lesbian terms not to the limitations of his own methods of data collection (he consulted other dictionaries, rather than conducting his own fieldwork) but to the "tradition of gentlemanly restraint among lesbians" (quoted in Hayes 1978: 204). This apparently simple statement contains a complex folk theory of the relationship among gender, sexuality, and language. Far from assuming that lesbians speak like women, Legman categorizes them among men, and gentlemen at that, a subsection of "restrained" (i.e., reticent) male speakers whose speech is marked by the absence of debasing slang. If the lack of lesbian slang indicates that lesbians speak like gentlemen, the abundance of gay male slang (329 items) must indicate that gay men's speech resembles that of women—working-class women, presumably, not "ladies."¹ It would seem that Legman accepted the folk linguistic view of women's verbosity, which more than twenty years of linguistic research has since been at pains to disprove. The association of lesbian speech with upper-class masculinity and gay male speech with lower-class femininity is strikingly at odds with the feminist-informed studies of the 1970s and 1980s, which, as mentioned, classified lesbians with women and paid little attention to class distinctions.

Commenting on the difficulty of obtaining copies of Legman's glossary, Charles Clay Doyle notes that the 1941 edition of *Sex Variants* is almost inaccessible, and the more easily available edition of 1948 excludes Legman's appendix. Doyle reports that it took considerable time and effort to obtain the 1941 edition on interlibrary loan. Six institutions refused to send their copy, a refusal that Doyle imputes to the fact that the book contains "numerous frontal photographs of naked human beings, which are intended to illustrate various physical types among homosexuals" (1982: 74–75). A grave, somewhat titillating warning appears on the title page: "The material in this book has been prepared for the use of the medical and allied professions only."

We have, perhaps, moved beyond the time when gay language could safely be studied only by persons holding medical degrees and the inclusion of pictures of naked, reputed homosexuals was grounds for the noncirculation of a work.² The glossaries and lexicons were followed by studies of lesbian and gay discourse (e.g., Hayes 1976³); ethnographic research into the defining aspects of gay and lesbian milieux (e.g., Ponte 1974⁴); the meaning of paralinguistic phenomena such as eye gaze and body posture (e.g., Webbink 1981); and gay code-switching (e.g., Lumby 1976). Birch Moonwomon's 1985 study "Toward the Study of Lesbian Speech" (reprinted this volume) was probably the first work to focus on perceptions of specifically lesbian speech and stress patterns. Although several scholars emerged in the 1970s as prominent researchers in the field—Julia Penelope (Stanley) (1970) working on the specificity of lesbian as opposed to gay male lexicon; Stephen O. Murray (1979) working on semantics and ritual insult; Joseph Hayes, who compiled a twenty-two-page annotated bibliography on the "language and language behavior of lesbian women and gay men" (1978, 1979)—the field itself failed to emerge. The first book-length collection of articles on lesbian and gay language issues, Chesebro's *Gayspeak: Gay Male and Lesbian Communication*, was published in 1981 and addresses questions of rhetoric and communication rather than linguistics as such. *Queer Words, Queer Images: Communication and the Construction of Homosexuality*, which came out in 1994, also concentrates on communication and rhetoric, as well as on media images of gays and lesbians and the process of coming out. It was not until William Leap began collecting articles for his edited volume, *Beyond the Lavender Lexicon*, that a book-length work concentrating on language issues as such was conceived.

Queer Theory

In this volume are collected a series of articles that approach the study of language from the twin perspectives of gender and sexuality, conceived as separate but intricately linked categories. In fact, the separation of sexuality and gender forms one of the cornerstones of queer theory, neatly encapsulated in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's Axiom Two:

The study of sexuality is not co-extensive with the study of gender; correspondingly, antihomophobic inquiry is not coextensive with feminist inquiry. (1990: 27)

If the separation of sexuality and gender is a key element of queer theory, the separation of sex and gender, or biological sex and the social production of male and female identities, is a key element of feminism. As Sedgwick observes, although many gender-based analyses do involve accounts of intragender relations, their definitional appeal "must necessarily be to the diacritical frontier between different genders" (1990: 31); hence the privileging of heterosexual relations that lesbian theorists have criticized within feminism.⁵ Since Sedgwick's formulation of the limitations of gender-based analysis (and therefore, albeit covertly, of the shortcomings of feminism) is both clear and beautifully expressed, we quote it here:

"The analytic bite of a purely gender-based account will grow less incisive and direct as the distance of its subject from a social interface between different genders increases. It is unrealistic to expect a close, textured analysis of same-sex relations through an optic calibrated in the first place to the coarser stigmata of gender difference" (1990: 32).

In this introduction we propose not to present or explicate the whole, complex developing field of queer theory but rather to point out those of its tenets that are most useful to linguistics and a study of language in context and, conversely, the contribution linguistics has made to queer theory. In some ways, queer theory, with its concern for hegemonic social forces rather than individual speakers—a position it largely inherits from postmodernism—may be seen as a reaction against the identity politics of feminism. *Identity politics*, a label most commonly applied from without and used to disparage the political position thus described, revolves around the recognition of one's identity as a member of a specific (typically oppressed) group: *women, blacks, the working class, the disabled*. Linked to the notion of community based on personal identity rather than on political allegiance is the more radical belief that only the people directly involved have the authority to speak for that community; that it is for gay men to theorize and combat gay oppression, while lesbians speak out against lesbian oppression. This belief, if pushed to its logical conclusion, would reduce scholarship (and, incidentally, creative production) to participant observation (and autobiography).

One of the most important criticisms of identity politics is that it is essentialist; that is, it assumes that personal identity is an unproblematic category and that all social relations may be derived from it. Linguistic studies of men's and women's speech that do not take into account other social parameters, such as class, race, age, occupation, or political affiliation, might be considered essentialist in outlook, informed by a brand of identity politics that assumes that gender is the superordinate category of which the other parameters are mere subdivisions. In the last chapter of *Man Made Language* (1980), for example, a volume that is composed mainly of commentary on previous studies, Dale Spender quotes various feminist critics who have pointed out the absence of representations of working-class and black women from the literary canon: "Working class women, literate or illiterate, play virtually no part in the conversion of raw material into literature" (Glastonbury 1979: 173; quoted in Spender 1980: 226); "Black women's existence, experience and culture and the brutally complex systems of oppression which shape these are in the 'real world' of white and/or male consciousness beneath consideration, invisible, unknown" (Smith 1979: 183, quoted in Spender 1980: 227). Yet Spender makes no comment on the absence of working-class and black speakers in the linguistic studies she outlines in the main body of the book.

We wish not to reduce feminism to identity politics, revolving around gender as the most salient category, or even to assert that feminist theory necessarily prioritizes identity politics but only to point out that it has been thus characterized and that it is, in part, against this categorization that queer theory has evolved. Clearly, a theory that is unable to focus on relations between members of the same sex is as inadequate to the study of lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender discourse as is a theory that focuses on homosexual and homosocial discourse to the exclu-

sion of cross-sex discourse. The former will be unable to analyze differences between same-sex versus cross-sex discourse, while the latter will downplay gender differences between gay men and lesbians. It may seem trite to state that both feminism and queer theory provide useful tools for linguistic research, but it is nevertheless true.

Although intersubjective relations have been well theorized by feminist linguists (see, for example, Coates and Cameron 1989 or Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1995), intersubjectivity remains inadequately conceptualized within queer theory. Judith Butler, who, with Sedgwick, is the foremost and most frequently quoted queer theorist, considers the individual *I* who speaks as "a citation of the place of the 'I' in speech" (1993: 226). There is, Butler insists, "no 'I' who stands behind discourse" (1993: 225). According to Butler, there is no referent for *I* that precedes the moment of speech. The deictic 'I' and 'you' *interpellate* each other, in Louis Althusser's term, which has been widely borrowed in both postmodernism and queer theory. That is to say both *I* and *you* call upon (hail) and call into being the other term in the dyad. Jacques Derrida, linchpin philosopher of poststructuralism, asserts that there is no transcendental signified that might lock referent to signifier. Indeed, he coined the term *différance*—a wordplay on the French noun *différence* (difference), spelled with an *e* taken from the Latin present participle (an etymology now opaque to most French speakers), and the verb *différer* (to differ), of which the French present participle is spelled *différent*. The neologism *différance*, whose participial origin is made transparent in its spelling, emphasizes the ongoing nature of the play of the signifier in the signifying chain, a process that is seen as unending since, in Derridean thought, the signifier cannot "acquire representational authority" (1976: 379). A theory that postulates the nonexistence of a referent behind the *I* will be unable to deal with the relationship between groups of speaking subjects or their addressees and interlocutors. Instead, this theory of language accords priority to the relationship between words, to the virtual exclusion of relationships between referents. Speakers are both created and constricted by the endless iterability (another Derridean keyword) of discourse. One is trapped within the limits of the sayable.

To linguists this claim must seem not only erroneous but unscientific. In his work on the linguistic aspects of translation, Roman Jakobson has shown that any cognitive experience may be conveyed in any existing language (Jakobson 1971: 264). John Searle, working in the philosophy of language, has formulated a similar insight in his *Principle of Expressibility*: "Whatever can be meant can be said" (Searle 1969: 68). While we might not wish to accept the extreme limitations on individual agency suggested by the Derridean scheme, nevertheless Derrida's prioritizing of the relationship between signifiers—a move in which Roland Barthes, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Michel Foucault (to name but a few) preceded him—proves a useful analytical tool if one considers it an emphasis, not an absolute. Most utterances are not unique, never previously formulated phrases, but things said before on other, similar occasions. Conference papers in recent years (at conventions as varied as the Modern Language Association meetings and the Kentucky Narrative Conference) have begun to feature the term *ventriloquism* in their titles: "The Ventriloquized Subject of Mimetic Narrative Identity," for example—

not a resurgence of a dying vocal art but a reference to the way speakers “channel” previous speakers, as texts make intertextual reference to preceding texts. This iterability points to the importance of preexisting discourses, not only to the final shape of the utterance, but also to its authority as a speech act. Think of a girl trying to get her younger brother ready for school, handing him the clothes their mother has left out for him on a chair, giving him the packed lunch their mother has prepared, and using the words and phrases their mother uses, as though they were her own: “Come on, hurry up, and get dressed, or you’ll be late for school. You are an old slowcoach,” she scolds, just as her mother does. Her brother, recognizing the term *slowcoach* as a favorite of his mother, acknowledges the directive to “hurry up” as originating in a superior, preestablished authority. Derrida and, following him, Butler argue that it is the citational aspect of an utterance that makes it authoritative. In Butler’s articulation, if a performative speech act succeeds, it is because “that action echoes prior action, and accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior, authoritative set of practices” (1993: 226–227). We will discuss the importance of speech acts, and especially performativity, to queer theory later.

As linguists we are familiar with the indexical properties of deictics which necessarily gain their meaning from the context of utterance. *I* is the person saying *I*; *you* is/are the person/s addressed; *here* is the place of utterance; *now* is the moment of utterance. It seems that in the postmodern queer theory espoused by Butler, deictics are no longer a limited set, and deixis is itself a constituting principle of language: words have no meaning in and of themselves except as meaning is constructed in discourse. Once the initial shock of the disappearance of the referent has passed, it is possible to discern the theoretical apparatus behind the disappearance. A key tenet of postmodernism, which Butler has inherited, is that of an extreme cultural and linguistic relativity that finds its most explicit expression in the writings of Foucault. “We must not forget that the psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality was *constituted* from the moment it was *characterized*” (our emphasis), writes Foucault in his *History of Sexuality* (1990: 43). For him it is the act of naming *homosexuality* as such that brings it into being. He remarks elsewhere that discourses should be considered not simply as groups of signs or signifying elements that refer to contents or representations but as “practices that systematically form the object of which they speak” (1972: 49). When Butler quotes the argument that “the category of ‘sex’ is the instrument or effect of ‘sexism’ . . . , that ‘race’ is the instrument and effect of ‘racism’ . . . , that gender only exists in the service of heterosexism” (1993: 123), she too is referring to the idea that categorizing creates or constitutes that which it refers to—though she points out that one can reverse and displace the usual meanings of such culturally loaded terms.

Linguists will probably be more familiar with the concept of linguistic determinism as articulated by Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf, an axiom commonly referred to as the “Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.” In its strong version, linguistic determinism—a position that seems closest to that of Foucault and his followers in queer theory—the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis posits that the language one speaks determines one’s perception of reality. In its weak version, linguistic relativity, it

states that one’s native language exerts a strong influence over one’s perception of reality. The concept of linguistic relativity is most clearly formulated in Sapir’s statement repudiating earlier beliefs in a correlation between linguistic morphology and cultural development.

Linguistic relativity

It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means for solving specific problems of communication and reflection. The fact of the matter is that the “real” world is to a large extent unconsciously built on the language habits of the group. (Sapir 1929, quoted in Mühlhäusler and Harré 1990: 3)

Linguistic determinism

Such categories as . . . gender . . . are systematically elaborated in language and are not so much discovered in experience as imposed upon it because of the tyrannical hold that linguistic form has upon our orientation in the world. (1970: 68)

It might seem that while Foucault is talking about the constitutive power of discourse, Sapir is more concerned with the lexical and morphosyntactic levels of language, a distinction that might be mapped onto the Saussurean *parole*, on the one hand, and *langue*, on the other. However, when Sapir insists on the importance of the “language habits of the group,” the distinction becomes blurred, and Foucault’s conception of the power of discourse becomes strikingly similar to Sapir’s hypothesis of the centrality of language to perception.

The strong version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis has been disproven by numerous experiments concerning, particularly, color terminology considered from a cross-linguistic perspective. In the 1960s, Brent Berlin and Paul Kay showed that although color distinctions are coded differently in different languages, the terms are not arbitrary, nor is the spectrum divided up at random. The color spectrum is an objective fact with consistent, identifiable, physical properties, and human cognition is so similar, whatever one’s culture or native language, that we approach the spectrum in the same way. Berlin and Kay have shown, for example, that all languages have at least two color terms that express the concepts of *black* and *white* (or *dark* and *light*). If the language also possesses a third term, it will be *red*; the fourth and fifth terms will be *yellow* and *green* (in either order); the sixth and seventh terms will be *blue* and then *brown*. After these come terms like *gray*, *pink*, *orange*, and *purple* (in any order) (Berlin & Kay 1969). The nonexistence of a particular term in one’s native language does not prevent one from distinguishing the main divisions of the color spectrum. Although there will be great disagreement about where to draw demarcation lines between *blue* and *green*, for example, speakers have little difficulty indicating a *typical blue* or a *typical green* and do so with remarkable uniformity.

For many queer theorists, linguistic determinism still appears to be a highly influential concept, though scholars familiar with French structuralist and post-structuralist thought and largely ignorant of American linguistic anthropology would probably credit Foucault with its original formulation. Related to the con-

cept of linguistic determinism is Benjamin Whorf's infamous Eskimo snow hoax. The claim that Eskimo (Inuit? Yupik?) has three, nine, four dozen, fifty, one hundred, two hundred words for snow (figures taken from Geoffrey Pullum's *The Great Eskimo Vocabulary Hoax* 1991: 159–171) is intended to show that the existence of a multitude of lexical items within the same semantic field demonstrates the cultural importance of the field (a point made by Dell Hymes in 1964: 16). Conversely, the absence of discrete lexical items is understood to indicate that the concept itself is lacking from the culture under investigation, as we saw earlier in reference to the term *homosexuality*, which, as Foucault pointed out, was not coined till the late nineteenth century. Sedgwick wittily ironizes this conception of the power of the lexicon: "Same-sex genital relations may have been perfectly common during the period under discussion—but since there was no language about them, *they* must have been completely meaningless" (1990: 52). To be fair, some linguists have also assumed that without its own denotative term, a concept must be lacking from a culture. In his study of homosexuality in Maori (spoken in New Zealand), L. K. Gluckman postulates that "homosexual expression was unknown to the pre-European Maori. Ancient Maori had no word for sodomy" (quoted in Hayes 1978: 205). It should be noted, however, that this stance would be atypical of contemporary linguistics.

Sedgwick's irony points up a conceptual weakness in social constructionism, an analytical perspective widely used within queer theory. If homosexuality (or lesbianism) is constructed within and by its specific cultural context, then the term cannot be applied cross-culturally or transhistorically, for this would be to posit a homosexual "essence" independent of material circumstance. As we have shown in our earlier discussion of Derrida's prioritization of the relationship between signifiers, for postmodern and queer theorists cultural concepts are deeply dependent on the discourse in which they are embedded. Social constructionism, with its extreme sensitivity toward cultural context, risks falling into a similar logical short circuit as linguistic determinism due to its inability to draw parallels between cultures.

It was in order to show up the falsity of any claim that morphological structure reflects the culture of its speakers that Sapir first formulated the axiom of cultural and linguistic relativism. He intended this as a warning against earlier assumptions that "primitive" peoples speak structurally "primitive" languages. With similar concern for cultural specificity, respect for the diversity of different cultures, and fear of perpetuating that assimilationist tactic that perceives only those elements in another culture that correspond to elements in the researchers' own, queer-theorist historians and literary critics are turning away from the platitudinous affirmations of the gay liberationist 1970s and 1980s: "Gays have existed throughout history"; "There are lesbians in every culture and every society." The lesbian philosopher Claudia Card, for example, points out the problems of an essentialist position: "The concept of 'lesbian culture' . . . seems to presuppose that we can extract lesbian culture from many cultures. Is that supposition nonsensical? Arrogant? Culturally imperialistic?" (1995: 16).

In his discussion of gay history, David Halperin asks, "Is there a history of sexuality?," pointing out that "the history of sexuality, in order to qualify as a gen-

uinely historical enterprise, must treat sexuality not as a purely conceptual and therefore timeless category of historical analysis but as an object of historical scrutiny in its own right" (1993: 416). Halperin goes on to describe how sex in classical Athens was seen not as a mutual enterprise but as an action performed by a social superior (adult male citizen) upon a social inferior (boy, woman, slave). Erotic desires and sexual object-choices were determined not by anatomical sex but by "the social articulation of power" (420). Distinctions between homosexuality and heterosexuality had little meaning, Halperin argues, for the distinction between male and female sexual partners was not culturally important compared with that between citizens and noncitizens.

Clearly, one cannot study gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transsexual discourse cross-culturally or transhistorically if the terms are defined in such a narrowly culture-specific way as to be ungeneralizable. It is here that the notion of the performativity of gender, articulated by Judith Butler, demonstrates its utility. With the theory of gender performativity we move away from the social construction of sexuality to the discursive construction of gender. Since this is an important point, it will prove useful to take a little time to elaborate it. Linguists will have no trouble recognizing the term *performativity* as Austinian or in tracing its origin to Austin's pithy little volume, *How to Do Things with Words* (conceived 1939, presented at Harvard 1955, first published 1962). As Butler asserts, gender is performative because it calls itself into existence by virtue of its own felicitous pronunciation. This pronunciation is felicitous, as we recall from Austin's little book, if it is made in the required social circumstances. A marriage is successfully performed by the declaration "I now pronounce you man and wife" if the speaker is a member of the clergy duly vested with the power to perform the marriage ceremony and the couple of whom he pronounces these words consists of one man and one woman, of whom neither is already married to someone else, each is in sound mind, and both are of age. The declaration is performative because it is by the pronunciation of the words that the marriage is performed. "I now pronounce you man and wife" is not a commentary on a marriage; it is the marriage itself.

Austin begins his discussion of performativity by considering the traditional constative, beloved of the logical positivists, and its verifiability or truth value. The classic constative "snow is white" is descriptive, and descriptively true or false. Austin introduces the performative as a new and separate category of utterance that has no truth value, since it does not describe the world but acts upon it—a way of "doing things with words." For Butler the marriage ceremony is not simply one example among many but is central to the "heterosexualization of the social bond" (1993: 224). She cites the midwife's pronouncement "It's a girl" as another, similar performative, one that "initiates the process by which a certain girling is compelled" (232). Performatives work through the power of citation; "it is through the citation of the law that the figure of the judge's *will* is produced . . . ; it is through the invocation of convention that the speech act of the judge [I sentence you to be hanged from the neck until you are dead, for example] derives its binding power" (225). In Austin's terms, it is the very "felicity conditions" that ensure a successful outcome to the performative declaration that give that declaration its authoritative status.

Gender, then, is said to be performative because, as with the classic utterance "It's a girl," statements of gender are never merely descriptive but prescriptive, requiring the referent to act in accordance with gender norms and, moreover, to create the appropriate gender in every culturally readable act she performs, from the way she combs her hair to the way she walks, talks, or smiles. Gender is considered not simply to fit the appropriate "words to the world," in the manner of a classic constative characterized by truth or falsity but, in important ways, to call that situation into being under certain, felicitous conditions, fitting "the world to the words uttered" (to use John Searle's terms, borrowed from Elizabeth Anscombe: Searle 1979).

Butler argues that the utterers of performative speech acts only think they are initiating an action when in fact they are merely reproducing regulatory norms (ventriloquizing the previous speech acts of previous speakers). For Butler, it is discourse that produces the speaker and not the other way around, because the performative will be intelligible only if it "emerges in the context of a chain of binding conventions." Even activities like gender impersonation are reiterative, because the impersonator must invoke the very essence of these "binding conventions" in order for the performance to be comprehensible. Such performances should therefore be analyzed not so much as innovative discourses of resistance but as focused appropriations of existing norms. As Butler reminds us (1993: 228), self-determination does not necessarily result from self-naming, since the names themselves have their own historicity, which precedes our use of them. No movement for the reclamation of pejorative epithets such as *dyke*, *faggot*, and *queer* ever succeeds in eradicating their pejorative force entirely; indeed, it is in part due to their emotive charge that we are moved to reclaim them in the first place. Drag, in its deliberate misappropriation of gender attributes, serves to queer not only the gender performance of the speaker but, by implication, all the other terms in the gender paradigm, according none the innocence of the natural or the merely descriptive. When one of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence conducts a marriage ceremony between two gay men, he is accused by members of the Christian Right of "bringing the holy sacrament into disrepute," a criticism that points up the inherent weakness of the institution of heterosexuality.

These premises provide us with the conceptual background to see our way out of the social constructionist dilemma. As linguists, we would not wish to confine our research to the discourse of cultures and historical periods so like our own that the terms used to refer to key concepts such as *sex*, *gender*, *homosexuality*, *lesbianism* cover more or less the same ground as in our own, but neither would we wish to be accused of assimilationism or incomprehension of local specificity. This ethical quandary seems to foredoom any attempt at a multicultural perspective on gay and lesbian speech. However, if we turn the idea around and consider *sex*, *gender*, *homosexuality*, and *lesbianism* in our own culture as concepts that are performative rather than constative (or descriptive), then we begin to see that any study of gender or sexuality, of men's, women's, gay, lesbian, transsexual, bisexual, hijra, or 'yan daudu speech, whether in our own dialect or in the ancient Sumerian women's language Eme-sal, will necessarily (1) create its own object of research and (2) need to pay acute attention to the historical moment and specific community in-

involved. The concept of performativity points both to the historicity of key cultural terms and to the possibility of queering the traditional meanings. It also places emphasis on the localized practice of gender (performed at each moment by every culturally readable act), for speakers incorporate local as well as dominant ideals of linguistic gender into their "communities of practice" (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1995). Gender as a reiterative performance has access to a variety of scripts, not all of which may be intelligible to the culture at large and some of which may be in conflict with others.

It is time to bring performativity back to its disciplinary origins. Cultural theorists have neglected what we consider to be the most revolutionary point of Austin's little book, a book that begins in characteristic humility: "What I shall have to say here is neither difficult nor contentious; the only merit I should like to claim for it is that of being true, at least in parts." Considering the enormous contemporary interest in speech act theory in general and in performatives in particular, this humble beginning must be waved aside as about as modest as Jonathan Swift's "Modest Proposal." Austin seemingly sets out to resolve an odd little anomaly that gets in the way of the truth value of utterances in ordinary language: The performative acts upon the world; it does not merely describe it and is therefore neither true nor false. During the course of the next 160 pages, performatives slowly move across an imagined graph, from a marginal position occupying only a thin sliver of territory grudgingly given up by the constative to a new superordinate position outside the chart. For, as Austin makes plain, "to state," the classic constative, "is every bit as much to perform an illocutionary act as, say, to warn or to pronounce" (134). With the tumbling of this final barrier, performatives are promoted to the level of the speech act itself, since all utterances turn out to be performative, of which constatives are merely a subsection, on a par with directives or commissives. If even statements rely on regulatory norms in order to be felicitous, the class of performative speech acts encompasses much more than the select set beloved of queer theorists. Applying the same extension to gender performativity, the gendered act that may be recognized as intelligible cannot be reduced to a dominant set of hegemonic heterosexual conventions. The chapters in this volume seek to uncover more localized gender conventions and the contradictions within the norms themselves that, when skillfully manipulated, may provide the locus for change. Lesbian, gay, and other sexually liminal speakers are often obliged to become adept at such manipulation, thereby demonstrating their comprehension of prevailing conventions.

Queerly Phrased

This, then, is the theoretical background that informs the editing of this volume. To see what practical applications it may have, let us turn to the articles themselves. The book is divided into three sections: liminal lexicality, queerspeak, and linguistic gender-bending. Articles in the first section focus on culturally and ideologically significant lexical items denoting alternative sexual identities. The terms discussed come from Renaissance French and English, as well as from present-day

Japanese, Yiddish, Polari, and American Sign Language. They denote lesbian, gay, and bisexual behavior and include both ingroup terms used by the community and outgroup terms used by heterosexuals and other outsiders. Read together as a cohesive unit, the articles in this section demonstrate, not only that changes in the prevailing sexual mores of the wider society have a profound impact on perceptions of marginal groups and are reflected in the terms used to describe them, but also that group members have considerable power to define themselves and that these definitions play an important role in creating the sexual climate of the times. Each time there is a movement toward political correctness in speech, an outlawing of specific lexical items as demeaning to a particular group, there will be a countermove among members of the group seen as marginalized aimed at reclaiming the terms at issue because of their affective force.

Articles in the queerspeak section discuss gay and lesbian discourse strategies, asking what characteristics are specific to the speech of gay men or lesbians and whether these traits must be found exclusively in such speech for them to be classified "gay." Linguistic data have been taken from a wide range of contexts, including gay men's graffiti on bathroom walls, coming-out stories, lesbian comics, the conversation of women friends, and homophobic slang. The discourse in question is not only that of the spoken word but also that of sign language, computer-mediated text, literary language, and media reports. Subjects include the Deaf as well as the hearing, Asian Americans as well as Australians and British participants. The implicit thesis of this section is that, while certain types of speech may indeed be labeled lesbian or gay in character, this classification requires recognition of a complex network of cultural, contextual, and textual factors. An utterance becomes typically lesbian or gay only if the hearer/reader understands that it was the speaker's intent that it should be taken up that way.⁶ Queerspeak should thus be considered an essentially intentional phenomenon, sharing some of the echoic or polyphonic structure of irony.

In the section on linguistic gender-bending, the focus moves away from gay and lesbian discourse to the uses made of the linguistic gender system by ambiguously sexed subjects such as transsexuals, hermaphrodites, the hijras of India, and the 'yan daudu of Nigeria, as well as by Parisian gays and Japanese couples. This section is crucial to the argument of the book as a whole. It demonstrates that, while grammatical gender in different languages may enforce a vision of the world as inherently gendered, the linguistic gender system also provides a means to express one's relationship to the concept of gender. Hermaphrodites, for example, compelled in the modern era to declare "their one true sex" despite their ambiguous anatomy, are considered to be monsters whose monstrosity is highlighted by the grammatical conundrum they present. Yet, at the same time, their physical ambiguity, and the impossibility of assigning them without doubt to one gender or the other, causes an intolerable breach in the gender system, a breach that will be filled by new, previously unthinkable terms. The articles in this section emphasize the ludic aspects of linguistic gender, demonstrating that speakers may consciously refer to themselves in terms deemed appropriate for the opposite sex in order to display a lack of allegiance to prevailing norms.

The rhetorical force of this volume progresses thus: It begins in a minute anatomization of particular lexical items denoting marginal sexualities. It shows that these items cannot be taken as given but depend for their meaning on a whole network of terms for human sexuality, including *heterosexuality*, which is thereby revealed as a linguistic construct like *homosexuality*, *monosexuality*, and *bisexuality*. The focus then widens to an examination of language at the discourse level and an insistence on the importance of speaker intent and hearer uptake (the illocutionary and perlocutionary force of any speech act). The final section shows that the concept of gender is itself fluid and insists on speaker agency and conscious use of language, revealing gender to be a process rather than a state. With the publication of *Queerly Phrased*, we hope not only to establish a place in linguistics for queer theory but also to encourage queer theorists to look again at the linguistic roots of many of the tenets of queer theory.

NOTES

1. Legman's association of lesbian speech with upper-class masculinity runs counter to current cultural mappings, as indicated by Livia (1995) in her account of literary representations of lesbian speech and Queen (this volume) in her discussion of comic-book representations of lesbian speech. Livia demonstrates that butch lesbians in fiction adopt the vocal traits of a stereotyped working class, while Queen shows that lesbian characters like Hothead Paisan employ nonstandard phonetic variants stereotypically associated with working-class males.

2. But not, alas, on e-mail. Witness the current debate in the U.S. Congress and in the press concerning which words and images may be sent via the Internet. See, for example, "On-Line Service Blocks Access to Topics Called Pornographic," *New York Times*, December 29, 1995 (A1, col. 1; C4, col. 4), which reports Compuserve's global block on access to more than 200 computer discussion groups and pictures in response to a new legal ruling in Germany (to mention only my tea-break reading while writing this introduction—A. L.). According to the *Times* report, "some of the banned Usenet areas include discussion groups devoted to topics like homosexuality that were not necessarily pornographic or a threat to children" (C4, col. 5–6).

3. Hayes's 1976 article "Gayspeak" shows that some features of gay men's verbal style are similar to those found in prototypical "women's speech," extending the domain of "gay linguistics" from the lexical to the discursive. His article features a lively analysis of a highly camp paragraph from *Data-Boy*, a biweekly tabloid distributed free in gay bars in Los Angeles, in which "the girls" are described as "just running pitter patter up and down the Blvd with their smart umbrellas and raincoats" (260).

4. One is pleased to imagine that this researcher at least must have gained a certain satisfaction from his work. Here is Hayes's annotation to Ponté's "Life in a Parking Lot: An Ethnography of a Homosexual Drive-in": "A heterosexual male sociologist observes the socializing and pickup activities of gay men in a California beach parking lot and adjacent area. Field notes record the nonverbal activity (car maneuvering and parking, eye contact, sexual posturing, cigarette lighting) and verbal exchanges in the parking area and restroom (daytime) and adjacent beach (night) for 5 days in early 1970" (1979: 303).

5. Most noteworthy of these criticisms must surely be that of Monique Wittig, famous for her proclamation that "lesbians are not women" (1992: 32). See also Hoagland and Penelope 1988 for other specifically lesbian critiques of feminism and Penelope 1990 for a lesbian critique of language and linguistics.

6. The importance of hearer recognition of speaker intent has been formulated most neatly and most notably by H. P. Grice in his discussion of meaning_{NN} (nonnatural), a groundbreaking argument which Grice, with a humility akin to Austin's, presents by remarking "all this is very obvious" (1990: 78). Austin's theory of perlocutionary force or speaker uptake (1962) covers similar terrain.

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