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ASPECTS OF GENDER SOCIALIZATION AS EXPRESSED THROUGH LANGUAGE

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Abstract

Gender socialization tied to language is something in which researchers have been interested in recent years. Language and gender are now viewed not just something we have but something we do. Language attitudes, of course, factor into the concept of language and gender. Differences between male and female voices are attached to masculinity and femininity, and power seems to be attached to the male voice. Somehow, homosexual speech and dialect seem to be considered other than masculine. But much of gay speech stems from being socialized to use gendered speech. Connected to gay speech is camp language, which is related to exaggerated queer behavior. Presentation in terms of dress and behavior of lesbians and gays are also viewed as identity markers. Additionally, the existence of non-heterosexual speech as marked forms is internationally pervasive.

Keywords: Heteronormativity, Manner of speech, Camp language, Gay dialect, Linguistic styles

Introduction

The age of acquisition represents a time when children begin to comprehend language. In the early years, many children learn to communicate with their parents and quickly begin figuring out that some words and tones of voice are reserved for members of a particular sex. Gender socialization is closely tied to language and, in recent years, researchers have found that gender identities have been tied to sexual identities (Meyerhoff 243). According to Miriam Meyerhoff, such attitudes that discern between the roles of the sexes and whose "attitudes towards the importance of same-sex and opposite-sex attraction clearly define an important sub-set of social practices through which gender roles emerge" (242-243). Gendered forms of speech stereotype the ways that men and women should talk and lay a social rule in the appropriate form for each sex, criticizing abrogation and generally valuing masculinity.

Heteronormativity, the norm that everyone is heterosexual, makes homosexuality, bisexuality and transgenderism virtually invisible (Rondahl, Innala et al 374). The powerful structure of heteronormativity is based on genderism, which assumes that two genders are equally separate and belong only to the physical sex of each human being. Males must be masculine by doing, talking and being "men," while females must exude the characteristics that are thought to comprise femininity to be perceived as feminine (374). The consequence of this form of thinking leads to social interactions where the sexes and sexualities are addressed and treated like their physical sex and as heterosexuals (374).

Differences in how people speak convey different messages to the receiver of the message. How fast a person talks do in fact radiate the vibe of the person being knowledgeable and credible (Franzoi 227), but the tone of speech and how it is delivered also affects persuasion and how the communicator comes off (228). Powerful forms of speech, speaking with force and a mastery of language, help us judge the speaker as credible and make him or her a persuader. This phenomenon occurs especially when the speakers are male. As children we are socialized to speak how our sex should speak. Males must be dominant to be "masculine," while females should tend towards submissiveness and speak with a higher pitch in their voice to be "female." Such mentalities, while antiquated, still persist today. While the history of oratory teaches us that powerful language packs "a punch" in its delivery, not everyone is taught to use it. Women's historical role as powerless and obedient may have harmed modern women who use powerful speech (229). Women are not socialized, "or expected to express themselves as assertively and as forcefully as men" and therefore use qualifiers ("I guess," "sorta"), disclaimers that tone down their assertive statements, and are more hesitant in their speech (229). When a male or female uses the language that "belongs" to the opposite sex, they are asked to tone down their speech and talk more like their sex ought to. In a study, it was found that women were better at persuading men while using powerless speech than other females,

even though most of the respondents believed that speaking with a powerless tone of voice meant being less persuading and credible (229).

Why the change in speech for each sex? Psychologist Stephen Franzoi explains that there is a double standard in speaking style for both sexes. The use of "tentative speech appears to enhance a woman's ability to persuade a man at the same time that it reduces her ability to persuade another woman" (Frazoi 229). Such double-standards exist because women have typically held lower social status than men and must demonstrate to men that they have no desire to compete for the man's status and therefore use powerless language. In fact, when women use disclaimers in their speech, such as "I'm not an expert," or "this may be out of the blue," men are more likely to continue their conversation with them (229). But this doesn't exactly state that women ought to be submissive and powerless to successfully get their message across to men. Women can combine assertive language with social nonverbal language that uses friendliness, smiling and affiliation to the person with whom she's talking. However, "women are more likely to use the higher prestige forms of language" (Yule, 320).

Manner of Speech

Manner of speech, specifically vocal pitch, has been how many people discern between the sexes. Male voices are in general rough, deep and masculine. In fact, if a man has a deeper voice, he is perceived as more masculine than his counterparts. Voice is the biggest difference between the speeches of both sexes (Chambers 119). The voices of males are affected by the Adam's Apple; and since females have no thyroid cartilage in their throats, their voices are higher pitched and to some people, comparable to children's voices (120). Such arguments have been criticized by feminists because this claims that women are infantile, child-like and not at the same level as men, who have deeper voices (120). Male speech that is feminine sounding is thought of as an indication of homosexuality, referred to as "Homosexual Speech" or "Gay Voice." Aside from the struggle of being an out and proud gay man in society, there is a truly uncomfortable belief that being thought of as "gay" is an emasculation of being a heterosexual (Gowen and Britt 438). Upon meeting someone, one of the most memorable cues that leaves an imprint in how we see them is their voice. Due to cultural divisions and linguistic variance across communities, it is easy for us to mark a person's group membership by the sound of their speech. We come to such conclusions of their membership in a group because they perform the stereotypes of said group.

When it comes to figuring out who is gay, many people mention "how they talk," as one of the clues that pins someone down as a part of that group (438). This form of *gaydar* stereotypes the idea that gay men speak in a feminine way and any man that speaks in such a tone is indeed gay. What we have done is stigmatize a community by how they speak and believe that they possess certain attributes that identify them as members of that community. Therefore, sounding feminine is grounds for suspicion of one's sexuality, engendering homophobia in straight men and internalizing homophobia in gay men (438). According to Benjamin Munson (127), a study done on sexual orientation and speech differences found that gay men "hyperarticulated their vowel spaces" and that gay men produced a "higher F1 frequency in /ae/ and /e/ and a more negatively skewed /s/ spectrum than heterosexual men." Most of the differences in gay male speech may stem from how we are socialized to use gendered language.

Camp Language

Related to gay speech is the idea of using camp language. Camp, the absurdity and cheesy, is a "parodic trivialization" which uses "females names and feminine forms to refer to males" (Kulick 254). The word "camp," derived from French to *show off* or *engage* in exaggerated behavior, is one of the most studied forms of linguistics in queer behavior and one that is routinely used in the drag community. Camp and "camp boys" have been words to connote homosexuality in pre-Stonewall era US culture (254). The arguments over camp and campy language are that it reflects the stereotypical image of the effeminate and emasculated male. Those sympathetic to camp believe that it is kind of "proto-political that served a social purpose before Stonewall, but that will (and, some think, should) die as homosexuality becomes more accepted and gay males become more sensitized to the misogynist, racist, and classist resonances of their in-group languages" (QTD in Kulick 255). Many gay writers have taken camp to be a truly homosexual invention, one that has roots in gay culture and continues to be reinvented by them through language. To many of these writers:

> Camp is not an infinitely stretchable piece of elastic…. In some way it's flattering that lesbians, heterosexuals, everybody else, are so envious of this gay male cultural strategy that they all want to muscle in on it. It looks like fun, and yes, it can be a screaming great laugh. (It can also be intensely serious, though its straightened varieties usually miss this aspect, and at its best it fuses to two). But it can't be transplanted, because it isn't just any way of savoring the ironies of gender. It is the way gay men have tried to rationalize, reconcile, ridicule and…wreck their own specific relationships to masculinity and femininity. It's ours, all ours, just ours, and the time has come to bring it back home. (Qtd in Kulick 256)

One has to be careful of about overgeneralizing the usage of camp among the gay community. While the use of the feminine may be common among some gay men, not all gay men feel comfortable using it or have heard of it. “For these reasons,” says Kulick, “it is important not to confuse symbolic resources that anyone can appropriate to invoke stereotypical images of homosexuality with the actual language practices, much less the identities of individual…” (257). Much of the criticism and shame that comes with gay speech is that men sound like women, which in our culture is another double standard. Women are allowed to speak forcefully, be assertive and have “male” qualities of speech, while men who use the archetypal “female” speech are chastised, laughed at and marginalized.

Dress and Physique

One of the most infamous studies on gender and sexuality and its use of language was done by Deborah Cameron (1997). This study referenced how a discourse from a group of males was turned into a conversation weaving gender and sexuality. Five young white males were watching basketball and they began to criticize one of their classmates as an antithesis of man for his apparent homosexuality (Meyerhoff 243-244). What is ironic about the conversation is that when they made fun of a classmate for wearing cut-off shorts in winter, they engaged in what could be described as “female” gossip banter, criticizing the young man for what he wears and his bodily appearance. To Cameron:

> The conversationalists themselves must show an acute awareness of such ‘unmanly’ concerns as styles and materials what kind of clothes go together, and which men have ‘good legs.’ They are impelled, paradoxically, to talk about men’s bodies as a way of demonstrating their own total lack of sexual interest in those bodies. (QTD in Kulick 275)

In putting this guy down, the five men use language that is typically seen as unmasculine (such as worrying what the guy wears). Why they want to distance themselves from this guy is because he represents the homosexuality that they may fear, but their discussion leads them to talk in stereotypical female language as they finish each other’s sentences and overlap their speech (Meyerhoff 243-244). The single most prominent theme in their conversation is their apparent homophobia; their criticism of this guy’s masculinity may stem from a fear of the presence of homosexuality in themselves. They defuse this thinking by invoking contrasts between what makes a man and what this homosexual man is.

Lesbians may index themselves through a number of linguistic styles in which they are able to identify one another. According to Don Kulick, “it is not membership (assumed or imposed) in the abstract conception of the lesbian community that makes the language of lesbians unique” but rather the “fluid contact between a number of styles to which lesbians have access and that carry various “conventionalized” meaning that can be exploited in uniquely ‘lesbian’ ways” (QTD in “Gay and Lesbian Language” 267).

Nature of Gay Dialect

It may not be appropriate to admit that there is in fact a gay dialect (some would say accent) that some gay men adhere to. The feminization of the voice, the intonation and meaning of words that come off as more feminine is one of the key elements to questioning someone’s sexual orientation, but defining “gay speech” is more difficult and relies heavily on assumptions (Gowen and Britt 440). It could be that the gay community may be “a speech community, where not all share the same language, but share norms and rules for that language” (QTD. In Gowen and Britt 438). So if the patterns of the so-called “gay speech” or “gay voice” conform to a dialect of some form, this does not mean that “there is one set of linguistic rules governing all who fall in the category homosexual” (438). What exactly does it mean to sound “gay?” It’s basically the ideal that gay men have a more “dynamic intonation than heterosexual men” (438). Erez Levon, a linguist at New York University, believes that two prosodic variables make up the use of “gay speech”: pitch range and sibilant duration” (533). According to Levon, no studies have conclusively found the link between variations of pitch range and sexual orientation (533). However, it is interesting that in studies done on voice and sexuality, people are spot-on with regard to who is gay and who isn’t based on voice (Gowen and Britt 438). The use of sibilant duration has been more successful in finding a link with sexuality (Levon 534). The “Gay lisp” as it is known has been researched and concluded to be a strong correlation “between the acoustic properties of sibilants in an individual’s speech and the perception of that speaker’s sexuality” (534). The proof of these studies further validates the stereotype that speech is one of the characteristics that identify gay men as part of the gay community, among other stereotypes, such as “fashionable,” “feminine,” “soft voice,” and “sensitive,” all which are words that also describe the female sex.

As stated earlier, the speech patterns are not physiological, but rather socially constructed. These social cues may be rooted in gay men in order to identify more of what they perceive to be “gay culture.” In the United States and other western countries, this may be a feminine touch to speech, dress and mannerisms. Such stereotypes

become ingrained in what gay males think they ought to be to identify as true gay men. Gay men may feel that by acting out the stereotype, they can claim their identity and let others know who they really are. The use of said "gay speech" may be a way to identify oneself as being part of a social group, most likely one that is marginalized by society. Such an occurrence appears to be taking place in Indonesia, where gay men are said to speak *Bahasa gay* or a form of gay language.

A perfect example of language that is fabricated by one's identity and social status, Bahasa gay involves unique suffixes, word substitutions and pragmatics based on community (Boellstorff 248). Gays in Indonesia might epitomize the marginalized of society - the outcasts that don't fit in with the mainstream society, but it may be that to them, this form of speaking builds a community of understanding and belonging, since most of Indonesia society does neither for them. Indonesia is linguistically divided by 6,000 islands and 700 spoken languages, of which Indonesian is the most commonly spoken. There appears to be a common understanding among Bahasa gays that the new words that are to be used by the country's gay community originate in the standard Indonesian language, not dialects such as Javanese or Sudanese (Boellstorff 253). The use of intonation when speaking is one indicator of Bahasa gay. The voices of these men have "high-pitched tone and rising utterance – final intonation that Indonesians associate with images of demure femininity and softness," which men in Boellstorff's study reiterated as being one the ways to know who was "gay" (258). Many speakers of Bahasa gay stated that they believe the language exists as a "secret" way to be and express who they are. The best reasoning would be that having their own dialect or language, the gay community wants to invoke, "a sense of community in a context where many gay men can socialize extensively in civic spaces such as parks, but there they have almost no institutional infrastructure, "because they have to place, city or as in many urban centers, a gay village, a place they can call their own (260). The mixture of nationalism and sexuality that has occurred in Indonesia is a means to finding people who have the same interests and wants. Their community transcends the islands that make up the Indonesian archipelago.

Rudwick (2010) notes that in spite of the prevalence of "the popular view of Zulu ethnicity as a fixed and static group identity" (112) , "there are various, multifaceted and also contradictory currents of what it means to be Zulu today (127). What it means to be Zulu has changed over time, particularly with regard to "Zulu gay men who live an openly 'out' lifestyle and engage in speaking isiNgqumo [these] are certainly not members of mainstream Zulu society" (127). However, not all isiZulu-speaking gay men in South Africa speak isiNgqumo, particularly those who are upper-middle class and speak English (114). This ethnolinguistic identity construction is interesting, particularly since South Africa was one of the first countries in the world to include sexual orientation in its Bill of Rights in 1996, and ten years later legalized same-sex marriage (112). When Rudwick was engaged in her study, she admitted that lavender linguistics was still in its infancy in South Africa.

Conclusion

As a tool, language can convey many different forms of emotions and feelings. How people address each other, specifically in relationships, is connected to our traditions and values. Many of the conversations that people have with strangers, where sexual orientation is not apparent, are based on assumptions (Rondahl, Gerd, Innala, and Carlsson 374). This unconscious manner of interacting with people leads to gendering the individual. Works on language and sexuality have paid attention to "gendered ways of talking" and how these were linked to gender identities, but also to "sexual identities" (Meyerhoff 242). Studies on how gays and lesbians talk demonstrate that there is a sexual "dimension of linguistic interaction that can be documented," and research has raised issues in how we gender our ways of speaking and the effects it has on women and sexual minorities (Kulick 277). According to Van Herk:

> In the same way that gender is seen as something that is performed, rather than inherent, gender differences are also seen as performed, reinforcing our sense of both gender and gendered language through performances and the feedback they receive. Scholars continue to debate how large the linguistic differences between genders are, and how they relate to gendered differences in access to power. An increase over the past couple of decades in research on people on the margins of the gender mainstream has expanded and nuanced our understanding of how language and gender affect each other. (2019, 112)

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