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Identity crisis?

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Abstract

This article responds to arguments made in a recent paper by Bucholtz and Hall (Bucholtz, M., Hall, K., 2004. Theorizing identity in language and sexuality research. Language in Society 33, 469–515), in which two contrasting approaches to language and sexuality, dubbed "identity-based" and "desire-centered", are identified, and the latter is critiqued. As well as seeking to correct some inaccuracies in Hall and Bucholtz's criticisms, the article continues their substantive discussion of contrasting approaches, proposing four major areas of disagreement where there is scope for fruitful debate among scholars (identity, sex, desire and psychoanalysis). Finally, an assessment is offered of the current status and future prospects of identity-based research on language and sexuality. It is suggested that the advent of alternative perspectives, and of debate or disagreement arising from this, is more likely to enhance than to endanger the future development of the field.
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1. Introduction

Readers who are not familiar with recent discussions in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology about the relationship between language and sexuality – and even many who are – may have been startled by some of the conclusions reached

in Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall's recent article published in *Language in Society*, titled "Theorizing identity in language and sexuality research" (Bucholtz and Hall, 2004). The article begins by drawing attention to a contrast between two approaches to language and sexuality. By the end, however, it seems to be suggesting that one of those approaches calls less for scholarly discussion and reflection than for immediate and uncompromising resistance. They warn that proponents of the approach in question have a "scorched-earth approach to alternative research paradigms", that they are engaged in a "crusade against sexual identity", and that this is part of a "backlash" threatening not only certain kinds of research on language and sexuality, but "all linguistic scholarship concerned with identity" (2004, p. 507).

It is our own approach that Bucholtz and Hall are referring to in these comments. Much of their article is devoted to a detailed critique of our book about language and sexuality (Cameron and Kulick, 2003a). Although we are pleased that the arguments we put forward have been seen as worth debating, we believe that Bucholtz and Hall's presentation is misleading on a number of key points. If their article is taken as a starting point for further debate, we worry that the debate will begin from false premises, and to that extent will be unproductive. So while we have no wish to forestall critical discussion of our ideas, we believe it is important for any such discussion to proceed from an accurate account of those ideas. Since it is the policy of *Language in Society* not to publish responses to articles or reviews, we welcome the opportunity offered by the editors of this journal to clarify what our ideas are, and to correct what we regard as significant inaccuracies in Bucholtz and Hall's account of them. We will then we go on to consider some substantive issues which are raised by our work and their critique of it – issues on which we think the differences between ourselves and our critics offer scope for productive discussion. Finally, we address an issue raised by Bucholtz and Hall's concluding remarks. Is there a "backlash" against linguistic research on identity in general, and sexual identity in particular? How should we assess the current status and future prospects of this area of socio-linguistic inquiry?

2. What do we say about language, sexuality and identity?

The argument that Bucholtz and Hall elaborate depends on the construction of a dichotomy: their own position emerges against what they claim is ours.[1] And what

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[1] One way in which this dichotomy is created is by reiterating points or arguments that are made in our book, but in a way that implies they do not appear in our work, but rather belong to Bucholtz and Hall's critique of it. This suggests that we have overlooked key concepts (e.g., "indexicality" and "performativity"), and on some points it constructs artificial oppositions between their position and ours. In this article we concentrate on areas where we think there is either a serious misrepresentation of our position or a real and consequential difference between ourselves and our critics, rather than producing a catalogue of instances where the arguments Bucholtz and Hall use "against" us are actually arguments we make ourselves. However, such instances only add to the generally misleading and confusing quality of their critique.

centrally defines their position in contrast to the one they attribute to us is the contention that we reject the prevailing sociolinguistic framework in which sexuality is treated as a matter of *identity*, and advocate substituting a framework which equates sexuality with *desire*. They argue that in making this substitution we have effectively narrowed the field.[2]

There is, however, a fundamental problem with this line of criticism: nowhere in Cameron and Kulick (2003a) will readers encounter a ''call to set aside sexual identity in linguistic research'' (Bucholtz and Hall, 2004, p. 472), let alone ''a scorched-earth approach to alternative [i.e., non-desire-based] paradigms'' or ''a crusade against sexual identity'' (p. 507). Below we reproduce some of the explicit statements we do make in our book about the status of identity and/or desire in language and sexuality research.

> 1. *That these* [i.e., sexual identity category labels and the linguistic self-styling practices of speakers who claim queer identities] *are legitimate and interesting research topics we do not dispute. Sexual identity is certainly an aspect of sexuality, and it is also one that lends itself to sociolinguistic investigation*. What we do want to take issue with, though, is the tendency to regard the study of language and sexuality as coextensive with the study of language and sexual identity. We are committed to the view that sexuality means something broader. All kinds of erotic desires and practices fall within the scope of the term, and to the extent that those erotic desires and practices depend on language for their conceptualization and expression, they should *also* fall within the scope of an inquiry into language and sexuality (Cameron and Kulick, 2003a, p. xi, emphasis added).

> 2. It is a longstanding observation in sociolinguistics that language-using, whatever else it may be, is an ''act of identity'', a means whereby people convey to one another what kinds of people they are. Clearly, language-using can fulfil this function in relation to sexual identity as it can in relation to other kinds of identity (. . .). It follows that *the field of language and sexuality should consider questions of sexual identity*. It does not follow, however, that the field is reducible to those questions (p. 11, emphasis added).

> 3. One of the main arguments of this book has been that sexual identity is *only one* aspect of sexuality; the investigation of language and sexuality needs to move beyond an *exclusive* focus on identity, if it is going to be able to account for the ways in which sexuality is materialized and conveyed through language. At the same time, however, we have stressed that *sexual identities are not irrelevant to an understanding of language and sexuality*. Identity categories like 'gay'', ''lesbian'', ''straight'' – or *travesti*, *hijra* or *batut* – are clearly salient ones

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[2] Actually, Bucholtz and Hall alternate between charging us with narrowing the field (p. 472) and of broadening it to ''infinitely expandable scope'' (p. 479).

for many people in particular societies. As social positionings that individuals claim, or avoid claiming, or are prevented from claiming, *the question is not whether these identities deserve scrutiny*. The question, instead, is what kinds of scrutiny are most illuminating (p. 133, emphasis added).

4. [T]he most sustained argument we have made is for an approach to language and sexuality that encompasses questions about desire *as well as identity* (p. 151, emphasis added).

In these passages we think it is clear that we are not calling for questions of identity to be *replaced* by other questions; rather we are calling for them to be *supplemented* with other questions – to be seen as one part, rather than the whole, of what the study of language and sexuality might encompass. Bucholtz and Hall are of course entitled to take issue with that proposal; but we do not think it is reasonable for them to characterize us as *rejecting* the study of identity and so narrowing the scope of the field. A more obvious interpretation would surely be the opposite: that we are seeking to broaden the field by bringing issues relating to desire within its scope. While we expected (and wanted) this move to stimulate debate, we did not expect the debate to proceed on the basis that we had advocated the wholesale rejection of identity-based research on language and sexuality. We hope the quotations above make clear that this account of what we argue is inaccurate.

If we do not deny the relevance or interest of identity for research on language and sexuality, while at the same time we do advocate more engagement with questions of desire, it follows that we must see these two projects as complementary rather than opposed. It is therefore misleading to refer to a "forced choice offered between identity and desire as rival concepts" (p. 507). Bucholtz and Hall's own call for the two to be combined in analysis is actually anticipated in our book. We argue (see e.g., quote 1 above) that the study of language and sexuality should include an investigation of the linguistic resources and practices through which erotic desire is made intelligible and meaningful. We also point out that for sociolinguists, an important question about these resources and practices concerns the norms which affect their use and social distribution (cf. Cameron and Kulick, 2003a, pp. 133–137; 140–142). To fully understand the workings of "desire as social semiotic", it is necessary to ask "who can say what to whom and when [and be intelligible as meaning what]?" This question clearly implicates identity, for the identities claimed by or attributed to language-users will affect what it is possible, intelligible or legitimate for them to say and mean. Yet instead of being reassured by this acknowledgement that desire and identity are connected, Bucholtz and Hall criticize it as "smuggl[ing] identity into the desire framework" (p. 480). In this way we are doubly damned: first our critics complain that we do not consider identity, then when it transpires that we do consider it they complain that we are inconsistent. If it is recognized that we do not regard identity and desire as mutually exclusive terms, or advocate replacing the former with the latter, the supposed inconsistency disappears: we do not need to smuggle identity back into our framework, because we never took it out in the first place.

It might be asked at this juncture why Bucholtz and Hall's reading of our text differs so markedly from our own. A fair-minded reader might point out that even if

our critics seem to have ignored some of the textual evidence (e.g., the passages quoted earlier) there are still some quotations in the article which do suggest we take the position they attribute to us. The most notable case in point is the series of quotations they reproduce (2004, p. 472) which includes a proposal taken from our book to "bracket identity, leave it behind and forget about it for a while" (Cameron and Kulick, 2003a, p. 105). Our fair-minded reader might wonder: is this book just so lacking in consistency or coherence that anyone can find supporting evidence for any position somewhere in its pages?

We do not think so. Rather, we think Bucholtz and Hall persistently select, discard, exaggerate and de- or recontextualize points to construct a "straw" version of our argument. Granted, all readings are re-readings and all re-readings are in some sense selective (the reader's selection of what is striking, to her, about a text), but some are more selective – and more misleading – than others. To take a small example (though it is a telling one, given how important it is for Bucholtz and Hall's critique overall to establish our rejection of research on sexual identity), we imagine readers might find the passage quoted above about "leaving identity behind and forgetting about it for a while" less provocative, less obviously a key piece of evidence for our being "anti-identity", if they knew where in the book it appears. It is taken from the concluding paragraph of a chapter dealing with gay and lesbian identities, which is immediately followed by a chapter dealing with desire. In context it is not a global manifesto ("forget identity!") but just a local transition between two topics ("we've been talking about identity, now let's talk about desire").

Bucholtz and Hall's "critique of the [i.e., our] critique of sexual identity" is not based only on what is said in Cameron and Kulick (2003a), but draws freely on a larger and far more heterogeneous body of material. This provides further scope for de- and re-contextualizing our arguments. Of course, we are not suggesting that it would always be illegitimate to base a critical reading of someone's position on more than one source. But in this case the heterogeneity of the corpus is of a kind and degree that makes it impossible to extract any unified position-statement from it. The sources assembled by Bucholtz and Hall include both single-authored and jointly-written texts, composed for widely differing audiences and in various academic genres (on-line debate, conference paper, handbook entry, review, article, book), with publication dates spanning seven years (1997–2003). They also include two texts – (Kulick, 1997, 1998), both reporting an ethnographic study of Brazilian transgendered prostitutes – that were published several years before either of us began developing a critique of the literature on language and sexuality. With such copious and diverse source material it is indeed possible to find textual support for a broad range of critical observations. But to label this collection of sources "*the* critique of sexual identity" so that it can be treated as a unified target for criticism recontextualizes the work in question in a thoroughly misleading way.

In fact, Bucholtz and Hall do recognize that their collection of sources does not present a unified argument, and they do call attention to some of the differences between earlier and later writings. But in constructing their critique, they do not consider the context in which those writings appeared, nor do they take later formulations as *superseding*, rather than just adding to, earlier ones. For example, having

already commented on the feminist perspective adopted by Cameron and Kulick (2003a) and the attention given in the book to issues of gender and power, Bucholtz and Hall nevertheless proceed to consider at length what they read as the anti-feminism of earlier work by Kulick. It could be asked whether that criticism is valid, but a more pertinent question would be why it is relevant, if by Bucholtz and Hall's own account it does not apply to the most recent – which is also the fullest – statement of the position they are taking issue with. Shifting between different versions of the argument being critiqued implies that any criticism of one source is applicable to all of them. It is likely to leave readers with a confused and misleading impression of what we do and do not argue: in this case it may also encourage those who have not yet read it to approach our book with negative assumptions that the text itself gives them no reason to make.

When the inaccuracies and confusions in Bucholtz and Hall's account of what we argue are cleared away, what remains of their critique, we think, is a set of disagreements – legitimate and potentially interesting ones – about our substantive proposals. Several interrelated areas of disagreement stand out: they concern identity, sex, desire, and the role of psychoanalytic perspectives in the study of language. Below we consider each of these in turn.

3. Identity

We have already pointed out that the claim we are conducting a "crusade against sexual identity" is considerably overstated. At this point though, it might be helpful to draw attention to what we mean by "identity". When we use this word in relation to sexuality, we do not intend it to refer broadly to all kinds of linguistically constructed subject positions, as Bucholtz and Hall imply (p. 472). Rather we mean it in the sense of something consciously and explicitly *claimed*, or *disclaimed*, by a subject – as when people say things like "speaking as a working-class lesbian, I...", or "I'm not a feminist, but...". This is the notion of identity that undergirds the phenomenon of "identity politics", where actors ground political claims in their authentic experience as members of particular identity categories and/or communities (e.g., "the gay community" or "the LGBT community[3]"). We would argue that this notion of identity has also undergirded, explicitly or implicitly, many sociolinguistic and anthropological studies dealing with issues of sexuality. If we are critical of some such studies (which is not the same as being critical of all research that deals with sexual identity), that is not because we deny either the real-world relevance or the political utility of the "claim-staking" notion of identity: it was crucial for both the women's and gay liberation movements, and it captures a part of the way identity is experienced and understood by many people today. But our argument is that in some research, the part has been treated as if it were the whole. We believe that

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[3] LGBT stands for "lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered."

the "claim-staking" notion of identity is insufficient on its own to ground the study of sexuality and its relationship to language.[4]

In our (and many other theorists') understanding of it, sexuality is a social and psychological phenomenon that often exceeds, and sometimes contradicts, the sexual identities people consciously claim or disclaim. What people desire often clashes with, undermines or disrupts who they consider they are or ought to be. In *The Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick makes a series of observations about the complexity and variability of individuals' sexualities, noting for instance that "sexuality makes up a large share of the self-perceived identity of some people, a small share of others", and that "many people have their richest mental/emotional involvement with sexual acts they don't do, or even don't *want* to do" (Sedgwick, 1990, pp. 25–26, cited in Cameron and Kulick (2003a, p. 9)). Other people may have a rich mental and emotional involvement with sexual acts they *do* do, and/or want to do, but which they nevertheless regard as quite alien, or threatening, to their "self-perceived identity": for instance, married men who identify as heterosexual, but who regularly seek opportunities to have anonymous sex with other men; or self-identified lesbians who have occasional crushes on or sexual flings with men. One way of understanding such cases is to say that the people concerned are "in denial" about their "true" sexuality. That, however, is to flatten out the real-world complexity Sedgwick's observations point to: in our view, the conclusion we should draw is that (consciously claimed or denied) identity is not simply or transparently congruent with sexuality.

A further important point is that identity is not *unitary*. The "claim-staking" notion of it does allow for multiple identities to be claimed by the same person (someone can be, for example, a "white, middle-class older British lesbian") but to be felicitous or indeed intelligible, such claims must be articulated in terms of a logic in which some combinations (for example, claiming to be both a woman and a man) are excluded as self-contradictory. This logic is enabling in some ways (e.g., for producing specific political constituencies and giving them a discourse in which to articulate collective demands), but it can be limiting in other ways: individuals may struggle to articulate their sexualities through the available identity categories and distinctions.

This point is illustrated in David Valentine's (2003) analysis of an individual known as Miss Angel, who is a participant in a New York City "alternative lifestyles" support group. In a single encounter, Angel declares herself to be a pre-op

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[4] Indeed, a corollary of our argument that has been noted by some scholars is that identity-based paradigms are insufficient to ground the study of *any* dimension of language and social life. See for example Hastings and Manning (2004, p. 292), who respond to a recent call that the sociolinguistic obsession with authenticity can be remedied by focusing on identity (Bucholtz, 2003) by observing that: "any approach that examines why we should be obsessed with authenticity that does not, in the same breath, wonder the same thing about identity is a half-measure. Identity is as much an "unexamined first principle" of sociolinguistics as authenticity. "Why authenticity?" should lead to "Why identity?".

transexual, a woman, a former drug addict, HIV-positive, gay, and "a woman with a large clit" – in addition to at one point saying "I dunno *what* I am" and later asserting "I know what I am". One of the points Valentine makes in his discussion is that Angel's various, apparently contradictory assertions of identity pose severe problems for the taxonomy of identity categories through which the group facilitator, well schooled in contemporary identity politics, attempts to make sense of her discourse. When Angel remarks, "I went to bed with my own kind once", the facilitator's efforts to establish what she means by "my own kind" (a woman? A gay man? A transexual? Some entirely different category of person?) do not ultimately bring clarification, but only frustration for all concerned. Although Angel apparently understands herself as a "kind" of person, the language of identity claim-staking does not enable her to make that understanding intelligible to others. Like Angel's interlocutors on this occasion, the analyst who conceptualizes identity only in terms of claim-staking will find it difficult to see Angel's talk as anything but obscure, confused or senseless.

How one thinks about identity has consequences for how one thinks about its relationship to language and how one approaches the analysis of linguistic data. Sociolinguists are used to thinking of the linguistic choices people make as "acts of identity": these may be conscious and deliberate (as when someone tries to sound "posh" or "sexy" or "camp"), but even in the more typical case where the language-user cannot plausibly be thought of as acting consciously and deliberately, the linguist will usually try to relate her language-use to those aspects of identity she can be assumed to have some conscious awareness of and allegiance to (e.g., to her being Black or Scottish, a nerd or a jock, a woman, etc.) There is, of course, nothing wrong with this, since people do indeed have conscious allegiances to particular social groups, and their language-use can be expected to reveal those allegiances. However, we would argue that there are also elements in a person's linguistic behavior – Miss Angel's, for example – which are not most usefully approached by supposing they are underpinned by conscious allegiance to a particular social position. To get at this, we distinguish between *identity* (a subject's more or less conscious allegiance to a particular social position) and *identification*, which is a concept that allows for the recognition and investigation of conflicting affiliations that may both structure and disrupt a person's claim to a particular identity. In our book, we illustrate how this perspective can enrich the analysis of language by drawing on work that is directly inspired by psychoanalytic theories (for example Butler, 1993 and Billig, 1997), but also work that is not (for example, Morrison, 1993; Capps and Ochs, 1995).

One way of summing up the difference between ourselves and Bucholtz and Hall regarding identity is that where they, as the title of their article underlines, concentrate on the issue of "theorizing identity in language and sexuality research", we, without denying that this is indeed an issue, are most interested in exploring the ways in which sexuality *exceeds* identity (especially where identity is defined exclusively or mainly in the "claim-staking" sense), and in how this insight can be brought to bear in empirical research on language. This difference of perspective or emphasis is clearly linked to other differences on the issues we turn to now, beginning with *sex.*

4. Sex

"We do not share", say Bucholtz and Hall, "the view (of Cameron and Kulick (2003a)) that 'sexuality is centrally about the erotic'" (2004, p. 506). This declaration is arguably a good illustration of Eve Sedgwick's point (1990, pp. 25–26, see also above), that people may differ quite profoundly in the degree of investment they have in sex – in doing it, or in thinking about it, or in this case in considering it as a theoretical issue or a research topic. Since we believe (as a matter of experience as well as theory) that Sedgwick is correct, we are not inclined to criticize Bucholtz and Hall simply on the grounds that they find other aspects of sexuality more interesting than sex theoretically, empirically or politically. So long as they grant (as in fact they do, in their definition of "sexuality"), that the erotic is part of what the term encompasses, we see little profit in an extended debate on whether or not sexuality is "*centrally* about the erotic". There are, however, two points arising from this disagreement about the centrality of the erotic on which our differences with Bucholtz and Hall are more consequential.

The first point concerns their attempt to argue that a concern with sex *depoliticizes* the study of language and sexuality. In pursuit of that argument they construct an opposition between feminists, who are attentive to issues of sexual politics, and certain queer theorists, whose focus on the erotic and representation of feminists as "anti-sex" betrays their phallocentrism, anti-feminism and in some cases, outright misogyny. We agree that there are theorists of this variety, and that long before the advent of queer theory, they were using the "anti-sex" charge as a stick with which to beat feminists who wanted to talk about, for instance, sexual violence and exploitation. But we object to being placed in the same category as such people, as if what we were trying to do by bringing sex into the picture was perk up a dowdy old feminist paradigm by administering a dose of recreational Viagra – "Enough of this talk about subjectivity and power, Virginia. Can we please get back to the phallus?" (Bucholtz and Hall, 2004, p. 486).

Ironically, there is a sense in which Bucholtz and Hall's choice of the word *phallus* in this quote undoes the point they are trying to make (that some queer theorists "only care about one thing", and it isn't subjectivity or power). In the Freudian tradition to which the term belongs, and emphatically in feminist readings of Freud, the word *phallus*, as opposed to *penis*, denotes not a literal body-part but a cultural sign or symbol: and what it signifies or symbolizes in heteropatriarchal societies is, precisely, subjectivity and power. Whether or not they make use of Freudian theory or terminology, feminist critiques of subjectivity and power are necessarily concerned with (what Freudians mean by) the phallus. And since sex is clearly among the cultural domains where subjectivity and power are unquestionably at issue, we do not see the kind of investigation we propose, in which sex is a central concern, as a way of avoiding those issues and so taking the feminist politics out of language and sexuality research (Cameron and Kulick, 2003a, pp. xiv–xv, 45–46, 111–112, 137–142, 151–155). On the contrary, we think that the value of our approach will often lie in its ability to reveal and critically analyze the phallocentrism, and other –isms (like heterosexism and racism), that currently pervade mainstream discourse

on sexuality, with noxious real-world consequences that are felt from the bedroom to the courtroom. Among the examples we discuss in our book are the problems experienced by young heterosexual women who want to have sex without losing their friends, forgoing their own pleasure or risking their health, the use of the "homosexual panic" defense to excuse brutal and sometimes fatal assaults on gay men, and the ease with which rapists and their lawyers can represent complainants as consenting to sex. We would not describe these as "sexy" topics. Nor would we confuse a critical discussion of phallocentrism with an endorsement or a celebration of it.

The second point can be illustrated with reference to Bucholtz and Hall's discussion of a part of our book where we refer in some detail to Hall's (1995) study – one we should say we find rich and thought-provoking – of the language used by telephone sex workers in the Bay Area of California. Their criticism is, essentially, that in analyzing the material from the point of view of its erotic or sexual character, we are overlooking what is most important about it, and distorting its real meaning. The differences between their analysis of the data and ours raise a number of issues which are of interest for this discussion of contrasting approaches to language and sexuality.

One of Bucholtz and Hall's criticisms of our analysis is that it "fails to notice that what Hall documents is not sexual play for pleasure; it is work" (p. 499). But this criticism misses a point we make in our discussion of the material, drawing on the long-established sociolinguistic insight that language does not simply reflect the context in which it is used, it also actively shapes that context. In this case, we are interested in how telephone sex talk creates the context as *sexual*, and we would argue that one part of this process precisely involves using semiotic resources to blur the boundaries between "work" and "play for pleasure", so that what is, indeed, work for one party will be apprehended by the other as something more like play – pleasurable rather than effortful, done willingly and with enjoyment rather than grudgingly just for the money. Sex workers in general are an interesting counter-example to Drew and Heritage's (1992) observation that workplace talk is produced as such by workers' making relevant their professional identities and institutional goals in the design and organization of interaction.[5] On the contrary, sex workers must downplay or conceal the professional and institutional nature of the encounter, because perceptions of work as routinized, relatively impersonal and potentially alienating or unpleasurable for the worker are in severe tension with perceptions of sex as spontaneous, intimate and mutually pleasurable. The resignifying of work as pleasure is thus part of the more general enterprise of using language to sexualize the context, and so suffuse the encounter with the erotic quality that is actually, in this case, the product being sold. With phone sex it is particularly clear that this sexualization is a semiotic effect: it does not depend on the worker actually feeling sexual desire for the customer (which as Bucholtz and Hall point out would be a very

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[5] Cameron (2000) argues that a similar point could be made about many kinds of contemporary service work. Sex work is a particularly marked case, but the new capitalist ideology of "customer care" has led to call center operators, supermarket checkout clerks, sales assistants and flight attendants also being required to downplay the routinized and formulaic nature of their workplace transactions with customers, resignifying these as quasi-personal encounters from which the server derives genuine pleasure.

uncommon occurrence), nor in principle on his feeling it for the worker. What counts is what is enunciated by the parties, and whether that successfully produces the encounter as "sexual".

Bucholtz and Hall also suggest that our analysis of phone sex interactions underestimates the extent to which their erotic effect depends on the worker's performance, not of sex, but of identity. "For customer satisfaction to be achieved", they explain, "the illusion that the language of desire produced by a phone sex worker is authentic and reflects an authentic identity on the other end of the telephone line must be maintained" (p. 499). For us this raises some interesting questions about the nature, significance and workings of illusion in erotic practice and erotic language.

To begin with, we wonder why it should be assumed that most users of telephone sex-lines are unfamiliar with the reality of how these services operate. Is it not, in fact, quite likely that many customers call commercial sex lines knowing full well (and not caring overmuch) that the language of whoever they speak to will *not* "reflect[] an authentic identity?" Customers do not exist in a social vacuum: many of them will have encountered representations of phone sex in popular culture – for example, Robert Altman's film *Short Cuts* – in which its inauthenticity is highlighted; some may have even read Hall's article.

But more to the point, we would question the idea that if a customer knows the worker is giving a performance which does not reflect any "authentic identity", this is likely to undermine his satisfaction or enjoyment – any more than his enjoyment of a porn movie would be spoiled by understanding (as he surely does) that the people on the screen are actors, having sex (or simulating it) because they are paid rather than because they feel "authentic" desire for that person at that moment. Someone who phones a sex line, like someone who watches a porn movie, or indeed goes to the theater or the opera or picks up a novel, has gone in search of entertainment through illusion: he has entered into a contract to be, at some level, deluded (in literary or dramatic terms, he engages in a "willing suspension of disbelief"), and that in itself may be part of the pleasure he is seeking. In the case of phone sex, understanding that the worker is creating a character to your personal erotic specifications rather than simply "being herself" might actually enhance satisfaction for some customers. For others, the identity of the worker might be irrelevant: after all, one of the attractions of commercial sex for many clients is precisely that paying is considered to absolve you of the normal responsibility to engage with your partner as a "real person".

It is true that callers in Hall's study often wanted their interlocutor to be a particular *type* of woman – an "Asian", say, or a "southern Belle"; but to judge from the samples reproduced in the article, they were satisfied by extremely stereotypical, which is also to say "*inauthentic*", performances of these identities.[6] If, as workers

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[6] Telephone sex work of this type is also a good example of what Hastings and Manning (2004) call "acts of *alterity*", rather than of identity. The particular forms and uses of language that occur in these interactions mark not the self-identity of the sex worker (nor, to a certain extent perhaps, of the caller either). Instead, they are imitations or voicings not only of 'another', but also of speakers who typically, themselves, never speak in this way. There is thus a disruption, rather than an alignment, between speaker, speech and some self-identity.

told Hall, it was often white women who made the best Black women on the phone, and vice-versa, that surely tends to confirm the suspicion that what customers find sexually satisfying is not an "authentic" performance of, say, African-American identity, but something more like a cartoon or caricature, drawn with broader and cruder brushstrokes than the actual African-American workers would be able or willing to use. All kinds of pornography testify, arguably, to the potency of stereotypes in many people's erotic lives: it may be that what makes them "sexy" is precisely their artifice, their remoteness from real life – the fact, in short, that they resonate with the porn-user's *fantasies* as opposed to his experience of "authentic" situations and people.

For us this raises the question whether it is helpful to treat the "identities" enacted in something like telephone sex talk as in principle no different from any other identities that may be produced in conversational speech. From Hall's study we learn that the term used by insiders for what phone sex workers produce is not "an identity" but "a character". This terminological borrowing from the domain of fictional entertainment seems to us to capture something important about the phenomenon being analyzed. In terms of Bucholtz and Hall's "tactics of intersubjectivity" framework, it could be argued that telephone sex talk exemplifies neither "authentication" nor "denaturalization", but the interestingly subtle blend of the two that is characteristic of realist fictional texts. In pornography (of which phone sex is one variant) as in 19th century classic realist novels, textual devices – for instance, detailed descriptions of someone's appearance and clothing which do not advance the action – are used to evoke a sense of the characters and setting as "real" and believable (a kind of authentication), but at the same time there is a framing assumption shared by author and reader (or here, worker and caller) that they are jointly engaged in the creation of a pleasurable illusion (a form of denaturalization). It is the combination of both "tactics" that produces the overall effect.

We have dwelt at some length on this example because we think it is particularly revealing about the differences between our perspective on language and sexuality, and that of Bucholtz and Hall. Whereas Bucholtz and Hall's analysis asks "How does phone sex workers' talk produce the effect of authentic identity?", we ask "How does phone sex workers' talk produce the effect of sex?" Whereas their questions are "identity-centered", ours are, so to speak, "sex-centered". This difference in the questions foregrounded by the two approaches gives rise to differences in our interpretations of particular data; it also gives rise to other differences which are at the heart of the contrast between our perspective and theirs, and which we will consider under the heading of *desire*.

5. Desire

The most overt and fundamental difference between our position and that developed by Bucholtz and Hall concerns the incorporation of questions of desire into the study of language and sexuality. This is not a matter of Bucholtz and Hall rejecting any proposal to bring desire within the scope of the inquiry: just as we acknowledge

the relevance and interest of identity-based research, so they do not dispute the relevance and interest, in principle, of research that focuses on desire. "We welcome", they say in their introduction, "the call to consider desire more centrally" (p. 472). Their subsequent remarks make clear, however, that they have two serious objections to the way we approach desire in practice. First, as they immediately explain, "we take issue with the insistence that desire is something that can and should be studied separately from identity" (p. 472). Second, as becomes evident later on, they object to our entertaining the idea that sociolinguists might make use of a psychoanalytic perspective on desire.

We feel bound to point out that these objections themselves rely on a degree of overstatement. We have already explained that we do not propose that the study of desire be conducted without reference to identity. We would also argue that in describing our approach as "singleminded prescription of psychoanalysis as the cure-all for what is ostensibly wrong with the sociocultural study of sexual identity" (p. 507), Bucholtz and Hall exaggerate considerably both our reliance on psychoanalysis and our enthusiasm for Freudian orthodoxy. A reader relying solely on Bucholtz and Hall's summary of our work might be surprised to learn that we conclude our summary of theories of desire with the observation that "perhaps the most productive way of thinking about desire would be to see it in more or less the same terms in which Foucault conceptualized power" (Cameron and Kulick, 2003a, p. 111). We devote a fair amount of space in our discussion to Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari – scholars known more for their antagonism towards psychoanalysis than their embrace of it. It should also be noted that not every reference to "desire" in our book is simultaneously an invocation of psychoanalytic theory. "Desire" has both a non-technical sense and a more specialized sense as a technical term in some variants of psychoanalysis: we use and discuss it in both these senses.

Nevertheless, we acknowledge that the separability or distinctiveness of "desire-questions" from "identity-questions" and the utility of psychoanalysis are indeed points of disagreement between ourselves and Bucholtz and Hall, and that these are issues of sufficiently general interest to be worth debating. Once again, then, it may be helpful for us to clarify what our position is and why we take it.

Regarding Bucholtz and Hall's argument that desire cannot or should not be studied separately from identity, our position is that while we are certainly interested in the articulation of the two, we do not want to collapse or conflate them. To make this a little less cryptic, we can reiterate that the inquiry we propose into "desire as social semiotic" focuses on the creation and communication of specifically *sexual* meanings – "sexual" being a concept that we touched on above, and that we devote a chapter of our book to discussing (Cameron and Kulick, 2003a, pp. 1–14). Identity will be part of this inquiry, insofar as any act of sexual semeiosis will derive part of its meaning from the subject positions claimed by and/or attributed to the parties involved; in addition, communicating certain sexual meanings may produce actors in a given situation as particular kinds of social subjects (e.g., men, women, straight, queer, etc.). Clearly, any analysis would be inadequate if it failed to consider this dimension of sexual semeiosis – that it occurs among, and partly constitutes, subjects

who have or are ascribed identities, histories and social positions.[7] On that point Bucholtz and Hall's argument is no different from our own.

Where we believe we do differ from them, though, is in our attitude to the *framing* of the kind of inquiry we advocate. Questions about desire as social semiotic may implicate identity, but for us it does not follow that these questions are always best framed as being "about" identity, or best approached using just those methods that are already established for investigating the relationship of language to identity. The questions we foreground in our own treatment of desire are about sexuality as a distinctive domain of semiotic activity. What linguistic resources are used to communicate about sex, to produce or establish a situation as sexual? What constraints apply to this activity, and what particular problems are associated with it? Such questions, we think, deserve to be studied in their own right and on their own terms; and in our view that entails developing appropriate frameworks in which to place them. A framework that was developed to address the relationship of language to sexual identity will not always be appropriate, since many of the phenomena that are central in identity-based research (e.g., the linguistic self-styling practices of people who identify as "gay", "lesbian", "transgendered", etc.) have little to do with sex as such.

In suggesting that questions of desire do not always fit well within a problematic of sexual identity, we are making a point also made by Bucholtz and Hall, that there is far more to sexual identity than sex "as such". We would think it absurd, and indeed offensive, to propose that a study of, say, lesbians' talk should focus entirely on their sexual interactions, as if lesbians were only lesbians when communicating lesbian desire (and as if one could not be a lesbian in the absence of any such communication). But our point is this: just as you cannot address issues of language and sexual identity by concentrating entirely on communicative acts whose meaning is specifically sexual – to do with sex "as such" – so we would argue that you cannot study the constitution of sexual meaning by concentrating entirely on the communicative acts through which sexual identities are constructed and made relevant. Precisely because sexual identity is not reducible to what people desire sexually, or do sexually, linguistic acts of sexual identity may be wholly uninformative about the semiotics of sex "as such". But for exactly that reason, questions about the latter cannot simply be subsumed into an approach that is geared towards the former.

If that point is acknowledged, there are two options: we can either deny that the constitution of sexual meaning is in any way relevant to the study of language and sexuality, or we can decide that it is relevant and seek to develop appropriate frameworks for analyzing it. We prefer the second option. We propose (uncontroversially,

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[7] We should however point out here that intersubjectivity is not in fact a necessary condition of all sexual semeiosis. There are cases where erotic interactions involve participants who do not have, though they may in some instance be ascribed by the other participant, "identities, histories and social positions" e.g., animals, dolls and other inanimate fetish-objects. Erotic interaction may also involve human sexual partners who are not in any meaningful sense subjects, since they exist in the context of the interaction only as two-dimensional photographic images on the page or collections of pixels on the computer screen. It is an interesting question (though for obvious reasons difficult to research) whether and how semiotic, and in particular, linguistic resources are used in such cases to produce the effect or illusion of intersubjectivity.

we would have thought) that one function of language in relation to sexuality is to communicate about sex, and we think this kind of communication is of interest in its own right. Why that should be found objectionable is a mystery to us.

Bucholtz and Hall's other main objection to our proposals regarding desire concerns the alleged dependence of those proposals on uncritically embracing psychoanalytic theory. Psychoanalysis is the final issue on which there is a clear and theoretically significant disagreement between ourselves and them; since that disagreement raises substantive points, we will now explore it in a separate section.

6. Psychoanalysis

First, we acknowledge that we do entertain the possibility of a specifically psychoanalytic approach to the question of desire and its relationship to language. We also acknowledge that this is more genuinely controversial than our other proposals. Bucholtz and Hall's doubts about whether linguistic analysis can really get at what is unsaid or unsayable, and whether the psychoanalytic concept of desire is too broad to be useful, will probably be shared by many other scholars too. While our book does address those questions (the first in more detail than the second), they will clearly bear further examination.

We are slightly more puzzled by another of Bucholtz and Hall's objections to psychoanalysis, namely that psychoanalytic approaches to sexuality locate it entirely in the "individual psyche" rather than the "social, cultural and political world" (p. 507). This criticism would not apply to the kind of discursive psychology that we discuss in our book, which argues that "phenomena which traditional psychological theories have treated as "inner processes" are, in fact, constituted through social, discursive activity. Accordingly, discursive psychologists argue that psychology should be based on the study of this outward activity rather than upon hypothetical, and essentially unobservable, inner states" (Billig, 1997, p. 140). The criticism would not apply either to feminist scholarship in which psychoanalysis is viewed as a theory of both individual subject formation and cultural reproduction – these being seen as connected processes inasmuch as the first is a powerful mechanism for accomplishing the second. Thus in feminist psychoanalysis, the focus is generally on how the structures and social relations of heteropatriarchy are enjoined on and internalized by individuals in the course of their constitution as gendered subjects. While any account of the constitution and workings of these structures is debatable, we think that feminist readings of psychoanalysis, from Juliet Mitchell to Judith Butler, deserve the attention or at least the acknowledgement of students of language. To say that is hardly equivalent to issue an edict that "require[s] sociolinguists, linguistic anthropologists, and discourse analysts to reinvent themselves as field psychoanalysts" (Bucholtz and Hall, 2004, p. 480).

In simply opposing the psychic to the sociocultural – largely, it would seem, as a strategy for dismissing psychoanalysis – we think that Bucholtz and Hall are closing down a discussion which they might more profitably try to open up to non-psychoanalytic approaches. We also think they underestimate the ability of students of

language to engage with the issues that psychoanalysis addresses. Even if one rejects the answers given by psychoanalysts, the question itself, about how key aspects of the social, cultural and political order (its heteronormativity, for instance) come to be internalized and reproduced (or not) in individuals, would seem to us to be highly pertinent to any serious study of both sexuality and identity – always supposing we do not simply deny that there are individuals, that they do have psychic as well as social lives, and that what we call "identity" is typically apprehended as having some inner (psychic) as well as outward (sociocultural) reality. We would therefore welcome a serious discussion of alternative – that is, non-psychoanalytic – approaches to this question.[8]

7. Identity crisis?

Far from being doctrinaire Freudians, we are wholly in agreement with Bucholtz and Hall's observation that "sociocultural linguistic research... has long flourished through the interaction of multiple theoretical and methodological perspectives" (p. 507). If that really is their belief, though, it seems strange that in the next paragraph they present our own theoretical and methodological perspective as a potential threat to the field's very survival. As we noted in the introduction, they warn against our "*scorched earth* approach to alternative research paradigms", and suggest we are carrying on a "*crusade* against sexual identity" which, although not "currently" attempting to "*eradicate*" sociolinguistic research on gender, race, ethnicity, class and age, must be seen as part of a "*backlash*" that threatens "*all* linguistic scholarship concerned with identity" (p. 507, our emphasis). Even if we did not think this a misrepresentation of our position we would still be taken aback by the language. How could our book, or any book, have the kind of impact that would justify this rhetoric of crisis and impending doom? And what is implied by using terms like *scorched-earth*, *crusade*, *eradicate*: that we are fanatical extremists on a mission to exterminate all those who do not embrace our creed? (If so, that sounds to us more like name-calling than critique).

Leaving aside their choice of metaphors, however, Bucholtz and Hall would seem to be raising a serious question – and expressing serious anxiety – about the present and future status of linguistic research in which identity is a central concern. What, though, is the basis for their evident fear that this paradigm is or could be under threat? Apart from ourselves, they do not name or even allude to any other scholars whose work is part of the supposed "backlash" against the study of language and identity. On the other hand, their extensive bibliography contains references to an impressive number of recent or forthcoming publications in which that study is pursued. This implicit contradiction is paralleled by a more explicit one. Early on in

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[8] It is perhaps worth noting here that most of the contributions to Cameron and Kulick (2003b), a special issue we edited of this journal on the topic of language and desire, do not adopt a psychoanalytic approach; and that several non-Freudian studies are also cited as useful models in the relevant chapter of our book.

their article Bucholtz and Hall suggest that our book misrepresents language and sexuality research by selecting for attention only a very restricted sample of what is actually a "*burgeoning* body of scholarship" (2004, p. 470, our emphasis) with a "*vast* literature" (p. 472, our emphasis). When we get to the closing pages, however, this vast and burgeoning scholarly enterprise has become an "*emerging* field" (p. 507, our emphasis) in need of protection from critical interventions that threaten to destroy it before it has really got off the ground. For outsiders or newcomers to the field, this must present something of a puzzle. Perhaps, then, we might offer our own assessment of the situation.

We would say that the truth lies somewhere between Hall and Bucholtz's two extremes. It is true that the study of language and sexual identities has suffered in the past from a degree of marginalization, no doubt reflecting, at least in part, distaste for the (mainly queer) scholars involved in it and the (also mainly queer) subjects whose language-use they investigated. But since the latter half of the 1990s, we would suggest, this area of research has moved decisively from margin to mainstream. We might not describe the literature as "vast", but its volume is certainly respectable, and just as importantly, it has become steadily more accessible and more credible. Book-length publications now emanate from respected scholarly presses (e.g. Baker, 2002; Cameron and Kulick, forthcoming; Campell-Kibler et al., 2002; Harvey and Shalom, 1997; Leap, 1996; Leap and Boellstorff, 2003; Livia and Hall, 1997; McIlvenny, 2002; Sauntson and Kyratzis, forthcoming); articles are published in leading journals; doctoral dissertations are written, and increasingly, courses are taught.

Work on language and sexual identity has benefited from an increased acceptance of sexual diversity, along with other kinds of diversity, as part of the contemporary social landscape; it has also benefited from the general ascendancy of identity as a research topic in social science. Whatever lingering doubts one might entertain about the status of research on language and sexual identity specifically, there can surely be no doubt of the centrality of identity more generally for contemporary linguistic researchers. Far from being threatened, beleaguered, confronted with a "backlash", or experiencing a crisis, research concerned in one way or another with identity now dominates not just the study of language and sexuality but the whole of sociolinguistics. While nothing is immutable, we find it hard to imagine the current pre-eminence of identity-based sociolinguistic research being seriously challenged in the foreseeable future.

Suppose for the sake of argument that we *had* in fact denounced all research on language and sexual identity and called for the whole enterprise to be abandoned forthwith. What real threat would that have posed to the continued existence of the research in question? We think that in the intellectual climate just described, the answer must be, "none whatsoever". Had we made it, the gesture would have been purely rhetorical. And we are inclined to think that Bucholtz and Hall's evocation of a "backlash" threatening identity-based research must be a rhetorical gesture too. We can only speculate on what they intended it to accomplish, but if their warnings were taken seriously, one effect might be to deter other scholars from airing skeptical or critical views – possibly quite different ones from our own – about the current state of research on language and sexuality. We think that would be a pity:

as with language and gender research in the mid-1990s, research on language and sexuality is now sufficiently established and secure that it need not fear the consequences of debate about its scope, aims, theoretical allegiances and methodologies. In the case of language and gender research, a field which had also had cause in the past to see itself as beleaguered and marginalized, the (sometimes quite acrimonious) debates of the 1990s did not precipitate catastrophe: on the contrary, it can be seen with hindsight that they inaugurated a new phase of innovation and creativity. We hope and believe that the same will be true for research on language and sexuality. In that sense we welcome Bucholtz and Hall's direct engagement in debate with us – we just regret that the position they ultimately take is not that the debate should continue and develop, but that it ought to be closed down in the best interests of the field.

We believe that they are worrying unnecessarily: in mounting their impassioned defense of identity-based research, they are knocking at an open door. The academic communities for which they (and we) write do not need to be convinced that identity matters. That is one reason why, in our book, we focused much of our attention (though not the whole of it) on the question of what else might fall within the scope of an inquiry into language and sexuality. We think that only a very narrow, insecure and intolerant community could construe our asking this question, and proposing some answers to it, as a threatening or hostile act. We also think that Bucholtz and Hall can only portray our work in this light by presenting what we say in a manner that an attentive reading of our text would not support. We have sought here to correct what we see as major inaccuracies in their presentation and to clarify our position on issues where we think there is scope for fruitful debate. In the end, though, rather than relying exclusively on anyone's selective précis, theirs or ours, we hope interested scholars who have not already done so will read our book, and judge it, for themselves.

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