

### 3 Language and Desire

---

DON KULICK

The relationship between language and different kinds of desire is a frequent topic in texts directed at psychoanalytic practitioners, even though therapists “tend to look *through* language rather than *at* its forms” (Capps and Ochs 1995, 186; emphasis original; for an example of this kind of text, see Fink 1997). Language and desire has also occasionally been discussed in literary criticism and philosophical texts (e.g., Barthes 1978; Kristeva 1980). However, research based on empirical material – material that examines how desire is actually conveyed through language in social life – is rare. The closest type of study that investigates desire in language is work that examines how sexuality is signaled through words, innuendo, or particular linguistic registers. This kind of research has been conducted since the 1940s in a number of disciplinary fields, such as philology, linguistics, women’s studies, anthropology, and speech communication. Most of the early work on this topic is not well known, largely because there isn’t very much of it, and what was written often appeared in obscure or esoteric publications. Beginning in the 1980s, research on lexicon was supplemented by work that examined other dimensions of language, such as pronoun usage, camp sensibility, and coming out narratives. And since then, work on gay and lesbian language has mushroomed, producing studies on everything from intonational patterns to the semiotic means by which gay men create private spaces in ostensibly public domains.

This past research on gay and lesbian language from the 1920s through the 1990s has been reviewed extensively in Kulick 2000 and Cameron and Kulick 2003. Those reviews identified three consequential shortcomings in much of that work.

The first concerns the fact that even though past research on gay and lesbian language ostensibly was concerned with understanding the relationship between sexual orientation and language, *it had no theory of sexuality*. That is to say, it had no real understanding of what sexuality is, how it is acquired, and what the relationship is between what Butler would call its “literal performance” and the unconscious foreclosures and prohibitions that structure and limit that performance. Instead, from its inception as a topic of research, the literature on language and sexuality has conceptualized sexuality exclusively in terms of

identity categories. The dimensions of sexuality that define it in disciplines like psychoanalysis – dimensions like fantasy, pleasure, repression, disavowal, and desire – all of these were nowhere considered. This means that research did not in fact focus on how language conveys sexuality. It focused, instead, on how language conveys identity.

This has had consequences for the kind of language behavior that was studied, which is the second problem. Because the concern was to show how people with particular identities signal those identities to others, the only people whose language behavior was examined were people who were assumed to have those identities, that is, men and women who openly identify as homosexual, or who researchers for some reason suspected were homosexual. The assumption was that if there is a gay or lesbian language, then that language must be grounded in gay and lesbian identities, and instantiated in the speech of gays and lesbians. That nonhomosexuals (imposters, actors, fag hags, hip or unwary heterosexuals) can and do use language that signals queerness was largely ignored, and on the few occasions it was considered, such usage was dismissed by researchers as “inauthentic” (Leap 1995; 1996). The lack of attention to the inherent *appropriability* of language meant that research conflated the symbolic position of queerness with the concrete social practices of men and women who self-define as gay and lesbian. In other words, ways of speaking that invoked or performed queerness were not considered separately from the linguistic behavior of people who claimed to be queer. The two can and do overlap, but they are not exactly the same thing.

For example, when a man who identifies as gay uses gender inversion to refer another male – let’s say, “What’s wrong with her?” – the inversion can be understood to signal perhaps both the speaker’s disdain for the target of his question and also his own facility with a particular kind of gay ingroup linguistic convention. It indexes gayness, and in this sense, previous researchers would all agree, is “gay language.” But what about a high school baseball coach’s shout of “What’s wrong with her?” hollered toward the boy in left field who just dropped the ball? Like the first example, the coach’s utterance indexes femininity, disdain, and, arguably, homosexuality as well. So is it, too, an example of “gay language”? If it is, then is it the same as the gay man’s “gay language”? If it is different, then is the difference between the two uses of “gay language” really to be comprehended on the grounds of “authenticity,” as a scholar like Leap would have it? Authentic of what, one might ask? Decided by whom? And if the coach’s taunt isn’t “gay language” because the person who utters it doesn’t identify as gay, then we are left with a concept of “gay language” that is restricted to language used by self-identified gay men. This is equivalent to saying that the only people who can use or do use or are allowed to use “women’s language” are (self-identified?) women – a standpoint that was abandoned a very long time ago in gender and language studies (to the extent that anybody ever really held it in the first place). The idea that “women’s language” only applied to language used by women was discarded precisely because it was understood that such a view of language misrecognizes gender as a position in language as being the same as gender as an actually occurring kind of social identity. Such a misrecognition blocks an exploration of how the

phonological, prosodic, lexical, and discursive elements of what are understood to compose a phenomenon like “women’s language” (or “gay language”) are available to any speaker to use (and any hearer to interpret) regardless of whatever the speaker may think about her or his sexuality, gender, or anything else.

The third problem follows from this. Because attention focused solely on whether or not gay-identified people reveal or conceal their sexual orientation, what was foregrounded in the study of language and sexuality was speaker intention. So the criterion for deciding if something constitutes gay or lesbian language has been to find out whether the speaker intended for his or her language to be understood in that way. Until recently, this was a structuring principle of all work on gay and lesbian language, but it has only been made explicit in some of the most recent work on queer language. Livia and Hall, for example, assert that “[a]n 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. Queerspeak should thus be considered an essentially intentional phenomenon” (1997, 14; see also Leap 1996, 21–23; Livia 2001, 200–202).

What is theoretically untenable about the idea that “queerspeak should ... be considered an essentially intentional phenomenon” is that *no* language can be considered “an essentially intentional phenomenon.” Meaning is always structured by more than will or intent – this was one of Freud’s most fundamental insights, and was expressed in his articulation of the unconscious as that structure or dynamic which thwarts and subverts any attempt to fully know what we mean. It was recognized by Saussure, who in the opening pages of *Course in General Linguistics* observed that “the sign always to some extent eludes control by the will” (1983, 16). It is insisted on by Bakhtin, who analyzed at length how meaning is always divided, both in the sense of “not whole” and “shared” (e.g., Voloshinov 1973). And that meaning must always exceed intent is also the principle point of Derrida’s (1995 [1972]) criticism of Austin’s concept of the performative. Derrida argues that performatives work not because they depend on the intention of the speaker, but because they embody conventional forms of language that are already in existence before the speaker utters them. Performatives work, and language generally works, because they are quotable. This is the meaning of Derrida’s example of the signature, with which he concluded his article “Signature Event Context.” In order for a mark to count as a signature, he observed, it has to be repeatable; it has to enter into a structure of what he calls *iterability*, which means both “to repeat” and “to change” (Derrida 1995 [1972], 7). Signatures are particularly good examples of iterability, partly because even though one repeats them every time one signs one’s name, no two signatures are ever exactly the same. But the main point is that in order to signify, in order to be authentic, one’s mark *has* to be repeatable – if I sign my name “XCFRD” one time and “W4H7V” the next time, and “LQYGMP” the next time, and so on, it won’t mean anything; it will not be recognized as a signature, as a meaningful mark. To be so recognized, the mark has to be repeated.

The rub here is that if something is repeatable, it also, therefore, necessarily, is forever at risk of failure. For example, if I am drunk and sign my name fuzzily, my signature may not be recognized in relation to the one I have on my driver’s license:

in this context, my mark will fail and my check will not be cashed. If something is repeatable, it also becomes available for misuse and forgery. This availability for quotation without my permission, untethered to any intention I may have, is what Derrida means when he says that failure and fraud are not parasitical to language, exceptions, distortions (as Austin (1997 [1962], 22) maintains). On the contrary, quotability is the very foundational condition that allows language to exist and work at all. The fact that all signs are quotable (and hence, subject to failure and available for misrepresentation) means that signification cannot be located in the intention of speakers, but rather in the economy of difference that characterizes language itself. In this sense, failure and misuse are not accidental; they are structural: a signature succeeds not in spite of the possibility of forgery, but because of it. Derrida's point, one that Butler relies on extensively in her own work (see especially Butler 1997) is that a speaker's intention is never enough to anchor meaning and exhaustively determine context. This is not the same as saying that speaker intention is completely irrelevant. Derrida notes that if one recognizes the iterable structure of language, "the category of intention will not disappear; it will have its place." But "from this place it will no longer be able to govern the entire scene and system of utterances" (1995 [1972], 18). Why? Because language necessarily and always evokes meanings that exceed, contradict, undermine, and disrupt the language user's intentions. If this is acknowledged, it follows that any attempt to define a queer linguistics through appeals to intentionality is fatally flawed from the start because it depends on an understanding about the relationship between intention and language that Derrida definitively dispensed with 40 years ago.

Because of these three fundamental problems with the kind of research that until recently has investigated the relationship between language and sexuality, Deborah Cameron and I have advocated that scholars of language interested in this area might want to reframe the questions they ask at least partly in terms of the relationship between language and desire (Cameron and Kulick 2003; 2005; Kulick 2000). There are three immediate advantages to be gained by beginning to think about desire.

First, an exploration of "desire" would compel research to decisively shift the ground of inquiry from identity categories to culturally grounded semiotic practices. The desire for recognition, for intimacy, for erotic fulfillment – none of this, in itself, is specific to any particular kind of person. What is specific to different kinds of people are the precise things they desire and the manner in which particular desires are signaled in culturally codified ways. For example, the sexual desire of a man for a woman is conveyed through a range of semiotic codes that may or may not be conscious, but that are recognizable as conveying desire because they are iterable signs that continually get recirculated in social life. The iterability of codes is what allows us to recognize desire *as* desire. This means that all the codes are resources available for anyone to use – be they straight, gay, bisexual, shoe fetishists, or anything else. It also means that desire cannot best be thought of in terms of individual intentionality. Because it relies on structures of iterability for its expression, desire is available for appropriation and forgery; as we know from cases where men invoke the desire of the other to claim – ingenuously or not – that

they thought the woman they raped desired them, or that they thought the man they killed was coming on to them. Researchers interested in language and desire need to be able to explain this too – they need to explain not only intentional desire, but appropriated or forged desire.

Second, a focus on desire would move inquiry to engage with theoretical debates about what desire is, how it is structured, and how it is communicated. One of the many problems with the concept of sexuality, especially when it is linked to identity, tends to be conceptualized as intransitive (one *has* a sexuality, *is* a sexuality); hence research comes to concentrate on how subjects reveal or conceal their sexuality (and hence, once again, the centrality of intentional subjects in this literature). An advantage with the concept of desire is that it is definitionally transitive – one can certainly be said to *have* desire, but that desire is always *for* something, directed toward something. This means that research is impelled to problematize both the subject and the object of desire, and investigate how those *relationships* are materialized through language. Because desire, in any theoretical framework, both encompasses and exceeds sexuality, research will, furthermore, be directed toward investigating the ways in which different kinds of desires, for different things, become bound up with or detached from erotic desire.

Third, thinking about desire widens the range and scope of phenomena that might be considered when thinking about different kinds of interactions. Desire provides a framework for thinking about the roles that fantasy, repression, and disavowals play in linguistic interactions. Desire directs us to look at how language is precisely *not* an essentially intentional phenomenon. It encourages scholars to develop theories and techniques for analyzing not only what is said, but also how what is said is in many senses dependent on what remains unsaid, or unsayable.

## 1. Theories of Desire

What is desire? In most discussions, that question will be answered with reference to psychoanalysis, since psychoanalysis posits desire as the force that both enables and limits human subjectivity and action.

The distinguishing feature of desire in much psychoanalysis is that it is always, definitionally, bound up with sexuality. Sexual desire is a constitutive dimension of human existence. For Freud, “the germs of the sexual impulses are already present in the new-born child” (1975, 42). Ontogenetic development consists of learning to restrict those impulses in particular ways, managing them (or not) in relation to socially sanctioned objects and relationships. This learning occurs largely beyond conscious reflection, and is the outcome of specific prohibitions and repressions which children internalize and come to embody.

Although Freud was more inclined to speak of “sexual impulses” or “libido” than “desire” (note, though, that “libido” is a Latin word meaning “wish” or “desire”), he would undoubtedly have agreed with Lacan’s Spinozan epigraph that “desire is the essence of man” (Lacan 1998, 275). Freud would probably not

have agreed, however, with the specific attributions that Lacan attaches to desire. In Lacan's work, desire has a very particular meaning. Unlike libido, which for Freud was a kind of energy or force that continually sought its own satisfaction, desire, for Lacan, is associated with absence, loss, and lack.

A starting point in Lacanian psychoanalysis is the assumption that infants come into the world with no sense of division or separation from anything. Because they sense no separation, and because their physical needs are met by others, infants do not perceive themselves to lack anything; instead, they imagine themselves to be complete and whole. This imagined wholeness is the source of the term *Imaginary*, which is one of the three registers of subjectivity identified by Lacan. Lacan argues that this psychic state must be superseded (by the *Symbolic*, which means language and culture), because to remain in it or to return to it for any length of time would be the equivalent of psychosis.

Exit from the Imaginary occurs as infants develop and come to perceive the difference between themselves and their caregiver(s). Lacan believes that this awareness is registered as traumatic, because at this point, the infant realizes that caregivers are not just *there*. Nourishment, protection, and love are not simply or always just given, or given satisfyingly; instead, they are given (always temporarily) as a result of particular signifying acts, like crying, squirming, or vocalizing. Sensing this, infants begin to signify. That is, they begin to formulate their needs as what Lacan calls "demands." In other words, whereas previously, bodily movements and vocalizations had no purpose or goal, they now come to be directed at prompting or controlling (m)others.

Once needs are formulated as demands, they are lost to us, because needs exist in a different order (Lacan's *Real*, which is his name *not* for "reality," but for that which remains beyond or outside signification). In a similar way as Kant argued that language both gives us our world of experience, and also keeps us from perceiving the world in an unmediated form, Lacan asserts that signification can substitute for needs, but it cannot fulfill them. This gap between the need and its expression – between a hope and its fulfillment – is where Lacan locates the origins and workings of desire.

The idea that desire arises when an infant registers loss of (imagined) wholeness means that the real object of desire (to regain that original plenitude) will forever remain out of reach. But because we do not know that this is what we want (in an important sense, we *cannot* know this, since this dynamic is what structures the unconscious), we displace this desire onto other things, and we desire those things, hoping – always in vain – that they will satisfy our needs. The displacement of desire onto other things means that the demands through which desire is symbolized actually has not one, but two objects: one spoken (the object demanded), and one unspoken (the maintenance of a relationship to the other to whom the demand is addressed). So the thing demanded is a rationalization for maintaining a relation to the other: the demand for food is also a demand for recognition, for the other's desire. The catch is that even if this recognition is granted, we can't assume that it will always be granted ("Will you still love me tomorrow ..."); hence, we repeat the demand, endlessly.

The relationship of all this to sexuality lies in the linkage that psychoanalysis articulates between sexual difference and desire. There is a purposeful conflation in Lacan's writing between sexuality and sex, that is, between erotics and being a man or a woman. (In English, the terms "masculine" and "feminine" express a similar conflation, since those terms denote both "ways of being" and "sexual positions"). Lacan's interest is to explain how infants, who are born unaware of sex and sexuality, come to assume particular positions in language and culture, which is where sex and sexuality are produced and sustained. Because becoming a man or a woman occurs largely through the adoption or refusal of particular sexual roles in relation to one's parents (roles that supposedly get worked out in the course of the Oedipal process), sexuality is the primary channel through which we arrive at our identities as sexed beings. In other words, *gender is achieved through sexuality*. Furthermore, the fact that our demands are always in some sense a demand for the desire of an other means that our sense of who we are is continually formed through libidinal relations.

This relationship between sexuality and sex is central to Judith Butler's claims about the workings and power of what she has termed the heterosexual matrix. Her argument is that men and women are produced as such through the refusals we are required by culture to make in relation to our parents. Culture, Butler says, has come to be constituted in such a way that what she calls heterosexual cathexis (that is, the desire for his mother of a person culturally designated as a boy, or the desire for her father of a person culturally designated as a girl) is displaced, so that a boy's mother is forbidden to him, but women in general are not. In the case of girls, something similar happens: her father is forbidden to her, but men in general are not. In other words, the object of the desire is tabooed, but the modality of desire is not – indeed, that modality of desire is culturally incited, encouraged, and even demanded. Not so with homosexual cathexis (the desire for his father of a person culturally designated as a boy, or the desire for her mother of a person culturally designated as a girl). Not only is the object of that desire forbidden; in this case, the modality of desire itself is tabooed.

These prohibitions produce homosexual cathexis as something that *cannot be*. And since its very existence is not recognized, the loss we experience (of the father for the boy and of the mother for the girl) cannot be acknowledged. Drawing on Freud's writings on the psychic structure of melancholia (Freud 1957; 1960), Butler (1990) argues that when the loss of a loved one cannot be acknowledged, the desire that was directed at that loved one cannot be transferred to other objects. In effect, desire gets stuck, it stays put, it bogs down, it cannot move on. Instead, it moves *in*. It becomes incorporated into the psyche in such a way that we *become* what we cannot acknowledge losing. Hence persons culturally designated as boys come to inhabit the position of that which they cannot acknowledge losing (i.e., males), and persons culturally designated as girls become females, for the same reason. Once again, gender is accomplished through the disavowal of particular desires and the achievement of others.

Unlike Lacan, who equivocates on whether the psychic structures he describes are universal or culturally and historically specific, Butler is at pains to stress that

the melancholic structures she postulates are the effects of particular cultural conventions. However, because she does not historicize her explanation, pinpointing when the conventions that form its backdrop are supposed to have arisen and entrenched themselves in people's psychic lives, and also because the only material she analyzes to make her points about melancholy is drawn from contemporary Western societies, it is hard to see what Butler sees as actually (rather than just theoretically) variable. Gender is a fact of social life everywhere, not just in the contemporary West. Do Butler's arguments about gender identity and melancholia apply in Andean villages, Papua New Guinean rainforests, or the Mongolian steppe? This isn't clear. And since Butler does not indicate where she sees the limits of her approach to the assumption of gendered identities, it is difficult to resist the conclusion that her model, despite her assertions to the contrary, is universalistic in scope.

However one wishes to read Butler here, the point is that this explanation of why certain human beings come to be men and certain others come to be women lies at the heart of performativity theory. This fundamental reliance on psychoanalysis is downplayed or ignored in some summaries of Butler's work (e.g., Hall 1999; Jagose 1996), and my own suspicion is that many readers of *Gender Trouble* simply skip over chapter 2, which is where she develops her claim that "gender identity is a melancholic structure" (Butler 1990, 68). But performativity theory, as Butler has elaborated it, is inseparable from psychoanalytic assumptions about the relationship between desire, sexuality, and sex. If you remove the psychoanalysis, what remains is simply a kind of performance theory à la Goffman – the kind of theory that inattentive readers mistakenly accused Butler of promoting in *Gender Trouble* (e.g., Jeffreys 1994; Weston 1993).

A dramatic contrast to psychoanalytic theories of desire is found in the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Deleuze and Guattari (1996) take great pleasure in criticizing and mocking psychoanalysis (chapter 2 of *A Thousand Plateaus*, about Freud's patient the Wolf-Man, reads like a stand-up comedy routine, with psychoanalysis as the butt of all the jokes). They insist that psychoanalysis has fundamentally misconstrued the nature of desire because it sees desire as always linked to sexuality. This is to misrepresent it: "Sleeping is a desire," Deleuze observes, "Walking is a desire. Listening to music, or making music, or writing, are desires. A spring, a winter, are desires. Old age is also a desire. Even death" (Deleuze and Parnet 1987, 95). In a recent article, sociolinguist Scott Kiesling has remarked that such an expansive view of desire "doesn't really help an analyst with finding desire, because it is everywhere" (2012, 217). He goes on to say that this omnipresence makes the Deleuzian concept "useless," but this seems an unnecessary conclusion. After all, language, in its broadest sense as a system of signs, is also arguably "everywhere." And power, Foucault famously proclaimed, also "is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (1980, 93). The perception that phenomena like language and power are "everywhere" has not rendered them useless: on the contrary, it has spurred a dazzling range of theories and methods for trying to understand how they manifest and how they work.



The dimension of Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of desire that makes it especially inviting for thinking about language is that it is not necessarily linked to sexuality, even though sexuality may well be one dimension (one "flux") that, together with other fluxes, creates desire. That psychoanalysis distills sexuality out of every desire is symptomatic of its relentless reductionism: "For [Freud] there will always be a reduction to the One: ... it all leads back to daddy" (Deleuze and Guattari 1996, 31, 35). Lacan's insistence that desire is related to absence and lack is also a reflex of the same reductionist impulse, and it is unable to conceptualize how voids are "fully" part of desire, not evidence of a lack (Deleuze and Parnet 1987, 90). Deleuze exemplifies this with courtly love:

it is well known that courtly love implies tests which postpone pleasure, or at least postpone the ending of coitus. This is certainly not a method of deprivation. It is the constitution of a field of immanence, where desire constructs its own plane and lacks nothing. (Deleuze and Parnet 1987, 101)

In contrast to psychoanalysts like Freud and Lacan (and Butler), who understand desire in terms of developmental history, Deleuze and Guattari see it in terms of geography. That is to say, they see their tasks as analysts as mapping the ways desire is made possible and charting the ways it moves, acts, and forms connections. They have no need to theorize the ontogenetic origins of desire, since desire is an immanent feature of all relations. For linguists and anthropologists, an advantage with this conceptualization of desire, regardless of whether or not one elects to adopt Deleuze and Guattari's entire analytical edifice, is that it foregrounds desire as continually being (dis/re)assembled. Thus, attention can focus on whether and how different kinds of relations emit desire, fabricate it and/or block it, exhaust it.

Deleuze and Guattari's framework is not abstract psychoanalysis, even though its formidable philosophical erudition, deliberately contorted presentational style, and highly idiosyncratic lexicon (hecceities, rhizomes, machines, bodies without organs, etc.) make it just as daunting as even Lacan's writing. Despite these difficulties, Deleuze and Guattari direct attention to desire without requiring that we derive all its formations from a particular source or a specific constellation of psychosocial relations ("... it all leads back to daddy").

This interest in mapping desire as a geographer would map a landscape links Deleuze and Guattari to Foucault. Perhaps the most productive way of thinking about desire would be to see it in more or less the same terms as how Foucault conceptualized power. Although he highlighted power in all his work, Foucault was explicit about not wanting to erect a coherent theory of power. "If one tries to erect a theory of power," he argued,

one will always be obliged to view it as emerging at a given place and time and hence to deduce it, to reconstruct its genesis. But if power is in reality a open, more or less coordinated (in the event, no doubt, ill-coordinated) cluster of relations, then the only problem is to provide oneself with a grid of analysis which makes possible an analytic of relations of power. (Foucault 1980, 199)

Following Foucault's lead, it should be possible to study desire without having to decide in advance what it is and why it emerges; that is, without having to become a psychoanalyst. Instead of a theory of desire, the point would be to develop a means of delineating, examining, and elucidating those domains and those relations that are created through desire, not forgetting for a second to highlight the ways in which those domains and relations will always be bound up with power.

## 2. Investigating Desire in Language

Desire in relation to sociolinguistics was first raised explicitly only relatively recently, in 1997, by Keith Harvey and Celia Shalom in their anthology titled *Language and Desire: Encoding Sex, Romance and Intimacy*. Harvey and Shalom argued that "the encoding of desire results in distinct and describable linguistic features and patterns" (1997, 3), and the contributions to the book analyzed data ranging from personal ads to intimate conversations between lovers in order to show that erotic desire was something produced through language and particular structures of interaction. *Language and Desire* is an important and pioneering book, but it made little impact. The next texts to foreground desire, my own review article titled "Gay and Lesbian Language" (Kulick 2000) and the book titled *Language and Sexuality* (2003), which Deborah Cameron and I wrote soon after that, met with an entirely different kind of reception. That article and book critiqued past work on gay and lesbian language and more recent work on "queer" language along the lines summarized in the first section of this chapter, and both the article and the book concluded with the suggestion that research on language and sexuality develop methods and theories that allow an investigation of desire in language. (See Milani, Chapter 13 in this volume, for a discussion of research that draws upon Cameron and Kulick's (2003) proposals.)

"Gay and Lesbian Language" and *Language and Sexuality* turned out to be polarizing works. The criticism they developed of research on gay and lesbian language angered a number of the scholars who had been working on those topics, and as a result, storm clouds gathered and battle lines became drawn. A field of language and sexuality, different from the previous field of "gay and lesbian language" emerged, but it was a field portrayed by some as sundered by and oriented around a fundamental division. That division was declared to be between "identity" on the one hand, and "desire" on the other. (See Queen, Chapter 10 in this volume, for a discussion of the identity-desire debate.) Our critique of the role that identity had played in the research on gay and lesbian language became interpreted by some as an attack on the very idea of identity in general and of sexual identity in particular. Morrish and Leap, for example, suggested that "one of the outcomes of a desire-centered approach is the erasure of 'lesbian/gay' from academic inquiry" (2007, 37). More melodramatically, Bucholtz and Hall accused "Gay and Lesbian Language" and *Language and Sexuality* of waging a "crusade against sexual identity" (2004, 507). By misleadingly portraying those works as insisting that speaker identities were somehow either nonexistent, unimportant, or

irrelevant to the study of language, scholars like Morrish and Leap and Bucholtz and Hall were able to characterize attention to desire as a research concern that was *opposed* to attention to identity. This supposed antithesis allowed those writers to depict themselves as rescuing identity from the war that Cameron and I apparently were busy mobilizing against it. It also allowed them to portray themselves as offering a synthesis to the polarization that they had announced, one that conceded that desire might be considered, but only as a kind of appendage or afterthought to identity, and only as long as any talk of psychoanalysis or repression was left out of the picture altogether. (Our response to some of this is in Cameron and Kulick 2005.)

Other researchers have found the call to explore desire in language to be a productive one. Ingrid Piller and Kimie Takahashi employ the concept of desire to discuss the attraction that the English language has for Japanese women (2006; 2010; see also Piller 2002, 2008; Takahashi 2010). They argue that “desire” is preferable to “motivation,” which is the concept usually invoked in the literature on second-language learning in reference to something that learners either do or do not “have.” Piller and Takahashi, instead, highlight desire, which they suggest “is a complex and multifaceted construction that is both internal and external to language learners, and is not linked to success in any straightforward fashion ... the link may even be negative” (2006, 59).

Piller and Takahashi show how desire for English is both incited and enacted. They discuss Japanese women’s magazines that portray the West as glamorous, nonpatriarchal and full of handsome, gentlemanly white men. Private language schools try to attract students by displaying smiling portraits of male teachers, along with promises that a female student’s English will improve faster because she “will be anxious to see her good-looking white teacher again soon” (2006, 65). Teaching material is often explicitly sexualized: one English-study magazine is actually titled *Virgin English*. It instructs women how to “learn love and sex through movies,” through the repetition of lines like “You know what’s going to happen? I’m gonna fall in love with you. Because I always, always do” (Marilyn Monroe in *The Prince and the Showgirl*), and “Oh yeah, right there” (Meg Ryan in *When Harry Met Sally*).

Japanese women who go to English-speaking countries to improve their English are unavoidably influenced by these discourses. The erotic connection stoked between the English language and white men encourages Japanese women to actively pursue relationships with white men and to reject partners who are not white. One woman recounted in an interview that:

Listen, I told you that my friend told me that there would be many Australians at the BBQ party? So I was really looking forward to it. Well, there were a lot of people, mostly my friend’s flatmate’s friends, but they were all Asian-Australian! They were all native speakers or spoke English really well. But I felt, “they aren’t my type of men” ... I am not here to waste my time mixing with men like these guys. Once again I had this self-confirmation that what I want is a white boyfriend. (Piller and Takahashi 2006, 74)

This kind of enactment of desire has a range of positive consequences – it often helps improve the women's English and, as Piller and Takahashi show, the Japanese women they interviewed are not shy about playing up their own sexual charms to get white men to talk to them. But the "bundle of desires" (2006, 80) that animate many of these women's dreams and interactions also set the women up for failure: many do not end up with a white Prince Charming boyfriend, and no matter how hard they try they will never become a white native speaker of English. In the end, the researchers note, desire can easily give way to depression.

Desire as an analytic concept also figures prominently in Scott Kiesling's (2005; 2012) analyses of talk among men in a fraternity. Fraternities are a kind of social men's club that exist in many US universities (their female equivalents are called "sororities"). They are composed of male undergraduate students who are invited to join by already active fraternity members. These fraternity "brothers" often live together in a large house, which is also the site of social activities and parties. Fraternities perform different kinds of public service, but they are widely known mostly for the excessive drinking that occurs in many of them, the baroque and demeaning rituals of hazing to which some of them subject potential members, and the expressions of sexism and homophobia that structure some of what many fraternity brothers say and do.

Kiesling uses the concept of desire to understand the structure and content of talk in a fraternity. He explains that fraternity brothers are in a tricky position in relation to one another. Much of what they do together is oriented toward engendering male bonding and male homosociality. But the line between homosociality and *homosexuality* is a fine one, especially in contexts in which the young men express their feelings about the importance of being together with other men, or in which they attempt to attract nonmembers to join their fraternity (Kiesling coyly labels this latter, relatively ritualized, activity as "homosocial flirting" (2005, 711)).

Kiesling understands desire as a lack, but not a Lacanian lack that only relates to sexuality. He invokes masculinity studies scholar Stephen Whitehead's (2002) notion of "ontological desire" to argue that the interactions he observed in the fraternity where he did fieldwork act to encourage and sustain desire to inhabit and embody a particular kind of subjectivity – that of being a man. Given that the interactions that Kiesling describes occur together with others and are clearly incited, scaffolded, and narrated by those others, one wonders whether a more promising perspective on desire here might be framed less as a question of ontology and more as one of Levinasian ethics (e.g., Levinas 1969), where the ego emerges as a result of a susceptibility to specific others, or in terms of what Adriana Cavarero (2000) discusses as a "narratable self." But no matter how one might analyze it philosophically, an important dimension of Kiesling's argument is that this desire is not only articulated as interdictions on what men cannot or must not do. Desire, like Foucault's concept of power, is not just prohibitive, it is also generative and creative: discursive practices among fraternity brothers "motivate the men's desires as something the men actively seek. They organize the men's perceptions of what is lacking in their identity, and how the men wish to achieve masculine identity" (Kiesling 2005, 702).

Like Piller and Takahashi, who argue that it is not enough to simply proclaim that individuals either do or do not have the motivation to perform particular activities or to invest in particular identities, Kiesling shows how language performatively enacts, invites, and directs desire. This enactment is sometimes cathected to the institution of the fraternity. Thus, men can announce to a group of fraternity brothers, "I love you all," or they can tell the group how being in their company entails "the best feelings ever." But they can do this only as long as the addressee of these declarations is a group or the institution of the fraternity, not individual men (Kiesling 2005, 711). In interactions, Kiesling shows how conversational alignment can be analyzed as the "doing" of desire. He argues that thinking about desire allows us to see more clearly how identities are not so much personal possessions as they are dispersed, relational, and contingent *achievements* that are created and sustained (or unmade and undermined) through interactional moves of alignment and nonalignment (Kiesling 2012, 234).

A final example of recent scholarly work that uses desire to understand interactional data is Bethan Benwell's (2011) analysis of how young men talk about men's magazines. An important observation made in psychoanalytic texts about desire is that desire is not, and, as I discussed above, in some senses *cannot* be fully conscious. Nor is it structurally coherent. One way that Freud and other psychoanalysts explored the fractured nature of desire was through the distinction they made between "identity" and "identification." Stuart Hall has discussed this distinction, and his definition of "identity" is as good as any: identities, he writes, are "points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us" (Hall 1996, 6). Identification is something different. Feminist scholar Diana Fuss, who has written a book on the topic, defines identification as "a process that keeps identity at a distance, that prevents identity from ever approximating the status of an ontological given." Identifications are "mobile, elastic and volatile," Fuss explains, and she argues that approaches to identity need to come to terms with the way that identity "is continually compromised, imperiled, one might even say *embarrassed* by identification" (1995, 2, 8, 10, emphasis original; see also Kulick 2003; Levon 2010; Milani 2012).

Any analysis of desire in language will want to at least keep in mind this distinction between "identity" and "identification" because the structurally antagonistic relationship between the two processes will direct attention to the ways in which language always necessarily both constructs and simultaneously undermines the positions and roles that speakers materialize in their interactions and narratives. Benwell's analysis of young men talking about men's magazines focuses on how both these antagonistic processes are evident in talk. Her concern is to show how ethnomethodological approaches such as conversation analysis (CA) are just as appropriate for tracking anxieties and disavowals in language as they are for identifying affirmations. This is a point made repeatedly by Michael Billig in his important work on discursive psychology (Billig 1997; 1999; Billig and Schegloff 1999). But Billig's discussions focus on the tacit epistemological assumptions made in CA, not on an analysis of actual extracts of conversations. Therefore, it is helpful

to see concrete examples of how an interpretive methodology like CA can identify features in language that can plausibly be analyzed as identifications – that is, as features of discourse that compromise (or threaten to compromise) the identity claims made by speakers, even as speakers make them. Here is an extended example of how Benwell analyzes a stretch of talk in terms of identifications. Two young men (D and M) are responding to the interviewer's questions about why a feature on grooming for men is framed by humor in the magazine (transcription conventions modified):

D: I think humour is a good way of getting around touchy subjects, like y' know ... if you asked a normal kind of lad who'd be like "oh I'm not going to go and have a facial" or something

I: having read it, would any of you be interested in those kinds of product?

M: great! If I had the money I'd have a go at it.

This exchange reveals what the assumptions, values and anxieties of a "normal lad" are. It also implies that the two speakers do not identify with this heteronormative construction, and with the mention of "normal," an opposite construction ("abnormal," "alternative," "subversive," "feminine" or "gay") is invoked. This disavowal is done in a number of ways: firstly speaker D employs third-person, distancing strategies ("a normal kind of lad"), where the prosodic emphasis on "normal" and the hedge, "kind of," create a generic identity ... but which is not explicitly aligned to by the speaker. The generic identity is also attributed a certain predictability by his stereotypical response: "who'd be like "oh I'm not going to go and have a facial" or something," where the general extender (Cheshire 2007) "or something" indexes something formulaic. Similarly, the use of the colloquial quotative "like" has a curious dual function here of introducing (imagined) reported speech whilst simultaneously indexing something stereotypical ... The speaker deliberately distances himself from this kind of generic or predictable masculine response and construct. Secondly [speaker M] provides an explicit, positive, non-ironic alignment to the grooming feature, "Great! If I had the money I'd have a go at it." (Benwell 2012, 195)

The point of Benwell's examination of this short stretch of speech is to highlight how the speakers both invoke normative masculinity, and, even as they do so, almost simultaneously disavow it. This subtle and complex choreography of invocation, recognition, alignment, and disavowal is characteristic of the "new lad": an identity that Benwell says "occupies an ironic space somewhere between traditional, hegemonic realisations of masculinity and a humorous, anti-heroic, self-deprecating masculinity" (2012, 196–197). But it is also characteristic in a broader analytical sense of the way in which desires – to be, not to be, to recognize, to distance, to see, not to see – materialize in language. Benwell shows us that while ethnomethodological approaches like CA cannot exactly give us access to speakers' unconscious thoughts or desires, they can nevertheless be used to show how speakers both stake explicit claims to particular subject positions, even as they also equivocate, disavow, repress, and undermine those claims in their talk.

### 3. Conclusion

Paraphrasing Roland Barthes, who was writing about love, we could say that to write about desire is “to confront the *muck* of language: that region of hysteria where language is *too much* and *too little*, excessive ... and impoverished (Barthes 1978, 99; emphasis original). The theoretical project discussed in this chapter is undoubtedly mucky. But what dimension of language and life isn’t? I have suggested some of the advantages that sociolinguists, linguistic anthropologists, and other scholars who work with language in context might gain by thinking about both psychoanalytic and nonpsychoanalytic or even antipsychoanalytic understandings of desire. A concept like desire can help us see how different positions, identities, identifications, and relations are materialized and co-constructed in language. Desire as a frame of analysis is opening up new lines of inquiry, establishing new theoretical and methodological linkages, and encouraging new connections to be made across disciplines. Those connections promise to strengthen cooperation between linguists, anthropologists, literary theorists, and scholars interested in psychoanalysis, and they have the potential to enrich the study of language in exciting and highly desirable ways.

### REFERENCES

---

- Austin, J. L. 1997 [1962]. *How to Do Things with Words*, 2nd edn. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Barthes, Roland. 1978. *A Lover's Discourse*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Benwell, Bethan. 2012. “Masculine Identity and Identification as Ethnomethodological Phenomena: Revisiting Cameron and Kulick.” *Gender and Language*, 5(2): 187–210.
- Billig, Michael. 1997. “The Dialogic Unconscious: Psychoanalysis, Discursive Psychology and the Nature of Repression.” *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 36: 139–159.
- Billig, Michael. 1999. *Freudian Repression: Conversation Creating the Unconscious*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Billig, Michael, and Emanuel A. Schegloff. 1999. “Critical Discourse Analysis and Conversation Analysis: An Exchange between Michael Billig and Emanuel A. Schegloff.” *Discourse & Society*, 10(4): 543–582.
- Bucholtz, Mary, and Kira Hall. 2004. “Theorizing Identity in Language and Sexuality Research.” *Language in Society*, 33(4): 501–547.
- Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith. 1997. *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. New York: Routledge.
- Cameron, Deborah, and Don Kulick. 2003. *Language and Sexuality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cameron, Deborah, and Don Kulick. 2005. “Identity Crisis?” *Language & Communication*, 25: 107–125.
- Capps, Lisa, and Elinor Ochs. 1995. *Constructing Panic: The Discourse of Agoraphobia*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Cavarero, Adriana. 2000. *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*. London: Routledge.
- Cheshire, Jenny. 2007. “Discourse Variation, Grammaticalisation and Stuff Like

- That." *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 11(2): 155–193.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. 1996. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London: Althone Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Claire Parnet. 1987. *Dialogues*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1995 [1972]. "Signature Event Context." In *Limited Inc.*, 1–23. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Fink, Bruce. 1997. *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 1980. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon. New York: Pantheon.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1957. "Mourning and Melancholia." In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (24 vols.), ed. James Strachey, vol. 14, 239–258. London: Hogarth Press.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1960. *The Ego and the Id*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1975. *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. New York: Basic Books.
- Fuss, Diana. 1995. *Identification Papers*. London: Routledge.
- Hall, Kira. 1999. "Performativity." *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 9(1–2): 184–187.
- Hall, Stuart. 1996. "Introduction: Who Needs 'Identity'?" In Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (eds.), *Questions of Cultural Identity*, 1–17. London: Sage.
- Harvey, Keith, and Celia Shalom. 1997. *Language and Desire: Encoding Sex, Romance and Intimacy*. London: Routledge.
- Jagose, Annamarie. 1996. *Queer Theory*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.
- Jeffreys, Sheila. 1994. "The Queer Disappearance of Lesbians: Sexuality in the Academy." *Women's Studies International Forum*, 17(5): 459–472.
- Kiesling, Scott. 2005. "Homosocial Desire in Men's Talk: Balancing and Re-creating Cultural Discourses of Masculinity." *Language in Society*, 34(5): 695–726.
- Kiesling, Scott. 2012. "The Interactional Construction of Desire as Gender." *Gender and Language*, 5(2): 213–239.
- Kristeva, Julia. 1980. *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Kulick, Don. 2000. "Gay and Lesbian Language." *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 29: 243–285.
- Kulick, Don. 2003. "No." *Language and Communication*, 23: 139–151.
- Lacan, Jacques. 1998. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Leap, William. 1995. "Introduction." In William L. Leap (ed.), *Beyond the Lavender Lexicon: Authenticity, Imagination and Appropriation in Lesbian and Gay Languages*, vii–xix. Buffalo, NY: Gordon & Breach.
- Leap, William. 1996. *Word's Out: Gay Men's English*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 1969. *Totality and Infinity*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
- Levon, Erez. 2010. *Language and the Politics of Sexuality: Lesbians and Gays in Israel*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Livia, Anna. 2001. *Pronoun Envy: Literary Uses of Linguistic Gender*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Livia, Anna, and Kira Hall. 1997. "'It's a Girl!': Bringing Performativity Back to Linguistics." In Anna Livia and Kira Hall (eds.), *Queerly Phrased: Language, Gender and Sexuality*, 3–20. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Milani, Tommaso. 2012. "Introduction: Re-casting Language and Masculinities." *Gender and Language*, 5(2): 175–186.
- Morrish, Liz, and William Leap. 2007. "Sex Talk: Language, Desire, Identity and Beyond." In Helen Sauntson and Sakis Kyratzis (eds.), *Language, Sexualities and Desires: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, 17–40. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Piller, Ingrid. 2002. *Bilingual Couples Talk: The Discursive Construction of Hybridity*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Piller, Ingrid. 2008. "'I Always Wanted to Marry a Cowboy': Bilingual Couples, Language, and Desire." In Terri A. Karis



- and Kyle D. Killian (eds.), *Intercultural Couples: Exploring Diversity in Intimate Relationships*, 53–70. London: Routledge.
- Piller, Ingrid, and Kimie Takahashi. 2006. "A Passion for English: Desire and the Language Market." In Aneta Pavlenko (ed.), *Bilingual Minds: Emotional Experience, Expression, and Representation*, 59–83. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Piller, Ingrid, and Kimie Takahashi. 2010. "At the Intersection of Gender, Language and Transnationalism." In Nikolas Coupland (ed.), *The Handbook of Language and Globalization*, 540–554. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Saussure, Ferdinand de. 1983. *Course in General Linguistics*. La Salle, IL: Open Court.
- Takahashi, Kimie. 2010. "Multilingual Couple Talk: Romance, Identity and the Political Economy of Language." In David Nunan and Julie Choi (eds.), *Language and Culture: Reflective Narratives and the Emergence of Identity*, 199–207. London: Routledge.
- Voloshinov, V. N. 1973. *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, trans. Ladislav Matejka and I. R. Titunik. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Weston, Kath. 1993. "'Do Clothes Make the Woman?' Gender, Performance Theory and Lesbian Eroticism." *Genders*, 17: 1–21.
- Whitehead, Stephen M. 2002. *Men and Masculinities*. Cambridge: Polity.