New perspectives on language and sexual identity.
Liz Morrish and Helen Sauntson.

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Reviewed by Heiko Motschenbacher

The title of Morrish and Sauntson's book, *New Perspectives on Language and Sexual Identity*, makes the rather daring promise to provide 'new' perspectives in a field generally known for scholarly innovation. And yet, this is exactly what the book achieves, making it a must-read for scholars of language and sexuality and language and gender alike. Recent language and sexuality research has been dominated by discussions revolving around 'identity' vs. 'desire'. Rather than replicating these polarizing debates, the authors locate their work between these two positions, despite a somewhat stronger leaning toward the 'identity' end of the continuum. Moreover, although the title of *New Perspectives on Language and Sexual Identity* does not mention gender, the authors Morrish and Sauntson show that the study of language and sexuality cannot be separated from the study of language and gender. The book convincingly argues that the linguistic construction of sexual identity is, in many contexts, more about the construction of gender than about the expression of desire.

The book is well structured and follows a clear line of argumentation. While some passages seem repetitive, this does not tarnish the overall extremely positive impression the book makes. It is written in a highly accessible style despite the complex theoretical considerations that the authors provide. The introduction outlines the field of language and sexuality along with key concepts to guide the analyses of data in the following chapters. Concepts discussed include communities of practice, volitionality, iterability, and tactics of intersubjectivity. Chapters 1 through 6 present the reader with a wealth of innovative approaches

Affiliation

IEAS - Linguistik, Goethe Universität, Frankfurt am Main, Germany.
email: Motschenbacher@em.uni-frankfurt.de

to a range of linguistic data dealing with marginalised, homosexual identities. This approach is valuable because the field of language and sexuality has been characterized by highly theoretical approaches and a lack of verification through empirical data. Furthermore, whereas the relatively young field of language and sexuality has been dominated by research on homosexual identities, the acknowledgement that heterosexualities are linguistically constructed has only recently attained scholarly attention. In their fresh approach to these issues, Morrish and Sauntson focus on data dealing with lesbian identities, to remedy the overwhelming emphasis on gay male identities in language and sexuality research, and provide innovative methodological approaches to the study of homosexualities that complement earlier research.

Chapter 1 explores conversations involving lesbians exclusively or lesbians and their heterosexual female friends through the methodology of structural-functional discourse analysis. The analysis demonstrates that 'lesbianism' is constructed in informal conversation mainly as a form of social identity as opposed to an expression of same-sex female desire. Accordingly, it is often the indexing of non-normative female gender identities that serves as an important tool for constructing lesbian identities. Chapter 2 deals with coming out narratives of lesbians and gay men collected from the Internet. The framework of appraisal theory is applied to this data, which successfully illustrates how certain social institutions may have a liberating impact on marginalised sexual identities whereas others serve to further entrench hegemonic discourses of heteronormativity.

Chapter 3 takes a rather different approach from the other chapters in the book debating the question of whether lesbian teachers should have a coming out in the classroom. This chapter focuses upon introspection and personal anecdotes. While these methods may not appear in themselves innovative, considering that they have existed for quite a long time, here they serve to reclaim insider knowledge as a valuable methodological tool. This is particularly relevant for the study of sexuality, which is not easily accessible through empirical data. The discussion culminates in a political appeal to the queer subject to eschew concealment and to challenge shame, which the authors contend is still the dominant narrative attached to homosexual identities.

Chapter 4 uses corpus linguistics to analyze a collection of lesbian erotic short stories. These data are oriented toward desire more than the kinds of discourse studied in the book and so complement the other chapters well. The analysis compares lesbian erotica with material from gay male erotic texts to demonstrate that – contrary to widely held beliefs – lesbian desire can be expressed linguistically. For example, a central theme in the textual construction of an eroticised lesbian masculinity relies upon the psychological dimension of

power more than the emphasis on physical power in hegemonic constructions of masculinity.

Chapter 5 also deals with lesbian identities, more specifically with the linguistic construction of butch and femme identities in three films that target lesbian audiences. The performativity at work in these constructions depends to a large extent on the exploitation and re-appropriation of linguistic gender stereotypes. Male genderlectal features play a central role in the construction of butch identities, while stereotypically female speech behaviour may be used to stage a femme character. However, these stylistic practices cannot be likened to a mere imitation of heterosexual gender display because they are explicitly combined with homosexual desire, which gives them a subversive edge.

Chapter 6 deals with the coverage of two male politicians in high-quality British newspapers. Both men are subjected to forms of outing as a homophobic policing mechanism. More specifically, a still-closeted politician is exposed to continuous pragmatic outing which over time leads the audience to draw inferences about his homosexual identity. This is ultimately intended to question his credibility. The second politician, who is already out, is more blatantly described in terms of linguistic markers denoting 'camp' that have a ridiculing effect. Both cases illustrate the role of mainstream media institutions in the propagation of public discrimination against non-heterosexuals.

The concluding chapter succinctly recapitulates the proposed lines of argumentation and summarises the key issues encountered throughout the book. Major findings include 1) that there is no such thing as a 'gay code', but rather linguistic resources that may be contextually negotiated and deployed to index gay identities, 2) that language, gender and sexual identity are uniquely interrelated and therefore should not be studied in isolation, and 3) that sexual identity constructions take place at the interface of power structures and agency.

In sum, *New Perspectives on Language and Sexual Identity* reflects the state of the art in both language and sexuality and language and gender research. Moreover, it bears witness to a high degree of originality by furthering contemporary academic debates and by supporting them with a range of diverse empirical data and convincingly applied methodologies.