What has gender got to do with sex? Language, heterosexuality and heteronormativity

In her essay ‘Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence’ (1980), Adrienne Rich pointed out that heterosexuality and lesbianism are not just ‘different but equal’ choices women can make; one of them – heterosexuality – is ‘compulsory’, the other – lesbianism – forbidden. ‘Normal’ development for women is equated with movement through a set of life stages defined largely in terms of heterosexuality (dating, one or more serious ‘steady’ relationships, marriage or cohabitation, having and bringing up children). This trajectory is not simply left to happen ‘naturally’, even though it is always portrayed as a natural phenomenon. Rather it is aggressively promoted in every part of the culture. The other side of that coin is the persecution of women who refuse compulsory heterosexuality, especially if they show a positive preference for sexual and emotional relationships with other women. ‘Lesbian existence’, Rich notes, is a precarious and risky business; and she documents the point with many historical and contemporary examples of women being oppressed because they chose other women, rather than men, as their lovers and most cherished companions.

HETEROSEXUALITY AS A PATRIARCHAL INSTITUTION: THE RADICAL FEMINIST ANALYSIS

The idea of heterosexuality as a norm rather than simply one option among others is still part of feminist thinking, and is also current among queer theorists and activists. But in the Women’s Liberation Movement of the 1970s and early 1980s, that idea was connected to a particular set of arguments about the relationship of sexuality to gender. According to those arguments, compulsory heterosexuality is not just bad because it denies individual women, and indeed individual men, the freedom to define and express their own sexual preferences. Rather, heterosexuality is a political institution, and the ‘compulsory’ status of heterosexuality has a key political
function in maintaining the gender hierarchy that subordinates women to men. Lesbians are threatening, not simply because of their erotic practices, but more fundamentally because they do not submit to the male dominance that is supposed to be all women’s lot. As the radical feminist Charlotte Bunch expressed this idea in a 1972 paper called ‘Lesbians in revolt’ (Bunch 2000[1972]: 332–3):

Male society defines lesbianism as a sexual act, which reflects men’s limited view of women: they think of us only in terms of sex. They also say lesbians are not real women, so a real woman is one who gets fucked by men. We say that a lesbian is a woman whose sense of self and energies, including sexual energies, center around women – she is woman-identified... Woman-identified lesbianism is, then, more than a sexual preference; it is a political choice. It is political because relationships between men and women are essentially political: they involve power and dominance. Since the lesbian actively rejects that relationship and chooses women, she defies the established political system.

Bunch’s term ‘woman-identified lesbianism’ implies that there may be other kinds of lesbianism. This is not the place to detour into the history of feminist political arguments – which were prolonged and sometimes acrimonious – about who counted as a lesbian and on what criteria (did you have to have sexual relationships with women or was it enough to declare yourself ‘woman-identified’? Were lesbians ‘in sexual practice only’ ‘real’ lesbians?) We cite the work of radical feminists like Charlotte Bunch and Adrienne Rich in order to illustrate the point that for these women and many others who were active feminists, the analysis of sexuality as a social/political phenomenon was not separate from the analysis of gender as a social/political phenomenon. The power structures at issue were taken to be the same ones in both cases, and in essence these were gendered power structures.

The ‘established political system’ which the lesbian ‘defies’ is the system of male supremacy, which depends on the normative or compulsory status of heterosexuality. It is within heterosexual relationships (prototypically, within marriage) that men’s power over women has been most directly affirmed by the law as well as by custom and practice. It is not so long since husbands in Western bourgeois societies legally owned their wives’ property and earnings, and could chastise their wives physically and rape them with impunity. Even after legal reform, many old assumptions about men’s rights in marriage have persisted (domestic violence is still prevalent, and it remains difficult to get legal redress in cases of marital rape).
Feminists also pointed to the economic inequality that is institutionalized in heterosexual relationships – historically men have been paid more than women on the grounds that they are responsible for the financial support of their households, while women are expected to contribute most of the unpaid domestic labour (this pattern has persisted even in the age of the dual-income family). And Women’s Liberation activists like Charlotte Bunch were critical of the emotional dependence on men which heterosexuality entailed for women. A woman who has primary sexual and emotional relationships with men has an interest in being the kind of woman men want to have those relationships with, and in male supremacist society, feminists argued, that essentially means a subordinate woman. As Martha Shelley noted (2000[1970]: 305) ‘[men] don’t like women who aren’t dependent on them – who aren’t sitting at home waiting for the phone to ring, waiting for “him” to come home, women who don’t feel totally crushed by the thought that some man doesn’t love them any more, women who aren’t terrified at the idea that a man might leave them’.

The radical feminist analysis reverses the common-sense assumption that heterosexuality arises from the natural attraction between pre-existing ‘opposites’, men and women. The alternative analysis is that heterosexuality as a political institution requires men and women to be ‘opposites’, and that is why they are socialized to be as they are – different in very particular ways. From this point of view, a lesbian is as much a gender deviant as she is a sexual deviant: since she is outside the heterosexual system, she can reject the oppressive forms of femininity it requires. The French feminist Monique Wittig takes the same thought a step further with her notoriously bold claim ‘[l]esbians are not women’ (1992: 32). ‘Woman’ for Wittig is not a biological category, but a social and political status which only exists within a sociopolitical system based on compulsory heterosexuality; just as the racist term ‘nigger’ does not denote a biological category, but a social and political status within a system that grounds and naturalizes white superiority.

A similar sort of analysis can also be applied to gay men, even though this was not a central concern of most radical feminist analysis. Indeed, given the tendency to analyse sexual oppression in terms of gender, it is not surprising that many feminist writers saw gay men first and foremost as men, and hence as beneficiaries and supporters of patriarchal institutions and values. Significantly, one much-discussed piece of evidence for this view (which we will return to in the next chapter) centred on language: the parodic use of female names and of stereotypical ‘Woman’s Language’ by
gay men. However, while gay men may indeed benefit from the privileges that a male-dominated society confers upon men (privileges that differ, of course, along lines of class and race, and that also are affected by the degree to which individual men choose to make sexuality a political issue), the open rejection of conventional masculinity, which is defined as heterosexual, is not without penalties. Like lesbians, gay men can be seen as traitors to their gender; even though in the case of men what is being refused is the powerful social position, not the subordinate one. In both cases, though, the rejection of compulsory heterosexuality constitutes a challenge to its status as natural, necessary and desirable. And one consequence of that rejection is harassment and persecution.

We have presented these radical feminist ideas at some length because they are relevant to the history of the field of inquiry this book deals with, language and sexuality. As we noted in our introductory chapter, the study of language and sexuality has been closely bound up with the study of language and gender. More exactly, while some lines of investigation (e.g. research on the special vocabularies associated with sexual subcultures) developed separately, questions about the broader linguistic correlates of sexual identity have tended to be seen as falling within the scope of language and gender studies. Since that field, which emerged in the early 1970s, drew its theoretical apparatus from feminism, it is not surprising that its treatment of sexuality or sexual identity reflected the analyses which were current among feminists at the time.

**Language, gender and compulsory heterosexuality**

In fact, early work on language and gender had rather little to say about sexuality, at least explicitly, and this omission has been noted critically by more recent scholars. In their editors’ introduction to the collection *Queerly Phrased*, Anna Livia and Kira Hall (1997b) suggest that early feminist work is flawed by its apparent assumption that ‘women’ means ‘heterosexual women’, and its failure to consider lesbians. But while the body of linguistic research they are talking about can indeed be criticized for neglecting questions about diversity among women – it rarely attended to class and racial or ethnic differences either – the specific criticism made by Livia and Hall overlooks an important point. What was assumed by feminists in the era of the Women’s Liberation Movement was not that all women were heterosexual (after all, this was a time when issues of sexuality were hotly debated, with many feminists publicly rejecting heterosexuality). Rather feminists claimed that *femininity* – the gender-ideal against which women’s
behaviour was judged by society at large – was inextricably linked to the 
institution of heterosexuality.

Some feminist researchers investigated the linguistic dynamics of 
heterosexual relationships directly. Pamela Fishman (1983) described the 
interactional work (in an earlier version of her paper she dubbed it ‘in-
teractional shitwork’) done by women in conversation with their male 
partners, basing her account on data from a sample of heterosexual cou-
ples. She found that the women in her sample asked large numbers of 
questions whose function was to facilitate men’s contributions to con-
versation. Since men did not return the favour, the result was a pattern 
whereby women offered men the floor and supported them in holding 
it, while receiving little or no encouragement to talk on subjects of inter-
est to themselves. Fishman likened women’s responsibility for the work of 
keeping conversations going to their responsibility for doing the house-
work. One implication of that analogy is that the unequal division of 
linguistic labour, like that of domestic labour, is part of the heterosexual 
contract.

Other feminists were interested in the kinds of language that symbol-
ically signal femininity. Probably the best known of all the early femi-
nist works on language and gender, Robin Lakoff’s book Language and 
Woman’s Place (1975), proposed the idea of a distinctive feminine register 
which Lakoff called ‘women’s language’ (WL). The characteristics of WL 
as Lakoff described them included superpolite forms and the avoidance 
of strong expletives (‘fudge’ rather than ‘damn’ or ‘shit’), rising intonation 
on declarative sentences, question tags added to propositions whose va-
lidity the speaker does not need to check (e.g. ‘it’s a beautiful day, isn’t 
it?’), and ‘trivial’ vocabulary items such as ‘lovely’, ‘divine’ and elaborate 
colour terms (e.g. ‘mauve’ rather than just ‘purple’). What the items on 
this list have in common is that they tend to reduce the force of utterances 
which include them, making the speaker sound less certain, less confident 
and less authoritative or powerful than she would otherwise. The implica-
tion is that one marks femininity linguistically by symbolically minimizing 
one’s power. Lakoff opposed this way of speaking not to ‘men’s language’ 
but to ‘neutral language’. She did not suggest that all women used WL 
all the time – for instance, she said they might well avoid WL in pro-
fessional or academic contexts – but she did suggest that the existence of 
this socially meaningful register faced women speakers with a dilemma. 
They could use neutral language and be judged unfeminine, ‘less than a 
woman’, or use WL and risk being judged less than a fully competent human 
being.
CHARACTERISTICS OF LAKOFF’S ‘WOMEN’S LANGUAGE’

1. Women often seem to hit phonetic points less precisely than men: lisped ‘s’s, obscured vowels.
2. Women’s intonational contours display more variety than men’s.
3. Women use diminutives and euphemisms more than men . . .
4. Women make more use of expressive forms (adjectives and not nouns or verbs and, in that category, those expressing emotional rather than intellectual evaluation) than men: lovely, divine.
5. Women use forms that convey impreciseness: so, such.
6. Women use hedges of all kinds [‘Well . . .’; ‘I don’t really know, but maybe . . .’] more than men.
7. Women use intonation patterns that resemble questions, indicating uncertainty or need for approval.
8. Women’s voices are breathier than men’s.
9. Women are more indirect and polite than men.
10. Women won’t commit themselves to an opinion.
11. In conversation, women are more likely to be interrupted, less likely to introduce successful topics.
12. Women’s communicative style tends to be collaborative rather than competitive.
13. More of women’s communication is expressed nonverbally (by gesture and intonation) than men’s.
14. Women are more careful to be ‘correct’ when they speak, using better grammar and fewer colloquialisms than men.

Source: Lakoff (1990: 204)

On the surface this argument is not about sexuality as such, but it is possible to make a link between the kind of femininity symbolized by WL and the positioning of women within heterosexual relations. Charlotte Bunch (quoted above) notes disapprovingly that in men’s ‘limited’ view, ‘a real woman is one who gets fucked by men’ – from which it would follow that only heterosexual women have femininity, this being the key attribute of ‘real’ women. Whether or not one agrees with Bunch about the prevalence of the assumption she criticizes among men, her formulation does capture something about the way femininity is constructed ideologically in male-dominated societies. ‘Feminine’ qualities such as weakness and dependency are frequently eroticized, and we will see later in this chapter that WL itself can be deployed for erotic effect. In choosing to contrast WL with
‘neutral’ rather than ‘men’s’ language, Lakoff herself is making use of the feminist insight that women are sexualized to a degree that men are not. The contexts in which she says women avoid WL are contexts in which competence and success depend on not being perceived in purely sexual terms.

At the beginning of the 1990s, the linguist Deborah Tannen published a bestselling book, *You Just Don’t Understand* (1990), on the subject of male–female misunderstandings. Once again, sexuality is not the overt focus of Tannen’s book, but it is evident that the communication problems of heterosexual couples are central to it. It is also evident that the book can be read (though Tannen herself would contest this reading) as supporting Fishman’s argument that heterosexual relationships position women and men asymmetrically: women have to do more interactional work for less interpersonal reward. As one reviewer, Senta Troemel-Ploetz, noted (1991), many or most of the misunderstandings cited by Tannen as examples of quasi-cultural differences between women and men mysteriously end up with the man’s needs rather than the woman’s being met. Theoretically, it can be argued that Tannen’s model of male/female difference is essentially a ‘complementarity’ model – the linguistic and interpersonal preferences she attributes to men and women are not just randomly different, but arise from a division of labour whereby the two sexes in principle have non-overlapping roles. This recalls the point made above, that women and men are required to complement one another – to be ‘opposite’ rather than merely different – largely because of the institutionalization of heterosexuality. Heterosexuality (prototypically in the form of marriage) is the key social institution for which and through which gender complementarity is produced. Unlike the radical feminists we have cited, Tannen does not take a critical position in relation to the social institution of heterosexuality, but the existence of that institution is presupposed in her account of gender difference, which arguably makes little sense without it.

The foregoing discussion has drawn attention to the (hetero)sexual dimension of some influential research on language and gender. While heterosexuality may not always be mentioned explicitly in this body of work, it is often strongly implicated in the discussion of gender and power (more precisely, perhaps, of femininity and powerlessness). An important assumption here, reflecting feminist (especially radical feminist) analyses of the relationship between compulsory heterosexuality and women’s subordination, is that heterosexual speech is more or less equivalent to gender-appropriate speech. The linguistic features that index femininity linguistically also
index heterosexual identity, because of the crucial role played by compulsory heterosexuality in the construction of gender identity and gender relations.

Explicit references to sexuality in the language and gender literature are not usually references to heterosexuality, however; instead they are references to ‘marked’ or minority sexual identities, especially gay and lesbian ones. In these references, too, we can discern the influence of the feminist tendency to treat sexuality primarily as an aspect of the gender system. Just as heterosexual speech is identified with gender-appropriate speech, so it is assumed that non-heterosexuals will be distinguished from heterosexuals by a tendency to gender-inappropriate speech. In other words, it is assumed that gay men will tend to talk like women, and lesbians will tend to talk like men. In some cases, this suggestion appears to be little more than a recycling of the popular, untheorized view of homosexuality as gender deviance or ‘crossing’ (see our discussion in chapter 1). Lakoff, for example, suggests that some features of WL are also used by ‘effeminate’ men, a category in which she places upper-class Britons and college professors as well as gay men. In other cases, though, particularly where lesbians rather than gay men are the subject of discussion from a radical feminist perspective, what underpins the suggestion is equally likely to be a particular model of the relationship of language to gender and sexuality, as outlined above. If femininity is signalled linguistically by a weak, powerless or deferential style of speaking, and if one motivation for this form of femininity is the dependence on male approval induced by compulsory heterosexuality, then lesbians — women who ‘defy the established political system’ by refusing heterosexuality and disdaining male approval — may well be expected to eschew ‘feminine’ speech styles, if only because they have nothing much to gain by adopting them.

THE QUEER CHALLENGE: SEPARATING GENDER AND SEXUALITY

The idea of lesbians as gender deviants or ‘outlaws’ has been embraced enthusiastically by some activists a generation younger than the early radical feminists. One writer who has linked the lesbian-as-outlaw idea specifically to issues of language and gender is the transgender activist Kate Bornstein. While in transition from her original status as a man to her new self-chosen identity as a (lesbian) woman, Bornstein, like many male-to-female (MTF) trans people, sought expert guidance on changing her speech. She was not, however, very impressed with the instruction she received:
I was taught to speak in a very high-pitched, very breathy, sing-song voice and
to tag questions onto the end of each sentence. And I was supposed to smile all
the time when I was talking. And I said ‘Oh, I don’t want to talk like that!’ The
teachers assumed that you were going to be a heterosexual woman. No one was
going to teach you to be a lesbian because being a lesbian was as big an outlaw as
transsexual. (quoted in Bell 1993: 112)

Materials about language and speech for MTF transexuals are strikingly
indebted to Robin Lakoff’s early account of ‘women’s language’, and sub-
sequent popular elaborations of it. This is perhaps odd, given that most
language and gender researchers today regard WL more as an idealized
symbolic construct than an empirically accurate account of the speech of
the ‘average’ woman in the social milieu Lakoff was writing from (i.e. white,
professional, English-speaking American society). Advising MTF transex-
uals to adopt WL features as a basis for their new female linguistic personae
defines an ‘appropriate’ performance of gender in terms of a gender stereo-
type. From any feminist point of view this is open to criticism (and we
should probably point out that it runs absolutely counter to the spirit of
Lakoff’s original analysis: she described WL in order to criticize it as an
artefact of an oppressive gender system, and was presumably hoping that
in doing so she would hasten its demise). Kate Bornstein’s particular ob-
jection, however, focuses less on the stereotypical nature of WL and more
on the sexual connotations of the stereotype: to her it is obvious that this
stereotype is heterosexual, and consequently does not provide an appropri-
ate model for someone like herself who identifies as a lesbian. It also seems
from the comments quoted above that part of what Bornstein rejects as
‘heterosexual’ is the subordinate status she takes conventionally feminine
speech to symbolize.

The position taken by Kate Bornstein on WL shows some continuity
with the radical feminist analysis, but it also shows the influence of an
alternative way of looking at the relationship between gender and sexuality,
which developed during the late 1980s and 1990s, as new forms of theory
and activism emerged around sexual identity and practice. These new de-
velopments were influenced by feminism, but at the same time they rejected
the assumption that feminism in and of itself could provide an appropriate
model for the analysis or the politics of sexuality. Feminism is a political
movement concerned with advancing the interests of women, and the key
social relation it theorizes is gender. While it is certainly necessary for a
theory of gender to discuss sexuality, the argument can be made that an
account of sexuality which subsumes it entirely under the heading of gen-
der is both theoretically insufficient and politically unsatisfactory. Sexuality
ADVICE ON SPEECH FOR MTF TRANSEXUALS

From *Miss Vera’s Finishing School for Boys who Want to be Girls* (Vera 1997):

The student learns to let her voice rise and fall as she speaks... A man might say, in a near monotone, ‘That’s a nice dress’, but a woman, allowing her vocal pitch to soar, would say ‘You look gorgeous!’ (131)

Another thing our girls must remember is that as men they speak from a place that is deeper in the throat. As their femmeselves, each must try to start her words at the roof of her mouth. A good way to do that is to start each sentence with an ‘h’ sound. This gives our girl more breath and brings her voice into the roof of her mouth... Another good tip is to end sentences on an up note, almost as a question. (132)

Girl talk includes learning to listen as well as to speak... In conversation, women tend to have greater willingness to listen, while men are more intent on being heard. (133)

From *From Masculine to Feminine and All Points In Between* (Stevens 1990):

I find that my own language is much less obscene as a woman than it was when I lived as a full-time man. It seems that I find myself thinking about what I am saying more, and concluding that using obscenities as a woman would be alien to the refined front I am trying to present. Even the occasional ‘damn’ or ‘hell’ comes difficult to my lips as a woman. Come to think of it, I’m probably a better person for it, too. (76)

When women talk, they move their mouths more than men; here again, smiling comes into play. If you don’t believe it, try talking while smiling and talking without smiling. It’s much easier to talk with a smile. Your mouth moves more, you’re more animated and people tend to have a warmer feeling as they listen to you. (76–7)

The more facial expression, the more smiles, the more you look and listen, the better feminine conversationalist you will be. Good advice for all of us, isn’t it? (77)

and gender may be interdependent, but they are not reducible to one another.

One of the earliest and most influential statements of this position comes from the feminist anthropologist Gayle Rubin. In her article ‘Thinking sex’, Rubin argued that sexuality is more complex than is generally recognized by feminist analyses like those of Charlotte Bunch or Adrienne Rich, which
see sexual oppression as derived from gender oppression. In opposition to this view, Rubin argued that lesbians are oppressed not simply because they are unruly women, i.e. not just because of gender, but also because of sexuality. Lesbians are not just any kind of unruly women, Rubin noted: in the eyes of society, they are sexual perverts. And like other sexual perverts – gay men, transvestites, sadomasochists – they suffer for that reason. Rubin agreed with previous feminist analysis that gender and sexuality are indeed related and interact in significant ways. But she disagreed that sexuality might be explained solely through an analysis of gender, and she argued that sexuality and gender constitute distinct arenas of social organization and practice. ‘Sex’, asserted Rubin, is a vector of oppression. The system of sexual oppression cuts across other modes of social inequality, such as racial, class, ethnic or gendered inequality, and it sorts individuals and groups according to its own intrinsic dynamics. It is not reducible to, or understandable in terms of class, race, ethnicity, or gender. Wealth, white skin, male gender, and ethnic privileges can mitigate the effects of sexual stratification. A rich, white, male pervert will generally be less affected than a poor, black, female pervert. But even the most privileged are not immune to sexual oppression. (1984: 22)

The sexual stratification and oppression to which Rubin was referring is the social and legal production of a hierarchical system of sexual value in which monogamous married reproducing heterosexuals are at the top of the hierarchy, and promiscuous homosexuals, transvestites and others cluster around the bottom. Rubin accused feminism of maintaining that hierarchy even while inverting it. She criticized the tendency in radical feminist literature to interpret all sexuality in strict relation to heterosexuality and classify those acts that seemed least heterosexual (e.g. non-penetrative sex between two women) as good, and any other kind of sexual act (the use of pornography, sadomasochistic role play, the exchange of money for sex, gay male orgies, heterosexual penetration) as politically retrograde and bad.

Rubin concluded her article with the suggestion that feminism is not the place to look for a radical theory of sexuality. Instead, she argued that the time had come for activists and scholars to move beyond feminism and develop ‘an autonomous theory and politics specific to sexuality’.

Feminist conceptual tools were developed to detect and analyze gender-based hierarchies. To the extent that these overlap with erotic stratifications, feminist theory has some explanatory power. But as the issues become less those of gender and more those of sexuality, feminist analysis becomes misleading and often irrelevant... In the long run, feminism’s critique of gender hierarchy must be incorporated
Rubin’s article was an early inspiration for the perspectives on sexuality and gender that in the early 1990s came to be known as ‘queer theory’. The name ‘queer theory’ is misleading, since there is no one ‘theory’ to which it refers: developed by philosophers, literary theorists and film theorists, queer theory is a cluster of perspectives, not a single theory. Furthermore, the main target of queer theory’s enquiries is not homosexuals, but rather heterosexuality and heteronormativity, defined as those structures, institutions, relations and actions that promote and produce heterosexuality as natural, self-evident, desirable, privileged and necessary. Queer theory interrogates heterosexuality by dismissing its claims to naturalness, and examining, instead, how it is vigorously demanded and actively produced in specific sociocultural contexts and situated interactions.

A major difference between queer theory and radical feminism is that whereas radical feminism continues to see sexual oppression as a reflex of gender oppression (Rich famously concluded ‘Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence’ with the observation that ‘the power men everywhere wield over women...has become a model for every other form of exploitation and illegitimate control’ (1980: 660)), queer theory follows Rubin’s advice to see sexuality and gender as separate and only partially overlapping social phenomena. In practice, this difference does not always mean very much. Judith Butler’s work, for example, is generally considered to be queer – indeed, her 1990 book Gender Trouble is often cited as one of queer theory’s inaugural acts. However, her argument that our bodies, sexualities and identities are articulated and produced through what she calls the ‘heterosexual matrix’ owes much to the writings of radical feminists like Rich and Wittig (as Butler herself acknowledges). One point of lasting disagreement, however, does stand out: whereas radical feminism continues to maintain that certain kinds of sexualities and identities – such as butch-femme lesbians, transexuals, drag queens, and sex workers who claim to enjoy what they do – conserve and perpetuate some of the most pernicious dimensions of heteropatriarchy, queer theory, in stark contrast, foregrounds those same sexualities and identities as threats to heterosexual hegemony, and as potentially agents of subversion and change.

What are the implications of these approaches for our understanding of people’s linguistic behaviour? In the study of language-using as a social
practice it is axiomatic that language is a resource through which its users construct their identities. An obvious question to ask, therefore, is whether and to what extent sexual identity and gender identity are constructed using the same linguistic resources. A less obvious, but equally important, question is: to the extent that the same linguistic resources do enter into the construction of both gendered and sexual identities, how does this actually work? As we have already said, there is a persistent, common-sense assumption that heterosexual identity is implied by a speaker’s use of ‘gender-appropriate’ styles of speaking, whereas ‘gender-inappropriate’ speech styles imply that the speaker is not heterosexual. We take the view that this assumption oversimplifies what is actually a more complex relationship between gender and sexual identity, and later we will pursue that argument using concrete examples in which the complexity of the relationship is apparent. First, though, we need to say something more general about how language ‘works’ in the construction of identity, and especially of gendered identities.

**Indexing gender**

We have already outlined Robin Lakoff’s concept of ‘women’s language’, a way of speaking constituted by various features which, according to her argument in *Language and Woman’s Place* (1975), identify the person who uses them as a woman. A more technical way of putting this is to say that these features index (feminine) gender. To ‘index’ means to ‘point to’ something. Hence, when linguists say that particular features of language, such as regional accent or specialized lexicon, ‘index’ a speaker’s identity or social status, what they mean is that those features are associated with specific social positions, and that a speaker, in using them (or appearing to use them), becomes associated with the positions that those linguistic features point to.

The question arises, however, of whether gender is indexed directly by language. Lakoff herself suggests that the features she identifies as constituting ‘women’s language’ do not have the single, simple meaning ‘this is a woman talking’. She claims that they also communicate things like deference, insecurity and lack of authority. This might imply that gender is indexed indirectly rather than directly. The ‘primary’ meaning of a feature like superpoliteness is ‘deference’; but because this trait is associated, in the community Lakoff is discussing, with women rather than men, the use of superpolite features acquires the conventional ‘secondary’ meaning of ‘femininity’. In fact, not long after the publication of *Language and Woman’s*
Place it was suggested that what Lakoff described as ‘women’s language’ would be better labelled ‘powerless language’. In a study of the styles of speaking used by witnesses in court, the researchers O’Barr and Atkins (1980) found that Lakoff’s WL features were used most frequently by low-status witnesses of both sexes, and avoided most consistently by high-status and expert witnesses of both sexes. O’Barr and Atkins suggested that Lakoff had in effect misidentified what was signified by the use or the avoidance of so-called WL features: it was power rather than gender. Arguably, however, there is right on both sides of this argument. Since in male-dominated societies the relationship between the two variables is non-random and socially meaningful (there is a regular, albeit not invariant, association between power and masculinity / powerlessness and femininity), in many contexts the language that signifies one may also signify the other. In a paper entitled ‘Indexing gender’, the linguistic anthropologist Elinor Ochs (1992) suggested that this duality of meaning is the rule rather than the exception: the relationship between language and gender is almost always indirect, mediated by something else. Ways of speaking are associated in the first instance with particular roles, activities and personality traits (e.g. ‘motherhood’, ‘gossiping’, ‘modesty’), and to the extent that these roles, activities and traits are culturally coded as gendered (the ones just cited, for instance, are coded as ‘feminine’), the ways of speaking associated with them become indices of gender.

Styles that conventionally index gender in the manner described by Ochs may themselves be appropriated to communicate other kinds of meaning in particular contexts. For instance, Cameron (2000) argues that certain ‘feminine’ styles of speech are now being widely used in the telephone service business to signify a particular, caring and empathetic, attitude to customers. That these ways of speaking retain their gendered connotations can be inferred from the fact that many managers believe women are ‘more natural’ users of the preferred service style, and there is a preference for employing women in service roles. But in this context gender (‘this is a woman talking’) is not the only or primary meaning of the style, which is also required of male service workers, and routinely used by them. What is indexed is not membership of the gender category ‘woman’ so much as membership of the occupational category ‘server’ – though of course it is not coincidental that the speech style associated with serving borrows heavily from that associated with femininity. The point is, no way of speaking has only one potential meaning; the meanings it conveys in one context are not necessarily the same ones it conveys in another, and it may also acquire new meanings over time.
The common-sense assumption that sexual identity is indexed linguistically by the use of either ‘gender-appropriate’ or ‘gender-inappropriate’ ways of speaking is complicated by the account we have just given of how indexicality works. The common-sense view presupposes that there is a direct relationship between a speaker’s gender and their use of linguistic features x, y and z, whereas the argument of Ochs and others is that this relationship is indirect: linguistic features are associated with gender via their association with something else that can itself be associated with gender. To see more clearly what difference it might make whether we understand the relationship as direct or indirect, consider the hypothetical case of a professional woman who uses a direct, forceful style of speaking and is described by her colleagues as ‘talking like a man’. Is this woman using language to signal that she thinks of herself as a man or wants others to take her as a man? Or is she using it to signal a ‘professional’ identity by indexing qualities like authority and self-confidence, which are also, however, associated with masculinity? We think the second possibility is far more likely. If our hypothetical woman has a problem, it arises from the fact that her way of using language has more than one meaning: what she regards as a way of speaking appropriate to her professional role and status can also be interpreted by others as inappropriate to her gender. (Men doing customer service work have a similar problem – some are uncomfortable with the ‘feminizing’ effect of the way they have to speak, and some report disparaging remarks on this subject from customers.)

In the hypothetical example we have just given, the same way of speaking signifies both a professional identity and a gendered identity, and in practice these are difficult to separate: the two meanings coexist, and both of them are always potentially relevant. The actual balance between them is not determined in advance by some general principle, but has to be negotiated in specific situations, since meaning is not only in the language itself, but also in the context where language is being used by particular speakers for particular purposes.

At this point we want to try to show how the argument we have just made is relevant to the relationship of gender and sexual identity as these are constructed in actual linguistic practice. The common-sense assumption, as noted above, is that speakers mobilize the gender-indexing capacity of language to index sexual identity. Gender in this account takes precedence over sexuality. Furthermore, the construction of sexuality is assumed to depend mainly on the speaker’s production of a speech-style with a particular gendered meaning (for heterosexuals, this will ‘match’ the speaker’s own gender, while for others it may incorporate deliberate deviations from the
expected gender norm). In what follows we will try to demonstrate that while the above assumptions may work in some cases, they are contradicted in others; from which we will conclude that a more complex understanding is necessary. The cases we discuss all concern the construction of heterosexual identity (gay and lesbian identities are the topic of chapter 4), and among the points they illustrate are the following.

- Although heterosexuality, because of its normative and naturalized status, can be thought of as the ‘unmarked’ or ‘default’ sexual identity, it does not necessarily go unmarked in discourse. Language-users in various contexts may be actively engaged in constructing heterosexual identities, both for themselves and for one another.

- The construction of heterosexual identities is not always accomplished by deploying gender-appropriate styles of speech. ‘Masculine’ or ‘feminine’ speech styles can be used by men and women to display heterosexual orientation, but equally that orientation can be displayed using styles that are strikingly at odds with the expected gender norm. What is conveyed by using any particular style of speech cannot be interpreted in isolation from questions about the context and content of talk.

- The mapping between gender and (hetero)sexuality is not unidirectional. Just as gendered talk may be (but does not have to be) a means for constructing heterosexual identities, heterosexual talk (i.e. talk which overtly marks the speaker as heterosexual) may be a means for constructing gender identities and/or homosocial relationships among people of the same gender.

**Example (1): Using gendered styles to construct sexual meanings**

Our first example is taken from a study of telephone sex workers’ language by Kira Hall (1995). Hall studied the linguistic practices of ‘fantasy makers’ working for telephone sex lines in the San Francisco Bay area of California, concentrating on lines that serve a male heterosexual clientele. Phone sex is of particular interest, sociolinguistically speaking, because what clients pay for is the experience of being aroused by talk alone: there is no visual or tactile contact with the worker, who depends entirely on the resources of language and voice to keep the client on the line for as long as possible (phone sex is generally charged for by the minute, so longer calls mean higher wages). ‘Fantasy maker’, the preferred occupational term of many of the workers Hall spoke to, is an apt description, since their job is to create a fantasy that appeals to the caller, using language to construct a setting,
a narrative, and a central female character who is both the narrator and a major protagonist in the verbal action.

Hall observed that fantasy makers often made use of a speech-style that was strongly reminiscent of Robin Lakoff’s ‘women’s language’ with its marked, feminine vocabulary and intonation. Their conversational strategies also recalled some of the interactional patterns Pamela Fishman found women using with male heterosexual partners. One of the women Hall interviewed explained, for instance:

I can describe myself now so that it lasts for about five minutes, by using lots of adjectives . . . and that’s both – it’s not just wasting time, because they need to build up a mental picture in their minds about what you look like, and also it allows me to use words that are very feminine. I always wear peach, or apricot, or black lace, or charcoal-colored lace not just black. (Hall 1995: 199–200, emphasis added)

Another interviewee spoke about the ‘lilting’ quality and ‘inviting tone’ she tried to put into her voice, while a third noted that she would often use supportive questions like ‘do you like that?’ to involve shy or silent callers (Hall 1995: 200). Many interviewees linked the erotic qualities of their speech to the ‘femininity’ of the language they used: in other words, sex was intimately linked with gender. But while they were no less gendered when talking to Kira Hall than when working on the phone lines, they did not use the same linguistic style to perform gender identity in both contexts. ‘Women’s language’ was part of their professional persona, adopted because of its potential to convey a particular sexual meaning in interactions with male clients. Fantasy makers made a clear separation between themselves and their characters, and between the way they constructed gender when they were working and the way they constructed it in other contexts.

In some cases the separation between worker and persona was extreme: while all of them created characters that were female and heterosexual, not all the fantasy makers Hall met identified as heterosexual in non-working life, and one fantasy maker in her sample was not even female. In addition, Hall learned that it is common for telephone sex workers to create a range of characters of different races and ethnicities. In order to cater for different tastes they might offer callers the opportunity to talk to an Asian, Black, Latina or white woman, with all these personae being created by the same individual using the resources of language variation (e.g. accent, intonation, voice quality). Hall was told that the ‘best’ Black women on the phones are often white in reality, and vice versa. Andy, a Mexican-American male who earns his living on the sex lines ventriloquizing heterosexual women, reeled off the range of women he could produce:
If I want an Oriental, then I have to put a little—you know, then I have to think oriental sort of ((laughs)) and then it comes out a little bit different. Well it’s—for example, okay (1.0) ((in alternating high and low pitch)) hull’o’:, ‘hi’i::, ‘how are’you::? This is Fong ^Su^u:. ((in natural voice)) See? [...] and then the Hispanic voice is more like ((c cleared throat, in high breathy voice)) He:lo::: this is Esta es Amelia, cómo estás/ (.hhhhh) o:::h lo siento bien (1.0) rica. ((in natural voice)) Then I think I’m like watching Spanish dancers or Mexican dancers—you know, with their big dresses? [...] and then Black is a little bit—you know, on and on it goes. [My Black name is] Winona—Winona. [...] and then there’s the Southern sound, you know, and then like I say, there’s a British sound and a French sound. For the southern woman I’ll use, like, Belle, ((laughs)) something Belle. ((laughs)). Oh, I play right up to it sometimes...You definitely have to use ((in slow southern accent, with elongated vowels)) a Sou:::thern a:::cent. (Hall 1995: 203–4)

**TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS**

[hhh = exhalation, .hhh = inhalation, (1.0) = timed pause in tenths of a second,— = short pause less than 0.2 secs., :: = lengthened segment, ^ ^ = enclosed syllables spoken at higher pitch than surrounding discourse, ? = rising intonation, _ = emphatic stress, (()) = non-verbal communication and/or analyst’s commentary, [ ] = editorial additions/clarifications, [...] = portion of original transcript omitted.]

This study is a good illustration of the point that heterosexuality may be actively marked, as opposed to just taken for granted, in discourse. It also illustrates that, while gendered speech styles can indeed be an important resource for constructing heterosexuality in the context of telephone sex, there is more to constructing heterosexuality in this context than simply ‘talking like a woman’. Since gendered speech comes in many varieties (differentiated among other things by age, race, ethnicity, personality and social or occupational role), you have to ask what kind of feminine speech is being used to construct heterosexuality. Some registers and styles of speaking that are recognizable gendered are nevertheless not conventionally associated with sex (an example is the way of talking to infants sometimes labelled ‘motherese’, which tends to index femininity, but is only erotic for a small minority of men). Other ways of speaking, however, are not only gendered but also conventionally imbued with erotic significance. When fantasy makers adopt features of Lakoff’s ‘women’s language’, or use markedly high pitch, sing-song intonation and breathy voice, what they are
doing is not imitating the everyday speech of any group of ‘real’ women, but producing a stylized performance in which certain gendered characteristics are particularly emphasized and exaggerated. This intensification of gender seems to be one conventional strategy for investing speech with a more strongly sexual meaning.

Another important point this study underlines is that the linguistic construction of identity is not simply about ‘authentic’ self-expression. The woman the client is talking to is a linguistic creation, and may bear very little resemblance to her creator – though her persona is that of, say, a demure Asian schoolgirl, the fantasy maker herself might be a fifty-year-old white woman, a lesbian or, indeed, as Hall found in one case, a bisexual Mexican-American male. Whatever her persona, the sexual excitement and intense interest in the client which her voice conveys is overwhelmingly likely to be simulated. Telephone sex is particularly congenial to this kind of deception because of the absence of any visual or tactile information. One interviewee told Kira Hall that a successful fantasy maker needs ‘big tits in her voice’. In face-to-face sex work, no doubt, the actual size of a woman’s breasts would be a more important consideration than their vocal representation. But the interviewee’s remark is not just a comment on the specific conditions of telephone sex, it is also a comment on the nature of language as a shared communicative resource. A fantasy maker who puts ‘big tits in her voice’ is making use of shared knowledge about what kind of voice says ‘big tits’. In this case, the phantasmatic tits were voiced through ‘words that are very feminine’, like ‘peach’, and by talk about feminine bodies and articles of clothing. Anyone who has that knowledge may use it, whether or not the resulting utterance is an ‘authentic’ representation (i.e. regardless of the actual size of their breasts). The link between a way of speaking and the social meanings it conveys is not created by the individual speaker; individuals can choose whether and how to deploy particular meanings, but the meanings themselves pre-exist that choice. If linguistic resources were not shared in this way, we would not be able reliably to convey anything about ourselves to others through our linguistic choices. But the way language works also creates the potential for faking: by appropriating the established, shared meanings of particular ways of speaking, speakers like the fantasy makers in Hall’s study are able to construct identities which are not ‘authentic’. (We will return to this point in chapter 4, where we discuss the vexed question of whether there is or could be an authentically gay speech, and in chapter 5, where we consider the relationship between sexual meaning and speaker intention.)
Example (2): Doing Gender by Talking about Sex

Our next example comes from an ethnographic study of hostess clubs in Tokyo, Japan, by Anne Allison (1994). Like telephone sex lines, hostess clubs are particularly fertile ground for sociolinguistic investigation, because what goes on in them is primarily talk. Although the clubs are considered part of Japan’s ‘water business’ (mizu shōbai), the term which is used to refer to the sex industry, ‘hostess’ is not a euphemism for ‘prostitute’, and hostesses are not employed to have sex with the male guests who come to the club. Rather, hostess clubs are places where men go (encouraged and often paid for by the corporations they work for) to socialize with one another in their roles as men. Conversation is not supposed to be about work, nor about home and family. The hierarchies of the workplace are supposed to be broken down as co-workers relax and talk informally. Women’s presence, and especially their linguistic contribution, is crucial to this project. The role of the hostess, Allison says, is ‘to smooth the conversational path between men’ (1994: 47), and she explains how this is done as follows:

If the man tells a joke, the hostess comments that he’s a good teller of jokes... If the man sings a song, the hostess proclaims him one of the finest singers she’s ever heard... The skill, as I learned, is to accept, reflect and augment the man as he has chosen to reveal himself. Whether he talks about his 30-foot penis or his joy in collecting stamps, the hostess is supposed to hear him out, comment on what he says, and swear that the qualities he has revealed are exactly what a woman like herself finds irresistibly attractive. The hostess is not supposed to challenge the man’s presentation of himself, and she is never to co-opt his authority by reversing their roles. (1994: 177)

In this description of what hostesses do, two points are of particular interest. One is the obvious gender asymmetry. The function of women’s talk in this context is to ‘accept, reflect and augment the man’, and men are not expected to reciprocate – in this respect, hostess-club talk bears comparison with the heterosexual couples’ talk described by Pamela Fishman (1983, discussed above). A second interesting point is that this gender asymmetry has an explicitly sexual element. The men’s talk may or may not be explicitly sexual – some men talk about their 30-foot penises, others about their stamp collections – but, either way, the hostess’s response will ideally convey to a man that she finds him ‘irresistibly attractive’ rather than, say, morally admirable or thrillingly powerful. The flattery hostesses engage in is thus directed to the man as a (hetero)sexual being. As Allison points out, though, in the setting of the hostess club this is not actually a prelude to sex, but
Language and sexuality

is seen rather as a strategy for making men feel more masculine and more powerful.

Explicitly sexual talk serves other purposes in the clubs as well. Allison observed many instances of what she dubs ‘breast talk’, where men make remarks to hostesses like ‘you have large breasts’; ‘your breasts are non-existent’; ‘are your breasts on vacation?’; and ‘your breasts are more like kiwi fruit than melons’ (1994: 48–9). On occasion men appraise women’s breasts and bodies in more extended sequences of talk like the following (72–3, Allison’s translation):

GUEST 1: Akiko has very pretty legs. She’s only 19, you know.
GUEST 2: Yeah, she’s a joshidaisei [university student].
GUEST 1: She really looks slender, but she has no breasts whatsoever.
GUEST 2: Maybe as she gets older, they’ll grow.
GUEST 1: Amazing, no breasts whatsoever to speak of. I mean nothing at all.
GUEST 2: Yeah, not even the hint of a breast.
GUEST 1: (As Akiko walked back to the table from singing) You know, her ass is surprisingly large.
GUEST 2: Yeah, she’s very big there. Yet she looks so slender and has no breasts at all.

Such appraisals are typically followed by laughter among the men. Hostesses agree with their assessments, and often encourage men to touch their breasts; according to Allison, however, the touching is often perfunctory, a matter of ‘short, ritualized pats’ (72). In her analysis, ‘breast talk’ is a form of banter whose main function is to allow men to relate to one another in an informal, nonhierarchical way. Thus what may appear to be primarily ‘heterosexual’ talk is in fact primarily homosocial talk: the point is for the men to bond with each other, in ways the workplace hierarchy would usually preclude, and the hostess fulfils the function of giving them something to talk about that they can all agree on. It is their relationship rather than her body that is the real focus of the men’s attention.

To the extent that sex-talk in hostess clubs is about something other than male bonding, Allison concludes (1994: 184) that it is mainly ‘a strategy for constructing gender rather than sexuality or heterosexual interest per se. Because sex talk degrades [i.e. is culturally seen to degrade] the woman but not the man, it emphasizes a gender imbalance that gives the man the pleasure of dominating. Putting the woman down is merely another means for structuring this relationship.’ She goes on, however: ‘After sufficient inflation of his ego, the man may in fact proceed to a sexual encounter with a woman, probably a different and less expensive woman than the one or
ones who made him feel so confident.’ This comment suggests that gender and sexuality are not so absolutely distinct as the first part of the quotation above seems to imply. The talk that goes on in hostess clubs is relevant to the construction of both gender and heterosexuality, with male dominance as a key component in both cases.

**Example (3): Doing Heterosexuality by Talking about Gender**

Our third example concerns the talk of five fraternity brothers on a US college campus (discussed in detail by Cameron 1997). Unlike the previous two examples, this one does not involve ‘institutional’ (e.g. workplace) talk, it involves ordinary, informal, domestic conversation. Nor does the conversation occur in a context that is specifically marked as sexual. It takes place in the house the men share, while they are engaged in what is for them a regular communal activity, namely watching a basketball game on television. No women are present, and in the section of the conversation we will focus on here, women are not the topic of discussion either. Instead, four of the fraternity brothers embark on a lengthy discussion of various other men they know on the campus, who are singled out for critical scrutiny because they are, allegedly, ‘gay’.

The extract below begins at a point where ‘gay men’ has been established as the current conversational topic, and attention has turned to a specific case in point, ‘that really gay guy in our Age of Revolution class’.

**Transcription Conventions**

[[indicates onset of simultaneous speech (overlap); (.) indicates pause of less than 0.1 sec.; = indicates latching, i.e. turn transition with no gap and no overlap; ? indicates rising pitch; {} indicates sequence that is indecipherable or non-verbal; _ underline indicates emphatic stress]]

**Bryan:** uh you know that really gay guy in our Age of Revolution class who sits in front of us? He wore shorts again by the way it’s like 42 degrees out he wore shorts again {laughter}

**Ed:** that [guy]

**Bryan:** [it’s like a speedo he wears a speedo to class (.) he’s got incredibly skinny legs
Language and sexuality

Ed: it’s worse = you know like those shorts women volleyball players wear?
Bryan: you know =

Ed: It’s like those (.) it’s l[ike [French cut spandex
Bryan: [you know what’s even more ridicu[lous? when you wear those shorts and like a parka on

5 lines omitted
Bryan: he’s either got some condition that he’s got to like have his legs exposed at all times or else he’s got really good legs =
Ed: = he’s probably he[’s like
Carl: [he really likes his legs =

Bryan: = [he = he doesn’t have any leg hair though
Ed: = [he’s like at home combing his leg hairs =

Bryan: [yes and oh those ridiculous Reeboks that are always {indeciph} and
Ed: he real[ly likes his legs =
Al: = very long very white and very skinny

Bryan: goofy white socks always striped = [tube socks
Ed: = that’s [right he’s the antithesis of man

What is the relationship between gender and sexuality here? The ‘really gay guy’ is identified and labelled by his supposed sexual identity – that is, he is ‘gay’ – but the discussion actually centres on his lack of masculinity (as Ed puts it, ‘he’s the antithesis of man’). Nothing is said about the ‘really gay guy’s’ sexual preferences or practices, but a great deal is said about his inappropriate dress and his narcissistic interest in his own body. It appears, then, that for the participants in this conversation, ‘being gay’ is about gender more than sex: a gay man is someone who is insufficiently masculine rather than someone who has, or desires to have, sex with men.

There is no doubt that Al, Bryan, Carl and Ed identify as heterosexual and disapprove of homosexuality. Earlier in the conversation from which the above extract is taken, they make jokes about a gay ball that had been held on campus, such as: ‘who wears the corsage and who wears the boutonniere?
Or do they both wear flowers cuz they’re fruits? Both the display of ignorance about gay ball etiquette and the use of the pronoun ‘they’ signify the speaker’s lack of solidarity with the group under discussion, gay men, while the pejorative term ‘fruits’ used in this context – by someone who has marked himself as an outsider to the group – suggests contempt. So one might expect Al, Bryan, Carl and Ed to take pains to mark their own masculinity (which would also, within their system of meaning, mark their heterosexuality), not only in what they say but also in how they choose to express it. On closer inspection, however, this conversation is stylistically more ‘feminine’ than ‘masculine’.

To begin with, this ‘gay men’ section of the conversation belongs to the speech genre of gossip, defined as talk, often of a critical nature, about the personal characteristics and doings of absent others. In English-speaking cultures, this genre of talk is strongly associated with women rather than men. At the level of everyday practice, both men and women gossip; but at the symbolic or ideological level, gossiping is marked as feminine behaviour.

Another symbolically ‘feminine’ feature of this conversation about gay men is its sustained concern with the topics of appearance and dress, which tend to be thought of as things women talk about while men do not. ‘Real men’ are not supposed to take an interest in things like ‘French cut spandex’ or ‘striped tube socks’ – or at least, they are not supposed to display such an interest in public. There is something particularly paradoxical about the way the participants dwell on the qualities of the really gay guy’s legs (lines 5–8), when the very point they want to stress is that they have no interest in other men’s bodies.

Less obviously but perhaps even more interestingly, the organization of discourse in this section of the fraternity brothers’ talk displays many of the hallmarks of all-female conversation as described by feminist linguists like Jennifer Coates (1996). It has been claimed that all-female talk tends to be collaborative, whereas all-male talk tends to be competitive. But although it is all-male conversation, the extract reproduced above contains several of the features linguists have used to define the notion of ‘collaborative’ talk, and few if any instances of the features that are generally taken to define ‘competitive’ talk. Although some participants (particularly Bryan) contribute more or longer turns than others, no one attempts to dominate by holding the floor uninterruptedly for long periods. Nor is there any sign of conflict and disagreement about the subject under discussion. The participants build on one another’s contributions, producing significant chunks of simultaneous speech (see line 7) and sometimes repeating each other’s actual words (see Ed’s recycling at line 7 of Carl’s statement at line 5,
'he really likes his legs'). Their turns are frequently 'latched' (i.e. one follows another with no gap or overlap), a precision-timing phenomenon which is often taken to indicate that participants in talk are attending especially closely to one another's contributions. They also make heavy use of 'you know', which has been associated with rapport-building and solidary relations among women in conversation.

The conclusion we draw from these observations is not that the men in this conversation are indexing feminine gender identities, still less that they are using 'gender-inappropriate' speech styles to display themselves as non-heterosexuals. Instead we want to recall one of the general points we made just before we turned to our three illustrative examples, 'What is conveyed by using any particular style of speech cannot be interpreted in isolation from questions about the context and content of talk', along with another general point made earlier in this chapter: that no way of speaking has only one potential meaning – features that index gender do not do so invariably, nor in most cases directly. Just as the professional woman who 'talks like a man' may be constructing authority rather than masculinity, so the straight men who gossip about gay men may be doing something other than marking femininity.

In Cameron's (1997) analysis of this conversation, what the fraternity brothers are doing is a kind of male bonding. As in the hostess-club case that we considered earlier, their talk is primarily homosocial. In that case, men related to one another using heterosexual banter about the bodies of women who were actually present; in this case, by contrast, the men relate to one another through disparaging gossip about other men who are not present. Reinforcing social bonds within a group is one of the key social functions commentators have attributed to gossip: sharing secrets or expressing criticisms about people who are not there underlines the 'in-group' status of those who are there, and brings them closer together. Commentators have also suggested that gossip involving criticism of absent others functions to affirm and strengthen a community's shared moral code. In expressing collective disgust about A who ran off with a man half her age, or B who stole money out of the church collection plate, the gossiping group reasserts its symbolic commitment to the social norms A and B have flouted. In the conversation about the 'really gay guy', similarly, the fraternity brothers underline their difference from him and their shared commitment to the norms of masculinity he has allegedly offended against. The co-operative style of their talk is related to its purpose, which is displaying solidarity and affirming their commitment to shared norms for gender and sexuality. The fact that both this style and the genre of the conversation, gossip, have
symbolically ‘feminine’ associations, is of marginal relevance in this particular context. Though they use different linguistic resources to do it, the fraternity brothers are constructing heterosexual identities just as surely as the Japanese men who engage in ‘breast talk’ at hostess clubs.

Of course, one might ask why the fraternity brothers feel the need to display their heterosexuality in this context – a context which, one might think, is not specifically marked as ‘sexual’. One possible answer is that in a society that is strongly heteronormative, and also male-dominated, male homosocial relations are both highly valued and highly problematic. Highly valued, because social bonds between men play a crucial role in the maintenance of power hierarchies (a point not lost on the Japanese corporations which send their male employees to socialize in hostess clubs). Highly problematic, however, because male homosociality tends to raise the spectre of homosexuality, which is forbidden and carries severe sanctions. One solution is illustrated by the institution of the hostess club: the club exists to facilitate male homosocial relations, but employs women to mediate those relations – for instance, by constantly telling the men how irresistibly attractive they are to women, and by allowing their bodies to serve as objects of male sexual banter. Relations between men which are not mediated by the presence of women have to be managed in other ways. All-male institutions may develop particular constructs of nonsexual love for this purpose – the military ‘comrade in arms’ or the Christian brotherhood of monastic institutions – which are usually accompanied by an overt prohibition on sex between men. Fraternities are all-male institutions, and their members (‘brothers’) are often very close. Perhaps this explains why the fraternity men in this conversation engage in a form of homosocial bonding which involves an explicit denial of homosexuality. (We will have more to say about the issue of denial in chapter 5.)

**Example (4): Heterosexuality as a developmental imperative**

Our last example draws on research carried out by the US sociolinguist Penelope Eckert with adolescents and pre-adolescents, which suggests that linguistic strategies for displaying heterosexuality have a special significance for speakers at this transitional life-stage. Although they may not yet be interested in sex as such, (pre-)adolescents are aware that displaying an interest in it (more specifically, in the normative heterosexual form of it) is an important signifier of ‘maturity’. Not displaying heterosexuality carries the risk that your peers will consider you immature and childish, and that
this will negatively affect your status within the peer group. In this example, heterosexual talk has the same homosocial function we noted in examples (2) and (3): it is a bonding mechanism for peers of the same gender, and also, as we will see, a mechanism producing differences of status within the group. But in addition, it is what Eckert calls a ‘developmental imperative’. As she explains: ‘Childhood is, among other things, about learning to be the next step older. Participation in kid communities requires a continuous learning of new age-appropriate behavior, and age-appropriateness changes rapidly. Social status among one’s peers requires growing up – it requires demonstrating new ‘mature’ behaviors. And in preadolescence, those new behaviors involve engagement in the heterosexual market’ (Eckert 1994: 3).

What Eckert means by the ‘heterosexual market’ is a set of social arrangements whereby girls and boys, though still socializing mainly with peers of the same gender, reorient their relationships around the norms of heterosexuality and the status hierarchy those norms create. An individual’s popularity becomes linked to their attractiveness to the other sex, and their ability and desire to get a boyfriend or girlfriend. Status is gained by pairing up with someone deemed desirable by the group at large, and it may also be gained by acting as a broker in negotiations about other pairings. Although there is little substance to these early heterosexual liaisons, and they may not be valued for their own sake by either party, they are important because they establish a ‘system of social value’ (Eckert 2002: 107), a ‘market’ which organizes social relations and hierarchies within the age cohort as a whole.

The overriding importance of homosociality in pre-adolescents’ heterosexual activity is evident if we consider the role played by talk among Eckert’s subjects. Heterosexual relationships furnished the subject matter for conversations among girls: they talked about which guys were ‘cute’, who liked whom, and who was going to approach whom to negotiate ‘going together’ status. By contrast, talk did not play an important part in the heterosexual relationships themselves. In this extract from Eckert’s data (1994: 6) a girl is explaining how she started going with her first boyfriend when she was eleven or twelve:

Oh I think someone went and delivered him the message that I liked him, you know. That was it. And so I guess the message came back that OK, he liked me too, so I guess we were going together, so he asked me to go with him. So I sent the message back to him, of course I wouldn’t talk to him, heavens no, you know, you didn’t talk to – [laughter]

The emotional investment here seems to be in the intimate conversation heterosexual relationships enable you to have with your same-sex friends
rather than in any kind of intimacy with the ostensible object of your desire.

As well as active participation in the local heterosexual market, ‘appropriate’ adolescent behaviour requires a display of knowledge about adult heterosexual practice. Eckert records an incident in a sixth-grade science lesson where the topic of discussion is the workings of cruise control. One eleven-year-old boy has just volunteered that cruise control keeps a car moving at the same speed, when another boy adds: ‘When you’re going at 60 miles per hour like in a James Bond movie and you press auto control and then you go make out with a woman in the back then you put it on cruise control and you stay at the same speed.’ The boy’s production of this vignette aligns him with adult heterosexual masculinity, and Eckert points out that it challenges others present to display their own understanding of his references – James Bond movies, making out in the back of cars – by producing an affiliative response such as laughter. In fact, most of his classmates did laugh. The student who does not show appreciation risks coming off as immature, as not understanding what more mature kids understand. As Eckert says, this puts girls in a double bind: if they laugh they are acquiescing in the objectification of their gender, but if they don’t they are compromising their age-appropriate credentials.

In our previous examples, performances of heterosexuality were used to position the speaker in relation to three major distinctions: masculine/feminine, heterosexual/homosexual and dominant/subordinate. Eckert’s work is important because it shows that heterosexual display can have other meanings, which may in fact be more significant for the participants themselves. In the pre-adolescent peer groups she studied, displays of heterosexuality were used by group members as criteria for making distinctions that included maturity/childishness, sophistication/innocence, coolness/uncoolness, popularity/unpopularity. Distinctions based on gender and sexual orientation were seemingly not attended to in the same way.

But that is not to say those distinctions were irrelevant or insignificant: rather they were taken for granted. Eckert is clear that the status of heterosexuality as a ‘developmental imperative’ makes certain forms of gender developmental imperatives too. Clearly, boys and girls are gendered beings before they enter the heterosexual market; but at the point when a market emerges, their desire for the social rewards that accrue from participation impels them to shift towards the particular forms of femininity and masculinity that conform to the heterosexual principle, ‘opposites attract’. Eckert sees this restructuring of gender identities and relations as
a source of some distress for many pre-adolescents, particularly girls, for whom obeying the developmental imperative involves colluding in their own subordination. The point is illustrated by the sixth-grade classroom vignette reproduced above: the boy’s performance of heterosexuality indexes both masculinity and dominance over women, which is ratified and normalized by the appreciative response of most girls in the class.

Eckert does not comment specifically on the implications of the social order she describes for young people who have recognized, or who will at some point in their adolescent careers come to recognize, that they do not fit the heterosexual template. What she does underline, however, is the extent to which heterosexuality is institutionalized both in the official culture of US schools and in the informal culture of the peer group. Heterosexuality provides the only developmental path that is recognized by either, and, as Eckert notes, that path is laid down for young people well before they become interested in actually having sex. Even if individuals who decline to participate in heterosexual activity are not actively persecuted, the social cost of non-participation is extraordinarily high, precisely because heterosexuality is the basis for a ‘social system of value’ rather than merely a sexual one. Eckert’s account of this system might well serve to illustrate Adrienne Rich’s argument, discussed at the beginning of this chapter, that socializing people to be heterosexual involves far more time, effort and coercion than one might expect if heterosexuality were the natural instinct it is so often claimed to be.

**CONCLUSION**

In the examples discussed above, we have seen that there is a close relationship between gendered speech and the enactment of heterosexual identity – but also that the relationship is more complicated than it might initially seem. In analysing any specific instance, it is necessary to pay attention to the context and purpose of speech: the linguistic performances of the California telephone sex workers and the Tokyo hostesses, or of the Japanese businessmen and the American fraternity brothers, are gendered and heterosexual performances, but they are undertaken for a variety of reasons, and may be realized in a variety of ways.

At the same time, our examples all show the constraining effects of heteronormativity. They show that a performance of heterosexuality must always also be in some sense a performance of gender, because heterosexuality requires gender differentiation. There is no such thing as a generic, genderless heterosexual: rather there are male and female heterosexuals.
Heterosexual talk as performed by a Japanese businessman is a very different thing from heterosexual talk as performed by the hostess who serves him. Sixth-grade girls and sixth-grade boys position themselves differently in relation to heterosexual discourse. Conversely, our examples suggest that many performances of gender will involve the affirmation of heterosexual identity and/or the rejection of homosexuality, because of the heteronormative assumption that heterosexuality is an indispensable element of ‘proper’ femininity or masculinity.

For those who identify as heterosexual, then, sexuality and gender are two sides of a single coin – which is not to say they are one and the same thing, any more than the two faces of a coin are indistinguishable from one another. What happens, though, when the relationship between gender and sexuality does not mirror conventional heteronormative expectations? How are gender and sexual identity indexed — and how are the two related — in the speech of lesbians and gay men? These are questions we address in the next chapter.
Muehlenhard and Lisa Hollabaugh reported findings from a questionnaire they gave to 610 women undergraduates, who were asked whether they had ever engaged in ‘token resistance’, i.e. saying ‘no’ to sex when they fully intended to have sex, and if so what their reasons had been. They found that 39.3% of respondents reported engaging in token resistance at least once. The most important reasons given included fear of appearing promiscuous, moral or religious scruples, and what the authors call ‘manipulative’ or ‘game playing’ reasons. These included being angry with a partner, wishing to arouse him further by making him wait, and wanting him ‘to beg’ (Muehlenhard and Hollabaugh 1988).

10. There were, of course, students who objected to the code or who reported that they simply ignored it. The most visible locus of opposition to it was in a men’s group called ‘The Boneyard’ which announced itself as ‘dedicated to the preservation of machismo’ (expressed by ostentatious consumption of beer and pornography), and a sister organization for women called ‘the Bushwhackers’. These groups, however, were seen, and saw themselves, as representing a disaffected minority on a campus where progressive and ‘politically correct’ views were mainstream.

11. Cameron (1994) was told by Antioch’s Dean of Students that the complaints logged to date under the policy had been made by heterosexual men as well as women, and there had also been complaints from lesbians and gay men.

12. In one notorious recent case, a straight male guest on a US talk-show was told he was going to meet, on TV, a person who had a crush on him: this turned out to be a gay man. Three days later, the straight man went to the gay man’s home and shot him dead. Waiting 72 hours hardly suggests that the killer acted in a panic prompted by his victim’s ‘advance’, but the homosexual panic defence was nevertheless instrumental in securing a verdict of second-rather than first-degree murder (for a concise summary of this case, see Kulick in press, and http://www.courttv.com/verdicts/schmitz.html).

13. This tendency, particularly in its overtly sadomasochistic manifestations, has been the target of feminist critique (cf. Linden et al. 1982; Reti 1993). But there are also feminists who defend and celebrate the erotics of power (cf. Califia 1983, 1988; Califia and Sweeney 1996; Samois 1981), arguing that power is not necessarily and inevitably connected to institutionalized male dominance, and that, in a nonpatriarchal order, power would remain a source of erotic possibility that could attract some people of both/all genders.

3 WHAT HAS GENDER GOT TO DO WITH SEX? LANGUAGE, HETEROSEXUALITY AND HETRONORMATIVITY

1. Among queer theorists and activists, the term ‘heteronormativity’ is more commonly used than ‘compulsory heterosexuality’, which has specific roots in feminism. As we will see (p. 55), queer theoretical analyses of
heteronormativity do not necessarily view its main political function as maintaining male supremacy.

2. A similar line of thought with regard to sex (the only sex that ‘counts’ in patriarchal societies is sex that culminates in male ejaculation) led one writer to argue that lesbians, as well as many heterosexual women, don’t have sex (Frye 1992[1987]).

3. For a more detailed argument to this effect, see Cameron (1992).

4. A sample of these materials is described and critically discussed by Kulick (1999).

5. This claim has been disputed, but here we will let it stand for the sake of argument.

6. The data reproduced in this section were collected by one of the participants in 1990. All participants have been given pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

7. Here we should note that such pejorative terms, when used by insiders (e.g. ‘faggot’, ‘queen’, or in a race context ‘nigger’ and ‘boy/girl’), may lose their pejorative force and be understood as in-group markers signalling solidarity, affection, ironic comment on the prejudices of others, etc.

4 SEXUALITY AS IDENTITY: GAY AND LESBIAN LANGUAGE

1. In fact, the Gay Liberationists were continuing a long-running internal debate with a complex history, at least in relation to male homosexuality. Homophile writers such as the French novelist André Gide in the mid-twentieth century defended a ‘manly’ homosexuality (modelled on the pederasty of classical Greece) and in some instances deplored the ‘effeminate’ homosexuality of the ‘uranist’ or ‘invert’. One of the arguments that would later recur in Gay Liberation discourse – that effeminate language and behaviour among male homosexuals is a form of misogyny – can also be found in some of the earlier writings on this subject. On the other hand, the ideal of the ‘manly’ homosexual in Germany between the two world wars took on explicitly fascist and misogynist overtones; in that context, socialists and sex radicals (including for instance the sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld) defended the forms of (unmanly or effeminate) homosexuality that Nazism defined as ‘degenerate’.

2. ‘The statement meant that the ringleader (queen) of a group of homosexuals was making a play (exhibiting-camping) for a young boy (jam-virgin)’ (Duberman 1991: 162).

3. The earliest list that we have been able to find is Rosanoff (1927; reproduced in Katz 1983: 438–40), which lists twelve terms and gives one-line definitions of each of them.

4. Donald Cory is a pseudonym for Edward Sagarin, a sociologist who, a decade after his book first appeared, decided that he was wrong, and that homosexuals were indeed disturbed individuals in need of help. For details see Marotta (1981). The pseudonym Sagarin chose echoes Gide’s mid-century defence of pederasty (see note 1, this chapter), which was entitled Corydon, an allusion to one of