

5 Language and Desire

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1 Introduction

Exploring the relationship between language and desire is a way of breaking past the problems that inhere in studies that investigate language and sexuality, and of opening up a new field of enquiry that links together research on language and gender, affect, repression, and erotics. Past studies of language and sexuality have overwhelmingly focused on the linguistic behavior of gay men and (to a lesser extent) lesbians. Those studies treat sexuality only in terms of sexual identity, and they focus on the ways in which speakers reveal or conceal that identity in their talk. While these are valid and important topics of investigation, the stress on identity has allowed researchers to overlook what from any perspective must be central dimensions of “sexuality,” namely phenomena such as fantasy, repression, the unconscious, and desire.

Furthermore, investigative emphasis on consciously assumed or consciously concealed identities has also blocked enquiry into one of the central insights of performativity theory; namely, that who we are and what we say is in many ways dependent on who we must not be and what must remain unsaid, or unsayable. But how might students of language approach the unsaid, the unsayable? Linguistic theories are of little help, because even though the unconscious is the very resource of all linguistic analysis (deep structures, preference hierarchies), this unconscious tends to be seen entirely in terms of cognition. It is more of a “non-conscious” than an unconscious. The foundational psychoanalytic concepts of desire, or repression – the “pushing away” of thoughts from conscious awareness – have not been theorized within linguistics. Even research that explicitly takes its cue from Freud (such as the work by Victoria Fromkin and others on parapraxes, or slips of the tongue: e.g. Fromkin 1973, 1980) looks only at what language reveals about underlying grammatical knowledge, and brackets out all concern with the psychoanalytic unconscious.

Recently, work in narrative analysis, literary theory, and discursive psychology has moved in directions that suggest ways we might begin exploring how

desire is expressed, negotiated, and socialized in language, and how repressions are achieved interactionally. This chapter is concerned with highlighting that work. I will first of all summarize previous work on language and sexuality in order to chart the way in which a focus on desire will differ from a focus on sexuality. Then, I will review a number of theoretical perspectives on how desire can be conceptualized. Finally, I will summarize some of the research now appearing that provides us with tools and concepts that we may use to analyze desire in language.

2 Language and Sexuality

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 in original). Language and desire has also occasionally been analyzed 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 (for example, one early study of sexual graffiti in men’s toilets was printed privately in Paris in a limited edition of seventy-five copies, and had the cover embossed with the austere command that circulation of the book must be “restricted to students of linguistics, folk-lore, abnormal psychology and allied branches of social science” (Read 1977 [1935])).

Early research on language and sexuality concerned itself almost exclusively with lexical items. There were several reasons for this, but a main one was the assumption that the specialized vocabulary of a group reveals something about “the sociocultural qualities about that group” (Sonenschein 1969: 281). This assumption is a reasonable one, but the interest in looking at language to try to understand the sociocultural qualities of a group established a pattern which persists to this day of seeing sexuality exclusively in terms of “sexual identity” which was shared with other members of the same group. Furthermore, because the only people deemed to have a “sexual identity” were deviants and perverts, it was their linguistic behavior that was examined.

Yet another effect of the focus on lexicon was to largely restrict research to the language practices of homosexual men, who were held to have an extensive in-group “lingo” that could be documented. Lesbians, it was often asserted,

had no equivalent slang vocabulary. One early researcher (Legman 1941: 1156) offered two explanations for this. The first concerned “[t]he tradition of gentlemanly restraint among lesbians [that] stifles the flamboyance and conversational cynicism in sexual matters that slang coinage requires.” The second explanation for this lesbian lack was that “Lesbian attachments are sufficiently feminine to be more often emotional than simply sexual” – hence an extensive sexual vocabulary would be superfluous.¹ In other words, lesbians were at once both too (gentle)manly and too womanly to talk about sex.

The early focus on gay in-group vocabulary continues today, as is evidenced by the continual appearance of such novelty books as *When Drag is not a Car Race: An Irreverent Dictionary of over 400 Gay and Lesbian Words and Phrases* (Fessler and Rauch 1997), and by articles in scholarly and popular publications that trace the etymologies and political resonances of such terms as “gay,” “queer,” “dyke,” and “closet” (e.g. Boswell 1993; Brownworth 1994; Butters 1998; Cawqua 1982; Diallo and Krumholtz 1994; Dynes 1985; Grahn 1984; Johansson 1981; Lee 1981; Riordon 1978; Roberts 1979a, 1979b; Shapiro, F. 1988; Shapiro, M. 1990; Spears 1985; Stone 1981). By the 1980s, however, research on lexicon had been 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.

Because I have recently reviewed this research in detail (Kulick 2000), I will limit my comments here to summarizing what I have identified as the most serious problems in this work on gay and lesbian language. There are three.

The first concerns the fact that even though this research ostensibly is concerned with understanding the relationship between sexual orientation and language, *it has no theory of sexuality*. That is to say, it has 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, as I mentioned above, from its very inception as a topic of research, the linguistic and social science literature has conceptualized sexuality exclusively in terms of identity categories. The dimensions of sexuality that define it in disciplines such as psychoanalysis – dimensions like fantasy, pleasure, repression, fear, and desire – all of these are nowhere considered. This means that research has not in fact focused on how language conveys sexuality. It has focused, instead, on how language conveys identity.

This has had consequences for the kind of language behavior that has been studied, which is the second problem. Because the concern has been to show how people with particular identities signal those identities to others, the only people whose language behavior has been examined are people who are assumed to have those identities, that is, men and women who openly identify as homosexual, or who researchers for some reason suspect are homosexual.

The assumption has been that if there is a gay or lesbian language, then that language must somehow be grounded in gay and lesbian identities, and instantiated in the speech of gays and lesbians. That non-homosexuals (imposters, actors, “fag hags,” hip or unwary heterosexuals) can and do use language that signals queerness has largely been ignored, and on the few occasions when it has been considered, such usage has been dismissed by researchers as “inauthentic” (Leap 1995, 1996). The lack of attention to the inherent appropriability of language has meant that research has conflated the symbolic position of queerness with the concrete social practices of men and women who self-define as gay and lesbian. While the two can overlap, they are not exactly the same thing. They are, on the contrary, importantly different.

The third problem follows from this. Because attention has focused solely on whether or not gay-identified people reveal or conceal their sexual orientation, what has been foregrounded in the study of language and sexuality is speaker intention. So the criterion for deciding whether something constitutes gay or lesbian language is to find out whether the speaker intended for his or her language to be understood in this way. This idea has been 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 Livia 2001: 200–2; Leap 1996: 21–3).

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. That meaning must always exceed intent is also the principal point of Derrida’s criticism of Austin’s concept of the performative (Derrida 1995a). 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 it is quotable. This is the meaning of Derrida’s famous example of the signature, with which he concluded “Signature Event Context” (Derrida 1995b). 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.” Signatures are particularly good examples of iterability, because even though one repeats them every time one signs one’s name, no two signatures are ever exactly the same. The main point, however, 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.

However, if something is repeatable, this means that it simultaneously becomes available for failure: if I am drunk, my signature may not be recognized, it 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 – they are not exceptions or distortions, as Austin (1977: 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, 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, to exhaustively determine context. Language constantly evokes other meanings that both exceed, contradict, and disrupt the language user's intentions. What all this means is that any attempt to define a queer linguistics through appeals to intentionality is hopelessly flawed from the start because it is dependent on precisely the fallacy of intention that Derrida definitively dispensed with years ago.

Because of these three fundamental problems with the kind of research that until now has investigated the relationship between language and sexuality, I have proposed that scholars interested in exploring this relationship will need to reorient and develop new perspectives and methods (Kulick 2000: 272–7). My suggestion is that continuing to phrase those explorations in terms of language and sexuality might be counterproductive, especially since “sexuality” can easily segue into “sexual categories,” which can lead us right back to “sexual identity.” To forestall and avoid that slippage, it might be helpful to declare a moratorium on “sexuality” for a while, and to phrase enquiry, instead, in terms of “language and desire.”

There are three immediate advantages to be gained by beginning to think about desire, rather than sexuality. First, a shift from “sexuality” to “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 – be they straight, gay, bisexual, shoe fetishists, or anything else – to use. 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 forged desire.

Second, a focus on desire rather than sexuality would move enquiry 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, is that it 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, a focus on desire rather than sexuality would allow analysis expanded scope to explore the role that fantasy, repression, and unconscious motivations play in linguistic interactions – that is to say, it would direct us to look at how language is precisely *not* an essentially intentional phenomenon. It would encourage scholars to develop theories and techniques for analyzing not only what is said, but also how that saying is in many senses dependent on what remains unsaid, or unsayable.

3 What is Desire?

Before we can begin an investigation of language and desire, however, definitional issues will have to be considered. 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" (Freud 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 here 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 for that which remains beyond or outside signification). In a similar way that 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. As Elizabeth Grosz has summarized so clearly (1990: 61), 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 certain 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 psychoanalysis's linkage 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 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, a person culturally-designated-as-a-boy's desire for his mother, or a person culturally-designated-as-a-girl's desire for her father) 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 (a person culturally-designated-as-a-boy's desire for his father, or a person culturally-designated-as-a-girl's desire for her mother). 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 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 achievement of particular desires.

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.²

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. Note, therefore, that performativity theory, as Butler has elaborated it, is inseparable from psychoanalytic assumptions about the relationship between desire, sexuality, and sex.³ Interestingly, this fundamental reliance on psychoanalysis is downplayed or ignored in many summaries of Butler's work (e.g. Jagose 1996; Hall 1999), and my own suspicion is that many readers of *Gender Trouble* simply skip chapter 2, which is where she develops her claim that "gender identity is a melancholic structure" (1990: 68). But performativity theory without psychoanalysis is not performativity theory, at least not in Butler's version. 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 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 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). None of these desires are 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 rejection of psychoanalysis as the final arbiter of desire is not without problems – Butler, for example, has commented that a reason she has not engaged with their work in her writing is that "they don't take prohibition seriously and I do" (Butler 1999: 296). The idea that desire is immanent in all relations may also strike some as an example of metaphysics at its most fanciful. Be that as it may, the French philosophers' critical stance toward psychoanalysis does resonate with the reactions of many students who become interested in performativity theory. A great difficulty with the conceptualization of desire that animates performativity theory is the fact that it is grounded in a priori psychoanalytic assertions about its genesis and nature. The quasi-universalistic assumptions which underlie those assertions

are difficult to reconcile with the kind of empirical material analyzed by linguists and anthropologists. When I teach performativity theory, for example, students are generally excited by everything *except* the assumptions that underlie the nature of the subject. While the ideas intrigue them, the majority simply do not find it helpful to assume that desire = lack, or that subjectivity is constituted through processes of melancholic foreclosure and incorporation. For students and scholars interested in the analysis of embedded practices, such as talk, appeals to highly abstract psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity and action do not free up thought; instead, they seem to constrict it. Of course, this does not mean that the theories themselves are without relevance, value, or explanatory power. But it does mean that investigations of the relationship between language and desire seem not to be most productively approached by beginning with abstract psychoanalytic theories and using them as a frame within which one collects and analyzes data.

Deleuze and Guattari's framework is not abstract psychoanalysis. In this context, though, it is hardly much improvement, since its formidable philosophical erudition, deliberately contorted presentational style, and highly idiosyncratic lexicon (hecceities, rhizomes, machines, bodies without organs . . .) make it just as daunting as even Lacan's writing (although, again, it does display a sense of humor that is substantially more satisfying than Lacan's smug double-entendres). Despite these difficulties, Deleuze and Guattari do direct attention to desire without requiring that we derive all its formations from a particular source or a specific constellation of psycho-social 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 that 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 an 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.

4 Investigating Desire in Language

So the question arises: if we see desire as iterable practices that can be mapped, how do we do the mapping? What kind of empirical material can we look at, and what do we look for?

At present, there are at least four kinds of work being done that address these questions, even if the researchers doing the work may not exactly see themselves as investigating language and desire. The four kinds of research I have in mind are:

- studies that examine how repressions are accomplished in everyday interactions;
- studies that document how desires are socialized;
- studies that demonstrate how silences and disavowals structure interaction;
- studies that analyze how intimacy is achieved.

The first kind of research on that list is best represented by the branch of scholarship called “discursive psychology.” In discursive psychology, ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis are crucial theoretical and methodological tools (for a detailed discussion of this, see the exchange between Billig and Schegloff in *Discourse & Society*: Billig and Schegloff 1999). In an overview article, Billig (1997: 139–40) explains that discursive psychology “argues that phenomena, which traditional psychological theories have treated as ‘inner processes’, are, in fact, constituted through social, discursive activity. Accordingly, discursive psychologists argue that psychology should be based on the study of this outward activity rather than upon hypothetical, and essentially unobservable, inner states.” A concrete example of this is developed extensively in Billig’s more recent monograph which reconsiders the Freudian concept of repression in terms of language (Billig 1999). Billig agrees with Freud that repression is a fundamental dimension of human existence. But he disagrees with the idea that the roots of repression lie in biologically inborn urges, as Freud thought. Instead, repression is demanded by language: “in conversing, we also create silences,” says Billig (1999: 261). Thus, in learning to speak, children also learn what must remain unspoken and unspeakable. This means two things: first, that repression is not beyond or outside language, but is, instead, the constitutive resource of language; and second, that repression is an interactional achievement.

Billig’s approach to Freudian repression is readily recognizable to anyone familiar with Foucault’s arguments that silences “are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses” (1981: 27), Derrida’s assertions that “silence plays the irreducible role of that which bears and haunts language, outside and *against* which alone language can emerge” (Derrida 1978: 54, emphasis in original), and Butler’s continual insistence that the subject emerges through the repeated enactment of repudiations and foreclosures

– foreclosures that are generated through language. Billig's contribution to this discussion is to focus attention on the mundane ways in which these kinds of foreclosures are accomplished in everyday conversation, through avoidances, topic changes, and direct commands. For example, in discussing the socialization of polite behavior, Billig remarks that "each time adults tell a child how to speak politely, they are indicating how to speak rudely. 'You must say *please*' . . . 'Don't say *that* word'. All such commands tell the child what rudeness is, pointing to the forbidden phrases. . . . [I]n teaching politeness, [adults provide] a model of rudeness" (1999: 94, 95; emphasis in original).

Billig's attention to socializing contexts leads us to the second kind of study that investigates desire, namely, research on language socialization that documents how particular fears and desires are conveyed and acquired through recurring linguistic routines. An early article that examined this is Clancy's investigation of how Japanese children acquire what she calls communicative style; that is, "the way language is used and understood in a particular culture" (Clancy 1986: 213). Clancy was interested to see how children are socialized to command the strategies of indirection and intuitive understanding that characterize Japanese communicative style. In working with two-year-old children and their mothers, she discovered that these skills were acquired through early socialization routines in which mothers, among other practices, (a) juxtaposed indirect expressions (e.g. "It's already good") with direct ones ("No!"), thus conveying the idea that various forms of expression could be functionally equivalent; (b) attributed speech to others who had not actually spoken, thereby indicating to children how they should read non-verbal behavior; (c) appealed to the imagined reactions of *hito*, "other people," who are supposedly always watching and evaluating the child's behavior; and (d) used strongly affect-laden adjectives such as "scary" or "frightening" to describe a child's (mis)behavior, making it clear that such behavior is socially unacceptable and shameful. These kinds of communicative interactions sensitized children to subtle interactional expectations which in adult interactions are not expressed explicitly. They also encouraged children to acquire the specific anxieties and fears (such as the disapproval of *hito*) that undergird Japanese communicative style.

The socialization of fear is also described by Capps and Ochs (1995), in their study of an agoraphobic woman in Los Angeles. A central attribute of agoraphobia is a sense of having no control over one's feelings and actions (hence one gets gripped by paralyzing anxiety attacks). Capps and Ochs hypothesize that this sense of being unable to control one's feelings is, at least in part, socialized, and they examine how this might occur by analyzing interactions between Meg, the agoraphobic woman, and Beth, her eleven-year-old daughter, when Beth talks about how she managed to handle some threatening situation. Whenever this happens, Meg will often reframe her daughter's story in ways that undermine Beth's control as protagonist. She does this by portraying people as fundamentally and frighteningly unpredictable, no matter what Beth may think; by casting doubt on the credibility of her daughter's memory of events; by minimizing the threatening dimension of the daughter's narrative,

thereby implying that Beth has not truly surmounted danger; and by reframing situations in which Beth asserts herself as situations in which the daughter has done something embarrassing.

Although the studies by Clancy and Capps and Ochs discuss fear and not desire, it is important to remember that from another perspective, *fears are desires* – the desire to avoid shame, embarrassment, danger, punishment, etc. Another study co-authored by Ochs (Ochs et al. 1996) specifically discusses desire. In this case, though, the desire is not sexual, but gustatory. Here, the research team investigated how children come to develop taste. One of their main findings was that children's likes and dislikes of different kinds of food are actively socialized at the dinner table.

In a comparison of dinnertime interactions between American and Italian middle-class families, Ochs and her collaborators found that dinners at the American tables were consistently marked by oppositional stances in relation to food, with children complaining that they did not want to eat the food they were served, and parents insisting that they must. One of the reasons why these dinnertime interactions were so oppositional is that they were framed that way by parents. American parents often assumed that children would not like the same kinds of foods that they enjoyed. This could be signaled through the preparation of different dishes, some for children and others for the adults, or by remarks that invited children to align in opposition to adults. For example, when one parent presents a novel food item at the dinner table, the other might remark "I don't know if the kids'll really like it, but I'll give them." In addition, the tendency in American homes was to "frame dessert as what their children *want* to eat, and vegetables, meat, etc., as what their children *have* to eat" (1996: 22, emphasis in original), thereby creating a situation in which certain foods were portrayed as tasty and desirable, and others as mere nutrition, or even punishment ("Eat that celery or you'll get no dessert").

Italian families, in contrast, highlighted food as pleasure. Parents did not invite their children to adopt oppositional stances (by creating distinctions between themselves and "the kids" in relation to food), they foregrounded the positive dimensions of the social relations that were materialized through food ("Hey look at this guys! Tonight Mamma delights us. Spaghetti with clams"), and they did not portray dessert as a reward to be gained only after one has first performed a laborious and unpleasant duty. The results of these kinds of differences in socializing contexts is that children acquire (rather than simply "discover") different kinds of relationships to food, different kinds of tastes, and different kinds of desires.

Studies of language socialization like those by Clancy and Ochs and her collaborators do not discuss repression or mention Freud or Lacan. Never mind: this kind of work is an important and guiding example of how linguists can link with the project of discursive psychology to demonstrate how "phenomena, which traditional psychological theories have treated as 'inner processes' [such as taste, intuition, shame, or anxiety] are, in fact, constituted through social, discursive activity" (Billig 1997: 139).

The third kind of research on my list examines the disavowals, silences, and repressions that take place in discourse in order for certain subjective positions to emerge. In other words, it is work that explores how the unsaid or the unsayable structures what is said. One of the most powerful examples of this is Toni Morrison's essay on the role that what she calls "Africanism" ("the denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify"; Morrison 1993: 6) has played in the constitution of American literature. Morrison's point is that in this literature, Black people are often either silent, invisible, or absent. But though they might be speechless or not present, they nevertheless assert a structuring power on the coherence of American literature and the forms it has taken. Their symbolization as enslaved, unsettling, dark, childlike, savage, and raw provided American authors with a backdrop against which they could reflect upon themselves and their place in the world. "Africanism," writes Morrison,

is the vehicle by which the American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not historyless, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny. (Morrison 1993: 52)

Morrison's project is to understand how Africanist characters act as surrogates and enablers, and to see how imaginative encounters with them enable White writers to think about themselves (1993: 51). Butler employs a similar analytic strategy in her essay on Nella Larsen's novel *Passing* (Butler 1993b). Butler's reading of *Passing* highlights how certain identifications, relational configurations, and desires exist in the novel only because the characters refuse to acknowledge certain other identifications, relational configurations, and desires. But a refusal to acknowledge something is already a form of acknowledgment; it is like ignorance: ignorance is not so much something we have failed to learn as it is something we have learned not to know. Hence, the disavowal of certain desires and relationships both sustains them and structures the desires and relationships that we do explicitly recognize and embrace.

But Morrison is a writer, Butler is a philosopher, and the material they analyze to make their points are literary texts. How can their insights about absences and repudiations be brought to bear on linguistic data?

One illuminating instance of this is Cameron's (1997) analysis of how heterosexuality is performed. The data for this study is a conversation between five White male American college students sitting at home watching a basketball game. This conversation was recorded by one of the participants, who used it in a class Cameron taught to discuss sports talk. Upon examining the tape, however, Cameron noticed something else: apart from talk about the basketball game, the single most prominent theme in the conversation was gossip about men whom the speakers identify as "gay." Cameron concludes that this kind of gossip is a performative enactment of heterosexuality, one structured by the presence of a danger that cannot be acknowledged: namely,

the possibility of homosexual desire within the speakers' own homosocial group. In order to defuse this threat and constitute a solidly heterosexual in-group, the speakers localize homosexual desire outside the group, in the bodies of absent others, who become invoked as contrasts.

What is most ironic about this enactment of heterosexuality is that in order to convey to one another that the males under discussion really are "gay," the students engage in detailed descriptions of those other males' clothing and bodily appearance, commenting extensively, for example, on the fact that one supposedly gay classmate wore "French cut spandex" shorts to class in order to display his legs, despite the fact that it was winter. Discussing this aspect of the students' talk, Cameron observes that the five young men

are caught up in a contradiction: their criticism of the "gays" centres on [the "gays'"] unmanly interest in displaying their bodies . . . But in order to pursue this line of criticism, the conversationalists themselves must show an acute awareness of such "unmanly" concerns as styles and materials ("French cut spandex" . . .), what kind of clothes go together, and which men have "good legs". They are impelled, paradoxically, to talk about men's bodies as a way of demonstrating their own total lack of sexual interest in those bodies. (1997: 54)

In other words, the students' desire in this homosocial context to distance themselves from the specter of homosexual desire leads them to structure their talk in such a way that it is not only similar to stereotypical "women's language" (besides topics, Cameron also analyzes how the speakers engage in a variety of "cooperative" discourse moves usually associated with women) – in its fine-tuned attention to the bodies and sexualities of other men, the talk is also not unlike stereotypical Gayspeak. Imagine telling them that.

The final kind of literature that I think provides linguists with models for how it is possible to examine the relationship between language and desire is work being done on the achievement of intimacy. Intimacy is a constellation of practices that both expresses and is expressive of desire. But like all desire, intimate desires are publicly mediated and run through specific circuits of power. As Berlant and Warner (1998) have recently argued, the state plays a crucial role in the constitution of intimacy by exercising its power to legitimize some types of intimacy and delegitimize others. Together with other institutions (e.g. the church, the family) and ideological formations (e.g. ideas about what "proper" or "real" men and women should and should not do in their intimate lives), intimacies are good examples of how desires may feel private, but are, inexorably and unavoidably, shaped through public structures and in public interactions. One of the ways in which public mediation shapes desire is through processes of prohibition. These processes, which are meant to discourage particular desires, in fact often incite and sustain them. As Freud and many others before him recognized,⁴ the act of prohibition is a crucial instigator of desire. Prohibition is always libidinally invested: it fixes desire on the prohibited object and raises the desire for transgression.

One consistent finding of linguists who have studied intimacy is that it is often achieved, at least in part, through the transgression of taboos. An example of this is Langford's (1997) examination of Valentine's Day personal messages in the British *Guardian* newspaper. The messages that Langford analyzes are ones in which the authors of the personal ads adopt the name and the voice of a cuddly animal for themselves and their partner, for example "Flopsy Bunny I love you, Fierce Bad Rabbit," or "Fluffy likes squeezing a pink thing at bed time! Oink says Porker." A number of taboos are transgressed in these messages, most obviously the prohibition on adults publicly behaving like infants, and by extension also the prohibition on children behaving in an overtly licentious manner. Langford draws on psychoanalytic theory to argue that the development of these alternate animal personalities may be related to the desire to create an attachment to an object which is reliable and unchanging, and which stands outside the emotional traumas of everyday adult life. (There seems also to be a particularly British preoccupation at work here, uncommented on by Langford, that appears amenable to a more thoroughgoing anthropological analysis.) Whether or not one agrees with Langford's interpretation of this phenomenon, her analysis does point the way to how psychoanalytic frameworks might be helpful in thinking about why and how desire comes to be expressed in specific sociocultural settings.

Another example of the relationship between intimacy and prohibition is Channell's (1997) use of Conversation Analysis to track how intimacy is accomplished in the infamous "Tampax" telephone conversation that allegedly took place between the Prince of Wales and his companion Camilla Parker-Bowles. A central argument in Channell's analysis is that intimacy is accomplished through the transgression of taboos that operate in public and non-intimate discourse; hence the Prince's notorious remark about wanting to be in Camilla's knickers so badly that he'll probably end up being reincarnated as a tampon.

That the hapless Prince's quip that he might return to us as a menstrual sponge raises vaguely pornographic images is predictable, given that pornography is a discourse of intimacy and desire (it is of course a discourse of many other things as well, like all desire). One of the ways pornography conveys intimacy and incites desire is by doing what the Prince of Wales does in his conversation with Camilla, namely, invoking and transgressing public taboos and prohibitions. This dimension of pornographic language is highlighted in Heywood's (1997) study of narratives published in the gay magazine *Straight To Hell*. Those narratives, which claim to be first-person accounts of real-life sexual experiences, give shape to desire by channeling it through the transgression of multiple boundaries. In the stories, straight men have sex with homosexuals, that sex often takes place in liminal public settings such as in the street *outside* a gay bar, and the sexual acts described flout social norms that separate the acceptable from the unspeakable ("I Slept With My Nose Up His Ass"). Heywood discusses how the *frissons* generated by these kinds of transgressions are comprehensible in a culture that fetishizes heterosexual

masculinity, elevates it to the status of hyper-desirable, and figures it as something fundamentally *other* than homosexuality. In this context, narratives of a homosexual man's sexual conquest of a supposedly straight man lubricate multiple lines of fantasy.

The social embedding and linguistic coding of fantasy is also discussed by Hall (1995), in her study of telephone sex-line workers who were employed in companies that advertise to a heterosexual male market. Hall observed that workers who earned the most money (by keeping their pay-by-minute callers on the line the longest) were speakers whose language best invoked the stereotypical image of the submissive and sexually accommodating woman. Hence, the most successful "fantasy makers," as some of the workers called themselves, were the ones who could verbally invoke a conservative frame that many callers recognized and could participate in. But as in the other cases of intimacy that I have discussed, the talk on the phone lines was also transgressive of public speech. This transgression partly concerned content, where overtly sexual acts were verbalized. However, it was also transgressive in terms of delivery. One woman explained that "to be a really good fantasy maker, you've got to have big tits in your voice" (Hall 1995: 199). The phantasmatic tits were voiced through "words that are very feminine," like "peach," and by talk about feminine bodies and articles of clothing. Other fantasy makers told Hall that they relied on high pitch, whispering, and "a loping tone of voice" to project sex through the phone lines.

Like the other research I have discussed, Hall's work is important because it directs us to examine the precise linguistic resources that people use to animate desire. But it does so without reducing desire to identity. Indeed, work like Hall's directs our attention in completely the opposite direction, since the desire emitted through the language of the sex-line workers has nothing to do with their identities – a fantasy maker may be an utterly riveting "bimbo, nymphomaniac, mistress, slave, transvestite, lesbian, foreigner [!], or virgin" (from a sex-line training manual quoted by Hall 1995: 190–1) on the phone, but it is not how she identifies herself in her day-to-day life. This disaggregation of desire from identity alerts us to the ways in which desire relies on structures of iterability for its expression – and, hence, is always available for appropriation and forgery. Hall mentions a number of forgeries that occur at the sex line, some of them about race ("European American women are more successful at performing a Black identity than African American women are": p. 201). But one particularly striking forgery involves gender. One of the sex-line workers interviewed by Hall was Andy, a 33-year-old Mexican American bisexual who earned his living on the sex lines posing as a heterosexual woman.

Paraphrasing 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 in original). The theoretical project I have outlined here is, to be sure, a bit mucky. But no matter: what dimension of language

and life isn't? The goal of this essay has been to motivate a shift from looking at language and sexuality to interrogating and mapping language and desire. This is already being done, as I noted in my summaries of current work. But my argument is that the insights being generated by that work have not been related to a meta-theoretical discourse that encourages us to see the work as contributing to a common intellectual project. The research I have discussed shares a number of theoretical concerns that could be sharpened and developed by being made explicit and linked. And they are linked: work on the ways in which repressions and silences are constituted through language, on how those silences play a structuring role in the way in which interactions are organized, and on how specific linguistic conventions are used to structure, convey, and socialize desire – all of this contributes to an understanding of the relationship between desire and language. Recognizing this would open up new lines of enquiry, it would establish new theoretical and methodological linkages, and it would allow new connections to be made across disciplines. Those connections promise to strengthen cooperation between linguists, anthropologists, and psychologists, and they promise to enrich the study of language in exciting and highly desirable ways.

NOTES

- 1 Lesbian feminist scholars Penelope and Wolfe (1979: 11–12) suggest other reasons for the absence of an elaborate lesbian in-group vocabulary. They argue that such an absence is predictable, given that, in their opinion, the vocabulary of male homosexuals (and of males in general) is misogynist. "How would a group of women gain a satisfactorily expressive terminology if the only available terms were derogatory toward women?" they ask. In addition, they note that lesbians "have been socially and historically invisible . . . and isolated from each other as a consequence, and have never had a cohesive community in which a Lesbian aesthetic could have developed."
- 2 To my knowledge, this issue is addressed directly only once in Butler's oeuvre, when she justifies why she feels she can use terms like

"heterosexuality" when discussing the work of classical authors like Aristotle and Plato. Her use of the term, she writes,

is not meant to suggest that a single heterosexualizing imperative persists in [widely varied] historical contexts, but only that the instability by the effort to fix the site of the sexed body challenges the boundaries of discursive intelligibility in each of these contexts . . . [T]he point is to show that the uncontested status of "sex" within the heterosexual dyad secures the workings of certain symbolic orders, and that its contestation calls into question where and how the limits of symbolic intelligibility are set. (1993a: 16)

- Note the slippage between the disavowal that there is “a single heterosexualizing imperative” across history and cultures, and the later invocation of “the heterosexual dyad” (singular). This is the kind of hedging that opens Butler’s work to the charge that she is in fact making universalistic claims, despite her assertions to the contrary.
- 3 Note also that this explanation of the assumption of sexed identities is not an argument about language. Hence, the frequent accusation that Butler’s theorizing is “linguisticism,” at least in this, central, instance, is not sustainable.
- 4 See Freud (1989). In his discussion of the relationship of transgression to the Law, Žižek (1999: 148) cites Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, chapter 7, verse 7, as an early argument that there can be no sin prior to or independent of the Law:
- . . . if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin, I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet”. But sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, produces in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law sin lies dead.

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