Commentary I: 'It's a hijra!' Queer linguistics revisited

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Abstract

In a review of contributions to a special issue of *Discourse & Society* on queer linguistics, this article argues that the concept of indexicality, as theorized across diverse fields in sociocultural linguistics, has the potential to offer a much richer account of subjectivity than found in dominant strands of queer theory. While queer theory valorizes practice over identity, viewing the latter as fixed and necessarily allied with normativity, research on language and social interaction suggests that an analytic distinction between practice and identity is untenable. The indexical processes that work to produce social meaning are multi-layered and always shifting across time and space, even within systems of heteronormativity. It is this semiotic evolution that should become the cornerstone of a (new) queer linguistics.

Keywords

Two years after the ground changing publication of Judith Butler's (1990) *Gender Trouble*, I traveled to northern India and began my research on language and society in four Banaras hijra communities. Discussed in the anthropological literature as a 'third sex', hijras seemed appropriate to an early 1990s exploration of a queer theoretics, particularly as they are widely known in India for troubling heteronormative assumptions regarding sex, procreation, and kinship. If queer theory ever wanted an example from the ethnographic record to buttress its 'anti-social thesis' (Bersani, 1995; Caserio et al., 2006; Edelman, 2004; Halberstam, 2008), hijras would be it. The hijras I knew in Banaras renounce all worldly ties when they join their respective communities, shunning the extended family structures so integral to Indian social life. Their self-presentation as

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neither man nor woman is only part of the story; they also see themselves as situated outside normative systems of caste, class, religion, and reproduction. From their position in what queer theorists following Butler (1993) have valorized as the 'constitutive outside', they are able to engage in repeated acts of subversion that call into question the linguistic fundamentals of heterosexuality. These practices became the focus of my early work in queer linguistics as I explored, for instance, how hijras 'trouble' the indexical link between biological and social gender by switching between feminine and masculine self-reference (Hall and O'Donovan, 1996); how they challenge heterosexual morality through a robust use of sexual innuendo (Hall, 1997); and how they resignify the vocabulary of heterosexual procreation by mapping it on to their own family structures (Hall, 1996). But even as I embraced the essentialism-busting potential of performativity, joining Anna Livia to introduce queer linguistics in the edited volume *Queerly Phrased*, I recognized that the universalizing tenor of Butler's philosophy is not easily integrated with the analysis of language in context (Livia and Hall, 1997). The divide between queer linguistics and queer theory has become even more pronounced in the last decade, as queer theorists have forged an understanding of subjectivity that is in many ways incompatible with social scientific inquiry (see also Green, 2007). It is this tension that I address in this brief commentary.

With the contributions to this special issue in mind, I suggest here that queer linguistics, while born from the queer critique of heteronormativity and gender binarism, would do well to counter the analytic distinction between identity and practice that characterizes much of contemporary queer theory. In the latter strain of scholarship, identity is viewed as always feeding the project of heteronormativity. This perspective is the logical outcome of Butler's (1993) early theorization of how subjectivity materializes in discourse within the constraints of cultural intelligibility. Like Louis Althusser's (1971) citizen who turns to respond to a policeman's call, we are hailed into being by dominant discourses that recognize, and thus privilege, only certain types of belonging and not others. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) groups that secure recognition within this discursive regime, even if antagonistically situated under a common civil rights agenda, are considered complicit in the essentializing project of identity. This is especially the case if such groups attempt to access or enact heteronormative institutions such as marriage, since they then become bedfellows in the hierarchizing of monogamy and reproduction over other types of sexual acts (Warner, 1999; for a counterview, see Boellstorff, 2007). In Lisa Duggan's (2002) well-cited critique of gay and lesbian activism as motivated by the celebratory individualism within neoliberalism, these groups are 'homonormative' and thus rejected by a radical queer politics, which is, by definition, anti-identitarian.

While sexual identity is rarely, if ever, considered subversive in queer theory, the practices through which it is constituted – for instance, drag, pornography, sodomy, promiscuity, sadomasochism, or even furry sex – are readily celebrated as foundational to queer critique. Drag, for instance, is seen as harboring the potential to denaturalize the gender binary on which heterosexuality is built as itself a performance. Yet from a sociocultural linguistic perspective, the acts discussed by queer theorists, if indexical of any degree of social meaning, are also necessarily acts of identity. This is, after all, the structuring idea behind Pierre Bourdieu's (1972/1978) theory of practice, which views

subjectivity as built up from the habitual activities that comprise sociality. It is also at the heart of Butler's own theory of gender performativity, which views subjectivity as the outcome of 'reiterated action' (1993: 17). Subjects do not precede action in Butler's poststructuralist formulation; they are produced as its effect.

But whereas queer theoretical accounts view the meaning of practice as already given by discourse – that is, drag is subversive, gay marriage is not – sociocultural linguistics seeks to understand how these practices become invested with meaning in the first place. Social meaning is never static in this paradigm, but is instead complexly emergent from the stances and styles habitually taken up in interaction (for reviews, see Bucholtz and Hall, 2004a, 2004b, 2005). Ethnography is one methodology that is able to capture this semiotic flux, for thick descriptions of social life inevitably reveal that even the most vociferously articulated anti-normative positions produce their own normativity. In ethnographically informed accounts identity is not inherently 'bad', even if society prioritizes certain types of identity over others. Rather, identity just *is*. It emerges in all interactions, even very queer ones, in fleeting and often unpredictable ways. It materializes in the production of difference as well as sameness, anti-normativity as well as normativity, subversion as well as complicity. My question, then, is this: What would contemporary models of queer theory look like if they were to adopt this broader understanding of identity? The authors in the current issue all bear the stamp of queer theory's valorization of practice over identity, yet they also express the need to view this relationship differently. Building on their case studies, I argue that the sociocultural linguistic theorization of practice and identity as mutually constituted in discourse has much to offer queer linguistics, ultimately promising a richer analysis of the complexities of normativity than that which is enabled by queer theory. I would thus like to engage in my own sort of troubling, but this time with respect to the disciplinary normativity that governs queer critique.

The first hint of tension between queer theory and queer linguistics emerges in the current issue when its authors express the need to redefine the concept of homonormativity. In their insightful introduction, Heiko Motschenbacher and Martin Stegu propose that we should broaden the meaning of this term to recognize that 'non-heteronormative contexts [also] show their internal normativities'. This is not a new insight for sociolinguists or linguistic anthropologists, of course. Indeed, the paradigm of ethnography of communication was established in the 1960s precisely to investigate the norms of linguistic behavior that characterize diverse speech communities (Hymes, 1964). J.L. Austin's work on the performative utterance was inspirational for early work in this tradition, as researchers attempted to uncover the localized felicity conditions that invest linguistic acts with social meaning in particularized contexts (Hall, 1999). As the association of the speech community model with cultural cohesion became theoretically problematic, scholars turned to a community of practice model to interrogate how normativity is produced and contested even within groups that may appear linguistically and socially uniform from a standpoint of exteriority (e.g. Bucholtz, 1999; Mendoza-Denton, 1999). Although scholars in queer linguistics voiced suspicion early on regarding the way community was theorized in sociolinguistics – with some, for instance, professing a preference for Mary Louise Pratt's (1987) model of a 'linguistics of contact' over that of the speech community (Barrett, 1997; Queen, 1997) – they have also recognized that

communal imaginings, of whatever kind and extent, are a critical source of intersubjectivity (Leap, 1996). Duggan's explication of the term *homonormative* as being about the appropriation of heterosexual normativity is justifiably puzzling to Motschenbacher and Stegu, since groups associated with sexual alterity (and even queer theorists, for that matter) are always engaged in establishing and hierarchizing their own kinds of normativity. If homonormativity is owned by heterosexuality, what should we call these kinds of normativity?

Consider, for instance, the divergent varieties of lesbian normativity discussed by Veronika Koller in her comparison of lesbian texts from two different periods in US sexuality politics: a 1970 manifesto from the New York activist group Radicalesbians and a 2013 editorial from the glossy lesbian magazine *Curve*. Koller has admittedly taken on a tall analytic order in selecting these two texts. Not only do they reflect very different moments in the sociohistorical articulation of lesbian identity, they also belong to discursive genres characterized by linguistic conventions that do not readily invite comparison. Yet the claim forged by Koller regarding the importance of incorporating history more deeply into the critique of heteronormativity is well taken. She juxtaposes these two discursive extremes to remind us, quite simply, that norms change over time. The separatist ideology that frames the collective yearnings of the earlier text, when brought into the current period of consumption-loving neoliberalism that backgrounds this *Curve* editorial, reminds me of the temporal disconnect that Elizabeth Freeman (2010) makes central to her book, *Time Binds*. To exemplify her notion of 'temporal drag', Freeman analyzes a performance art piece by Sharon Hayes, who stands in 2005 in front of a government building holding up the sign 'Ratify E.R.A. NOW!'. What makes this image so odd in the present, in my reading of it, is the fact that the woman is standing alone. We are abruptly reminded that the feminist collective recalled by the sign's slogan is a thing of the past, its drive subdued by a new individualism. The Radicalesbian manifesto similarly transports us to a collective vision of lesbian normativity that is distinctly out of time with current individualizing discourses. This manifesto, once real, is now a relic of history, not a performance of it. But Koller's decision to bring it into her article enables her to unmask for readers how current articulations of lesbianism are themselves temporally bound. This approach thus synchronizes well with what she proposes should be the main project of queer linguistics: 'to uncover and destabilize normativity' (here broadly defined) 'through the analysis of text and discourse'. The different 'chrononormativities' that emerge from within these two texts, to again borrow a term from Freeman, importantly expose lesbian normativity as a production that is always in dialogue with the production of heteronormativity, with both shifting as society changes.

This brings me to a second tension that emerges in these articles, which revolves around the queer theoretical representation of heteronormativity as stable across time and space. Freeman is right to call Butler to task for failing to consider the place of temporality in her early conceptualization of subversive acts, for most models of queer theory do not interrogate the evolution of indexical meaning in a way that captures the complexities of social life. In fact, Robyn Wiegman (2012), in her brilliant exposition of the 'identity knowledges' that lie behind the constitution of disciplinary boundaries in academia, argues that the very existence of queer theory is dependent on the stability of

heteronormativity. Because acts are perceived to be queer only if they trouble the regime of heteronormativity, their subversive efficacy is reliant on the assumed cohesion of this platform. Like Deborah Cameron's (1997) heterosexual fraternity brother who formulates his masculinity against the imagined gay man, queer theory formulates queerness against a unitary conceptualization of heteronormativity. It thus violates its first rule of order by projecting a stable identity onto both the oppressor and its nemesis, with the designation of acts as either normative or subversive already predicted by this dichotomy.

Cultural anthropologist Tom Boellstorff (2013) has recently stressed the need to develop a theory of 'normaling' that interrogates how subjects associated with heteronormativity can both be *in* the norm and *shift* the norm. As Boellstorff reminds us, we have this in the sociocultural linguistic theorizing of indexicality, a key concept in our field that refers to the creation of semiotic links between linguistic forms and social meanings. Mary Bucholtz and I have argued in our collaborations that the indexical processes that work to produce identity occur at all levels of linguistic structure (2004a, 2004b, 2005); they are not limited to the overt use of referential identity categories that are the mainstay of queer theorizing. These processes are always in flux, as are the groups with which they are associated, leading to the coexistence of multiple orders of indexicality that become the ground of signification (Agha, 2003; Eckert, 2008; Silverstein, 2003). The resignification of social meaning must therefore be analyzed as neither singular nor linear, but rather ubiquitous and exponential. To bring this back to the current collection of articles, the social meaning granted to heteronormativity, even if its idealization persists, is always shifting across the interactions of those associated with it. This semiotic evolution, in my opinion, is what a queer linguistics should attempt to capture.

We see such an evolution in Motschenbacher's provocative article on the emergence of a 'normative shift' in the self-referential practices of celebrities at the pan-European Eurovision Song Contest, an event that attracts more than 100 million viewers in 40 participating European nations. In the extensive press conferences that surround the event, which Motschenbacher studiously recorded, competitors from across Europe strategically use gender-free language to discuss the romantic scenarios that constitute their songs. Now this certainly suggests a sea change for our understanding of social markedness, with gender neutrality, not gender complementarity, becoming the default for the discursive expression of desire. Motschenbacher characterizes these constructions as 'non-heteronormative' since they express a positionality that is alternative to dominant expectations of gender binarism. Yet I wonder if we could also view them as constituting a discursive shift from within the very interior of heteronormativity. Could it be, for instance, that we are witnessing the 'normaling' of a new kind of hegemonic masculinity that is made more cosmopolitan by the incorporation of homosexual potential? Or is heteronormativity itself not quite so heteronormative anymore, as lesbians and gays gain civil rights across Europe and North America and expand the contours of its earlier rigidity? Surely, the recent movement in Sweden to mainstream the gender-neutral pronoun *hen* (Rothschild, 2012) would suggest that very different indexical orders are emerging, even at the national level.

Whatever the case, any analysis of social life must start by acknowledging that the meaning of discursive practice is not fixed, nor is its designation as 'heteronormative' or 'queer'. Sixteen years ago, at the time of *Queerly Phrased*'s publication, gender-neutral constructions very similar in form to those discussed by Motschenbacher were seen to signify the concealment of homosexual desire, not its affirmation (Liang, 1999; Livia,

2000). Yet whether such acts conceal or affirm, they are produced in relation to the heterosexual assumptions that undergird much of everyday conversation, a subject taken up in this issue by Jennifer Coates in her detailed exposition of the 'discursive production of everyday heterosexualities' (see also Kitzinger, 2005). In contrast to Motschenbacher, Coates centers her analysis on the innermost rings of heteronormativity so as to interrogate what Deborah Cameron and Don Kulick (2003) have discussed as the 'heteronormative hierarchy'. Drawing on a broad database of spontaneous conversation that takes place in informal British contexts, much of which was recorded in the 1980s and 1990s, she focuses on talk structured around the pillars of heteronormativity identified by queer theorists: monogamy, childrearing, and conventional gender.

Coates does not discuss the sociohistorical situatedness of these excerpts, but from my current vantage point in 2013 when the United States government is debating the Defense of Marriage Act, I cannot help but wonder if the exposition of them as 'heterosexual' involves its own sort of temporal drag. That is, if the names in these conversations were changed to reflect gender neutrality, I could just as easily imagine them as taking place among my gay and lesbian friends who are involved in the hard work of coupledom and childrearing. Do we want to analyze their conversational practices as also heteronormative? Perhaps we do, and I do not want to preclude this interpretation. But I would also like us to allow for the possibility that the meaning of 'couples talk' – or even its counterpoint, 'affair talk' – is not dependent on a hierarchy that precedes its contextualization. The relationship between form and meaning is never static. Even if we embrace Duggan's homonormative thesis, we should at the very least acknowledge that the new intelligibility of gay couples in national imaginings is altering the participant structures that have traditionally made heteronormativity felicitous.

The final two articles in this special issue – Britta Schneider's discussion of German and Australian appropriations of Latin American salsa and Tommaso Milani's analysis of user profiles on the South African gay online dating site *meetmarket* – each attempt to understand 'queerness' not as the property of particular types of action, but as emergent from social context. For Milani, this context is the intersectionality of sexuality and race in post-apartheid South Africa; for Schneider, it is the 'cultural contact zone' that brings together contrastive indexical orders regarding the performance and interpretation of eroticized gender roles. What is compelling about both of these articles is their refusal to accept the usual analytic interpretations of the practices they analyze. Two women may take on oppositional gender roles and perform a kind of heterosexual drag for their salsa-loving audience, but given the way these acts are interpreted, can we really call them 'queer'? Alternatively, the men of Milani's study may express a preference for 'straight-acting' partners and thus appear to be complicit in dominant regimes of gender and sexuality, but can we also read these requests as denaturalizing heterosexuality as itself a kind of acting? These questions can be answered only by acknowledging the sociocultural complexity of discursive action; indeed, both authors refuse to settle on a singular interpretation of the actions they analyze.

I conclude this commentary by reflecting again on issues of practice and identity as they materialize among India's hijras. While the stances and styles that hijras produce in the hinterlands of society trouble a heteronormative center (indeed, hijras even mimic the act of giving birth when celebrating the arrival of a new child in the neighborhood), it is the

threat of sedimented identity that truly disturbs. In the 1990s when I conducted my field-work, every parent I interviewed in Banaras feared the performative 'it's a hijra!', knowing that these three words would interpellate their child as exterior to home, family, and society. Hijras use this fear to their advantage, demanding higher fees in their performances as they peek inside the diaper of a newborn. Their practices trouble precisely because onlookers consolidate them as bound to an imagined abject identity; otherwise, they would have no efficacy. Should we valorize these acts of anti-sociality as the singular program of a queer future? The suffering of Banaras hijras, together with the families who ostracize them, suggest to me that we should not. From a political perspective, I am concerned that queer theory, by maintaining its analytic distinction between practice and identity, ignores the subjectivity of those it was initiated to defend. From a sociocultural linguistic perspective, I am concerned that this distinction leads to a static account of the indexical processes that give rise to social meaning. Over the past two decades, I have found queer theory, in all its diverse forms, inspirational for thinking through the linguistic reproduction of gender and heterosexuality. Now I suggest that we showcase our own theorization of the evolving relationship between form and meaning as the cornerstone of a (new) queer linguistics.

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