QUEER EXCURSIONS
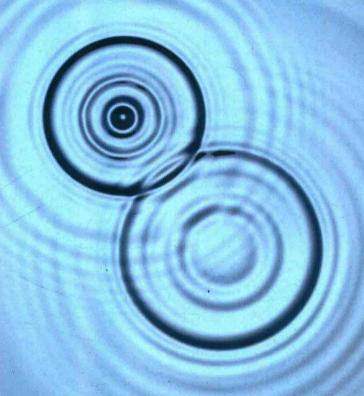
Retheorizing Binaries in Language, Gender, and Sexuality

BY

LAL ZIMMAN, JENNY L. DAVIS AND JOSHUA RACLAW

STUDIES IN LANGUAGE AND GENDER

Queer Excursions

RETHEORIZING BINARIES IN LANGUAGE,
GENDER, AND SEXUALITY

Edited by Lal Zimman
Jenny L. Davis
and
Joshua Raclaw

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD

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SERIES FOREWORD

Oxford's series Studies in Language and Gender provides a broad-based interdisciplinary forum for the best new scholarship on language, gender, and sexuality. The mandate of the series is to encourage innovative work in the field, a goal that may be achieved through the revisitation of familiar topics from fresh vantage points, through the introduction of new avenues of research, or through new theoretical or methodological frameworks. The series is interdisciplinary in its scope: volumes may be authored by scholars in such disciplines as anthropology, communication, education, feminist and gender studies, linguistics, literary studies, psychology, queer studies, race and ethnic studies, sociology, and other fields.

EDITOR'S PREFACE

Research on language, gender, and sexuality has been uneasily walking the gender binary since the field's beginnings in the 1970s. In some of the earliest work, the notion of a binary difference between women and men was a crucial foundational move in drawing attention to gender in linguistics and other language-oriented disciplines, given the almost complete absence of gender in linguistic research up to that point. This perspective shaped much of the work within language, gender, and sexuality studies for the next decade and more. The theoretical reliance on a binary conceptualization of gender, however, came to be the target of extensive critique from linguistic scholars influenced by poststructural feminism, who rejected the gender binary in favor of an examination of the diverse forms of femininity and masculinity produced through language. This extremely productive shift led to studies of a wide range of gendered semiotic practices as well as a still-ongoing extension of the field's traditional focus on gender to more centrally include sexuality.

Yet as poststructuralist theories of gender make clear, we should not be too quick to abandon the binary, for the ideology of gender difference is the basis of gender-based inequality. That is, the sociopolitical processes that neatly categorize human beings into girls and boys, women and men, require the gender binary in order to operate. Moreover, binary thinking does not end with gender: Binaries also organize systems of sexuality, race, class, and other dimensions of social subjectivity. At the same time, binarity serves as a vital resource for social agency, as language users enlist binary structures precisely in order to undo or redo them. Hence, as much as feminist researchers might lament the enduring power of binarity, we give up too much if we do not acknowledge its effects on language-users—and vice versa.

Queer Excursions: Retheorizing Binaries in Language, Gender, and Sexuality argues compellingly that it is time for scholars of language, gender, and sexuality to return to the binary, not as a taken-for-granted starting point for research, but as the very problem to be investigated.

The contributors to this volume offer a wealth of studies that show that at the current stage in language, gender, and sexuality studies, the gender binary is both politically problematic and theoretically necessary. In short, as a key concept for understanding the social world, binarity is "good to think with," to borrow anthropologist Clifford Geertz's famous reworking of Claude Lévi-Strauss. In the following chapters, authors examine the uses and limits of binary thinking in a variety of contexts, from reconceptualizing the Native

North American "Two-Spirit" identity to exploring the relational—and binarily structured—"*lesbi*" category in Indonesia. As these examples suggest, this endeavor is necessarily global in its span yet, crucially, attentive to local cultural meanings.

Importantly, the chapters of *Queer Excursions* regularly emphasize the close interconnections between gender and sexuality. Just as valuable is the volume's sustained consideration of trans identities and other forms of transgressive gender around the world that both disrupt the two-gender system and creatively draw on its resources. Such work moves scholarship on language, gender, and sexuality from its early focus on difference to the more nuanced concept of alterity, a reformulation that emphasizes the powerful political effects of binarity as well as its historical and situational contingency.

Finally, as the authors demonstrate in different ways, the theorizing of binarity is a linguistic project as much as it is a feminist project, given that the grammatical gender systems and other resources of specific languages participate at times in upholding and at other times in subverting social systems of gender and sexuality. Thus to fully unpack the binary and how it is deployed in social life, the specialized expertise of the linguist must play a central role.

* * *

This volume is the last that will be published under my editorship of Oxford University Press's Studies in Language and Gender series. As the series' founding editor, I have been privileged to get an advance look at emergent ideas and trends and to help foster cutting-edge scholarship over the years. Happily, Studies in Language and Gender will continue under the visionary leadership of Lal Zimman, one of the editors of the present volume as well as one of the most exciting, talented, and innovative scholars of language, gender, and sexuality working today. With Lal's skillful guidance, the series is certain to thrive and to move in exciting new directions.

I am proud to conclude my work for Studies in Language and Gender with the appearance of *Queer Excursions*, a scholarly project that returns to one of the most fundamental issues in feminist linguistics in order to rethink the very basis of gender and sexuality. I can think of no more fitting volume to inaugurate the next phase in the development of the series and the field.

Mary Bucholtz
Series Editor

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

Rusty Barrett is an Associate Professor in the Linguistics Program and the English Department at the University of Kentucky. His research focuses on language and sexuality, language and gender, language revitalization, and Mayan languages. His book, *From Drag Queens to Leathermen: Language, Gender, and Gay Male Subcultures*, is forthcoming from Oxford University Press as part of the Studies in Language and Gender series.

Orit Bershtling is a PhD candidate and a Lecturer at the School of Social Work, Faculty of Social Welfare & Health Sciences, Haifa University, Israel. Her research interests include the intersection between gender identity, critical discourse analysis, public policy, and feminist psychology. Her contribution to *Queer Excursions* is a chapter from her thesis in Gender Studies at Bar Ilan University, Israel.

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Jenny L. Davis is a Lyman T. Johnson Postdoctoral Fellow in Linguistics at the University of Kentucky. Her research analyzes the intersections of language, ethnicity, and identity, with foci on indigenous language use and the sociocultural dynamics of language revitalization, such as its gendered representations in Breton language revitalization media (an article in *Gender & Language*, 2012) and the intersections of language revitalization and religion (a chapter in *The Changing World Religion Map*, 2013).

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Rudolf P. Gaudio is Associate Professor of Anthropology at Purchase College, State University of New York. His book, *Allah Made Us: Sexual Outlaws in an Islamic African City* (2009), is an ethnography of *yan daudu*, Hausa-speaking men who are said to talk and act "like women" and who have a complicated relationship with the larger Islamic community in northern Nigeria and worldwide. His current research deals with language, social life, and nationalism in Abuja, Nigeria's modernist capital.

William L. Leap is a Professor in the Department of Anthropology where he teaches courses in language and sexuality studies and in anthropology and social justice. Leap coordinates the annual *American University Conference on Lavender Languages and Linguistics* (http://www.american.edu/lavenderlanguages) where lesbian, gay, trans, and queer linguistic themes have been explored freely and frankly since 1993. With Heiko Motschenbacher, he is cofounder and coeditor of the *Journal of Language and Sexuality* (http://www.benjamins.com/#catalog/journals/jls).

Erez Levon is Senior Lecturer in Linguistics at Queen Mary University of London, UK. His work uses quantitative, qualitative, and experimental methods to examine the role of language in the perception and performance of identity. He primarily focuses on the relationship between language and gender/sexuality, and the ways in which gender and sexuality intersect with other social categorizations (notably, those based on race and social class). His book *Language and the Politics of Sexuality: Lesbians and Gays in Israel* was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2010.

Joshua Raclaw is a Post-doctoral Researcher in the Center for Women's Health Research and Honorary Fellow in Sociology at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. His research focuses on conversation analysis and sociolinguistic analyses of language, gender, and sexuality in the United States. His current work brings together both approaches in an examination of the interactional production of race and gender bias in scientific peer review processes.

Lal Zimman is a Visiting Assistant Professor at Reed College. His research, which brings together ethnographic, sociophonetic, and discourse analytic frameworks, deals with the relationship between gender, sexuality, and embodiment in the linguistic practices of transgender and LGBQ communities. The focus of his dissertation and current research is the role of physiological and social processes in shaping the gendered voices of transgender speakers, with particular attention to trans men and others on the female-to-male identity spectrum.

Queer Excursions

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Opposites Attract

RETHEORIZING BINARIES IN LANGUAGE, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY

Jenny L. Davis, Lal Zimman, and Joshua Raclaw

In scholarship on gender and sexuality, the binary has been problematized as a primary symbol of the marginalization and stigmatization of non-normative subjects and practices. This rejection runs contrary to the intellectual histories in which most academic work is situated, which have privileged the dichotomy as an elegant and intuitive structure. The fields that have informed the study of language, gender, and sexuality—sociolinguistics, cultural and linguistic anthropology, and gender and sexuality studies—are no exception in this regard. Of course, the past two decades have seen an integration of poststructuralism and queer theory into studies of language, gender, and sexuality, accompanied by a critique of essentialized dichotomies like female and male. With these developments, the field has seen a widespread engagement with the theoretical notions of intersectionality (Barrett 1995), performativity (Livia and Hall 1997b), and globalization (Leap and Boellstorff 2004; Manalansan 1995) in efforts to move away from a decades-long focus on binary gender differences. "Queer linguistics," as this set of perspectives has been called, presents a fundamental challenge to the assumption that binary systems for categorizing gender and sexuality are natural, universal, and indisputable. At the same time, researchers interested in the linguistic construction of gender and sexuality continue to frame their research in terms of the well-established binaries of women and men, femininity and masculinity, homosexuality and heterosexuality. Consequently, there is a serious need for the field to retheorize such aprioristic dichotomies.

We do not mean to suggest that previous authors have been entirely unaware of the problematic nature of these binaries, nor that the binary is itself an inherently problematic analytic device. Today's studies of language, gender, and sexuality would not be possible if not for the earlier recognition of socially salient distinctions between female and male, or gay and straight.

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Given the ways that second-wave feminism informed the development of language and gender as a field, it is unsurprising that the first researchers in this area focused largely on documenting women's speech and the ways it differed from the unmarked masculine norm. Here a gender binary was useful as a strategic tool (McElhinny 1996) insofar as it encouraged sociocultural linguists to acknowledge both sides of the female/male dichotomy rather than treating men as representative of all speakers. Additionally, the relevance of these binary distinctions to speakers' organizations of the world around them should not be underestimated; as long as binaries have a role in the talk and other practices of those we study, they must remain a component of our explanations (Bucholtz and Hall 1995). However, the scope of early language and gender research was limited when compared to subsequent progressions in the field. Furthermore, this body of work often had the effect of reifying the femininity/masculinity and female/male binaries as fundamental macrocategories that determine access—or lack of access—to institutionalized power, and that are reflected and reinforced linguistically through gender socialization.

The emergence of language and sexuality research served as a response to and critique of the heteronormative assumptions implicit in many early studies of language and gender, which conflated femininity, femaleness, and attraction to men on the one hand, and masculinity, maleness, and attraction to women on the other. Linguists with an interest in queer communities brought sexually marginalized groups into the research canon, although here too the earliest research often focused on documenting the ways that lesbian and gay speakers differed from their straight counterparts, or otherwise challenged generalizations about the relationship between language and gender that were informed by heteronormative assumptions.

The poststructuralist turn in sociocultural linguistics brought with it new theoretical frameworks that complicated existing assumptions about seemingly natural social categories. These challenges came from a number of directions. Among these was the recognition of the intersectional nature of identities. With the rise of the third wave of feminist thought in the 1990s, language and gender research began to fully embrace the kaleidoscopic variation in the norms for gender and sexuality on the basis of race, class, and ethnicity (e.g., Bucholtz 1996; Hall 2005; Mendoza-Denton 1999; Pujolar i Cos 1997). At the same time, work on language and sexuality similarly started to explore the diverse and multifaceted forms of sexual alterity in a wide range of communities within the United States and on a global scale (see, for instance, the variety of groups discussed in Leap and Boellstorff 2004, and Livia and Hall 1997a). Barrett's (1995, 1999) analysis of African American drag queens epitomizes the trend of intersectional analysis within queer linguistics by demonstrating the way drag performers draw on the social fabric of gender, sexuality, race, and class to linguistically enact complex and dynamic stage

personae. Butler's (1990) reworking of Austinian performativity also resulted in substantial changes in sociocultural linguists' conceptions of gender and sexuality. From a performative perspective, identity does not represent a set of preexisting, static truths but is rather an emergent, contextual, and inter-subjective phenomenon that is constantly open to renegotiation and relies on a system of interconnected "citations" of gender norms. The influence of per-formativity can be seen most clearly in the literature on linguistic practices of gender crossing, such as Gaudio (1997, 2009), Hall and O'Donovan (1996), Jackson (2003), Livia (2000), Manalansan (1995), and Murray (2003). This body of work has shown how femininity and masculinity can be detached from the bodies to which they are ideologically linked, with language play-ing a crucial role in this process. Similar studies that analyze more norma-tive constructions of gender and sexuality, such as work by Cameron (1997) and Kiesling (2002) on the maintenance of heterosexual masculinity, have also shown how gendered subjectivity is co-constructed in interactions rather than a preexisting social fact. Each of these studies illustrates how the in-sights of performativity apply to naturalized social positionalities as well as to marginalized ones.

A number of scholars have issued explicit calls for research that goes beyond the binaries of female versus male and gay versus straight (Bing and Bergvall 1996; Cameron and Kulick 2003, 2005; Kulick 2000, 2002; Queen 2007). For example, in their focused critique of the limits imposed by gender binaries, Bing and Bergvall (1996) deconstruct the assumption that female and male are natural opposites and point out that even on the level of bio-logical sex there are many more than two categories. Based on these obser-vations, Bing and Bergvall call for more linguistic research on communities that blur the lines between female and male or otherwise problematize the gender binary. From a rather different theoretical perspective, Kulick (2000) argues that studies of language and sexuality have been severely limited by a focus on lesbian and gay identity rather than the broader operation of sexual-ity, particularly the workings of sexual desire. Yet in spite of such arguments, binary thinking continues to be pervasive in language, gender, and sexuality research, and the differences between women and men or between gay and straight speakers continue to be the primary focus of inquiry in these fields. Rather than simply accepting the binaries as inevitable, or discarding them from our analyses entirely, we advocate for a more complex and contextually grounded engagement with the binary.

Each chapter of *Queer Excursions* offers a distinct perspective on the binaries discussed above, as well as on a number of other, less immediately apparent dichotomies that nevertheless structure the gendered and sexual lives of speakers in various contexts. Some chapters focus on the limiting or misleading qualities of binaristic analyses, while others suggest that bina-ries are a crucial component of social life in a given community. What each

contribution demonstrates is that researchers must be careful to avoid the assumption that our own preconceptions about binary social structures will be shared by the communities we study. Reflecting this concern with localized discourses of binarity, many of the contributors to this book make use of ethnographic approaches that allow for highly contextualized analyses of linguistic phenomena, including the deployment of phonetic styles, morphological gender markers, community-specific speech acts, and the resignification of lexical items.

The volume opens with Lal Zimman's chapter on a binary that has received considerable criticism from feminist theorists but has less frequently been addressed in sociocultural linguistic research: gender versus sex. While sex is often framed as the natural, physiological state of being female or male, and gender as the socially constructed role imposed on members of each sex, poststructuralist feminists (e.g., Butler 1993) have argued that biological sex is no less constructed than gender. In other words, the meanings attributed to different kinds of bodies are not derived directly from these bodies' natural states as female or male, but are rather filtered through culturally and historically specific conceptualizations of gender. Zimman provides empirical support for this argument through an analysis of transgender men's talk about their own and each other's bodies. His analysis shows how trans speakers engage in a radical reformulation of the semantics of terminology used for gendered body parts, like *dick* and *cunt*, in order to construct their bodies as unambiguously male. These practices align with speakers' self-defined gender identities, regardless of whether their physiology matches up with dominant understandings of male bodies. For members of this group, gender identities are not derived from genitalia—on the contrary, the meanings they attribute to their bodies are determined by their self-identification as men. Rather than treating sex and gender as opposites and mapping them onto the divide between nature and culture, respectively, sex is framed in this chapter not as the cause of gender, but rather its product. Zimman's analysis demonstrates that the line between femaleness and maleness, like the line between femininity and masculinity, is much more dynamic and linguistically contingent than it may seem.

Chapter 3, by Orit Bershtling, explores the extent to which grammatical gender both constrains and facilitates the realization of non-normative gender identities among speakers of Hebrew, a language with a pervasive grammatical gender system. Bershtling shows that, while Hebrew obligatorily marks gender on both first-person and second-person forms of verbs, genderqueer speakers—who identify outside of the binary system of female and male— engage in a number of linguistic practices to avoid choosing between these (purportedly) mutually exclusive positionalities. For instance, feminine and masculine morphology may both be used in formulating a single word, as in the case of *havarimot* ('friends,' marked with the masculine plural suffix *-im*

followed by the feminine plural suffix *-ot*). Similarly, speakers strategically avoid person and tense forms that are marked for gender in favor of those that are not, for instance opting to use the first-person plural form, which is gender-neutral, in contexts where the gendered first-person singular might be expected. Yet Bershtling's argument is not that Hebrew's binary grammatical gender system simply constrains or places a burden on genderqueer Israelis. Instead, she suggests that it allows for greater visibility for genderqueer identities and thereby assists genderqueer individuals in their rejection of the gender binary. In a language like English, which employs relatively little morphological gender-marking, speakers can easily make assumptions about their interlocutors' gender identities without ever making those assumptions explicit. Hebrew, on the other hand, requires that speakers and listeners actively and explicitly negotiate each other's genders through language. As a result, genderqueer people who reject exclusively feminine or masculine positionalities are able to index their identities in ways that are difficult to ignore. The linguistic systems that could be seen as enforcing the gender binary most adamantly thus also afford speakers a greater arsenal of resources to undermine that very system.

In Chapter 4, Jenny Davis argues for a nonexclusive (or "both/and") conceptualization of binaries based on the self-articulated gender, sexual, and ethnic identities of Two-Spirit individuals, or indigenous North Americans who define themselves as spiritually both female and male. Specifically, Davis analyzes how members of a regional Two-Spirit group in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States articulate the multiple facets of Two-Spirit identity by simultaneously aligning with both sides of various mainstream binaries regarding gender, sexuality, and indigenousness. While Two-Spirit people are often colloquially described simply as "gay Indians," this terminology erases a number of more localized aspects of this identity that hold primary importance for group members. To be sure, many Two-Spirit people identify as members of non-normative sexual categories such as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, but at the same time this community also includes members of non-normative gender categories such as transgender, intersex, and genderqueer individuals. These gender-based and sexuality-based categories are seen by members of the Two-Spirit community as manifestations of the same underlying spiritual state. Two-Spirit identity as both female and male and as encompassing both gender and sexual non-normativity is further mirrored in the way members of this group simultaneously align with both local tribal and pan-Indian traditions, identities, and roles. Davis focuses in particular on the tactics of semantic adequation and distinction (Bucholtz and Hall 2004) employed with both English and indigenous language identity terminology during public presentations. In this group's approach to binarity, "both/and" is honored as a valuable way of positioning oneself in relation to different categories. The group's rejection of the mutual exclusivity of binaries reminds us