

Dyke/Girl

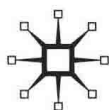
Language and Identities
in a Lesbian Group

Lucy Jones



Dyke/Girl: Language and Identities in a Lesbian Group

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University of Hull, UK



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Transcription Conventions

[beginning of first overlap
]	end of first overlap
[[beginning of second overlap
]]	end of second overlap
-	self-interruption or false start
/	latching (no pause between speaker turns)
(.)	pause of less than 1 second
(2)	timed pause
.	end of intonation unit; falling intonation
?	end of intonation unit; rising intonation
()	uncertain transcription
<>	transcriber comment
{ }	stretch of talk over which comment applies
::	lengthening of sound
(XX)	emphatic breath out/sigh
@(10)	laughing, plus duration
<@ @>	laughing quality
<u>underline</u>	emphatic stress or increased amplitude
<* *>	rapid speech

Acknowledgements

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LUCY JONES

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1

Introduction

In the autumn of 2006, a conversation occurred between Sam, Marianne, Eve and Jill, some of the members of a lesbian hiking group that I had recently become acquainted with. We were in a family pub eating a meal, having just been for a walk nearby. We were discussing Jill's recent women-only walking holiday, and Jill told us about how long the hikes had been and what the accommodation had been like. The friendly atmosphere changed, however, when Marianne asked the question: 'Were most of the women dykes, then?' It was clear that Jill was irritated by this question – she told me that she had gone on the trip to appreciate the walks, not the women. When she claimed that she had not had those conversations and did not know the sexuality of her companions, Marianne asked: 'Well, did they look like dykes?' Again, Jill said that it was not something she had considered, and promptly changed the topic.

This was a typical interaction between the Sapphic Stompers,¹ a group of gay women that met regularly to walk together in the English countryside, and with whom I carried out the research for this book. Although the Sapphic Stompers did not spend all of their time talking about their sexuality, the varying attitudes that each woman in the group had about this sensitive topic often emerged in their conversations. Their interaction often included moments where they indirectly defined what a 'real' or 'proper' lesbian looked or behaved like, for example. Typically, this meant a style and practice they referred to as 'dykey'. This book considers the ways in which these women positioned themselves and others as 'authentic' lesbians through their discussions of what makes a woman a 'dyke'. It explores the meaning and identity of a Stomper lesbian, but also considers what it means to be a Stomper *woman*, looking beyond the women's sexuality alone

as a way of defining themselves. The Stompers' identity is considered in relation to broader social norms and values related to their shared experience, illustrating how individuals create their own meaning and shared sense of identity through their engagement. Central to this is Bucholtz and Hall's (2005: 586) proposition that identity is 'the social positioning of the self and other'. The approach taken here draws upon ideas from feminism, anthropology and queer theory, using concepts from linguistics to provide analyses of specific interactions. Through a sociocultural focus, it is shown to be possible to trace the relationships between local practice and social identity.

This is the first book of its kind to focus exclusively on lesbian discourse and identity. As will be shown in later chapters, recent research has considered the interaction of lesbian friends (e.g. Morrish and Sauntson 2007, Queen 2005), as well as the written discourses constructed by lesbian 'communities' for their members (e.g. Koller 2008, Turner 2008). The existing body of work on lesbian discourse does not, however, currently include a concentrated ethnographic study which investigates the links between broader ideological conceptions of lesbian culture and the local practices which might be shaped by them. Even in the twenty-first century, negative and offensive stereotypes about lesbians continue to exist, and (particularly older) gay women are often rendered invisible within a male-dominated gay culture. It is therefore important to attempt to capture snapshots of the experiences of gay women in order to represent – and try to explain – the realities of being a lesbian in a heterosexual, male-oriented world. It is my intention to provide one such snapshot in this book. This first chapter outlines the meaning of being a Sapphic Stomper, explaining the typical demographic of the group and outlining the relationships within it. It concludes with an introduction to the key concepts used throughout these pages in analysing Stomper interactions, before a plan of the book is presented.

1.1 The Sapphic Stompers

In 2006–7, when the research for this book took place, the Sapphic Stomper group was based in the north of England. Most of its members lived in Dayton (a city with a population over 400,000) where any events for lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people were sporadic and typically occurred in late-night bars and clubs. Heavy consumption of alcohol and loud dance music were the norm, making up what was typically referred to as 'the gay scene'. In itself, as implied above, this

excluded older LGB individuals given that there was little to reflect broader cultural tastes, and the 'scene' was dominated by people in their teens and twenties. The universities in the city had LGB societies, typically comprising undergraduate students between the ages of 18 and 21 and not open to the general public, and events aimed at a wider range of people (such as the first Dayton Pride²) were only just beginning to emerge.

As a result of this restricted scene, a small group of friends – lesbians who had lived in Dayton for some time and wanted to extend their social circle – decided to set up a social group intended to facilitate events and activities for lesbian women in the area. Using an existing facility on the internet, which enabled the creation of a free email-based mailing list, these women created the group 'Do You Know Everyone?' (DYKE) and advertised the group in the listings of national lesbian magazines and websites. This group was established in 2004 and, by 2006, had just over 100 people subscribing to the mailing list. The Sapphic Stompers advertised themselves through this mailing list with a link to a website that a few members of the group had created. The Stompers were established in 1991 and had previously been advertised through the gay media more generally, but their involvement with DYKE allowed new people to discover them. To join a Stomper walk, an interested woman would obtain information about it from either the website or the mailing list and then go along to the starting point of the walk at the specified time (typically on a Sunday morning). Any number of women might turn up for a walk, but on average there were between six and ten people per hike.

Upon encountering a newcomer, individuals within the group would typically ask only a few questions about their personal life, enough to show a polite interest but not so many that they might invade their privacy. As a result, they did not always know one another intimately and their interaction reflected this. They were typically middle-class white women, and they ranged in age from their mid-forties to their early sixties. There was an understanding that not everybody would be comfortable talking about their sexuality or their relationship status, and new members would never be asked outright about their family life. It was assumed that a woman was gay, single and childless unless they mentioned otherwise, but there was never a demand for this information to be provided. It was also assumed that the women were female-born rather than transgender, though – again – the discretion maintained by the Stomper members was such that this would not necessarily have been disclosed. In this sense, members were able to

maintain some level of anonymity and, crucially, to present the version of themselves that they wished to and that they felt was appropriate in this context.

Often of primary importance in these introductory stages was the question of whether the new arrival was a keen hiker. The Stompers often went on walking vacations alone, with partners, friends, or through (typically women-only or lesbian-specific) holiday organisations, and spent much of their spare time outside in the countryside. In this sense, most of the women took hiking seriously, and expected potential members of the group also to be passionate about it. The most committed members of the group spent much of their time preparing and leading Stomper walks as well as meeting four times a year to plan a timetable. They often referred to themselves as the 'core' members and were identifiable as such by most of the other regulars.

For all of the core members, a primary reason for living in Dayton was to be close to a rural area. Typically, they originated from other areas in the UK – often the south – but had moved to the area in later life either for employment or retirement. All of the core members had lived in London at some point, and they talked enthusiastically about the fact that they now lived in or near to a city in such close proximity to the countryside. The hikes that the women engaged in were always a maximum of 45 minutes' drive from the centre of the city, as within just half an hour one could reach open land upon which hikers were free to roam. The women walked in these areas on routes which they planned themselves and which, typically, were between eight and ten miles in length. The walks were usually on undulating (yet not unstable) ground, and were suitable for relatively fit individuals but also not overly challenging for those new to the pastime. They typically took place on a Sunday morning twice a month and, in the summer months, twice on weekday evenings, and would usually take five or six hours to complete. Though the length of walks could have been covered in less time, the ethos of the group was to enjoy being in the outdoors, to spot wildlife, and to take in impressive views. In this sense, there was never a perceived need to move quickly whilst on a Stomper hike.

Passion for nature and wildlife was an important part of the overall Stomper identity; all of the core members and many of the regular members would try to name and identify species of butterfly, bird, plant or tree, and enjoyed demonstrating their knowledge of ecology and geography as we walked through the countryside. To present themselves as knowledgeable was a part of their practice generally, as the women were typically well educated, well read and articulate, and

would often have discussions about current affairs. In itself, hiking was accessible to most of the women due to their income and free time, which, along with these displays of knowledge and intellectualism, reflected the typically middle-class status of the Stomper members. The activity of walking, as the Stompers considered it, was about the experience throughout the day as opposed to the achievements in terms of miles walked or heights climbed. This became particularly clear when new or infrequent attendees who were already members of other walking groups came along to a Stomper hike; they would often walk faster, protest at the regularity of stops, or wish to take a harder route than that planned by the leader.

On a typical walk, the Stompers would stop for two short rests and a lunch break, during which time they ate their own packed lunches and often drank from flasks of hot drinks or from bottles of water. It was not common practice to attempt to share food or treat the breaks as a picnic, but instead as a well-deserved rest from the walk. During these times, people would occasionally talk but, more often, would simply sit surveying the view. The moment and location at which a break occurred were decided upon by the walk leader, and it was expected that this leader would have carried out a trial walk before leading the Stompers on it. This was referred to as a 'reccy', a term which the core Stompers all used frequently to describe the practice run they would do before leading a walk for the group. The word was always used but never defined, though it is common in British hiking circles – its use originates from army slang, short for 'reconnaissance' or 'reconnoitre', meaning to become familiar with or inspect an area. Its use was an example of shared linguistic practice between the women, and symbolised not only their awareness of walking culture but also the importance of taking the role of walk leader seriously. The fact that a reccy was expected from a leader illustrates the time commitment that the women would make to the group, not only planning and leading a walk, but spending an additional day rehearsing it, too. Stompers always went along with the leader's decisions and navigation, and it was not appropriate to question choices made or directions taken by that leader (though the women would often criticise aspects of the walk between themselves, without the leader's knowledge). Typically, the leader of the walk was also a member of the core group.

Another shared practice of the core Stompers related to the money that they spent purchasing the best equipment for their hikes (such as walking poles, rucksacks, boots and clothing). For a newcomer to achieve membership, they needed to demonstrate similar enthusiasm.

Often, newcomers would return after one hike with the group with new equipment, presumably having decided that they enjoyed the hobby enough to spend the money, realising what was required to do it in comfort, and noting what the other Stomper women wore, used and carried. Whilst the wearing of clothes with the brands of certain well-respected outdoor clothing companies was practical, it was also a part of the women's style. Indeed, the few times that we encountered newcomers wearing training shoes as opposed to walking boots, the women would mock them for being ill-prepared novices, with one Stomper once despairing of what she referred to as 'the trainer brigade'. To clearly mark oneself out as a group member, therefore, it was important to wear the 'right' clothing, and this was of clear importance to the core members.

Six women made up this core group, and they reflected the typical demographics of the Stompers as a whole. The core women were mostly in their fifties or sixties, in (or retired from) professional occupations, home owners, had all been educated up to at least graduate level, and were all white British citizens. Typically, the Stomper women identified as feminists, having experienced a period in the 1960s or 1970s where consciousness-raising and discourse about 'women's liberation' were widespread, particularly amongst the middle classes and lesbians. Although the interaction of less frequent members will be considered in the chapters that follow, the core group members were those with whom I spent the most time. As a result, the majority of the analysis in this book is focused on their engagement. The six core Stomper women are introduced below. They are **Claire**, **Eve**, **Hannah**, **Jill**, **Marianne** and **Sam**.

1.1.1 The Stomper members

Claire was in her early forties, and the youngest member of the Stompers by almost a decade. This was a source of banter between her and the other women, as she frequently (playfully) mocked them for being 'prehistoric' or 'dinosaurs' in order to illustrate her relative youth. She had lived in Dayton for 11 years, coming originally from a city 40 miles north and then living in London for some years whilst studying for a doctorate. Claire became involved with the Stompers as soon as she arrived in the city. Working in a skilled, technical role for a large company, she considered her colleagues to be her main social network in Dayton, and she gave this as the main reason for joining the Stompers. She knew nobody in the area upon gaining employment there, wanted to make other lesbian friends, and thought that taking up a hobby would be a good way of enhancing her social life.

Claire was never a keen walker before joining the Stompers, though her attitude towards the activity changed as she spent more and more of her spare time hiking, both with and without the group. Whilst Claire also enjoyed socialising in pubs and bars, the women in the group were not typically interested in such activities. She found this difficult, sometimes feeling bored or apathetic towards the group, yet it was the only contact that she had with other lesbians. For her, this was extremely important. In an interview with me, when I asked her whether she attended the group because of the walking or because of its lesbian status, she said: 'the most important part is that it's lesbian just so you can be yourself and you don't have to be worrying any of the time about what you might say'. For Claire, then, the group represented safety and comfort due to the people within it not questioning her sexuality or judging her for it.

Eve had been a central member of the group for four years, responsible for leading the Stomper planning meetings and organising the calendar of walks. Eve was a self-employed professional in her mid-sixties, managing and chairing local government meetings and committees. She was educated to Master's level, identified as a feminist, and frequently engaged in discussions regarding the connections between gender and sexuality, considering her own experience of being 'other' as due to her discomfort in wearing 'feminine' styles. Her relationship with the Stompers was formed primarily through her love of walking and, whilst she felt secure in the group because (as she said in an interview) 'it's nice not to have to explain yourself, it's nice to be in a situation where you assume you've got certain things in common', she did view it primarily as 'a walking group that happens to be lesbian'.

Hannah was in her early sixties, having retired in her late fifties from work as a civil servant, and the Stomper group played an important part in her social life as well. She was instrumental in the creation of the Stomper group in the 1990s and had formed some strong relationships through it, though not with any of the core Stompers involved in this study. The walking was the primary reason for her joining the group as she was passionate about it as a hobby, though she also enjoyed the company of other women in a big group. She felt that it was a refreshing change to many of the 'individualistic' elements of current society and reflected the experiences she had as a younger woman and a feminist. She regularly led walks for the group and typically attended the planning meetings, though was also in the process of trying to broaden her social circle as she was becoming tired of spending all of her spare time with gay women.

Jill was the newest member of the group, having recently retired from a professional, self-employed role and moving to Dayton in her mid-sixties. Jill took the group very seriously and came to the area primarily due to the Stompers' existence; she met some women on a walking holiday who were involved in the group and invited her to visit the area, which she promptly 'fell in love with'. As a result, the Stompers were the only people that Jill knew upon first moving to the area and they were a crucial part of her social life. Though Jill enjoyed walking with the Stompers, having long been independently interested in the hobby, she often grew frustrated with the Stompers as she felt that the group was 'too lesbian' in its focus. She argued that she had 'very little time for gay women's groups', partly because she disliked the label 'lesbian', viewing herself primarily as a feminist, but also because they were so often not political; if lesbian groups had to exist, she felt that they should be activist in nature. For her, though, the Stomper group was an opportunity to spend time engaged in her favourite hobby while also meeting new women who were her 'kind of people: middle aged and middle class'.

Marianne also joined the Stompers immediately upon moving to Dayton, and had been involved with the group for nine years. In her early fifties, she was employed in a highly skilled profession yet was committed to the Stompers in her spare time. She led walks and organised Stomper holidays, and attended every planning meeting that she could. She described herself as middle class and had engaged with feminist groups as a student. Her identification as a lesbian came in part, she felt, from her views about patriarchal society. Marianne strongly identified as a lesbian and, other than her work colleagues, her friends were exclusively gay because she felt more comfortable in such groups. Though she enjoyed walking, she engaged with the Stompers primarily to be in the company of other lesbians, explaining that she felt at ease because 'you don't have to go through all the other stuff of "are you married, have you got children" ... you don't have to even think about answering those questions'.

Finally, **Sam** had recently retired from a professional job, for which she had obtained a number of postgraduate qualifications, and was in her mid-sixties. Unlike the other core Stompers, Sam had only 'come out' relatively recently and lived in an area 30 miles away from the other members. The first time she ever hiked was with the Stompers, having heard about the group at a DYKE event. Before this, she had not been a regular walker and had not been a part of any other walking group but, since joining the Stompers, described it as 'an adrenaline

rush to be in the open space'. Though she joined the group primarily to meet people, she felt 'hooked on walking'. Though Sam's dedication to the group was clearly formed from a new-found love of hiking, illustrated by her regular leadership of Stomper walks, the lesbian side of the group was also crucial to her. Before becoming a part of the Stompers, she identified as a feminist, but had little experience of any specifically lesbian groups and knew little of gay culture. The group was intrinsic to her discovery of this.

Each woman in the group interpreted their relationship with it slightly differently, then; all went because they enjoyed the activity but not all of them felt that its lesbian status was important. For some, such as Jill, the lesbian focus was completely incidental and even, at times, irritating, whereas for Sam, for example, it was vital. All of the women considered the Stompers to be an important part of their social life, however, and had been engaged with the group for long enough and with enough frequency to consider themselves a central part of it. The women's commitment to the group was clear, as they routinely reserved up to two Sundays and two evenings per month to attend Stomper events.

Whilst the group's ethos was based around their passion for nature and the countryside, the activity of walking also clearly facilitated their engagement as lesbians. It gave this otherwise unconnected group of women a reason to be together and, despite their individual orientations or opinions about their sexuality, their part in the group was maintained through the shared assumption that they all identified as lesbian. Unsurprisingly, individual relationships developed between the women yet, despite the core members' regular engagement, it was not inevitable that *close* friendships would emerge. When they did, the women involved would often still only engage within Stomper contexts. The main friendships in the group were between **Claire** and **Marianne**, platonic and friendly ex-lovers; **Claire** and **Sam**, who got on well within the group and occasionally went together to DYKE events; **Jill** and **Hannah**, who regularly shared lifts to the Stomper walks; and **Marianne** and **Eve**, who were good friends within the group and often accompanied one another on a reccy of their walks. There were two poor relationships in the group, however, both of which involved Sam. **Sam** had failed to form neutral or positive ties with either **Marianne** or **Eve** after she experienced failed romances with both. The latter women's bad feeling towards her was compounded by their friendship with one another, and when moments occurred in which Sam and one of these women were present, they tended to avoid

direct interaction. Despite the conflict between them, however, all three continued to attend the Stomper walks and meetings. This illustrates the importance of the group to them as, although their attendance at the walks was optional and therefore their interaction theoretically avoidable, they considered their membership to the Stompers to be more important than the relative unease that they felt when together.

The other relationships in the group were relatively neutral. This reflects the fact that these women had little (other than their sexuality and the hiking) in common to create a more intimate friendship, yet no reason to actively dislike one another. It also reveals the typically non-intimate nature of the group's dynamics. The ties between the women were uniplex (see Milroy 1980: 179) in that they usually only knew one another through the group and typically had no interaction together outside of it, and this had a clear impact on the ways that the Stomper women made sense of their time together. The women were committed to maintaining their engagement, despite awkwardness between certain members and disagreement in what the group was 'for', making the Sapphic Stompers a fascinating site within which to view the construction of mutual identity.

1.2 Focus of the book

The following chapters will reveal how the Stompers negotiated their differing perspectives in order to construct a shared sense of self, by focusing in minute detail on a range of interactions that occurred between them. Central to their engagement together was a jointly created sense of what it meant to be a woman and a lesbian – this defined who they were and their membership to the group, and they negotiated these ideas together in order to create a Stomper identity. The chapters which follow, as a result, deal with gender and sexuality as concepts which can be reworked within interaction. That is to say, they are viewed as *ideological* concepts.

To posit that gender and sexuality are ideological is to invoke a concept core to Marxist theory: *ideology*. Ideology can be defined, for the purposes of this book, as ideas which create structure and order in society. Central to Marxist thought is the view that the ideas of the ruling classes are, essentially, the ruling ideas. In other words, those with the most influence in society are able to create a world which reflects their own needs and desires. Ideologies, within this structure, are the versions of truth and reality put forward by those with power. The critical position on gender which is taken here, then, views the