



Gayspeak

by Andrea D. Sims

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What does it mean for someone to "sound" gay or lesbian? How do people create lesbian and gay identities through language? Attempts to answer these questions have only recently moved beyond stereotyped assumptions that gay men speak like heterosexual women, and lesbians like heterosexual men.

While recent research has rejected these stereotypes, it has so far suggested that if glbtq identities are expressed through language at the level of sentences, words, or sounds, that expression is either so subtle or so various as to not be easily pinpointed.

The Speech of Gay Males

Several features have been proposed as markers of gay male identity (or more accurately, white middle class American gay male identity, since this is the group that has been the topic of most research).

These features include overly careful pronunciation, a wide pitch range, high and rapidly changing pitch, breathy tone, lengthened fricative sounds (for example, long *s*, *z*) and pronunciation of *t* and *d* as *ts* and *dz*. Also, ritual insults, irony, sarcasm, use of sexual and erotic reference, and women-related imagery and metaphor have all been cited. Finally, slang and other new words, mostly relating to aspects of gay and lesbian culture, have been widely noted. Strong evidence for almost all of these features, however, has been elusive.

Rudolf Gaudio investigated the claim that (a) people can differentiate between gay and straight men based solely upon their speech, and (b) listeners base their judgments on the use of a wider pitch range and greater fluctuating pitch. Although he found that listeners could distinguish gay from straight men, he failed to find any convincing empirical differences in pitch between these two groups. In short, part (b) of his hypothesis was not upheld. This study is representative of others that have failed to find concrete differences in the speech of gay and straight men.

Arnold Zwicky hypothesizes that the lack of a consistent and significant difference between gay male and straight male speech may stem from gay identity being marked by variation from stereotypically male (linguistic) behavior, with the form of differentiation being potentially various, and less important than the fact of differentiation itself.

The Speech of Lesbians

The search for lesbian speech characteristics (again, more accurately white middle class American lesbian speech characteristics) has been even more difficult. While there exists a stereotype that lesbians use a lower pitch range than do heterosexual females (exemplifying the perception that lesbians and gay men have more in common with the opposite sex than with heterosexual members of their own sex), studies have not substantiated this belief.

For example, Birch Moonwomon asked listeners to identify female speakers as either lesbian or straight based solely on voice. In contrast to Gaudio's study, she found that listeners could not distinguish the two groups.

While the study was conducted on a small scale, it suggests that there may not, in fact, be salient differences (identifiable or otherwise) in how lesbians speak. Moonwomon argues that lesbian identity is instead constructed "through indirect and direct . . . acknowledgment of the negative sanction [of lesbian partnerships] on the one hand, and, importantly, resistance to it on the other." In short, the construction of discourse, the topics that are used in discourse, and the background assumptions of a conversation appear to be the primary means through which lesbian identity is signaled.

Slang and Other Words

The only feature which has (to date) satisfactorily been shown to be a characteristic of gayspeak is a specialized vocabulary. A large variety of specialized words are known and used to refer to sexual relationships (for example, *partner*) and non-sexual ones (for example, *sister*), behavior (for example, *bull dyke*), age (for example, *chicken*), places (for example, *tearoom*), sexual identity (for example, *gay*, *lesbian*, *queer*), and so forth, as evidenced by several dictionaries such as *The Queen's Vernacular*.

Linguistic studies of languages other than English (for example, Burmese, French, Greek, Japanese, Brazilian Portuguese, Spanish) have almost exclusively investigated words used by glbtq populations and to refer to glbtq people rather than other linguistic phenomena.

Why Have Features Been So Elusive?

Theorists have argued that there are two important reasons why glbtq linguistic features are so elusive.

Answer 1: "Gayspeak" as Code

Some people have argued that "gayspeak" has been difficult to identify because glbtq populations use language subtly.

Gay men, lesbians, and other non-heterosexual people have the choice to present themselves as such, or not. The ability to conceal one's identity is not available to many other minority groups, such as African Americans or women, for whom membership in the group correlates with readily observable physical features. Combining this ability to conceal with the often heavy stigma associated with being gay or lesbian in a heterosexually-oriented society, we might expect that linguistic clues to a gay or lesbian identity could be subtle, and observable only to those who are "in the know."

William Leap calls this subtle communication the "language of risk." Examples include word choice (such as genderless pronouns to describe a partner), silence (to allow people to maintain assumptions of heterosexuality), ambiguous phrasing (as in a lesbian saying *I'm not INterested in finding a man* vs. *I'm not interested in finding a MAN*), and hinting at glbtq-related background knowledge (for example, reference to a glbtq-oriented business).

In short, one theory is that gay men and lesbians *do* have their own language, but the stigmatized nature of being non-heterosexual promotes a subtle form of expression. As A. C. Liang observes, "Covert meanings . . . can be inferred only if listeners disabuse themselves of the default assumption of heterosexuality."

Answer 2: Multiple identities

By contrast, other linguists argue that language unique to all lesbians or gay men has not been found because glbtq people do not represent a single unified and delineable social group. Instead, glbtq people

represent many social groups, and we would therefore expect them to use language in many different ways.

For example, Rusty Barrett's interesting research on African-American gay men demonstrates that people use language to construct simultaneously multiple and even contradictory identities. Linguistic expression of sexuality cannot be isolated. The African-American "bar queens" in his study used overly correct pronunciation, ritual insults, and in-group words such as *fish*, *work*, *girl/girlfriend* and *Miss Thang*. Each feature is used by gay men who are not African American, and also by African Americans (especially women). The bar queens "became" gay through manipulation of these different identities, but such language use would not be appropriate to *all* gay men.

Similarly, Robin Queen argues for the linguistic expression of multiple identities among lesbians as well. For example, she claims that lesbians can create a specifically lesbian identity through use of language stereotypically associated with different, even contradictory social groups (for example middle class heterosexual females and "macho" working class males).

Conclusions

Ultimately, there is probably truth in both theories. Some features of gayspeak clearly are subtle in nature, but we should not assume that language is used identically, and for the same purposes, by all glbtq people.

Potentially interesting paths for future research include the study of gayspeak in context (Do gay men speak differently amongst each other than when speaking with straight people?) and how language use differs at different levels of identity formation (Do women who are questioning their sexual identity use language differently from lesbians who are in the closet, and do the latter differ in speech from lesbians who are out?).

Gayspeak is only beginning to be understood as a multifaceted phenomenon, but it is a growing and promising topic of research.

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About the Author

Andrea D. Sims is a Ph.D. student in linguistics at Ohio State University. She often teaches *Language and Gender*, a course that covers, among other topics, lesbian, gay, and transgender speech. She has a general scholarly interest in the ways in which identity is constructed through language, focusing her research on Croatian.