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Opposites Attract

RETHEORIZING BINARIES IN LANGUAGE, GENDER,
AND SEXUALITY

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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.

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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 intersubjective phenomenon that is constantly open to renegotiation and relies on a system of interconnected "citations" of gender norms. The influence of performativity 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 playing a crucial role in this process. Similar studies that analyze more normative 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 insights 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 2005; Cameron and Kulick 2003; 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 biological sex there are many more than two categories. Based on these observations, 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 sexuality, 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 binaries are a crucial component of social life in a given community. What each

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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 indigenusness. 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

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that dualities are not necessarily opposites and that common approaches to femaleness and maleness or gender and sexuality as non-overlapping categories are very much culturally bound.

The fifth chapter, by Evelyn Blackwood, considers two distinct, potentially competing binaries among *tombois* and their girlfriends in Padang, Indonesia. *Tombois* are assigned to a female gender role and maintain a female identity in some contexts while expressing a masculine gender identity in relation to their girlfriends and one another. *Tombois'* girlfriends are normatively gendered women who have generally had relationships both with *tombois* and with non-transgender men. On the one hand, *tombois* and their girlfriends often orient to a model of same-sex relationships that emphasizes partners' differences in gender expression, with one partner taking on a feminine role and the other a masculine one. On the other hand, these couples also position themselves as part of a global *lesbi* community (from the English cognate *lesbian*). From this perspective, which tends to dominate in more urban contexts, *tombois* and their girlfriends are both part of the *dunia lesbi* ('lesbi world') on the basis of their same-sex attractions. Blackwood shows how *tombois* use gendered linguistic features of the Minangkabau language to negotiate the demands of these two sets of identities, in which they are at once *lesbi* and self-identified men. *Tombois* and their girlfriends shift between these two ways of understanding their non-normative relationships, challenging the Western division between gay/lesbian and transgender identities, while also showcasing the way that multiple binaries (*lesbi* vs. *tomboi*; *lesbi* relationships vs. heterosexual ones) can exist alongside one another, sometimes harmoniously and at other times potentially in competition.

In Chapter 6, Erez Levon explores the role of nationalism in the construction of sexuality among lesbian and gay Israelis, revealing the unavoidably political nature of these identities while simultaneously questioning the importance of sexual orientation to the formation of queer speakers' linguistic styles. Levon's analysis focuses on the pitch properties of lesbian and gay Hebrew speakers' voices during research interviews he conducted that spanned several topics and genres of speech. He finds that both lesbians and gay men shifted between relatively more or less normatively gendered phonetic styles depending on contextual factors within the interview. However, the exact pattern of style shifting depends both on the speaker's gender and on whether they are a member of the more "mainstream" political organizations Levon studied, which focus on securing legal rights for lesbians and gays, or of "radical" political groups, which see their mission as the reformation of power structures more generally. Levon argues that gender, sexual orientation, and politics must be woven together in order to account for his data, a claim that undermines the significance of any single binary division. Thus, even when binaries continue to be relevant, their proliferation and intersection leads to a rising number of potential subject positions that cannot be

captured by simple dichotomies like lesbians versus gay men. Furthermore, Levon's chapter shows that even when lesbian or gay identity is explicitly foregrounded in participants' talk, linguistic features that are ideologically linked with sexuality can be deployed to do work that has far broader sociopolitical implications.

William Leap's contribution (Chapter 7) expands on the political theme established by Levon through an exploration of an emerging post-queer neoliberal subject, which he locates in what he calls gay sexual cinema (or pornography) and its consumers' responses in online movie reviews. Leap argues that the normatively masculine actors found in these films and their engagement in versatile sexual relationships with their fellow actors represent a shift away from old binaries and toward a form of homonormative neoliberalism (Duggan 2003). That is, these films help construct a masculine positionality that is characterized by adherence to neoliberal political principles, including not only loyalty to nationalistic and free-market economic ideals but also the embodiment of normative gender, ethnic, and class-based categories that erase the power differentials imposed by neoliberal forces. Through processes of fractal recursivity, Leap argues, the significance of object choice and erotic practice is demoted, and the gay citizen-consumer is positioned on an equal footing with his heteronormative counterpart. In order to tap into the workings of this process in gay sexual cinema, Leap analyzes the responses to a set of films posted by viewers to video club websites. He demonstrates how viewers' use of particular lexical items, thematic patterns, and discursively achieved stances reveals an eroticized system of homonormativity that valorizes the neoliberal subject as "hot," or sexually desirable, while excluding and othering those who fail to live up to the demands of this new gay subjecthood. In the cases he examines, dominant binaries like gay versus straight, "active" versus "passive" sexual roles, gender-normative versus effeminate, black versus white, and female versus male lose their salience in favor of the "equality" supposedly offered by neoliberalism. Although it might be tempting to assume that dismantling binaries leads to a more fluid and equitable social landscape, Leap's chapter warns that what takes their place may have equally disturbing implications.

The discourses of homonormativity that Leap discusses are also taken up in Chapter 8, by Elijah Edelman, which is centered around a group of female-to-male trans persons' discussions of the discursive practice of disclosing their transgender status. He notes that many trans people, after undergoing a transition from one gender role to the other, experience what has been called "the cissexual assumption" (Serano 2007), or the implicit belief that someone who does not "look trans" must be cissexual (i.e., not transsexual). Individuals facing the cissexual assumption must then negotiate the extent to which they will allow this assumption to go unchallenged. For some trans people, this means being openly trans in as many contexts as possible; others prefer to be seen as nothing

more than “ordinary” women or men. For members of the latter group, coming out as trans may undermine their gender identities, because trans people are often denied the status of fully authentic members of their self-identified gender. Edelman argues that trans speakers’ talk about this type of disclosure frames it as a balancing act between the desire to be seen as men (in the case of female-to-male individuals) and the often conflicting desire to be recognized as trans in at least some contexts. He refers to this tension as “stealth practice”: a fluid, contextual negotiation that undermines the ideological binary between those who are “in the closet” and those who are “out.” In mainstream lesbian and gay discourses about coming out, which emphasize the subversive value of being openly queer, stealth practice is positioned as in alignment with cultural and political conservatism. Here again, seemingly liberating ideologies about the public nature of queer subjecthood may ultimately exclude, demonize, and contribute to the marginalization of certain kinds of queer subjects.

The ninth chapter, by Rudolf Gaudio, which focuses on the northern Nigerian Hausa-speaking *‘yan daudu*, a group of men with non-normative gender identities and sexual practices, provides a similarly complexified understanding of gendered power in the linguistic negotiation of binaries. In an analysis of conversational narratives told by *‘yan daudu* about their affective, sexual, and economic relationships with more typically masculine men, Gaudio shows how these speakers make strategic use of grammatical and rhetorical devices that either attribute or erase particular forms of gendered agency when it comes to their own and others’ actions. However, these narratives are not simply instances of reification of dominant links between femininity and passivity on the one hand and masculinity and agentivity on the other. Rather, they create an ambiguous, shifting alignment between gender, sexuality, and the interactional role of either acting or being acted upon. As Gaudio points out, gender binaries are usually an undeniable part of the social worlds of the communities we study, and this fact should not be denied in order to advance theoretical interests. However, he also demonstrates that a simple approach to gender binarism that treats such a structure as assumed—rather than produced contextually and interactionally—provides a necessarily limited view of speakers’ daily lives.

The final chapter is a contribution from Rusty Barrett that explores the parallels between theoretical linguistics and queer theory through a comparison of the linguistic treatment of certain structures as “marked” and queer theory’s treatment of certain social categories as “queer.” As Barrett points out, formal linguistic theory has often showcased marked linguistic structures because of the need for universal linguistic theories to account for even the most unusual phenomena. However, in the interest of preserving binary theoretical constructs, linguists have often forced non-binaristic language data into restrictive dualistic models. Barrett argues that speakers of languages seen as linguistically exceptional—such as the now much-debated Amazonian

language Pirahã, which is said to exhibit a number of highly marked and perhaps heretofore unattested linguistic patterns (Everett 2005)—have frequently been discussed in ways that seem to question their status as full-fledged human beings. In this regard, Barrett argues that linguistic theory could benefit from incorporating queer theory's perspective on power and normativity. Linguists often ignore the power dynamics implicit in treating one class of phenomena as ordinary and another as marked, but queer theorists have time and again exposed the structural violence that can come from ignoring the power differentials that privilege some individuals as normal and denigrate others as queer. The book ends with the suggestion that our discussions of binarity may reach far beyond the study of language, gender, and sexuality.

As a whole, *Queer Excursions* offers a unique and diverse set of perspectives on the binaries that permeate gender and sexuality. The lesson to be drawn from this volume, however, is not that binaries should be rejected or understood as irredeemably oppressive. Instead, we call for greater sensitivity in the ways that sociocultural linguists approach potential dichotomies. Our contributors present analyses that are rooted in localized understandings of sex, gender, sexuality, and other facets of identity. These community-driven perspectives offer no one-size-fits-all model that can be transported to other analytic contexts, but a few general lessons can nevertheless be drawn from their treatments of binarity.

The authors featured in this volume consistently encourage us to question whether a community of speakers does in fact orient to a binary, no matter its apparent relevance to the analyst. Where divisions appear, we must not carelessly map them onto a binary structure that treats such divisions as necessarily dual, oppositional, and mutually exclusive. Even when binaries are clearly salient, there still remain a number of questions: do speakers reject the gender binary, for instance, as with Bershtling's discussion of genderqueers in Israel, or do they embrace or redefine it, as Zimman's male-identified trans speakers do? Are the categories mutually exclusive, or can the same individual occupy both ends of the continuum at once, like the Two Spirits in Davis's research? Are the poles of the binary constructed as static positions, or can the boundary be crossed? If the border is permeable, are crossings made only with great effort and against considerable resistance, as many who cross the gender divide encounter, or do they pass through with the kind of fluidity displayed by 'yan daudus' attribution of gendered agency, as Gaudio describes? Alternatively, the extreme ends of the continuum may be essentially uninhabitable, thus making the gray area between binary categories far more important. We see this in Edelman's illustration of the practice of stealth which leaves trans people neither closeted nor out. Crucially, a number of chapters consider how a binary might intersect with other social categories and systems. Does it complement related boundaries, or do the binaries offer potentially conflicting perspectives, as the different understandings of Indonesian

tombai identity discussed by Blackwood might? How could a binary that appears to be primarily about gender or sexuality have implications that extend into other realms of subjectivity, such as the political positionalities that are so important for explaining style shifts among Levon's lesbian and gay speakers? What kinds of power dynamics inform the erasure of certain dichotomies in favor of others, like those considered by Leap in his analysis of "hotness" as an index of certain types of desirability? Finally, Barrett challenges us to ask whether the binaries built into theoretical linguistic frameworks are really the product of apolitical analysis of language data, or whether they function in part to produce the abjection of certain languages and their speakers.

Far from a simple theoretical or heuristic device that can be employed whenever it suits the analyst, the binary is a social construct that takes on an array of forms in different communities and at different moments. Although we have presented some overarching considerations, the precise character and meaning of a binary can only be discovered through careful attention to contextual detail. When we turn our attention to the workings of dichotomies in social context, new vistas appear: the both/and approach to binaries; the potential for dualisms to liberate in the same moment that they constrain; the implicit dichotomies constructed by researchers; and the shifting character and meanings taken on by established and apparently basic binaries. We hope that this volume will prompt more research on speakers and communities who are not easily categorizable according to the usual dichotomies, and that the theoretical advances enabled by studying these speakers will be carried on into future studies of both marginalized and normative subjects. We also hope that researchers who make use of binaristic divisions such as female versus male or gay versus straight will be inspired to consider the ways that such a two-sided approach might be retheorized in order to better reflect the concerns and practices of speakers themselves.

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