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The "Homo-genius" Speech Community

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> The uniformity of the code, "sensibly the same" for all members of a speech community, posited by the *Cours* and still recalled from time to time, is but a delusive fiction; as a rule, everyone belongs simultaneously to several speech communities of different radius and capacity; any overall code is multiform and comprises a hierarchy of diverse subcodes freely chosen by the speaker with regard to the variable function of the message.
>
> —Roman Jakobson (1971), "Retrospect"

The notion of the speech community is a basic component of linguistic theory. Speech communities are usually constructed through abstract notions of ideal speakers living in communities that display homogeneous use of language. In this chapter, I reconsider the notion of a speech community from a queer perspective. Building on Mary Louise Pratt's (1987) critique of what she calls a "linguistics of community" (i.e., a linguistics centered around the notion of the speech community), I examine the ways in which traditional notions of a homogeneous speech community do not adequately relate to the notion of a "homo-genius" speech community (a community that is essentially and crucially "homo" or queer[1]). In considering a truly queer community, the notion of community itself is called into question. Indeed, the variety of articles found in this volume suggests that no overall external definition of what constitutes membership in a queer community will adequately allow for the variety of social realities that might be seen as queer.

In considering the ways in which one might begin to develop a queer linguistics, I argue that linguistics founded on the notion of community cannot adequately handle queer uses of language. Instead, I propose that queer linguistics take the form of what Pratt calls a "linguistics of contact" in which the notions of community and identity are not held to be externally definable categories. As an example of the directions such a linguistics might take, I draw on personal experience and previous research (Barrett ms.) to discuss briefly the language of gay men (more specifically, "bar queens") in Texas. The perspective offered here is

from the viewpoint of a gay male. I assume that lesbian, bisexual, and transgender issues of language use may be quite different from the issues relevant to gay men. Thus, rather than attempt to provide an all-encompassing perspective, I provide one form of a gay male perspective with the hope that other queer approaches will contribute to the evolution of a better understanding of queer uses of language.

The Homogeneous Speech Community

Following the work of Ferdinand de Saussure and Noam Chomsky, the majority of contemporary linguists in Western societies have focused on the formal properties of linguistic structure. Saussure (1986) argued that the "primary concern" of linguistics must be the study of the "independently definable" linguistic structure found in a given society (9). Saussure saw this linguistic structure (*langue*) as part of a social bond that may differ across individuals but that exists in its *purest* form "only in the collectivity" of all members of a given society (1986:13). Chomsky (1957, 1965) moved this "perfect" linguistic structure into the mind of a single ideal speaker who reflects the uniformly homogeneous linguistic structure found in her or his society:

> Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech-community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance. (Chomsky 1965: 3)

Given the assumption of an entirely homogeneous community of speakers, it seems natural to allow one "ideal" speaker to stand in place of the entire community. As Pratt (1987: 51) has noted, however, abstract ideal speakers cannot be constructed in a socially neutral fashion. In practice, these "ideal speaker-listeners" are typically linguists themselves, using intuitions to uncover their own linguistic "competence." In other cases, a native speaker consultant may convey knowledge of her or his language to a linguist as a means of uncovering the linguistic structure found through a homogeneous community. In either case, little consideration is given to the amount of socialization that has gone into the construction of the linguistic competence of a given speaker.

In theory, the "grammar" generated by the Chomskian framework is thought to reflect the formal system of the language found throughout any given society. V. N. Voloshinov has argued that this formal system exists only "from the point of view of the subjective consciousness of an individual speaker belonging to some particular language group at some particular moment of historical time" (1973: 66). By discounting the subjective nature of positing an abstract "objective" formal system of language, linguists have typically ignored the fact that the "grammar" they propose is (in actual practice) usually the elaboration of the abstract conception of "Standard" English. By removing social variation from the system of lan-

guage, formal linguists have reencoded the very prescriptive norms they claim to reject.

Recent studies in the political economy of language (e.g., Bordieu 1991; Woolard 1985; Gal 1989) have demonstrated that the concept of a "Standard" language has a crucial role in upholding and enforcing the power structure in a given society. By claiming that a language, for example "English," can be reduced to a formal system that is shared by all members of a society and then equating that shared language with the "Standard," linguists have equated the "grammar" of society at large with an abstract conception of language that is a means by which the ruling class maintains power. As Pratt notes, this "shared grammar" corresponds to a "shared patrimony" (1987: 50); it assumes that "English" is equivalent to the intuitions of white, northern, middle-class men (and some women). The problem does not stop with studies of English. Paradigms such as Government and Binding (GB) theory (Chomsky 1981), which are based on "Standard" English, are then applied to other languages throughout the world, often with the effect of forcing the structure of those languages to conform to the structures proposed for English. Van Valin, for example, has pointed out that most linguistic frameworks, and in particular Government and Binding theory, force linguists to ensure that the linguistic structures of a given language "can be accommodated within some antecedently given theoretical perspective" (1987: 394). Thus, "exotic" languages are forced into a theoretical framework based on English, even if the actual structures of those languages are not particularly well suited for descriptions in this English-based framework. The version of Universal Grammar produced by most accounts of generative syntax typically forces all of the world's languages to conform to a set of subjectively derived concepts of language structure based on intuitions reflecting the "grammar" of the ruling class in the United States. Contrary to being devoid of social meaning, the program of formal linguistics serves as a means of legitimizing the domination of the American ruling class by forcing the study of any language to conform to an idealization derived from "Standard" English. It is a means of "manufacturing consent" for the power structure of white colonialist patriarchy.

In attempting to overcome such problems, sociolinguists have focused on variation in the formal character of language and have moved the homogeneous nature of language from the "system" itself to the set of "norms" held within a speech community. Gumperz (1972) and Labov (1972b) have both argued that a speech community is defined by shared rules and norms for language use. Gumperz writes that membership in a speech community is based on shared knowledge of "communicative constraints and options governing a significant number of social situations" (1972: 16). Gumperz sees this shared knowledge as an understanding of how language encodes social meaning:

> [M]embers of the same speech community need not all speak the same language nor use the same linguistic forms on similar occasions. All that is required is that there be at least one language in common and that rules governing basic communicative strategies be shared so that speakers can decode the social meanings carried by alternative modes of communication. (1972: 16)

In theory, the makeup of a speech community need not reflect any community defined in external terms such as ethnicity, religion, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, and so on, although Gumperz notes that the boundaries of a speech community "tend to coincide with wider social units" (1972: 16). In actual practice, however, these shared boundaries have often been assumed. Even where they are not assumed, the boundaries of speech communities often end up delineating a certain social group within society. The membership of such communities often tends to reify stereotypes of a community defined by language-external factors.

This is the case with Labov's (1972a) ground-breaking study of African American Vernacular English (hereafter AAVE). Labov's definition of a speech community differs slightly from that of Gumperz in that Labov finds shared knowledge in behavioral patterns, rather than in understanding of the language/society relationship. Nevertheless, both definitions assume that it is shared norms for usage that define a given speech community. Labov (1972b) defines the speech community as follows:

> The speech community is not defined by any marked agreement in the use of language elements, so much as by participation in a set of shared norms; these norms may be observed in overt types of evaluative behavior, and by the uniformity of abstract patterns of variation which are invariant in respect to particular levels of usage. (1972b: 120–121)

In Labov's framework, a speech community's linguistic system contains linguistic variables (such as the presence or absence of word-final /r/), but the appearance of such variables displays statistical patterns related both to social class and "attention paid to speech."

If one bases the definition of a speech community on norms (or the statistical patterns thought to reflect those norms), one would expect community membership to mirror actual behavior. In actual practice, however, the use of statistical measures has sometimes reified external stereotypes of community membership. In Labov's (1972a) work, for example, the "members" of the "African American speech community" were primarily heterosexual males between the ages of nine and eighteen who belonged to gangs and hung out on the street in Harlem. Morgan (1994) has argued that Labov's study of *lames* has perpetuated a stereotyped image of unemployed adolescent males as representative of the African American community as a whole. In Labov's study, speakers who did not fit the statistical patterning that "defined" the African American speech community were classified as *lames* that were peripheral to the *vernacular culture*. The term *lame* was used by the young men in the study to refer to those who "are not *hip*, since they do not hang out" (Labov 1972a: 258). Labov offers several reasons for one's being a *lame*:

> There are many reasons for someone to be lame. Separation from the peer group may take place under the influence of parents, or of school, or of the individual's own perception of the advantages of the dominant culture for him; on the other hand, he may be too sick or too weak to

> participate in the peer-group vernacular activities, or he may be rejected by the peer-groups as mentally or morally defective (a *punk*). (1972a: 259)

In African American Vernacular English (AAVE), the term *punk* is generally used to refer to homosexuals (e.g., Smitherman 1976: 254; Folb 1980: 250). Thus, gay African Americans (the "morally defective") do not constitute "real" members of the speech community. Similarly, the majority of research on AAVE has ignored women (see Morgan 1994; Stanback 1985). The process of limiting the participants in the study to a specific subset of possible members in the African American speech community creates a circular experimental framework in which the choice of participants limits the range of language usage so that the homogeneity of the speech community has been predetermined. In the case of Labov's study of the African American speech community, the supposedly scientific approach of using statistical patterning as the basis for determining community membership has served to reestablish a white stereotype of what constitutes "typical" members of the African American community.

Like Labov's study of the African American speech community, attempts to study the speech of gay men have generally restricted the membership of the "speech community" in some way. Studies of gay male language have focused almost exclusively on middle-class European Americans.[2] In attempting to define the "gay community," many linguists (e.g., Leap 1993; Gaudio 1994; Moran 1991) have focused on their own personal conceptions of their "community." Due to the power structure of American society, most academics are white and middle class. While the study of white middle-class gay men is certainly as valid as the study of any other segment of society, it is important that white middle-class men do not "stand in" for the gay community as a whole. Representations of the gay community as a "white" community, combined with representations of minority communities as "straight" communities (such as Labov's African American speech community), serve to maintain stereotyped exclusive identity categories that place many gays and lesbians outside both queer communities and communities constructed on the basis of ethnicity. A number of gays and lesbians of color have expressed feelings of being torn between a queer identity and an ethnic identity (e.g., Icard 1985; Tinney 1986, Smith 1988; Peterson 1992; Almaguer 1993). The social stereotypes that create such dichotomies between ethnic and queer identities might be a valid area for linguistic study. However, reproducing these dichotomies through a theoretical paradigm that assumes externally definable "communities" based on identity categories not only reproduces potentially harmful stereotypes; it fails to accurately depict a social reality in which people may have multiple overlapping identities that may not easily fall into category-based "communities."

Although placing homogeneity at the level of "norms of usage" may help resolve some of the problems arising from ignoring social variation in language, it may result in stereotyped representations that are perhaps no better than those provided by formal linguistic descriptions of "homogeneous" linguistic systems. Voloshinov has argued that "community norms" occupy an "analogous position" to a homogeneous linguistic system, in that both "exist only with respect to the sub-

jective consciousness of members of some particular community" (1973: 66). The "norms" for using language are thus a subjective set of concepts concerning what form of language is appropriate for a given speaker in a given setting. Attempts to "objectify" such norms of behavior (through quantitative studies focusing on variable rules) do not necessarily produce accurate representations of language use in a given community but may simply reflect stereotypes held (consciously or not) by researchers.

Both formal linguists and sociolinguists have typically defined a speech community through some objectifiable criteria that allow for homogeneity at some level (either in the linguistic system itself or in the norms of language use). This process, however, may produce a false conception of what constitutes membership in a given speech community. Such conceptions may serve to reinforce negative stereotypes and misrepresentations by offering supposed "scientific validation" for prevelant stereotypes and misrepresentations.

There are, however, more subjective approaches to the notion of speech community. Studies of language death (e.g., Dorian 1982; Guion 1993) have suggested that speech communities need not display homogeneous knowledge of language or even the full range of usage norms. Dorian suggests that, at least in situations of language death, the definitions of speech community proposed by Dell Hymes (1972) and Pit Corder (1973) might be more appropriate than those of Gumperz and Labov. Hymes suggests studying the organization of language uses within specific social groups, rather than defining a speech community on the basis of linguistic criteria. Corder sees the speech community as consisting of those who perceive themselves as speakers of the same language. By allowing for language-external definitions of the speech community, these approaches may allow for more subjective understandings of linguistic structure and norms of language use compared with the understanding offered by analyses based on objectified aspects of linguistic structure. In the following section, I consider the ways in which queer communities have attempted to define themselves as a means of considering the form that a self-defined queer speech community might take.

The Homo-genius Speech Community

Any attempt to define a gay, lesbian, or transgender speech community using "objectifiable" criteria based on language usage would likely, at least in the United States, exclude many people who see themselves as members of such a community. It is highly unlikely, for example, that the speech of gay men who are African American, Latino, Asian American, Native American, or European American could all be unified through homogeneous norms in the usage of any given variable rule. It might be possible to overcome such problems by using a more subjective approach that defines queer speech communities on their own terms. In other words, would it be possible to replace the notion of a homogeneous speech community (with shared norms of language usage) with that of a "homo-genius" speech community (one that has an essential spirit that is fundamentally "homo," or queer)? The question of defining a queer speech community then becomes one

of simply defining a queer community itself. The notion that a community has some essential spirit is related to Sapir's conception of genuine culture:

> Culture thus becomes nearly synonymous with the "spirit" or "genius" of a people, yet not altogether, for whereas these loosely used terms refer rather to a psychological, or pseudo-psychological background of national civilization, culture includes with this background a series of concrete manifestations which are believed to be peculiarly symptomatic of it. (1949: 84)

Some gay scholars have used Sapir's notion of authentic or genuine culture as a starting point for examining such "concrete manifestations" of gay culture. A particular school of gay male studies led by the anthropologist Gilbert Herdt argues for an approach to the gay community that centers around the examination of "authenticity" as gay culture:

> We shall argue for the existence of a gay *cultural system*, with a distinct identity and distinct institutions and social supports in particular times and places. We see this as a major battleground for social change in America into the twenty-first century.
>
> "Authenticity" as a criterion of gay culture is meant to indicate here what is genuine as opposed to what is spurious in gay men's worldviews and relationships. Relevant to this issue is Edward Sapir's discussion of the anthropological problem of what makes a culture great or feeble, balanced or unstable, satisfying or frustrating to its natives. (Herdt and Boxer 1992: 3)

Frameworks based on the assumption that there is some "genuine" or "authentic" gay male culture usually define the gay male community as primarily consisting of those who are "out" (i.e., open about their sexuality) or those who are in the process of coming out. The process of coming out is thus seen as a rite of passage in which gay men become full members of the community and participate in "authentic" gay culture (e.g., Herdt and Boxer 1992; Leap 1994). Similarly, Valerie Jenness has argued that taking on a lesbian identity (and thereby joining the lesbian community) is a process of reanalyzing and personalizing "lesbian" as an identity category:

> [T]he adoption of a lesbian identity—the difference between "doing" and "being"—fundamentally hinges upon a process that I refer to as detypification. *Detypification is the process of redefining and subsequently reassessing the social category "lesbian" such that it acquires increasingly concrete and precise meanings, positive connotations, and personal applicability.* (Jenness 1992: 66)

The use of identity categories such as "lesbian," "gay," "bisexual," or "transgender" as a means of defining community membership is founded in identity politics and the desire for recognition of specific "communities" as legitimate minorities in American society. Considering the political reasoning behind such approaches to queer communities, it is not surprising that Herdt and Boxer state that their view of gay culture represents "a major battleground for social change in America into the twenty-first century."

Identity politics leads other queer theorists to find the essential nature of queer communities rooted in biology. In this view of community, one is born gay or lesbian and has no choice but to belong to the gay and lesbian community (even if denying membership in the community). Richard Mohr (1992), for example, argues that one cannot "decide" to enter into the gay community, for one is born into the community:

> The gay community cannot be thought of as an artifice like, say, a stamp collectors' club or Alcoholics Anonymous. In such social groupings, as a condition of membership, one agrees to abide by the club's bylaws, and if one doesn't like the club's rules, one can set up one's own competing club. Rather, the gay community is a natural community in the way that English is a natural language but the computer languages Fortran and Cobol are not. If one is born in England of English parents, it is not an option to decide not to speak English as one's mother tongue but to set up linguistic shop instead in some artificial language, in the way one can, if one does not like some computer language, simply make up one's own. Gays simply find themselves immersed in the presumption of protecting each other's closets. Individual consent has nothing to do with it. (Mohr, 1992: 27)

Although Mohr and Herdt and Boxer ground their definitions of the gay community in terms of identity politics, the resulting "communities" have highly divergent memberships. For Mohr, those who are not "out" are community members in denial, while for Herdt the community contains only those who openly define themselves as members of the gay community.

The problem of how to deal with those who have not come out of the closet often falls at the center of discussions of how to define queer communities. Most gays and lesbians are familiar with the problem of determining who is actually part of the "family." Many of us have encountered those whom we thought were gay but who claimed otherwise. Similarly, we have encountered those we thought to be straight but who turned out to be gay. Because our "gaydar" is not infallible, we must constantly question who is actually a member of a gay or lesbian community, no matter how that community is defined. In addition, sexualities are fluid, and communities based on definitions of sexual practice may not adequately reflect any real concept of how people define their own identities. There are those who go through periods of questioning their sexuality without ever actually defining themselves as gay. There are those, such as "fag-hags," who are clearly part of some queer community but who may be entirely heterosexual in terms of behavior.

For reasons such as these, many queer theorists have argued that the entire notion of identity categories (and the communities based upon such categories) are ill suited for attempting to understand the reality of queerness. Judith Butler (1993a, 1993b), for example, has continually attempted to call into question the meaning of identity categories. Although critics have claimed that this depoliticizes theory (by questioning identity politics), Butler has argued that by leaving the determinant of "community membership" purposely vague, the community itself is defined in a more open and approachable way:

> Those of us who have questioned the presentist assumptions in contemporary identity categories are . . . sometimes charged with depoliticizing theory. . . . [T]he critique of the queer subject is crucial to the continuing *democratization* of queer politics. As much as identity terms must be used, as much as "outness" is to be affirmed, these same notions must become subject to a critique of the exclusionary operations of their own production: For whom is outness a historically available and affordable option? Is there an unmarked class character to the demand for universal "outness"? Who is represented by *which* use of the term, and who is excluded? For whom does the term present an impossible conflict between racial, ethnic, or religious affiliation and sexual polities? (1993a: 227)

In a similar vein, Michael Warner (1993) has argued that the notion of "community" will always be problematic for queer studies:

> Although it has had importance in organizational efforts (where in circular fashion it receives concretization), the notion of a community has remained problematic if only because nearly every lesbian or gay remembers being such before entering a collectively identified space, because much of lesbian and gay history has to do with noncommunity, and because dispersal rather than localization continues to be definitive of queer self-understanding ("We Are Everywhere"). (1993: xxv)

Rather than providing a clear consensus on what constitutes a gay and lesbian community, work in queer theory suggests that gays and lesbians view such communities in a wide variety of ways, ranging from biologically determined to virtually nonexistent. Anderson has argued that "all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined," asserting that communities "are to be distinguished not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (1991: 6).

What, then, is the style in which queer communities are imagined? One unifying principle to all discussions of what constitutes a queer community has been the focus on the problem of knowing who is "family" and who is not. While many communities are imagined in ways that focus on what constitutes a "good" or "typical" community member (without a great deal of doubt about who those members might be), queer communities seem to focus extensively on what (if anything) constitutes a community member. Even essentialists who may offer ways of defining community members (such as by their genes) seem to recognize that the question of determining who "belongs" is the central question in the construction of a queer community. Thus, one style in which queer communities are imagined is a style in which the boundaries of community membership are consciously vague and uncertain. While all communities are imagined in some sense, queer communities recognize that they are imagined and knowingly and openly question the membership status of a variety of potential members. Thus, a "homo-genius" community is one in which the very notion of community cannot be taken for granted. The essential nature of a queer community can be seen as the self-recognition that it is socially constructed. Although the degree and importance of such construction may be called into question (e.g., Mohr 1992), the fact that community membership may not always be accurately determined is rarely denied. By imagining it-

self in such an ambiguous and uncertain style, a queer community calls the very notion of community into question. In terms of linguistics, issues of sexual orientation and gender identification do not easily lend themselves to studies in what Pratt (1987) calls the "linguistics of community."

Linguistics of Community

In offering a critique of "linguistics of community," Pratt notes that the prototypical case of language examined in linguistics is taken to be "the speech of adult native speakers face to face (as in Saussure's diagram) in monolingual, even monodialectal situations—in short, the maximally homogeneous case linguistically and socially" (1987: 50). This focus on homogeneous communities and the assumption of shared systems or norms of usage is embedded in the tradition (within historical linguistics) of "genetic" linguistics. The genetic tradition focuses on language as it changes over time, as a "mother" language divides into various "daughter" languages. Although a language is assumed to be a homogeneous linguistic system at any given moment, it changes over time, primarily through "imperfect" learning as language is passed from parents to children. Within the theoretical framework of traditional genetic linguistics, language change is primarily a language-internal process in which contact between languages and dialects is often seen as secondary (or entirely uninteresting). Within the genetic framework, the assumption of a homogeneous speech community and the focus on language as "inheritance" go hand in hand. Saussure, for example, argued that "no society has ever known its language to be anything other than something inherited from previous generations, which it has no choice but to accept" (1986: 72).

This genetic/community framework assumes that language is a social inheritance, a part of one's identity from early childhood that marks one as belonging to a specific community throughout one's life. As LePage and Tabouret-Keller have pointed out, "language" in the sense of one's native language or mother tongue remains "an important hypothetical base for many linguists and educationists" (1985: 190). The theoretical frameworks of genetic linguistics and its descendant, generative grammar, continue to treat the language one learns in childhood as a basic marker of social identity that is relatively constant across situational settings and the time of one's lifespan. Although linguists have (from the time of Boas, at least) adamantly argued that there is no direct relationship between language and race, the formal frameworks of genetic/generative linguistics continue to reify widely held assumptions about the association between language and race by placing speakers in isolated static homogeneous communities that often reflect common stereotypes of identity categories. In addition, the genetic framework thus fails to acknowledge the role of contact in the historical development of languages and the great deal of cultural history that can be extracted from considering the history of languages as a contact or areal phenomenon (Bauman and Sherzer 1972).

In the sense that genetic and generative linguistics focus on a static formal system that is inherited from one's parents, these theoretical frameworks are

centered exclusively on what Warner (1993) has called "heteronormative behavior." That is, the basic assumptions of normative heterosexuality (including the processes of socialization associated with child-rearing) become the basis for linguistics as a field of study. This acceptance of heteronormative behavior is an example of how the community-based framework limits itself in ways that are difficult to acknowledge (Pratt 1987: 52). As Warner (1993) argues, the theoretical frameworks in many academic disciplines (re)produce the ideology of heterosexual society, even when allowing for the existence of sexual minorities. Studies of gay and lesbian language that are situated in a linguistics of community, for example, may produce descriptions of the linguistic behavior of a small subset of some assumed queer community. In doing so, they produce hypothetical (though unrealistic) communities of typical speakers who share some common language or norms of usage. Studying such communities in isolation does not actually convey the complexity of the relationship between language and queerness.

A framework that isolates fairly homogeneous queer communities fails fully to acknowledge the uncertainty involved in establishing concepts of community membership. In addition, such a framework fails to account for the fact that gay and lesbian language, or at least those things that make gay and lesbian language distinctive, do not originate in traditional (heterosexual-dominated) communities. Generally, people do not raise their children to talk like homosexuals. Quite to the contrary, language associated with gayness is probably discouraged by parents. Considering the fact that queer language is probably highly divergent from the language we are socialized into using, why should we base queer linguistics on a framework that assumes that language is a homogeneous system (of rules or norms) accepted throughout the community in which we are born?

The concept of isolated communities fails to recognize the ways in which contact influences the construction of gay and lesbian uses of language. Gays and lesbians are not isolated from straight society, and assuming that queer communities can be isolated does not convey the realities of living in an (often homophobic) heterosexist society. Gay and lesbian language may occur entirely within a context of straight society, where language may convey social information about sexual orientation that is not detected or understood by straights present during the interaction. In addition, the linguistics of community fails to acknowledge that gay and lesbian uses of language often occur *across* "community" boundaries. Language within a queer community is often simultaneously language across communities defined in terms of ethnicity, class, age, or regional background. For these reasons, a linguistics of community does not adequately deal with the realities of the relationship between language and queerness.

In her critique of the linguistics of community, Pratt proposes a different view of linguistics, one that she calls a *linguistics of contact*:

> Imagine, then, a linguistics that decentered community, that placed at its centre the operation of language *across* lines of social differentiation, a linguistics that focused on modes and zones of contact between dominant and dominated groups, between persons of different and multiple identities, speakers of different languages, that focused

> on how such speakers constitute each other relationally and in difference, how they enact difference in language. Let us call this enterprise a *linguistics of contact*, a term related to Jakobson's notion of contact as a component of speech events, and to the phenomenon of contact languages, one of the best recognised challenges to the systematising linguistics of code. (1987: 60)

Taking Pratt's notion of a linguistics of contact as a starting point, I would like to suggest that queer uses of language can be studied without the tradition of a linguistics of community and the social (heteronormative) trappings that it carries. A linguistics of contact offers a starting point for the formation of a queer linguistics, that is, a linguistics that takes queerness as its center rather than forcing gay and lesbian language to conform to a heterosexual model of language production and learning.

As a starting point for examining the issues related to gay uses of language, I refer to the use of language among bar queens in Texas. Bar queens are gay men with dense social networks centered on gay bars and for whom being gay is a self-categorization of primary importance. This discussion is based partly on research conducted on the speech of African American drag queens (Barrett ms.) and partly on personal experience and casual observations in gay bars. This consideration of bar queen speech is not meant to be a detailed study of specific examples of recorded speech but is rather a broad discussion of the form and use of bar queen speech intended to raise issues relevant to the way in which gay male speech might be studied.

Structural Aspects of Bar Queen Speech

In their work on the role of language in the construction of social identity, LePage and Tabouret-Keller examine the ways in which people recognize and imitate forms of language that reflect the social identity of a group with whom they wish to be associated. LePage and Tabouret-Keller argue that "what they recognize and imitate are stereotypes they have constructed for themselves" (1985:142). For speakers who wish to use language in a way that will index a gay identity (see Ochs 1992), the form of language often reflects a stereotype of gay men's speech. As such, it may contain one or more of the components attributed to gay male speech by various linguists, such as the following features:

- The use of lexical items included as part of Lakoff's woman's language (Walters ms.; Moran 1991), including specific color terms and the so-called empty adjectives (e.g., "marvelous," "adorable"), as well as hedges and boosters (such as "like")
- The use of a wider pitch range for intonational contours (compared to the speech of straight men) (Walters ms.; Goodwin 1989; Moran 1991; Gaudio 1994)
- Hypercorrect pronunciation; the presence of phonologically nonreduced forms (Walters ms.) and the use of hyperextended vowels

- The use of lexical items specific to gay language (Walters ms.; Moran 1991; Farrell 1972; Rodgers 1979)
- The use of a H*L intonational contour (often co-occurring with extended vowels, as in "FAABulous") (Barrett ms.)

These features may (in a given context) index a gay identity. Thus, studies in which these features are considered out of context (e.g., Gaudio 1994) might not capture the relationship between the structural features and gay identity. In isolation, most of these features can also index some other identity in a different context. Specific color terms and empty adjectives, for example, may index a stereotype of female identity, while the use of hypercorrect pronunciation and phonologically nonreduced, hyperenunciated forms may index the "schoolteacher" speech of some older African American women. Thus, the indexical power of these structural elements often overlaps between gay male speech and the speech of some other social group. The linguistics of community cannot easily acknowledge this overlap, except where it might be seen as "dialect borrowing" or "accommodation." Within a linguistics of contact, however, such elements need not be viewed as the sole property of a single social group.

Consider, for example, the overlap between gay male speech and African American Vernacular English. In addition to hypercorrect pronunciation, speech events involving ritual insults can be found both among African American straight men (e.g., Labov 1972a) and among gay men (e.g., Murray 1979). Also, there are a number of lexical items that may index either gay or African American identity, depending on the speaker and the context. A few (but certainly not all) examples include the following:

fish: a pejorative term for women (a reference to myths concerning the fragrance of female genitalia) (Folb 1980: 237, Major 1970: 54 and Smitherman 1994:110, for AAVE; Rodgers 1979: 81 and Farrell 1972: 102 for gay male speech).

work, often *"work it":* to strut or show off; to try to draw attention to one's self in the bar. In AAVE "work" has historical roots as a jazz term for playing with great energy (Major 1970: 123, Smitherman 1994: 240–241). In gay male speech it has traditionally meant to put great effort into cruising, occurring in phrases such as "work the toilets" (Rodgers 1979: 215). The term *work* became quite common in bars in Texas in 1993 after the release of RuPaul's dance song "Supermodel (You Better Work)."

girl; girlfriend: Used as a term of address or solidarity between African American women (Smitherman 1994:122) or between gay men (of any ethnic background).

Miss Thang (or Mizz Thang): Used by both African American women and gay men to refer to someone who thinks highly of her- or himself or who may behave in a way that draws attention to himself or herself (Smitherman 1994: 161).

read: a specific speech event in which the speaker "tells someone off" (Smitherman 1976: 259; Smitherman 1994: 192) for AAVE; Rodgers 1979: 169 and Farrell 1972: 106 for gay male speech). Among African Americans, the term *reading* is sometimes associated with women (Morgan 1994). Among gay men it also has an older form (still in use among older gays) of "read his beads." It may also refer to the act of recognizing another homosexual.

Within a community-based framework, the elements that overlap between AAVE and gay male speech would probably be interpreted as borrowings from one community by another. As such, they might be seen as cultural appropriations. While some of these examples might be the result of appropriation, such an analysis does not fully account for situations such as that in which white gay men (even those who have little contact with African Americans) use linguistic markers of gay solidarity that are identical at the level of form to those used by African American women to mark their solidarity with other African American women.

A linguistics of contact, in which community boundaries are not assumed to be static and rigid, allows for an analysis in which bar queen speech may be constructed from the speech of a variety of individuals (or groups of individuals) with different linguistic backgrounds who participate in mutual acts of identity (LePage and Tabouret-Keller 1985) to create shared linguistic markers of social identity. As such, bar queen speech can be viewed as an abrupt creolization (Thomason and Kaufman 1988) at the level of language style, in which the linguistic elements that index gay identity are brought together from a wide variety of sources. As Moran (1991) argues, the use of "feminine" linguistic elements in the speech of gay men may be seen as a reclaiming of stereotypes of the extent to which gay men behave like women. In a situation where gay men from various ethnic backgrounds come together in the setting of a bar, stereotypes of effeminate linguistic behavior from white English and African American English, as well as from other ethnic and regional varieties, come together to create a unified stereotype of what constitutes gay English.

Another important aspect of these structural elements is the fact that almost all of them are markers of what Brown and Levinson (1987) have termed "positive politeness." Markers of positive politeness serve as a means of conveying common ground between speakers. Exaggeration (including exaggerated intonation), the use of ingroup lexical items and slang, the use of hedges, and a tendency toward standard varieties are all considered markers of positive politeness. Brown and Levinson suggest that the use of positive politeness markers might be more prevalent in the speech of dominated groups:

> In general we have a hunch that all over the world, in complex societies, dominated groups (and sometimes also majority groups) have positive-politeness cultures; dominating groups have negative-politeness cultures. That is, the world of the upper and middle groups is constructed in a stern and cold architecture of social distance, assymetry, and resentment of impositions, while the world of the lower groups is built on social closeness, symmetrical solidarity, and reciprocity. (1987: 245)

Similar (independent) evidence for Brown and Levinson's "hunch" comes from studies of social identity (within the framework of self-categorization theory) by Willem Doise and Fabio Lorenzi-Cioldi. Doise and Lorenzi-Cioldi argue that members of dominating groups (or groups with higher social status) "perceive themselves as unique individuals and do not seek self definition in terms of group membership. On the other hand, members of dominated groups define themselves, and are also defined by others, more in terms of social categorizations imposed on them" (1989: 55). Thus, members of lower status groups, which define themselves according to group memberships, would be expected to display less social distance among ingroup members, since social distance is a function of the degree to which one views others as sharing similar social identity.

The presence of a variety of positive politeness strategies as the main indexical markers of bar queen speech suggests that language may serve as a means of producing a unified social identity among gay men from divergent backgrounds. Many of these positive politeness strategies can be found in stereotypically "feminine" language (e.g., Lakoff 1975). In bar queen speech, the manipulation of stereotypes about the effeminate behavior of gay men is combined with the use of positive politeness strategies that forge solidarity within a given social network centered around the bar. Thus, in order to study gay male speech adequately, consideration must be given to the unique role of language in both gender construction and the formation of solidarity.

The Uses of Gay Male Speech

The study of gay male speech as a behavioral characteristic of a homogeneous speech community cannot easily account for the wide range of competences found among gay men with different backgrounds who participate in various social networks. In discussing ritual insults among gay men, for example, Murray is careful to state that "very few gay men and seemingly fewer lesbians spend an appreciable amount of time verbal dueling" (1979: 217–218). Thus, a genre that indexes a gay identity may in actual practice occur only among a small subset of gay men. Although competence in bar queen speech may vary a great deal, most gay men (and many straights) recognize bar queen speech as indexing a gay identity. As Pratt notes, "for a linguistics of contact, it is of great interest that people can generally understand many more varieties of discourse or even languages than they can produce, or understand them better than they can produce them" (1987: 62). The range of competence in bar queen speech may vary according to participation in the social networks of the bars or the degree to which one desires to be seen as a member of the bar crowd. Because of the gradient nature of language style, the degree to which bar queen speech actually indexes gay identity may vary a great deal. Depending on the context, for example, the use of *mauve* may not index a gay identity as much as the use of *Miss Thang*. Similarly, greater frequency and variety in the elements of bar queen speech used might convey a stronger sense of gay identity. Because the indexical value of any element of gay male speech (or any speech, for that

matter) is highly dependent on context, sociolinguists need to be aware of the ways in which language may convey intertextuality (Kristeva 1980), as in studies of linguistic genre in the field of folklore (e.g. Briggs and Bauman 1992).

The categories of language variety proposed by Charles Ferguson are extremely useful in considering the relationship between the indexical value of language and context. Ferguson (1994) proposes three basic types of language variety: dialect, register, and genre. Basically, in Ferguson's terms, dialect is language that indexes the identity of a specific social group, register is language that indexes social context, and genre is language that indexes a particular speech act. For some speakers, bar queen speech may be a dialect in that it is practically the only form of English that they use. Although such speakers may have spoken in a stereotypically gay style for most or all of their lives, the details (mostly lexical items) that differentiate bar queen speech from other gay-sounding styles would have been acquired after the speaker came out and joined the social networks surrounding the bar(s). For other speakers, bar queen speech is a specific register in that its use is reserved for the bar setting. For these speakers, the overt display of gay identity is restricted to certain times, places, and interlocutors. Speakers for whom bar queen speech is a register may not be out in their lives outside the bar and are thus forced to restrict their speech to settings in which straights are absent. They may also be completely open about their sexuality outside the bar but reserve behavior that is overtly gay for the bar setting. Because of the gradient nature of language style as an indexical marker of identity, these two groups are not always clearly differentiated but exist along a continuum. A better understanding of how these differences in usage occur across gay communities would likely offer a better understanding of variation in the display of overtly gay behavior, as well as of the relationship between dialect and register. The distinction between register and dialect offers a way of beginning to understand how language as a site of contact between gay and straight settings might act differently for different speakers.

As Ferguson notes, in actual practice the distinctions between dialect, register, and genre are not necessarily absolute. In cases where bar queen speech is a register, for example, it is still a marker of social identity. In addition, language style that falls under genre (i.e., that indexes a particular speech event) may also index identity or context. A genre such as "reading" (telling someone off through ritual insults) is an example of a speech event that may also serve as a register (in that it may only occur in gay settings) or as part of a dialect (in that it indexes a gay identity). Because the distinctions among dialect, register, and genre are not absolute, gay speech must be considered in relation to the context in which it occurs.

One means of relating language and context is to consider the use of gay male speech in terms of code-switching or style-switching. Myers-Scotton's (1993) Markedness Model provides a means of analyzing style-switching in terms of the indexical meaning conveyed by any particular switch. In Myers-Scotton's model, speakers choose the linguistic form of an utterance so that it indexes the set of social relationships (a "rights and obligations set" or "RO set") the speaker wishes to have in place for a given interaction. The model analyzes switches in terms of whether or not the linguistic form of an utterance is expected for a given interaction. Myers-Scotton offers four specific types of code-switching:

1. Sequential unmarked code-switching. "When one or more of the situational factors change *within the course of a conversation*, the unmarked RO set may change. . . . Whenever the unmarked RO set is altered by such factors, the speaker will switch codes if he or she wished to index the new unmarked RO set" (1993: 114).
2. Code-switching as the unmarked norm: "Speaking two languages in the same conversation [as the unmarked norm between bilingual peers] . . . *each* switch . . . does not necessarily have a special indexicality; rather, it is the *overall pattern* which carries the communicative force" (1993: 117).
3. Code-switching as a marked choice: "A marked choice derives its meaning from two sources: first, since it is *not* the unmarked choice, it is a negotiation against the unmarked RO set; and second, as 'something else,' the marked choice is a call for *another* RO set in its place, that for which the speaker's choice is the unmarked index" (1993: 131).
4. Code-switching as an exploratory choice: "When an unmarked choice is not clear, [speakers] use code switching to make alternate exploratory choices as candidates for an unmarked choice and thereby as an index of an RO set which [they] favor" (1993: 142).

One way of examining the social relevance of gay speech is to use the markedness model to analyze the ways in which switches between gay speech and other varieties of English serve to convey specific social relationships. In cases where gay male speech may act as a register, for example, code-switching as an unmarked choice will most likely occur. Instances of code-switching as a marked choice could provide insight into where and why the foregrounding of gay identity is important for various speakers. The distinctions between code-switching as the unmarked norm and code-switching as an unmarked/marked choice may serve as a starting point for studying the ways in which gay male speech relates to other types of speech that index different aspects of one's personal identity. In another work (Barrett 1995), I have used the model to consider the ways in which African American drag queens use language style to negotiate their overlapping identities as gay men, as African Americans, and as drag queens.

The case of code-switching as an exploratory choice is of great importance in the understanding of gay male speech. Although Myers-Scotton (1993: 142) suggests that exploratory switching is probably quite rare in most situations, it is actually quite common in gay male speech. Indeed, one important focus of research on gay male speech has been this very issue (e.g., Hayes 1981; Leap 1993). In encounters outside a specifically gay setting, exploratory switching may be used as a means of determining the sexual orientation of one's interlocutor. One may, for example, use linguistic forms that index gay identity to see if a listener recognizes the indexical power of the forms and uses more elements of gay speech in return. In such cases, the elements of gay speech may not be extremely salient markers of gay identity, so straight overhearers might never recognize the actual importance of the exchange. Exploratory switching thus represents an important site of contact between gay and straight settings, as it may be used covertly to establish gay solidarity even in entirely straight settings.

Conclusion

The study of the actual use of gay male speech provides a means of examining the fluidity of gay identity—how it is constructed and used in a variety of settings for a variety of purposes. Studies of both the structure and the use of gay speech may provide insight into the ways in which gay identity is constructed and maintained across different contexts. As such, it provides a powerful tool for understanding the style in which gay communities are imagined.

Because of the unique social realities of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons, the study of queer forms of speech has much to offer the field of linguistics as a whole. Queer linguistics may provide a start towards overcoming the problems produced by a linguistics of community. It may also produce valuable insight into understanding commonly used terms such as *dialect* and *register.* In addition, queer linguistics has much to offer queer studies. It provides a means for beginning to understand the ways in which people actually construct and produce markers of queer identities and deal with the ambiguity of identity categories and communities that are imagined differently by different community members. Beginning to understand the various ways in which gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgenders imagine their own communities, we can begin to try and understand what exactly constitutes a "homo-genius" community.

NOTES

1. The use of *queer* here is intended to convey any variety of lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or gay culture/society and is otherwise purposely left vague in terms of who actually claims membership in or is considered to belong to such a culture/society.

2. Gaudio (1994) includes one African American in his study of gay intonation but does not include ethnicity as a factor in his final analysis.

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