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## 1 Introduction

In the past decade, the sociolinguistic study of gender variation has taken new directions, both theoretically and methodologically. This redirection has made the linguistic subfields of language and gender and variationist sociolinguistics relevant to each other in new ways. Within sociolinguistics, issues of gender emerged primarily as the study of "sex differences," in which the focus of analysis was the quantifiable difference between women's and men's use of particular linguistic variables, especially phonological variables. While these questions were vitally important, their motivation was often less an interest in women or men *per se* than in understanding the social processes that actuate and advance linguistic change. Consequently, the close relationship between language and gender and quantitative sociolinguistics in the early years of both subfields became looser over time, as scholars pursued separate sets of questions with separate theoretical and methodological tools. Researchers whose work contributed to both areas maintained the connection between the subfields, and as language and gender studies experienced a burst of renewed activity in recent years, the effects have been felt in variationist circles as well. At the same time, current work in quantitative sociolinguistics has opened up a new set of issues of interest to language and gender scholars.

In order to accelerate this process of mutual influence and inspiration, this paper lays out some of the ways in which the two subfields can benefit each other and have already done so. I open this discussion by scrutinizing the key term that initiated this shared project: *sex differences*. The paper uncovers the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of this term and traces where new theories and methods are leading the sociolinguistic study of gender variation. I illustrate the argument with examples from my own and others' work on gender, to argue that all sociolinguists must understand gender not as a variable that transcends particular situations but as a complex and context-specific system for producing identities and ideologies.

## 2 Theorizing Sex, Gender, and Sexuality

To begin, then, with the first element of our key term: *sex*. The overwhelming majority of the early work both within language and gender and within variationist studies of women's and men's speech took sex as its basic social variable. Unlike other social variables that preoccupied sociolinguistic investigations, this concept was taken to be entirely straightforward and hence was not seen to require theoretical explanation. This situation stands in stark contrast to variables such as social class, whose operationalization was and continues to be elaborately discussed and debated (e.g., Davis 1985; Milroy and Milroy 1992; Rickford 1986).

Nor was the situation greatly altered by the shift in terminology from *sex* to *gender* by the 1980s, inspired by feminist theorizing that distinguished between sex as a biological phenomenon and gender as a social phenomenon. While the labels had changed, research on "gender differences" was very much like research on "sex differences," and as studies became increasingly noncomparative, *gender* often became synonymous with women, and men's gender identities, never an extensively investigated topic, moved even further out of view.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, some sociolinguists have continued to use the earlier term, *sex*, often understanding it as providing a biological warrant for their work. Thus a researcher who shall remain ungendered once remarked to me that they used *sex* instead of *gender* in their analysis because the social constraints placed on the speakers they studied were due to the speakers' biological status as women, not their gender identities. This comment revealed to me how much work must be done to bring contemporary theories of sex and gender into sociolinguistics. For of course the inequity that is described here is not about biological sex but about gender: a system of social classification based on the binary terms *female* and *male*. Or more accurately, what is described here is both sex and gender. As gender theorist Judith Butler (1990, 1993) has pointed out, the definition of sex as biological and gender as social or cultural in origin misses the fact that sex, like gender, is a social construction; that is, it is assigned social meanings by social beings, and the body thus semiotically indexes a host of ideologies about social (and other) practices and abilities.

This does not mean that an individual's sex and gender are always isomorphic; indeed, it is the purported "mismatch" between sex and gender that makes people with transgendered identities so unsettling to both concepts as

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<sup>1</sup> The move toward noncomparative analysis occurred primarily within language and gender studies as a way of investigating more fully the range of women's linguistic practices, regardless of their distinctiveness vis-à-vis men's practices.

conventionally understood. A good deal of sociolinguistic work must be done on transgendered speakers, in all their diversity, if we are to understand the linguistic consequences of stepping outside the sex/gender system (some pioneers of this question are Barrett 1999; Gaudio 1997; Hall 1997; Hall and O'Donovan 1996; Livia 2001). But these lessons also apply to sociolinguistic research on speakers who more closely adhere to their assigned sex and gender. In particular, our classification of speakers whether by sex or by gender is nowhere near as simple as it first appears. I offer as an example the story of how I met Fred, one of the key speakers in my study of European American teenagers in California (Bucholtz 1997, in preparation).

On my first day of fieldwork at Bay City High School, I observed a class on health and sexuality required of all students at the school.<sup>2</sup> Before sixth period, I sat down in a vacant desk and quickly noticed that I myself was being observed by a student nearby, who was half-turned toward me and smiling slightly. I say "a student," because I was unable to assign a gender to the teenager who was watching me; there were no conclusive clues in the loose T-shirt and jeans, nor in the tall slim frame and long straight dark hair (since many boys as well as girls at the school wore their hair long). It was not until the teacher introduced me to the class and the student turned fully toward me and smiled in welcome that I realized that she was in fact a girl.

Fred (as she wanted to be known in the study) was not the only teenager whose sex was not immediately obvious to (some) observers. One boy, Erich, told me that other students often mistook him for a girl. These two teenagers, however, were not attempting to be gender-transgressive; the temporary ambiguity of their physical self-presentation was due instead to the fact that neither of them was attempting to conform to the highly dichotomous styles of gender display typical of cool and trendy teenagers at the school. Fred and Erich were not gender outlaws but self-described nerds, who rejected coolness as a desirable part of their identities. As I discuss below, such confusions are not simply about how the body is (mis)read within a dichotomous gender system, but about the whole set of practices that constitute gender display, of which language is a central part.

To understand gender identity in all its complexity, however, it is not enough to consider only gender, or even the relationship between sex and gender, for theories of gender are always underwritten by theories of sexuality. Yet this connection is not often made explicit. Indeed, like gender, sexuality underlies a great deal of what has been labeled "sex" in variationist sociolinguistics. This issue comes to the fore in the work of Elizabeth Gordon (1997), who has proposed that the much-discussed tendency of

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<sup>2</sup> All names in field data and examples are pseudonyms.

women to be more conservative than men in the use of stable linguistic variables may be explained by recognizing the ideological association between women's use of stable vernacular variables and, among other things, their sexual availability to men. Women who avoid these variables thereby attempt to avoid inferences in part about their sexual activity. Conversely, gendered linguistic variables may also have sexual associations for men, though of a different kind. Lesley Milroy (1992) notes the language ideology that links men's use of prestige forms to what she calls *effeminacy*, a term, it should be noted, that crucially carries ideological information not only about gender but also about sexuality. She comments:

Burchfield (1981) reports difficulties experienced by the BBC in persuading regional radio stations in the UK to adopt the high-status accent known as RP; he quotes a Radio Carlisle spokesman as replying, "If we pronounced everything in the way suggested here our northern listeners would feel we're a bunch of poofters" (Burchfield 1981: 7). (Milroy 1992:177)

The homophobia expressed by this speaker indicates that sexuality, while closely tied to gender, merits further investigation in its own right as a sociolinguistic variable. Such investigation is especially crucial given that the language use of each gender is assigned social meaning according to different ideologies of sexuality. Whereas women's failure to use prestige forms is often associated with transgressive sexual (and hence gender) practice, it is men's use of prestige forms that may be tied to violations of hegemonic sexual (and hence gender) arrangements.

Sexuality, then, includes both one's *sexual orientation*, as defined by the gender of one's erotic attachments, and what might be called one's *orientation to sexuality*—the whole collection of sexual and sexualized practices and ideologies that shape everyday interactions. Not surprisingly, sexuality, especially in the latter sense, figures centrally into the identities of nerds, as it does for all teenagers negotiating the sexualized minefield of life in U.S. high schools. For nerdy teenagers, the fundamental question of sexuality is not whom one wants to have sex with, but whether one wants to have sex at all, or even to look as though one wants to. The complex symbolic apparatus through which cool girls display sexual sophistication or sexual engagement—e.g., through makeup and revealing clothing—is almost wholly absent in nerd girls' self-presentations. Thus an important source of gender differentiation is what Judith Butler (1990) calls the heterosexual matrix and Penelope Eckert (1996, 2000) calls the heterosexual market: the system for directing individuals to seek out and form intimate heterosocial bonds, in-

cluding sexual bonds. Much gender display is therefore also sexual, or sexualized, display.

There are therefore two ways in which the subfield of language and gender can assist variationist sociolinguistics: first, it can help retheorize the competing and conflicting definitions of *sex* and *gender* that have been circulating in the sociolinguistic literature; and second, it can demonstrate the crucial relevance of the additional key term *sexuality* for variationist research. Below, I summarize the most common understandings of each term in sociolinguistics (a) and then offer an alternate definition (b) that captures more fully the social grounding of sex, gender, and sexuality:

### Three definitions of *sex*

- (a) A social variable with two values: female and male
- (a') The biological differentiation of individuals into a dichotomy between female and male (in contrast to *gender*)
- (b) The negotiable and contestable social classification of individuals into the categories of female and male based on cultural understandings of the body, especially with respect to sexuality, with attendant normative local ideologies about social, physical, cognitive, and affective practices, attributes, and capabilities

### Three definitions of *gender*

- (a). (i) Sex (see (a) above)
- (ii) Women
- (a') The social differentiation of individuals within a continuum between feminine and masculine (in contrast to *sex*)
- (b) The negotiable and contestable social classification of individuals into the categories of female and male based on cultural understandings of the body, especially with respect to sexuality, with attendant normative local ideologies about social, physical, cognitive, and affective practices, attributes, and capabilities

### Two definitions of *sexuality*

- (a) Sexual orientation, based on the gender of one's erotic attachments
- (b) Definition (a), and one's orientation to sexuality: sexual(ized) practices and ideologies that shape daily life, including gender

This brief examination of the connections and the differences among sex, gender, and sexuality is intended to make clear that all three of these dimensions must be carefully considered in any sociolinguistic study that involves

any one of them. I turn now to some linguistic dimensions of these social processes, which I discuss with reference to the second element in our key term: difference.

### 3 Gender, Sexuality, and Style

As already noted, the first wave of research on gender ("sex") within sociolinguistics considered variation almost entirely in terms of differences in female and male language use. The virtue of reducing gender variation to intergender difference was that it allowed for a sustained examination of the effects of gender on language change. But it quickly became evident that other kinds of variation also needed to be investigated, namely that within a single gender and that within a single speaker. And while the latter type has long had a place within sociolinguistic study under the label of *style*, understood as situational variation, variation within a single social category, such as gender, has more recently made a claim to that term as well (Eckert and Rickford 2001). This new conceptualization of style as distinctive social practice, including linguistic practice (Eckert 2000; Irvine 2001), is valuable for at least two reasons: (1) it foregrounds dimensions of identity that might otherwise be overlooked because they do not always correlate directly with broader demographic variables; and (2) it conforms to the way the term is used in other social sciences, such as cultural studies, thus bringing sociolinguistic research closer to adjacent disciplines, with benefits in both directions.

The importance of the definition of style as social practice, and its utility for sociolinguistics, quickly became evident in the Bay City High School study. As cultural styles, nerdiness and coolness are largely invisible according to demographic criteria. Nerd girls and cool girls the school often grew up together, live in the same neighborhoods, and attend the same classes, but as I have already discussed their gender styles are very different. Likewise, their linguistic styles are very different. Table 1 shows the degree to which girls within each style produce a fronted pronunciation of (uw) and (ow), two vowels that are part of the California Vowel Shift (Hinton et al. 1987; Luthin 1987).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Replicating the method used by Hinton and her collaborators, for each of the vowels (uw) and (ow), I analyzed between 20 and 50 tokens produced by each speaker. Degree of fronting was assessed impressionistically for each token on an integer scale of 0-2, where 0 indicated no fronting and 2 indicated extreme fronting. Overall fronting scores were calculated by totaling token scores and multiplying by a constant; the maximum possible fronting score was 200 and the minimum was 0.

<i>Nerd girls</i>			<i>Cool girls</i>		
Speaker	(uw)	(ow)	Speaker	(uw)	(ow)
Bob	88	46	Claudia	115	97
Christine	71	39	Erin	136	129
Claire	56	52	Iris	142	76
Fred	113	78	Josie	138	116
Kate	80	33	Lumiere	130	114
Loden	82	56	Paige	144	111
			Rebecca	148	120
			Sophia	135	138
			Zoe	137	122

Table 1. Fronting scores for (uw) and (ow) for 15 European American girls at Bay City High School, by cultural style

Despite some individual outliers, most notably Fred herself, the results indicate that these styles have consequences for language use. Fred's own more advanced fronting actually underscores this point, for she is a formerly cool girl who in the previous year made a deliberate choice to join a nerdy friendship group. Her speech therefore retains traces of her former identity.

Nerdiness is not just about avoiding coolness but about resisting gender hegemony. It allows girls to opt out of the heterosexual market altogether or to enter it when they feel ready and on their own terms. Nerd girls remove themselves from coolness and its attendant gender obligations as much through their untrendy vowels as through their deliberately unsexy, unsophisticated clothing. (The popular ideological association of advanced variants of these vowels with airheaded beach bimbos may have something to do with this aversion as well.) These negative identity practices, both linguistic and nonlinguistic, semiotically locate nerdy girls as firmly removed from hegemonic femininity.

In place of this sexualized style of femininity, nerd girls draw on positive identity practices to construct for themselves a gender identity based on intelligence and humor, as I have discussed elsewhere (Bucholtz 1999). Thus in Example (1), two nerdy girls, Claire and Christine, display this orientation in their discussion of "hippies" at Bay City High:<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Transcription conventions: Each line represents a single intonation unit. A period indicates falling intonation; a comma indicates fall-rise intonation; a question mark indicates rising intonation. Colons indicate lengthening of a sound; underlining indicates emphatic stress or increased amplitude. A period in parentheses (.) indicates a pause of 0.5 seconds or less; an h indicates laughter (each token marks one pulse). Curly brackets indicate a stretch of talk over which a transcriber comment applies;

(1)

- 1 Mary: Are those the granola people you were [talking] about?
- 2 Claire: [Yeah. ]
- 3 Christine: Yeah.
- 4 Mary: Okay.
- 5 Claire: I never use that word except that Christine used it the other day,  
6 And now it's just (.) so apt.
- 7 Christine: Yeah and they're very kumbayah: too,  
8 [hh I love those]
- 9 Claire: [I know. ]
- 10 Christine: little words like that. hh
- 11 Claire: I know. hh
- 12 Christine: They're so descriptive, hh  
13 And they're very evocative [hhhh]
- 14 Claire: [Yeah.]
- 15 Christine: I mean they say exactly what I'm trying to say hh

Here Claire and Christine demonstrate several aspects of a nerdy linguistic style: a high degree of metalinguistic awareness (*I love those little words like that*, lines 8, 10); creative language use for humorous purposes (*granola*, which I mention in line 1, and *kumbayah*, line 7); and formal-register linguistic forms, such as Latinate lexical items (*apt*, line 6; *evocative*, line 13). This contrasts with cool students' linguistic practices, in which creative language use, like slang, is more often associated with displaying coolness than humor, and in which language forms tend to be highly colloquial, even in sociolinguistic interview settings, as here.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, there are some indications that nerd girls avoid other linguistic forms associated with trendy femininity. Preliminary analysis of the quotative markers *be all*, *be like*, and *go* suggests that nerdy girls and cool girls make different linguistic choices here as well. In Example (2), Claire and Christine are complaining that they have to pretend they have tutors in order to avoid the stigma of being smart.

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angled brackets indicate a transcriber comment; square brackets indicate overlap between speakers.

<sup>5</sup> Christine and Claire commented that they talked differently to me than to their friends, but their linguistic style with each other did not diverge dramatically from their style with me.

(2)

- 1 Claire: Then you say the magic word,  
 2 "I have a tutor." h  
 3 Mary: Mm.  
 4 Christine: Everyone goes,  
 5 "O:::h,"  
 6 and they're all jealous and they're like,  
 7 "Oh wow,  
 8 I wish I had a tutor." hh

Here Christine uses the colloquial forms *go* and *be like* (lines 4, 6). However, she does not use *be all*, here or elsewhere. But as Example (3) illustrates, this quotative form is favored by the very popular cool girl Josie. She is talking about how much she dislikes the computer nerds at the school:

(3)

- 1 Josie: They would not let me join their club by the way.  
 2 Mary: You tried and they woul{dn't let you }?  
 3 Josie: [Oh I was all,]  
 4 "Can I join your club?"  
 5 <lower volume> {Of course I'd been sitting in the corner  
 laughing at them for the last twenty minutes.}  
 6 And they're all,  
 7 "No."  
 8 And I was all,  
 9 "I don't like you either."

Josie uses the *be all* quotative exclusively in this example (lines 3, 6, 8). The difference between the two girls' language use here (in content as well as form) may be attributable to their different cultural styles, which are bound up with styles of gender.

Researchers of *be like* have found a language ideology linking it to "Valley girls" (Blyth et al. 1990; Dailey-O'Cain 2000), particularly among speakers outside California. Its actual use, however, is widespread among younger speakers not only in the United States but elsewhere as well (Ferrara and Bell 1995; Macaulay 2001; Tagliamonte and Hudson 1999). Hence *be like* is not necessarily socially marked as trendy among teenagers at Bay City High. The more innovative form *be all* remains more restricted in its usage, being largely limited to California (Gilman et al. 1999), and it is this form

that nerdy speakers appear to avoid. Like *be like* in other parts of the country, *be all* may be ideologically linked particularly to trendy teenage girls.<sup>6</sup>

Gender variation, then, is not only about intergender differences, although it is about those as well. It is also about intragender differences, and even intraspeaker differences, whether over time or across social contexts. To study variation must involve looking not only at trends but also at exceptions. Moreover, although I have focused here only on female language use, *gender* should not be taken, as it too often is, to refer only to women. Men have gender identities, too, and indeed, the study of men's linguistic practices of gender and sexuality is under way, especially in the pioneering work of Scott Kiesling (e.g., 1997, 1998).

I have pointed out some ways that recent ideas in language and gender can be helpful to variationists, but there are important benefits in the other direction as well. For example, quantitative methods of variation analysis are currently underutilized in language and gender studies, which has moved away from quantitative approaches and toward various forms of qualitative discourse analysis. As Natalie Schilling-Estes points out, there is no reason why we can't have it both ways, and develop research approaches that involve a fuller integration of quantitative and qualitative methods. A second arena in which variationist sociolinguistics can be of use to language and gender studies is in the ongoing discussion concerning the role of women as leaders in linguistic change (e.g., Eckert 1989; Labov 1990, 2001), which invites further work, both qualitative and quantitative, from a language and gender perspective. And although I have discussed the two subfields as though they function largely independently of each other, of course there is important work already being done on precisely these issues, in precisely these ways, including that of Penelope Eckert, Scott Kiesling, Norma Mendoza-Denton (1997), Miriam Meyerhoff (1999), and many others.

## 4 Conclusion

Teasing out the different roles played by sex, gender, and sexuality, as these are currently being theorized and debated in feminism, gender studies, and queer theory, is a crucial way for sociolinguists to forge and strengthen ties to other social sciences. And as I have emphasized, the lines of influence should be moving in both directions. As we shift our focus from sex differences to the whole range of phenomena captured by the term *gender varia-*

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<sup>6</sup> Although Rachelle Waksler (2001) does not discuss the social distribution of *be all* in her analysis of its discourse functions, her data are taken from teenagers and young adults in San Francisco.

tion, we engage with issues of style and ideology, social practice and performance, that contribute a distinctively linguistic perspective to the analysis of the diversity and complexity of the social world, thereby setting the entire field of sociolinguistics in its wider context.

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