Lesbian Identity Construction

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter considers the relevance of cultural discourses to speakers’ indexing of recognizable “lesbian” identities. It begins with a discussion of the ideological discourses that lesbian women have been found to draw upon in their interactions, explaining key aspects of lesbian culture and experience. It then provides a survey of linguistic research into lesbian discourse, offering an account of the mostly Western studies conducted to date. A critical discussion of the prevalence of “butch” and “femme” identities is provided, with the inclusion of data from the author’s ethnographic fieldwork with a lesbian community of practice. The chapter demonstrates that these normative notions carry symbolic value in the construction of some lesbian identities, but also argues—through an account of studies looking at same-sex-identified women who identify with categories other than lesbian—for research that looks beyond the white, middle-class, Western women who so far dominate work in this area.

Keywords: lesbian identities, butch, femme, discourse, community of practice, intersectionality

Introduction

Like all sociolinguistic research that focuses on a particular demographic, studies into “lesbian discourse” are at risk of overgeneralization, whereby research into individual groups or speakers may be taken as conclusive of how “all lesbians” use language. As I will argue in this chapter, certain themes are repeatedly found in studies of self-identified lesbian women, but these themes reflect the impact of a largely white, middle-class, Western cultural context on a largely white, middle-class, British and American sample of women. While the research detailed here is of great importance because it reveals prevalent ideologies associated with lesbian culture and identity in the West, it must not therefore be taken as representative of a single, homogenous lesbian identity.

Furthermore, the most commonly cited studies in this area tend to focus on women who
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actively use the label lesbian, rather than women who may desire and/or sleep with women but who do not identify with that category; the dominance of this research is reflected in this chapter. However, I also outline emerging work within language and sexuality studies addressing the intersections of other identities (such as age, social class, ethnicity, and geography) with this cultural category, including that which considers some of the other identities that may be taken up by women who desire women.

As will be made evident in the discussion that follows, most existing studies of interaction between women identifying as lesbian have shown them to draw on symbols and practices that allow the positioning of themselves as ultimately different from, or even in opposition to, the heteronormative mainstream image of femaleness. Largely, this is enabled by the popular stereotype of the “butch” lesbian, a characterization often placed in binary opposition to the “femme.” Being butch is often equated, quite crudely, with being “masculine,” partly as a consequence of heteronormative expectations of binary gender (whereby if a person is not normatively “feminine” they must, ideologically, be “masculine”). The link also emerges from the popular medical and cultural explanation for homosexuality in both women and men as a form of gender inversion, whereby to desire a man one must be more feminine and to desire a woman one must be more masculine (see Doan 2001 for further discussion).

Butchness, then, is ideologically associated with female masculinity, a concept Jack Halberstam (1998) develops in relation to those women who, for example, do not conform to normative expectations regarding femininity, are gender ambiguous, may pass as male, or identify as a butch lesbian. Halberstam’s aim is to demonstrate that masculinity, itself, does not belong to men. While this is true, as I have argued elsewhere (Jones 2015), there remains a need to distinguish between “doing butch identity” and “doing masculinity.” Since butchness is a specifically female identity, and masculinity is ideologically linked to maleness, we may perceive a performance of butch identity as a rejection or a reworking of hegemonic gender norms. A butch lesbian, therefore, is not necessarily role-playing a male identity, but projecting a lesbian one; this is a way of performing a version of womanhood that indexes difference from normative expectations of femininity. As a concept, though, being butch is rooted in the ideological presumption that, due to their sexual identity, lesbian women are fundamentally—or even inherently—different from straight women. It is this notion that has been found to enable the production of lesbian identity in most studies of their interaction.

Though many of the stereotypes surrounding lesbian identity and behavior appear to be rooted in ideological butchness, the aforementioned “femme” identity is also prevalent within lesbian—and indeed mainstream—Western culture. If the butch lesbian reflects a nonfeminine woman, the femme lesbian is presented as the polar opposite: a feminine woman who seemingly adheres to expectations of female style and behavior. This dichotomous construction is, of course, stereotypical; many lesbian women may identify as “somewhat butch” or “quite femme,” while others will not identify with either label. Yet the notion of being either butch or femme remains salient within lesbian culture and is therefore useful for women who wish to perform a recognizable lesbian persona. Butch
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and femme operate, in this sense, as what Helen Sauntson (2008: 274) identifies as “key terms of reference” for the discursive construction of lesbian sexuality.

Indeed, many linguistic analyses of texts produced by and for lesbian women reveal the prevalence of butch/femme, such as lesbian novels (Livia 1995), lesbian erotica (Morrish and Sauntson 2011), and comic strips (Queen 1997). In Robin Queen’s data, in particular, gay women are presented as inhabiting either a butch or a femme persona, with butch identity projected via such means as the flat intonation patterns normatively associated with hegemonic masculinity (1997: 244). In coming-out advice literature analyzed by Deborah Chirrey (2007), a strict use of binary sexuality is again identified, with women being advised to embrace a lesbian identity or a heterosexual one, thus excluding bisexuality. Similarly, analyses have shown the ideal of difference between lesbian women and straight women to be reinforced in lesbian-specific magazines and pamphlets, with both Veronika Koller (2008) and Georgina Turner (2008) showing that a sense of lesbian community may be produced via a discourse in which “us” (lesbian women) is distinct from “them” (heterosexual women). These ideological stances—whereby lesbians are fundamentally different to heterosexual women, and one is either butch or femme—are prevalent not only in media representations, of course. As discussed here, they are also found within the talk of women who have been included in many studies of lesbian interaction.

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Within language, gender, and sexuality research, there have been fewer studies into lesbian discourse than those focused on heterosexual speakers or gay men (Cameron and Kulick 2003). Attempting to explain this, Robin Queen (2014: 215) refers to “the special case of the lesbian,” outlining the popular perception that few definable linguistic characteristics typify lesbian women and therefore no clear traits exist for the performance of lesbian identity. Despite this, several early studies attempted to ascertain whether any linguistic features or styles specific to lesbian women did exist. Probably the first linguistic analysis of lesbian communication was Dorothy Painter’s (1980) study into the use of humor as a device that allowed lesbians to negotiate and normalize their experiences as a minority group. This was followed by Connie Day and Ben Morse’s (1981) analysis of conversations between lesbian couples. Day and Morse argued that the style of these conversations was egalitarian and symmetrical, offering the somewhat generalized conclusion that lesbian relationships and experiences are distinct from heterosexual ones (see Wagner 2010 for a contemporary account of lesbian family discourse). Supporting the idea of a specifically lesbian style of speech, Painter’s (1981) later study posited that there might be particular linguistic cues recognizable to lesbian women who seek to identify one another (see also Laude 1993), while Leonard Ashley’s (1982) analysis of “Dyke Diction” included a glossary of terms used in lesbian writings. Since these studies were all carried out in the United States with a limited range of participants, their attempts to locate a “lesbian language” were necessarily restricted, of course. Such efforts to homogenize a range of experiences were also possible only by the
exclusion of those who did not fit the pre-defined category of "lesbian." However, as the first serious attempts to identify the communicative styles of a minority group, they remain groundbreaking.

From the 1980s onward, studies with a more explicitly sociolinguistic focus emerged, with Birch Moonwomon’s (1985) study of American women often cited as the first in the field. Moonwomon set out to identify lesbian-specific intonation in listener perception tests, as well as in the interaction of lesbian and heterosexual women. She found no clear patterns distinguishing the different women’s intonation, however (a finding mirrored in Rachelle Waksler’s 2001 follow-up study), and no evidence of listeners perceiving particular intonation styles as more or less lesbian-specific. From these findings, Moonwomon drew an important and influential conclusion: a distinct lesbian repertoire does not exist due to the continued cultural invisibility and peripherality of lesbians.

However, later studies have found some variation between lesbian and heterosexual women’s pitch ranges (Van Borsel et al. 2013, Rendall et al. 2008), making this a rich area for continued investigation.

The early studies cited here were admirable yet problematic; in their attempts to identify the language of lesbians, they implied the existence of one homogenous lesbian identity. Furthermore, the research contributed to an assumption that any patterns found in lesbian speech can be straightforwardly linked to lesbian identity, not accounting for other aspects of women’s identities that might influence their language use. Erez Levon and Ronald Mendes (2016: 4) describe this as a “correlational” period in language and sexuality research, an approach that contrasts with more recent studies making use of queer theory and poststructuralist approaches. Indeed, research into lesbian discourse since the 1990s has typically endeavored to identify the ways in which lesbian women may use language to indexically situate themselves—albeit temporarily—in relation to the broader sociocultural context outlined earlier, rather than attempting to identify “lesbian language.”

One of the first studies taking this approach was Ruth Morgan and Kathleen Wood’s (1995) analysis of recordings between American lesbian friends in conversation. They found that, though not all aspects of the women’s conversations were specifically related to their shared sexual orientation, they worked together as lesbians to develop a sense of unity, symbolically creating a lesbian space via topics of conversation specific to their experiences as lesbians. The relevance of lesbian space is reflected in Robin Queen’s (1998) analysis of a group of American gay and lesbian speakers; her analysis shows how their mutual stance-taking toward homophobia (positioning it as a problem) and queer history (positioning it as important) allows them to index their membership of an imagined queer community. Similarly, Birch Moonwomon-Baird’s (1996) discourse analysis of a group of American lesbian women revealed the importance of lesbian-related topics, specifically feminism in the case of her participants, to the construction of a lesbian identity.
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Further research into lesbian interaction has suggested that it may not simply be lesbian topics, but lesbian ideologies that enable the construction of lesbian identities: butchness, unsurprisingly, features here. Lisa Bland’s (1996) study of a group of American lesbian friends, for example, features them teasing another lesbian for owning a pink washrag, due to the indexical relationship between the color pink and heteronormative femininity. Bland claims that pink is also indexical of a femme identity and that, by teasing this woman and rejecting pink as a color they themselves would use, the lesbians in question position themselves as comparatively butch. This reveals, she argues, the importance of cultural references as contextual cues, which in turn operate as identity markers. This is also demonstrated in my own research with a British lesbian group (Jones 2012), in which the women produce a butch identity by overtly rejecting stereotypes of heteronormative femininity (such as wearing makeup), and in data analyzed by Natasha Shrikant (2014), in which American lesbian friends discuss (among other things) their aversion to lacy underwear.

There is also evidence of the importance of other cultural themes related to lesbian experience in studies of lesbian interaction. For example, Kathleen Wood’s (1999) analysis of a range of deaf and hearing coming-out stories demonstrates how lesbian narratives often involve the negotiation of ideological discourses of heteronormativity and homophobia, a conclusion shared by Michelle Maher and Wende Pusch (1995) in their interviews asking primarily European American lesbians about their coming-out experiences. The role of responding to and negotiating heteronormativity is also shown in Victoria Clarke and Celia Kitzinger’s (2005) analysis of televised lesbian interactions in Britain, New Zealand, and the United States, in which women are frequently forced to defend their relationships in light of the ideology that children need a male role model as part of their upbringing. Similarly, Liz Morrish and Helen Sauntson (2007) focus on the role of resisting heterosexual norms in the construction of lesbian identity through their account of a group of British lesbian friends’ interaction. In their analysis of a conversation about a home improvement television show, Morrish and Sauntson demonstrate how the women humorously co-construct a lesbian-specific version of the show, drawing attention to the heteronormativity found within the broadcast under discussion. In their version of the show, the women suggest, there would be no pastel colors used in the decor, and the participants would have cats rather than children; this offers a direct reworking of heteronormative expectations of womanhood.

Morrish and Sauntson argue that lesbian stereotypes such as these enable lesbian identity construction due to the symbolic role they hold as in-group identity markers. Often, as in their data, these stereotypes are invoked humorously; this is also shown in Queen’s (2005) analysis of American lesbians’ joke-telling and Victoria Land and Celia Kitzinger’s (2005) data of British lesbians’ spontaneous talk. Indeed, research has shown that, despite the prevalent cultural assumption—identified and critiqued by Don Kulick (2010)—that lesbians tend to be “humorless,” joke-telling and irony often has a central role to play in lesbian identity construction. This is evident in Anna Livia’s study of lesbians’ contributions to the “lonely hearts” section of the French magazine Lesbia; she argues that humor “is always significant in any study of community building since irony
assumes (and requires) a homogenous set of members who are able to read both the sincere surface message and its ironic—usually opposite—intended meaning” (2001: 201). This may be particularly true in the case of marginalized speakers, as shown by Corinne Seals’ (2016) analysis of an Australian lesbian comic’s routine for an LGBT audience. Seals argues that the jokes made by the comic are found funny by the audience in part because of their shared knowledge of the experiences she draws upon, including homophobia and inequality, and the agency this gives them in validating their own identities.

The research presented so far demonstrates how identities may be produced on a local level—in all kinds of interactional contexts—by drawing on broader sociocultural ideologies, assumed shared experiences, and stereotypes (see Bucholtz and Hall 2004 for further discussion of sociocultural linguistic frameworks that enable such a focus on sexuality). As discussed, it has typically been found that lesbian women may draw on salient aspects of lesbian culture—including, very often, lesbian stereotypes—in the discursive construction of a shared lesbian identity. While stereotypes do not necessarily reflect the actual practice of lesbian women in all contexts, then, invoking them during interaction with other lesbians can enable the performative construction of a culturally recognizable lesbian persona. In the following section, a close examination of data is presented that allows greater insight into the negotiation of lesbian stereotypes for such identity construction.

Focus: Negotiating Butch Identity

A recurrent stereotype drawn on by women in the studies outlined in the previous section is that lesbians are more butch (or less feminine) than heterosexual women. This is also reflected in my research with a lesbian community of practice: the Sapphic Stompers1 (Jones 2012). The Stompers are a British hiking group composed (like most women featured in the studies detailed so far) of white, middle-class, cisgender lesbians. The Stomper women frequently work together in their interaction to produce the contrasting personas of Dyke and Girl. They sometimes explicitly index their own identities in relation to one or other of these categories, and at other times simply express ideological perspectives that further their mutual understanding of what the identities mean; a Dyke is thought to be an “authentic” lesbian who eschews “girly” or normatively feminine styles and practices, whereas a Girl is an illegitimate lesbian that, to the Stompers, means one who matches heteronormative ideals of femininity. This reflects, to an extent, the women’s generational experience—they were in their mid- to late middle age at the time of these recordings. However, such identity construction is not necessarily straightforward; meaning in communities of practice is organic rather than fixed, and norms within them may therefore be altered and mutually negotiated (Eckert and Wenger 2005: 584).

This process is evidenced in the data that follows, revealing the very ideological nature of stereotypes associated with gender and sexuality yet also their relevance and importance.
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in the process of group-based identity construction. In the extract considered here, adapted from Jones (2012), the Stomper women work together to frame particular practices as legitimately “lesbian” or not, specifically, shaving one’s legs and wearing skirts or dresses. These two practices may be seen as symbolic of femininity on a broad cultural level, of course; skirts, in Western contexts, are traditionally worn only by women and girls, and Western women are culturally expected to be free of body hair. As will be shown, these ideologically feminine practices therefore symbolize illegitimacy for the Stompers. In the conversation—reproduced in two halves—the women negotiate their expectations of what is authentically lesbian (or “Dykey”) and thus reveal the salience of the butch/femme distinction within the group.

In 2007, I was in conversation with five members of the Stompers—Claire (C), Eve (E), Hannah (H), Jill (J), and Sam (S)—over dinner at Jill’s house, following a hike. The conversation turned to the chore of ironing, which Claire, Hannah, and I took clear stances against (with Hannah claiming that “no self respecting lesbian has an ironing board”), but which Eve and Jill professed to rather enjoy. Eve mentioned that she always ironed her sheets (arguing that it was a good way to air them), leading me (L) to ask Jill if she did the same thing. A transcript of this interaction is provided below (see Appendix for transcription conventions):
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1  L  Do you iron bed-sheets Jill?

2  J  <*Oh god no.*>

3  L  So you’re not as bad.

4  J  Only [shirts and trousers (.) and skirts] that’s all]

5  E  [No she’s not that bad. Shirts have to be done though.]

6  L  Skirts?

7  H  I was gonna say that ski::rts? [You’ve got ski::rts?]

8  E  [You’ve got ski::rts?]

9  J  [Yes]

10  L  [Ah::]

11  H  Have you got skirts?

12  J  Yes I’ve got [ski::rts.]

13  L  [And do you wear them?]

14  H  When d’you wear them?

15  J  Well I have to [admit that-]

16  S  [Why do you wear them] is- @(1)

17  J  Because in summer they are considerably cooler [than trousers or] shorts.
Jill states in line 4 that, while she does not iron her bed sheets, she *does* iron other items, including her skirts. The response of the women to Jill owning skirts (emphasized initially by me in line 6) demonstrates that this stereotypically feminine style may clash with culturally recognizable assumptions of lesbian behavior. This may be seen from Jill’s own statement in line 4, where she pauses before including skirts in her list of items that must be ironed, as well as from Eve and Hannah’s display of shock, whereby both ask simultaneously “you’ve got skirts?” Following from this, a clear rhetorical pattern is established between me, Hannah, and Sam: “do you wear them?” (Lucy, line 13); “when do you wear them?” (Hannah, line 14); “why do you wear them?” (Sam, line 16). This not only highlights the cultural disconnect between being a lesbian and wearing a skirt, given
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the projected incredulity of these three speakers; it also threatens Jill’s positive face and forces her to defend her behavior and, in turn, her authentic identity as a member of the group (her Dykeyness). Interestingly, she does this through claiming that, due to their coolness in summer, it is more logical to wear skirts (line 17), indexing a rational and practical persona that may be seen as more masculine than feminine within an ideologically binary system of gender. It is in this way that skirt-wearing becomes, temporarily at least, a legitimate practice for the Stomper group, as Sam (line 20) acknowledges that skirts are more suitable in hot weather than trousers or shorts are. This is also, of course, particularly relevant for a group of women whose engagement together is based around hiking outdoors.

This enables, in this moment, the negotiation of skirt-wearing as a potentially legitimate lesbian practice. Though this symbolically feminine style is initially rendered inauthentic due to the group’s typical reliance on butch stereotypes to construct a mutual sense of lesbian identity, Jill’s declaration enables several other women to admit that they, too, might occasionally wear skirts. Both Hannah (line 34) and I (line 22) claim to sometimes wear a skirt on holiday; this positions the behavior as unusual and out of our ordinary day-to-day lives, reducing the threat to our otherwise claimed Dykey selves. Claire’s subsequent questioning of Eve and Sam as to whether they own skirts includes an immediate rejection of the practice (“do you own a skirt? I don’t own a skirt,” line 27), which leads to similar mitigation. In lines 28–29, both Eve and Sam claim that they have worn skirts in the past (indicated by Sam’s temporal marker “now” and Eve’s use of the past tense to refer to her twenty-one-year-old self), and Sam then positions herself as confused by, or unfamiliar with, skirts in describing “one of those wrap-around things” (line 31, my emphasis). It is clear, then, that the women are reluctant to wholeheartedly embrace skirt-wearing as a legitimate Stomper practice due to its lack of consistency with the Dykey norms that usually allow them to index a butch identity.

Following the discussion of skirts, the conversation quite naturally moves to the topic of leg hair removal. This begins with Eve taking the opportunity to tease me for—she assumes—the fact I shave my legs:
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36  E  [Was this when] you shaved your legs or not?
37  J  [@ (1)]
38  L  Oh I- that’s that is the one time that my legs will be seen by the public (.)
39    the one time I wore a skirt is in a foreign place where no one knows me.
40  C  Why do you not sha::ve then?
41  E  No::: [@ (1)]
42  C  [God you are a] real proper butch aren’t you?
43  E  Can’t be bothered.
44  H  @ (.)
45  C  God I’m th- I’m getting a re::al complex now about I- I’m a [real gi::rl]
46  S  [What do you]
47  S  shave your legs?
48  C  Yeah. [Why not?]  
49  L  [Do you] Jill?
50  S  [Why::?:]  
51  J  [Do I what?]  
52  C  @ (.)
53  J  I shave my legs.
54  C  [Cos they’re better] that way.
55  H  [Shave my legs?]  
56  J  Course they are. They’re much more attractive shaved./
57  C  /They a::re.
58  L  Yeah.
59  H  I [shave my legs.]  
60  S  [I’m not no:::] I mean I- I do it sometimes but on the whole I prefer::: (1)
61  H  I do haven’t [for some time]
62  S  [natural.]
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Eve’s question in line 36 (and my avoidance of it in line 38) leads Claire to ask her whether she shaves (“do you not shave then?,” line 40), with “then” used as a qualifier to frame not shaving as potentially unusual despite its ideological links with femininity. Eve emphatically denies shaving, following which Claire labels her as “a real proper butch” (line 42). The pre-modification of “butch” with the intensifiers “real” and “proper” allows Claire to position butchness as gradable (similar to Hannah’s use of “self-respecting lesbian,” earlier). This construction suggests that one can be an actual lesbian without also meeting the appropriate butchness requirements of the group, but also that there is no one coherent mold for lesbians to fit into in order to perform the lesbian identity. The traits that make up this “proper lesbian” persona are negotiated constantly within this group, then, but tend to rely on stereotypes of butch and femme; the women’s performance of a lesbian identity, in this moment, is achieved in part through their claimed knowledge of stereotypical lesbian discourse. This demonstrates the importance of understanding identity construction in relation to not only the local group level but also a wider ideological level (Bucholtz and Hall 2005).

It is telling, of course, that Claire positions leg-shaving—something that she engages in—as indicative of her being “a real girl” (line 44). This shows that the indexical relationship between not shaving and butch lesbianism is prevalent, as her turn serves to align shaving one’s legs with femininity, femme behavior, or Girlishness. Claire’s subsequent attempt to defend this practice, following Sam’s questioning in lines 45–46, is rather weak (claiming they are “just (…) better that way,” line 54), yet Jill supports her by characterizing shaved legs as more attractive (line 56). As with her earlier claim that wearing skirts is more practical, this characterization enables leg-shaving to gain status as a rational activity within the Stomper group, since Jill positions it as more sexually desirable for a woman and therefore highlights their shared sexual orientation.

The shift that occurs here is, as with the discussion of skirt-wearing, evident from the altered stance-taking of other members of the group; once Jill announces that she shaves her legs (line 53), Hannah and Sam do the same. Sam’s stance in line 60 is less confident, shifting from “I’m not” to “I do,” and her use of the temporal marker “sometimes” again indicates a desire to align her stance with the majority yet maintain a butch (i.e., non-heteronormatively feminine) persona. Hannah follows this in line 61 with a similar move, qualifying her stance by suggesting that “I haven’t for some time,” once again mitigating her admission to engaging in an apparently non-butch practice. As with the negotiation of wearing skirts, it is apparent from this moment that the women are aware of the ideological nature of lesbian stereotypes; though rejecting symbols of femininity may be a convenient way of indexing a recognizable lesbian identity, it is clear that these ideas are flexible and negotiable. Nonetheless, the women’s interaction here also reveals the salience of butchness within lesbian culture—at least for British women of this generation, and of this socioeconomic and cultural background.
Contexts and Intersections

The brief account just cited demonstrates how lesbian-specific cultural stereotypes may be useful—and jointly negotiated—in the mutual construction of lesbian identity. In addition to recognizing the salience of stereotypes such as butch and femme in data such as this, however, it is also important to problematize them. This is not to suggest that language and sexuality scholars should criticize speakers who make use of culturally salient symbols and norms to index their identities in line with broader ideological categories; instead, it is to argue that we must consider whether such norms simply facilitate this identity construction, or whether they may also constrain it. This point is exemplified by Morrish and Sauntson (2007), who, drawing on Louis Althusser’s (1971) theory of interpellation, argue that butch and femme are—at least in a Western context—categories that cannot be avoided as part of lesbian identity construction. Even if speakers consciously shift away from prevalent identity positions (such as “lesbian” or “butch”), by doing so they are still responding to the category and therefore engaging with it to some extent. The prevalent ideological structures that exist, in this sense, shape the available identities it is possible to produce. For example, a woman who identifies as femme may be rejected from certain lesbian groups due to not conforming to perceived “authentic” lesbian styles, just as a transgender woman who desires women may not fit squarely into the cisnormative cultural interpretation of the category lesbian. Though we may celebrate the creative subversion of heteronormative gender roles and practices, then, we must also question what binaries they reinforce as a result. Often, this reflects broader gender ideologies—that one is either female or male, for example—and, in this sense, may serve to reproduce discourses that can ultimately serve to exclude certain groups.

It is also important to critique—and address—the problem of bias in the studies outlined so far. One such bias relates to age: most often, the women included in the studies cited so far were of an older generation, either due to the research having been carried out some time ago, or the participants themselves being in their middle age or older at the time of data collection. There is a need, therefore, to consider the impact of current discourses on younger women’s identity construction; in my own ethnographic work with a British LGBT youth group (Jones 2018), for example, I found teenage lesbians articulating their desire to be seen as “just the same” as their heterosexual peers and tending not to foreground their sexuality in their identity work. This differs considerably to the findings discussed earlier, whereby women identifying as lesbian drew explicitly on stereotypes positioning them as different to the mainstream; research with younger women may therefore reveal changing cultural influences on lesbian identity construction. Aimee Bailey’s (2016) study of a corpus of online lesbian sex advice provides evidence of such change, as her data shows lesbian desire for femme identities tending to be assumed and therefore normalized, and butch women being largely ignored. This suggests that the reliance on cultural stereotypes associated with female masculinity, or butch/femme relationships, may well be changing during these
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“homonormative” times (for discussions of homonormativity, see Motschenbacher this volume, Lazar this volume).

A further bias evident in the research presented so far is reflected in Bonnie McElhinny’s (2014) argument: language and sexuality research has typically been informed by conceptualizations of gender and sexual identity that are specific to the cultural context of the West. Indeed, the research outlined so far has focused not only on Western speakers, but typically those who are middle-class, cisgender, and white. By moving beyond these speakers, we can gain an understanding of how norms and ideologies are drawn upon in lesbian interaction in different cultural contexts; in turn, the somewhat homogenous lesbian identity that is presented in the studies cited earlier may be revealed to be based largely on the norms of a privileged demographic. For this reason, it may be argued that now is the time for a focus on lesbian discourse that thinks intersectionally: to consider identity as constituted by multiple factors, not just one. As well as considering a person’s identity construction according to their sexuality, then, we might consider how other “mutually reinforcing vectors” (Nash 2008: 2) such as race, gender, or class interact with this. Such an approach enables us to focus not only on the situation of one particular “type” of person, but to instead view marginalization as multidimensional (Crenshaw 1989); this facilitates research with political aims by highlighting the multiple ways in which discrimination is realized. This means looking beyond the normative categories that are presented to us by the culture and people under study, and looking too at those on the margins.

An important area where further research is needed in relation to lesbian discourse relates to ethnicity, though one study that does deal explicitly with this comes from Natasha Shrikant (2014), mentioned earlier. Like the Stompers (Jones 2012), the women in Shrikant’s data actively negotiate what it means to be an authentic lesbian, including a discussion of “gold star” lesbians (women who have never slept with a man). Shrikant shows how this concept is jarring for one of her participants, an African American woman. In order to validate her own experience as a lesbian who is not gold star, this woman links the concept with privileged white women who have grown up in liberal families and communities—in other words, those who may have been better supported in realizing their sexuality at a younger age. Shrikant’s analysis demonstrates that the differing experiences of women who identify with the category lesbian can lead to a range of identity constructions, but also that the cultural dominance of white identities cannot be ignored in analyses of lesbian interaction.

For us to better understand the relationship between lesbian identity and language, then, we need to move beyond the most dominant groups and try to account for other multiple, intersecting aspects of women’s identities. Erez Levon’s (2010, this volume) research with lesbian activists in Israel demonstrates this; through prosodic analysis, Levon shows the women’s pitch range to vary in a clear pattern between talk about lesbian-specific topics and talk about topics unrelated to their sexuality. Levon argues that this provides evidence of the women compartmentalizing their lesbian identity from their female identity, as is expected of them in Israeli culture. Francesca Stella (2010) also takes an
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intersectional approach to her data analysis, focusing on non-heterosexual women in Russia and foregrounding the plurality of identifications found there. The women in Stella’s study identify in varying ways with categories defining their sexuality according to, for example, their age and subsequent experience of Soviet versus post-Soviet society, and their (either positive or negative) association of terms such as lesbian with the West. Stella therefore argues for the careful and sensitive use of analytical categories by researchers when interpreting their participants’ identities.

In this sense, the consideration of lesbian as an identity category may also be, in itself, problematic. Not all women who desire women necessarily identify with this label, and researchers must therefore carefully examine their subjects’ use of this and other terms if they are to gain an understanding of how language is used to produce meaningful identities. Hideko Abe’s (2004) research in Japan is illustrative of this; though Abe’s ethnography took place in Tokyo’s “lesbian bars,” there were important distinctions between the customers who frequented them. Abe shows, for example, how some of the same-sex-desiring women there—rezu—used feminine linguistic forms to denote their identification as women, but also some masculine forms to distinguish themselves from heterosexual women. The particular combination of forms was crucial, however—some were too feminine, and others too masculine—in part because the rezu wished to also distinguish themselves from onabe, female-bodied persons who desire women but identify emotionally and socially as male. A further illustration of the issue with lesbian is found in Ruth Morgan and Saskia Wieringa’s (2005) account of women who engage in same-sex practices in Africa. While they find that many women in South Africa (where homosexuality is legally protected) use lesbian, elsewhere (such as in Kenya, in the east of Africa) it is considered dangerous to define oneself using this term. William Leap’s (2015a, 2015b) work shows an even more complex picture in South Africa. During his research with same-sex-desiring women in the post-apartheid townships of Cape Town, Leap found that though some of the women in his study made use of the term lesbian, others explicitly rejected it. These latter women associated the word with the cosmopolitan city center rather than the black townships and, ultimately, with whiteness and privilege; the need to consider identity construction in an intersectional way is therefore very apparent in this case.

Evelyn Blackwood (2014) considers the construction of identity among women in Indonesia who identify as lesbi, a term used to refer to what they perceive to be the global community of same-sex-desiring women, with two clear categories within this: tomboi women are “masculine” females who desire women, while their girlfriends (who may desire men and tombois) are “feminine.” A comparable linguistic pattern is revealed in Peter Jackson’s (2001) research in Thailand, whereby the English words tomboys and ladies have been appropriated and adapted to reflect the Thai-specific identification of more masculine same-sex-desiring women (toms) and more feminine same-sex-desiring women (dees). In her Indonesian data, Blackwood makes the important observation that tombois identify as differently gendered to their girlfriends, but not within a heteronormative binary frame of reference: they use masculine pronouns and male terms to refer to themselves as men, yet also identify as female. Like the context presented by
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Abe in Tokyo, Blackwood’s data disrupts expectations of both normative gender and same-sex desire. These studies also reveal the need for a bottom-up, ethnographic approach to any research study hoping to gain an understanding of how sexual identities intersect with other cultural factors.

In related research, Kira Hall (2011) studies women at a sexual health organization in New Delhi, where some identify as lesbians and others as boys. Hall finds that the two languages spoken there, English and Hindi, have very different indexical meanings for each type of woman; those who identify as lesbian tend to speak English, because they feel Hindi indexes “masculine vulgarity,” and those who identify as boys speak Hindi because it acts in rejection or opposition of that which they feel English indexes: prudishness and effeminacy. Something similar to butch/femme is being produced here, but its realization—and the particular way the gender binary is presented—is entirely rooted in the specific cultural context of urban India. For example, the boy identity draws on a lower class and more rural identity category, one that interprets same-sex attraction through a masculine/feminine model. The boys’ use of Hindi also permits them to position themselves as not women in a way that the English language does not allow, authenticating their version of masculinity. Like Blackwell’s and Abe’s research, Hall’s study demonstrates that symbols and notions of normative gender are disrupted and reproduced even when it appears as though female-bodied subjects are simply adopting male identities. As with the lesbian construction of a butch identity, then, “masculinity” is symbolic and malleable rather than being straightforwardly attached to men, and its binary opposition to normative femininity allows same-sex-desiring women to produce a non-normative version of womanhood. In this sense, the picture is far more complex than simple gender inversion, as may popularly be believed.

What this research also demonstrates is that to categorize all same-sex-desiring women as “lesbian” is to ignore the cultural context in which they construct their sense of self as individuals and as members of a community; as Motschenbacher (2011) argues, most non-Western cultures have not traditionally conceptualized sexuality in the binary terms of homosexual and heterosexual. Though there is clearly now recognition of categories such as gay and lesbian around the world thanks to increasing globalization, this does not necessarily mean that those categories will retain their Westernized meanings when reinterpreted elsewhere. Of course, by including studies exploring the identity construction of same-sex-desiring women who do not identify with the cultural category lesbian here, in a chapter on “lesbian identity construction,” it is not my aim to homogenize the experiences of all women who desire women. Instead, this section is intended to highlight the complexities of research into sexual identities, and the importance of understanding identity construction in terms of the context of its production—while at the same time drawing some parallels with relevant research focused on “lesbian” data from the West.
Conclusion

It is evident from the variety of research outlined in this chapter that there is no specific code or identity shared by all women who desire women, or all women who identify as lesbian. We can therefore accept, on the one hand, Moonwomon’s (1985) early claim that there is no clear style of “lesbian language,” due to a lack of definable lesbian characteristics. On the other hand, it has been shown here that, in a Western context, there are salient, culturally specific lesbian stereotypes that enable the situational and co-constructed interactive performance of coherent lesbian selves. It is clear that ideologies and stereotypical practices can be reworked according to the specific needs of a particular group, but that the process of identity construction for women who identify with the category lesbian may well often be found to draw on similar resources.

Furthermore, as shown in the Stomper data presented earlier, the meanings of even the most culturally prevalent notions (such as that wearing skirts is a heteronormatively feminine practice) may be negotiable depending on the local interactional setting and the identity goals that need to be met in a given moment. An ethnographic methodology is particularly useful in enabling an understanding of how such identity formation works in relation to a specific interactive context.

The studies presented in the first half of this chapter, in particular, show consistencies in how women constructing a lesbian identity might draw on lesbian stereotypes such as butch and femme, and on assumed shared experiences such as those relating to homophobia and marginalization. The salience of these themes, however, can be accounted for by the dominant focus in the research on white, middle-class, cisgender women: it does not reflect some essential quality of all same-sex-desiring women. While it is entirely necessary and appropriate to continue to conduct research into how women might construct a culturally recognizable lesbian identity in the West—particularly with younger women, to gain a clear idea of how dominant ideologies are changing, and with explicit consideration of other intersecting factors such as class, ethnicity, and (trans)gender identity—it is also essential that research moves beyond the quite narrow range of women who have, to date, been included in the majority of studies.

Future research into sociolinguistic identity construction among same-sex-desiring women in non-Western cultures, too, will expand our knowledge and understanding of the role of “female masculinity” in other contexts. Though I have argued that butch identity in the West reflects a specifically lesbian form of womanhood rather than, for example, a performance of mannishness or maleness, it is clear that, in non-Western contexts such as India and Japan, the links between gender and sexuality are differently realized and differently complex. We therefore need considerably more research that accounts for such identity constructions around the world if we are to better understand the range of identities taken up by these women. With changing technologies, shifting global ideologies, and new cultural representations of women who desire women, the contextual identities being constructed by those women will also change—as will the ways in which they are realized linguistically. Though research into “lesbian identity construction” has
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been ongoing in sociolinguistics for nearly forty years, then, there is still plenty of work to be done.

Appendix

Transcription conventions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>[]</th>
<th>beginning of first overlap</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>]</td>
<td>end of first overlap</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>self-interruption or false start</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(.)</td>
<td>pause of less than 1 second</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>timed pause</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.</td>
<td>end of intonation unit; falling intonation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?</td>
<td>end of intonation unit; rising intonation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>::</td>
<td>lengthening of sound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@ (1)</td>
<td>laughing, plus duration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;***&gt;</td>
<td>increased pace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>line</td>
<td>emphatic stress or increased amplitude</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Notes:

(1) All names provided throughout this chapter are pseudonyms.

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