“The Only Dykey One”: Constructions of (In)Authenticity in a Lesbian Community of Practice

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This article demonstrates how members of a lesbian community of practice make interactional moves that allow them to position themselves as “authentically lesbian.” Through the use of discourse analysis and a sociocultural linguistics focus on indexicality, the speakers are shown to invoke broadly accessible stereotypes and ideologies and to rework them in order to create locally specific, meaningful identities. This is achieved via mutually negotiated stance taking toward group-constructed, oppositional personae. Specifically, the women in this group position styles deemed as “girly” as inauthentic and antithetical to their concept of a lesbian—the authentic “dyke.”

KEYWORDS community of practice, lesbian, identity, authenticity, sociocultural linguistics, indexicality, stance

As this special issue demonstrates, the study of language and sexuality is far from homogenous as a discipline. Approaches considering the relationship between language and sexuality consider queer practices, identities, and representation, and have diverse theoretical and methodological backgrounds. One field of linguistics beginning to consider issues of sexuality is sociolinguistics, a discipline which, traditionally, has used broad demographic

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categories (such as age, sex, or socioeconomic class) as social markers with which to align linguistic variation. This approach, although offering reliable, statistical data through which language variation in communities can be explained, tends to categorize individuals in accordance with the characteristics being sought for comparative analysis by the researcher. As a result of a relatively mainstream research agenda, non-heterosexual speakers have typically either not been included or not been recognized in such variationist work. Furthermore, identities have often been assumed to be somehow pre-existing rather than varying between (and within) communities. Nonetheless, the fundamental goal of sociolinguistics—to explain language use within societies—has inspired those scholars more clearly focused on speakers constructing their own identities through their language and interaction, typically in terms of gender and sexuality, to develop research in this area. Bucholtz and Hall (2005) have recently gathered such research under the umbrella term of sociocultural linguistics, taking identity as an intersubjective act of social positioning (p. 58), with language viewed as meaningful only within the dialogic context of an interaction. Within this approach, the demographic categories shaping social roles are considered to be ideological structures, which are then performatively reproduced within interaction (cf. Butler, 1990). This article endeavors to illustrate how a sociocultural linguistics approach may be used to explain the construction of lesbian identities by considering a small group of gay women in conversation. As outlined below, the context of interactions between such groups is crucial for an understanding of identity construction.

**SOCIOCULTURAL LINGUISTICS**

Key to the sociocultural approach is the consideration of speakers within their own interactive settings, where their identities are constructed in line with one another. Fundamental to this is a view of language actively producing, rather than reflecting, identity. Instead of taking a group of speakers and classifying them in a way that is meaningful for the analyst (such as “male” or “East Asian”), therefore, a sociocultural approach considers what it means to be a member of that group for the speakers themselves by taking a “bottom-up” view (Bucholtz, 1999). This enables language to be considered as a kind of style (cf. Eckert & Rickford, 2001), whereby speech is seen as agentive, enabling the positioning of oneself in a particular way at any one point in time. In this sense, language is viewed as enabling a speaker to present their own concept of their identity as, for instance, a gay man, rather than having their physical attributes and sexual practices defined for them. The community of practice (CoP) approach, developed from educational theory for sociolinguistics by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992), has
been particularly influential in enabling this theoretical position. A CoP can be defined as

an aggregate of people who come together on a regular basis to engage in some enterprise . . . In the course of their engagement, the community of practice develops ways of doing things—practices. And these practices involve the construction of a shared orientation to the world around them—a tacit definition of themselves in relation to each other, and in relation to other communities of practice. (Eckert, 2005, p. 16)

As Bucholtz (1999) states, the CoP positions speakers’ shared engagement as definitive of their community membership and, therefore, provides a view of the meaning behind the linguistic features (practices) that they use as mutually negotiated and specific to them as a collective. The enterprise of the group is a prerequisite to community membership because it fuels the joint engagement of individuals and defines what it means to be a member of that group, such as work colleagues who “engage in daily gripe sessions” (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003, p. 562). Such a regular activity defines the context in which members are placed and allows them to jointly create a shared orientation to that context. Furthermore, the meanings specific to their activity will become connected to the usage of particular context-specific practices, and newcomers to that environment will gradually learn their meaning and engage in them themselves. In doing so, they will develop a sense of their own place in that context, communicate a meaningful self through the tools of the group, and, ultimately, play a role in constructing a shared social identity. In this article, a CoP of lesbian women are shown to work together in constructing a shared sense of what it means to be lesbians, a goal achievable only because of their prolonged engagement together as a group and their familiarity with broader ideologies related to their shared sexuality.

A central argument of the sociocultural approach to linguistics is that identity emerges through discourse, as speakers position themselves in line with and against others (such as an individual expressing a “heavy metal fan” identity through the shared articulation of genre-specific slang in a CoP). Furthermore, speakers may position themselves in line with broad identity categories in their interaction through the process of indexicality. Indexicality is a notion that is core to a constructionist approach to language, as it suggests that speakers can produce cultural roles and positions. Scholars such as Silverstein (2003) and Irvine and Gal (2000) have developed the notion of indexicality to explain how certain linguistic features (such as a particular vowel sound, for instance, or a certain vocabulary choice) can index, or point to, ideologically iconic identity categories. For example, language choices such as swearing or “taboo language” are traditionally found to be associated with working-class men (cf. Queen, 1997) and, in this sense, it may be argued that a man wishing to assert his masculinity
would be likely to use swear words. However, this is not to say that swearing itself is somehow masculine in its nature; it is the product of a semiotic process whereby swearing is linked to aggressiveness due to its function, and aggressiveness is linked ideologically to men due to the cultural norms of masculinity. In this sense, indexicality is not a direct process, but neither is it as straightforward as this account suggests; the indexical meaning of a particular linguistic feature will vary depending on factors influencing the local context (i.e., the interaction in which it occurs and the background of the participants in that interaction). A child using taboo language, for example, may be articulating a “naughty” self, using language that emulates “gangster” characters from television shows or performing a “grown-up” character. The meaning behind a particular child’s use of the same swear word, then, will depend on the broader identity category that it is ideologically associated with for them and for the CoP they are engaged with at the time. It is useful to consider the type of identity that is constructed as a result of an interaction (and meaningful to every participant within it) as a persona. In contrast, the broader identity being indexed through the construction of that persona (such as “adult,” “male,” or “gangster”) may be labeled an identity category. This distinction helps to explain the indirectness of the indexical process. As Moore and Podesva (2009) argue, the ideological link between a linguistic feature and an identity category is always mediated by the local meaning of that language. It is evident, then, that more than one aspect of identity may be constructed when a particular type of language is used.

Bucholtz and Hall (2005) extend indexicality to include not only individual linguistic items but whole ethnographically salient moves and roles that carry semiotic links with broader social meanings. Included in this are stances that are taken by individuals and group members and that occur within a given moment of interaction. Stance taking may be defined as a “display of evaluative, affective, and epistemic orientations in discourse” (p. 595), or how speakers position themselves during interactions (see also Coupland & Coupland, 2009, and Du Bois, 2007). For example, a speaker may wish to align themselves with another member of their group in order to participate in the construction of a jointly meaningful, group-specific identity. One way of doing this would be to respond to the turn of an individual in a positive dialogical way, such as by responding to a statement such as “I hate football” with the stance move “I also hate football” (or, conversely, “I love football” if that speaker wishes to position themselves against their interlocutor). Similarly, as Weeks (1987) shows, stances can include the alignment of oneself with a particular ideological identity category, such as through outing oneself as “a gay man” or “a lesbian.” By aligning oneself with (or against) a category that exists on a broader level, a stance move allows a context-specific persona to be constructed. In the data below, it will be shown how women in the lesbian CoP dealt
with here took stances toward (and against) broad categories, prevalent in gay culture, in order to construct group-specific personae. In turn, it will be shown that this allowed them to index a meaningful lesbian self. First, however, it is important to account for the role that a sociocultural approach to linguistics has already played in the development of research in this area.

**LANGUAGE AND SEXUALITY IN SOCIOCULTURAL LINGUISTICS**

The sociocultural linguistics framework was first suggested by Bucholtz and Hall (2004) as a possible approach to the study of language and sexuality. In addition to the work detailed in this special issue, a number of studies have endeavored to demonstrate the relationship between language and the performance of sexual identity. Barrett (1997), for example, focuses on the performance of drag queen identities by African-American gay men, while Hall (1995) analyzes the discursive construction of overtly sexualized (heterosexual) feminine selves on telephone sex lines. Podesva (2007) also focuses on the projection of queer identities, considering the use of falsetto by a gay man in different contexts. Research focusing explicitly on lesbian language is a smaller area by comparison, although this is also growing. Much work has been concerned with the representation of gay women within texts, such as Queen (1997) and Livia (1995), while Koller (2008) charts the changing discourses of the past 40 years that have shaped the perception of lesbian community and identity. A small body of work has also emerged to consider lesbian identity as it is constructed through interaction, such as Morgan and Wood (1995), who consider lesbian friends in conversation, and show the women collaboratively co-constructing a lesbian identity and working together to create a lesbian space. While some of the conversational topics featured were about lesbians, however, little in the interaction actually demonstrated what being a lesbian meant to the group as a whole, or to each individual member, and it is difficult to reliably claim that their discourse involved any specifically lesbian identity construction. In contrast, Morrish and Sauntson (2007) advocate a study of lesbian identity that considers how “linguistic resources are deployed and manipulated within a given context” (p. 40), advocating Bucholtz and Hall’s (2004, 2005) approach to investigate the complex links between broad lesbian stereotypes and local identity construction. This has been influenced by such work as Queen (2005), whose investigation of joke telling in lesbian groups finds that formulaic jokes are indicative of social stances and identities. The jokes in her study reflect certain lesbian stereotypes, such as those surrounding hair length (that
lesbians have short hair), clothing style (such as lesbians wearing comfortable shoes), and so on, reflecting the significance of broad stereotypes and categories in the indexical construction of meaningful personae in local contexts.

By taking particular care to consider the sociocultural context in which the speakers in these studies used language, therefore, it is possible to explain how personae constructed on a local level have broader indexical meanings associated with sexuality-based categories. Such approaches allow an understanding of identity as something that is not predefined or innate, but rather as an ever-changing and multifaceted phenomenon. As such, this research offers a response to concerns that research into language and sexual identity may produce “predictable debates” about queer authenticity (see Cameron & Kulick, 2003). Research that does not endeavor to locate the most “real” gay identity (i.e., the ideological or stereotypical view of queerness), in contrast, may focus on the construction of authenticity as it is meaningful on a local level. Using the CoP approach, as is the case in this study, a coherent focus on authenticity may be achieved; by its very nature, the CoP allows a view of its members as constructing a meaningful shared identity (therefore, something that is “real” for them) through their interaction. While broad categories such as “lesbian” or “gay man” may be problematic if they are assumed by researchers to be somehow homogeneous, then, as ideological labels they are crucial for the construction of meaningful personae.

For this reason, a consideration of lesbian culture is core to an understanding of lesbian identity construction. Intrinsic to this—and significant to the data under analysis here—is the ideological notion of gender inversion. Historically, homosexual behavior was routinely explained through this concept, whereby a psychological disorder led to the misalignment of a person’s sex and their gender identity (cf. Henry, 1948). Such a view assumed that it was natural for a man to be “male” or masculine, for example, a definitive element of which was his sexual attraction to the female. This concept has clear salience in lesbian culture; Doan (2001) argues that lesbianism has been associated with “butch” styles since Radclyffe Hall came to prominence in the 1920s, while Vicinus (1992) points out that the presence of a “femme” identity in opposition to butch styles allows lesbianism to be made sense of within a heteronormative culture of binary gender. In a society whereby gender is seen as dichotomous, with masculine men and feminine women, it would perhaps be surprising if this prevalent ideology had no impact on queer identity construction. It is evident from research into the representation of lesbian women in literature, for example, that butch—femme is a dynamic often used to represent lesbian culture (cf. Livia, 1995). Below, the women’s construction of personae that largely reflect this dichotomy is evaluated, once the local context in which their identity positioning occurred has been outlined.
ETHNOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

Research that hopes to understand the meanings behind linguistic features, interactive moves and stance taking must have a clear understanding of the local context in which it occurs. Through ethnographic engagement with a given group, by means of close participant observation, the interactive context in which identities are mutually constructed may be explained. Ethnography sheds light on the relationships between participants, the sociocultural experience of those involved in a conversation, the interactive goal of the moment, and the indexical meaning for the group of the linguistic features being used. This approach has recently been advocated by researchers engaging with CoPs within sociolinguistics, including Mendoza-Denton (2008), E. Moore (2006), and Eckert (2000). These researchers, concerned with linguistic variation between CoPs emerging in high school contexts, were able to ascertain the indexical meaning of language used due to their ethnographic understanding of the internal structures of the CoPs. Through this, they could explain the mutual construction of meaning between group members. In this study with the Sapphic Stompers, a lesbian hiking group, a similarly ethnographic approach was taken over a 15-month period (from July 2006 to October 2007). The data presented here emerges from this research and is composed of two individual extracts of transcribed recorded conversation. These extracts illustrate some of the ways in which identity categories were produced and given meaning during the interaction of the women in the Stomper group. During the first 12 months of the ethnography, extensive fieldnotes were taken, after which point one-on-one informal interviews with the core Stompers (see below) were conducted. Following this, group recordings of naturally occurring interaction between the women were obtained. It is from these recorded interactions that the data in this paper emerges, and from the interviews and ethnographic fieldnotes that the sociocultural context of the interactions is understood.

The Stomper group met several times per month to hike together in the open countryside close to the northern English city in which most of them lived. They had been walking together for over a decade by the time that this research took place and were very much a self-maintained and jointly organized group. A core of six women, who tended to lead the walks but also scheduled them in and maintained an email list of members, reflected the typical demographic of the group: White, middle-class professionals or retired professionals between ages 40 and 60. Most hikes involved 6 to 10 people. Typically, the women involved only saw one another during the walks. Nonetheless, the group met regularly and there were a number of clear practices emerging from their engagement together that related to the group's ethos. For example, a certain political standpoint tended to be assumed, with the women often referring to themselves (as a group) as feminists and talking about their engagement in consciousness-raising or
activist groups in the 1970s and 1980s. As typically middle-class women who had experienced, to some extent, the second-wave of feminism, and as lesbians aware of the stereotype connecting them to this political view, it is perhaps unsurprising that feminism was often used, or talked about, for the construction of sameness. As Queen (1998) argues, when something as intangible and varying as sexuality is the defining characteristic of a group, the members of that group are likely to use broad hegemonic stereotypes in order to find some common ground. The other aspect of their identity was as hikers and, indeed, this formed an important part of their interaction as well. For example, while on the walks, the women in the group routinely spotted birds and other wildlife and shared information about the breeds that they saw; knowledge about “the great outdoors” was highly valued in this CoP, and a newcomer wishing to fit into the group would often endeavor to involve themselves in this practice.

Although the sexuality of the individual Stomper women was rarely discussed (indeed, personal details such as family situation or relationship status were not typically topics of conversation between them), the core Stompers advertised the group on lesbian Web sites and in the gay press as being for lesbian women only and, as a result, it was always assumed that the women on the walks were gay. While the women rarely directly articulated their sexuality, therefore, their presumed shared cultural experience did revolve around their identification as lesbian women. Indeed, throughout their engagement together, the women constructed a joint notion of what it meant to be a “proper” lesbian. This tended to be achieved through the positioning of themselves and others in line with the ideological categories of “butch” (typically evaluated in a positive way) and “femme” (usually evaluated negatively) styles. These categories, as outlined above, are highly prevalent in broader lesbian culture, and were certainly meaningful to the Stompers. During a drink in a pub after a summer walk, for example, Lisa (a woman who was relatively new to the group) emerged from the bar with a full pint of beer. As the other women had all chosen a half-pint or a non-alcoholic drink, this was remarked upon, with Lisa being classed as the most like a lesbian of all of us—she was defined as the “dykiest.” Given the historic cultural association in Britain of pint-drinking and men (see Aitkin, Eadie, Leathar, McNeil, & Scott, 1988), it was clear that Lisa’s act was being evaluated as non-feminine and, therefore, as stereotypically butch in its nature. In this sense, the binary between butch and femme was often reproduced in the women’s interaction. A further illustration of this occurred during an evening’s social event in a gay bar, during which several of the Stompers noticed an ostensibly femme couple (both with long hair, make-up, and clothes tailored for women) in an intimate embrace. It was noted by two of the core Stompers that these women were “probably just bicurious,” as they looked too “girly” to be “real lesbians.” This clearly measured “real” or “whole” (as opposed to bi-) lesbianism by appearance rather
than apparent sexual behavior, but also positioned traditional feminine styles as in some way oppositional to authentic lesbianism.

The data that follows provides the opportunity for in-depth analysis of moments during which these two extreme categories (“dyke” and “girl”) were actively constructed and negotiated by the Stomper women. This data does not reflect any general or typical use of language in the Stompers, and does not aim to reveal trends that are likely to be found in the interaction of any other lesbian women in wider society. Rather, it illustrates two unique interactions, specific to the moments in which they occurred and enabled by the broader engagement of the women present with both the Sapphic Stomper group and with lesbian culture more broadly. In these extracts, the women are shown to construct these two opposing personae in order to represent what they position as being authentically or inauthentically “lesbian” style and practice. These findings are illustrated through discourse analysis of the extracts, whereby the interactive techniques used by the women to negotiate both local personae and broader categories are considered in line with overall Stomper meaning. This approach to analysis enables individual linguistic features to be presented as meaningful only in the sense that they are embedded within the discourse that they emerge from, and is wholly qualitative in nature. This follows the work of such sociocultural linguists as Bucholtz (1999), whereby discourse analysis is primarily used to relate individual linguistic features or interactive moments to the broader context in which they are situated. Extract 1 emerges from a conversation between three of the core Stompers—Marianne, Sam, and Claire—and me on a hike. Extract 2 results from a recording between five of the core Stompers—Claire, Sam, Hannah, Eve, and Jill—and me during dinner. An in-depth account of each of the women involved in the Stompers is provided in Jones (in press).

CONSTRUCTING THE “DYKE” PERSONA

Extract 1 details a conversation leading from a discussion of Cagney and Lacey, a 1980’s television drama about two female police officers. Although the characters in the show were portrayed as heterosexuals, the women in this interaction claimed that the series was popular with lesbians due to the independent nature and feminist traits of the protagonists. The conversation continued with my suggestion that the women watch The L Word, a television drama series first broadcast in the United Kingdom in 2004. In contrast to Cagney and Lacey, The L Word was a show specifically about lesbian women and their lives, focused on a friendship group in Los Angeles, California, USA. Although the women were theoretically as likely as me to watch this drama series, had heard of it and had seen a little of it, my familiarity with it as a cultural reference for lesbians marked me, as a lesbian woman in my mid-20s, out as of a different generation to them.
Extract 1: Claire (C), Marianne (M), Sam (S) Author (L)

1  M: I wasn’t impressed with it
   C:                                            /It’s not exactly- Cagney and
   L:                            What the L Word?/
---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
2  S: [I still haven’t got] I still haven’t got past the pilot I’ve got the
   C: Lacey [wasn’t exactly the L Word]
---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
3  S: first series but I just (.) They just so do not look like lesbians/
   M: (XX)                                     /I
---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
4  M: C:             But the L Word is genius as well
   L:                                              That’s that is the problem (.)
---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
5  M:                                                    [They all- they all
   C:                                [They’re a::ll
   L: ridiculously like (. ) feminine [and
---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
6  M: they’re all talking how] I’ve never heard any lesbian talk           [about
   C: La::cey were unrealistic.]                                 They said [that
---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
7  M: other women]
   C: there would] never be two female police officers who were partners that (.)
---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
8  L: there is one who (...) looks like she is (.) and she’s the one that everyone
---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
9  M: [That is] bisexual? No? Oh
   L: [fancies] No she’s the one that everyone fancies though
---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
10 S:                                   [Which one is she?]          
    C:                                        She’s [not really] androgynous::s
    L: because she’s like androgynous looking
---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
11 S:                                                               Oh that
    C:                                        /Sha::ne
    L: She’s er/ she’s also the one that sleeps around a lot
---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
12 S: one [Shane.]                     Shane
    C:                                                            Yeah the one who
    L:     [Yeah] (...) ridiculously thin though.     Shane yeah
---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
13 S:                                   [Well yeah she’s the only one who looks] vaguely like a dyke
    C: really is [bisexual is ]
---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
14 S: actually
    M: True.
    C:                                                    [I thought Guinevere-]
    L: But you see and everyone fancies [her which suggests-] (.) that
---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
15 S:                                   [that she’s the only dykey one s]
    C: Guinevere Turner’s [in it as well and she’s a lesbian]
    L: Which one’s Guinevere?

The transcription above shows the women orienting themselves to the show, evaluating it in terms of its authenticity and representation of “real” lesbians, and comparing it to Cagney and Lacey. From the outset of this conversation, Marianne sets up a stance against The L Word, stating in line 1 that she “wasn’t impressed with it.”

While Claire constructs a stance that defends The L Word in comparison to Cagney and Lacey, Marianne and Sam are more forthcoming in their criticism of the recent show. For example, in line 3, Sam constructs the
notion that there is a way of looking like a lesbian. This suggests that there is a definable and recognizable lesbian “look,” which Sam presents as obvious and inevitable through the use of “just” and “so” to position her statement factually. By expressing this in such an “obvious” way, Sam’s own identity as a lesbian is asserted and framed as being “authentic” since she apparently knows “the rules” (which she presents as having been flouted). Marianne then adheres to this line of thought by constructing her own stance toward it (line 6), arguing that “they’re all talking like I’ve never heard any lesbian talk . . .”. In this sense, the notion that there may be a certain way of being, doing and talking “lesbian” (and, therefore, that this category exists and is tangible) is co-constructed between these two women.

It is clear from line 6, as Marianne takes the floor from Claire, that the characters in The L Word are considered to be inauthentic due to their apparent femininity, a stance initially constructed by me (line 5) in an effort to present my own legitimacy based on my understanding of the Stomper’s value of butch styles. Although this may have impacted on the women’s direction of their conversation, Sam’s later turn in the interaction (discussed below) demonstrates that their understanding of legitimacy did revolve around this gendered frame. Furthermore, the claim that the characters in the show do not represent “real” lesbians due to their typically feminized appearance is one which has also emerged in scholarly critique of the show. Heller (2006), for instance, argues that The L Word is:

... entirely consistent with the television industry’s emphasis on conventional femininity and its portrayal of woman as non-threatening (read non-butch) objects to be visually enjoyed by some imagined mainstream (read non-queer) cable audience. (p. 56)

It is clear, therefore, that the immediate stance taken by the Stompers toward The L Word, objecting to its inauthenticity based on the characters not looking or talking like “real lesbians” is related to the fact that the show represents only ideologically femme women. The conventionality that Heller refers to illustrates the presumed heterosexual way of being female that femininity conveys, demonstrating why this may be seen as an inauthentic way of “doing lesbian” for the Stomper women. Marianne’s contribution in lines 6–7 demonstrates this, as she constructs an opposition between “lesbians” and the women that “they” talk about. Although she refers to “other women,” she places “women” as a generic category in comparison to the more specific category of “lesbian,” suggesting that the former is a specifically heterosexual manifestation. By expressing this difference, Marianne posits that being a lesbian and being a woman are not identical experiences. It is clear from the subsequent discussion of the character Shane that this is directly linked to gender ideologies.
In line 8, I again introduce a notion of what counts as authenticity by defining Shane as “like androgynous looking” and as a promiscuous character (line 10). It is clear that I am aligning this character with ideologically non-feminine traits in order to justify her as an authentic lesbian character and thus defend the show that I initially introduced. In doing so, I am articulating my own knowledge of the cultural connotations of butch women in lesbian culture and, to some extent, indexing my own identification with the lesbian identity category. Claire, however, argues against me at this point, stating in line 10 that Shane is not “really androgynous.” Her use of “really” appears to function in two ways, both as an intensifier (to indicate that Shane wasn’t very androgynous) but also to function as a truth marker or “hedge,” sensitively suggesting that I am incorrect. This illustrates a moment in which the meaning of a label such as this must be negotiated. Claire’s argument seems to imply that that the actress is too feminine to pass as androgynous, thus positioning androgyny with non-femininity, and the make-up wearing, long-haired Shane as too feminine to represent a lesbian. It is interesting to note Claire’s awareness of my reference to the character of Shane before I articulate her name myself, demonstrating that, even though the actress may not be seen as looking androgynous, she is presented as a character with the traits of an ideological butch lesbian. This is supported by C. Moore and Schilt (2006), who argue that Shane’s promiscuity and “boyish” dress and gestures allowed the script writers of The L Word to present her character as more androgynous than the actress may have looked, facilitating the introduction of a butch character “without visually alienating squeamish viewers by rendering one of The L Word’s permanent characters male in appearance, or worse, gender ambiguous” (p. 161). This illustrates why my suggestion that Shane looks “like a lesbian” is salient for the group, and why the construction of Shane as authentic emerges subsequent to this from line 13.

At this point, Sam concedes that the character is “the only one who looks vaguely like a dyke, actually.” To qualify her comment with “vaguely” suggests that it is to a limited and therefore unsatisfactory extent that this is so, and allows Sam to align herself with Claire’s assessment of Shane as not being “really androgynous.” The use of the term dyke is significant, however. It was frequent among the Stompers, functioning as a reclaimed pejorative and signalling a more butch lesbian (according to my interviews with the women). The term was routinely used in a positive way, and it is clear that Sam’s usage here aligns the category with connotations of androgyny and non-femininity that, in turn, equate to “real” lesbianism. This is supported by her comment in line 15 that Shane is the “only dykey one” because, as I claim in line 14, she is typically found to be the more attractive character to other lesbians. Sam’s statement, through which she finishes my turn and, therefore, offers a logical (and assumed as shared) conclusion, positions attractiveness and being dykey as inevitably connected. This statement is not challenged
and the conversation continues to discuss the actress and director Guinevere Turner’s role in the show; as such, the assumption maintains factual status.

The resulting assumption made in this final moment is that a feminine woman is unattractive to lesbians due to her lack of dykey qualities. Crucially, mine and Sam’s co-construction of attractiveness is defined by the character’s appeal to lesbians rather than heterosexual men. As Inness (1997) argues:

The beautiful, feminine woman who is desired by men yet still persists in her lesbianism is an almost unbelievable creation to many; it is an image that has been selectively censored from the popular imagination. (p. 31)

In this sense, it can be claimed that feminine lesbians are a somewhat unacknowledged phenomenon within lesbian culture, and that this is somewhat resultant from their appeal to straight men. For the Stompers, at least, it is clear that a woman who matches traits associated with male desire (i.e., heteronormative femininity) holds a less authentic status as a lesbian. It is fair to suggest, then, that the temporary construction of androgyny as a form of authenticity as a lesbian is formulated, to some extent, as a result of broader understandings of sexuality, style, and identity. If authenticity as a lesbian is to be non-feminine, it also seems likely that the women in this interactive moment are drawing on broader ideologies about lesbians as being in some way gender inverted. By constructing the stance that androgyny is a more authentic style of lesbianism in line 8, I enable the other women to jointly negotiate the meaning of it and its relevance to lesbian identity. By disputing only whether Shane may or may not be “really” androgynous and concluding that she is “vaguely” dykey, the women’s identity work in this interactive moment is to align themselves with my stance and, therefore, to play a role in constructing the correlation between androgyny and lesbian authenticity. In doing so, they construct the persona of dyke and position this as authentically correlated with the broader identity category of “lesbian.” To be a dyke on the local CoP level, therefore, is to be a “real” lesbian on the global level.

CONSTRUCTING THE “GIRL” PERSONA

It is through consideration of the Stomper’s response to non-dykey roles and stances that the women can be viewed as directly claiming this “dyke” persona for themselves. Extract 2 shows a conversation that emerged between five of the core Stompers (Jill, Hannah, Sam, Eve, and Claire) and me. During dinner, Eve had introduced a topic based around some
scientific experiments that she had heard of involving testosterone and sexuality. The findings from these experiments, quite well known in the public sphere, argue that a person’s oestrogen and testosterone levels are directly related to the length of their index and ring fingers. According to research at the University of California, Berkeley (Williams et al., 2000), if there was a high level of testosterone in the womb, a person’s ring finger was likely to be longer than their index finger. In this study, some lesbian women were found to have longer ring fingers. At the time of the experiment, this research was discussed in the British media (e.g., Radford, 2000). As is evident by Eve’s introduction of the topic, below, it was assumed that most people would have heard of the experiment. The analysis that follows is partial, although a fuller account (see Jones, in press) considers not only the construction of the girly identity category, but the significance of Jill’s positioning as bisexual (line 14) as well.

Extract 2: Claire (C), Eve (E), Hannah (H), Sam (S), Jill (J), Author (L)
It is evident that this test is used by the women present in this moment in order to project an authentic lesbian identity. Interestingly, however, their evaluation of themselves as lesbians is ultimately secondary to their evaluation of the test. Initially, Sam’s response “[of] course, mine is” (line 6) authenticates the test due to her own—presented as inevitable—biological homosexuality (see Bucholtz & Hall 2005, for a discussion of authentication). Sam’s use of the scientific test to position herself as a legitimate lesbian leads to an interaction in which the other women “test” themselves. This leads to Claire’s construction of a non-lesbian persona (a “girl”) due to her apparent biological failure as a “real” lesbian.

Claire’s repeated demands for the other women to observe her “failure” of the test is evident from line 7, where she determines that her ring finger is not longer than her index finger, followed by the tag question, “Is it?” (to which Sam responds accordingly with “no”). Overlapping with Sam, Eve’s comment in line 8 that Claire is “still other” relates to a conversation between Claire, Eve, and me on a previous occasion, during which Claire used the term “other” to explain how she felt as a teenager coming out as gay. Eve’s light-hearted (as evidenced by the laughter surrounding it) statement positions Claire as “other” in both heteronormative society but...
also within the lesbian community more widely, thus supporting her stance alignment yet challenging her authenticity within the group. Eve and Sam’s collusion with Claire in this temporary identity positioning provides her with the opportunity to construct herself as girly, despite the potential risks to her authenticity that such a move could theoretically pose. Indeed, in line 8, I offer Claire a way out of this temporary illegitimacy by suggesting that the test may apply to a different hand than the one she was using for the test. Rather than taking this opportunity, however, Claire addresses the whole group and defines herself as “a real girl” (line 9). The use of the intensifier “real” and the lengthening of the vowel in “girl” reveals a technique that she repeats throughout this extract (with the intensifier “proper” in line 10 to define herself as an authentic, tangible girl), and implies some disgust and horror at this new persona. Claire’s interaction here allows her to transform the label of “girl” beyond its literal meaning of a young female into a persona that directly opposes authentic dykeyness. Furthermore, she deliberately destabilizes her own identity (and, therefore, the group’s sense of homogeneity) in order to encourage the other women to focus on her and collaborate in the construction of this girly persona. This continues throughout the remainder of the interaction as Claire actively demands the attention of the other women (lines 14–15: “oh my God . . . look how girly I am”).

It is evident from line 15, when Sam states that Claire is “just not a lesbian,” that to be girly is being constructed as antithetical to being a lesbian. In this instance, Claire actually strengthens the normative expectation and group-specific ideology that authentic lesbians are butch by constructing a frame in which girl must be illegitimate and in some sense “other.” In this sense, Claire accentuates her own temporary inauthenticity, it seems, in order to strengthen the group’s notion of butch-ness as authenticity. Her coaxing of the other women to co-construct her inauthentic status as a girl is achieved when Hannah and Jill playfully tell her that she is “out of the group” (Hannah, lines 16–17) and “ostracized” (Jill, line 17). Jill and Hannah also play a role, here, in constructing the normative identity of a Stomper and the boundaries surrounding the group, indexing their own status as authentic Stompers as they do so. Once this has occurred, Claire begins to reject the girly persona and to reclaim her lesbian (i.e., dykey) self. In line 18, she overtly indexes ideological masculinity, defining herself by her degrees in mathematics—a traditionally androcentric domain (Bergvall, 1996)—which contrasts with the supposed girliness she has acquired at this moment. In claiming that she will somehow retract her own mathematics degrees, Claire also highlights her intellectualism and academic achievements, highly valued aspects of the Stompers’ shared experience. In this sense, she authenticates herself not only as a lesbian, but as a CoP member, and discards the temporary persona of “girl.”

The significance of Claire’s identity move demonstrates a clear link between sexuality and gender, here, particularly in line 17, where she
equates her apparent girliness with being “so female.” This reveals that, on some level, an association of dykeyness with masculinity and even maleness exists in the minds of the Stompers. Evidently, although the Stompers identify as women, the cultural ideologies that they draw upon prevent them from performing a heteronormative female gender identity due to the ideological association with femininity and heterosexuality that this has (a reflection, perhaps, of broader culture’s assumption of gender and sexuality as intrinsically and inherently connected). Claire’s pause in line 17 before using the term “female” indicates her awareness that her alignment of femaleness with non-lesbianism is controversial, yet she nonetheless positions the Stompers’ version of womanhood—a lesbian rather than heterosexual one—as oppositional to femininity. Her temporary inauthenticity as a lesbian, based upon her girliness, is a notion tied here not only to an ideological, heteronormative style of womanhood, however. It is also tied to a biological femaleness. In this sense, the link between (homo) sexuality and (inverted) gender is particularly strong in this moment, facilitated by the women’s use of the concept of testosterone to construct authentic and inauthentic lesbian personae. Since testosterone is a male hormone, and this is attributed to lesbians in the original experiment, it is logical for the women to attribute less testosterone (as Claire’s finger seemingly represents) with femaleness and, within the parameters of the original experiment, a non-lesbian identity. In this sense, the test itself facilitates the link between femaleness and heterosexuality, although Claire clearly embraces the notion; this indicates that the ideology already has salience in the group. This moment seems to show, therefore, the ideologically binary system that exists for the Stompers and that frames their identity construction: one is a girl or a dyke, femme or butch, and one cannot be a femme dyke or a butch girl. It demonstrates the women’s construction (and negative evaluation) of the ideological persona “girl,” as well as its link with “femaleness.”

**DISCUSSION**

It is important to note that the meaning behind the personae “dyke” and “girl” are specific to this group, but also that they are influenced by the prevalence of the butch–femme dichotomy in broader lesbian culture. In turn, it seems that the categories of butch and femme are manifest due to the mainstream, ideological notion of dichotomous gender roles. Although the butch–femme dichotomy has clear cultural weight and is apparently usable for the construction of identities on a local level, this is not to say that the Stompers’ specific values presented here are necessarily replicated in other lesbian CoPs, or that they reflect broader lesbian culture. The butch identity, for instance, is not always favorably evaluated; Smith and Stillman (2002) find that, in lesbian dating advertisements, significantly more
“femmes” are requested than “butches,” and butch women are occasionally asked not to apply. In contrast, of course, the Stomper women reject that which would ordinarily be seen as “femme.” Their rejection of girliness is evidently related to their construction of an indexical link between the label “girl” and femininity. One should not conclude from this that the women embrace masculinity or in some way perform a male identity. Instead, it seems that their rejection of the dominant style of womanhood relates to its ideological links with heteronormative femaleness.

It is evident that the women’s generational experience appears to have led to their negative evaluation of this girly persona. As detailed above, these women often identified as feminists, and they were typically in their teens and early 20s during the 1970’s women’s liberation movement. In their interviews, many of the women expressed their involvement in feminism at that time. The feminist discourse of that period often positioned traditional femininity, achieved via clothing and cosmetics, as “tools of sexual objectification and therefore instruments of male oppression to be discarded” (Craig, 2003, p. 20). In this sense, the Stompers’ rejection of traditional femininity in favor of a specifically lesbian style may also be explained along these lines. However, in rejecting femininity in this way, the Stompers arguably marginalize it and reproduce misogynistic views of femaleness as superficial. In this sense, their aim to remove themselves from this category and to embrace a non-feminized identity potentially positions masculinity as superior, and deflects from their own apparent aims as feminists. Indeed, it has been argued that butch–femme reproduces harmful binaries and patriarchal structures through the “imitation” of heteronormative roles (see, e.g., Johnston, 1973, and Martin & Lyon, 1972). Certainly, the Stompers appear to rely on essentialist notions of masculinity and femininity and typically treat them as distinct, dichotomous categories. This is, perhaps, unsurprising; as Baker (2008) argues, it is often by putting identities into opposition with one another that they gain meaning and can be understood. In this sense, we can only define ourselves in comparison to others. Furthermore, the women’s reproduction of butch and femme identity categories could be seen as marking a positive step away from patriarchy. By articulating these identity categories, rejecting femininity and indexing an ideologically masculinized identity, the women are arguably exposing the performative nature of gender itself (a stance taken by Case, 1993, and Nestle, 1992). As in the case of drag acting, such as Barrett’s (1995) account of drag queens in the United States, women “doing butch” demonstrates the ideological nature of this supposedly inherent dichotomy. Indeed, as Newton (1984) argues, patriarchy itself is challenged when normative gender is subverted.

Irrespective of any political motivation behind their interaction, however, what is clear from these extracts is that the Stomper women’s identity construction aims to make mutual sense of their shared situation as lesbians. It is also clear that this is shaped by broader cultural ideals and structures,
such as the ideology of dichotomous gender, where one is either feminine or masculine. As stated above, it is clear that lesbian culture has reinterpreted this ideology into the lesbian-specific categories of femme and butch and, as women with little in common other than their shared sexual orientation and their hobby of hiking, it is unsurprising that the Stompers reproduce such stereotyped personae in order to create a sense of homogeneity. The women’s mutual construction of these two personae allows them to present a shared sense of self that is crucial to their understanding of what it means to be a Stomper and highlights the importance of this being a lesbian-based group.

CONCLUSIONS

Research utilizing a sociocultural linguistics approach provides an understanding of the relationship between broad, ideological notions of identity and their instantiations in real, local-level contexts. Using discourse analysis of the type illustrated in this article can provide a clear understanding of practices and stances within a group setting. By recognizing that these may differ from moment to moment, yet viewing interactions as part of a much broader context, we may learn more about the varied ways in which individuals within CoPs construct meaningful identities—sexuality based or not. In the second interaction detailed in this article, for example, authenticity as a lesbian is achieved through the apparent links between biology and sexuality. In contrast, the first extract shows authenticity being constructed in accordance with style, such as hair length. This demonstrates that identity construction is typically momentary and partial, reliant on group-defined norms emerging through unfolding discourse (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005), and shifting depending on the context at any given moment.

Extracts 1 and 2 illustrate, then, that authentically queer identities may be constructed on a more local level than might otherwise be assumed. The broad category of “lesbian” may seem like an ideologically salient identity, but consideration of its reproduction via the construction of personae during interactions such as these imply that such categories are fundamentally reworked on a local level. While one cannot—and should not hope to—draw any conclusions about how “all” lesbians speak from data such as this, it is important to investigate the culturally prevalent norms across communities in order to understand how queer identities may often manifest themselves. The current study demonstrates that the gender binary dominates the Stompers’ possible identity construction, for example, and reveals the considerable role of hegemonic, heteronormative ideology on this fundamentally queer identity. Further study into lesbian and gay CoPs will reveal whether this is something that is changing or static,
and how salient this ideological dichotomy is within queer culture more broadly.

NOTES

1. This name, as with all other proper nouns mentioned in this article, is a pseudonym. In reflecting my familiarity with the group and the abbreviation of their actual name that the more regular members routinely used, I typically refer to them as just the “Stompers” in this article.

2. Bicurious is a term typically and recently used within gay culture to refer to a person who is interested in having a homosexual experience, but who is unlikely to define themselves as gay or even bisexual in the future. The Oxford English Dictionary places the first use of the term as in a personal advertisement in an American newspaper in 1990.

3. The transcription conventions used for this extract are as follows:

   [ ] beginning of first overlap
   ] end of first overlap
   [ ] beginning of second overlap
   ] end of second overlap
   - self-interruption or false start
   / latching (no pause between speaker turns)
   ( ) pause of less than 1 second
   (2) timed pause
   . end of intonation unit; falling intonation
   ? end of intonation unit; rising intonation
   :: lengthening of sound
   (XX) emphatic breath out/sigh
   @(1) laughing, plus duration
   underline emphatic stress or increased amplitude
   < > transcription remarks

4. This includes the construction of dialogic support; Claire comments (see line 4) that the show was “genius as well,” which is a link to an earlier comment of my own where I sarcastically evaluated Cagney and Lacey as “sounding genius.”

5. Tag questions are short grammatical structures that are added to the end of declarative statements in order to request confirmation or agreement, thus, turning a factual statement into a question.

REFERENCES


