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Who's really normal?

Language and sexuality in public space

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1. Introduction

Today's understanding of normativity in the disciplines of social sciences and humanities is based on Antonio Gramsci's (1971) theory of cultural hegemony which investigates the power relations amongst the social classes of a society. This means that the modifier 'hegemonic' in the expression *hegemonic normativity* appertains to the cultural dynamics accepted by mainstream social groups. Such hegemonic norms must be maintained by those dominant in societal hierarchy. Hegemonic normativity, however, is also a stable yet fluid notion that has been sociologically objected to, and has been constantly modified by social organizations throughout history. The processes of naturalization become relevant when discussing hegemonic normativity. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003) describe the naturalization process to be an extension of Gramsci's (1971) idea of hegemony. They argue that, "the most effective form of domination is the assimilation of the wider population into one's worldview" (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2003:43). Various ideas of 'normative' are transferred between locations or cultures through travel, communication or other media, with those ideas that are given the most exposure eventually becoming dominant, possibly at the expense of traditional cultural ideals (see Johnson & Milani 2010). Media's naturalization of cultural ideologies and popularization of ideas in a society present an intersection of gender (a social category of people) and sex (a property of human bodies).

In the course of research on language, gender, and sexuality, discussions are often built around the notion of hegemonic normativity. Expanding this notion, the literary critic Michael Warner (1991) discusses the concept of heteronormativity in his seminal work *Fear of a Queer Planet* — one of the first major works on queer theory outside of linguistic anthropology or sociolinguistics. In short,

hegemonic normativity is based on the foundation of heteronormativity — an idea that appeals to the majority of a society. In current literatures of language and sexuality, however, in addition to heteronormativity, the notion of normativity includes homonormativity, which is the adaptation of heterosexual models into members of LGBTQ communities (see Duggan 2003, Koller 2013, Leap 2013, Motschenbacher 2014). Further, issues of normativity and sexuality become complex when a researcher does not entirely focus on heterosexual or homosexual orientations, but instead investigates normative/non-normative situations concerning one's desire and identity under certain specific contexts (e.g. Hall 2013, Leap & Motschenbacher 2012, Motschenbacher 2011, Valentine 2003). As such, in a contemporary globalized society, where new combinations of linguistic and cultural contact take place every second, ideas of 'hegemonic normativity' have even more potency. Today, individuals' value systems concerning what is meant by hegemonic normativity are not only reproduced in widely circulated naturalized media discourse, but also increasingly subject to constant stimulation of external ideologies. This is due to the constant focus of the media on information about masculinity and femininity and normative/non-normative gender roles and attributes (e.g. Agha 2011, Hiramoto 2015, Koller 2004, Lippi-Green 1997, Milani 2014, Motschenbacher 2009, 2013, Talbot 1995, Wong 2005, among many others). As a result, much of what we define as masculine is derived from mediatized images of jocks, macho men, knights, cowboys, James Bond, or even butch lesbians (e.g. Connell 1995, Kiesling 2007, Milani 2015, Reeser 2010). Similarly, quintessential feminine images like cheerleaders, princesses, Barbie, slim leggy models, etc., have become part of dominant ideology of hegemonic normativity across different cultures. A good example of this from a recent publication on sociolinguistics/linguistic anthropology includes Starr's work on sweet voice assigned to anime characters (Starr 2015). Such an essentialist understanding of gender and sexual identities often occurs through naturalization. However, it should be noted that one might hold simultaneous definitions of 'normative' should they belong to a minority group; one's traditional beliefs and practices may not be completely lost upon the introduction of a new, more widely-accepted ideal.

For the reasons mentioned above, ideas of desire and identity challenge us to reconceptualize the way we understand language and social practice. This special issue aims to take up this challenge by highlighting the subjective aspects of language and sexuality, particularly delving into the treatment of desire/desirability and sexuality in public space. The current conceptions of desire and identity are often treated separately through the 'identity approach' and the 'desire approach' (see Bucholtz & Hall 2004a, 2004b, Cameron & Kulick 2003, 2005, Milani 2011, Morrish & Leap 2007). However, papers in this special issue take the stance that notions of sexual desire/desirability and identity complement each other when we

revisit ideas of hegemonic normativity. The heterogeneity of linguistic and social practices, and our constant movement across different conceptual spaces in contemporary life play an important role in the identities that we assume, and our perceptions of these assumed identities shape our use of and response to various types of linguistic varieties (Blommaert 2010, Blommaert, Collins & Slembrouck 2005, Hall 2014, Hiramoto & Park 2014). Moreover, such subjectivity can shape and reshape one's social relation to a specific space. By bringing together researchers who explore the subjectivity of desire/desirability and identity in the context of language and sexuality, including heteronormative and homonormative domains, this special issue aims to seek new ways in which we can understand the changing conditions of contemporary life.

All the contributions to the special issue share a common focus on the subjective dimension of linguistic anthropological issues concerning how language ideologies are displayed in public space at different research sites that are influenced by the globalization phenomena. More importantly, however, the contributions construct a coherent whole by the shared themes that they identify for potential research on how desire/desirability and sexuality are displayed in public spheres under an intersection between hegemonic 'normativity' and 'non-normativity'. The range of public space discussed by the contributors includes both physical and virtual realms from different parts of the world that are relevant to citizens of a globalized society such as a university campus, internet websites, and a city state. While desire/desirability and sexuality, as larger themes, represent key areas that are made salient through globalization (and localizations) in these different regions, they also serve as important junctures where the sociolinguistics of globalization may profitably engage in to further establish its grounding on the analysis of subjectivity concerning language and sexuality. That is, as these larger themes are influenced by changing ideas of 'what is hegemonic' and 'what is normative', sociolinguistics/linguistic anthropology studies focusing on globalization and localization phenomena will benefit from analyzing such themes of desire and sexuality.

2. Overview of the special issue

The contributions in this issue bring the lens of desire/desirability and identity concerning language and communication to four different institutional and cultural contexts of language and sexuality in the globalized world. The first two papers discuss overlapping properties of gender and sexuality regarding impositions of hegemonic normativity in public place. These studies identify strong practices of naturalizing gender ideologies through language in two global Asian cities,

Hong Kong and Singapore. In these places, heteronormative ideas are held strongly in place by mainstream society and/or the government, influencing ideas about how non-normative individuals should be treated in these societies. Katherine Chen and Agnes Kang's paper, *Demeanor indexicals, interpretive discourses and the "Kong Girl" stereotype: Constructing gender ideologies in social media*, considers a heated online discussion in Hong Kong regarding the emergence of a new generation of young women known as 'Kong Girls' in 2005. Their data comprises a series of online discussion posts by a young female identified as 'Jenny' and responses from her fellow netizens. Through the forum, Jenny became a 'Kong Girl' prototype (see also Kang & Chen 2014). Today, Kong Girl is largely understood as a type of highly undesirable, non-traditional, and non-normative woman in Hong Kong. The unattractiveness of the Kong Girl is attributed to their materialism and sense of entitlement. In their contribution to this special issue, Chen and Kang treat relevant linguistic traces in the online forum postings as demeanor indexicals (Agha 2007, Goffman 1956), and demonstrate a process of how Jenny's story was collectively retold to describe an undesirable woman who is materialistic, arrogant, and exudes a privileged attitude. Chen and Kang provide insights into local gender dynamics, and address how strong attachments to the idea of hegemonic normativity can be realized through everyday discourse found in popular forum posts. Moreover, this strongly valued heteronormative ideology in the mainstream society of Hong Kong can be so powerful that it has created a new category to describe women perceived as undesirable by a people's shared voice on naturalized gender/sexuality ideologies. Chen and Kang's analysis proposes a framework for how interpretive discourses mediate between situated social media context and gender/sexuality ideologies, and contributes to an understanding of the role of demeanor indexicals in the construction of a stereotype that is not associated with a specific linguistic register. All in all, Chen and Kang successfully convey their findings that the Kong Girl imagery had been jointly created by various online forum contributors who engaged with Jenny's online posts, and that the Kong Girl is a product of cosmopolitan Hong Kong where material wealth is rampant and women have started speaking for themselves.

The next article, *Heteronormative love makes a house a home: Multimodal analysis of luxury housing ads in Singapore*, by Mie Hiramoto and Cherise Teo moves the analytic focus to multimodal data analysis of housing advertisements in a society that orients around hyper-heteronormative state ideals. Hiramoto and Teo investigate the process of identity construction by looking at how luxury apartment housing advertisements in Singapore function as meaning-generating institutions through visual and textual discourse. Under the influence of patriarchal Confucian ideology, the Singapore government has promoted a pro-family policy since 1987. Rhetorically, a 'pro-family' policy sounds similar to any given

governments' position and, as a result, the state's explicit announcements that 'Singapore is a pro-family state' in different government campaigns appear to be unnecessary. The state, however, has used this pro-family discourse to actively endorse a narrow, heteronormative definition of 'family' in its pro-family policy (see also Teo 2014). In other words, the government has taken advantage of the popular connotation of the term, despite constructing its own, narrower definition of 'family'. As a case study of how the state's pro-family policy discourse strategically excludes those who do not fit into this narrowly defined model of family, Hiramoto and Teo examine instances of the pro-family policy in advertisements for one of a family's most important assets, namely housing. They observe randomly selected housing advertisements for two different types of luxury apartments, one government-regulated and the other private, that were released between 2013 and 2014. In the data, they find two levels of conformity to the policies that suggest what is expected of ideal (and heteronormative) tenants and by association, members of society in Singapore.

The next two papers focus on issues concerning language and sexuality in public space by looking at language use in LGBTQ group members in western communities: a London-based blogger's website, and a college campus in California. In *The subversive potential of queer pornography: A systemic-functional analysis of a written online text*, Veronika Koller raises the question, 'what potential does queer pornography have to subvert hegemonic discourses of gender and sexuality?' In another paper of hers that discusses the language of pornography, Koller mentions that sexual identity is often naturalized as following from gender and hegemonic normative ideology (Koller 2015). Then, what happens when gender/sexual roles of two individuals who are engaged in sexual intercourse are made ambiguous in text? In her contribution to this special issue, Koller attempts to answer the question with a short story of porn entitled *Dark Room* written by an amateur writer named Mr J. The writer identifies himself as a "London-based tranny muscle boy" and writes "kinda half fiction/half real queer porn stories" in his blog *Queer fucking porn* (Mr J 2008). Koller conducts textual discourse analysis by employing the systemic functional grammar framework. Particularly, she engages in the analysis of transitivity and metaphor found in the data. Then, she connects the elements of textual analysis to the role of online text dissemination and consumption in realizing any potential of subversion. Koller's findings point out that rather than challenging hegemonic discourses of gender and sexuality, the text reinforces it. While the main protagonists in *Dark Room* are both ambiguously gendered/sexed, patterns of transitivity and use of metaphor construct largely binary gender identities for them. That is, sexual behavior of the first-person narrator is described as an active agent (penetrator) whereas the Other is assigned the role of a passively desiring (penetrated). Concerning the distribution and consumption of the story,

however, the text maintains its subversive potential as it greatly sexualizes a public online space. In other words, the story has the potential to turn an offline public space into a sexual place.

The issue's final article *Combating privilege, regulating language: The struggle to create and maintain university safe spaces* by Chris VanderStouwe, draws from his research on a concept of 'safe place' among members of LGBTQ communities. VanderStouwe's discussion/study of safe space takes an ethnographic approach to challenge the almost neoliberalistic concept of the "post-modern homo" advocated by Aguirre-Livingston (2011). Aguirre-Livingston (2011) simply states that there is no more need for gay space in this modernized and liberated society (see Leap 1998). VanderStouwe, however, argues how this neoliberal-like notion of (no) gay space orientation actually does not work in reality after studying the safe space situation in a liberal and modernized university campus. What complicates the whole notion of the "post-modern homo" space is the fact that this concept is grounded on a dominant racial ideology — white homonormative racial formations. As such, within the LGBTQ community, this idea leaves a wide range of people who are unable to adjust themselves in relation to the post-modern homo place due to factors beyond their control such as race and ethnicity. VanderStouwe carefully observes constructions of safe spaces among different LGBTQ community members through his ethnographic fieldwork, and discusses issues that are important to them such as 'being out vs. being gay', 'linguistic choices in creating safe space', and 'California's Proposition 8 related event' (see VanderStouwe 2013 for the last item). He also discusses pragmatic challenges of carrying out ethnographic research on a highly sensitive topic concerning matters such as participants' privacy, racial dynamics in the field, and involvements of a university's campus-based student organizations. All in all, VanderStouwe demonstrates how language use can be a tangible way of positioning oneself in the material world, and how important such material negotiations are for communities which secure safe spaces for a LGBTQ community. He concludes that while there are calls for a rejection of (public) gay spaces as per the post-modern homo discourse, this idea remains limiting in reality as it only applies when one is in a place of societal acceptance. Therefore, safe spaces will continue to be relevant in the lives of queer individuals, even in modernized and liberalized environments.

3. Concluding remarks

There is no denying that existing literatures on topics of language and gender exceeds those on language and sexuality, especially with regard to language and power issues in the tradition of linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics (see

Bucholtz 2004, Gal 2001, Lazar 2005, Leap & Motschenbacher 2012). However, there is also no denying that one's sexuality, like one's race, social-class, and gender, can affect one's access to capital symbols (Bourdieu 1991) like power, social-status, and material resources in everyday life. People constantly use indicators regarding their interlocutors' sexuality in deciding how to communicate with them in social interactions. Moreover, categorization such as sexuality, like gender, is not only a possible way of responding to differences, but also a way of creating them, even when both interlocutors seemingly belong to the same category. The contributions in this special issue each address different responses to the category of 'sexuality' in terms of language use when an issue of language ideology and normativity is scrutinized at a societal level. While these answers largely concern language and sexuality matters, they also show overlapping areas with studies of language and gender. In a way, 'language and sexuality' is not treated as an opposing position to 'language and gender', rather, the contributors posit sexuality as something to complement theoretical limitations of language and gender when approaching their data for linguistic anthropological analysis.

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