

Navigating normativities: Gender and sexuality in text and talk

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MOVING ATHWART

This special issue was born out of a conversation initiated at a panel organized by two of us at the ninth biannual meeting of the International Gender and Language Association (IGALA), held at City University of Hong Kong in May 2016. The principal goal of the panel was to stimulate an academic discussion on the role of normativity and antinormativity in language, gender, and sexuality research in response to a series of critical interventions in cultural studies regarding some of the tenets underpinning queer theory (see Wiegman 2012; Penney 2014; Wiegman & Wilson 2015). It was our belief that sociolinguistics—with its focus on situated interpretations of social practice—has much to contribute, both theoretically and empirically, to these debates within cultural studies. This special issue is an initial attempt at articulating what such a contribution would be.

It is a truism that queer theory has become increasingly prominent throughout the humanities and social sciences, including in linguistics. Research in this area ‘puts at the forefront of linguistic analysis the regulation of sexuality by hegemonic heterosexuality and the ways in which non-normative sexualities are negotiated in relation to these regulatory structures’ (Bucholtz & Hall 2004:471). One of the key tenets of queer theoretical perspectives is the belief that, as scholars, we should be wary of simple confluences between sexual processes (e.g. same-sex desire) and sexual identities (e.g. ‘straight’, ‘lesbian’, ‘gay’, ‘bisexual’), since forms of sexual categorization are themselves the products of historical processes that work primarily in the interest of modern state power (Foucault 1978). In light of this, queer theorists warn against a too optimistic reliance on sexual identity categories as catalysts for social change. In their view, a politics based on sexual identities can, in the best of cases, lead only to a temporary re-calibration of power inequalities, ultimately leaving the homo/heterosexual binary intact and unchallenged (Yep 2003:47; see however Cashman, this issue; Hall, this issue). In order to achieve a radical project of deep social transformation of the status quo, queer theoretical approaches instead promote a questioning of the seemingly ‘normal’ and widely accepted nature of the homo/heterosexual divide itself in an effort to destabilize the very truth of that normality. Crucially,

the queer theoretical prominence given to *practices* is coupled with a focus on processes of *valorisation*: some practices (e.g. nonmonogamous, polyamorous sex) are imbued with positive social and political value, and are labelled as ‘queer’ and ‘antinormative’. Other practices, in contrast, such as same-sex marriage or adoption, can be dismissed as ‘pink’ replicas of hegemonic heterosexual norms, and are seen as complicit in reproducing dominant forms of heteronormativity.

Recently, queer theory has come under sustained critique by scholars in the field of cultural studies who accuse it of violating its own anti-essentialist principles and its distrust of any form of identity consolidation (e.g. Wiegman 2012; Jagose 2015; Wiegman & Wilson 2015; see also Hall 2013). For example, Penney argues that

queer wants to subvert identity and have it too. It qualifies queer as groundless as a means of compensating for prior political blind spots, while at the same time positing a queer ground defined against a “normativity”, the status of which is never clearly defined. (2014:11)

Focusing less on the indefinite character of normativity than on its very defining role in queer studies, Wiegman (2012) proposes that queer theory has reified itself as an anti-identitarian, antifoundationalist, and antinormative enterprise.

Through its own self-animating antinormative intentions, then, Queer Studies gets to have its cake and eat it too: it can function as an organizing referent for queer theory while simultaneously forging an interdisciplinary critique of it; it can promise to fulfil queer theory’s anti-identitarian commitments while proliferating identity commitments of its own; it can refuse institutionality while participating in and generating its own institutionalized forms. (Wiegman 2012:332)

In other words, Wiegman contends that the underlying antinormative positioning of queer theory has itself become a normative benchmark, one against which both scholarly and political projects are measured and evaluated (though cf., for example, Duggan 2015 and Halberstam 2015 for trenchant critiques of this argument).

In order to disturb this sort of ‘normative antinormativity’, Wiegman & Wilson (2015:2), in their introductory essay to a special issue of the journal *differences*, ask the potentially provocative question, ‘what might queer theory do if its allegiance to antinormativity was rendered less secure?’. As the authors clarify, the proposal does not necessarily entail abandoning normativity altogether. But, it requires pursuing critical self-reflection about the investment that queer theoretical approaches have in normativity as a central motivating construct, as well as retheorizing the politics of queer criticism more broadly. In order to do that, Wiegman & Wilson argue, it is first necessary to reflect on the meaning of ‘norm’.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a norm indicates what is ‘usual, typical and standard’ (*OED* online). Etymologically, it derives from the Latin *norma*, the T-shaped instrument traditionally used to draw and/or measure right angles. Wiegman & Wilson (2015), following Foucault (1978) and Ewald (1990), describe how this understanding of norm as a single and inevitable rule

(i.e. THE straight line) evolved over time to describe a relational field of comparison, a dispersed calculation that examines all actors in a given social space in order to derive a common and ‘representative’ reference point. Yet whether viewed as a single rule or an average, the fact remains that norms serve as yardsticks with which to organize categories and practices as ‘normal’ or ‘deviant’, ‘acceptable’, or ‘beyond the pale’. As much research in linguistic anthropology has demonstrated, establishing norms is always an ideological process (Gal 2016) through which markers of social difference are created, iconized, and imbued with moral and affective weight. It is this ability of norms to rule the social order—to determine what is acceptable and what is not—that queer theoretical approaches have critiqued, promoting instead the destabilizing of norms and normativity via antinormative practice. Wiegman & Wilson, however, argue that the study of normativity should be less about the capacity of norms to rule the social order as it should be about the field of relationalities that norms create. According to them, the concept of antinormativity as understood by queer theorists ‘asphyxiates the relationality that is at the heart of normativity’ (Wiegman & Wilson 2015:17), and could profitably be set aside to examine the contours of the social landscape that norms themselves create.

It is this more processual and ethnographic approach to the study of norms and normativity that we pursue in this special issue of *Language in Society*. Through the issue, we aim to offer a sociocultural linguistic perspective on current discussions of (anti)normativity and queer theorizing. In an earlier article, Hall (2013) argued that sociocultural linguistics, or the broad coalition of fields addressing the relationship between language and society (Bucholtz & Hall 2008), is uniquely placed to offer nuanced analyses of how norms are taken up, contested, and reshaped in discourse. In extending this argument here, we draw on a long tradition in sociocultural linguistics of examining the ways in which differing sets of norms and normativities are instantiated and attended to. Labov’s influential concept of *speech community* entails ‘participation in a set of shared norms’ (1972:120–21), and, as Gumperz (1968) pointed out, community membership cannot be viewed as a simple replication of pre-existing rules, but as a dynamic process that occurs interactionally and can ultimately be subject to change. The study of how norms are interactionally accomplished was taken up in different strands of sociolinguistic scholarship, including the ethnography of communication (Saville-Troike 1982), interactional sociolinguistics (Gumperz 1982), and research on communities of practice (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1992). While it is beyond the scope of this introduction to offer a comprehensive overview of this research trajectory, it is nevertheless important to highlight how linguistic anthropological research on language, gender, and sexuality has for many years illustrated the complex sets of relations that exist between norms at the societal ‘macro-level’ and the more local negotiations of these norms that take place at the ‘micro-level’ (see e.g. Barrett 1999; Hall 2003). As Motschenbacher explains,

Sexual macro-norms operate collectively, across social actors, and their power is, therefore, not so much a matter of individual powerful agents. But agency is clearly involved on the level of concrete local performances, where social actors choose to draw on certain normative discourses... to normalize or delegitimize certain sexual practices, desire, or identities. (2018:6)

In saying this, we do not wish to imply that ‘macro’ and ‘micro’ levels exist ‘as ready-made platforms for social practice, as if social life simply unfolded in more or less intimate, proximate, local, grounded or contained situations’ (Carr & Lempert 2016:8). Instead, we follow current linguistic anthropological scholarship that sees ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ as metaphors for the different *scales* that individuals operate within, where we understand scales as corresponding to the different ways people have of organizing and representing the social world (Blommaert 2007; Woolard 2012; Blommaert, Westinen, & Leppänen 2015). We draw on Blommaert’s (2007:2) conceptualization of scales as anchored by particular ‘centers of authority’ (e.g. the nation-state, a friendship group, a family), which in turn license specific practices, beliefs and forms of personhood. Scales are thus associated with their own sets of norms—their own normativities—that govern the evaluation of practices at a given scalar level. Yet, crucially, scales do not exist in isolation from one another, nor are they restricted to specific predetermined contexts. Rather, scales are discursive accomplishments (Carr & Lempert 2016), negotiated and enacted by participants in situated interaction. Sociocultural linguists—by virtue of our attention to the details of language use as social action—are uniquely equipped to examine this process.

The upshot of adopting a scalar perspective is that we cannot speak of a singular ‘normativity’ organizing social practice. Instead, we must consider the multiple and competing normativities that are available for individuals to draw upon. Likewise, thinking in these more processual terms defies a simple binary/antinormative logic, and encourages us to examine the creative ways in which normativities are actively NAVIGATED in interaction. Wiegman & Wilson (2015) describe this methodological approach as one in which we focus on how individuals move *athwart* normativity as opposed to moving *against* it. The preposition/adverb *athwart*, which means ‘crossways’, encapsulates both the *transversal* nature of the relationships instantiated by different scales/systems of normativity and the inherent *contradictions* between them. Although the articles in this special issue do not overtly deploy this spatial metaphor, they contribute to examining how normativities are navigated *crossways* in text and talk and, in so doing, provide a more complete map of the broader ideological terrain in which these practices take place.

In addition to allowing us to develop a more nuanced understanding of social practice, the zigzagging encoded in ‘moving athwart’ also allows us to highlight the intersectional character of normativity in (inter)action. Doing so helps to bring queer theory back to its intersectional origins, as indicated *inter alia* in Sedgwick’s (1994) claim that

a lot of the most exciting recent work around the term ‘queer’ spins the term outward along dimensions that can’t be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all: the ways that race, ethnicity, post-colonial nationality criss-cross with these and other identity-constituting, identity-fracturing discourses. (1994:8)

As the contributions to this special issue illustrate, it is difficult—if not impossible—to analytically isolate the discursive negotiations of *SEXUAL* normativities without taking into account their imbrications with, for instance, gender, race, and ethnicity (see also Baker & Levon 2016; Levon, Milani, & Kitis 2017), and their laminations with a plethora of other socially relevant dimensions, which include, but are not limited to, tradition/modernity and cosmopolitanism/orientalism (see also Milani & Levon 2016).

Overall, and read collectively, the articles in this special issue argue for the need to avoid overly simplistic dichotomies between what is ‘normative’ and what is ‘antinormative’, and instead to illustrate the various strategies individuals adopt to negotiate multiple, dynamic, overlapping, and, at times, contradictory normativities (Abu-Lughod 1990; Gal 1995). This argument is mounted through detailed analyses of a variety of texts that draw upon numerous sociocultural linguistic theories and methods: conversation analysis, corpus-assisted discourse studies, ethnography, multimodal discourse analysis, language ideological analysis, and spatial analysis. In bringing this diverse set of studies together, we seek to open up a discussion about how the subject of ‘navigating normativities’ can be treated in sociolinguistic research while at the same time demonstrating how gender and sexuality can be useful analytical vantage points from which to understand broader social processes.

THIS ISSUE

The six articles in this issue all explore the dialectic relationality between normativity and antinormativity, and the ways in which norms/antinorms are enacted and contested through specific discursive practices. In her discussion of consolidations of sexual modernity in India, KIRA HALL describes how middle-class lesbians, bisexual women, and transgender men in Delhi make use of everyday Hindi-English joking routines to construct themselves as sexual moderns. Hall demonstrates that the individuals in her study use these joking routines as a way of reframing modernity as contingent upon sexual knowledge and, in doing so, position themselves as at the vanguard of a normative progress narrative in India that temporalizes urban English-speaking middle-class subjectivities as more advanced than others. While this practice has the effect of re-inscribing troubling hierarchies of ethnicity, class, and place in the Indian context, Hall argues that it also serves to challenge persistent structures of heterosexist exclusion. Through this argument, Hall challenges characterizations of LGBT practice in India as complicit with dominant discourses of normativity, and illustrates the tight imbrication of norms and antinorms in situated interactions.

HOLLY CASHMAN's article also examines the ways in which seemingly normative acts can be deployed for antinormative effect, this time in relation to the intersections of race/ethnicity and sexuality. Her analysis considers how queer Mexican/Latinx visibility is enacted in Phoenix, Arizona by local chef Silvana Sarcido Esparza in the context of advertisements for her restaurants and by the group TransQueerPueblo during successive Phoenix Pride parades. Drawing on theories from *jotería* studies (Hames-García 2011; Pérez 2014), Cashman describes how Sarcido Esparza and TransQueerPueblo strategically embrace normative identity-category labels in order to reconfigure them and take a stance of resistance/confrontation to dominant ideologies that exclude queer Latinxs in Phoenix. Cashman elaborates her arguments in counterpoint to a queer theoretic commitment to anti-identitarianism, describing how queer theory's subjectlessness erases the identities and experiences of queer and trans people of color (QTPOC).

The entanglement of race with gendered and sexual normativity is further explored in MIE HIRAMOTO & PHOEBE PUA's article, which focuses on representations of East Asian characters in the popular James Bond film franchise. Surveying the sexualization of East Asian women and concomitant desexualization of East Asian men in the twenty-four official films in the series, Hiramoto & Pua document the various tactics through which East Asian sexuality is depicted as deviant. The authors describe how through this positioning as racial and sexual Others, East Asian characters serve as a non-normative foil for Bond, whose own white heterosexual masculinity is reflected and affirmed as normative, and hence, ideal. In this way, race is used to provide an account for sexuality, thus opening up a space for the authors to theorize racialized performances of heterosexuality as 'queer'.

Unlike the previous three studies that use qualitative methods, ELVIS COIMBRA GOMES & HEIKO MOTSCHENBACHER employ a corpus-assisted discourse analytic approach to map the discursive regimes governing normative articulations of masculine heterosexuality. As a case in point, Coimbra Gomes & Motschenbacher examine the communicative practices employed in an online forum by heterosexual men who suffer from sexual orientation-obsessive compulsive disorder (SO-OCD), a form of OCD in which sufferers pathologically fear that their sexual identification is threatened. In particular, Coimbra Gomes & Motschenbacher consider how these men draw on dominant discourses of heteronormativity to narrate and pathologize their own experiences. The authors demonstrate how the men consistently position themselves in relation to traditional articulations of heteronormative desire and practice, where even the slightest departure from this normative ideal is taken as evidence of pathological deviance. In doing this, the men reproduce hegemonic discourse of normative masculinity and construct themselves as unable to meet this desired standard.

Moving from online texts to spoken interaction, CHASE RAYMOND's contribution investigates how what counts as 'normative' emerges in relation to what is

constituted as ‘non-normative’ in talk. Grounded in a framework of conversation analysis, Raymond examines what he terms *category accounts*, in which participants in conversations make use of normative assumptions about identity categories in order to explain away instances of category deviance. Using examples from naturally occurring conversations, television shows, and scripted advertisements, Raymond focusses on sequences in which speakers’ initiations of repair are oriented to as problems of understanding, where the source of the misunderstanding is treated as stemming from some violation of gendered or sexual norms. Raymond argues that it is through sequences of this type that conversational participants collaboratively normalize departures from normativity, and, in so doing, reconstitute a normative/non-normative distinction.

Lastly, TOMMASO M. MILANI & EREZ LEVON’s article considers a situation in which acts of normativity and non-normativity are simultaneous and inextricable. Focusing on the experience of gay Palestinians in Israel as depicted in the documentary film *Oriented*, Milani & Levon demonstrate how the men in the film enact a strong affective attachment to Israel even while that attachment is a source of profound tension and distress. The authors draw on Foucault’s (1986) concept of *heterotopia* to describe the men’s experience as one of ‘viscous belonging’, where the men feel simultaneously attached and unmoored, liberated and constrained. Milani & Levon use this analysis to argue against the overly binary analyses of Israeli homonationalism that pervade much of the critical scholarship on this topic. Instead, the authors promote an approach that embraces the ambivalence and irresolvable tensions that animate the everyday lives of the men in question.

Together, the articles in this special issue demonstrate that sociocultural linguistics can contribute a high level of nuance to current debates on normativity in cultural studies, illustrating the analytical purchase to be had when queer theory’s ‘critical vigor is constituted by something other than an axiomatic opposition to norms’ (Wiegman & Wilson 2015:20). It is our hope that repurposing the study of normativity in this way will help to open up further discussions about the function and politics of critique in language, gender, and sexuality research, and in sociolinguistics more broadly.

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