So far we have used the tools of discourse analysis to explore how sexual identities are constructed across a range of texts and contexts. In this and the remaining chapters, we move to an examination of how sexual identities are represented in a number of written text types. In this chapter, we employ some methods of corpus linguistics to investigate how desires and identities are portrayed in a 60,000 word corpus of lesbian erotica from the late 1980s and early 1990s. The corpus is made up of all the short stories contained in the magazines On Our Backs and Bad Attitude. Both of these publications are produced by lesbians for a lesbian readership and are characterised by sexually explicit stories, many depicting ‘adventurous’ lesbian sexual encounters, sado-masochism (S/M), subordination and domination.

We pose the question whether there is anything exceptional and different about the articulation of lesbian desire; indeed one could imagine that the language of lesbian erotica would provide the most transparent examples of the materialization of a unique lesbian discourse, since it might be expected that heterosexual resources available for talking about sex would result in rather a clash of gears. We examine how ‘lesbian gender’ and power are reproduced and enacted in the texts in ways that challenge hegemonic discourses of gender and sexuality. We also discuss how these discourses circulate to create possibilities for identity formation within lesbian communities. Our primary investigative tools will be the word frequency, concordancing and keyword analysis functions of the Wordsmith Tools software (Scott, 1996). We selectively employ some of the objectives of critical discourse analysis by setting out to uncover socio-political ideologies in the texts. Again, for the purposes of originality and for making visible what has largely been invisible in prior academic work, we focus upon lesbian sexualities and desires in this chapter.
We begin by discussing the social and political context in which the texts comprising the corpus were produced. This contextual information is important for interpreting the results that the corpus analysis reveals, as will be discussed later. We then introduce and explain the corpus-based methods employed to analyse the data before discussing the findings of our study. In terms of applied linguistic methodologies, this chapter illustrates some uses of corpus linguistics in the study of language and sexual identity.

**Pornography or erotica?**

The existence and role of pornography in society is at best controversial; whilst its cousin, ‘erotica’, may seem like a polite euphemism. However, some critics seek to distinguish between them. One definition of the difference comes from Steinem (cited in Doan, 1994: 100, n4): ‘erotica is about sexuality, but pornography is about power’. This introduces a complication since, in the stories which form our corpus, there is the eroticisation of power, both in word and in image. Furthermore, Lamos, writing about *On Our Backs*, claims there is also a commodification of women’s bodies in the images portrayed (1994: 90). But are we analysing pornography, and is its existence undesirable?

A determining distinction emerged from the Meese Commission on Pornography *Final Report* of 1986. ‘Pornography’ is distinguished from the legal term ‘obscenity’ and defined as material that is predominantly sexually explicit and intended primarily for the purpose of sexual arousal’. (Attorney General’s Commission on Pornography, 1986, 228–9, cited in Califia, 1986). The Commission endorsed the opinions of many feminists of the time that pornography degraded women and incited violence against them (cited Schlosser, 2003: 111). It had been led by figures from the religious Right, and it embodied the emerging conservative realignment under the Reagan administration and enraged a new sex-positive grouping of feminists, notably the S/M campaigner Pat Califia: ‘(T)he Commission’s findings should placate the lowest common denominator of the citizenry who made a drugstore cowboy our Chief Executive – those folks who believe the Bible should be taken literally, but the First Amendment should not’ (Califia, 1986).

An attempt to criminalise the category of pornography warranted a U.S. Supreme Court ruling in 1986. The Court supported the rescinding of a local Indianapolis law, which had been championed by Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon. The legislation had been an attempt to ban pornography as discriminatory against women and it allowed ‘victims’