In early December 2006, I found myself in conversation with Marianne (a core member of the Sapphic Stompers, introduced in Section 1.1.1). We were talking about Christmas events at our respective workplaces, telling one another about the parties that had been planned. As she told me about what was scheduled at her workplace, she stated that she was often uncomfortable at such events because she never knew what to wear. She described the other women in her firm as wearing party dresses and high heels, whereas she would never be comfortable in such attire. She presented the dress and heels combination as an expected uniform for such events, and herself as standing out as different in her trousers and shirts. It was apparent that Marianne did not expect this to be much of a revelation to me; indeed, I shared her experience and offered examples of similar situations that I had found myself in.

In this moment, neither Marianne nor I made any mention of the fact that we were both lesbians, yet it was implicit in our conversation that our sexuality had some relevance to our clothing choices. As two gay women, we were drawing on certain stereotypes and ideologies about lesbian style and quite clearly aligning ourselves with them; this allowed us to go some way towards creating a mutual lesbian identity. This book contains many descriptions of times such as this: fleeting, interactional moments whereby two or more speakers contribute to a conversation, draw on broader ideologies and, in doing so, project a certain persona – a type of ‘identity image’ which is specific to that context and that moment (Coupland 2007: 237). In this book, ethnographic moments and recorded interactions will reveal the construction and negotiation of personae which were meaningful to the Sapphic Stompers’ overall shared identity, and this analysis will explore, through the use of a sociocultural framework, the many linguistic routes taken
to achieving this identity. This theoretical approach, as introduced and outlined in the current chapter, may be defined as *interactionist* in nature. This is explained below.

### 2.1 Interactionist sociolinguistics

Interactionist approaches – those which interpret language as meaningful only within an interactive context and which view it primarily as a communicative tool – are fundamental to the sociocultural linguistics approach. As mentioned in Chapter 1, a central aspect of sociocultural linguistics is what Bucholtz and Hall (2005: 586) refer to as social positioning: the ways that speakers frame themselves and others as particular types of people through a variety of linguistic techniques. This approach enables a view of language as a resource for the creation of shared meaning between social actors. Rather than being individually produced, Bucholtz and Hall view identity as an intersubjective product of interaction with others on a local level and in relation to broader social structures (Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 598). For example, a moment such as that detailed between Marianne and me, above, can be understood from this perspective by considering the sociocultural context surrounding it; our shared membership of a lesbian group and declaration of ourselves as gay prior to this particular conversation clearly led to our invoking lesbian stereotypes surrounding non-feminine clothing style. Had one or both of us been straight, for instance, it might not have been so inevitable that we would position ourselves in the way that we did in this moment – as women who do not conform to the feminine styles expected of us. A focus on the context in which interactions take place is therefore intrinsic to the sociocultural linguistics approach and reflects an interactionist approach to language.

An interactionist approach to sociocultural linguistics differs in significant ways from what is often thought of as sociolinguistics ‘proper’, though it is frequently placed within the broad umbrella term. For instance, in the above example, the specifics of which words, syntax, phonological or prosodic patterns Marianne and I used in speaking to one another are interesting to interactionist sociocultural linguists inasmuch as they reveal how we communicated and what meaning that communication had. Whereas a traditional *variationist* approach may be primarily interested in the frequencies of such linguistic items and their statistical correlation with clearly defined social identities (such as male, female, young, old), the approach taken here is instead concerned with how such social categories are created and made meaningful