3
Approaches to Language and Sexuality

In the previous chapter, it was shown that a sociocultural approach to language use may enable an understanding of identity as an interac-tional phenomenon. Through stance-taking in conversation, we are able to perform particular personae, which are given meaning due to their indexical relationships with broader ideological categories. This chapter explores Bucholtz and Hall’s claim that sexuality is ‘a relational and contextual socio-political phenomenon’ (2004: 506), a position which allows them to advocate theoretical approaches which use their proposed tactics of intersubjectivity and principles of sociocultural linguistics to investigate the relationship between language and sexuality. This chapter begins by introducing post-structuralist approaches to sexuality and examining its relationship with gender, before moving on to briefly review recent studies taking place within ‘queer linguistics’, particularly those concerning lesbian discourse and identity. In outlining some key aspects of lesbian culture, the chapter explains the ideological context of the Stomper group’s interaction before it moves on to provide a detailed critique of current debates within the area of language and sexuality.

The view of sexuality posited by Bucholtz and Hall (2004) reflects the post-structuralist approach which, as shown in Section 2.3.1, influenced work within language and gender research by moving beyond an assumption of inherent gender (reflected by language) towards a view of language as a tool used in the construction of (gendered) identity. In much the same way that gendered roles can be viewed as a product of social practice, the categorisation of individuals by their sexual orientation can similarly be viewed as a cultural construction. As gender is often assumed to have predefined meaning, different sexualities have social meanings ideologically imposed upon them, too. Foucault
(1978) explores the concept of sexuality with relation to the privileged role of heterosexuality in society; he argues that the perception of heterosexuality as ‘normal’ is a historical construct, an ideal which maintains the moralistic view of sex as primarily an act of reproduction and classifies homosexuality as deviant or abnormal (1978: 43). This is known as *heteronormativity*, a term mentioned briefly in Chapter 1 and coined by Warner (1991) to mean an ideological notion of what is ‘natural’ with regards sexuality. Sexuality is also viewed as intrinsically linked to gender, in the sense that masculinity and femininity are ideologically binary and viewed as a logical romantic pairing (hence heterosexuality maintaining a normative status). Any conceptualisation of homosexuality has to therefore take heteronormativity into account, as work within the discipline of *queer theory* – outlined below – illustrates.

### 3.1 Queer theory

The term ‘queer’ is a reclaimed epithet; it has been used in a homophobic way against gay men and women for decades, but has now been redefined and implemented in an academic context to refer to all non-heteronormative behaviours and desires. Queer theory emerged through postmodernist approaches to culture and society, directly influenced by a Foucauldian understanding of sexuality, and has provided a new way of viewing homosexuality. This new approach to sexuality moves beyond the historical theorisation of homosexuality as a psychological illness or deviant practice; until the latter half of the twentieth century, homosexual behaviour was routinely explained through the concept of gender ‘inversion’, whereby a psychological disorder led to the misalignment of a person’s sex and their gender identity (see, for example, Henry 1948). Such a view assumed that it was natural for a man to be ‘male’, for example, a definitive element of which was his sexual attraction to the female. In this sense, homosexuality was seen as a curable affliction, but it also led to prevalent cultural ideologies about the gendered identity of gay men and women, who were assumed to be effeminate and masculinised respectively. Rather than assuming that there is a definitive ideological dichotomy between the sexes, with gender options allowing men (who are masculine) *or* women (who are feminine), one of queer theory’s aims is to view homosexuality as a social phenomenon and discursively produced identity, not as an inherently inverted self.

Butler’s (1990) work on performativity (see Section 2.3) is often cited as the beginning of queer theory, combining a feminist understanding