2 Discourses of Gender and Sexuality

2.1 Introduction: ‘Talking Like a Man’

In the American film *Gran Torino* (2008), Clint Eastwood plays Walt Kowalski, a retired Polish-American assembly-line worker in Detroit who is resentful of the changed character of his old white working-class neighbourhood, which now has a significant community of Hmong refugees from Laos and their American-born children. A Hmong family lives next door. Despite his racist feelings, Walt develops a protective mentoring friendship with Thao, the teenage son of the family, and decides to help him get a job in construction. But first, Walt tells Thao, ‘I have to man you up a little bit’ so that he seems the kind of person who would fit ‘naturally’ into the specific male culture of the construction site. Walt takes Thao to visit his Italian-American barber, Martin, so that Thao can learn ‘how guys talk’, and tells him, ‘Listen to the way Martin and I batter it back and forth.’ This is the exchange as Walt enters Martin’s shop:

| MARTIN | Perfect – a Polack and a Chink |
| WALT   | How y’doin’ Martin, you crazy Italian prick? |
| MARTIN | Walt, you cheap bastard, I shoulda known you’d come in, I was havin’ such a pleasant day |
| WALT   | Whadya do, jew some poor blind guy out of his money? Give him the wrong change? |
| MARTIN | Who’s the Nip? |
| WALT   | Oh he’s a pussy kid from next door . . . I’m just tryin’ to man him up a little bit |
| WALT [TURNING TO THAO] | Y’see kid? Now that’s how guys talk to one another . . . |

In this community, men’s sociality is marked by racist banter and mocking insults. Thao is invited to imitate this style, but his first attempt gets it hopelessly wrong, coming over as aggressive and seriously insulting. The older men then go on to give further advice to Thao about how to talk ‘like a man’:

22
WALT You could talk about a construction job you just came from and bitch about your girlfriend and your car

MARTIN Um . . . ‘Sonofabitch I just got my brakes fixed and those sons of bitches really nailed me I mean they screwed me right in the ass’

WALT Yeah . . . you can bitch about your boss making you work overtime when it’s bowling night

MARTIN Right or um ‘My old lady bitches for two goddam hours about how uh they don’t take expired coupons at the grocery store and the minute I turn on the fuckin’ game she starts cryin’ how we never talk’

WALT You see? . . . It ain’t rocket science, for Chrissake

‘Guys’ talk’, in other words, is also marked by homophobia and misogyny, and is on a set of predictable topics such as work, cars and the trouble with women. Thao, after further ‘manning up’ practice, faces a crucial test of whether he can pass scrutiny as a suitable ‘man’ when Walt takes him to meet his friend Tim Kennedy, a construction supervisor, who can offer him a job if he makes the right impression. The conversation, effectively an informal job interview, begins awkwardly: when Walt introduces Thao, Kennedy at first struggles to ‘recognize’ him as the kind of ‘man’ that is expected in this environment.

WALT OK, this is the kid I was telling you about. Thao, this is Tim Kennedy, the super on this job.

TIM So what have we got here, Walt?

WALT Well he knows construction and he’s a smart kid. He’ll do anything you need him for.

TIM You sure?

WALT Yeah.

TIM You er speak English?

THAO Yes sir.

TIM Were you born here?

THAO You bet.

TIM I see that Walt drove you here. You got a vehicle?

THAO Not at the moment. Taking the bus for now.

TIM The bus. Jesus Christ, you don’t have a car?

Thao is not ‘visibly’ or ‘recognizably’ masculine in the white working-class world where he is seeking employment on a building site. He is not white; he has a ‘difficult’ non-English name, which Kennedy later struggles to pronounce. Kennedy worries that he might not even be an English speaker at all (‘Can you speak English?’) and is alarmed when Thao discloses that he doesn’t drive and needs to take the bus to get to work. Thao manages to retrieve the situation by ‘talking like a man’ about car trouble and the cost of repairs, with colourful homophobic references:
KENNEDY Jesus Christ, you don’t have a car?

THAO My head gasket cracked and the goddamn prick at the shop wants to bend me over for twenty one hundred

KENNEDY Oh please I just replaced the tranny on my Tahoe and the sons of bitches fucked me hard – just under thirty two hundred

THAO Goddamn thieves – it ain’t right

KENNEDY You got that right . . . ok um come on in on Monday and uh we’ll find something for you to do

The fact that Thao has mastered the art of ‘speaking like a man’ means that for Kennedy, Thao is visibly, recognizably the kind of ‘man’ who will fit in as a construction worker, and he gets the job.

These scenes from the film illustrate the way in which in order to survive inspection as the kind of man these men can feel comfortable with, Thao must be familiar with and competent in the language and behaviour dictated by discourses of masculinity circulating within Walt’s world. Language use is part of these discourses; Walt and Martin use a linguistic display to teach Thao what it is to be a ‘man’ in that world. Becoming a ‘man’ involves mastery of a certain kind of language use, marked by style, topics and themes, as a public display of the knowledge that the discourse enjoins. Discourse constructs subjectivities which are acceptable – or rather, not unacceptable, not ‘a pussy kid’, the kind of unfortunate who is ‘bent over’ and ‘screwed right in the ass’.

In this chapter, we will examine the role of language within discourses of gender and sexuality. To begin, then, what evidence is there to support the beliefs of Walt and Martin that there are distinct ways of speaking for men and women, and that discourses dictate that to be recognizable as an adequate or proper ‘man’ or ‘woman’, you need to be able to speak appropriately?

2.2 DO MEN AND WOMEN COMMUNICATE DIFFERENTLY?

Men are not the only ones who need to master ‘gender-appropriate’ speech; women have traditionally been subject to considerable advice on ways of speaking (Cameron, 1995), but the advice is very different from that given to men. Early twentieth-century advice books on elocution for women, for example, suggested that women should avoid gossip, keep their voices low, avoid stating an opinion and pay attention to ‘correct’ pronunciation. A particularly worrying issue a century ago was the effect of women dropping the ‘g’ in words ending in ‘-ing’:
This is, unfortunately, not confined solely to the uneducated classes, and people are to be met with on every hand who consider it ‘good form’ to say ‘Mornin’ for ‘Good-morning’, and so on through all their conversation, never once realising that beauty of form is just as necessary in speech as in other arts ... To chip or mar a statue would be considered an act of vandalism, and yet we systematically maltreat words, which, after all, are the only means we have of clothing our thoughts. (‘The art of elocution’, 1912)

Damousi (2010), in discussing nineteenth-century discourses on the relationship of language to gender in women, states: ‘One of the key attributes of femininity was a woman’s voice, both the sound of it (timbre and pitch) and the way in which she spoke’ (p. 101). She quotes from a magazine article from 1905 by the novelist Henry James: ‘A lady should speak like a lady ... Her speech must be to the liking of those whose ear has been cultivated and has thus become sensitive. She affronts this sensibility at her peril’ (James, 1999, p. 62).

### 2.3 LANGUAGE AND GENDER DOMINANCE

It was precisely such advice and the discourses generating them that became the target of work by feminist linguists in the early 1970s, as part of second-wave feminism. The Berkeley linguist Robin Lakoff wrote a highly influential book, *Language and Woman’s Place* (Lakoff, 1975), on the speech of women, arguing that women’s language is a result of the powerlessness of women within the hierarchical nature of gender relations, and that as a result women’s speech style shows uncertainty and powerlessness (in contrast to the confident assertiveness of men). Moreover, for Lakoff, women’s speech behaviour not only signified but also reproduced the oppression of women: in Lakoff’s view, as Wolfson (1989, p. 173) puts it, ‘speaking like a lady keeps a lady in her place’. Lakoff claimed that several features of women’s speech indicated the submissive role they adopted in relation to their conversational partners. According to Lakoff, women typically used hedges (for example well, y’know, kinda) to convey uncertainty even when the speaker’s actual feelings were quite certain; used tag questions and rising intonation even in statements, again to suggest tentativeness and a concern to secure the agreement of the interlocutor; women’s speech was marked by euphemism and tactful wording; and women did not interrupt. We can think of Lakoff’s work as initiating a particular discourse on men’s and women’s language, with linguistic research both informed by this discourse and informing it.
Lakoff’s claims were not in fact based on data from empirical research, but simply on her own intuitions. Yet they struck a chord with many readers. Later researchers explored the issues she had raised empirically and discovered certain difficulties with Lakoff’s account. For example, Janet Holmes (1986) did a careful analysis of the use of ‘you know’ in the speech of men and women. She found that the phrase had several quite independent functions, such as when a person is searching for a more precise phrase; after a false start in an utterance; to clarify the content of a previous utterance; as an appeal for validation; or to refer to shared knowledge. A close examination of the use of ‘you know’ for each of these functions failed to show the claimed greater use of this phrase by women: sometimes there was no difference, sometimes men were found to use the function more than women. Similarly, Deborah Tannen (1989) studied interruptions in the speech of men and women and showed that they are difficult to distinguish from overlaps in conversation, where overlaps can be supportive. Consider this example from interaction in a language testing context, a study examining the potential impact of the gender of the examiner/interlocutor in an oral interview test, the IELTS test (Brown, 2005; Brown and McNamara, 2004). Clearly, if men and women do have differing interactional styles, then this is likely to create different opportunities for the candidate to speak and interact, and these may have implications for the score the candidate gets, resulting in potentially unfair assessment. The following shows a female interviewer, Jean, with a male candidate, Lim (Brown, 2005, p. 191):

\[ \text{mean poor poor is poor} \]

\[ \text{26} \]
The data shows multiple examples of overlap, indicated by a square bracket ([]) at the beginning of the overlapping section of the aligned utterances in each case. Towards the end of the exchange, Jean seems to interrupt Lim’s utterances (‘yeah so: SO: quite a big middle class’ and ‘bit like Australia?’), a supposedly ‘typically male’ behaviour, but these can alternatively be seen as intended to be supportive or facilitative of the exchange. After all, Jean is an experienced language teacher and interviewer, who is used to encouraging and supporting the speech of learners and test takers. (This extract and related extracts from Brown’s work are discussed further in Chapter 6.)

A study by O’Barr and Atkins (1980) supported the idea that ‘female’ interactional behaviour was a function of powerlessness. The study involved male and female witnesses giving evidence in court, and found similar hesitancy, hedging and tentativeness in the speech of some of the witnesses, but not in that of others. However, the divide was not between male and female; rather the observed variation was associated with the degree of status of the individual in court and his/her familiarity with court procedures, unrelated to gender. Expert female witnesses showed fewer of the features Lakoff had described as indices of women’s powerlessness, while inexperienced witnesses of either gender showed abundant use of these features.

Another study seemed to strongly support Lakoff’s position about the association of interactional features in conversation with a gendered power hierarchy. Pamela Fishman (1978) argued that women consistently work to ensure the uptake of topics introduced into conversations by their male interlocutors, while the men make no such effort with the women’s topics, many of which therefore do not ‘fly’. Fishman uses the colourful phrase ‘conversational shitwork’ to describe the unequal interactive effort of men and women in the conversational data she studied.

2.4 LANGUAGE AND GENDER DIFFERENCE

In the succeeding decades of the 1980s and 1990s, however, a new discourse around male–female differences in conversational interaction emerged. This discourse had two aspects: on the one hand, a confirmation of the findings of the earlier period of research that the communication styles of men and women differed; but this time giving a different comparative account of the interactional style of
women to suggest not only its legitimacy but indeed its superiority to that of men. Far from women’s speech being evidence of, or even an instrument of, women’s oppression, it was an expression of the positive qualities of women’s value systems, in contrast to those of men. The ‘difference’ approach shared with the ‘dominance’ approach of Lakoff and others a pro-feminist stance, and asserted the distinctiveness of the speech of men and women, but differed from it in celebrating, rather than deploring, the characteristics seen to be typical of women’s speech. In turn it was subsequently widely criticized for its neglect of power and dominance relations (for example by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992 and by Cameron, 1995).

The ‘difference’ approach was popularized in Deborah Tannen’s best-selling book ‘You Just Don’t Understand’: Men and Women in Conversation (1990). In this analysis, male–female communication was conceptualized as a form of cross-cultural communication. Studies of children socialized within segregated same-sex peer groups appeared to show that boys and girls acquired differing verbal and non-verbal skills. For example, Sheldon (1990) made a study of the management of conflictual talk by preschool children in which the boys were found to be direct and confrontational, whereas girls were more likely to use their language skills to negotiate and mediate. For Tannen, as a result of these differences, which endure into adulthood, male–female communication is like other forms of cross-cultural communication, marked by misunderstandings and misinterpretations.

A variant on the differences approach appeared in the work of the British feminist linguist, Jennifer Coates. In detailed empirical studies of the speech of men and women in all-male and all-female groups, Coates (1986; 1997a; 1997b) found a number of differences. For example, she found that in female conversational groups it was relatively unusual for a woman to ‘hold the floor’; more typically all the women participated equally, with frequent overlap and simultaneous speech, and joint construction of utterances. This was found to be in contrast to the style typical of men’s groups, in which there was little sharing of the floor and little overlap; monologues and displays of expertise, both discouraged in women’s speech, were regularly observed. There were differences in topics, too: while men were found to avoid self-disclosure, preferring talk on impersonal topics, women in contrast preferred to talk about people and feelings, not about objects (remember the advice to Thao in Gran Torino: ‘You could talk about a construction job you just came from, and bitch about your girlfriend...')
and your car’). Overall, the goal of women’s talk was seen as the establishment and maintenance of good relations, while with men what was valued was the exchange of information. This is no doubt an idealized portrait of women’s speech: Turner (2002), in her study of the socialization into writing of children in the first year of schooling, while finding stark differences in the interactional styles of boys and girls in separate groups of girl learners and boy learners, highlighted the destructive and manipulative aspects of the behaviour of the girls to one another.

Partly as a result of the popularization of the research of linguists such as Tannen and Coates, there consolidated a kind of public consensus – a discourse – about differences in the communication styles of men and women, summarized by Cameron (2007) as follows: men and women have different goals in communication: while men want to ‘get things done’ in conversation and are motivated by competitiveness and the need to achieve status, women’s goals are about relationships with others, and are hence more cooperative; moreover, women, for whom communication is more important than it is for men, talk more, and more skilfully; and increasingly it was suggested that these differences are biological in origin (Moir & Jessel, 1992; Blum, 1997; Moir & Moir, 2000; Pinker, 2002; Baron-Cohen, 2003). This in turn meant that if the differences were hard-wired, it would be difficult to change them, even if this were considered desirable.

The discourse of difference in turn was disputed, particularly in the work of Deborah Cameron. Cameron first disputed the facts of the matter, arguing that empirical research did not support the difference position:

The idea that men and women ‘speak different languages’ has itself become a dogma, treated not as a hypothesis to be investigated or as a claim to be adjudicated, but as an unquestioned article of faith . . . our faith in it is misplaced. . . the evidence does not lead where most people think it does. If we examine the findings of more than 30 years of research on language, communication and the sexes, we will discover that they tell a different, and more complicated, story.

. . . The idea that men and women differ fundamentally in the way they use language to communicate is a myth in the everyday sense: a widespread but false belief. (Cameron, 2007, p. 3)

Cameron cited a meta-analysis conducted by Hyde (2005) investigating the issue of the claimed differences in features of speech between men and women of the sort claimed by Coates, which concluded that whatever differences exist were minor even where they were real.
Studies such as that of Coates, according to Cameron, underplayed the similarities in the speech of men and women, which overlap far more than they differ, and underestimated the extent of variation among individuals of both genders.

But there is more than just a disagreement about the facts or about the empirical evidence for differences in gendered styles of communication here. Cameron’s position is ultimately based on a fundamental critique of the assumptions of earlier language and gender research from the perspective of poststructuralism. Before we consider this critique, however, we need to consider the role of discourses of sexuality in discourses of gender.

### 2.5 DISCOURSES OF SEXUALITY IN DISCOURSES OF GENDER

Discourses of gender and sexuality go hand in hand: an important strategy in discourses defining abnormal (and hence normal) gendered identity is to make ‘proper’ gender isomorphic with ‘proper’ sexuality. This means that a principal way in which a man or woman can be not a ‘proper’ man or woman is to be homosexual. The homosexual is excluded from the category ‘man’ or ‘woman’. This is apparent in the discourses of masculinity in *Gran Torino*: there is a strong othering of the (passive) homosexual in phrases such as ‘they screwed me right in the ass’, ‘the prick at the shop wants to bend me over for twenty one hundred’, ‘the sons of bitches fucked me hard’, all representing the ultimate humiliation for a ‘man’, of being the passive or receptive sexual partner – the underlying misogyny is also clear.

During the late eighteenth and through the nineteenth century, the pathologization of homosexuality, its conceptualization as a medical condition, was a feature of a discourse on sexuality emerging in medicine, psychiatry and jurisprudence (Foucault, 1978). Central to this discourse was the strategy of exclusion of homosexuals from the categories ‘man’ and ‘woman’. This was because it was assumed that desire itself was heterosexual; the only possible desire was that of a man for a woman, and a woman for a man. How, then, could the phenomenon of male desire for another man be explained? It must be that homosexual men were ‘subjectively female’ and, moreover, that the target of their desire must be heterosexual men (on the grounds that a subjectively female homosexual would be incapable of desiring another subjectively female person). Similarly, lesbians were seen as ‘psychologically masculine’, and
the target of their desire could only be heterosexual women. Cameron and Kulick (2003) show how this discourse of sexuality underlay research in the period from the 1920s to the 1940s on the language of homosexuals, the findings of which in turn fed into and supported the discourse. A recurring assumption in this research was that homosexual speech would display evidence to support the idea that male homosexuals were really subjectively female and lesbians subjectively male. Accordingly, it was soon discovered that in the male homosexual subculture of the time homosexual men sometimes used feminine pronouns to refer to homosexual men: ‘look at her!’ rather than ‘look at him!’ Homosexual men of that generation were found to give each other feminized nicknames: ‘Miss Kitty’, ‘Pixie’ and so on. These linguistic practices were seen as expressive of homosexuality per se.

The assumptions about sexuality and gender in the discourse of this early period were exploited for very different purposes during the period following the beginning of the movement known as gay liberation in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This strategy of reversal is described in general terms by Foucault (1978, p. 101):

[The appearance of the discourse on homosexuality]... also made possible the formation of a ‘reverse’ discourse: homosexuality began to speak on its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or ‘naturality’ be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified.

Pride in the distinctiveness of the speech of homosexuals was one feature of this period, with studies of gay slang emphasizing both its historicity (Baker, 2002) and its positive qualities of humour and creativity. Gay and lesbian speech was claimed to be not only different but better: it showed the kind of positive qualities that Coates identified in her comparison of the speech of men and women – lesbian discourse was ‘collaborative and supportive’ and the discourse of gay men was egalitarian and cooperative in the same way. If homosexuality involved a kind of ‘gender crossing’, as the earlier discourse suggested, then this could be accepted and valued, rather than stigmatized. Gay men were happy to distance themselves from the ‘masculine’ speech of heterosexual men with all its limitations. In this period of ‘identity politics’, the terms within which ‘them’ and ‘us’ were defined within discourses on sexuality were accepted and reversed, but the exploitation of the categories for new ends in a sense depended on maintaining them.
2.6 POSTSTRUCTURALIST APPROACHES: GENDER AS PERFORMATIVITY

In the period since 1990, a challenge to earlier discourses of both gender and sexuality and a critique of the essentializing of subjectivity in ‘identity politics’ have emerged in the areas of feminist poststructuralism and queer theory. Following Foucault, the key strategy of poststructuralist thought is the possibility of stepping outside of binary terms constructed within discourses of gender and sexuality by emphasizing the instability of the gender (and sexuality) categories in prevailing discourses, and the way in which they are not exclusive of one another. In what follows, we will first give a concrete example of this instability in the transcript of a television interview on the issue of the presence of openly homosexual men in a traditionally heterosexual masculine domain, men’s sport. We will then consider poststructuralist approaches to theorizing gender and sexuality as performed identities, with an example from gay male communication. We will conclude by considering a landmark study of a type of men’s talk which seems to flout gender norms, and its interpretation in poststructuralist terms.

‘What Would that Do to a Man’: Homosexuals in a ‘Man’s’ Domain

The idea that ‘proper’ masculinity excludes homosexuality is a prominent theme in the following text, but the text also illustrates the instability of a category which depends on this exclusion. The text is the transcript of a television interview with a well-known Australian football player, Jason Akermanis. Australian football, a distinctive type of football bearing little resemblance to soccer, rugby or American football, is the most popular football code in Australia, with a huge following; its leading players are celebrity figures in Australian life. Towards the end of his career, Akermanis took a job as a commentator on a populist radio station known for its conservative social views and wrote a column in a popular newspaper. His declaration there that gay footballers playing in the Australian Football League (AFL) should ‘stay in the closet’ caused considerable controversy. In the following, he is being interviewed by television host Karl Stefanovic to explain his views.

01 JA: Well they can come out of the closet and we’re happy for them to do that I think it’s a safe environment we have in the AFL but I’m not sure
05 that (. ) other players would be ready for it ah I know I played with a (. ) a gay footballer in the twos
I talk about in Mayne in Queensland. and looking back in hindsight I really should have gone and spoken to him just to sort of clear any kind of problems that I may have had because really he was a terrific guy and he was very tough and courageous uh here we are all these years later and I think there’s been a little bit of a gay hunting going on where we’re trying to get people to come out and I’m not sure that’s very safe and healthy for the competition either if you are what you do in your private life that’s your business we don’t care we’re here to play football and footballers seem to be at the um peak of masculinity which of course then uh makes homophobia almost at its peak so we as footballers need to be more open if there is and accept people if they would come out but at the moment I’m not sure that while you’re playing it would be a safe thing

KS: Wha wha what do you mean by it wou wouldn’t be a safe thing uh what would happen (.). Aker

JA: Oh I just don’t think I don’t think the some people within it uh would be very accepting of (.). particular people like that not that there—I think some footballers think there’s something wrong with people uh they have some kind of disease but I—I don’t think that of course I think uh they are just normal people trying to play football trying to make a living

KS: so when you say so when you say just so that we can clarify Aker just so that we can clarify here you’re saying you’re saying that (yep)

JA: me no I’m ready I’m fine with it all but I’m my I some of my the homoeroticism around football clubs
that would be an interesting thing Carlos
uh wha-what workplace would you be able to see twenty men uh
nude all the time even if you wanted to
and all of a sudden you know when you’re slapping blokes on
the bum and just having a bit of fun
(. ) what would that do to a man in there
when you actually work out
oh wait a second (. ) wait a second
I don’t know if I can handle that guy

and and there needs to be (. ) a lot more done of course
because the participation numbers is very high (. ) for (...) sport

KS: Aker Aker Aker you’re the one that has the problem here
no one else
JA: that’s right that’s right it looks like that
but I’m just bringing the attention of people
so you can work through it and deal with it
me I’ve got no issues Carlos (. )
no issues at all

It is interesting to note in this interview how Akermanis cites differ-
ing, sometimes contradictory discourses around homosexuality. On the one hand, there is the official position of the Australian Football League (AFL) which campaigns against homophobia in the code and is committed to tolerance. Akermanis, as a leading AFL player, cites and endorses this policy, even to the point of using the term ‘homophobia’ itself, a term encoding contemporary critiques of earlier prejudiced attitudes:

they can come out of the closet
and we’re happy for them to do that
I think it’s a safe environment we have in the AFL

we as footballers need to be more open [...] and accept people if they would come out

there needs to be (. ) a lot more done of course
because the participation numbers is very high (. ) for (...) sport

if you are what you do in your private life
th... is your business
we don’t care
we’re here to play football

I think uh they are just normal people
trying to play football
trying to make a living
On the other hand, within these statements there is a clear positioning of the homosexual footballer as Other, through the use of the contrasting pronouns ‘we’ (the AFL, which is presumed to be heterosexual), and ‘they’, the gay footballers. Elsewhere, more explicitly, Akermanis cites homophobic opinions and reactions from which he is careful at times to distance himself (although the interviewer challenges his sincerity):

I don’t think the—some people within it uh
would be very accepting of (. ) particular people like that
not that there—I think some footballers think
there’s something wrong with people
uh they have some kind of disease

(. ) what would that do to a man in there
when you actually work out
oh wait a second (. ) wait a second
I don’t know if I can handle that guy

What is at stake here is masculinity itself. Masculinity is mapped onto heterosexuality and is seen as necessarily excluding homosexuality:

Footballers seem to be at the um peak of masculinity
which of course then uh makes homophobia almost at its peak

But there is a problem with this strategy of opposition and exclusion of the homosexual. For the Other to be excluded, it must be identifiable. How is the dangerous homosexual Other to be recognized? The problem is that the cues to recognition as masculine, and as homosexual, are shared, and hence can lead to confusion. A homosexual footballer whom Akermanis had as a team-mate in a lower level competition (‘in the twos’) earlier in his career in Queensland showed ‘classic’ signs of masculinity:

he was a terrific guy
and he was very tough and courageous

Even more confusingly, heterosexual footballers engage in physical intimacy in the locker-room in ways that might be mistaken for homosexual intimacy, so that a potential crisis of subjectivity is precipitated by the sudden awareness of what it would mean if one of the participants were ‘actually’ a homosexual:

uh wha—what workplace would you be able to see twenty men uh
nude all the time even if you wanted to
and all of a sudden you know when you’re slapping blokes on
the bum and just having a bit of fun
(. ) what would that do to a man in there when you actually work out
oh wait a second (. ) wait a second
I don’t know if I can handle that guy

The recognition problem, in other words, is that the signs by which one knows who is who in this game of Self and Other turn out to be ambiguous. The personal characteristics and behaviour of the supposedly opposed categories are in fact shared, leading to confusion and insecurity. This is presumably why Akermanis thinks gay footballers should stay in the closet, to preserve an admittedly illusory status quo ante – prior, that is, to the confusing new world with its academic talk of ‘homophobia’ and ‘homoeroticism’.

### 2.7 GENDER AND SEXUALITY AS PERFORMANCE

The instability of gender and sexuality categories apparent in the extract just discussed is the primary focus of poststructuralist theorists. A key notion here is that sexuality and gender, rather than being ‘given’ or ‘natural’ social categories, are in fact socially constructed, and hence liable to disruption. It may be helpful here to return to the notions of subjectivity and surveillance in the work of Foucault, introduced in Chapter 1. We saw there how social control is exercised by an awareness of how we are seen. The visibility of our behaviour, appearance, gestures and language means that they are permanently available for evaluation in terms that are the subject of discourses circulating in society at any time – discourses about what it means to be a ‘proper’ or ‘normal’ man, a ‘proper’ or ‘normal’ woman, discourses which define the ‘normal’ by default by focusing on the definition of the abnormal. In order to be ‘recognized’ as ‘normal’, we need to continually demonstrate our conformity to the norms of gender and sexuality. We do so by unconsciously orchestrating features of our speech, gestures, appearance and behaviour so that they can bear scrutiny under the conditions of social surveillance. In this sense we produce prescribed social identities by repeatedly displaying behaviours, speech and so on that we have learned will be approved. The approval does not come explicitly; rather it is a kind of negative approval – the approval which comes from not being noticed as different or ‘abnormal’, with all the stigma and social penalties attached to that. We are truly like the prisoners in Bentham’s panopticon.
The notion of gender as produced is particularly associated with the work of the Berkeley philosopher and queer theorist Judith Butler, whose work we will consider shortly. But it is foreshadowed in a study of the performed character of gendered identity in early work in the branch of sociology known as ethnomethodology by its founder, Harold Garfinkel (1967). At the time, gender reassignment surgery had recently been legalized in California, on condition that the person presenting for such surgery be subject to an assessment by a psychiatrist. Garfinkel made a study of one such candidate for surgery, Agnes, who had been born a biological male and who presented for surgery at the age of 19. Garfinkel had access to tape-recorded interviews with Agnes, dealing with her life, her future and her fears in relation to ‘passing’ as a woman. Agnes’s problem was to be recognizable and visible as a woman; in order to do so, she had had to make a study of the minute features of women’s behaviour, speech, gestures, bodily habitus and so on, and consciously imitate them. Garfinkel realized that Agnes had become an expert observer of female behaviour, an ethnographer of gender, as she was required to do deliberately and consciously what women do unconsciously: to perform their subjectivity as women in order to be recognized as such. In Garfinkel’s (1967, p. 181) words:

> Agnes’s methodological practices [demonstrate] . . . that normally sexed persons are cultural events . . . whose character as visible orders of practical activities consist[s] of members’ recognition and production practices. We learned from Agnes, who treated sexed persons as cultural events that members make happen, that members’ practices alone produce the observable-tellable normal sexuality of persons.

Thus, for Garfinkel gender is ‘observable’ and hence ‘tellable’, that is, recognizable (‘tell’ here is to be understood in the sense of ‘recognize’ or ‘know’: ‘you can tell she’s a woman by the way she walks and talks’); gender is recognizable by things that individuals are seen to do. Gender, in other words, is a ‘visible’ social order. It requires members of communities within which particular discourses of gender circulate to produce the signs by which their gender is recognizable in terms which make sense in that community – Garfinkel calls these productive activities ‘practices’. Note that communities will differ significantly across cultures and historical periods in the ways in which very differing practices are associated with the production of gender. Another sociologist puts it this way: ‘It is surprising to realize
the extent to which gender differentiation consists of a filigree of small scale, socially organized behaviours which are unceasingly iterated’ (Heritage, 1984, p. 197). Or as Deborah Cameron (1995, p. 16) puts it, ‘who you are ... taken to be ... depends on how you act’. Transsexuals know this very well and may undergo systematic voice coaching so that they can produce the gender-appropriate vocal quality.

The best-known discussion of gender as performed is in the work of the philosopher Judith Butler (1990). Butler draws on work on linguistic pragmatics by the Oxford philosopher J. L. Austin as the basis for her argument that our inner sense of ourselves as gendered beings is achieved through iterative performance of gender-appropriate actions.

Austin (1962) drew attention to the special class of utterances whereby, when spoken in the appropriate circumstances, certain social actions are actually performed – utterances such as ‘I now pronounce you husband and wife’ performing the action of marrying, ‘I’m warning you, don’t go in there’ performing the action of warning, ‘I thank you for your kind attention’ performing the action of thanking, ‘I christen this ship The Daydream’ performing the action of launching a ship, and so on. Austin (1962, pp. 5–6) states:

In these examples it seems clear that to utter the sentence (in, of course, the appropriate circumstances) is not to describe my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it . . .

What are we to call a sentence or an utterance of this type? I propose to call it a performative sentence or a performative utterance, or, for short, ‘a performative’ . . . The name is derived, of course, from ‘perform’, the usual verb with the noun ‘action’: it indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action – it is not normally thought of as just saying something.

It is not only such ritualistic phrases, often marked by explicit wording naming the act performed, which are performative: all utterances in context are performative. We can distinguish semantic and pragmatic (or performative) levels of the meaning of an utterance. For example, take the utterance ‘The door is open.’ Semantically, the sentence contains the word ‘door’ (as opposed to ‘window’, ‘book’, etc.) which is said to be ‘open’ (not ‘closed’, not ‘ajar’, not ‘locked’, etc.); the verb is in the present tense; it is ‘the’ door, not ‘a’ door. This is what the sentence ‘means’ in a dictionary and grammar book sense. But what does the person who utters this sentence mean by it? Depending on the context
it could be performing a number of possible social acts: invitation ('come in'), a warning or threat ('get out'), a complaint ('you’ve left the door open'), an explanation ('that’s why the room is cold') and so on. Pragmatic competence involves the capacity to recognize what Austin called the ‘illocutionary force’ of an utterance. All utterances have an illocutionary force, and so all utterances are performative: a social action is accomplished in each utterance.

2.8 BUTLER AND PERFORMATIVITY

Butler (1990) extends this notion to identify a further, larger-scale performative effect. She argues that gender is a social effect which is the result of performance: that is, that features of our speech, our bearing ('habitus'), our appearance are socially ‘read’ as performing our gendered subjectivity, as Agnes understood. In Foucault’s terms, discourses of gender prescribe the terms within which ‘normal' and ’abnormal’ gendered behaviour will be recognizable; the subject then ceaselessly, iteratively, presents her/himself as intelligibly gendered by attending (usually unconsciously) to features which will render the gendered self-recognizable. In Anglo-Saxon cultures it may be compatible with normal notions of women’s gendered behaviour for two women to walk arm-in-arm in public; but it is not compatible with the gendered behaviour of men to do so – or rather it is marked in another discourse, as suggesting a likely reading of homosexuality in the men (we have seen the role of homosexuality in constructions of masculinity).

We have already seen that we are subject to the power of discourse in that we are constantly open to scrutiny by others among whom particular discourses of ‘normal’ gendered behaviour circulate. We are subject to surveillance on a permanent basis and must enact our gendered selves so that they are visible and recognizable in terms of the understanding of gender available in the discourses to which we are subject in our particular cultural setting. What Butler observes is that this repetition of gendered performance creates a sense in us of how ‘natural’ it is to behave in such a way, to the extent that we feel that it is an expression of some inner gendered essential self. Butler argues however, that this sense of our ‘inner nature’ as men or women (or of our inner sexual nature) is actually created by the repetition (iteration) of actions that are performed in accordance with the constraints of discourses of gender (or sexuality). This then results in the conventional belief that our inner (gendered, sexual) nature is given, and that our actions are the external manifestation or expression of
something ‘inner’; instead, for Butler, our gendered and sexual identities are performed in accordance with external constraints. As she writes:

Acts, gestures and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance … Such acts, gestures, enactments … are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. (Butler, 1990, p. 136)

Note that language is a central cultural practice involved here. Moreover, if gender identity is the product of socially sanctioned actions yet results in a sense of inner self which is experienced as private and individual, then the origins of gendered subjectivity in social values and social ideologies remain invisible and unconscious, as we saw in Chapter 1. The aim of Butler’s work is to destabilize and make obvious the social construction of gendered and sexual subjectivity. One implication of this is that instead of using social categories as the basis for organizing (as in the movement of ‘gay liberation’, for example), the very categories themselves are subverted. Queer theory values social practices which undermine the taken-for-granted ‘naturalness’ of social categories to reveal their ‘performed’ and conventional nature. Practices of conscious performance such as that of the transsexual Agnes have this potential; ‘drag’ performances within gay culture are identified as another site for such subversive practices. Within linguistic research, there followed from Butler’s work a renewed interest in the significance of ‘camp’ homosexual talk, with its feminized naming and deictic practices, as an example of such subversion. In this view, ‘camp’ talk provides a set of resources to achieve disruptive effects of paradox, inversion, linguistic playfulness and parody (Cameron & Kulick, 2003).

How convincing is this? Consider the following example of chat room data from a popular gay male website (www.gay.com). Glosses and comments are added to explicate the bolded elements in each turn. The ‘handles’ (nicknames) of some of the members of the site reference sexuality and masculinity: ‘oz_matey’ uses the popular spelling for the short version of ‘Australia’ (‘Oz’) and the Australian greeting term traditionally used among men (‘mate’); ‘knackers’ is a colloquial term for testicles. The turns are good examples of ‘camp’ banter, with frequent teasing using sexual insults and playful feminization of naming, and an exaggerated, theatrical style of interaction.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Member</th>
<th>Turn</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>tarquin</td>
<td>Goodnight all . . . Sino, if Miss Chelsea comes back, please give the sad sac</td>
<td>feminized title; sac = scrotum; ‘sad sac’ is hence a teasing, punning put down</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>my least warm regards :)</td>
<td>teasing inversion of a compliment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>oz_matey</td>
<td>ms Special K</td>
<td>alternative title, suggesting that the person is a drug user (Special K is the name of a party drug)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>knackers8</td>
<td>good1 oz</td>
<td>‘good one’ – complimenting the teasing in the prior turn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>oz_matey</td>
<td>why thank you :)</td>
<td>exaggerated acknowledgement of compliment; mocking the style of a Southern belle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamb_</td>
<td>Good Evening Ms oz_ matey</td>
<td>feminized title; ironic as the handle ‘oz matey’ trades on stereotypical Australian masculinity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>oz_matey</td>
<td>pfft Tamb Mwah, now don’t get jealous precious</td>
<td>exaggerated rejecting gesture; exaggerated ‘pouting’ gesture ‘precious’ – speech characteristic of a pantomime Dame – heightened by semi-rhyme of ‘jealous/precious’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamb_</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>You have to earn the respect to refer to me in the feminine:)</td>
<td>mock reference to feminized title as showing respect</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We can read this text in multiple ways. The feminized play-acting seems to me to border on misogyny: the querying of masculinity in the feminized vocatives, the theatrical performing of speech and interactional styles stereotypically associated with women, is used in insulting play. This seems to me symbolic of the anxiety of men excluded by mainstream discourse from the category ‘man’; does this mean they must then be classified as ‘women’? Hardly, as the emphasis on masculinity in the handles shows. The fact that the ‘feminine’ is playfully embraced or turned against other members indicates that the men occupy a gendered no man’s land (no pun intended!). The instability of gendered categories is certainly at play in these men’s talk, but the hint of misogyny suggests an allegiance to the very gendered hierarchy from which these men have been excluded.
Some studies of the speech of homosexuals focusing on gender-discordant pronominal use are more convincing examples of the creatively destabilizing potential of homosexual speech. Abe (2004) studied the use of first and second person pronouns in the speech of lesbians in lesbian bars in Shinjuku, a well-known gay and lesbian area of Tokyo. English, like many languages, does not distinguish the gender of the referent in the first and second persons: we have no specific pronouns meaning ‘I, male’ or ‘I, female’ or ‘you, male’ or ‘you, female’ (unlike in the third person, where we refer to ‘he, that male person’ and ‘she, that female person’). Japanese, like many languages, does offer choices for indicating the gender of the referent in the first and second persons, some of which are shown in Table 2.1. Abe showed that while the lesbians in her study sometimes used the form marked as male to refer to themselves and each other, this was not automatic but involved complex, strategic use of the pronouns as a linguistic resource for projecting identity. Some of the speakers she studied avoided pronouns associated with traditional femininity but were also reluctant to use the most clearly marked masculine forms; instead they used less marked masculine forms and varied their choices according to the nature of their relationship with their interlocutors.

### Table 2.1 Some gender-related pronouns in Japanese

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>M &amp; F</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st person</td>
<td>watashi</td>
<td>boku</td>
<td>atashi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ore</td>
<td>(reflexive)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd person</td>
<td>anta</td>
<td>ome</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some studies of the speech of homosexuals focusing on gender-discordant pronominal use are more convincing examples of the creatively destabilizing potential of homosexual speech. Abe (2004) studied the use of first and second person pronouns in the speech of lesbians in lesbian bars in Shinjuku, a well-known gay and lesbian area of Tokyo. English, like many languages, does not distinguish the gender of the referent in the first and second persons: we have no specific pronouns meaning ‘I, male’ or ‘I, female’ or ‘you, male’ or ‘you, female’ (unlike in the third person, where we refer to ‘he, that male person’ and ‘she, that female person’). Japanese, like many languages, does offer choices for indicating the gender of the referent in the first and second persons, some of which are shown in Table 2.1. Abe showed that while the lesbians in her study sometimes used the form marked as male to refer to themselves and each other, this was not automatic but involved complex, strategic use of the pronouns as a linguistic resource for projecting identity. Some of the speakers she studied avoided pronouns associated with traditional femininity but were also reluctant to use the most clearly marked masculine forms; instead they used less marked masculine forms and varied their choices according to the nature of their relationship with their interlocutors.

### 2.9 Language, Gender and Sexuality: Poststructuralist Approaches

A classic locus illustrating the potential of poststructuralist approaches to gendered speech is Cameron’s (1997) study of men’s same-gender talk in a dorm at a US university. Several of the young men in the dorm are discussing and making fun of a gay classmate. The men’s language use in this study forms a striking contrast with Coates’s (1997a) findings, discussed above: the men display precisely those features which Coates argues characterize women’s speech. They talk about a person, not
about things, and conversation topics include talking about details of clothing (including fabrics and styles) and bodily appearance; there is frequent latching and simultaneous speech; and the main point of the conversation is not to exchange information but to affirm solidarity. Here is the extract that Cameron discusses (1997, pp. 53–4):

‘He’s the antithesis of man’ – thus illustrating again the primary strategy of homophobia, the exclusion of homosexuals from the category ‘man’; the homosexual is the Other of ‘man’, ‘the antithesis of man’ in a very real sense. In that sense, the men’s talk is actually performative of masculinity, in the sense that masculinity is equated with heterosexuality. What the example shows, claims Cameron, is that ways of talking do not flow ‘naturally’ or inexorably from membership in social categories in an a priori way, although ways of talking may characterize the subjectivity of members of social categories in that members distinguish themselves from others by conforming their verbal behaviour to the norms mandated within discourse. But they are capable of speaking and interacting in ways that deviate from these norms in the appropriate circumstances – as here, in distinguishing themselves not from women, but from the homosexual male.
Perhaps surprisingly, most studies of language and sexuality have focused on sexual identity, rather than on sexual desire more generally. The emphasis has been on markers of minority sexual identity, that is, the distinctiveness of gay/lesbian speech. There have been relatively fewer studies of the language of heterosexuality, with notable exceptions, such as the well-known study of refusals in ‘date rape’ (Kitzinger & Frith, 1999) using the tools of Conversation Analysis. But looked at another way, the preoccupation with the minority identity, with the homosexual Other, is a way of defining the ‘normal’ heterosexual self, and the ‘normally’ gendered self – we have seen how masculinity is defined in opposition to homosexuality, and the putative ‘unfeminine’ characteristics of some lesbians have the same function. In other words, research on the Other is in fact research on the Self, for it is in terms of the Other that the Self is defined. As poststructuralist theorists argue, this means that the oppositions between Self and Other which are so characteristic of discourses of gender and sexuality are illusory, as the Other is crucial to definitions of the Self. Studies of men who sometimes have sex with men for example within the migration context (Baynham, 2017), but who do not identify as gay, have the potential to explore the paradoxes in these supposed oppositions. We will take this issue up again in the next chapter, in the construction of the Other in colonial settings.

2.10 CONCLUSION: PERFORMANCE AND PERFORMATIVITY

In the example of Agnes, like the situation with Thao, the performance of the expected characteristics of ‘normally’ gendered subjectivity is conscious and deliberate. But in the Hmong cultural context in which Thao was socialized, his masculinity would have been ‘normal’ and unquestioned, and his signalling of it conventionally would have been routine. It is important here to distinguish between performance and performativity, though they are each associated with the verb ‘to perform’. Performance refers to behaviour, the act of displaying the signs which are interpreted within discourses of gender. Performativity refers to the interpretation of those performances within social discourses – how those behaviours are read. The relationship between these two things is something which we will explore in detail in the second half of this book. How can the details of performance be studied in the light of an understanding of its meaning in terms of discourse, for example gendered discourse? The key here, as we will see, is the idea that our gendered subjectivity needs to be iteratively,
repeatedly signalled in real time, again and again, over and over. This implies that actions at the micro-level are crucial in the achievement of performed subjectivities. We will propose Conversation Analysis as a methodology for the study of this iterability in face-to-face interaction, and will use examples of gendered discourse (among others) to illustrate the argument. But before we move onto the micro-level, we need a more developed understanding of the macro-level, of discourses in Foucault’s terms. In the next two chapters, we will explore processes of recognition within racist discourses.

### 2.11 SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

There is a vast literature on language and gender, with dedicated journals, conferences and research organizations. Classic works are Lakoff (1975), Coates (1986) and Tannen (1990). Lakoff’s work was reissued with commentaries in 2004 (Lakoff, 2004). Deborah Cameron’s writing on language and gender is distinctive both for its incisiveness and for its articulation of poststructuralist perspectives on the topic. Cogent summaries of developments in the field can be found in Cameron (2007; 2010). Cameron and Kulick (2003) remains the best introduction to the topic of language and sexuality, while Baker (2008) and Milani (2018) bring together the issues of gender and sexuality. The classic text on linguistic pragmatics is Levinson (1983). The classic text by Butler on performativity is *Gender Trouble* (1990). Kitzinger (2005), Land and Kitzinger (2005, 2008), Speer (2011) and Speer and Green (2007) represent recent work on gender and sexuality in interaction (see Chapters 6 and 7 below).