

Formal Approaches to Social Meaning, Variation and Identity Construction

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Limits of Variability in Language Summer School (Day 5)

So far in the course. . .

We investigated how sociolinguistic variants contributed to **persona** construction.

(1) (ING)

a. I'm **going** fishing.

[iŋ]

b. I'm **goin'** fishin'.

[in]

(2) a. [iŋ] \rightsquigarrow competent/aloof persona.

b. [in] \rightsquigarrow incompetent/friendly persona.

Today's class

We investigate how speaker's identity contributes to the **interpretation** of linguistic expressions.

- ▶ Personae can affect truth conditional interpretation.

(3) Let's take back control. Brexit **Leave** slogan (Lake, 2017)

There are three context-sensitive expressions in (3).

(4) Let **us** take back control (**of X**) (**from Y**)

Lake (2017): Listeners interpret indexical expressions differently based on the persona of the speaker.

- ▶ 'Politically correct' interpretation yielding proposition in (5).

(5) Let us (UK) take back control (of the UK) (from the EU)

Dog whistles

In the mouth of a speaker constructing an **English, old aristocratic, nostalgic, colonial** persona, indexicals get interpreted as

Let us **(English)** take back control **(of English identity)**
(from foreigners)



- (6)
- a. Modern persona $\rightsquigarrow p =$ *Let the UK take back control of the UK from the EU.*
 - b. Colonial persona $\rightsquigarrow p' =$ *Let the English take back control of English identity from foreigners.*

From variant to propositional content

Acton (2016): (7-a) biases the interpretation of a certain kind of fishing-action than (7-b).

(7) (ING)

- a. I'm **going** fishing [iŋ]
- b. I'm **goin'** fishin'. [in]

- (8)
- a. [iŋ] \rightsquigarrow competent/alooof persona \rightsquigarrow $p = I'm$ *going yacht sport fishing.*
 - b. [in] \rightsquigarrow incompetent/friendly persona \rightsquigarrow $p' = I'm$ *going fly fishing.*

Interpretation tied to identity: Slurs

Slurs are natural language expressions which are often used to denigrate individuals based on some aspects of their identity.

I SAW THAT, IN FACT, THERE WAS PLENTY OF REVOLUTIONARY FERMENT STILL AFOOT.



Figure: From the preface to *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For* (Bechdel, 2008)

Interpretation tied to identity

I SAW THAT, IN FACT, THERE WAS PLENTY OF REVOLUTIONARY FERMENT STILL AFOOT.



Figure: From the preface to *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For* (Bechdel, 2008)

Slurs have a long history of study in formal semantics and the philosophy of language dating back at least to Kaplan (1999).

- ▶ They give rise to many patterns that are puzzles for their analysis within classic formal semantic frameworks.

Hypothesis

We can make progress towards solving these puzzles by building a semantic analysis based on **personae**.

- ▶ The terms *dyke* and *lesbian* denote different sets of personae.
- ▶ **Consequence:** The domains of interpretation of social meaning and truth-conditional meaning overlap.

Plan

Semantic and pragmatic puzzles about slurs

Personae for dykes and lesbians

A persona-based semantics for 'dyke' and 'lesbian'

Summary of the class

Puzzle 1: Perspectival dependence

The use of (9-a) is (usually) taken to indicate that the speaker holds some derogatory attitude, while the use of (9-b) is (usually) not (Kaplan, 1999; Potts, 2007; McCready, 2010; Hedger, 2012, a.o.).

- (9) a. Sarah is a dyke.
- b. Sarah is a lesbian.

Test for the presence of a derogatory attitude

On analogy with the *Hey, wait a minute test* (von Stechow, 2004)...

The *Dude, not cool!* test

An utterance ϕ communicates a derogatory attitude just in case I feel like saying *Dude, not cool!* after hearing ϕ .

(In American English, *dude* is a gender neutral expression (see Kiesling, 2004))

- (10) a. Sarah is a dyke.
b. Sarah is a lesbian.

Dude, not cool!
That's nice...

Puzzle 2: Offensive autonomy

Slurs are offensive even when the speaker does not intend the use to be derogatory (Hom, 2008; Anderson and Lepore, 2013a; Bolinger, 2017, a.o.).

At a dinner party in the South of France in 2014...

- (11) Well-meaning gay man visiting from San Francisco:
Aren't there any **dyke** bars in Toulouse?
- (12) Heather: I beg your pardon? Dude, not cool!

Projection even out of more complicated constructions

The following examples are still not cool to say. . .

- (15) My father screamed that he would never allow me to marry that dyke Sarah. (modified from Kratzer (1999))

Dude, not cool!

- (16) I am not prejudiced against lesbians. But John, who is, thinks/claims that you are the biggest dyke he knows. (modified from Schlenker (2007))

Dude, careful. . .

Expressivism

The derogatory attitude is encoded as part of the lexical meaning of the slur.

- (17) “For a group slurring term *S* with a neutral counterpart *NC* that references a group *G*, *S* is used to express contempt for members of *G* on account of their being in *G* or on account of their possessing a *G*-defining property *g*.” (Jeshion, 2013, 308)

Encoding contempt into the meaning of *dyke* accounts for both perspectival dependence and offensive autonomy.

Expressivist approaches account for projection properties by the **way** in which the attitude is encoded.

- ▶ Either as separate expressive content (Potts, 2007; Richard, 2008; McCready, 2010; Gutzmann, 2015, a.o.).

(18) $\llbracket \text{kraut} \rrbracket = \lambda x. \text{German}(x) \blacklozenge \text{bad}(\cap \text{German}): \langle e, t \rangle^a \times t^s$ (McCready, 2010, 21)

- ▶ Or as an indexical presupposition (Schlenker, 2007; Sauerland, 2007).

(19) $\llbracket \text{honky} \rrbracket(c)(w) \neq \#$ iff the agent of c believes in the world of c that white people are despicable. If $\neq \#$,
 $\llbracket \text{honky} \rrbracket(c)(w) = \llbracket \text{white} \rrbracket(c)(w)$. (Schlenker, 2007, 237)

Identity-based variation in interpretation

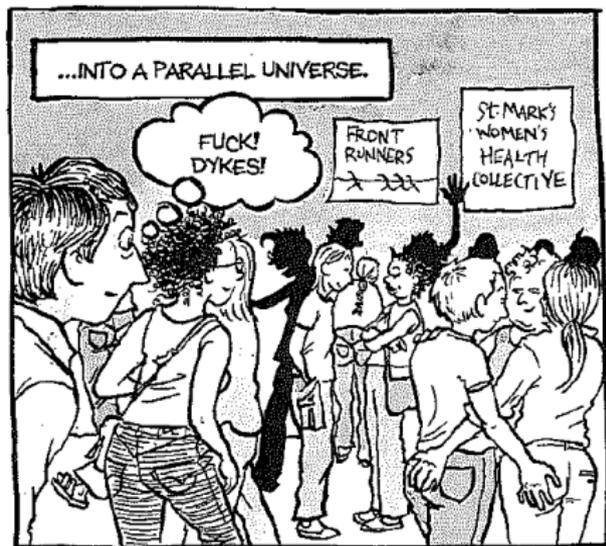
Expressivist approaches deal well with the puzzles associated with use by 'out group' members.

- ▶ But what about use by 'in group' members?

Puzzle 1: Appropriation

In the mouths of members of the target group, the derogatory attitude can disappear (Anderson and Lepore, 2013a; Anderson, 2018; Ritchie, 2017; Bianchi, 2014, a.o.).

I SAW THAT, IN FACT, THERE WAS PLENTY OF REVOLUTIONARY FERMENT STILL AFOOT.



Echoic uses

"In-groups echo derogatory uses in ways and contexts that make manifest the dissociation from the offensive contents"
(Bianchi, 2014, 36)



Figure: *Dykes to watch out for #31* (1988) (Bechdel, 2008, 27)

Non-echoic admiration, not contempt



Figure: *Dykes to Watch Out For* #197 (1994) (Bechdel, 2008, 129)

Not just another predicate. . .

(Jeshion, 2013, 326) on appropriated **queer**:

“it is plausible that the term acquired a new meaning via the process of appropriation. On this analysis, “queer? became semantically ambiguous upon appropriation. Initially, it was non-ambiguous, its only linguistic standing as a slur, one whose derogating capacity can be accounted for semantically. Later, it came to have another conventional use, one that is non-pejorative.

Puzzle 2: Appropriation worry

If there exists a separate non-derogatory predicate **dyke**ND, then why can't out group members use it? (Anderson and Lepore, 2013a; Ritchie, 2017)

Said by a non-lesbian:

- (20) Have you noticed, suddenly there's all these young dykes everywhere? **Dude, not cool!**

Conclusion

We would like a single analysis of **dyke** for both 'in group' and 'out group' speakers.

Deflationary theory

The derogatory attitude is not encoded into the meaning of the slur.

- ▶ Slurs are derogatory because they are prohibited or **taboo** terms (Anderson and Lepore, 2013a,b; Anderson, 2018).
- ▶ “When a word is prohibited, then whoever violates its prohibition risks offending those who respect it”. (Anderson and Lepore, 2013a, 38)

Perspectival dependence, Offensive autonomy

- ▶ Since a slur’s offense is completely pragmatic, the offense is predicted to be unpluggable. Projection properties
- ▶ Since the derogatory attitude is not encoded in the meaning of the slur, non-derogatory uses are predicted to be possible. Appropriation

'In group' use (Anderson, 2018): different pragmatics

- ▶ Anderson (2018): Taboos and norms are different inside different **communities of practice** (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1995).
- ▶ Some African American communities of practice have developed a new illocutionary act called **addressing** (Baugh, 1983; Smitherman, 2006).
- ▶ “Endearing or neutral uses of the [n-word] among African American speakers emerge from an illocutionary act of addressing, one that is available only to members of the relevant community of practice.” (Anderson, 2018, 32)
- ▶ “the tying of friendly interpretation to insider status in this case is not an isolated incident, but an instance of a much more widespread phenomenon” (p.23)

Problems extending this analysis to *dyke*

The interpretations of non-negative *dyke* are very different from the endearing uses of the n-word.

Example: The Dyke Manifesto

Strategic use of *lesbian* vs *dyke* by the *Lesbian Avengers*, a lesbian direct action group formed in 1992 in New York.

- ▶ Avengers aimed to distinguish themselves from other lesbian political groups by being “a group totally focused on high-impact street activism, not on talking” (Co-founder A. Simo)

Inciting not endearing

lesbian avengers **DYKE MANIFESTO** lesbian avengers
CALLING ALL LESBIANS
WAKE UP! WAKE UP! WAKE UP!

IT'S TIME TO GET OUT OF THE BEDS, OUT OF THE BARS AND INTO THE STREETS
TIME TO SEIZE THE POWER OF DYKE LOVE, DYKE VISION, DYKE ANGER
DYKE INTELLIGENCE, DYKE STRATEGY.
TIME TO ORGANIZE AND IGNITE. TIME TO GET TOGETHER AND FIGHT
WE'RE INVISIBLE AND IT'S NOT SAFE--NOT AT HOME, ON THE JOB, IN THE
STREETS OR IN THE COURTS
WHERE ARE OUR LESBIAN LEADERS?

- ▶ Under the deflationary theory, the special lesbian illocutionary act associated with *dyke* would have to be very different from the one associated with the n-word.

Lesbian speech act?

Research on *lesbian language* denies that there are linguistic ways in which this community distinguishes itself from other “non-lesbian” communities (Stanley, 1974; Stanley and Wolfe, 1980; Moonwomon-Baird, 1985; Queen, 1997; Cameron and Kulick, 2003; Koller, 2008, among others).

- ▶ Queen (1997) proposes a ‘contact-based’ model, where ‘lesbian language’ is composed of features of stereotyped women’s language (in the sense of Lakoff, 1973), stereotypical nonstandard varieties, often associated with working class urban males (Labov, 1972), stereotyped gay male language, and stereotyped lesbian language (cursing, *bite me*, *suck my dick* etc.).
- ▶ “By combining the stereotypes of non-lesbian communities with the stereotypes that lesbians hold about themselves, lesbians create an indexical relationship between language use and a lesbian “identity”” (Queen, 1997, 239).

Puzzle 3: Gradability (adjs. **dykey**, **dykish**)

Speakers from Jones (2012)'s lesbian hiking group (UK) discussing Shane from the L word:

S: Well yeah.

She's the only one who looks vaguely like a dyke actually.

L: But you see everyone facies her which suggests-

*S: That she's the only **dykey** one.*



- (21) **Dykey**, **dykish** appear in the full range of degree constructions.

Examples from anthropological/ethnographic interviews

40 year old participant in Taub (1999)'s study on sexuality and appearance (p.31):

*I have a dyke look that I assume when I want to fit in more with lesbian social settings, and I think I've been more careful about keeping my haircut very crisp and clean so I can look **more dykey** when I want to instead of letting it go longer and shaggier.*

Ross (2009)'s study of the Burlesque scene in Vancouver:

*She remembers being ostracized by club owners for being **too dykey** at the same time that she was shunned, as was Roxanne, by the women's community for not being **dykey enough**.*

Out group use

We find gradable **dyke** even used by 'out group' members.

- ▶ From a romantic novel written by two guys (James & Edwards 2006: 69):

*She had really nice brown hair and that annoying East Coast accent, and had the body of a track star: very hard and toned, but not bulky or **dyke-ish**.*

Dude, not cool!

- ▶ We associate a scale with **dyke** based on how close the object or person we're describing is to an abstract ideal (stereotype/**persona**).

Personae for dykes and lesbians

Caution: Personae (and therefore the meaning of **dyke**) vary depending on the community of practice (see also McConnell-Ginet, 2002).

- ▶ Speakers and listeners may have different personae in their ideologies.
- ▶ Personae may be more detailed for some speakers than for others.

Concretely

Focus on the world of *Dykes to watch out for...*

Dyke persona(e)

Common themes emerging from (non)scholarly works on the topic across communities in the US and UK:

1. Engagement in stereotypically masculine practices.
 - ▶ Appearance (short hair, boots), (working class) masculine activities/professions, etc.
2. Sexual desire for women (related to 1.)
3. Radical/anti-social/'counter culture' stance.

(Davis and Kennedy, 1993; Halberstam, 1998a; Jones, 2012; Wiedlack, 2015; Ainley, 2016, among many others)

Radical punk zines (Queercore/Dykecore)

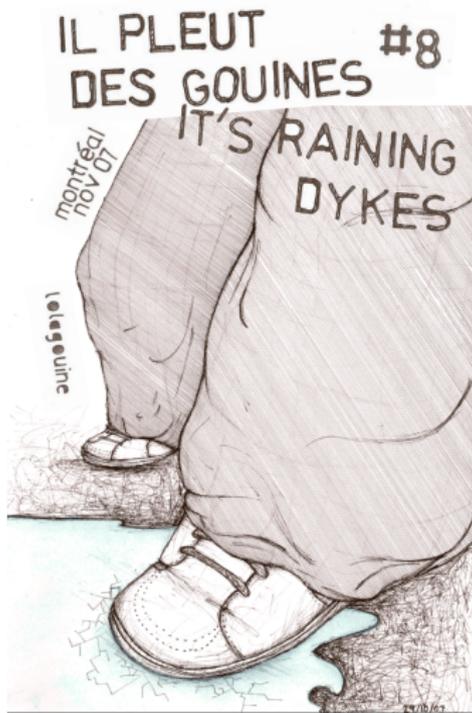
THE FIRST ANNUAL
DYKES
AND
THEIR
HAIR

ADMISSION:
a dyke haircut
(if you have one, you know
what that means. if you
don't... well, pay the cover.)
or \$5

LOCATION:
everywhere.

ART
OPENING

EXHIBITION THIS WAY



Covers of two dykecore zines from 2007 (QZAP archive)

Stereotype approaches to slurs (Hom, 2008, 2010)

A slur means (Hom, 2008, 431): “Ought be subject to $p_1 + \dots + p_n$, because of being $d_1 + \dots + d_n$, all because of being NPC*,”

where $p_1 + \dots + p_n$ are deontic prescriptions derived from the set of racist practices, $d_1 + \dots + d_n$ are the negative properties derived from the racist ideology, and NPC* is the semantic value of the appropriate nonpejorative correlate of the epithet.”

Applied to dyke

Dyke means: “Ought to be subject to [insert various oppressions here] because of having a masculine appearance, being working class, having sexual desire for women, being anti-mainstream etc., all because of being a **lesbian**.”

Very common approach to defining **dyke** in terms of **lesbian** (Hom, 2008; Camp, 2013; Jeshion, 2013, among many others)

What is the semantics of **lesbian**?

(McConnell-Ginet, 2002, 246):

- ▶ “Although the choice between *gay* and *homosexual* certainly has political overtones, neither of those words has been the site of as much ideological struggle as **lesbian**, with its connections not only to antihomophobic but also to antisexist politics.”
- ▶ “There have been many disputes on just what being lesbian might amount to.”

lesbian

“The word LESBIAN comes to us as a British word derived from the Greek 600 BC Isle of Lesbos and ‘the reputed female homosexual band associated with Sappho of Lesbos’ (*Webster’s Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary*). Etymologically speaking, the word LESBIAN, rather than the word ‘gay,’ is the more correct term when speaking of women-identified women.” (Jeanne Cordova, 1974)

Mary Daly...prefers “to reserve the term LESBIAN to describe women who are woman-identified, having rejected false loyalties to men on all levels. The terms *gay* or *female homosexual* more accurately describe women who, although they relate genitally to women, give their allegiance to men and male myths, ideologies, styles, practices, institutions, and professions.” (Mary Daly, 1978)

“A lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion.” (Radicalesbians, 1970)

“I, for one, identify a woman as a lesbian who says she is.” (Cheryl Clarke, 1981)

“Lesbian is the only concept I know of which is beyond the categories of sex (woman and man), because the designated subject (lesbian) is *not* a woman, either economically, or politically, or ideologically.” (Monique Wittig, 1981)

Those who “have a history of perceiving them Selves as such, and the will to assume responsibility for Lesbian acts, erotic and political.” (Janice Raymond, 1982)

“One who, by virtue of her focus, her attention, her attachment is disloyal to phallocratic reality. She is not committed to its maintenance and the maintenance of those who maintain it, and worse her mode of disloyalty threatens its utter dissolution in the mere flicker of the eye.” (Marilyn Frye, 1983)

Ideological conflicts in lesbian communities

Very many communities of (for lack of a better word) non-heterosexual women are deeply divided along three (related) main lines (Davis and Kennedy, 1993; Halberstam, 1998a; Cameron and Kulick, 2003; McConnell-Ginet, 2002; Wiedlack, 2015):

1. How they feel about female masculinity.
2. The role that sexual desire plays in non-heterosexual identity.
3. How well integrated into the mainstream “neoliberal consumer and heteronormative cultures” (Wiedlack, 2015, 17) non-heterosexual people should be.

The **dyke** persona occupies an extreme with respect to these three aspects.

Conflict 1: Female masculinity



Figure: *Dykes to Watch Out For* #325 (1999)

Conflict 2: Same gender sexual desire



Figure: *Dykes to Watch Out For* #323 (1999)

Conflict 3: Mainstream

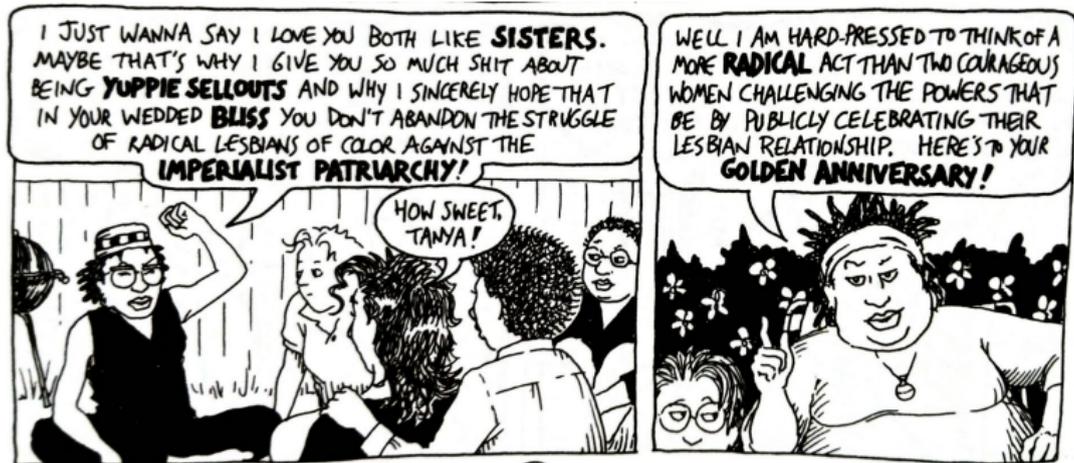


Figure: *Dykes to Watch Out For* #87 (1990)

Development of a middle class lesbian persona

The *lesbian feminism* movement was very influential in the US/UK in the 1980s.

Lesbian feminists. . .

- ▶ De-emphasized the importance of sexual desire for lesbian identity (Rich, 1980; Faderman, 1981; Wittig, 1992).
- ▶ Saw lesbian identity as the continuation of **(upper) middle class** relationships such as “passionate friendships” and “Boston marriages” (Faderman, 1981).
- ▶ Was extremely critical of female masculinity (*butch* identities, drag kings) (Davis and Kennedy, 1993; Halberstam, 1998b; Wiedlack, 2015, a.o.)
- ▶ **Politically active** for the integration of non-heterosexual women into mainstream institutions (marriage, family, legacy etc.).

Two personae for non-heterosexual women



Dyke persona

Masculine appearance/practice
Same sex desire
Working class
Illegitimate/Anti-mainstream



A **lesbian** persona

Feminine appearance/practice
Ambiguous w.r.t. desire
(Upper) middle class
Legitimate/Mainstream

Although there is variation across lesbian communities of practice (see Jones, 2012), for many speakers, **lesbian** and **dyke** are not truth conditionally equivalent.

Lesbian personal ads (Livia, 2002; Crémieux, 2013)



DTWF #82 (1990), from Crémieux (2013)

- (22) Crémieux, A. (2013). Rich Dykes from LA are called Lesbians. *TV/Series*, (4), p.76.
- (23) "A **dyke** is a woman committed to revolution, the most radical position. A **lesbian** is committed to a more liberal position, and she is more willing to compromise and work within the system." (Stanley, 1974, 391)
- (24) **Old joke¹**:
Q: What's the difference between a lesbian and a dyke?
A: \$30 000 a year (and a Women's Studies degree).

Gradable **lesbian** vs gradable **dyke**

In 2012, Autostraddle (mainstream lesbian/queer blog) published their list of the “21 most **lesbianish** cities in the US”, based on a combination of lesbian population, resources, political climate etc. (Amherst/Northampton is #1).

(25) Los Angeles (#3) is more **lesbianish** than San Francisco (#4).

(26) San Francisco is more **dykeish/y** than Los Angeles.

- ▶ A greater range of haircuts are **lesbian** haircuts than **dyke** haircuts.

(<http://www.afterellen.com/people/448587-lesbian-haircut-guide>)

Ideologies in conceptual spaces

Speaker/listener ideologies correspond to an n -dimensional vector space with the usual topology.

- ▶ **Personae** are distinguished sets of points in the conceptual space (Gärdenfors' **prototypes**).

Which dimensions?

We take the relevant dimensions from the **discourses** on non-heterosexual women in the relevant speech community.

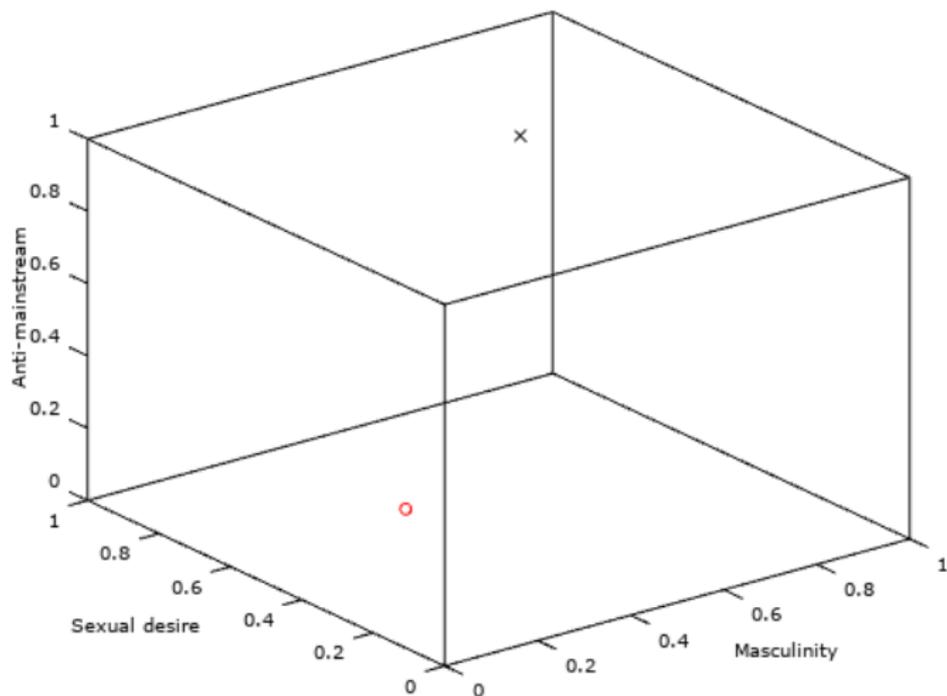
- (27)
- Masculinity (masculine \leftrightarrow feminine)
 - Same gender sexual desire (more desire \leftrightarrow less desire)
 - Mainstream (mainstream \leftrightarrow anti-mainstream)

Valence

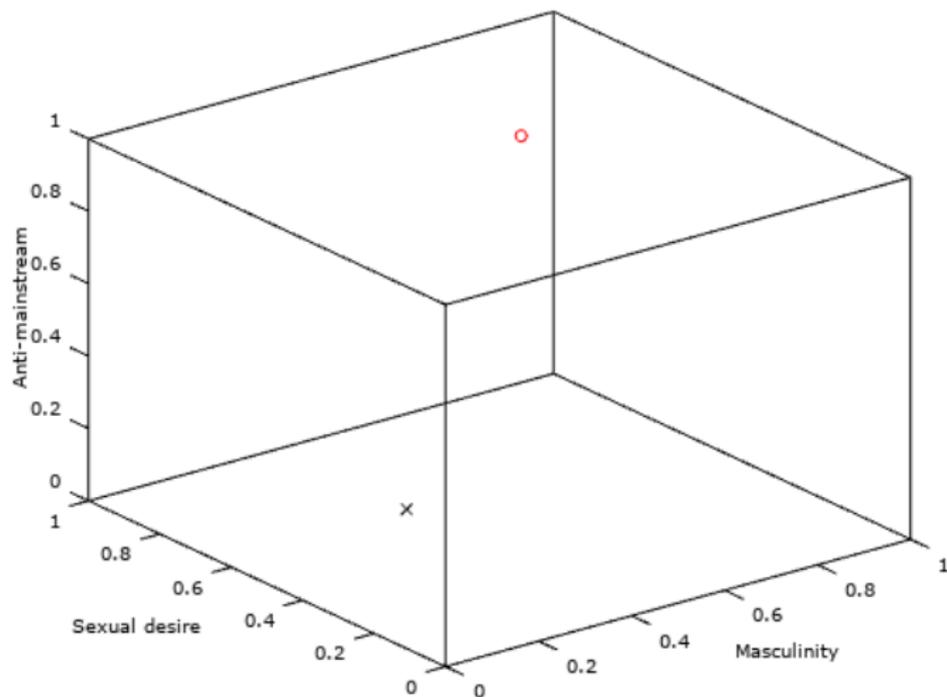
In addition to their properties, many theories of stereotypes involve reference to their **valence**: whether the speaker/listener is **positively** (o) or **negatively** (x) disposed towards them (Greenwald et al., 2002).

- ▶ It is possible that both the set of personae and (definitely) the valence is context-sensitive.

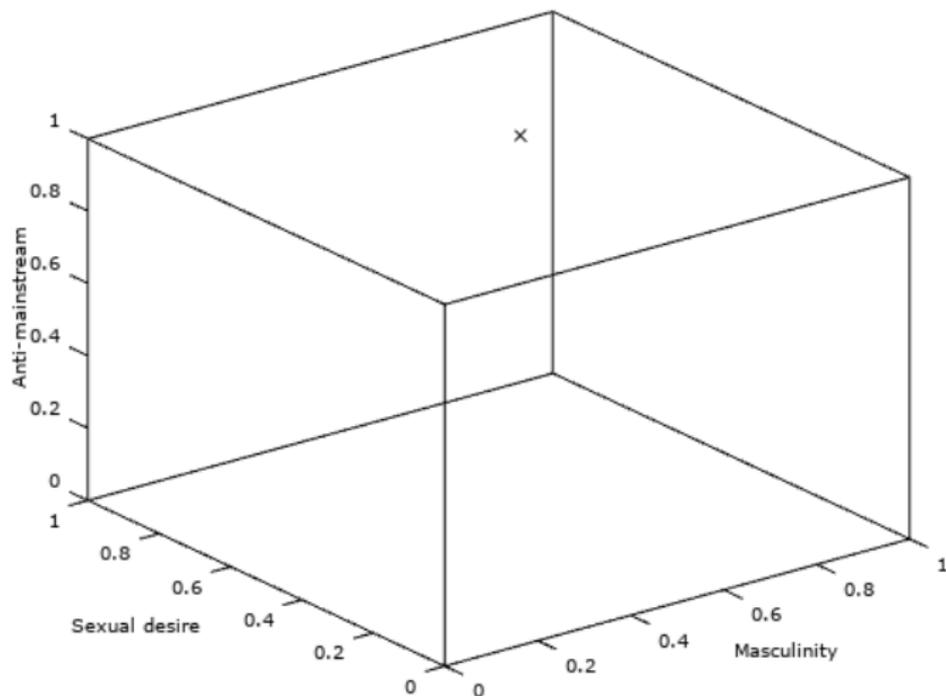
Current mainstream US lesbian ideology



Queer feminist punk ideology



Traditional 'bigot' ideology



Interpretations of 'dyke' and 'lesbian'

(28) Mainstream lesbian

a. $\llbracket \text{dyke} \rrbracket = \{\mathbf{x}_{(0.7,0.7,0.9)}\}$

b. $\llbracket \text{lesbian} \rrbracket = \{\circ_{(0.3,0.5,0.1)}, \mathbf{x}_{(0.7,0.7,0.9)}\}$

(29) Punk lesbian

a. $\llbracket \text{dyke} \rrbracket = \{\circ_{(0.7,0.7,0.9)}\}$

b. $\llbracket \text{lesbian} \rrbracket = \{\mathbf{x}_{(0.3,0.5,0.1)}, \circ_{(0.7,0.7,0.9)}\}$

(30) Bigot

a. $\llbracket \text{dyke} \rrbracket = \{\mathbf{x}_{(0.7,0.7,0.9)}\}$

b. $\llbracket \text{lesbian} \rrbracket = \{\mathbf{x}_{(0.7,0.7,0.9)}\}$

Communication in Conceptual Spaces

The Game

The speaker wants to communicate the location of a particular individual in conceptual space to the listener.

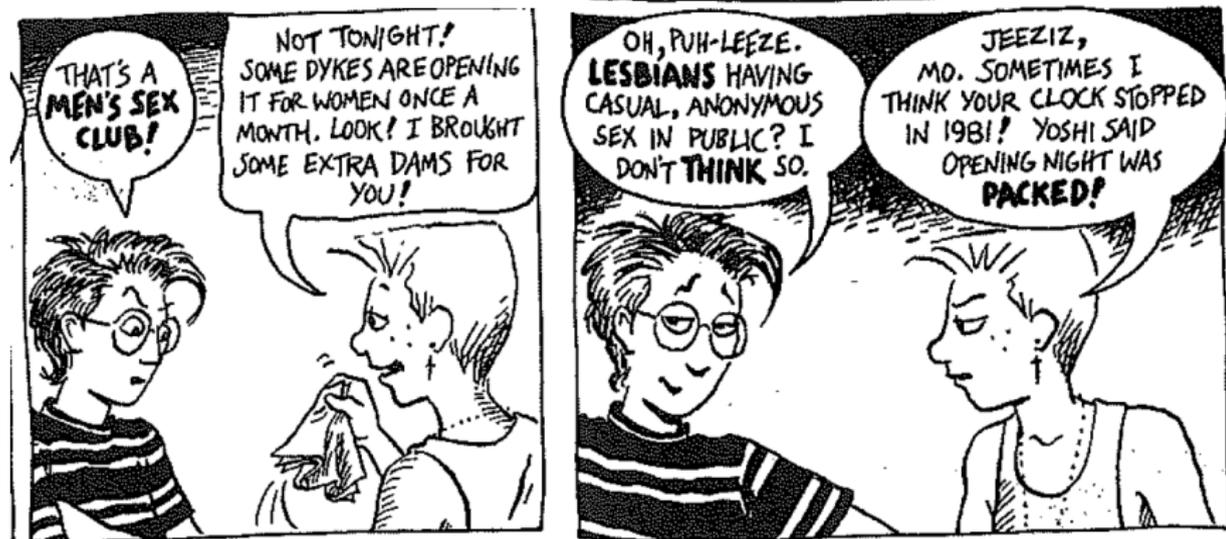
- ▶ S picks a message to send to L to signal x's location.
- ▶ L interprets S's message by picking a location that is closest to a/the prototype associated with the message.

(Jäger, 2007; Jäger and Van Rooij, 2007; Warglien and Gärdenfors, 2013; Gärdenfors, 2014)

In order to interpret S's message, L must draw inference both about the individual being described and **S's ideology** (personae + valence).

Prediction 1: Topic conditioned variation

'In group' speakers should use more **dyke** when describing aspects of the 'dyke' persona (masc., sex, counter culture...).



DTWOF #144 (1992)

Predictions for language use

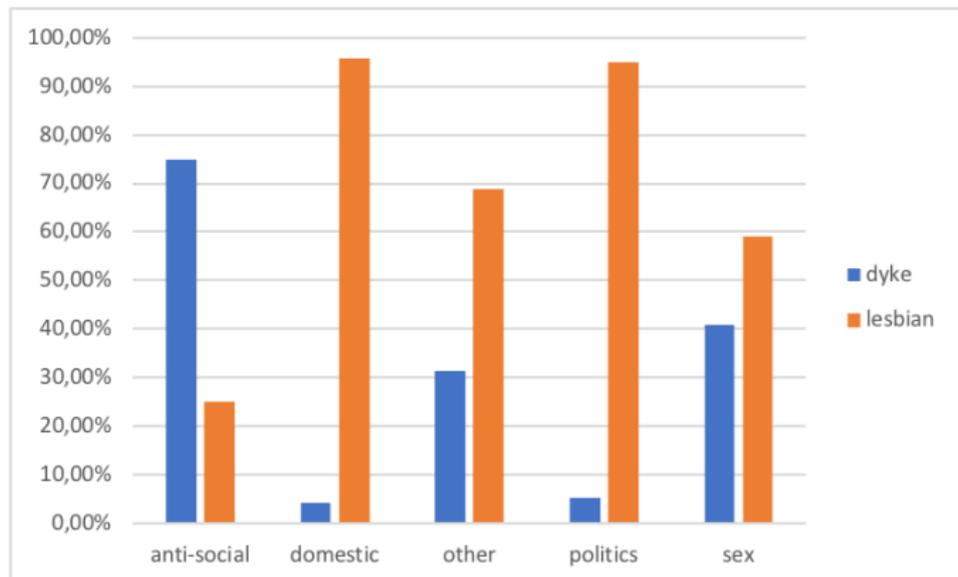
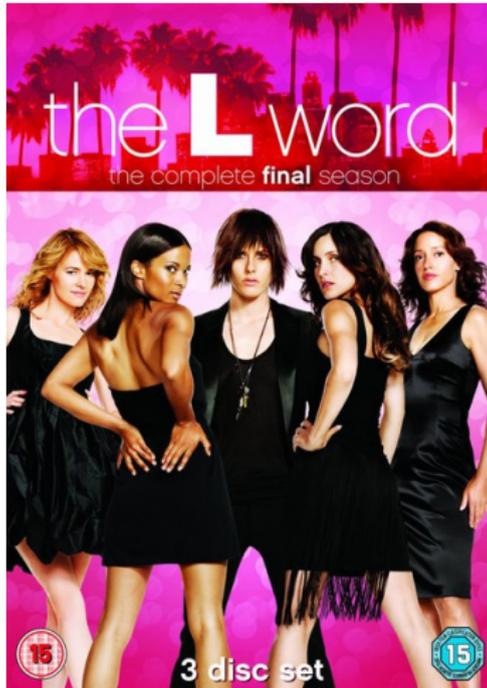


Figure: *Dyke vs lesbian* in DTWOF (1983-2000) by topic (N=133)

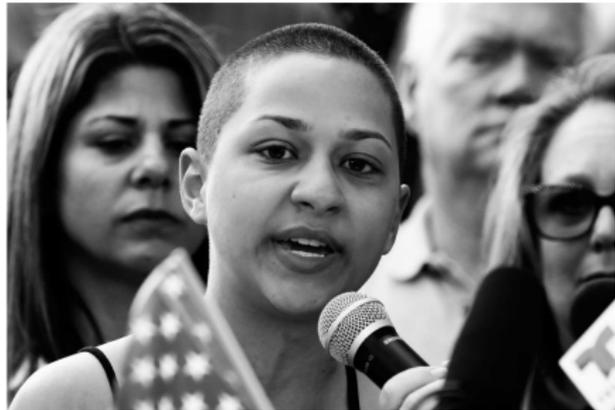
Predicton 2: Lesbian can be a slur in degenerate ideologies



STONEMAN SHOOTING

Republican Candidate Says He's Sorry for Calling Parkland Student a 'Skinhead Lesbian'

By Amanda Arnold [@aMandolinz](#)



Emma González.

Summary

- ▶ Both slurs and 'neutral' terms name denote personae, and one can construct a scale based on proximity to the persona(e).
gradability
- ▶ Slurs name anti-mainstream/illegitimate personae, which are assigned negative valence by most members of society in most contexts.
perspectival dependence
- ▶ Valence is part of ideology not semantics, so inferences about it should not be pluggable.
projection properties
- ▶ If (and only if) there is common knowledge of positive valence assigned to the illegitimate persona, the listener have zero chance of drawing an insulting inference.
appropriation
- ▶ But this condition is very rarely met, so using a slur will most likely be offensive
offensive autonomy

Summary of the class

Monday

What are social meaning and identity construction?

- ▶ Decision theory is useful for modeling code-switching in Catalonia.

Tuesday

Properties of style shifting

- ▶ Bayesian signaling games are useful for modeling intra-speaker variation.

Wednesday

Properties of social stratification

- ▶ Incorporating speaker agency and persona games is useful for modeling inter-speaker variation.

Thursday

The actuation problem for language change

- ▶ Game theory can be useful for modeling the relationship between social change and language change.

Friday

The borders of truth-conditional and social meaning: the case of slurs

- ▶ Personae have a role to play in the (variable) meaning of identity terms.

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