A few years ago, US President Bill Clinton denied that he had 'sexual relations' with White House intern Monica Lewinsky, even though he admitted that she had performed oral sex on him on a number of occasions. Intrigued by this apparently illogical denial, two researchers from the Kinsey Institute for Research on Sex, Gender and Reproduction took it upon themselves to re-examine the findings of a 1991 study in which they had asked 600 undergraduates to complete a questionnaire (Sanders and Reinisch 1999). The question was: 'would you say you “had sex” if the most intimate behavior you engaged in was…?'. There followed a list of eleven intimate behaviours, and in each case respondents were asked if they would label the behaviour 'having sex'. The results showed that, like President Clinton, 60% of respondents did not consider oral-genital contact as 'having sex'; 20% did not even consider penile-anal intercourse as 'having sex'.

The Kinsey re-study, and the Clinton–Lewinsky affair that prompted it, illustrate several important points about the relationship between language and sexuality. They show that our ideas about sex are bound up with the language we use to define and talk about it. They show that what is or isn't considered to be 'sex' is by no means a simple or straightforward matter: if 60% of younger Americans agreed with the President that fellatio was not 'sex', then 40% thought it was 'sex'. The Clinton–Lewinsky affair also dramatizes the way in which sex is political: it raised issues of gender, power, exploitation and agency that galvanized an entire nation for months on end. Finally, discussions and opinions about whether Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky had had 'sexual relations' demonstrate that contests about sexuality — about what is good or bad sex, what is normal, permissible, acceptable or 'real' sex — are inevitably conducted on linguistic terrain.

It is that terrain that we have set out to map in this book. In the chapters that follow, we consider how linguists and other social scientists might think about, research and analyse the complex and multifaceted relationship between language and sexuality. This is the first book-length treatment of
this topic, and one of our major goals in writing it is to draw together a wide range of research to form a coherent field of inquiry.

We are able to write this book because, during the past few years, there has been a steady stream of publications – most of them edited collections – devoted to various dimensions of the relationship between language and sexuality (e.g. Leap 1995b; Livia and Hall 1997a; Harvey and Shalom 1997; Campbell-Kibler, Podesva, Roberts and Wong 2002). Edited collections have the great advantage of presenting readers with a snapshot of the variety of scholarly work being undertaken on a particular topic at a particular time. Their disadvantage is that they cannot easily accommodate more sustained reflection. However skillfully the pieces in a collection are selected, ordered and introduced by the editors, a volume made up of relatively short contributions by numerous contributors does not allow for the cumulative development of a single line of argument or point of view. In this book, by contrast, we do want to be reflective and to develop extended arguments around particular issues. In doing those things, we seek to complement rather than duplicate the contribution made by other researchers.

In the chapters that follow, we try to represent the range and diversity of research on language and sexuality for the benefit of readers who may not be familiar with it. However, we do not claim to provide an exhaustive survey. If we discuss some topics in preference to others, or at greater length than others, this is a choice reflecting our own intellectual and political commitments; we see ourselves as making an intervention in current debates rather than simply giving an overview of them. The details of our position will become clear in the chapters that follow. Here, though, we think it is useful to give interested readers some sense of our general aims and some indication of the book’s overall direction.

First of all, we want to reflect on the theoretical assumptions underlying research on language and sexuality. This involves revisiting some fundamental questions, perhaps the most fundamental of all being: what do we mean by ‘sexuality’? In a great deal of recent writing about language and sexuality, including most of the collections cited above, ‘sexuality’ is used as a synonym for what is often called ‘sexual orientation’ and what we will call ‘sexual identity’, a social status based on the individual’s self-definition as heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc. Sexual identity in this sense has come to occupy a pre-eminent position in language and sexuality studies. For instance, the collection Queerly Phrased (Livia and Hall 1997a) is almost entirely devoted to two topics: one is the expressions used in various languages to label and categorize people on the basis of their sexual identity, and the other is the styles of speech and writing used by people enacting queer sexual identities. That these are legitimate and interesting research topics we do not dispute. Sexual identity is certainly an aspect of sexuality, and it is also one that lends itself to sociolinguistic investigation. What we do want to take issue with, though, is the tendency to regard the study of language and sexuality as coextensive with the study of language and sexual identity. We are committed to the view that sexuality means something broader. All kinds of erotic desires and practices fall within the scope of the term, and to the extent that those desires and practices depend on language for their conceptualization and expression, they should also fall within the scope of an inquiry into language and sexuality.

This is a rather abstract formulation of a point which is central to this book’s purpose, so let us elaborate on what we mean. In fact, the argument here has two steps. First, we are suggesting that any inquiry into sexuality, whatever else it may take to be relevant, should have something to say about sex, i.e. *erotics*. We imagine that few scholars would dispute this point in principle, but in practice sex has become a somewhat neglected topic in recent linguistic research on sexuality (an exception is the papers collected in Harvey and Shalom 1997). The relative neglect of sex seems to us to be a consequence of the ‘identity’ focus many researchers have adopted, since the linguistic construction of self and others as straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc., can be studied without direct reference to sex as such. Granted, sex is invoked indirectly: to enact a sexual identity through language is to invite certain inferences about your sexual life (for instance that you seek sexual satisfaction with partners of the same / the other gender). But neither the identity nor its linguistic assertion is confined to specifically sexual contexts. It is not only when he engages in or talks about sex that an out gay man, say, can claim a gay identity or be perceived as gay by others.

At the same time – this is the second step in our argument – when our hypothetical gay man participates in a specifically sexual situation, his identity as a gay man is not the only thing he is likely to be communicating. Just as sex is not all that is relevant to the construction and communication of sexual identity, sexual identity is not all that is relevant to the construction and communication of sexual meanings. No doubt sexual encounters, like all human encounters, do involve what sociolinguists call ‘acts of identity’. But they also involve many other kinds of verbal acts: acts of love and affection, domination and submission, aggression and humiliation, lying and concealment. If we ask what part language plays in such explicitly sexualized transactions as, for instance, courtship rituals, sadomasochistic scenes, interactions between clients and prostitutes, incidents of sexual assault, the telling of ‘dirty’ jokes and the composition or reception of
erotic narratives, it will be evident that constructing sexual identities is only one of the things people involved in these transactions do with words – and not always the most interesting thing.

Part of our project in this book, then, is to map out a field of language and sexuality broader in scope than the inquiry into language and sexual identity which is currently its most salient manifestation. It is also part of our project to try to show how this broadening of scope – to encompass, for instance, questions about the linguistic construction and expression of erotic desire – can be achieved in practice by researchers using an empirical approach to data collection and analysis. Where we propose that a certain phenomenon is worth investigating or that a certain theory is worth applying, we will support that claim with concrete illustrations from our own or other people's work.

The arguments we pursue here are political as well as theoretical. It is not a coincidence that so much recent work on language and sexuality has dwelt so insistently on questions of identity. The same trend is evident in the study of language and gender (witness such influential recent collections as Hall and Bucholtz 1995 – a volume whose subtitle is Language and the Socially Constructed Self – and Bucholtz, Liang and Sutton 1999, which bears the title Reinventing Identities). The focus on language and identity that is so marked among politically committed scholars today is one reflex of the turn to a particular form of 'identity politics' in the late 1980s and 1990s. By 'identity politics' we mean, roughly, a kind of politics where claims are grounded and validated with reference to the shared experience of those who identify as members of a particular group. The two major sexual political movements that developed during the late 1960s and 1970s—Women's Liberation and Gay Liberation — were both examples of identity politics in this sense. Participants in those movements spoke out about their own personal experiences, and engaged in processes of 'consciousness raising', self-discovery and self-affirmation – 'coming out' as gay or lesbian being a classic example of this personal/political journey.

We are not decrying this form of politics, for it has clearly been crucial to the gains made by women and sexual minorities since the late 1960s. But by the late 1980s, certain problems that had always been latent began to manifest themselves more overtly. The less radical and more individualistic climate of the Reagan/Thatcher era produced a more inward-looking orientation among radicals, and many became preoccupied with the 'personal growth' element of identity politics – the part that focuses on self-discovery and self-definition. Identity categories proliferated (as witness the now-common listing of sexual minority identities that goes, with slight variations, "lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, queer or questioning"). and attention focused on the ways in which radical movements themselves might have been guilty of excluding or marginalizing certain constituencies. Gay and lesbian organizations debated whether and how they could accommodate the claims of people who identified as bisexual or transgendered. Lesbian feminists argued about whether women who defined their lesbian identities in terms of butch-femme roles could legitimately lay claim to a radical sexual politics. Women's groups grappled with the issue of male-to-female transsexuals who claimed access to women-only space on the grounds that they identified as women.

What emerged in the 1990s was a greater emphasis within radical movements on acknowledging differences and respecting the diversity of people's identities. Among social researchers affiliated to radical movements, there was a corresponding upsurge of interest in documenting this diversity of identities, both to foreground diversity in general and to make particular identities more visible. In the case of linguistic research, this took the form of investigating how identity was constructed, displayed or performed in the language used by particular groups, ranging from women police officers in Pittsburgh (McElhinny 1993) to African-American drag queens (Barrett 1995).

While the turn to identity has had some positive consequences for linguistic research on gender and sexuality (in particular, the focus on diversity has curbed the tendency to overgeneralize about ‘women’ and ‘homosexuals’), there are a number of political criticisms that could be made of it. We have already mentioned one problem that arises when sexuality and sexual identity are conflated: it tends to evade the sex from sexuality. This is politically as well as theoretically unsatisfactory, for if post-1968 radical sexual politics have taught us anything, it is that sex, in all its forms, is unavoidably a political issue. But there are other problems with the identity approach, of which three are particularly relevant to the arguments made in this book.

Firstly, identity politics tends to lay emphasis on the ‘authentic’ expression of identity through the shared practices, symbols and rituals of a community (e.g. spending time in community spaces like bars, cafes and bookshops, wearing pink triangle badges and displaying rainbow flags, celebrating Gay Pride). The linguistic reflex of this is an impulse to claim for the community a ‘language of our own’ – a distinctive way of speaking and/or writing which serves as an authentic expression of group identity. Thus the history of the study of language and sexuality has been punctuated by attempts to delineate what has variously been called the ‘language of
homosexuality', 'gayspeak' and 'queerspeak'. Although the more simplistic forms of this quest have been challenged, the underlying idea continues to exert a powerful influence on the popular (and in many cases, the scholarly) imagination. We believe it has done more to obstruct than to advance our understanding of the relationship between language and sexuality, and we will pursue that point at greater length in chapter 4.

Secondly, the politics of identity has a tendency to accentuate the positive: of course radicals protest their subordinate status, but at the same time they celebrate their identities as a source of pride ('Black is Beautiful', 'Out and Proud'). In the case of sexual identity, activists also counter mainstream disapproval by openly affirming the joys of gay and lesbian sex. In linguistic studies of (minority) sexual identity, research has typically been conducted with people who share this positive outlook, in the sense that they are open about their sexual preferences and appear to be comfortable with them. Yet while admittedly it would be much harder for researchers to recruit subjects who do not acknowledge or accept their own queerness, it does need to be remembered that such people exist. There is still gay shame as well as gay pride; indeed, it is not only members of sexual minorities who may regard their own erotic desires with anything from ambivalence to horror. More generally, sex itself is not an unequivocally positive force. While it can bring us intense physical pleasure and deep emotional satisfaction, it can equally be the site on which we suffer the most appalling cruelty and endure the most profound misery. Less extreme but more common negative experiences of sex include embarrassment, disappointment and boredom. Although we live in a culture which tends to view negative sexual experiences or feelings as problems which can and should be remedied by education or therapy (hence all the 'how-to' manuals and self-help books on the subject), most serious attempts to theorize the erotic (the traditions of psychoanalysis, for instance) suggest that things are more complicated. Feelings of shame, disgust, envy, aggression and hatred are treated by many theorists as an integral part of human sexuality, which implies that they would play some part in shaping erotic desire in even a more sexually egalitarian and enlightened society than ours. In this book we will take that suggestion seriously, focusing on the negative as well as the positive aspects of sex.

Finally, a criticism that has been made of contemporary identity politics is that it downplays something that should be at the heart of any kind of politics worth the name: power. It has been asked whether cultivating and celebrating authentic selves has become a substitute for collective action to change the material structures that reproduce social inequality. Not everyone would accept the presuppositions of this question. Some activists would insist that when sexual minorities make themselves visible through acts of identity, they are subverting mainstream norms and so challenging the existing power structures. Versions of this argument have been made by linguists analysing 'deviant' uses of language, such as the substitution of feminine- for masculine-gendered forms among transgenderspeak- ers (e.g. Hall and O'Donovan 1996; Moril 1998). Whatever we make of the argument about subversion, though, it is noticeable that recent studies focusing on the performance of sexual identities seldom address the linguistic mechanisms through which dominance and subordination are accomplished. In this book, we will follow Gayle Rubin (1984) in arguing that sex is 'a vector of oppression', and we will examine in particular the complex interactions of power, sex and gender.

Although we are critical of contemporary identity politics, we recognize that our own identities have a bearing on our scholarly work. If readers feel impelled to ask, 'who are these authors and from what kind of experiences do they come to the subject they are writing about?', we are not going to dismiss that curiosity as irrelevant or impertinent. It seems reasonable for us to make explicit, for instance, that neither of us identifies as heterosexual: that we are, respectively, a lesbian and a gay man. This is relevant information for our readers to have, since it would be strange if our views on sexuality had not been affected significantly by our status as members of sexual minorities. Our whole outlook on life is affected by that status -- and also, no doubt, by other social characteristics we happen to have in common, such as being white, having received an elite academic education, and belonging to the generation that came of age in the late 1970s: a decade after Stonewall, a decade before Queer Nation.

Yet while this biographical information may help the reader to situate our ideas and arguments, it does not in and of itself explain why we think what we do. There are plenty of people who could say exactly the same things about themselves that we have just said about ourselves, but who would not by that token subscribe to the same opinions. Clearly, educated white non-heterosexuals in their forties are not a homogeneous group. Even as a group of two, we have our differences and disagreements. We were trained in different academic disciplines (linguistics and anthropology). We are of different genders, and this has led us to follow rather different paths politically (mainly feminist versus mainly gay/queer/transgender activism); there are political issues on which we hold sharply divergent views. This is not exactly the same book that either of us would have written had we been working alone rather than together. It is the product of a dialogue, and we
offer it to our readers in the hope that they will feel moved to engage in further dialogue with us.

As well as acknowledging our debt to one another, we would like to thank those who have offered us assistance and support during our work on *Language and Sexuality*. We are particularly indebted to Meryl Altman, Keith Harvey, Keith Nightenhelser and Christopher Stroud for helpful suggestions and comments. Thanks also to the various audiences in Europe and North America to whom we have presented work in progress. The Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation (grant no. 99-9061) provided financial support to Don Kulick which we gratefully acknowledge.

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CHAPTER I

Making connections

This book sets out to explore a particular set of connections, between 'language' on one hand and 'sexuality' on the other. Each of these terms encompasses what is really a complex range of phenomena, and in addition each has connections to other terms which are related but not identical. Before we do anything else, therefore, it is important to try and get as clear as possible what it is that we will be discussing under the heading of 'language and sexuality'.

SEX, GENDER, SEXUALITY

In 1975 a groundbreaking collection of feminist scholarship on language was published under the title *Language and Sex* (Thorne and Henley 1975). Today, this title appears anachronistic: the field of inquiry that the volume helped to establish is known (in English) as 'language and gender studies'. The change reflects a general tendency, at least among social scientists and humanists, for scholars to distinguish gender (socially constructed) from sex (biological), and to prefer gender where the subject under discussion is the social behaviour and relations of men and women. In a somewhat similar way (and for somewhat similar reasons), sex in its 'other' sense of 'erotic desire/practice' has been progressively displaced for the purposes of theoretical discussion by sexuality. Sexuality, like gender, is intended to underline the idea that we are dealing with a cultural rather than purely natural phenomenon.

In this book we will follow most contemporary scholars in using sex, gender and sexuality to mean different, rather than interchangeable, things. Nevertheless, we think it is worth remembering that the English word sex has only recently yielded to alternative terms. There are good reasons to prefer the alternatives, but we should not underestimate the significance, nor the continuing relevance, of the connection that was made explicitly in the term sex with its dual meaning. That connection (between the phenomenon
we now call 'gender' and the phenomenon we now call 'sexuality') is not coincidental, and it has not been destroyed by the preference for different words with somewhat different and seemingly more precise definitions. On the contrary, it can be argued that old assumptions about sex are often a sort of ghostly presence, haunting contemporary discussions which claim to have transcended them.

The entry for sex in the Concise Oxford Dictionary (hereafter COD; 1991 edition) begins like this:

1 either of the main divisions (male or female) into which living things are placed on the basis of their reproductive functions. 2 the fact of belonging to one of these. 3 males or females collectively. 4 sexual instincts, desires, etc. or their manifestation. 5 collog sexual intercourse.

Clearly, the first three definitions in the entry are variations on the first main sense of sex, the one which has to do with male–female difference. The fourth and fifth definitions go with the alternative, 'erotic desire and practice' sense. Yet the fourth definition gives no indication that we have moved on to a different and distinct sense of the word. From the point of view of the proverbial visiting Martian (or the bored schoolchild looking up 'dirty words' in the dictionary) it is a singularly uninformative definition, since it does not give any criteria for describing 'instincts, desires, etc.' as 'sexual'. It is as though the meaning of the word sexual in this context were wholly obvious and transparent, even though the entry is for the more 'basic' lexical item – sex – from which sexual is derived. This only makes sense if we take it that, covertly, the last two definitions are parasitic on the other three. We are supposed to understand what makes an instinct or a desire 'sexual' through the previous references to 'males or females' and their respective 'reproductive functions'. The most obvious inference is that sex in its second sense prototypically refers to what males and females instinctively desire to do with one another in order to reproduce.

Since the late 1960s, radical thinkers have attempted to unpick, criticize and transcend the assumptions embedded in the COD entry for sex. Those who coined and then popularized the terms gender and sexuality were deliberately trying to get away from narrowly biological/reproductive definitions, and also to make a clear distinction between the two senses of sex. But this strategy has still not met with uniform acceptance, and the two 'new' terms, gender and sexuality, have complex histories in recent English usage.

As early as 1949, Simone de Beauvoir in The Second Sex had observed that 'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman' (Beauvoir 1989[1949]: 267).

DEFINITIONS OF ‘SEX’

In the wake of then US President Bill Clinton's public denial that he had 'had sex' with White House intern Monica Lewinsky because no penile-vaginal intercourse had ever occurred, two researchers at the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender and Reproduction re-examined data that they had gathered in 1991 on the sexual lives of US college students. As part of that research, 599 undergraduate students had been asked to fill in a questionnaire that contained the following question:

Would you say you 'had sex' with someone if the most intimate behaviour that you engaged in was... (mark yes or no for each behaviour):

(a) a person had oral (mouth) contact with your breasts or nipples?
(b) you touched, fondled, or manually stimulated a person's genitals?
(c) you had oral (mouth) contact with a person's breasts or nipples?
(d) penile-vaginal intercourse (penis in vagina)?
(e) you touched, fondled, or manually stimulated a person's breasts or nipples?
(f) a person had oral (mouth) contact with your genitals?
(g) you had oral (mouth) contact with a person's genitals?
(h) deep kissing (French or tongue kissing)?
(i) penile-anal intercourse (penis in anus [rectum])?
(j) a person touched, fondled, or manually stimulated your breasts or nipples?
(k) a person touched, fondled, or manually stimulated your genitals?

The results indicated that 66% of the respondents would not say that they 'had sex' with someone if the most intimate behaviour engaged in was oral-genital contact. Undergraduates who had experienced oral-genital contact but had never engaged in penile-vaginal intercourse were even less likely to consider oral-genital sex as having 'had sex'. In addition, one in five respondents said that they did not count penile-anal intercourse as having 'had sex'.

Source: Sanders and Reinsch (1999)

To be a 'woman' as opposed to a 'female' takes more than just being born with the 'correct' reproductive organs. It is a cultural achievement which has to be learned, and exactly what has to be learned is different in different times and places. To give a couple of examples (they are trivial, but a great deal of everyday gendered behaviour is trivial): Western women have to learn not to sit with their legs apart and to button their coats the opposite way from their brothers. On the other hand, most no longer have to learn to
some speakers still cling to traditional beliefs (e.g. that the way women or men behave socially and sexually is a direct expression of innate biological characteristics). But it may also be partly because the phenomena denoted by the three terms – having a certain kind of body (sex), living as a certain kind of social being (gender), and having certain kinds of erotic desires (sexuality) – are not understood or experienced by most people in present-day social reality as distinct and separate. Rather, they are interconnected.

Let us illustrate the problems this raises using a case where the relationship between sexuality and gender is both particularly salient and particularly complicated: the case of a group of people in Brazil known throughout the country as travesti (Kulick 1998). The word ‘travesti’ derives from trans-vestir, or ‘cross-dress’. But travestis do much more than cross-dress. Sometimes beginning at ages as young as eight or ten, males who self-identify as travestis begin growing their hair long, plucking their eyebrows, experimenting with cosmetics, and wearing, whenever they can, feminine or androgynous clothing such as tiny shorts exposing the bottom of their buttocks or T-shirts tied in a knot above their navel. It is not unusual for boys of this age to also begin engaging in sexual relations with their peers and older males, always in the role of the one who is anally penetrated. By the time these boys are in their early teens, many of them have already either left home, or been expelled from their homes, because their sexual and gender transgressions are usually not tolerated, especially by the boys’ fathers. Once they leave home, the majority of travestis migrate to cities (if they do not already live in one), where they meet and form friendships with other travestis, and where they begin working as prostitutes. In the company of their travesti friends and colleagues, young travestis learn about oestrogen-based hormones, which are available for inexpensive over-the-counter purchase at any of the numerous pharmacies that line the streets in Brazilian cities. At this point, young travestis often begin ingesting large quantities of these hormones. By the time they reach their late teens, many travestis have also begun paying their travesti colleagues to inject numerous litres of industrial silicone into their bodies, in order to round out their knees, thighs, and calves, and to augment their breasts, hips, and, most importantly (this being Brazil), their buttocks.

In many respects a travesti’s linguistic choices index feminine gender. Travestis all adopt female names and they call and refer to one another as she (ela in Portuguese – we adopt their own usage in discussing them here). At the same time, however, despite these linguistic practices, and despite the fact that travestis spend so much time and energy (and pain) acquiring female bodily forms, the overwhelming majority still have, and

ride side-saddle or lace a corset, which were once important gender-markers for Western women of a certain class. None of the ‘accomplishments’ just mentioned, past or present, can plausibly be considered an innate biological characteristic, but they are part of what it means, or meant, to be a woman in a certain society. This sociocultural ‘being a woman’ is what the term gender is supposed to denote, while sex is reserved for the biological phenomenon of dimorphism (the fact that humans come in two varieties for purposes of sexual reproduction). But the conflation of the two terms remains pervasive, and one consequence is that, among people who are neither political radicals nor academic theorists, the term gender is very frequently used as a sort of polite synonym for (biological) sex. One of us once heard a biologist on TV explain that there was ‘no accurate DNA test for gender’. He wasn’t making the obvious and redundant point that things like which way you button your coat cannot be read off from your chromosomes. He meant that even the most up-to-date genetic testing methods cannot determine an individual’s sex with 100% accuracy. Ironically, one factor that may be influencing speakers to prefer gender over sex even in contexts where the topic is biology, and sex would therefore be perfectly appropriate, is that sex has the additional meaning of erotic desire or behaviour – a subject speakers in some contexts try hard to avoid on the grounds that it is indecent or impolite.

What has happened to sexuality in many English speakers’ usage is that the broad meaning it was intended to have – something like ‘the socially constructed expression of erotic desire’ – has been narrowed so that it refers primarily to that aspect of sexuality which is sometimes called sexual orientation. Sexuality has entered common usage as a shorthand term for being either ‘homosexual’ or ‘heterosexual’ – that is, it denotes a stable erotic preference for people of the same / the other sex, and the social identities which are based on having such a preference (e.g. ‘lesbian’, ‘gay’). This usage does take us beyond the purely biological and reproductive ways of talking about sex that prevailed in the past. It recognizes a kind of sexuality (homosexuality) that is not directed to procreation, and makes a distinction (homo/hetero) that is not about reproductive organs (whether one is straight or gay/lesbian does not depend on one’s anatomy). On the other hand, the ‘sexual orientation’ usage of sexuality could be said to reaffirm the connection between the ‘men and women’ sense of sex on one hand, and the ‘erotic desire and practice’ sense on the other, because it defines an individual’s sexuality exclusively in terms of which sex their preferred sexual partners are.

It seems, then, that new theoretical terminology has not entirely dispelled confusion around sex, gender and sexuality. Partly, this may be because
highly value, their male genitals. The logic behind this is that travestis do not define themselves as women; they define themselves, instead, as homosexuals – as males who feel ‘like women’ and who ardently desire ‘men’ (that is, masculine, non-homosexual males). Their sexual preference (for masculine, non-homosexual men) is central to their identity. It shapes the way they think about and structure both their affective relationships (it is men they fall in love with – not women and not other travestis) and their professional life (travestis say clearly that their work is often sexually pleasurable, and not just a way of making money). They think transsexuals of the North American and northern European variety, who say they are ‘women trapped in men’s bodies’, are the victims of a serious ‘psychosis’. The overwhelming majority of travestis would not dream of having their genitals surgically altered because such an operation would preclude having the kind of sex they desire.

Question: is ‘travesti’ a gender or a sexuality? The answer is surely that it has some element of both; neither one on its own would be enough to understand the travesti’s behaviour and her sense of her identity. The ‘crossing’ practices that cause us to label travestis ‘transgendered’ are not just about gender, but also and perhaps even more importantly about sexuality. It is futile to try to separate the two, for the identity of a travesti arises from the complex interplay between them.

Travestis may be a particularly complicated case, but gender and sexuality interact in more ‘ordinary’ cases too. Even where it does not involve bodily alteration or renaming oneself or cross-dressing, homosexuality is very commonly understood as gender deviance. Prejudice does not focus only on the supposedly ‘unnatural’ sexual practices of gay men and lesbians, but also on their alleged deficiencies as representatives of masculinity or femininity. Gay men are commonly thought to be effeminate (hence such insulting epithets as English pansy), while lesbians are assumed to be ‘mannish’ or ‘butch’. Conversely, straight people who flout gender norms are routinely suspected of being homosexual. Feminists of all sexual orientations come under suspicion of being lesbians, not necessarily because they do anything to signal that they are sexually attracted to women, but simply because their behaviour is not conventionally feminine. Heterosexual male transvestites (like the British comedian Eddie Izzard, who often appears in women’s clothes though his performance is not a drag act) have constantly to explain that they are not, in fact, gay.

The conflation of gender deviance and homosexuality comes about because heterosexuality is in fact an indispensable element in the dominant ideology of gender. This ideology holds that real men axiomatically desire women, and true women want men to desire them. Hence, if you are not heterosexual you cannot be a real man or a true woman; and if you are not a real man or a true woman then you cannot be homosexual. What this means is that sexuality and gender have a ‘special relationship’, a particular kind of mutual dependence which no analysis of either can overlook.

For that reason, the study of sexuality (in relation to language or anything else) will inevitably need to make reference to, and may in some respects overlap with, the study of gender. That does not, however, mean that sexuality and gender are ‘the same thing’, or that the study of one is just an appendage to the study of the other. The title of this book suggests that we view ‘language and sexuality’ as a distinctive field of study. But in order to discover what makes it distinctive and what is distinctive about it, we will have to consider in some detail what the relationship between sexuality and gender might be, and how the linguistic ‘coding’ of one is similar to or different from that of the other.

Later on, we will review what twenty-five years of research into the relationship between language and gender has told us about the relationship between language and sexuality, and what it has neglected or left obscure. First, though, we need to clarify a few important points about what is encompassed by the term sexuality as we use it in this book.

**SEXUALITY: SOME KEY POINTS**

As we have already noted, probably the most common understanding of the term sexuality in contemporary English-speaking communities is as a shorthand term referring to same-sex (homosexual) versus other-sex (heterosexual) erotic preference, particularly where that becomes a basis for some ratified social identity such as ‘gay man’ or ‘lesbian’. We might add that the preferences and identities most commonly under discussion when the word sexuality is used are precisely the ‘minority’ or ‘deviant’, that is non-heterosexual, ones. ‘Heterosexual’ or ‘straight’ is not regarded as a social identity in the same way (no one ever talks about ‘the heterosexual/straight community’, for instance, or asks a heterosexual: ‘So when did you first realize you were attracted to people of a different gender?’). When heterosexuality is used as a categorizing device it is usually in genres like personal ads, where finding a sexual partner of the preferred kind is the exclusive point at issue. This is a predictable bias, also found in relation to the terms gender and race, which are not infrequently used as if only women had a gender and only non-white people a race. We have no wish to recycle this sort of unconsidered and untheorized (not to mention heterosexual) common
sense, and in later chapters we will return to questions about how sexuality may be understood theoretically. In the meantime, though, let us spell out some of the fundamental assumptions that inform our own use of the term sexuality.

Our first assumption is that all humans have sexuality – not just those whose preferences and practices are outside the (heterosexual/reproductive) norm, and not even just those who actually have sex (a word that can itself refer to many things, not only the kinds of genital contact it is most commonly understood to mean). This implies, also, that the study of sexuality cannot limit itself to questions of sexual orientation. Rather the study of sexuality should concern itself with desire in a broader sense; this would include not only whom one desires but also what one desires to do (whether or not with another person).

Everyone may have sexuality, but not everyone defines their identity around their sexuality. Our second assumption is that sexuality does not include only those preferences and practices that people explicitly identify as fundamental to their understanding of who they are. As we will see in later chapters, the very possibility of making statements like ‘I am a heterosexual / a homosexual / a lesbian / gay / queer / bi . . . ’ (which is to say, explaining who one is in sexual terms) has not existed throughout history, and it still does not exist in all societies. Even in contemporary Western societies where there has been a proliferation of possible sexual identities, people vary a good deal in the importance they accord sexuality in their understanding of who they are and what group they belong to. For some, sexual identity has a very strong defining function; for others it comes second to other kinds of identity (e.g. some lesbians consider themselves ‘women’ or ‘feminists’ first and ‘lesbians’ second, whereas for others this ranking is reversed). Others again will say that they regard their sexuality as relatively unimportant to their identity. For instance, in an interview (Guardian, 18 March 2000) the movie actor Kathleen Turner, who is most famous for playing femme fatale characters, mused on what she represented as the ironic contrast between her public image and her own sense of self, saying that ‘sexuality has never been the core of my personality’.

Thirdly, we assume that not only sexual identities (like ‘lesbian’, ‘bisexual’) but also sexualities (which we can gloss for the purposes of this discussion as ‘ways of being sexual’) are both historically and culturally variable. This assumption follows from our general commitment to the social constructionist view that human behaviour is never just a matter of nature or instinct. People do not just do things: they are constrained...
in what they can do or can imagine doing, and they imbue these doings or imaginings with meaning. This applies even – or perhaps especially – to the most ‘basic’ activities that humans must engage in to survive, like eating and, of course, sex. Clearly we do not only eat or have sex to survive and ensure the reproduction of our species: we use these activities for all kinds of other social purposes (for instance worshipping sacred beings, alleviating boredom, forging and maintaining intimacy, putting others under an obligation and displaying our power over them, giving ourselves and others pleasure). All kinds of meanings and elaborate rituals surround the supposedly ‘natural’ sexual impulse, and these are not the same meanings or rituals in every time and place.

One of the things a social constructionist view of sexuality should make us particularly cautious about is assuming that ‘the same’ sexual practice always has the same meaning, regardless of the culture and context in which it occurs and the way in which it is understood by those involved. For example, it is tempting for today’s lesbian feminists to claim the married women who, 200 years ago, engaged in romantic and often physical ‘passionate friendships’ with their women friends as forerunners, lesbians who just did not realize, or could not risk acknowledging, that they were lesbians (see Smith-Rosenberg 1975). But these women almost certainly did not understand their sexuality in the way contemporary lesbians understand theirs: the ideas about sex they had at their disposal did not include the now commonplace idea that every person has a fundamental ‘sexual orientation’ towards either their own gender or the other. Indeed, they may not have understood passionate friendships as ‘sexual’ at all. Our understanding of what is sexual, and what different ways of being sexual mean, is always dependent on the kind of discourse about sex that circulates in a given time and place – a point that is directly relevant to the issue of how sexuality can be connected to language.

**Language and Sexuality**

What does the collocation ‘language and sexuality’ most readily bring to mind? We suspect that for many readers it will be one or both of two things: the specialized language (slang or argot) used in sexual subcultures, and/or the issue of whether gay men and lesbians have an identifiable style of speaking, which distinguishes them from heterosexual men and women. Both these topics have been more extensively studied than most other candidates for inclusion under the heading of language and sexuality. Until recently the study of the terminology in use among homosexual men particularly was such a dominant theme that one collection of papers on language and sexuality announced itself as a radical departure with the title *Beyond the Lavender Lexicon* (Leap 1995b). Since then, a good deal of research interest has focused on the question of how gay men (and to a lesser extent lesbians) use patterns of discourse choices (rather than just words) to signal that they are gay. Another topic that has cropped up persistently is the phonetic characteristics of identifiably gay (typically, gay male) voices. We will review some of the research on these subjects later on. However, we do not think that on their own they should define the field of ‘language and sexuality’.

It will already be clear from what we have said about our understanding of sexuality that we are not only interested in the voices, vocabulary or discourse styles of individuals who explicitly identify themselves as gay men or lesbians (or members of any other sexual subculture). That would be to fall into the trap of equating sexuality with *homosexuality* (or more broadly, minority sexualities), forgetting that sexuality is not the sole preserve of the subordinate group(s), and that there is more to it than whether one desires someone of the same or the other sex.

Questions about ‘how gay men / lesbians speak’ belong to what we would prefer to call the study of ‘language and sexual identity’. It is a longstanding observation in sociolinguistics that language-use, whatever else it accomplishes, is an ‘act of identity’, a means whereby people convey to one another what kinds of people they are. Clearly, language-use can fulfil this function in relation to sexual identity as it can in relation to other kinds of identity (e.g. gender, class, ethnicity, regional provenance). It follows that the field of language and sexuality should consider questions of sexual identity. It does not follow, however, that the field is reducible to these questions. Furthermore, the study of sexual identity should in principle include normative heterosexuality as well as the ‘deviant’ or marked cases. As we have already said, normative heterosexuality is seldom explicitly presented as an identity, whereas being gay or lesbian or bisexual is often presented in this way. But that does not necessarily mean that being straight has no impact on the way people use language. Later on we will present examples where it is clear that heterosexuality is an important influence on people’s verbal self-presentation, shaping what they say, how they say it, and also what they do not say.

But sexuality is not only made relevant in language-use as a matter of the speaker’s *identity*. When we attempt to define the scope of an inquiry into ‘language and sexuality’ our starting point is that sex, for humans, is not just the instinctive behaviour suggested by the dictionary definition we
Building on the theoretical work of Jacques Lacan, the editors of a book with the title *Language and Desire* (Harvey and Shalom 1997) suggest that sexual desire in general (not only those variants that are socially stigmatized) is an area of human experience that always exceeds the capacity of language to represent it. But if the importance of the not-said or the unsayable is a characteristic feature of discourse about sex and sexuality, that poses a problem for linguistic analysis. Techniques for systematically analysing spoken or written discourse are minutely attentive to the intricate patterning of what is 'there' in the text; but how do we begin to get at what is *not* there? In a later chapter we will consider some possible answers to this question, for we believe it is a question that any worthwhile study of language and sexuality must address.

**How this book is organized**

Our investigation of language and sexuality begins with the way sexuality itself is represented in language (chapter 2). Language gives us categories with which to think about sexuality, and conventions for speaking and writing about it. We will look at how those categories and conventions have evolved over time, and how they reproduce ideological propositions about 'normal' and 'deviant' sexuality.

The next issue we address is the relationship of gender and sexuality. In chapter 3 we will focus critically on the common assumption that a speaker's identity as heterosexual is marked by the same linguistic strategies that mark her or his gender identity (and the corresponding assumption, also common, that homosexual identity is marked linguistically by using strategies more characteristic of the 'other' gender group). We will argue, using a number of examples from our own and other researchers' data, that this view is over-simplified. We will then move on in chapter 4 to consider a question that has been much debated in recent years: whether there is such a thing as 'gay language' or 'lesbian language' – in other words, a distinctive 'lect' or register which signifies the speaker's homosexual identity. In this chapter we will also discuss recent work on language that draws on queer theory, which has questioned the idea of an 'authentic' sexual identity – and consequently, of an 'authentic' language in which that identity is expressed.

As we have already noted, we believe that sexual identity should not be the exclusive focus of research on language and sexuality, and in chapter 5 we explore the broader question of language and desire. Here we return to the question we raised above about the significance of what is not said, or what cannot be said. We ask how the techniques of linguistic analysis can
be used to illuminate the meaning of the unspoken, and whether linguistic researchers can make use of insights from psychoanalytic theory.

Finally, in chapter 6 we focus on language and sexuality as a new field of inquiry, summarizing the arguments we have made in this book and considering the most exciting future directions for theory, research and politics.

CHAPTER 2

Talking sex and thinking sex: the linguistic and discursive construction of sexuality

In the film *When Harry Met Sally* there is a famous scene in which the female protagonist Sally apparently has an orgasm as she sits fully clothed at a table in the middle of a busy diner. In fact, both the man she is with, Harry, and the audience watching the action on screen know that she is faking it, to demonstrate that you can't tell the difference between a competent performance of an orgasm and the real thing. Part of the joke is the surprise, amusement and embarrassment her performance causes other customers in the diner, who cannot be sure whether the orgasm is real or faked. Also part of the joke is the chagrin of the man for whose benefit the performance is being put on; for if this is not a real orgasm, perhaps the female orgasms he has been party to in more intimate circumstances were not real either.

This scene provides an illustration of what is meant by 'the discursive construction of sexuality'. The man who believes that you can always tell whether a woman's orgasm is genuine is holding on to one of our most cherished beliefs about sex: that the body does not lie. According to this view, the outward expression of orgasm comes directly from the inner physical processes and sensations of orgasm, and in the absence of the physical stimulus the outward expression cannot be convincing. The woman, however, sets out to show that you can communicate an orgasm without actually having one, by producing the signs that conventionally mean 'orgasm' (these include both nonlinguistic signs like gasping and moaning, and linguistic signs like uttering (in English) 'oh' and 'yes'). Sexual experience, like other human experience, is communicated and made meaningful by codes and conventions of signification. Indeed, without those codes we would not be able to identify particular experiences as 'sexual' in the first place. Codes of signification are not only relevant to the doing of sex (e.g. communicating orgasm) but also to the understanding of what it is that we are doing, which in turn exerts an influence on what we do. What we know or believe about sex is part of the baggage we bring to sex; and our knowledge does not come