

## The role of sexuality in the construction of gender

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What gender is “gay man”? While the question may seem trivial or, even worse, potentially insulting, the response lies at the heart of modern sociolinguistic inquiry.

Social scholars have long recognized that gender is not equivalent to or necessarily even derived from biological sex. Gender is a social construction—a category incorporating inequalities in social access, mobility, and the expression of one’s sexual being—the interaction of pervasively different social histories, freedoms, and sanctions.

Once we begin to deconstruct our expectations of gender, then, should we not *expect* a functional difference between the broad strokes of “straight man” and “gay man”? Gay and straight men, after all, have different kinds of social access, networks, expectations for mobility, and—for the last two centuries, at least—widely different sanctions on the expression of self. What is that if not a description of two different genders?

Although we’ve long known that a speaker’s gender influences the way he or she engages linguistic practice (to the point where we’ve developed a set of near axioms: women are at the forefront of language change, men use more vernacular forms, etc.), sociolinguistics remains stuck in a model that reifies gender *qua* normative biological sex. The majority of sociolinguistic publications continue to use a male/female dichotomy solely, excluding any contribution of sexuality in the construction of gender. Even in those works where gender is allowed to be a “locally constructed” category, the biologically based male/female split remains deeply entrenched. Meanwhile, research that includes an explicit awareness of sexuality as an intrinsic component of a speaker’s sociality languishes in the academic ghetto of “queer studies”—studies set apart from “normal” research, excepted as something one only considers if one is explicitly investigating “queer people”.

So I ask again, what gender is “gay man”?

As I will show with a combination of sock puppet discourse and word-list phonetics, “gay man” is a separate gender, compositionally distinct from the broader categories of both “queer” and “male”. Using a four-way distinction of gender (man, woman, gay, lesbian), I will show how the incorporation of sexuality as an explicit aspect of speaker gender allows us to more fully understand and interpret sociolinguistic data. I will argue that the continued ignorance of speaker sexuality in sociolinguistic research is equivalent to the ignorance of ethnicity, class, or age—and that it is our job as critical readers to adapt our methods and remain as aware of sexuality as we are of any other aspect of identity. While this kind of reified box-model remains less than entirely desirable, it is only by first atomizing these possible dimensions of self-identity that we can gain an understanding of the resources available for true local identity construction.