Preface

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'.[1]

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 skilfully 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 transexuals 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 evacuate 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.[2] 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 transgendered speakers (e.g. Hall and O'Donovan 1996; Moriel 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.

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