"Ties That Bind": The continued conflation of sex, sexuality and gender

Abstract:

Few in the humanities and social sciences will doubt the long-standing historical conflation of sex, sexuality and gender both within and outwith academia. Despite research and socio-political movements aiming for the contrary, it continues even now. This paper discusses the ongoing conflation between these interrelated but independent social categories in current linguistic research, including how it can serve to reflect and reinforce socio-political antagonism outside of academia. I propose two potential directions of travel: (1) welcoming ideological pluralism between scholars on the primacy of either sex, gender or sexuality; and (2) horizontally disaggregating the three categories. I argue that engaging with both strategies in tandem serves to benefit researchers, participants and the public. The former encourages trust in academic research during a time wherein that trust is waning. The latter enables an analytical distinction between sex, gender, and sexuality in linguistic research, whilst continuing to acknowledge their interrelatedness. Implemented together, they will allow researchers to embed research in the 21st century, which entails pluralistic and competing socio-political activism between equally deserving groups.

1   Introduction

Few in the humanities and social sciences will doubt the long-standing and historical conflation of sex, sexuality and gender both within and outwith academe. In recent years, this conflation of identities and practices has received its most significant and wide-reaching attention in mainstream discourse/s surrounding identity recognition, rights, and resource allocation. Now, perhaps more than ever, the implications of conceptualising the social categories of sex, gender and sexuality as largely synonymous in language-based (and other socially oriented) research reflect significant political and ideological divisions in the wider world – not least of all in legislation, public policy and education

Despite efforts towards inclusivity in research and towards remedying this conflation of categories, the issue remains. Indeed, it is perhaps the overextension of inclusivity and perceived progressiveness in linguistic research that may serve to reinforce what amounts to an over-simplification of social categories. That is, referring simultaneously to sex, gender and sexuality through the same critical lens in linguistic research obscures the social differences it seeks to explore. Thus, practices are reduced to overarching umbrella categories that do not provide an adequate explanatory 'fit'. Of course, there are – often deeply embedded links – between sex, sexuality and gender that must be acknowledged and navigated in linguistic research. However, I argue that when the three are disaggregated in linguistic research, there is created a vertical hierarchy, which serves to reinforce a specific ideological positioning whilst ignoring alternatives.

In this essay, I reflect on the role of current linguistic research – and research spaces – in challenging and reinforcing the conflation of sex, sexuality and gender. Specifically, I discuss the contiguous relationship between the domain of research and the public-political domain of discourse/s on sex, sexuality and gender, including how the two have existed in coalition and conflict. The social, political and economic contexts within which our research is necessarily situated has changed significantly, but that this is not necessarily reflected in the research that is currently disseminated. I suggest possible directions of travel that could be explored within the field of linguistic research on each (or all) sex, sexuality and gender to more accurately reflect the multiple lived realities and experiences in the world within and outwith academe.

2   Continuing conflation of categories

Fundamentally, the conflation of sex, sexuality and gender can be attributed to complexity reduction. Gendered and sexual practices are conceptualised vis-à-vis biological sex (cf. Carr, 2005); thus, sex is arguably the frame within which gender and sexuality, both normative and non-normative, are construed and constructed. In social science research, despite a seeming primacy as the underpinning foundation of both gender and sexuality, the biological and anatomical factors of sex are largely neglected. Hence, though gender and sexuality are commonly conceptualised as the social and erotic outputs – congruent or not – of sex, sex is largely ignored as a factor. This is not necessarily surprising, given that research in the social sciences is more interested in the social than in the physiological. However, there are practices, experiences and behaviours that are rooted in a sexed embodiment and cannot, therefore, be reduced to

the social (e.g. menstruation, pregnancy, reproductive health). This is exactly where a conflation between sex and gender (and, to a lesser extent, sexuality) renders research unable to accurately reflect or represent the contextual underpinning of identities, behaviours and practices.

The conflation between sex, sexuality and gender is no less apparent in current linguistic research than in other social science disciplines. Examples abound, even in the most well-meaning of spaces. A prime example is Meyerhoff and Erlich's (2019) review article on *Language, Gender and Sexuality*, which was proposed as a potential starting point or inspiration for the essays in this issue. In it, the authors posit "the study of language and gender" as an "introduction to the field [of language, gender and sexuality] as a whole" (Meyerhoff & Erlich, 2019: 456). Immediately thereafter, examples are given on the differences between language use on the basis of sexual and transgender identities. Notwithstanding the conflation between sexuality and transgender status, which reflects the wider socio-political conflation inherent in the acronym *LGBT(QIA+)*, there is insinuated a hierarchy between gender and sexuality. That is, sexuality is conceptualised as an outcome of gender by dint of language and gender research being introductory to language and sexuality research. Whilst language and gender research predates language and sexuality research, the conflation of (trans)gender and sexual identities in Meyerhoff and Erlich's (2019) review inaccurately construes an inextricability between gender and sexuality that clearly exemplifies the ongoing conflation between – and hierarchical ordering of – the two categories. Where sex is considered in their review, Meyerhoff and Erlich subscribe to the view that sex is performative in much the same way as gender, referring only to studies that explore the

relationship between language and gender-sex incongruence.[1] This stance is an inherently ideological one that reflects an antagonism in existing socio-political spheres over the recognition of transgender identities and practices at the detriment to gender-congruent sexed identities and the influence of sex on lived experiences, including sexual practices (cf. Hines, 2019; 2020). Through its inclusivity of non-normative identities and practices, Meyerhoff and Erlich's (2019) review of the field of language, gender and sexuality therefore illuminates an exclusionary outcome of current research in the field.

Despite its well-meaning stance to (critically) explore the linguistic and social consequences of sexuality, the *Journal of Language and Sexuality* also conflates identities and practices within and between the categories of sex, gender and sexuality. For example, the invisibility of biological sex is apparent in the journal's author guidelines, which encourage authors to "make an effort to use gender-fair, non-heteronormative and non-stigmatising wording wherever possible" (Journal of Language and Sexuality, ©2020a). The author guidelines also encourage authors to refrain from using specific terminology, including *homosexual*, and the journal embeds itself within the theoretical lens of Queer Linguistics. Reference to gender and sexuality without reference to sex in the journal's author guidelines indicates an ideological ordering of relevance and importance. Similarly, contesting the use of specific identifiers reflects other research within the field of language, gender and sexuality – my own included (cf. Webster, 2019) – that erroneously invalidate the use of specific

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[1] The influence of anatomical and physiological sex on language, or speech, production is relegated to a footnote (see Meyerhoff & Erlich, 2019: 459).

terminology, which reflects an ideological position on what is considered correct for an entire social group. Finally, the use of contested identifiers (i.e. *queer*) to encapsulate fields of study and theoretical lenses is itself ideological, conflating gender-incongruence and non-heterosexuality (see also Meyerhoff & Erlich's [2019: 461–466] review as an example of the 'queer' conflation of sex, gender and sexuality). The ideological position taken by the *Journal of Language and Sexuality* is not necessarily a *bad* one, but it is also not necessarily reflective of wider social and political understandings. That is, it is neither reflective of the widely conceived understanding that sex underpins – and pre-exists – gender and sexuality, nor is it reflective of myriad personal and individualised understandings of the identifying terminology that people use in reference to themselves and their social group.

Historically, contesting sex essentialism and heteronormativity has been the domain of political movements that further spearhead social and academic turns. Sex essentialism and the social power relations built thereupon were challenged by feminist political movements, which turned to prioritising gender over sex as a means of deconstructing patriarchal power structures. Alongside factions within feminist politics, gay liberation movements sought to challenge heteronormative power structures that served to oppress gay men and women in all spheres of life. Research in language, gender and sexuality is often reflective of such political movements outwith academia (cf. Meyerhoff & Erlich, 2019). The consistent contiguity between politics and academe within the domains of sex, gender and sexuality explains – at least partially – the inattention to sex and non-heteronormative focus in social and linguistic research, which is also often rooted in a critical impetus for deconstructing normative social structures. Hence, for example, turns in socio-political movements away from sex

essentialism resulted in turns away from sex essentialism in language research. This is not least of all due to the evolution of language used to discuss the key socio-political issues in relevant domains of politics and study (i.e. using *gender* instead of *sex* to distinguish classes of people). The difficulty for current and forthcoming language research is that there exist pluralistic – and often antagonistic – socio-political movements regarding the domains of sex, gender and sexuality in public discourse that use different terminology owing to their different ideological and hierarchical positioning of categories.

Of course, pluralism and antagonism have always existed within political movements, not least of all within feminist politics regarding the centralisation or otherwise of sexual identities over gendered or sexed identities (cf. Koller, 2008). Similarly, the often-critical impetus of linguistic research within the domains of gender and sexuality is not without its antagonists. Critique entails deconstructing dominant structures, after all. The challenge we find ourselves facing within linguistic research is how such research is and can be used to fuel antagonism. If, as researchers, we continue to hierarchically order sex, sexuality and gender, there are two potential directions of travel: (1) prioritising performativity at the expense of embodiment; or (2) essentialising physiology at the expense of behaviour. Current research in the field indicates that the former is inevitable. I argue that this may only serve to alienate large swathes of the population who were once supported by academic research in emancipating themselves from oppressive social structures. This alienation will not only impact the quality of research, it will also impact the transferability of research to the domains where it can make the most impact – education, legislation and policy. In terms of the former, alienating entire social groups from research into language and sex, gender or sexuality

will minimise the availability of respondents, thereby reducing the generalisability of research, and increase distrust of academia. This is of specific concern in a so-called 'post-truth' and 'post-expert' wherein public trust in academic research is already diminished (cf. Gudonis, 2021). In terms of the latter, recommendations for development in the arenas of education, legislation and policy will always be the result of ideologically driven research that does not account for alternative conceptualisations of sexed, gender, and sexual experience. Again, this is of specific concern when the priority of research into language and gender, sex or sexuality are non-normative minority groups; the needs of minority groups who do not subscribe to the ideological positioning and ordering of the categories under analysis will not benefit from this critical research.

3   Future directions

One potential direction of travel is to welcome ideological pluralism regarding the primacy of either sex, gender and sexuality in linguistic research. This ideological and inherently politicised pluralism is seldom apparent in critically oriented research or in academia, more widely, regarding sex, gender and sexuality (cf. Grove, 2020). Of course, this strategy would require a commitment from researchers, reviewers, editors and institutions to engage with and enable alternative positions in linguistic research. There is a mutual benefit for both researchers and the researched in engaging with such pluralism. For researchers, certain academic freedoms that are perceived – rightly or wrongly – to have diminished are restored and all academically sound viewpoints are considered valid, despite opposition. For participants, all lived experiences – normative

or otherwise – are explored and all factors considered when attempting to understand the relationship between language and sex, sexuality and/or gender. Additionally, public trust in academic research may increase. In a post-truth era, wherein populist politics denounces academia (i.e. teaching and research) as a vehicle for ideological indoctrination (cf. Gudonis, 2021), the explicit encouragement and dissemination of multiple ideological perspectives may well serve to re-engage the public with the findings of social research.

Following ideological pluralism comes a horizontal disaggregation of sex, gender and sexuality in linguistic research. This potential solution is inspired by research in political economy analysis, which treats political-economic structures as analytically distinct despite their interrelatedness in the real world (Hudson & Leftwich, 2014: 76– 77). Hence, the social and linguistic consequences of any one – or more – of the three can be analysed separately from its counterpart/s without detracting from their interrelatedness. That is, it becomes possible to explore the role of physiological sex and its relationship to both sexuality and language. Similarly, it remains possible to explore the relationship between language, gender performativity and sexuality. Equally, it becomes acceptable to explore *only* anatomical sex in relation to language, without simultaneously exploring either gender or sexuality.[2] This strategy allows, more than anything, a more comprehensive exploration of each category's social and linguistic consequences. That is, it enables a narrower focus in research that, in combination with other narrow explorations of language and its relationship with sex, gender or sexuality,

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[2] Of course, this includes all possible permutations of exploring gender, sex, and/or sexuality in relation to language use.

provides the field of study with a sum that is greater than its constituent parts. Exploring the specific differences between the linguistic and social consequences of, for example, sex and gender may also serve to contribute more positively and effectively to impact in education, legislation and policy. That is, research within the field(s) will provide multiple perspectives that enable a consideration of implications that changes to education, legislation and policy have for competing social groups in the real world. For example, the UK Government's Gender Recognition Act consultation (UK Government Equalities Office, 2018) may have been well-served by horizontally disaggregating sex and gender in their language use; the conflation of the two continues as a source of antagonism between competing social groups in relation to resource allocation and identity recognition.

In this essay, I have critiqued the conflation of sex, gender and sexuality in linguistic research. However, it is also inherently a critique of how social research conflates the three linguistically. It goes without saying, though I must make it clear, that my own research does not always practice what I preach. Studies that explore specific linguistic practices in relation to gender, sex, or sexuality necessarily struggle to simultaneously unpack the labyrinthine socio-historical politics that underpin the conflation between the three. We need a new testament of sorts. As linguists, we can either form the solution or exacerbate the problem. We define, explore and expound upon the rules and consequences of language, which have significant potential impact on political and social spheres outside of academia. If we engage in mutually beneficial pluralistic scholarly discussion, we can take the best of all viewpoints. We can embed linguistic research within the 21st century of pluralistic and competing socio-political

activism without compromising academic freedom, equality of experience, or public trust. To do so, however, we must work both in coordination and in conflict.

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