

*Language and gender research from a queer
linguistic perspective: A critical evaluation.*

Michaela Koch (2008)

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Reviewed by Shannon Weber

The field of sociolinguistics has flourished in recent years, pushing against the traditional boundaries of linguistics to consider how social context and power are involved in the enacting of linguistic practices. The advent of queer linguistics is an exciting new project within this broader movement that incorporates the deconstructionist and anti-essentialist insights of queer theory with the study of language. In this context, Koch's *Language and Gender Research from a Queer Linguistic Perspective: A Critical Evaluation* proves to be both a timely and concise articulation of the history of the study of gender and sexuality in linguistics as well as a helpful resource for understanding the major tenets and value of a queer linguistic approach.

Koch's book, exclusive of introduction and conclusion, is organized into three main sections: 'Development and Critique of Traditional Gender and Language Research'; 'Queer Theory and Its Main Concepts'; and 'Queer Linguistics.' In the first section, Koch introduces the concept of the 'linguistic deviant', which claims that gender and language research began with the theorization of women's speaking styles and the linguistic analysis of differences in power between speakers. She traces the evolution of the understanding of 'women's language' first as deficient and then as the result of women's relative lack of power compared to men. Recognizing that less powerful groups of men, such as gay men, cannot access hegemonic

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masculinity leads Koch to conclude that ‘the deviant speakers are not women per se, but all speakers who are in some way disenfranchised from institutionalized male power’ (2008: 7).

Koch then discusses challenges to the ‘difference’ or ‘two-culture’ model, which posits that women and men grow up in different cultures and thereby form different speech patterns. She details the flaws of the difference model, including its conflation of non-conforming gender behavior with same-sex sexuality and its lack of attention to linguistic styles outside of hegemonic whiteness. Following this critique of the difference model, Koch traces the development of the field of gay and lesbian linguistics, which acknowledges the importance of sexuality and sexual orientation in theorizing gender and language.

Part of Koch’s project in chronicling the history of gay and lesbian linguistics is to examine both its contributions and limitations in order to argue for a queer linguistic model. She documents how scholars of gay and lesbian linguistics focused first on the idea of a gay lexicon. These scholars were later challenged by feminist linguists who argue that the lesbian lexicon is less developed not because lesbians are less sexual than gay men, as some eminent scholars of the gay lexicon had posited, but because many of the words included in the gay lexicon are misogynist and thus not used by women. Additionally, these feminist linguists argue that because women have had less mobility and access to the public sphere, the lesbian lexicon has been less developed, smaller, and more hidden than that of gay men. Following her discussion of the lesbian lexicon, Koch explores the debate within linguistics as to whether the concept of the gay lexicon is valid at all. While supporters argue that it provides a way for gay people to find and connect to one another, critics argue that there cannot be a ‘homosexual language’ because there is no monolithic gay experience. Related to this critique is the meta-critique of whether the study of gay and lesbian language is valid in relying on stable and coherent gay and lesbian identities.

In Section Two, Koch pursues this question through her introduction to queer theory in preparation for her ultimate argument that linguists’ incorporation of certain components of queer theory enriches the study of linguistics. She describes queer theory as an interdisciplinary and anti-hegemonic critique that, while lacking a precise definition, analyses power and oppression. Koch explains the way *queer* has been reclaimed by gay and lesbian movements since the 1990s as well as de Lauretis’ use of *queer theory* to mean the ‘theoriz[ing] of sexuality and identity from an anti-essentialist perspective’, as Koch describes it (2008: 20). She discusses the difference between the categories of sex and gender and the mechanisms

by which heterosexual hegemony operates according to the arguments of various queer theorists.

Koch then describes the way that queer theory pushes against the identity politics of gay and lesbian liberation. She argues that dominant articulations of gay and lesbian identity centre around white, middle-class gay and lesbian people and exclude people of colour, poor people, or anyone who has a marginalized sexuality and/or gender but who does not necessarily identify as 'gay', such as bisexual people, polyamorous people, transgender people, intersex people, and people who engage in sadomasochism. For these reasons, Koch claims that using queer theory is preferable to the gay and lesbian linguistics model for the study of linguistics, particularly due to the fruitfulness of Butler's (1990) concept of performativity for theorizing the relationship between power and language. Koch's elaboration of the importance of performativity for linguistics brings her to the third section, 'Queer Linguistics.'

In defining 'queer linguistics,' Koch outlines a few definitions before ultimately championing the approach that Wong *et al.* define as 'the socio-linguistic study of language use without recourse to identity categories' (2002: 15f). Koch is interested in the power of queer linguistics to study negotiations of power in local settings. Performativity becomes central to this endeavour for Koch, as it allows us to see social norms 'as effects of power ... [which] "developed" or "grew" over time based on social agreements that became conventions that became rituals and now are seen as "natural" ... through the power of citation and repetition' (2008: 31). She takes up the position, in line with prominent queer linguists, that sexuality and power are inextricably connected and that because queer linguistics takes this as a foundational thesis, it is also related to feminist theory. Koch contrasts the 'desire-centered approach,' which focuses solely on sexual desire while 'bracketing' identity, with the queer linguistic model. Yet she does not completely cast off identities in linguistic analysis, for while identities may be socially constructed and fluid, they are nonetheless useful resources for organizing and positioning social actors. In addition, Koch explains how prominent scholars of queer linguistics reject the psychoanalytic approach found in 'desire-centred' linguistics. According to these linguists, psychoanalysis does not permit for a full understanding of the social contexts at play in the construction of language.

Koch explains the methodology of the queer linguistics model, including its relationship to 'communities of practice' and 'speech communities.' She analyses the various nuances of each approach, including their respective supporters and critics, and argues that the communities of practice model is especially compatible with queer linguistic analysis. After she finishes detailing methodology, she provides a discussion of three scholars' studies

that serve as concrete examples of applied queer linguistic research: Barrett's (1995) work on the linguistic strategies of African American drag queens; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet's (1995) study of linguistic styles and subject positions of female and male jocks and burnouts at a Detroit high school; and Hall's (2002) analysis of linguistic representations of hijra identity in Hindi.

The book provides a valuable overview of recent theoretical developments, although it would have been useful to define queer linguistics early on and to integrate queer theory and linguistics throughout the text rather than describing their development separately. This might have been achieved by foregrounding conceptual intersections rather than relying on a historical approach. There were also a few points in the text where the relationship of queer linguistics to other developments, such as communities of practice and gay and lesbian linguistics, could be more clearly articulated. It would also be exciting to see more of Koch's independent analysis surface in the text.

Despite these suggestions, Koch effectively surveys gender and language research in her explanation and analysis of queer linguistics. She discusses overarching theoretical foundations, methodological approaches, and relevant examples of applied research in order to cogently make the case for using a queer linguistic approach. This introduction to queer linguistics will no doubt be helpful to sociolinguistic researchers and students of linguistics who wish to further challenge the traditional boundaries of their field to account for power, marginalization, and social context in examining local negotiations of language.

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