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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 *colloq* 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 behavior that you engaged in was . . . (mark yes or no for each behavior):

- (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 60% 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 Reinisch (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

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 indelicate 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

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 *travestis* (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

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 heterosexual. 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 heterosexist¹) 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

THINKING ABOUT SEXUALITY

- Even identical genital acts mean very different things to different people.
- To some people, the nimbus of 'the sexual' seems scarcely to extend beyond the boundaries of discrete genital acts; to others it enfolds them loosely or floats virtually free of them.
- Sexuality makes up a large share of the self-perceived identity of some people, a small share of others'.
- Some people spend a lot of time thinking about sex, others little.
- Some people like to have a lot of sex, others little or none.
- Many people have their richest mental/emotional involvement with sexual acts they don't do, or even don't *want* to do.
- For some people, it is important that sex be embedded in contexts resonant with meaning, narrative, and connectedness with other aspects of their life; for other people, it is important that they not be; to others it doesn't occur that they might be.
- For some people, the preference for a certain sexual object, act, role, zone, or scenario is so immemorial and durable that it can only be experienced as innate; for others, it appears to come late or feel aleatory or discretionary.
- For some people, the possibility of bad sex is aversive enough that their lives are strongly marked by its avoidance; for others, it isn't.
- For some people sexuality provides a needed space of heightened discovery and cognitive hyperstimulation. For others, sexuality provides a needed space of routinized habituation and cognitive hiatus.
- Some people like spontaneous sexual scenes, others like highly scripted ones, others like spontaneous-sounding ones that are nonetheless totally predictable.
- Some people's sexual orientation is intensely marked by autoerotic pleasures and histories – sometimes more so than by any other aspect of alloerotic object choice. For others the autoerotic possibility seems secondary or fragile, if it exists at all.
- Some people, homo-, hetero-, and bisexual, experience their sexuality as deeply embedded in a matrix of gender meanings and gender differentials. Others of each sexuality do not.

Source: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), 25–6

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 foresisters, 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