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Analyzing celebrity gossip blogs to gain a better understanding of the language stereotype of gay men

Amanda Wolfel
The University of Toledo

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A Thesis
entitled
Analyzing Celebrity Gossip Blogs to Gain a Better Understanding
of the Language Stereotype of Gay Men

by

Amanda Wolfel

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty as partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Master of Arts Degree in English ESL

Dr. Melinda Reichelt, Committee Chair

Dr. Dorothy Siegel, Committee Member

Prof. Joel Lipman, Committee Member

Dr. Patricia Komuniecki, Dean
College of Graduate Studies

The University of Toledo

May 2010

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Since it first became a major area of interest in sociolinguistics, the study of the language of gay men has shifted focus among several types of linguistic elements, such as slang use and phonology, and has consistently produced inconclusive data. Researchers often rely on their own perceptions of gay language when developing their research methodologies. Many important works in the field are discussed and a new methodology is proposed that may provide deeper insights into the stereotype of gay men that tends to influence heterosexuals' perceptions of gay men. This proposed methodology suggests that researchers conduct a linguistic analysis of what is arguably one of the most stereotypical and certainly one of the most influential gay men in the media today: Perez Hilton. The benefits that analyzing blog writing can provide toward any study of language are explained, which turns into a more specific discussion of the potential that Perez Hilton's blog writing can offer toward understanding linguistic characteristics of the gay stereotype, and ultimately, to the study of gay language.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
Acknowledgments	iv
Table of Contents	v
1 Researching Gay Language	1
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Literature Review	3
1.2.1 Gay Slang	5
1.2.2 Uniquely Gay Language Traits	7
1.2.3 Phonological Aspects of Gay Language	8
1.2.4 Perception	10
1.2.5 Labeling	12
1.2.6 Identity or Desire?	14
1.3 The Gap: Proposal of a New Focus for Research on Gay Language	16
2 From Speech to Blog Writing	18
2.1 Introduction	18
2.2 Differences Among Language Mediums	19
2.2.1 Writing and Speech	19
2.2.2 Printing and Typing	21
2.2.3 Word Processing	21
2.2.4 Hypertext	22
2.3 Blogs	23
2.4 Impact of Blog Writing within a Social Group	26
2.5 How Will the Proposed Methodology Address these Issues?	28
3 Proposed Methodology	30
3.1 Introduction	30
3.2 Proposed Data Source	31
3.3 Proposed Methodology	32
3.4 Future Research	34
3.5 Conclusion	35
References	37

Chapter 1

Researching Gay Language

1.1 Introduction

Since the advent of language and gender studies, many linguists have come to recognize the delicate and elusive relationship between one's gender identity and language style. For one thing, to assume that gender is purely dichotomous and directly related to one of two language styles is problematic (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 2003). This assumption ignores the existence of the non-heterosexual community, which includes individuals whose gender identity may not necessarily coincide with the norm, and it also ignores the variety of factors other than gender that are involved in shaping one's language style.

The study of homosexual language use largely focuses on gay male language and the research base is rife with inconclusive data. As is outlined in the "Literature Review" section of this chapter, studies striving to identify linguistic traits unique to gay speakers have resulted in less than satisfying findings. Many of the problems in this field of research lie with the researchers' assumptions about what are and are not elements of language used by gay speakers. If the bulk of these studies is designed under the same set

of perceptions and consistently produces insignificant results, then perhaps there is a need for a new approach.

I will propose in this thesis a different methodology that may suit the need for a fresh approach to studying gay language use. Prior research has focused exclusively on gay speech. When considering the language used by gay men, it is more reasonable to concentrate on speech than on writing since language manifests itself through speech with fewer filters than through writing. Writing happens after speech, not only in the development of a child, but also in the cognitive evolution of the human species. Writing also provides the chance for editing, while speech is unable to undergo revisions once spoken. There are numerous other differences between speech and writing, which will be covered in the next chapter.

Bearing in mind the differences between speech and writing, I suggest that analyzing gay writing may provide contributions to the study of gay language. I propose analyzing writing over speech, since writing may project a more intentional persona. By “intentional persona,” I am referring to the fact that because writing is not as instantaneous and transitory as speech is, and also since writing can undergo editing and modification, as speech cannot, a writer can create a particular written voice to be read – a persona. I recommend analyzing certain celebrity gossip blogs written through the personae of gay men for this reason. As will be further evidenced in Chapter Two, these blogs are intentionally written in a particular manner in order to produce the desired finished product for the readers: celebrity news via the stereotypical gay man. As a result, the blogger’s true identity is masked under the writing of a fictitious gay man blogging about celebrities. Identifying traits of stereotypically gay language in this masked writing

may lead to a deeper understanding of what specific language traits influence a heterosexual's perception of a speaker as being gay. The rest of this chapter will highlight the most common topics of the research on gay language, which should be investigated and understood in order to pursue unconventional methodologies like the one briefly proposed above and more thoroughly examined in the final chapter of this thesis.

1.2 Literature Review

In order to gain insight into how homosexual language research has evolved, I first looked at previous reviews of literature about homosexual language use, which have overviewed some of the most popular and most controversial issues in this field. In "Lesbian and Gay Male Language Use: A Critical Review of the Literature," Jacobs (1996) addresses several categories of research: phonological variation, grammatical variation, comparison and contrast of homosexual speech with standard American speech, lexicon, conversational styles, humor, and paralinguistics. Jacobs concludes that perhaps no other minority is as diverse as the gay community as it spans across all races, sexes, classes, ages, and regions, to name a few, and agrees with Eckert & McConnell-Ginet (1992) that researchers should "look locally and think practically." To illustrate this important point, Eckert & McConnell-Ginet explain that

to think practically and to look locally is to abandon several assumptions common in gender and language studies: that gender can be isolated from other aspects of social identity and relations, that gender has the same meaning across communities, and that the linguistic manifestations of that meaning are also the same across communities. (p. 462)

They believe that many gender and language researchers often tend to neglect that among social interactions, gender should not be isolated and analyzed as a single component of communication. Rather, it should consider all variables that influence a speaker's language.

In "Gay and Lesbian Language," Kulick (2000) takes a chronological approach. He traces some of the earliest research on the topic and notes that from the early 20th century until the 1980's, research on gay and lesbian speech has almost exclusively focused on the slang use within those groups. This vocabulary has been dubbed "the lavender lexicon," most notably by Leap (1995). Through the acknowledgment of this set of slang terms, certain categories received extra attention. Out of the 60's and 70's emerged discussions of "camp talk" and its relationship with homosexuality. Kulick's section on camp talk reviews previous attempts of linguists, novelists, and researchers to define what exactly camp talk is and to what group of speakers its existence can be credited. He explains that the term "camp" may derive from the French *se camper* which means "show off" or "engage in exaggerated behavior," and that it began to be used mid-20th century as a characteristic associated with homosexual behavior. Since the 1980's, researchers have almost completely limited their studies to analyzing pitch and intonation patterns of gay speech.

I have noticed two distinct patterns of change throughout the decades: "what" to study and "how" to study. The first movement is the shift in focus about what aspects of homosexual speech are most helpful in providing insight into the study of the relationship between sexual orientation and language use. In its earliest days, research on homosexual speech concentrated on slang usage among gay men (Hayes, 1981; Graf & Lippa, 1995).

Then, interest in the field shifted from a lexical domain to a phonological domain as researchers tried to identify sound patterns in homosexual speech, most specifically with pitch and intonation (Podesva, Roberts, & Campbell-Kibler, 2002; Smyth, Jacobs, & Rogers, 2003; Rendall, Vasey, & McKenzie, 2008). At about the same time, researchers also explored how speech impacts a listener's perception of the speaker's sexual orientation (Hajek & Giles, 2005; Gowen & Britt, 2006; Levon, 2006; Munson, McDonald, DeBoe, & White, 2006).

The second development over the years has been a definitional war; that is, how to define the groups under observation and how to define what exactly is being observed. One of the first issues to arise among linguists was that just because a study shows that "x" may be a characteristic of homosexual speech, it does not necessarily mean that "x" is exclusively a homosexual speech trait (Darsey, 1981). Another concern is one of labeling. More specifically, when referring to the target group consisting of non-heterosexuals, a researcher must be sure to use the appropriate label for the group under observation, for instance, "lesbian," "gay," "bisexual," or "transgendered" (Hayes, 1981; Wong, Roberts, & Campbell-Kibler, 2002; Barrett, 2002; McConnell-Ginet, 2002). A final cautionary matter still hotly debated today is to shift the focus from language and identity to language and desire, that is, to attempt to study a group of individuals based on their true inner desires rather than their apparent or self-proclaimed identities (Kulick, 2000; Wong, Roberts, & Campbell-Kibler, 2002; Cameron & Kulick, 2003).

1.2.1 Gay Slang

The first major focus in studying homosexual speech was to analyze specific terminology used within a circle of homosexual speakers. Hayes (1981) studies his own

language use and that of other homosexual people in a variety of settings, and he refers to these languages styles as “gayspeak.” He focuses on what he describes as three major “settings of gayspeak,” among which one may code-switch depending on present company. The first setting Hayes describes is the secret setting, which is the environment where a gay speaker uses as little gayspeak as possible in order to avoid labeling or discrimination. A speaker will likely use this language style if he has not yet “come out.” The second setting is the most commonly recognizable setting: the social setting. The use of social setting gayspeak is crucial for a community of gay speakers because it allows for the assignment of roles within and outside of the language group, and it operates with its own set of observable linguistic traits (the lexicon, intonation patterns, and conversational styles). The third setting is perhaps the most difficult to decipher, the radical-activist setting, which operates on the belief that “language uses us as much as we use language,” so that as long as the gay community continues to use language that binds them, they will not be free.

Nearly a decade later, research continued to address lexical characteristics of homosexual speech. Graf and Lippa (1995), for example, conduct a one year long observational study on the way in which two groups of homosexual men applied feminine terms and women’s names to one another. The researchers attend informal social gatherings of these two groups. Neither group was aware that they were being studied and freely used feminine terms and women’s names to refer to one another. Each group did so in different ways, which the researchers attribute to the varying degrees of activism and involvement in the gay community between the two groups. Graf and Lippa conclude that the use of feminine terms and women’s names is a special code within the

gay community that strengthens the cohesiveness of different social groups within that community.

In the past decade, less emphasis has been placed on gay slang. Purely studying gay slang in hopes of making convincing remarks about the gay community as a whole is a dangerous and ill-considered action because it ignores deeper linguistic issues in the syntax and phonology of the language system and suggests that cataloging a gay lexicon is a sufficient indicator of the speech complexities of the whole gay community. Thus, for the proposed methodology, it would be interesting to consider what lexical items are being used in the celebrity gossip blogs to facilitate creating the desired gay persona, but only as an addition to other linguistic features of the writing. In conducting the proposed study, I recommend not to isolate gay slang when determining what elements of the written language are perceivably gay. There are many linguistic areas to consider when analyzing the blogs, especially in terms of syntax and morphology. Also, I advise taking into account all possibly gay characteristics of writing, such as manipulations in typing (capital letters, italics, multiples of the same letter within a word), which suggest pitch variations or emphasis given to certain syllables. Chapter Two will cover these issues in greater detail.

1.2.2 Uniquely Gay Language Traits

The earliest focus of homosexual speech research –gay slang- was not without debate. Darsey (1981) responds to Hayes' (1981) chapter about gayspeak in the following chapter in the same book. Darsey mentions that the three language settings that Hayes describes include characteristics of speech that are not solely identifiable in gay speech, that is, some characteristics of what Hayes described as gay speech markers can also be

seen in heterosexual contexts and thus are not uniquely gay. Instead of criticizing Hayes' work as useless to the field, Darsey praises the wealth of information that Hayes offers to the very new field of gay studies. Darsey elaborates by saying Hayes has created a new platform for debate. He suggests that the future research should focus on linguistic characteristics of gay speech that are unique to gay speech; otherwise, any findings are not conclusive.

I agree that researchers in this field should not assume that any speech characteristic under observation is indeed a speech characteristic exclusive to homosexual speech. However, I also believe that a certain feature of speech that can be identified as one typical of homosexual speech is still helpful to the field if it is used differently or more often than in non-homosexual speech. Thus, simply identifying language traits commonly used in homosexual speech is valuable, whether or not the traits are uniquely gay.

1.2.3 Phonological Aspects

Research on homosexual speech has moved from the lexical domain toward a phonological domain. Podesva, Roberts, and Campbell-Kibler (2002) compared the speech styles of an openly gay attorney and a heterosexual male representative of a libertarian organization through the means of vowel durations, sibilant durations, and pitch, and they found that there were no significant differences. Rendall, Vasey, and McKenzie (2008) compared the physiological differences (height and weight) between homosexual speakers and heterosexual speakers with respect to the pitch of several vowel sounds. Since no across-the-board findings were found, the authors in both of these studies concluded that contrary to popular stereotypes, differences in homosexual speech

and heterosexual speech cannot be reduced to pitch differences but are perhaps be due to a selective adoption of opposite-sex speech patterns or selective use of vowel production styles as a means of signaling in-group identity.

Other researchers have used the perception of listeners to calibrate the “gayness” of recordings made by various speakers before analyzing the phonological elements of the recordings, as in Smyth, Jacobs, and Rogers (2003). They played recordings of various speakers and asked listeners to decide whether or not the speakers sounded homosexual. Based on these perceptions, the researchers conducted a pitch analysis and found that there was no significant difference between groups that the listeners perceived as homosexual or heterosexual. Levon (2006) also examined pitch range and sibilant duration by recording the speech of a single individual and presenting the recording to a group of 10 men and women who all identified the speaker as “extremely gay” and “extremely effeminate.” Levon claims that this pretest is crucial to the success of the methodology because the pretest group perceives the sexual orientation of the speaker of the recorded voice rather than being told that the recorded voice is gay or straight. The recording was then digitally manipulated in terms of pitch and sibilant duration by using measurements from past research. The participants were 121 undergraduates in Manhattan enrolled in linguistics, anthropology, or women’s studies courses. The participants were not only asked to rate the different recordings on the basis of sexual orientation, but also on several other affective scales such as generosity and kindness. A concise assessment of the results revealed that the pitch range and sibilant duration had no effect of the participants’ judgments on the speaker’s sexual orientation.

The results of phonological studies of gay speech usually come back with no significant findings. This is not to say that data from these studies is completely worthless. The careful compilation of recordings of speakers, be they self-identifiably homosexual or not, can be useful for new areas of research within the field in some shape or form. If nothing else, having a data bank of recordings of a variety of speakers can provide a pool of data for future research to draw upon.

1.2.4 Perception

As suggested in the previous section, perception is an approach used in much of the research in order to discover possible traits commonly perceived by the general public as traits of a gay speaker. Perception is not a harmless assumption as it might also affect an interaction. For instance, in a study by Hajek and Giles (2005), undergraduates in a southern California university were given a personal information sheet about David, an imaginary student who, through the personal information sheet, is depicted as being gay. The participants were asked to write a conversation that they would imagine having with David in a first-day-of-class-ice-breaker and then later report how they felt while writing the dialogue. The researchers also asked the participants to fill out personal information sheets about themselves which disclosed information pertinent to the research, such as the sexual orientation of the participants. Hajek and Giles concluded that heterosexuals' conversational style and content were influenced by the homosexuality of their conversation partner, much like a study by Harwood (1998), which concluded that the conversational style and content of intergenerational speakers will be influenced by the age of their conversation partner.

While Hajek and Giles have suggested that perceived sexual orientation of a speaker might influence the conversational style of another speaker, other researchers have considered how the perceived sexual orientation of a speaker may manipulate the judgment and actions of a listener toward the speaker. Gowen and Britt (2006) examined the coupled effect of homosexual speech and sexual orientation in a mock college admission phone interview. For the pilot study, a homosexual undergraduate student was recruited to record six tapes: three were read in a stereotypically gay voice and three were read in unmarked, non-gay speech. In each of the categories, the speaker was identified through the recording as either gay (refers to boyfriend), straight (refers to girlfriend), or unspecified (refers to best friend). Gowan and Britt designed a short telephone interview between the recruited student who acted as the interviewee and another speaker who acted as the interviewer. Each of the recordings was identical except for the mention of boyfriend, girlfriend, or best friend, and whether or not the speech pattern was stereotypically gay or straight. The participants were 120 undergraduates drawn from a subject pool at a southeastern university and were randomly grouped into six groups, each of which listened to one of the six recordings. The participants were misinformed that the study was about the effect of phone interviews for college admission programs. Each group listened to the recording and made judgments in four categories: admission decision measure, scholarship decision measure, social distance measure, and attitudes toward lesbians and gay men scale. Gowan and Britt found that the listeners were more likely to grant admission and scholarship when the speech patterns in any of the recordings matched those of the given sexual orientation of the speaker in the recording and were less likely to grant admission or scholarship when the implied gay student

spoke in a stereotypically straight voice and vice versa. There was no difference with respect to the implied sexuality of the speaker, but preference was given to speakers whose stereotypical voice matched the implied sexuality of the speaker.

As stated in the introduction, perception is one of the main topics of the proposed methodology because real world implications of how an individual is treated on the basis of their sexual orientation are largely dependent on perception. If we can gain a better understanding of what elements of language affect our perception of one's sexual orientation, we can gain a better understanding of how our perceptions are formed and whether or not we can trust instinct.

1.2.5 Labeling

The non-heterosexual community includes individuals whose sexual and gender orientations are so varied that finding a single term acceptable by all to use when referring to this demographic is next to impossible. Kulick (2000) recalls a personal incident during a queer studies conference where he heard the acronym "LGBTTSQ" and "was informed (in that tart, dismissive tone that New Yorkers use to convey their opinion that the addressee must have just crawled out from under some provincial rock) that it signified „Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, Two-Spirit, Queer, or Questioning”" (p. 244). That a well-published cultural and linguistic anthropologist of more than a decade is chastised for his unfamiliarity with the latest set of initials for referencing the homosexual community shows how quickly new labels become the standard accepted form and how the emotional connotations that these labels hold for those umbrellaed by the term.

When referring to a target group in a linguistic study, one should take care not to mislabel or to use any term that over-generalizes the group that is actually being observed. When studying the language use of homosexuals, there are many factors to consider when choosing labels for the target group. McConnell-Ginet (2002) argues that, for one, the difference between the dictionary meaning of a certain word and its actual usage in social context could create serious implications for a study. Using the denotation of a word without considering possible connotations can create problems. While definitions exist to help direct and funnel thoughts about a particular subject, those definitions also create boundaries around an idea and may cause negative consequences if not carefully considered before use. McConnell-Ginet supports her claim by analyzing the words “queer,” “gay,” and “lesbian” with regard to the political connotations they have projected throughout their existence. Seidman (1997) provides historical context for the celebration of the word “queer” by example of the activist group Queer Nation in the early 1990’s. This group developed the famed “We’re here, we’re queer, get used to it,” and McConnell-Ginet points out that mantras such as these operate on the shock value that the word “queer” provides, as a result of its historically insulting connotations. While activists may use the term for its shock value, Wong, Roberts, and Campbell-Kibler (2002) note the negative impact that the most basic definition of the word “queer” has on the rest of the group of individuals whom it is used to define. The word “queer” implies “different,” so it is unsurprising that this may be offensive to many of those who are referred to as such, activists aside. Kulick (2000) also addresses the problem with using “queer” in his observation that

queer, however, has never been accepted by a large number of the people it was resurrected to embrace, and in activist contexts, the word has lately been turning up as just one more identity to be tacked on to the end of an already lengthy list (p. 244).

What is important to recognize is that while some non-heterosexuals do not accept the term “queer” as an appropriate all-encompassing label, others appreciate its versatility and impact as a result of its place in history. Perhaps no single term will ever be fitting for the group that Jacobs (1996) describes as the most diverse minority.

Considering the implications of so many definitional struggles, special care must be taken when choosing a label for a target group in a study. Hayes (1981) points out that while participants may be self-identified as non-heterosexual, they might not identify themselves as part of the target group under the specific label the researcher chooses to use. The participants might identify themselves otherwise and will thus label themselves otherwise. For instance, a researcher studying the language of gay men might consider data from a man that the researcher considers gay. The problem arises if the man might consider himself as bisexual rather than gay.

Labeling is especially important in any sociolinguistic field of study, and as seen in the field of studying homosexual language, it can be especially problematic. As I have mentioned in the introduction section, the suggested target group in the proposed methodology in this thesis should be referred to as a group of gay personae. It is crucial to acknowledge that the target language is not necessarily the language of one individual person, and it is also not necessarily the typical or natural language of the individual portrayed as the blogger. Chapter Two will extensively examine this issue.

1.2.6 Identity or Desire?

Within the past decade, the newest area of debate in studying gay speech has moved toward redefining the target group. Kulick (2000) suggests that future research should perhaps not only reconsider the way the target group is named, but that researchers should become more concerned with studying desire rather than sexual orientation, since the term sexual orientation implies a clear cut distinction, which is not often the case. Cameron and Kulick (2003) examine the debate over whether to continue researching language in terms of sexual identity or to change the focus to researching language in terms of desire. This distinction has been made throughout recent years because while identity implies an explicit recognition of one's sexual orientation, it does not account for underlying desires that truly mold a person's self-presentation. In other words, studying identity means studying those who outwardly identify themselves as part of the target group, but at the same time it means ignoring those who in terms of their desires fit the target group but are not outwardly identifiable as such. Focusing on sexual desire extends the boundary of research to include those who may not necessarily identify themselves as "gay" or "lesbian" but fit the desires held by those groups. Wong, Roberts, and Campbell-Kibler (2002) take the debate between using sexual identity or sexual desire as a way of defining target groups a step further by pointing out that there are other factors to consider besides these two, including nationality and ethnic backgrounds, among many other factors.

There are obvious difficulties in shifting the focus from identity to desire. Cameron and Kulick (2003) mention that researchers encounter problems with focusing on desire rather than identity because the focus on desire is more secretive and elusive

and thus more indefinable. How can a researcher study a target group whose members might not even be aware that they fall into the categorization of the target group? How can researchers know what the desires of the target group really are? What can the researchers actually study? These are some serious issues that need to be addressed before the research can begin its shift toward desire.

1.3 The Gap: Proposal of New Focus for Research on Gay Language

As evidenced in the previous sections, there are countless complications in the field of gay linguistics. Phonological studies have consistently produced statistically insignificant results. Methodologies tend to oversimplify the intricate reality of gay speech by isolating an alleged aspect of it and then, not surprisingly, being unable to find it in the speech. Not only do the data collection instruments lack the necessary elements for obtaining pertinent and conclusive results, but defining the target group itself has caused and continues to bedevil researchers.

Researchers in homosexual language acknowledge that there indeed seem to be patterns in the use of language among the homosexual community. The field's existence is not in vain; rather, it exists because we hold common assumptions about homosexual language and yet still cannot quite break it into analyzable components. Many researchers even recognize the same patterns and attempt different methodologies to arrive at some sort of conclusion. Why, then, has the vast majority of the research failed to come to any conclusion at all? It can be tempting to overgeneralize the target group in any study, which is especially dangerous when the target group of homosexuals is as diverse as it is. Perhaps we are allowing our own perceptions of what we believe to be elements characterizing homosexual language to form our focus of study, without truly

understanding whence these perceptions come. What are our perceptions based on? It might prove beneficial to explore an idea that the stereotype of gay men projected by the media may have a role in our perceptions. In order to investigate any correlation between stereotypical language traits and target language traits in studies, we must first identify the stereotypical language traits, which the proposed methodology addresses in Chapter Three. But first, Chapter Two will contextualize the proposed methodology by discussing differences between speech and writing, distinguishing between different types of blogs, and suggesting the power and solidarity that blogging can provide for a specific social group.

Chapter 2

From Speech to Blog Writing

2.1 Introduction

Chapter One began with a critique of a widely-held assumption in the field of language and gender: that there exists a dichotomy of two clearly defined genders which is reflected in two clearly defined language styles. I argued otherwise. The trouble that researchers have had in producing substantial data in this field of research has shown that a language division between the two genders is not easily drawn. With respect to language, assuming that it exists in a clearly defined dichotomy of speech and writing is just as problematic. Biber (1988) suggests that the fact that both speech and writing exist in a variety of genres (résumés, academic lectures, love notes, water cooler talk, etc...) implies that there are overlaps between and differences within these two language forms. The proposed methodology presented in Chapter Three of this thesis relies on data from blog writing, but this research should only be conducted with not just a thorough understanding of the differences between speech and writing, but also of the difference between the specific data source and other types of writing. That is the main focus of this chapter, to look more closely at the language medium that I propose as a valuable data source: blogs.

2.2 Differences Among Language Mediums

2.2.1 Writing and Speech

Before exploring the possibilities that blogs may offer to the study of gay language, one should consider the different ways in which language is used. The innate language vehicle available for humans is speech. Speech is an auditory exchange between people that often works in conjunction with paralanguage in order to communicate meaning (Baron, 1981). Speech was also the first vehicle of language for the human race. For centuries, people could communicate only through speech until writing developed as an additional and unique form of communication. Vandendorpe (2009) explains that in a speech communication, the listener is unable to revisit what the speaker says as compared with the way that a reader can review a piece of writing; writing is a “fixation of thought.” Writing is an invention whose creation allowed opportunities for people to edit, revisit, review, analyze, and distribute language to the general public. This technology, although a form of language, is not a “substitute for speech” (Gnanadesikan, 2009). Drawing conclusions about language in general based on analysis of writing should be avoided.

Nearly all of the studies mentioned in Chapter One focus on speech rather than writing, perhaps because of its instantaneous production and the appeal that this provides to a researcher eager to uncover instinctual language tendencies, which ultimately leads to the discovery of language patterns. Even Hajek and Giles (2005), which relied on the written data of imagined conversations with a perceivably gay student, strived to capture language used in a conversation, albeit via writing. The researchers coded the data by using techniques from conversation analysis, and found that the communication schemas

they uncovered paralleled and supported a similar previous study on intergenerational communication by Harwood (1998); and they also found new communication schemas unique to gay-straight communication. I would argue, in support of my proposed methodology, that gathering writing as data in their study helped them discover interesting results. Writing involves the use of more carefully constructed language because of the benefit of revising and having the time to think things through. The participants in Hajek and Giles' study were given a topic to write on and were also given time to develop their thoughts into writing. If the researchers had set up mock scenarios by bringing in a gay college student for the participants to engage in a communication such as the imagined written one, the results might have been quite different. The results of a spoken communication may have been a better reflection of the participants' most impulsive conversational reactions, but the written imagined conversation allowed for the participants to present themselves in a way that they wanted to be perceived.

This Hajek and Giles study, in fewer words, more accurately captured a more deliberate communication of the participants via writing rather than the participants' impulsive communication via speech. Studies analyzing writing over speech should emphasize the unique characteristics of this different approach to studying language. For one, the traditional approach to studying speech has the benefit of examining language as it is being used in an unselfconscious and time-bound manner. On the other hand, analyzing writing has the advantage of considering the way people use it to create a persona. Language can be carefully crafted to achieve a preferred written voice. What this means for research is the chance to analyze the deliberate ways in which individuals use language to construct their identities.

2.2.2 Printing and Typing

The differences between speech and writing are only briefly mentioned above, but within the realm of writing, there are many variations that deserve consideration with respect to the proposed methodology of studying gay celebrity blogs. *The Writing Revolution* by Gnanadesikan (2009) describes many landmark changes in the technology of writing. One of the first major developments was typeset printing as an option to achieve what handwriting previously could not. The Gutenberg press from the mid 1400s contributed to the spread of widely demanded pieces of writing such as the Bible, but along with its undeniable advantages also came disadvantages. Printing presses demanded a lot of time to set the type and print pages of text, one at a time. The invention of typewriting in the late 1800s, as opposed to the type printing of presses like the Gutenberg, allowed for more flexibility. Typists were able to type any piece of writing, as long as it was done with relative precision. One of the major disadvantages of typewriting was that it was not easy to erase a typing mistake, and few people were able to obtain the skills necessary to type efficiently with speed and accuracy.

2.2.3 Word Processing

Then came word processing, which, as Gnanadesikan (2009) describes, took the freedom of typewriting to another level. The ability of typists to delete and copy and paste are only a few of the opportunities that word processing brought to the technology of writing. Fonts can be manipulated in endless ways in order for typists to present their writing in the most visually pleasing layouts. Alphabets for nearly every written language exist in most word processing programs, making typing an option for any literate person fortunate enough to have access to a computer. Even with the abundance of advantages

that word processing has brought to the technology of writing, there exist certain consequences. Writing on a computer screen is harder for the eye to read. It is certainly harder to scroll through pages of text on a screen than it is to flip through pages of a book. But the ease of handling a book is perhaps challenged and outdone by one of the newest forms of writing: hypertext.

2.2.4 Hypertext

Books present writing in a continuous manner. Even books with chapters dedicated to different categories of information still present writing within the chapters in a continuous manner. Readers must dig through the pages in order to find relevant information, or consult the table of contents or index (if the book has one). Even then, readers need to sift through paragraphs in order to find what they are looking for. Vandendorpe (2009) explains how hypertext of the Internet allows for readers to easily click from one topic to another. These associations between topics distribute the information in what Vandendorpe describes as “rhizomes,” a network of associations that “branch out” information in a structure similar to a rhizome stem and root system of a plant. This is especially relevant to the proposed methodology of this thesis, as blogs are laid out in a hypertext form. This specific form of writing allows the reader to choose what to read. The reader can interact with the blogger in comment fields of the website, and the blogger often addresses the readers directly, as in “Welcome back, my faithful readers,” or “What do you think of this fashion disaster?” Vandendorpe suggests that “interactivity, thus, despite its technological appearance, seems to revive certain aspects of orality” (p. 63). So even though blog writing is a form of writing, it reflects some conversational elements that could not as easily be obtained in other forms of writing.

2.3 Blogs

Baron (2008) describes the birth and evolution of blogs. Web logs, later shortened to “blogs,” began to take hold in the late 1990s. These early blogs were personal websites containing lists of URLs that the blogger found to be interesting, and each URL was often accompanied by a short headline describing the content of the link. One mandate in blogging was that the blogger needed to maintain the blog by regularly updating the material. By updating the material, the blogger simply added new entries to the list of previous entries. The most recent entry always at the top of the webpage is the first thing a visitor to the page would see. Blogging has since generated interest in a larger population of Internet users. As a result, there are now many different types of blogs.

Baron explains that all blogs share four common traits: they are text based, entries are organized in reverse chronological order (newest entry listed first), bloggers regularly update the blogs, and the bloggers create links to other websites. She also discusses three main types of blogs: news/political, personal journal, and expertise. Sometimes, these boundaries are not always clear. Newson (2009) describes several other categories of blogs: academic, arts, how to blog, business and professional, entertainment, financial, food, jobs and careers, technology, personal, politics, and sports. He also argues that there are many more categories within these major categories. Perez Hilton’s blog, www.perezhilton.com, which will be referred to throughout the rest of this chapter, and which will also be used as the main example for the proposed methodology to be discussed in Chapter Three, falls under the entertainment category, and will be more specifically referred to as a gay celebrity blog.

I have classified Perez's blog as a gay celebrity blog, as he is a self-identified gay man who blogs about celebrities. A typical blog entry on Perez's website consists of a paparazzi photo of a celebrity accompanied by a few sentences of commentary by Perez. The commentaries are generally very "Perez Hilton-like." He writes in a way that writer Benoit Denizet-Lewis (2009) of the US-based national gay and lesbian news magazine *The Advocate* describes as "the style of a catty, celebrity-obsessed seventh-grade girl." Denizet-Lewis conducted an interview with Perez and wrote one of the most recent and most personal glimpses into the blogger's life. Perez's real name is Mario Lavandeira and he blogs on weekdays from before sunrise until about 7 p.m. According to the Web information company Alexa, his blog has been online since February 6, 2005, and most of the readers of Perez's site are women between the ages of 18 and 35. Also according to Alexa, his blog is the 131st most popular website in America, and since this rank includes mega-websites like Google.com and Facebook.com, a celebrity gossip blog like Perez's to be ranked 131st is quite an accomplishment. This number shows how popular Perez's blog is and how much of an impact that his blog entries have on the Internet community. The negative consequences of this impact will be further discussed later in this chapter.

Besides the influence on readers from the immense popularity of Perez's blog, there are other qualities of this blog that offer a unique perspective into language use. As briefly mentioned in Chapter One and as will be discussed more deeply in Chapter Three, analyzing a gay celebrity blog like Perez Hilton's blog will reveal certain language traits that the blogger uses frequently in order to help create and maintain an online identity. It is important that writing analyzed in the blog entries should not be assumed to be like the

speech of the speaker. The blog entries should be analyzed as the language of carefully crafted and edited representations of how the blogger wishes to be perceived.

Furthermore, it can be safely said that the blog writing can be likened to that of theatrical speech, a highly scripted form of language, if one must compare this type of writing to a spoken genre. The blog writing is very much masked language. It is as though the blogger dons his celebrity-blogging-mask and writes through this persona. As far as the content, Denizet-Lewis (2009) quoted Perez as saying “I don’t really believe everything I write. What I write is an exaggeration of what I believe. It’s heightened reality. I write a lot of things just to piss people off or get a laugh. I’m not *The New York Times*. I’m Perez Hilton.” When asked about calling a beauty queen a bitch, Perez was also quoted as saying “The word ‘bitch’ has no meaning to me. It’s just a word.” It is important to understand the content of Perez’s entries is not necessarily what the blogger believes, but is a way to initiate a reaction in the readers. Knowing this may help researchers understand the way that Perez uses language, not as a true representation of his beliefs, but as a way to get into character in order to give the readers what they expect.

Earlier in this section, I mentioned that there are several types of blogs, and that I categorized Perez’s blog as a gay celebrity blog. I would also argue that because of the blog’s immense popularity, it is also a business blog. Perez Hilton is selling a brand: his own name. In “Perez Hilton Won’t Shut Up,” an article on the *Entertainment Weekly* website, Stack (2009) states that Perez hopes to build a brand on the same level that Oprah has. With the heavy traffic that Perez’s site draws in, he receives a generous monetary income from advertisers eager to use the popularity of his site to promote their products. According to Silicon Valley Blogger (2010), a blogger on a website about

finance in the world of technology, Perez earns around \$110,000 per month, a number based on ad rates. This huge income, along with Newson's (2009) description of a successful business blog, clearly defines Perez's blog as a business blog. Newson describes several advantages that blogs can bring to business, such as having the freedom to be your own publisher, having a ready audience, speaking with your own voice, and moving with the times, among many others. Perez was able to tap into these benefits and his website became one of the most popular in the country, making him a celebrity. This is important to note when considering the proposed methodology, because since Perez has built the highly successful Perez Hilton name brand, a lot is at stake to maintain this image. The language he uses, however masked it may be, should remain consistent due to the pressure to continually produce the Perez Hilton name brand, leaving a researcher with a reliable source of data of the masked target language.

2.4 Impact of Blog Writing Within a Social Group

The Internet has provided an opportunity for members of nearly any social group to come together to build a sense of solidarity. *Webbing Cyberfeminist Practice*, edited by Blair, Gajjala, and Tulley (2009), is a collection of chapters written about the prospects that the Internet has provided for one social group in particular: feminists. The editors organized the chapters into three units: "Forming Virtual Kinships," "Redrawing Academic Borders," and "Resisting Gender Hierarchies." The most pertinent units to the proposed methodology in this thesis are the first and last units. In the first unit, the editors point out how feminists are able to use the Internet to form support systems that would not exist without the web. The chapters in this unit focus on different types of websites, among which are those for women who experienced stillbirth or neonatal loss, for women

who suffer from infertility, and even for women seeking help to support their anorexia. The editors mention that these sites do not exist to provide answers, but to provide support among the women. The women can interact and share stories in a way that would not have been possible without the Internet because the web reaches a far larger and more widespread audience than a support group meeting once a week would. These websites are available around the clock, allowing for the women to give and receive support at any time needed. In the last unit, the editors consider Internet use among other minority social groups and quote Heinz and Cheng (2005), who assert that “the World Wide Web (where accessible) has drastically changed communication and identity-related practices and perceptions.” The question relevant to this thesis is How has the Internet changed communication within the gay community? Looking at the style of communication of a gay celebrity blogger like Perez Hilton may provide some insight into the blog’s place in the larger gay community on the Internet.

A quick Google search of the term “gays against perez hilton” turned up a number of possibly relevant results, including hits from gay sites like queerty.com, glad.org, and gawker.com, to name a few. They are to the online gay community as the sites in *Webbing Cyberfeminist Practice* are to the online feminist community. These sites are an opportunity for gays to create solidarity amongst one another. But sites like Perez’s create a bad name for much of the gay community. Anna North (2009), who writes for jezebel.com, a site whose byline is “celebrity, sex, fashion for women,” opens the article “Perez Hilton, Brüno, and „The Gay-Panic Offense,”” with the question “What does this mean for gay stereotypes in the media?” She discusses several of Perez’s highly offensive publicity stunts, such as when he called music group Black Eyed Peas’ will.i.am a

“faggot,” which left Perez with a black eye due to a punch in the face. According to North, members and supporters of the gay community wish that Perez would tone down his antics, as they are creating a bad name for the gay community as a whole. J. Matt Barber (2009), for CNSNews.com, describes Perez’s actions in “Perez Hilton: The Foul Face of ‚Gay’ Activism” as “provid[ing] the world a sneak peek into the soul of homosexual activism.” With most of the gay community against Perez’s behaviors, Perez’s actions should not be considered any part of homosexual activism. Cyberfeminists can connect online for solidarity and support, but the gay community only does so under the shadow of Perez Hilton.

2.5 How Will the Proposed Methodology Address these Issues?

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, studying writing allows a researcher to examine the elements of language that an individual has labored over. Speech is much more fluid and unrehearsed, and phrases like “I put my foot in my mouth” reflect that speech can often present an individual in a way that he or she would not like to be presented. Writing allows more time for an individual to carefully plot and rearrange words into phrases and sentences until a piece of writing is created that the individual is content with sharing. Perez Hilton’s blog showcases a specific type of writing that is masked and portrays a certain persona: a gay man blogging about the lives of celebrities. Perez’s blog, with its immense popularity among the Internet community and the media, generates a particularly predictable and stereotyped language. Because it is a blog and tends to directly address the readers personally, it is conversational in nature, despite the fact that it is writing. Analyzing the blog entries may provide insight into this stereotype that is damaging the rest of the gay community, both online and in the real world. Until

now, a proposed methodology has repeatedly been referred to, and Chapter Three will go into further detail about specifics of this methodology.

Chapter 3

Proposed Methodology

3.1 Introduction

Chapter One outlined the major areas of interest within the field of gay language studies, and it also pointed to a gap in the research. Inconclusive data in this field may be due to the tendency for researchers to rely on their assumptions about gay language, based on their own perceptions and expectations about gay language. It is difficult to investigate a language variety when its speakers are so heavily stereotyped, as is the case with gay men. Perhaps this is why the field of research is so slow in moving forward. The typical American can often identify a man as being gay based on his speech, but a group of linguists analyzing the speech of gay men over a time span of almost 50 years have yet to identify any speech traits that are characteristic of gay men. How can this be?

Chapter Two investigated differences between speech and writing, explored the various types of writing throughout history, and suggested that studying celebrity blogs written through a gay persona might offer a new perspective on the study of gay language. Studying these blogs from a linguistic point of view might reveal deeper insight into the stereotype of gay language. This will not directly address the gap as mentioned in Chapter One, but will help researchers understand more about linguistic

traits of the stereotype itself, thus redirecting future methodologies in the field. The following sections of this chapter propose a variety of research options aimed at achieving a better understanding of linguistic elements of the stereotype.

3.2 Proposed Data Source

In Chapter Two, I described Perez Hilton's blog as a worthy data source for linguistic analysis. There, I supplied general information about Perez, as depicted through published interviews in popular magazines, and information about his blog, such as the way Perez uses it to get a reaction from his readers. While performing a linguistic analysis of Perez's blog, I stressed in Chapter Two that the language form he uses involves masked writing, and that it should not be analyzed to make claims about gay language in general. The language should be analyzed with an understanding that Perez is writing to project a certain persona, that of a brutally direct, celebrity and fashion-savvy gay man. This type of persona is easily viewed as the stereotype of a gay man. Hajek and Giles (2005), as described in Chapter One, mentioned that in imagined dialogues with an imaginary gay student, many of the female participants in their study tended to talk about shopping or gossiping with him. This supports the idea that stereotypical activities of gay men include fashion and gossiping. Perez's blog covers these territories, lending his blog and himself to the stereotype.

In a study designed to investigate a form of gay language that is heavily influenced by the stereotype, a celebrity gossip blog such as Perez's offers many benefits. For one, the masked writing he uses is laden with characteristics of stereotypically gay language. Since the data source is writing rather than speech, a researcher can assume that because of the opportunity to revise and because of the immense audience that the

blog reaches, the language is carefully crafted in order to portray the persona in a particular way. Readers expect a certain voice when buying into the Perez Hilton brand by visiting the blog, and Perez consistently churns out this persona via highly stylized writing. Also, the blog entries tend only to be a few sentences or phrases long, forcing the blogger to achieve the desired personality of the persona in as few words as possible. It is as though the blog entries are a concentrated portrayal of the desired persona, providing a rich source of linguistic data for a researcher analyzing stereotypically gay language.

3.3 Proposed Methodology

To approach a data source like Perez Hilton's blog, I will first need to select a set of blog entries. This selection process could be approached in several ways, such as taking all entries from the first day of each month of one year, all entries from one week, or a randomly selected set of entries. Then, I will read all of the blog entries and determine a list of specific discourse elements that appear in the blog entries.

This list will draw from previous research on discourse analysis and include linguistic traits. Such a list cannot be formally proposed here and now, but can only be developed after close readings of the blog entries to be analyzed. Of course, there are some items that will almost certainly be included in the list. It will include heavily researched conversational elements such as tag questions, which are thoroughly researched in Lakoff's (1975) work on gendered language. On the list, tag questions could be further detailed into different types, such as "facilitative" and "epistemic modal" tags, which Holmes (1995) describes as having totally different functions for men and women. Another item that should be included in the list is the use of direct address. This list item, like the tag questions, could also be broken down in terms of tone of address

and assumed gender of the reader, such as using a welcoming and feminine form like “hello, my darlings.” One more item that should definitely be included in the list is the use of insult words. Again, this item could be further itemized on the basis of connotation. Whether Perez seems to use these insulting words in a positive or negative connotation makes a difference for analysis, since his use of “bitch” could be used to peg a celebrity either as unsavory or as charmingly sassy.

The list also needs to include new categories for analysis that are more specific to blog writing but are still linguistically important, such as the use of abbreviations and acronyms (OMG and WTF), the use of capital letters for emphasis, the use of multiple letters for emphasis (as in “waaaay too much”), and the use of multiple punctuation marks for emphasis, among other possibilities. The collection of examples described above is only a small sampling of the list of linguistic elements that can be analyzed, but based on these examples, it would look similar to this:

1. Tag questions

- 1a. Faciliative

- 1b. Epistemic modal

2. Direct Address

- 2a. Tone

- 2a1. To welcome

- 2a2. To create distance

- 2b. Assumed gender of recipient

- 2b1. Female

- 2b2. Male

3. Insult
 - 3a. Positive
 - 3b. Negative
4. Use of abbreviation
5. Use of multiple letters
6. Use of multiple punctuation

Other coders will then look at the list that I developed and will suggest additions or modifications to the categories. Then, my coders and I will code the data and use the numbers of each category for further analysis.

3.4 Further Research

The data obtained in the methodology described above would be a good representation of linguistic traits used most often in the blog entries, suggesting that Perez exploits these traits to create a blogger persona. This data could easily be further analyzed to make broader generalizations about gay celebrity blogs as a whole. There exist several other sites like Perez's that the researcher could also use to employ the method. In an even larger reach, the researcher could analyze other forms of popular culture that depict gay men stereotypically, such as many television shows and movies. This, of course, would demand a comparison of speech and writing, but might still provide insights of the stereotype. Finally, the researcher could take non-celebrity gossip blog entries written by gay men in which an argument could be made that the blogger does not want to portray the stereotype. Blogs from members of the online gay-proud magazine *The Advocate* might provide worthy data sources. These blogs might contain language that is less masked than the language used in Perez's blog, and a comparison could be made between

the language categories used in heavily masked stereotypically gay writing and less masked gay writing. I say “less masked” because one cannot assume that any piece of writing is completely unmasked, as the writer’s intent is not always completely noticeable, as in Perez’s case.

As suggested above, there are a variety of ways that a researcher could use the data source of a blog like Perez Hilton’s in a study on stereotypically gay language. The data can always be further analyzed in comparison to other language mediums, but even an analysis of the language used in Perez’s blog should reveal linguistic traits that are used most often. The traits identified in a study from this methodology might hold promise toward a better understanding of what the gay stereotype is linguistically based on.

3.5 Conclusion

Using a data source like Perez Hilton’s blog in order to gain deeper linguistic insights into the gay stereotype certainly has its limits. Shifting the research on gay language from the actual speech of members of the gay community toward an analysis of the writing of a stereotypically gay persona via blog entries might seem unnecessary. Why go backward when we should be going forward? In sociolinguistic studies, it is nearly impossible to divorce oneself from one’s preexisting assumptions and perceptions of language groups. Researchers conduct linguistic analyses with some set of biases. We may never be able to determine a set of linguistic characteristics unique to gay speakers in a similar way that research has treated other groups of linguistically similar speakers, such as speakers of different American dialects, Black English speakers, and speakers of different socioeconomic class. But, a deeper understanding of the specific linguistic traits

of the stereotype of gay language can help guide researchers in conducting less biased research.

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