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Masculinity in lesbian discourse: The case of *butch* and *femme*

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Abstract

This chapter explores the ways in which a lesbian community of practice perform a 'butch' identity. It uses discourse analysis to consider an interaction between them, showing a shared sense of self to be produced which rejects traditional symbols of femininity. It is argued that performing a 'butch' identity is not the same as projecting a 'masculine' self; instead, butch identity is a way of challenging typical expectations about (heterosexual) women and femininity. 'Butch' identity is more complex than the mimicry of maleness, as it is often interpreted; instead, it allows lesbian women to perform an alternative, queer female identity.

Introduction¹

Work in the area of language and masculinity has, unsurprisingly – and as argued already in this volume – typically concerned the language of men (see, for example, Johnson and Meinhof (1997) and more recently Milani (2011)). This research has served to provide a lens through which we may interpret masculinity and establish what it *means*. Studies have shown that masculinity is constructed through interaction via the rejection of, for example, homosexuality and intimacy (Cameron 1997; Pujolar 1997; Kiesling 2002; Milani and Jonsson 2011), the discussion of sport and women (Coates 2003), and the use of competitive language to assert hierarchical positions (Kiesling 1997). Such work reveals the ideological link between **homosexuality** and femininity/effeminacy; it emphasises the hegemonic ideal of 'masculinity' as meaning heterosexual, 'red-blooded' maleness (Cameron 1997, 62) and illustrates that it exists in opposition to women and gay men. Despite this, scholars such as Halberstam (1998) have argued that masculinity can exist in *isolation* from men, and "female masculinity" is often presented as being synonymous with butch styles and behaviours in lesbian women. In this chapter, I problematise and challenge the use of the term 'masculinity' when discussing the identity construction of **butch** lesbian women. I argue that the phrase "**female masculinity**" (Halberstam 1998) may imply that butch lesbians are 'pretending to be'

men due to the connotations that ‘masculinity’ has with ‘manliness,’ and that we should instead re-interpret what butch women do as a rejection of heteronormative femininity.

In line with the themes of performance and intersectionality that resonate throughout this volume, I focus in this chapter on the projection of a specifically middle-class, middle-aged, white lesbian identity by members of a lesbian **community of practice**. Using a sociocultural linguistics framework (Bucholtz and Hall 2005), identity is viewed here as an interactional and momentary phenomenon which is intersubjectively constructed in discourse. Through a consideration of the sociocultural context of lesbian culture (specifically, the meaning of **‘butch’** versus **‘femme’** styles and identities), as well as the ethnographic site of a group of gay women’s interaction, this chapter will unpick the indexical links between the rejection of ideological femininity that takes place in the community of practice, and the women’s stance-taking towards ideologically butch styles. I will argue that the women do not simply ‘do’ masculinity but, instead, challenge hegemonic ideologies of femaleness in the construction of a butch identity. Central to this argument is that non-femininity need not necessarily be defined as ‘masculinity’; both femininity and masculinity are reworked, queered and negotiated in this group of women’s construction of a lesbian-specific identity, one which embraces the cultural stereotype of ‘butch’ and rejects that which is ‘femme.’ I will begin this chapter by outlining the historically salient identity label of ‘butch,’ before going on to problematise the notion of ‘female masculinity.’ I will then outline the theoretical context of **sociocultural linguistics** before presenting some data which shows the construction of a butch – but certainly not *masculine* – group identity in a **lesbian** community of practice.

‘Butch’ as a symbol of lesbian identity

The link between masculinity and lesbian identity has emerged via a long sociohistorical process of increased visibility for queer women. The term ‘butch’, however, which is broadly

recognised as a particularly non-feminised style that lesbians might adopt, emerged only relatively recently in the history of lesbian culture. Previously, it was interpreted as ‘mannishness’ or as **gender ‘inversion’**, as Doan’s (2001) account of the influential Radclyffe Hall testifies. Hall was author of *The Well of Loneliness*, a 1928 novel about female same-sex relationships. Hall’s protagonist was portrayed as being of the ‘wrong’ sex, an interpretation which Doan suggests is directly related to her acceptance of the ‘invert’ explanation for her sexuality, which she projected through the wearing of men’s clothing (2001, xv). Doan argues that the banning of this book (due to its ‘immoral’ content) led to the promotion of lesbianism as a concept, one which many people would not have been aware of until then. The label ‘lesbian’, Doan suggests, then became indexically linked with images and descriptions of Hall’s “mannish” attire (2001, 27). An issue with explaining modern-day ‘butch’ identities in line with historical ‘mannish’ concepts, however, is the unproblematic way in which it encourages us to think of certain gay women as somehow role-playing a male character. One question that we need to ask is whether being ‘mannish’ means being ‘masculine,’ and whether being ‘masculine’ is the same as being ‘butch.’ If it is, one might reasonably assume that being butch simply involves the taking on of styles and practices which are ideologically associated with men. This is certainly how it has been discussed in the past, with Rubin, for example, defining **butch** as “a category of **lesbian** gender that is constituted through the deployment and manipulation of masculine gender codes and symbols” (1992, 467). Similarly, Inness (1997, 185) argues that butch identity is achieved through the use of “masculine identifiers.” Different strands of feminism, however, theorise butch identities very differently; some take ‘butch’ to involve “merely re-enacting, reinforcing, and hence [being] an active agent in, the oppression of women” whilst others view it as “disrupting and decentering heterosexual masculinity” (Wilton 1995, 104). The

ideological relationship between butch styles and male ones, then, may be perceived as a problematic one.

It is not clear from the categorisation of butchness as ‘masculinity’ whether it might concern self-definition or a position which is attributed by others. Similarly, it is debatable whether being butch is about sexual behaviour and desire, or simply about the clothes and haircut that a woman wears. Indeed, butchness is conceptual and ideological, borne out of a presumption of difference that lesbian women are inherently different to straight women. As an ideology, it is reworked within given cultural contexts in a way which best fits the needs of given individuals. There are many ‘versions’ of butch identity, for instance, from the ‘diesel dyke’ to the ‘soft butch’ to the ‘stone butch’ (see Faderman 1992), yet the core concept remains the same; butchness is about *not* being feminine, or ‘femme’ (a lesbian-specific category which connotes engagement with traditional symbols of womanhood). Though the category of ‘lipstick lesbian’ has existed since the 1990s – a more commercially-viable, palatable or ‘consumable’ lesbian image, as Ciasullo (2001) argues – symbols of femininity are also often symbols of *heterosexuality* within lesbian culture. In an episode of *The L Word* (a mainstream American drama series broadcast in 2004, written by an out lesbian and popular with gay women), for example, a sequence occurs in which several of the main characters attempt to assess whether another character is straight or gay. As Beirne (2007, 4) puts it, the characters use “pseudo-scientific methods of placing [the character’s] various attributes in ‘lez’ and ‘straight’ columns”, with authentic ‘lez’ points being awarded for a masculine walk, and ‘straight’ points coming from the character wearing earrings and having long hair. The underlying message in such a sequence, though fictional, is that ‘real’ lesbians are somehow less feminine than straight women. In this sense, we can argue that being ‘butch’ is about *not* doing what women are *supposed* to do, as creatures whose bodies and behaviours are ideologically oppositional to (and therefore attractive to) the male.

This is central to the argument in this chapter: those lesbians who identify as **butch** may do so in order to produce a specifically *lesbian* identity, not a *masculine* one. As Esterberg puts it, the creation of a “distinctly lesbian style” allows lesbians who are butch or androgynous to “define a positive lesbian presence in opposition to heterosexist notions of women as weak, passive, and small” (1997, 96). In other words, whilst not all lesbians might recognise themselves as being butch, the presence of the category – and its salience within lesbian culture – reinforces a discourse of difference from, and rejection of, the **heteronormative** mainstream. Butch styles function as cultural signifiers for many lesbians and, for some, can act as a vehicle for authenticity and acceptance within lesbian communities. As Hallett (1999, 112) suggests, lesbians continue to struggle for visibility, but can gain it by reproducing an identity of difference. As members of a minority group, many lesbian women may embrace cultural norms which position them as part of a collective and engage in discourses which are recognisable to other lesbians (though many others may strive for a more ‘homonormative’ identity – see Duggan (2002)). In this way, lesbian women may achieve some cultural legitimacy (see Morrish and Sauntson 2007, 87 for an example of this). Due to the historical construction of lesbianism via ideologies of gender inversion, achieving legitimacy for western lesbians may have become mostly about avoiding femininity. Because women who are not heterosexual stand out as ‘other’ in mainstream society, they may be likely to embrace their otherness by constructing an identity which opposes that which they ‘should’ be – heterosexual and feminine. Whilst it may be empowering for those women who subvert the norm by rejecting femininity, and whilst it may be understood within lesbian communities that this differs to the adoption of *male* styles and practices, however, there remains a popular misconception that butch lesbians ‘want to be men.’ Lesbian blogger Lesbian Wink (2010), for example, asks why some lesbians choose to be with a woman who “acts and looks like a man, happiest in her male disguise, completely barren of the qualities

most people associate as feminine.” To dispel such myths of butchness as desired maleness, I argue that it is necessary to problematise and denaturalise the seemingly straightforward connection between the two. In the following section, I consider the reasons for, and problems with, their apparent link.

Butch and masculinity

Irvine and Gal’s (2000) theory of how language practices come to be ideologically salient can help to explain the reason why butch practices are often interpreted as male performances in western cultures. They argue that it is not only within a specific interactive context that meanings are created (2000, 38); ideologies from broader cultural contexts beyond a particular interactive moment will always influence the way that practices are interpreted. When a woman employs culturally-recognisable butch styles, for example, broader ideologies of binary gender difference directly impact on how they are explained – as masculine, because they are not *feminine*. The cultural resources available to us are limited and dominated by hegemonic, **heteronormative** ideas of essentialised, dichotomous gender; our understanding of a woman who does not engage in feminine styles and practices is shaped by these cultural resources, and she is subsequently interpreted as being ‘mannish.’ Irvine and Gal’s theory of fractal recursivity helps to explain this further: they argue that broader oppositions and constraints from one group may be drawn upon in the conceptualisation of difference in another group (Irvine 2001, 33). Because there is perceived to be an essential difference between male (masculine) behaviour and female (feminine) behaviour, then, the ideological disruption between femaleness and femininity which takes place when a woman engages in butch behaviour becomes associated with maleness. This is because it cannot easily be explained as a *form* of femaleness within the constraints of our binary system of

gender. For this reason, butchness may often be described as “female masculinity,” a term popularised by Halberstam (1998).

Halberstam’s description of female masculinity, however, works towards a definition of non-normative gender behaviour in women that overtly positions it as an *empowering* act. Though some of the contexts that she outlines in her discussion of female masculinity do involve a performance of maleness, such as drag kings, overall she argues that female masculinity is far more than an imitation of manhood (1998, 122). Her work clearly places masculinity as a concept which may be removed from men themselves and embodied by women, and as a relational concept which exists because of its opposition to femininity (Halberstam 2002, 354). This point is shared by Connell (2001, 31), who argues that it is only in cultures which treat women and men as inherently different that polarised gender – and thus masculinity compared to femininity – exists. Whilst this perspective encourages a view of masculinity as an ideological construct which is the consequence of a cultural system of binary gender, however, I would argue that *labelling* non-feminine behaviour in women ‘female masculinity’ may, in fact, inadvertently reproduce harmful ideologies which link non-normative sexualities to gender inversion. Within the ideological system of binary gender that shapes western societies, masculinity is intrinsically tied to maleness, after all. When a woman engages in non-feminine behaviour, as explained above, she is therefore perceived as ‘acting like a man.’ To *name* this ‘masculinity’ does little to challenge or deconstruct the deeply-entrenched concept of binary, essentialised gender; it reinforces it, in fact, and makes it difficult to view non-femininity in women as an identity or behaviour in its own right. The labelling of butch behaviour as ‘masculine’ may obscure the relevance of butchness as a subversive act which deconstructs and challenges heteronormative ideals of femininity, and may augment the ideology of butch as a form of gender *deviance*.

It is important to state, here, that I do not dispute that masculinity itself is an ideological concept, or argue that only men can embody masculinity because it is somehow innate to them. On the contrary, I would argue that masculinity is a repertoire of styles and practices which we simply think of men being more likely to use, and which match our understanding of hegemonic masculinity because normative men are most frequently represented as using them. In this sense, masculinity may be said to be an imagined space or “configuration of practice” (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 836) which can be occupied by men *or* women. However, because masculinity is so clearly resonant with hegemonic maleness, there is a case for revisiting the concept of ‘female masculinity’ when discussing lesbian-specific style, practice and identity, in order to provide a more nuanced, critical and *queer* understanding of what ‘butch’ can mean. Through the consideration of interaction between members of a community of practice called the Sapphic Stompers, I will argue that ‘butch’ may be best understood not as a performance involving male signifiers, but an identity which eschews social scripts that state what bodies women should have and what lives they should lead. In order to do this, I will utilise the theoretical framework proposed by Bucholtz and Hall (2005), detailed below in relation to lesbian discourse and identity.

Sociocultural linguistics

I have argued so far in this chapter that broader ideologies of essential, dichotomous gender must be explicitly addressed when considering the identity construction that might take place between lesbian women, in order that projections of butchness are not unproblematically defined as a performance of masculinity. That is to say, the construction of a shared identity that draws on culturally-salient identity categories (such as ‘butch’ and ‘femme’) should be viewed as facilitated by broader structures (such as ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’), but not wholly constrained by them. To take such a view, we must try to understand the way that

hegemonic ideologies are reproduced and, crucially, *reworked* from the perspective of those engaged in the construction of identity. A theoretical approach which allows such a multi-layered perspective – a *sociocultural linguistics* approach – has been developed for interactionist sociolinguistics by Bucholtz and Hall (2004; 2005). Bucholtz and Hall (2005) bring together broad linguistic research which takes interaction as the site at which meaning is negotiated and identities are made, formulating a framework which positions identity as being constructed intersubjectively. Their framework posits, in other words, that identities are not produced on an individual basis, but in relation to other people's identities and in response to local as well as global ideological structures and discourses (2005, 586). One of the principles that they put forward, the *positionality principle*, allows us to view identity construction on three levels; the broad, macro level which concerns stereotypes or ideologies being drawn upon by social actors, the ethnographic level which concerns speakers' relationships to one another and the cultural context in which they are engaging, and the interactional level at which speakers engage in temporarily-significant identity work in order to construct meaningful personae – or “identity images” (Coupland 2007, 237) – relevant to that interactional moment.

Of particular resonance to the current issue of whether butch identities equate to masculine identities, and of central concern to Bucholtz and Hall's framework, is the notion of *indexicality*. This concept concerns the processes by which certain linguistic features or discursive moves signal particular ideological identity categories or personae (Ochs 1991; Silverstein 2003). The meaning behind particular features, moves or roles, however, will depend on the sociocultural context of an interaction; it is only through interaction with others that identities emerge and become seen as meaningful or real (Bucholtz 2011, 2). This means, for example, that the use of euphemism could point towards femininity or towards professionalism, or even towards a certain social class or ethnicity, depending on who uses it

and how their interlocutors understand it in a particular socio-cultural context. Importantly, then, **indexicality** is not a simple process whereby a particular linguistic feature necessarily indexes a given identity. It is, Ochs (1991) argues, an *indirect* process, with the ideological link between language and the identity that it indexes being mediated by cultural stereotypes and expectations. For example, a gay man who wishes to perform an identity relevant to his sexuality might employ a falsetto voice quality which, as research such as Gaudio (1994) has shown, is stereotypically linked with western gay men. By using falsetto, Podesva (2007) has shown, gay male speakers in the USA can index a gay identity in a complex and indirect way. Falsetto has gay connotations, Podesva argues, because its function as a discourse marker is to communicate expressiveness. Expressiveness is ideologically the reserve of women because men 'should' be strong, silent and powerful. Falsetto or expressiveness is therefore seen as a feminine trait, given its links with hysteria, and a man using it would seemingly index effeminacy as a result. Given the continued ideology of **gender inversion** surrounding gay men and women, it is evident that the use of falsetto can thus be seen as indexing a gay male identity (Podesva 2007, 18). Importantly, Podesva shows that this occurs only in contexts in which it is relevant or beneficial for a gay identity to be constructed; it is not the case that all gay men make use of falsetto.

For Bucholtz and Hall (2005, 594), **indexicality** occurs not only through specific language features, but through the use of social category labels, implicatures, stance-taking and other means by which speakers can position themselves (and others) as certain 'kinds' of people. By **stance**-taking, I refer to the process of "taking up a position with respect to the form or content of one's utterance" (Jaffe 2009, 3). Stances are made up of discursive moves and linguistic styles, and concern an ideological standpoint towards or against something (Coupland 2006). This concept may be relevant for the construction of a sexual identity as speakers orient themselves towards, or away from, particular stereotypes from within gay

culture in order to project an identity as a particular kind of person at a given time. Through even fleeting interaction, we can use language to take stances relevant to that moment. In turn, these stances can index salient identity categories and personae. We know which styles and stances are salient for the identity we wish to construct due to our engagement with cultural resources relevant to that identity and our interaction with groups who are defined by it. For example, identities which are constructed within lesbian groups are likely to draw on ideologies of gender inversion or butch/femme. Indeed, research into conversations between western lesbians has found this to be the case; whilst the specifics of what it means to be a lesbian may depend on the cultural context of a given community, similar stereotypes about lesbians which are more global can be drawn upon in order to construct a recognisable identity (see Morgan and Wood 1995; Queen 2005; Morrish and Sauntson 2007; Jones, 2012 for examples). Such research suggests that, when sexuality is a shared and relevant part a group's purpose, it is likely that discussions relevant to that sexuality will emerge as a way of constructing a group identity. This is not to argue that all lesbians will necessarily engage in 'lesbian' talk, any more than it is to suggest that all lesbian women will relate to the categories of butch and femme. But it *is* to suggest that certain ideological concepts – including identity categories – may be prevalent amongst a broad range of women who *do* identify as lesbian, and that these ideologies enable the construction of shared selves. For the women detailed in this chapter, such categories were of central importance; this group of women are outlined below.

The Sapphic Stompers

The women involved in the interaction detailed below were all members of the Sapphic Stompers², a hiking group based in the UK which met two to four times per month and was managed and organised by the members themselves. There were over a hundred women

registered on an online mailing list which a core group of members maintained, but there were usually only half a dozen women on each hike (see Jones 2012 for a detailed account of the group's structure and practice). The core Stomper members, who make up the focus of this study, were women who were in their late fifties to early sixties at the time of recording in 2007. They were part of the baby-boomer generation, mostly identified with feminism, and typically rejected symbols of femininity in favour of androgynous or butch styles. The women were middle-class, university educated professionals, who came from an era whereby their sexuality was political; they could be classed as part of a vision of a 'lesbian nation,' a place which "stood apart from the dominant culture as a sort of haven in a heartless (male/heterosexual) world" (Stein 1997, 378). The women can be classed as a **community of practice** (CoP), a model which has been borrowed from a theory of learning (Lave and Wenger 1991) to explain how group identities are constructed through shared linguistic resources and styles (see Eckert 2000; Moore and Podesva, 2007; Mendoza-Denton 2008 for examples of its application in sociolinguistics). Members of CoPs engage in shared practices (ways of doing things) which can index broader social categories in ways that are specific to the group. For the Stompers, a group of lesbian women who engaged regularly in shared activities which were, in part, defined by their sexuality, shared practices certainly emerged and were employed when they were together. These practices included joking about what 'counts' as authentically lesbian by drawing on cultural stereotypes of butch and femme, as described below.

Through their interaction together, and amongst other things, it was typical for the Stomper women to use discursive strategies which enabled them to position themselves and others in line with 'authentic' or 'illegitimate' personae that they constructed. They did this through the framing of one another (and themselves) as either a Dyke or a Girl, depending on the point of reference. For example, practices such as having short, cropped hair or riding

motorcycles would index a more dykey style, whilst wearing pastel shades or makeup indexed girliness (Jones 2011; 2012). The practices which made up the Dyke persona were typically taken as indexical of what they perceived to be a 'proper' lesbian and were closest to an ideologically-salient butch identity, whilst those which made up the Girl persona were indexical of femme identities and were classed as practices which were less authentically lesbian in their nature. For these women, then, being butch was a more legitimate way of 'doing' lesbian identity, and lesbian identity itself was gradable. If we return to the **positionality** principle put forwards by Bucholtz and Hall (2005), it is apparent that the women engaged in practices (on the interactive level) which allowed them to construct salient personae such as a Dyke (on the ethnographic level) which, in turn, indexed a butch identity (on an ideological level). Broader concepts of 'femininity' and 'masculinity' are clearly salient here, then, but they are not directly reproduced. By scrutinising the levels of identity and ideology that are involved in the production of salient personae in the group, it is possible to provide a more nuanced understanding of the role that ideological notions of femininity and masculinity play in the construction of a Stomper identity. This avoids the problematic and uncritical reproduction of hegemonic ideologies of binary gender and inversion in the analysis of their interaction, as shown in the following analysis.

Analysis

The interaction detailed below involved three members of the core Stomper group – Claire, Marianne and Sam – in conversation. I was also present, and feature in both the transcript and the analysis. I had been engaged in ethnography with the Stomper CoP for over a year by the time that this interaction occurred, and had begun to gain credibility as an honorary member of the group, but – as will become evident – I stood out as different to the women due to my relative youth (I was in my early twenties at the time), my researcher status, and my lack of

adherence to butch norms or practices. The interaction occurred at Claire's home, with the four of us eating takeaway fish and chips following a mid-week, evening walk. We had attempted to eat at a pub near the walk's finish point, as would be our usual practice, but a fully-booked venue took us back to Claire's house instead. Whilst eating our food, sitting in her living room, we began to talk about the hike that we had just completed. We talked about another group of women that we had seen on the hills, and joked about whether we thought that they were lesbians or not. This led to a discussion of whether other hikers recognised *us* as lesbians when they saw us out on our walks. The women all agreed that not everybody would interpret us in this way, but Marianne suggested that "sometimes they think some of us are men." Sam agreed with this, telling an anecdote of a time she had been mistaken for a man and questioning what it was about her (and other lesbians) that led people to make this mistake. Ultimately, she concluded that it must be "body language a bit...the way we stand or the way we walk or something." Her use of inclusive language such as the pronoun "we" was noticeable here, as she positioned herself as typical of other lesbians and cemented the notion that this is what lesbians looked like and experienced. At this moment, Sam effectively constructed the norm that lesbians can be mistaken for men and, in turn, that butch styles and practices are normative for gay women. This is very significant in shaping the interactional moment that occurred next.

Following Sam's anecdote, Marianne then went on to tell her own story, one which concerned an ex-girlfriend who was frequently mistaken for a man. Marianne felt certain that it was body language that led people to mistake lesbians for men, but said that it was not something which happened to her. It is important to note at this point that Marianne did not perceive herself as being **butch**. She was less stereotypically 'recognisable' as a lesbian than Sam and Claire – both of whom had very short cropped hair, wore no makeup or jewellery, and had a very androgynous, neutral style of dressing which often involved wearing clothes

designed for men. This rather explains Marianne's input in the transcript that follows, as she shows less concern to distance herself from 'femme' styles than the other women.

Nonetheless, by telling her own anecdote and sharing in the lesbian-specific experience of Sam, Marianne was able to work collaboratively in the construction of a shared stance towards the negative experience of lesbians being mistaken for men. In the run up to the interaction which follows, then, both Sam and Marianne authenticated (Bucholtz and Hall 2005, 601) their own status as lesbians by drawing on a real-life, personal experience. The telling of personal stories such as this, according to Holmes (2006, 182), enables speakers to focus on the aspect of themselves that are most prevalent to a given moment and thus strengthen social ties. In this moment, the Stomper members were able to come to a shared conclusion: the reason that people mistake lesbians for men is that they simply do not look closely enough, taking cues such as short hair for granted without looking past them. In this sense, Marianne and Sam blamed the heterosexual mainstream for their inability to see past what they expect to see, successfully 'othering' those that did not fit into their lesbian group and reinforcing a sense of homogeneity between them as a result.

At this point, my attempt to authenticate myself as a lesbian within the given parameters of the interactional moment occurred. I began to tell my own story about being mistaken for a boy several years earlier, when I had my (usually long) hair tied back underneath a baseball cap and had been wearing a baggy sweater and tracksuit. I ended my turn by suggesting that I would not usually be mistaken for a man, partly because I wore makeup. Sam (S), Claire (C) and Marianne (M) would not have been surprised by this admission – I wore a little makeup on each of my hikes with them, and they undoubtedly recognised me as being not as butch – or perhaps more femme – than them. Nonetheless, as shown in the opening lines of the extract below, the women playfully admonished me for wearing makeup before moving on to critique makeup generally, and then lipstick

specifically. The extract begins, below, with the conclusion of my story about being mistaken for a boy, as I (L) state that “it must be the body language thing ‘cause there’s no way that looking at my face (...) people could’ve thought I was a boy I don’t think...not with mascara on, and foundation!”:

*Part One*³

```

-----
1 L   so it must be the body language thing `cause there’s no way that
-----
2 L   looking at my face and like people could’ve thought I was a boy I
-----
3 S   No                                     [@(2)]
   M                                       [@(1)]
   C                                       [@(1)]
   L   don’t think (.) Not with <@ mascara on (.) and @> foundation [@(1)]
-----
4 S                                       [Wearing makeup]
   C   <in mock-horror> Makeup?                [When I in]my:: youth
   L                                       I kno::w (.) I’m not [proper one]
-----
5 S   I don’t know                               Wasn’t allowed in our day @(2)
   C                                       didn’t wear ma::ke-up ah::
-----
6 C                                       [We’ll] have- we’ll have none of
   L   Ah well bucking trends (5) I don’t [know]
-----
7 S   @(.)
   M                                       Doesn’t she anymore?
   C   that.   Bev used to wear lipsticks before me                No I
-----
8 S                                       [@(2)] [Ruth always wore lipstick on] occasion I hated
   M                                       [@(2)]
   C   don’t let her.
   L                                       [@(2)] [I wouldn’t go as far as lipstick]
-----
9 S   it [I didn’t] want to kiss her [when she’d got lipstick on] Mm
   C   [I know]                               [it’s horrible urgh lipstick]
   L                                       I
-----

```

Stances against makeup

As explained above, it was common practice for me to wear a little makeup around the Stompers, and indeed I was wearing some during this recording. It is reasonable to argue, therefore, that Claire’s horrified turn of “makeup?!” is intended to be ironic. Her exclamation in line 4, following the other participants’ laughter at my admission of wearing mascara and

foundation, suggests that the women understood the dominant **indexical** links between makeup and femaleness. Indeed, given that the laughter comes once I myself have laughed, it seems that the women are expressing agreement that it would be unlikely for me to be mistaken for a male given the fact that makeup was worn at the time. I interpret Claire's exclamation in a specifically lesbian frame, positioning myself as "not a proper one" (line 4), using the pronoun "one" in place of "lesbian." This indicates a presupposition that the women would interpret my statement in light of our shared sexuality, and allows me to articulate my understanding of the implicature behind Claire's expression. This exchange begins the construction of the notion that *real* lesbians should not wear makeup.

It is relevant to note that I am not ostracised or demonised for wearing makeup in this moment. Instead, it seems, my apparent transgression is explained by the women positioning themselves as older than me, seemingly excusing me because I am of a different generation to them. From line 4 onwards, Claire and Sam jointly argue that they themselves would not have been able to wear makeup when they were my age. Claire's turn of "in my youth," and Sam's turn of "wasn't allowed in our day" (line 5) position me as younger and therefore peripheral to their shared, age-related selves. That Claire accentuates "my" draws a clear divide between the two of us, and Sam's use of "our day" positions the rest of the group in opposition to me. In doing so, the women "adequate" (Bucholtz and Hall 2005, 599) their shared experiences in order to construct a mutual persona. At this moment, Sam's and Claire's identity work positions them (or "us") as older. It is particularly interesting that this move is made by Sam, because – unlike the other core Stompers – she had only come out as a lesbian a few years prior to joining the group; "in our day" seems to refer to when she was a young "out" lesbian as well as a young woman, but this was not, in fact, part of her experience. This, perhaps, illustrates an important argument of the **sociocultural linguistics** approach; personae can be fleeting or changing, and need not reflect the identities held by

interlocutors in other contexts. In this sense, identities are only ever *partial* (Bucholtz and Hall 2005, 606).

The fact that the critique from Sam and Claire is lighthearted in nature is indicated by Sam's laughter in lines 5 and 6, but also by Claire's parodic use of Northern English vowels, exaggerated from her usual vernacular, in "didn't wear makeup (/me:kʊp/), ah." She employs extended vowel sounds which mimic older, traditional speakers in a "performance speech" (Schilling-Estes 1998) and, in doing so, seems to index an old-fashioned – or at least *old* – persona. This serves to inject a little humour into her speech, showing that she is not being entirely serious in her critique of me, as well as referring to differences between lesbian culture now and in the past (see Koller 2008 for an account of such differences). In this moment, then, my wearing of makeup is aligned with my youth. This means that, whilst I am de-authenticated due to my age, my status as a lesbian remains intact. The very fact that my wearing makeup led to this identity work, of course, indicates how clearly the practice is ideologically oppositional to 'authentic lesbian style' for these women. The topic becomes more focused at this point, as lipstick itself becomes the iconic form of makeup under scrutiny. From line 7, Claire introduces the topic of romantic partners wearing it. She actively constructs the claim that her girlfriend wore lipstick *before* her by setting up the temporality of the situation in line 7 with "used to" and "before me," clearly stressing that this was something which occurred in the past and removing herself from any current association with lipstick. In distancing themselves from lesbians who *do* wear makeup, Claire and Sam seem to emphasise the ideological incongruence of this practice, here, and position themselves as more authentic by comparison; this is defined by Bucholtz and Hall (2005, 599) as a tactic of *distinction*.

Claire's alignment with Sam's stance against lipstick is enabled, at this moment, through her supportive statement in lines 6-7 ("I know"), and the two women continue to

cooperatively construct this by positioning lipstick as sexually unattractive. In lines 6-7, Sam claims that “I didn’t want to kiss [my girlfriend] when she’d got lipstick on,” supported by Claire’s declarative “it’s horrible” in line 9 and her subsequent expression of disgust (“urgh”). To position lipstick as unattractive allows the interactants to subvert the heteronormative status of makeup as a tool for women to enhance their femininity and thus be more alluring and appealing to the opposite sex. By expressing that lipstick functions as a *turn-off* rather than a *turn-on*, therefore, these women position their perception of attractive womanhood as fundamentally different to that of the ideological heterosexual woman, and their desire as lesbians as fundamentally different to that of heterosexual men. In this moment, then, they mark a very clear distinction between lesbian women (and what is attractive about them), straight women (and what is attractive about *them*), and straight men (and what they find attractive). Though it is done in a light-hearted way, the constructed stance against makeup and lipstick does suggest an awareness of particular styles and norms within lesbian culture; these clearly correlate with the time that these women came of age, and enable Sam and Claire to position themselves in line with butch lesbian stereotypes. That the women construct *not* wearing makeup as a valued norm also demonstrates their concern to be marked out as different to heterosexual women. What follows, detailed below, illustrates this further:

Part Two

10 L I don’t wear lipstick I wear f- I wear foundation purely to cover my

11 M [I do I always
L my spots and I wear mascara just I don’t know why I [wear mascara(.)

12 M wear not foundation not like that] but but you know concealer or
C [@(.)]
L makes my eyes look better]

13 M whatever I always have (.) but not much other makeup I always found

14 M it really diff- is that there was one of those things I’m twenty-one

15 M I should own a lipstick and I'd go and stand for hours looking at the

16 M things trying to see if there was one that I could possibly I I think

17 S [Mm]
M there are some of those sort of funny conflicty things I [think] more
L [Mm]

18 M recently I did get a little bit into it and I actually B- Betty when

19 M I met her she had lipstick and that but she hardly wears any now but

20 M I thought God I've never had a girlfriend that wears lipstick before

21 M I thought it was quite nice actually I thought.
C (.) Well you put your

22 S @ (1) [I don't like-] Ah
C foot down
L I can't believe you banned her [from wearing] lipstick

23 M [@ (2)]
C she still sneaks it on when she's going to meetings and things [@ (2)]
L [@ (2)]

24 S @ (1) /I really
C but but not in my presence
L Ah that's funny/

25 S think it it's horrible to wear (.) and it's a completely unnecessary

26 S thing. Mm
M I do think lipstick's a bit horrible actually I don't mind

27 M other makeup.

Shifting stance-work

Marianne's role in this interaction is of particular interest because she attempts to shift the dominant stance that has been established by this point. Largely, it seems, this is in an effort to defend her wearing of makeup. In response to my own attempt at face-saving by justifying my use of foundation (as functional and allowing me to cover blemishes, line 11), Marianne begins to construct a new norm that *some* makeup is an exception to the rule. Her supportive statement in line 11 ("I do") highlights our shared use of this type of makeup. In aligning herself with me (already established as a makeup wearer), however, Marianne places herself in an inauthentic position in line with the co-constructed authentic stance of Sam and Claire.

As established early in the interaction, however, my use of makeup was excused due to my age, whereas Marianne was a long-standing member of the Stompers who matched the typical demographic of the group. By aligning her **stance**-taking with me, a peripheral member of the group, she engages in identity work which disrupts the apparent homogeneity between the Stomper members. She mitigates this somewhat by distinguishing between my use of foundation (typically a full base coverage applied to the entire face) and her use of concealer (typically applied solely to blemishes on the skin), claiming that she wears “not foundation, not like that” (line 10), using the pronoun “that” to both refer to, and to *other*, the type of makeup that I claimed I wore. She also hedges her admission of makeup use in this interaction through “you know” and “or whatever” either side of her confession, mitigating the position that she has already taken. This may be perceived as an attempt to mediate between the two norms under construction in this interaction: that no lesbian would wear lipstick and that *some* types of makeup might be permissible.

The dialogic and intersubjective nature of meaningful **stance** construction is evident here, as “the value of any stance utterance tends to be shaped by its framing through the collaborative acts of co-participants” (Du Bois 2007, 141). Without the prior construction of lipstick *specifically* as negative, after all, Marianne would have been unable to meaningfully present *other* makeup as potentially legitimate. She presents lipstick as something that, as a younger woman, she felt she *ought* to wear, but also as something that she was uncomfortable wearing due to her sexuality. By describing this as a “funny conflicty thing” in line 15, Marianne illustrates a conflict between being female and lesbian, highlighting her awareness of ‘appropriate’ styles for non-heterosexual women, and ultimately rejects this symbolically feminine product. Her consciousness of how her identity as a lesbian *should* conflict with hegemonic femininity is particularly apparent, here, and it seems that Marianne attempts to play down her own wearing of makeup as a result.

Despite her rejection of lipstick for herself, however, Marianne then again flouts the Stomper norms by claiming that she thought that her partner wearing it was “quite nice actually” (line 19). Though she uses the adverbs “quite” and “actually” to weaken the strength of “nice,” seemingly acknowledging her deviation from the dominant norm presented by her interlocutors, Marianne fails to alter the dominant **stance** against lipstick in this moment. This is apparent not only from Claire’s response which ignores this contribution, suggesting that she should “put [her] foot down” (discussed below), but from the fact that this begins a new sub-topic in which an additional stance *against* lipstick can be taken. This involves the stance object (lipstick) being altered from being unpleasant to kiss (line 9) to being horrible to *wear*, with Sam presenting wearing lipstick as a forced act of heteronormativity (“It’s a completely unnecessary thing” lines 25-6). Though Marianne presents lipstick as potentially desirable on a partner, then, this is fundamentally rejected by the other women. In apparent acknowledgement that her stance will not be taken up by any of her interlocutors, Marianne shifts her stance and concurs with the majority in line 26 by saying: “I do think lipstick’s a bit horrible actually.” By specifying lipstick, Marianne distinguishes it from the makeup that she has already admitted to wearing, and uses the resonant form “horrible” to mirror and align herself with what Claire and Sam have already said. Marianne again uses “actually” in this statement, but this time with its evaluative function implying that she might have now reconsidered her **stance**. Using “a bit” again functions to mitigate the strength of her assertion, and might also signal some reluctance to shift her stance entirely. What is evident, of course, is that Marianne has moved from a somewhat positive evaluation of lipstick to a somewhat negative evaluation of it; this seems to reveal her awareness of its salience, her concern to maintain cohesion and an in-group identity, and the symbolic power that lipstick holds for the group.

It is clear from Marianne's failed stance-taking, here, that the ideological link between makeup and femininity is extremely strong for this group of lesbian women. For the women to place the wearing of makeup as antithetical to their concept of authentic lesbianism is logical, given the **heteronormative** discourses in which messages advocating the wearing of makeup are transmitted; women are told to wear makeup to be more attractive to the opposite sex, and that this is how to be a 'real' woman. Furthermore, as indicated above, Stomper identity was frequently associated with feminism, a concept of great importance to many (gay) women of this generation. In the 1970s (a decade which most of the core Stompers experienced), feminist discourse typically positioned "all fashion and cosmetics [as] simply tools of sexual objectification and therefore instruments of male oppression to be discarded" (Craig 2003, 20). By rejecting **heteronormative** ideals of femininity, then, Claire and Sam arguably also reject a patriarchal model of womanhood in this moment. In this sense, their positioning of feminine symbols as inauthentic allows them to articulate their own authenticity as lesbians because they are *not* feminine, again using the tactic of distinction, and because they are feminists. As Rothblum et al. (1995, 65-66) argue, lesbians of this generation grew up in a period when it was almost mandatory for them to embody butchness, and when androgyny was culturally acceptable for straight women and lesbians alike. Marianne's eventual acceptance of Stomper values and her acknowledgement of the symbolic relevance of lipstick to the Stompers' mutual identity thus illustrates the powerful role of cultural norms when constructing identity for women of this generation. It also demonstrates the salience of rejecting symbols of heteronormative femininity in the construction of a normative lesbian – butch, for these women – identity. What is perhaps more interesting still, however, is the response to it and the type of identity that this turn enables Claire to momentarily construct. This is considered, below.

Power and control

Claire's turn from line 21, when she suggests that Marianne "put her foot down" over her girlfriend wearing makeup, reveals the extent to which Marianne's attempt to positively evaluate lipstick has failed. Rather than respond in an expected manner, by simply agreeing or disagreeing with her, Claire takes the interesting step of ultimately ignoring the very clear message in Marianne's statement – that she liked her girlfriend wearing lipstick. Instead, she takes a domineering approach for the second time in this interaction (the first being in lines 7-8, when she claims to have prevented her girlfriend from wearing makeup). She re-frames Marianne's turn as a problem to which she has the solution, an intention which is evident from her beginning her turn with the evaluative "well" (line 21). It is clear from Claire's response that she perceives Marianne to have failed to construct an authentic Stomper persona in this moment, as she has not aligned herself with the prevalent stances taken within the interaction and has flouted one of the core expectations of normativity within the group (that lesbians eschew heteronormative femininity). However, Claire and Marianne were close, and it is therefore possible that this is a supportive move to save her friend's positive face. This seems feasible because Claire reiterates the contextually-established norm that one would *not* like it if one's girlfriend wore makeup, providing Marianne with the opportunity to comply with it. This also allows Claire to construct and align herself with a participant role which is powerful, as she states that Marianne ought to prevent her partner from wearing makeup. Claire's apparently facilitative role here, then, also allows her to position herself as somebody who plays a dominant or controlling role in a relationship.

It is important to unpick the **indexical** relationship between Claire's move, here, and the persona which she appears to be constructing for herself through it. Claire's stance – albeit a humorous and, presumably, ironic one – draws upon what we might think of as a stereotypically 'male' practice: being domineering and controlling within a relationship. At

this moment, she goes beyond simply rejecting lipstick as a symbol of femininity in her construction of a **lesbian** persona; her suggestion that Marianne should enforce some rules with her partner implies that Claire behaves in this way herself. This indexes a stance of assertiveness, power and dominance. What this *indirectly* indexes (see Ochs 1991) is relevant to the ethnographic context in which it occurs, as well as to the interactive moment. One could suggest that she is alluding to stereotypical masculinity because of the common ideological association between power, dominance, and men. However, given that this is a discussion of *lesbian* relationships and that the people concerned are *women*, this is not a straightforward conclusion to draw. Given the fundamentally *female* context, there is little reason for Claire to index a *male* identity at this moment. Instead, I would argue that she is performing an identity which disrupts the supposedly natural temperament of females, by being the opposite of what women are expected, ideologically, to be: facilitative, submissive, and supportive (Holmes 1995; Coates 1996). This enhances and supports the collaborative stance-taking that she and Sam take against traditional femininity. It would be problematic and naïve, however, to suggest that Claire is therefore indexing masculinity in this moment. Instead, one might suggest that she is drawing on the binary system of **butch** and femme (rather than male and female); the lesbian-specific nature of this interaction makes the positioning of herself as butch (in contrast to femme) far more likely than the positioning of herself as male (in contrast to female). As argued above, it is important to make this distinction clear if we are to avoid perpetuating stereotypical notions of lesbians as ‘doing’ masculinity, or projecting a male persona.

Discussion and conclusion

What has been highlighted in the analysis, above, is that – for these women, at least – ‘doing’ a **butch** identity is *not* synonymous with doing a *masculine* identity. Instead, butchness may

be produced via the rejection of strong symbols of femininity and, to a lesser extent, taking stances of power and control. For the Stompers, the personae of Dyke and Girl indexed broader categories of butch and femme, hence the salience of makeup (and lipstick in particular) to the women's construction and performance of authentic lesbianism in this moment. It has been suggested, above, that lesbian adherence to non-feminised styles may often be interpreted simply as being 'mannish,' or as role-playing maleness. It has been argued that this is because of the relational system in which gender is ideologically structured, whereby one is female and feminine/male and masculine, and where femininity and masculinity are the only two options available. Yet the distinction between **butch** behaviour and male behaviour must be made clear, not least by an avoidance of referring to butch behaviour as 'masculinity.' The very fact that the women in this conversation are discussing lipstick and makeup in relation to their female partners and to their experience as women themselves demonstrates that this identity work does not concern the construction of a masculine, male identity. After all, if this conversation had occurred between a group of heterosexual men, we would not expect to see them asserting a strong stance against lipstick; it would not be expected that they should wear it, and they would therefore have less need to reject it. As argued above, masculinity as a concept is about all things associated with hegemonic manliness, whereas butch as a concept is about all things associated with stereotypical lesbianism. For this reason, the rejection of lipstick cannot be seen as an act of masculinity: most men would not need to renounce lipstick in order to assert their masculinity, but some lesbians *would* need to renounce lipstick in order to assert their butchness. If we choose to refer to what lesbians do in moments such as this as 'masculinity,' then, we need to deal with the fact that this is a very *different* masculinity to that which is produced by *men*. To avoid confusion, I suggest we avoid the term 'masculinity' all together.

The way that gender ideologies work, it is clear from this discussion, is via a relational, oppositional system whereby identities are defined by what they are *not* as much as what they *are* (Baker 2008, 12). However, it would be unwise to presume that the rejection of a symbol of femininity means the claiming of a masculine identity. By rejecting heteronormative femininity, after all, these women do not deny their own womanhood. The rejection of symbols such as makeup is, in fact, a rejection of that which is expected of a *heterosexual* woman, not a **lesbian** woman. In refusing lipstick, therefore, it can be argued that the women in this interaction are positioning themselves as fundamentally *lesbian* in opposition to straight women, *not* as somehow male or masculine in opposition to womanhood itself. The Stomper women may also reject symbols of heteronormative womanhood in this moment in order to construct a specific *type* of lesbian persona – the Dyke. In casting aside and disparaging makeup, they may also index a lack of affiliation with ‘lipstick lesbians’ or femmes – those who engage in feminised styles which conflict with the women’s generationally-specific understanding of **lesbian** style and practice. In this sense, the construction of butchness may be achieved by distinguishing the self from both heteronormative femininity *and* the lesbian-specific category of femme, but it is clearly *not* about the adherence to male or masculine norms.

The sociocultural linguistics framework presented earlier in this chapter has been shown to be of use when attempting to understand identity work in interaction, as it allows a view of conversation as the point at which identity is constructed. This makes it possible to interpret individuals as working intersubjectively to create new positions which are meaningful within that moment and within that context, rather than attempting to understand how their behaviour reflects pre-existing categories or personae. As a result, the identities that are produced through interaction may be considered in a more nuanced way, with moves such as the rejection of makeup being considered in relation to the ethos of their community

of practice (i.e., in light of their typical practice as a group) as well as to lesbian culture more broadly. In this way, the identity work of Sam, Claire and Marianne can be seen to be both constrained by ideologies of dichotomous gender, but also enabled by specific cultural themes (namely butchness and feminism) which are prevalent to them due to the intersecting aspects of their experience and identity as middle-aged, middle-class, white British lesbians. By viewing identity as emergent in interaction, and as a product of indexicality and positioning, as well as identity *work* as involving relational concepts such as ‘us’ and ‘them,’ ‘authentic’ and ‘illegitimate,’ it has been possible to interpret the women’s drawing on apparently masculine resources as far more complex than it may, at first, appear.

Butch identity, as long as it is thought of simply as a form of ‘female masculinity,’ will remain misunderstood. Butch identity is enabled because of the dichotomous, relational system of gender that exists for heteronormative women and men, and masculinity may therefore be a resource which is drawn on in the construction of a butch identity, but this does not make butchness and masculinity *the same*. It must be remembered that being *butch* is about being a queer *woman*, a concept which is defined by the experience of being non-heteronormatively *female*. To simply refer to butchness as masculinity, given the clear association of masculinity with men, will perpetuate an understanding of butch lesbianism as merely a form of drag. To interpret it, instead, as a challenge to heteronormative femininity, and as a powerful construction of alternative womanhood, is to value its role in giving non-heterosexual women a powerful resource to draw upon. Through this resource, these women may proudly and confidently project their identity as lesbians.

Notes

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2. The name of the group, as with all other names provided in this chapter, is a pseudonym.

3. Transcription conventions:

[beginning of first overlap
]	end of first overlap
[[beginning of second overlap
]]	end of second overlap
-	self-interruption or false start
/	latching (no pause between speaker turns)
(.)	pause of less than 1 second
(2)	timed pause
.	end of intonation unit; falling intonation
?	end of intonation unit; rising intonation
<>	transcriber comment
::	lengthening of sound
@ (10)	laughing, plus duration
<@ @>	laughing quality
<u>line</u>	emphatic stress or increased amplitude

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