‘Delicate connotations’

How women-loving women construct their identity through community-specific labels and terminology

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Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract

Tämä pro gradu -tutkielma käsittelee seksuaalivähemmistöihin kuuluvien naisten identiteetin rakentumista kielen näkökulmasta. Tutkielma perustuu neljän yksilön haastatteluihin, joissa keskeisenä teemana ovat oma identiteetti, coming out -tarinat ja LGBTQ-yhteisön sisäinen terminologian käyttö. Tämän lisäksi tutkitaan englannin kielen asemaa globaalin LGBTQ-yhteisön yhteisenä kielenä; englannin kielen keskeisyys näkyy myös haastateltavien kielenkäytössä.

Tutkimusaineisto koostuu kahdesta Zoom-alustalla toteutetusta videohaastattelusta, joista kumpaankin osallistui kaksi toisilleen tuttua haastateltavaa. Keväällä 2020 puhjenneesta koronapandemiasta johtuen haastattelut suoritettiin etäyhteyden välityksellä. Haastattelut tallennettiin haastateltavien luvalla suoraan Zoomin kautta. Tutkimuksessa käytettiin äänitallenteita ja niiden pohjalta tehtyjä muistiinpanoja.

Haastatteluaineiston analyysi tässä tutkielmassa yhdistelee sosiolingvistiikan ja queer-teorian tutkimushistoriaa, ja tärkeimmät teoreettiset käsitteet ovat Judith Butlerin performatiivisuuden teoria sekä Eckertin sosiolingvistiikan alalle tuoma käytäntöyhteisö (community of practice). Näiden lisäksi sosiolingvistiikan konseptit indeksikaalisuus ja asenne (stance) toimivat analyysin perustana. Coming out -tarinoita peilataan myös aiempiin samaa aihetta käsitteleviin tutkimuksiin. Tutkimusnäkökulma on deskriptiivinen ja kvalitatiivinen.

Tutkielman tulokset on jaoteltu haastattelukysymysten mukaan: ensin käsitellään haastateltavien omaa identiteettiä, minkä jälkeen keskustelu laajenee käsittelemään yhteisön sisäistä terminologiaa ja kielivalintojen merkityksiä. Tuloksissa käsitellään eri termien eksklusiivisuutta ja inklusiivisuutta, konnotaatioita ja termien välisiä hierarkioita ja linkkejä. Tämän lisäksi käsitellään termien historiaa ja niihin liittyvien asenteiden muutoksia, esimerkiksi aiemmin halventavina käytettyjen termien (slur) takaisinottoa ja käyttöä nykypäivän arkikielessä. Haastateltavien näkemyksiä nykypäivän kielenkäytöstä peilataan aiempaan tutkimukseen terminologian muutoksista. Haastateltavat tuovat myös esille englannin kielen keskeisen aseman seksuaalivähemmistöjen terminologiassa, joka ulottuu myös muita kieliä äidinkielenään puhuvien kielenkäyttöön.

Tutkielman keskeisimmät tulokset ovat, että termien konnotaatiot sekä yksilön identiteetin että yhteisön tasolla ovat vahvasti aika-, paikka- ja kontekstisidonnaisia. Yksittäisellä identiteettikategorialla, kuten nimikkeellä queer, ei siis ole yhtä sidottua merkitystä ja konnotaatiota, vaan esimerkiksi historiallinen tausta ja termin käyttöyhteys vaikuttavat sen merkitykseen ja puhujien asenteisiin. Lisäksi omaa identiteettiä kuvailevia termejä voidaan käyttää eri tavoin eri sosiaalisissa tilanteissa, koska konnotaatiot ovat sekä puhujasta että kuulijasta riippuvaisia. Näin ollen identiteetin performatiivisuus korostuu tutkielman tulosten analyysissä – kuten aiempi tutkimus on osoittanut, identiteetti on kielessä ja sosiaalisessa kontekstissa rakentuva ilmiö. Haastatteluaineistosta ilmenee myös, että LGBTQ-yhteisön kielenkäyttö on jatkuvassa muutoksessa uusien termien syntymisen myötä. Seksuaalivähemmistöjen kielenkäytön tutkiminen onkin jatkuvasti relevanttia, etenkin globaalin käytäntöyhteisön näkökulmasta.

Avainsanat – Nyckelord – Keywords

queer-lingvistiikka, performatiivisuus, identiteetti, seksuaalisuus

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1. Introduction

Language evolves, 'flowing in time and changing constantly as new generations come along and social structures shift.' – Alison Bechdel (Manders, 2020)

This quote uttered by graphic novelist Alison Bechdel in a *New York Times* article about lesbian identities rather nicely sums up the reason why I chose to focus on the language of women-loving women (henceforth wlw) in my thesis. Neologisms such as wlw, alongside changing pronoun usage among non-binary and genderqueer people (see e.g. Hekanaho L., 2015) are examples of the way in which language used by sexual and gender minorities is constantly evolving. Thus, it is an area of language use that is in need of continuous research. One of the biggest reasons that research with this specific focus is relevant is that studies related to queer women have often been conducted by (heterosexual) men. Therefore, adding research done by wlw about wlw is crucial.

In this thesis I analyse the way a group of four wlw in Helsinki, Finland, identify and relate to identities, labels and terms used in their community. The main goal is to give lesbian/gay, bisexual, and pansexual wlw a space where they can self-identify and describe the way contemporary wlw identify and use community-specific language without an outside influence. Furthermore, I aim to give a realistic example of everyday language use and terminology that is central to a Finnish wlw community of practice.

In my analysis of the interview data I use the concepts of performativity (see Butler, 1993), community of practice (Eckert, 2006), and indexicality and stance (see e.g. Jones, 2012). Additionally, research on coming-out stories within the field of queer linguistics acts as historical background for my research. These concepts are introduced in the background chapter of this thesis. Following the background chapter, I introduce the participants of the interviews shortly and give an account of how the interviews were set up and the data collected and analysed. The results and discussion are presented as one chapter, as the data I collected is qualitative in nature.

The more specific aim of my analysis is to study how wlw identities are constructed through language choices, and what affects these choices. Another aspect of wlw identities that is studied here is whether individuals within the wlw community have different ways of labelling themselves and speaking about wlw identities in different situations. I also aim to

find out whether people with different identities face different kinds of stereotyping and social pressures that in turn reflect on how they identify and express their identity to others. In relation to this I also study how words that are, or have been, seen as slurs are used by wlw: are terms such as *queer* and *dyke* acceptable nowadays?

Hence, my research questions are:

1. How do wlw self-identify and what factors have an effect on the choice of these terms? (Also: how has their possible coming-out process affected this and have the labels they use to identify themselves changed over time?)
2. How are wlw terms related to each other? (hierarchies, interchangeability)
3. What kind of connotations do specific terms have among the people who use the terms for self-reference?
4. Which (former) slurs are perceived as acceptable and who is allowed to use them?

Finally, I would like to add a few words regarding the terminology choices of this thesis. Suffice to say that the choices were not easy, and someone else may have made different ones. Sexuality, and especially minority sexuality, is a sensitive topic and I endeavour to write about it as respectfully and consciously as possible. When it comes to terminology regarding LGBTQ+ people, the choices are many and nearly none of the terms uncontested (see Zwicky, 1997). The following choices were made for the sake of clarity, and first and foremost to be respectful towards the participants of my interviews.

When referring to people of a minority gender and/or sexuality, I use the acronym LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and others) or the term *queer people*. However, quotes from the interview participants include different iterations of this acronym (namely, LGBT and LGBTIQ), as the versions of it are many. When it comes to the title of this thesis and referencing the participants, I chose the acronym wlw to describe the group of people I interviewed, because it is a relatively new term that has been circulating in LGBTQ+ discourse both in real life and online. The term wlw also has a positive connotation amongst women who belong to sexual minorities, and is less contested than *queer women*, which could be seen as its synonym. While queer is the more common term within academia, I wanted to

use a term that has not been used as slur in the past. And most importantly, the participants of this study all agreed that they self-identify as belonging under the umbrella of wlw.

Additionally, when referencing certain communities, such as the LGBTQ+ community or the wlw community, I refer to broader imagined communities (see Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2007) that exist on the level of discourse and in the mind, rather than actual salient communities that consist of real human beings. However, in some instances in the interview data, it may be unclear whether the participants are referencing their real-life wlw community, the Finnish wlw community, or the global wlw community. In these instances, 'the community' is most often cited as an authority on how certain terminology should be used.

This thesis is a descriptive and qualitative study that aims to give an authentic, albeit brief, look into the everyday language use of a small community of people. In order to understand how identity is formed through language choices in everyday conversations, I chose to interview a group of four people who are acquainted with each other (and me). The aim here is not to give a generalizable account of LGBTQ+ language use, but rather provide qualitative data of a specific group and add to the small pool of research on wlw communities of practice. To my knowledge, this is the first study focusing on English usage of Finnish-speaking wlw. Following this introduction, Chapter 2 provides and overview of the theoretical background and previous research that I use as the basis of my own research. Chapter 3 outlines the interview questions and process, the research methodology, and shortly introduces the participants of this study. The results and discussion of this study are combined in Chapter 4. Finally, the conclusion and further research possibilities are discussed in Chapter 5.

2. Background

The theoretical background for this thesis is a combination of sociolinguistics and queer linguistics, with a focus on concepts such as performativity and community of practice. In the following sections, I open up the theoretical approaches and previous studies that act as the groundwork for my own research.

2.1 Queer Linguistics and Coming Out

Queer linguistics, which has also been referred to as LGBT linguistics and lavender linguistics in some instances, is a subfield of linguistics that stems from the wider field of queer theory. The objective of queer linguistics, in short, is to make heteronormative discourses and practices visible (Milani, 2017, p. 8). Bucholtz and Hall (2004, p. 471) more specifically describe queer linguistics as a subfield of linguistics that ‘puts at the forefront of linguistic analysis the regulation of sexuality by hegemonic heterosexuality and the ways in which nonnormative sexualities are negotiated in relation to these regulatory structures’.

One of the notable figures of queer theory is Judith Butler, whose research centres largely around deconstructing the western world’s norms relating to gender and sexuality. In Butler’s view the commonly accepted, normative view of gender derives from the ‘heterosexual project’, which in reality is just another form of imitation (akin to a drag performance) and a way of re-establishing the normative ways gender is performed (1993). Butler writes extensively about all gender being a performance, whether the individual is aware of their performing or not, and emphasises that in order to understand and deconstruct gender, it must be viewed as something that is performative, and not a natural phenomenon, which is exceedingly difficult in a society where heterosexual privilege operates by, ‘ […] naturalising itself and rendering itself as the original and the norm’ (Butler, 1993, p. 126). This perspective of gender as performance rather than a natural phenomenon ties in with the view of identity as a social and linguistic construct, which will be further elaborated on in section 2.4.

In addition to Butler, and more specifically a pioneer of queer linguistics, is Leap (1996), whose research is focused on what he calls ‘Gay English’, i.e. the way in which gay

men in the United States speak. While Leap's work is specifically about gay men, there are certain experiential and social situations that can be extended to the study of other LGBTQ+ people's experiences and language use. One example of this is coming out and socialization into gay culture. According to Leap, acquiring Gay English is 'central to gay socialization and to the "coming out" process' (Leap, 1996, p. 13). Furthermore, Leap suggests that part of this language acquisition is learning 'code words that confirm gay identity' (Leap, 1996, p. 13). Coming out narratives have been central in research regarding queer language use also apart from gay men. For example Zimman (2009) focuses on transgender coming out narratives and how they are notably different from gay coming out narratives. Lesbian coming-out stories have previously been studied for example through narrative analysis of email coming out stories (Wood, 1997), structure and coherence analysis of coming out narratives (Liang, 1997; Wood, 1999), and the study of life stories and coming-out narratives as cultural artefacts (Wood, 1994) – largely based on Labov's (1977) framework of story structuring. In my research (see section 4.1), the coming out process appears to be a logical place for participants to begin describing their identity.

In later research Leap and Boellstorff (2004) discuss the globalization of 'Gay English' and elaborate that although gay (male) speech is considered the source, 'Gay English' as a term can and does cover a broader range of LGBTQ+ identities and language use. While naturally it is problematic to assume that gay men's language is the 'source' or origin of other LGBTQ+ people's language, Leap's research nonetheless gives tools for studying queer and wlw speech, namely from the perspective that a global language, or global languages, of LGBTQ+ people exist. In other words, even while subverting the idea that gay (male) English is the source or origin, a global language (or languages) of wlw can be argued to exist. While Boellstorff and Leap state that 'male-centred, same-sex desires and identities remain the dominant focus […] that reflects the enduring preference of researchers in language and sexuality studies to work with heterosexual women or homosexual men and for academic publications to be inventoried accordingly' (Boellstorff and Leap, 2004, p. 4), thus voicing the narrowness of academia regarding non-heterosexual women, the flaw of assuming that other queer Englishes have a base in Gay English still perseveres.

As has been stated later (Baker, 2008), Leap's research gives 'insights into the subtleties and ambiguities of the interactions [of gay men]. However, it is important not to generalize his research.' Furthermore, in more recent research (see Milani, 2017; Baker, 2013), the idea of Gay English as a linguistic variety has shifted towards the study of

language use associated with a certain identity – in other words, regarding language use as one manifestation of a certain identity rather than an inherent part of e.g. a gay person. This perspective can be linked to Butler's theory of gender and identity as performance rather than something inherent and natural.

In terms of my research, the field of queer linguistics acts as the historical framework that I use as a comparison point for my analysis. Although my study does not focus specifically on coming-out narratives, they were a central part of how the participants verbalised their identity construction. Furthermore, I analyse the participants identity positioning from the perspective that identity is performative, thus aligning my study with Butler's theory of gender performativity.

2.2 Women-loving Women's Representation in Language Studies

LGBTQ+ language use has been studied since the 1960's, but the research in this field has historically been largely focused on studying gay men's speech (Hall and Livia, 1997, p. 3) rather than the nuances within language use of all LGBTQ+ people. The shortage of research regarding women's, and especially lesbian and other women-loving women's, speech is commented upon in the work of many past and current linguists (see e.g. Coates, 1997; Queen, 1997; Morrish, 2002). In fact, according to many researchers, the lesbian and wlw experience as a whole has been historically largely invisible. This sentiment is present in Moonwomon-Baird's (1997) article, in which she describes lesbian behaviour (both linguistic and other) as 'particularly marked and particularly unremarked. It is caricatured and so largely not observed, and when observed, devalued. From a homophobic point of view, lesbians are not seen simply as strange, we are not allowed; we aren't supposed to exist at all' (Moonwomon-Baird, 1997, p. 204). This is to say that the small amount of representation that lesbians do have is often stereotypical, caricatured, and arguably far from reality.

A similar view is brought forth by Yorke (1995), who describes the invisibility of wlw on two levels. Firstly, on a personal level, Yorke describes how growing up she never came across words that would allow her to know about women-loving women, and how the word 'lesbian' was virtually non-existent in the discourse around her. Secondly, she describes lesbians as being historically 'excluded from the cultural symbolic order. They have found themselves situated at the margins of acceptability and have been virtually eradicated from

many public discourses – including the male-dominated discourses of poetry. Lesbian voices have literally been silenced, lesbian experience and identity have been erased and, for centuries, lesbians have been systematically dispossessed of their heritage' (Yorke, 1995, p. 47).

Furthermore, and more recently, Jones (2012) points out that her book *Dyke/Girl: Language and Identities in a Lesbian Group* is, 'the first of its kind to focus exclusively on lesbian discourse and identity.' She goes on to explain that this is likely related to the reality that 'Even in the twenty-first century, negative and offensive stereotypes about lesbians continue to exist, and (particularly older) gay women are often rendered invisible within a male-dominated gay culture' (Jones, 2012, p. 2). Consequently, I chose to focus specifically on lesbians and other wlw in my research.

2.3 Sociolinguistics and Identity

"— among the most important affordances offered by language are the labels through which individuals and groups can invoke identities – sexual and otherwise – that serve particular purposes." (Milani, 2017, p. 2).

Human identity is a highly complex phenomenon that has been researched across multiple fields of study, including linguistics. In this thesis, the analysis of identity labels and terminology is based on the same principles that De Fina (2003) describes in her work regarding narrative identity – i.e. identity is a socially constructed entity that is inherently linked with language. This view is derived from Kroskrity's (1999) definition of identity as 'the linguistic construction of membership in one or more social groups or categories.' In terms of constructing and indexing LGBTQ+ identities, language plays an even more crucial role, as LGBTQ+ identities can often remain invisible if they are not verbalised, unlike for example racialised identities that may be easily visible without being verbally communicated. Conversely, this invisibility allows one to avoid stigmatisation in certain social situations by 'staying in the closet', a choice which does not exist in situations where the reason for oppression and stigmatisation is e.g. racism (Sedgwick, 2008, p. 75).

The lexical items used when referring to different sexual orientations and individuals of those orientations are multiple and in a constant state of change. Identity categories began to solidify during the post-Stonewall era, beginning with the abolishing of a 'pathological'

view of a homosexual versus heterosexual binary that was soon followed by a need for new, more definitive identity labels (Murphy, 1997). However, the invention and especially the acceptance of definitive identity categories among LGBTQ+ people are anything but clear-cut. As Zwicky (1997) states, not only are the lexical choices for referring to sexual orientation multiple, but also virtually every one of the proposed terms is publicly contested by different members of the LGBTQ+ community. This contention is related both to the appropriateness of specific lexical items, and their usage in specific social contexts. Perhaps the most controversial and debated lexical items are reclaimed epithets, which are former terms of derision known more commonly as 'slurs' in vernacular speech. Slurs include identity labels such as 'queer' and 'dyke', both of which emerge in my interview data as well. Furthermore, as Murphy's (1997) study shows, different identity categories exhibit different levels of inclusion and exclusion. In terms of the development of identity categories and their level of exclusivity, Murphy proposes the use of the following hypotheses:

i. If a category name is introduced, an opposite will also be introduced.
ii. New category names that are incompatible with an accepted categorization system either will not gain acceptance (and thus become obsolete) or will undergo semantic change in order to be compatible with the existing system.
iii. Category names will be most closely associated with members of the category that are least like members of a relevant contrast category.
iv. Names for positively valued groups will be associated with more exclusive senses than are names for negatively valued groups.
v. People who identify within a category (and thus are likely to value that category positively in comparison to others) will use narrower senses of that category's name than will outgroup members.

In more recent sociolinguistic research, focus has shifted to analysing interactive moments in which identities are constructed through language. This perspective regarding identities as constructed entities stems from so-called third wave approaches, such as Butler's theory of performativity that was mentioned in section 2.2, which view identity as the end result of social practice. Butler's theory of performativity has had a widespread influence on research regarding language, gender and sexuality – namely through developing a view of language as the locus where gender and sexuality are produced, instead of language simply reflecting a broader reality. This is to say that identity holds meaning within language rather than as a salient or 'true' identity of an individual, and that through language individuals are able to index identities that are meaningful in a certain social context (Jones, 2018, p. 56).

In earlier research Jones (2012) states that, ‘Within sociocultural linguistics, two important concepts have emerged which enable an understanding of the process by which ideologies are communicated, and by which local- level identity positions are established: *indexicality* and *stance*.’ These two concepts are central to my research, as I analyse identity positioning and the participants’ relation to terminology from the perspective of indexicality and stance. The concept of indexicality stems from Peirce’s (1994) theory of signs that has been further developed in multiple fields, including linguistics.

Within linguistics, indexicality is considered a way of projecting ideologies through language that in turn links language with social context (Jones, 2012). Indexing, to put it simply, means ‘to point’, which in this context means that language choices point to a broader web of meanings than simply the word that is uttered (for example identities and their social positioning). Furthermore, as Irvine and Gal (2000, p. 27) state, ‘Linguistic form can become a pointer to (index of) the social identities and the typical activities of speakers. […] Linguistic features are seen as reflecting and expressing broader cultural images of people and activities.’ Stance is a concept linked with indexicality, and is described by Jones (2012, p. 26) thus, ‘The definition of a stance is far from universal, though may be broadly characterised as the use of conversational strategies or discourse features in order to position oneself in line with or against another speaker.’ In terms of my research, stance relates to the way the participants position themselves and certain identity labels in relation to one another.

2.4 Community of Practice

According to Labov (1972), who is considered to be one of the founders of variationist sociolinguistics (see e.g. *The Handbook of Language Variation and Change*, 2002), ‘One cannot understand the development of a language change apart from the social life of the community in which it occurs’. Accordingly, much of subsequent sociolinguistic research deals with communities of practice – an updated alternative for ‘speech community.’ Communities of practice was a concept introduced to sociolinguistics by Eckert (among others), that refers to ‘a collection of people who engage on an ongoing basis in some common endeavour’ furthermore, communities of practice ‘emerge in response to common interest or position, and play an important role in forming their members' participation in, and orientation to, the world around them’ (Eckert, 2006).

While communities of practice are generally communities of people who are physically in the same space, such as a workplace (see e.g. Holmes, 2006; Holmes and Stubbe, 2003) or recreational community, it is argued that due to globalization and especially the process of the internet becoming a central part of everyday life, the concept can extend to mean communities that exist internationally and overlap with domestic speech communities and discourses. This aligns with Eckert and McConnell-Ginet's (2007, p. 29) view that communities of practice exist in relation to one another and are in continuous communication with larger entities (e.g. schools, legal systems) and what they describe as global imagined communities (e.g. nations, women). Thus, in my research, I regard the global LGBTQ+ community as an imagined global community that has an effect on the way that wlw in Finland verbalize their identity, converse about sexuality and gender, and index nuanced positions within the community through language choices.

Furthermore, due to the global LGBTQ+ community not being tied to a specific place or language and the possibility of online communities of practice that the internet provides (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2007, p. 34) has much more effect on an individual's language choices regarding identity than many other global imagined communities do. In other words, the global imagined LGBTQ+ community is in fact also the primary community of practice to many LGBTQ+ individuals, especially in situations where there is a fear of discrimination in real life or there may not be any face-to-face contact with other LGBTQ+ people. For example, Hanckel and Morris (2014) study the way in which young queer people utilise the internet as an anonymous, safe space for exploring a queer identity. They state that this kind of safe space is necessary because, despite the growing amount of positive narratives of same-sex attraction in popular culture, young people still report local exclusion and discrimination due to their queer identity.

In relating the concepts of community of practice and gender and identity as performance, I use the following interpretation provided by Hall and Livia (1997): 'The concept of performativity points both to the historicity of key cultural terms and to the possibility of queering the traditional meanings. It also places emphasis on the localized practice of gender (performed at each moment by every culturally readable act), for speakers incorporate local as well as dominant ideals of linguistic gender into their "communities of practice" (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1995). Gender as a reiterative performance has access to a variety of scripts, not all of which may be intelligible to the culture at large and some of which maybe in conflict with others' (Hall and Livia, 1997, p. 13). This is to say that

the way in which wlw living in Finland construct their identities is affected by both local and international linguistic features, especially in the contemporary social environment in which the internet allows for a global community of practice, and in which English is used as the primary language for speaking about LGBTQ+ related topics online.

Similarly to the work of Jones (2012), whose research focuses on a lesbian hiking group called 'The Sapphic Stompers', my research takes a small group of wlw based in Finland as its focus. Thus, I will apply the same approach as Jones, who 'draws upon ideas from feminism, anthropology and queer theory, using concepts from linguistics to provide analyses of specific interactions' (Jones, 2012, p. 2). This is to say that I use the concepts of performativity and community of practice to describe and analyse the way the participants in my interviews construct and index their own identities and take stances regarding terminology within the wlw community.

2.6 English in Finland; English as a language of LGBTQ+ communities of practice

English was traditionally regarded as a foreign language in Finland, and it was not used as a means of internal communication in the country's history. However, a change in the role of English has become apparent in the 21st century, and its use has spread on multiple different levels and in different realms of everyday life, as Leppänen (2007) states, 'English has several different roles and functions in a number of social domains, such as the media, education, and professional life. Importantly, however, the role of English in Finland is far from uniform: it varies considerably within and across domains and contexts. In this sense, Finland is no one expanding circle, but rather a series of overlapping circles in which English manifests itself and spreads in distinctive ways.'

Furthermore, English use has increased especially within youth culture since the 1950's through changes in culture, education, and social life. (p. 150) Similarly, a national survey conducted in 2007 concludes that English use in Finland has increased significantly in multiple social domains and that this change is widely regarded as a positive one: 'The survey confirms that English has a strong presence in Finland. English is the most widely studied language and the foreign language most commonly used. Finns also assess their own skills in English as relatively good. In addition, Finns' overall attitudes to English are quite positive and pragmatic and they do not consider English a threat to the Finnish language and culture.

Instead, the knowledge of English is considered an essential resource in the increasingly multicultural and globalizing world.' (Leppänen et al., 2011).

Leppänen et al. also argue that language education policies, language use of different social groups, and changes on a societal level have contributed to the trend of English becoming the most desired, needed, studied and used foreign language in Finland (p. 19-20). As English is regarded predominantly in a positive light in Finland and its use is increasingly important due to globalization, English use has arguably grown steadily in the years after the survey was completed. ' – it appears that in some contexts English is becoming a phenomenon which occurs as a matter of course. Indeed, English often seems to offer means of expression and communicative resources similar to those offered by the mother tongue. In particular, in the language uses of young people, especially in relation to certain media, English may be one of the everyday languages that Finnish young people (or at least some of them) need and use without experiencing the communication as distinctively "foreign".' (p. 24). More recently, Education First placed Finland in the top 5 of European countries ranked by English proficiency (EF English Proficiency Index, 2019).

English use is arguably even more prevalent among LGBTQ+ Finns. English gender and sexuality terminology is prevalent in mainstream Finnish LGBTQ+ discourse, both on the level of theory (see Hekanaho P., 2010; Karkulehto, 2010) and everyday culture. For example, the annual Helsinki Pride event has no official Finnish title. Helsinki Pride is the biggest LGBTQ+ event in Finland, as well as one of the biggest summer events in Helsinki, boasting almost 100 000 attendees in 2018 (Helsinki Pride –yhteisö ry, 2020). In the LGBTQ+ context in Finland, words such as *(gay) pride, queer, wlw, femme,* and *butch* remain largely untranslated (see e.g. Hekanaho P., 2015). In a study conducted by Alanko (2014), survey answer examples show LGBTQ+ youths (15-25 years old) using the terms 'queer', 'pan', 'bi', and the English acronym LGBT in the midst of Finnish when describing themselves and others. The use of English terms in everyday speech amongst first language Finnish speakers also becomes apparent in the interview data in this thesis.

This chapter has provided an overview of the research history that serves as a basis for this thesis. As this study focuses on a group of wlw, the theoretical background is a combination of sociolinguistics and queer linguistics. The key concepts that are used in the analysis of the forthcoming interview data are performativity and community of practice. The concepts of indexicality and stance are also present in the analysis, especially in relation to performativity and identity labels. When it comes to personal identity labels, the coming-out stories of the

participants are considered in the context of previous studies on coming-out narratives. On a broader level, this thesis makes a small contribution to the field of queer linguistics and adds to the limited amount of research focusing specifically on women of minority sexualities.

3. The Interviews – Data, Participants and Methods

The inherent difference between qualitative and quantitative research, as Croker (2009) states, is that quantitative research deals primarily with numerical data and its analysis, while qualitative research centres around collecting and analysing textual data. Furthermore, Croker describes qualitative research as 'an umbrella term used to refer to a complex and evolving research methodology. It has roots in a number of different disciplines, principally anthropology, sociology, and philosophy, and is now used in almost all fields of social science inquiry, including applied linguistics' (Croker, 2009 p. 5). In this thesis, the methodological background relies specifically on a qualitative sociolinguistic approach and sociocultural linguistics, with research that focuses on Finnish wlw discourse. This is to say that my research considers 'speakers within their own interactive settings, where their identities are constructed in line with one another' (Jones, 2011, p. 720).

This chapter describes my process of data collection and analysis. In the first two sections of this chapter I describe the group discussions and pair interviews that I conducted, and in the latter two I focus on the participants of the interviews and my methods of analysis.

My original plan was to interview a small group of self-identified wlw in person during the spring of 2020. However, due to the outbreak of COVID-19 and the subsequent worldwide pandemic, I was only able to conduct a preliminary group discussion in person. The pair interviews, which provide the majority of my research data, were conducted remotely on the videoconference platform Zoom.

3.1 Group Discussions

The goal of my study is to give an authentic description of how wlw-related terms and labels are perceived, described, identified with and used by members of the wlw community. Thus, due to the shortage of previous research that focuses specifically on wlw, I held two group discussions prior to the interviews in order to gather a list of labels and terms that are commonly used in the wlw community.

During the group discussions, the participants were asked to list all the terms, labels, and words that they could come up with that relate to women-loving women. Following the discussions, I made a shortlist of terms and labels, including the words that were mentioned

most frequently and were the most recognisable to all participants. This curated list was used in the subsequent pair interviews that are described in more detail in the following section. In the following subsection, I list the chosen terms and labels and clarify their formal definitions.

3.1.1 Terms, Labels, and their Definitions

'Although we now recognize that love between women has always existed, the terms used to describe it have varied over the years.' (Bonnet, 1997, p. 147). In this section, I present the terms used as a basis for discussion in my interviews and their 'formal' definitions. However, it is important to note that most of these words have fluid and complex meanings that depend on the social and historical context in which they are used. For example, words such as *butch* and *femme* have a long-standing history within the lesbian community, and their meaning has shifted over the years. Furthermore, the usage and different connotations of terms depends on the social context and the people discussing them. As Zwicky (1997) states, 'As with slang, we are dealing with shifting, local usages. Rapid change divides the generations, and locally restricted usages produce intergroup misunderstandings.' This also becomes apparent in the Results and Discussion chapter of this paper. However, for the sake of clarity and for those who are unacquainted with LGBTQ+ language, here are the definitions that the participants of this study agree on.

Lesbian: A woman who is romantically and/or sexually attracted to other women. (Predominantly used to describe women who are only attracted to other women, but may also include non-binary individuals.)

Queer: An umbrella term used to describe a person whose gender and/or sexual identity is something other than cisgender and heterosexual. E.g. a lesbian woman, or a non-binary pansexual may both identify as queer. *Queer* is also a term used widely in academia.

Gay: A person who is romantically and/or sexually attracted to people of the same gender. Originally a term used for homosexual men, but is widely used by lesbians nowadays. Can also be used as an umbrella term for all sexual minorities, alike queer.

Bisexual: A person who is romantically and/or sexually attracted to both/all genders. (The definition is highly debated, as the prefix bi indicates a binary understanding of gender, but many bisexuals nowadays use the term as a synonym for pansexual.)

Pansexual: A person who is romantically and/or sexually attracted to people of all genders.

Femme: Historically, a lesbian whose gender presentation is traditionally feminine. May also be used for other wlw. Also used as a descriptor for gender presentation among non-binary and genderfluid individuals (in this case the opposite of 'masc').

Butch: Historically, a lesbian whose gender presentation is traditionally masculine. May also

be used today for other wlw.

Chapstick: A lesbian (or other wlw) whose gender presentation is somewhere between feminine and masculine.

Wlw: Women-loving woman, or women-loving women (also women loving women in some instances). An umbrella term used to describe all women who are romantically and/or sexually attracted to other women – i.e. lesbian, bisexual, and pansexual women. Often also includes non-binary and genderfluid individuals.

Sapphic: Derives from the ancient Greek poet Sappho, often used as a descriptor of art or literature of a lesbian or queer nature.

Dyke: A reclaimed slur that was historically used as a derogatory term for (especially butch) lesbians.

Pillow princess/queen: A wlw who predominantly receives sexual pleasure. Sometimes also referred to as a 'bottom'.

Stone: A wlw who predominantly gives sexual pleasure. Sometimes also referred to as a 'top'.

Agender: A person who does not fall under any gender identity, or experiences no gender.

Non-binary: A person whose gender does not fit into the binary gender categorisation (female-male / woman-man).

3.2 Pair Interviews

After the group discussions, I conducted two video interviews on Zoom, each with two participants. I chose to interview the participants in pairs in order to minimise the risk of participants talking over each other during the videoconference, and to make sure every participant had enough time to voice their opinion. The participants were sent privacy notices and consent forms based on the EU General Data Protection Regulation, Art. 12–14 ahead of the interviews. The interviews lasted approximately an hour each, and were recorded with the permission of the participants. The outline of the interview questions was the following:

1. Age and first language(s)?
2. How do you identify regarding sexual orientation? → Has it changed over time? What things affect it?
3. Task. I'm going to give you a list of terms and labels I have collected from a small group of wlw and then ask you some questions related to them.

   lesbian, queer, gay, bisexual, pansexual, femme, butch, chapstick, wlw, Sapphic, dyke, pillow princess/queen, stone, agender, non-binary
4. Are there any words you don't recognize? Do you have any initial thoughts about this list?
5. Can you tell me how you relate these words to each other? E.g. which ones are closely linked and which ones aren't, which are hierarchical, which are interchangeable, etc.?
6. Can you group these words according to how exclusive or inclusive they are?
7. How about the connotation of these words? Are they neutral, positive, or negative?
8. Which former slurs have become acceptable and who can use them?

9. Is there anything else you want to talk about regarding this topic?

The list of labels (question 3) and terms was posted as a chat message on Zoom, so that the participants had the chance to refer back to it during their discussion. The aforementioned list of questions is the outline I used, but naturally the questions were somewhat reworded during each interview depending on the participants' discussion.

After conducting the interviews, I used the audio files downloaded from Zoom and wrote rough transcriptions of the interviews in order to ease examining them in comparison with one another. As my study focuses on the semantic contents of the interviews, there was no need for detailed transcriptions.

3.3 Participants

Due to the personal nature of my research topic, I chose to interview people who I knew prior to my thesis project. In order to make the discussions a safe space where all participants would feel as comfortable as possible discussing their sexual identity and experiences as a minority, I chose to interview people who were previously acquainted with each other. As Murphy (1997) states, 'Self-selection of respondents is a nearly necessary feature of research involving sexual minorities'.

The participants of this study are all self-identified wlw who live in Helsinki at the time of the interviews, and have lived most or all of their life in Finland. Three of them are native Finnish speakers with highly fluent English skills and one is a native speaker of both Finnish and English. In order to ensure the participants' anonymity, they were assigned pseudonyms. The participants are only referred to with these pseudonyms throughout this paper. Here, the participants are shortly introduced under their given pseudonyms. All of the gender and sexuality related labels are in their own words, and thus differ from each other in their wording somewhat. Their answers may also contradict some of their later comments during the interviews (e.g. which identity labels they use).

Emma
Age: 29
First language(s): Finnish

Gender: Female
Sexual orientation: Gay

Anna
Age: 27
First language(s): Finnish and English
Gender: Cis[1] woman
Sexual orientation: Queer

Julia
Age: 25
First language(s): Finnish
Gender: Woman and/or non-binary
Sexual orientation: Lesbian

Laura
Age: 29
First language(s): Finnish
Gender: Non-binary
Sexual orientation: Pansexual

3.4 Methods

The interviews were recorded (with the participants' permission) with Zoom's built-in recording feature. In my analysis, I used only the audio file and left the video (and thus any non-verbal data) out. I wrote rough transcriptions of the interviews to ease the process of analysing the data. The examples presented in the Results and Discussion chapter were chosen based on which terms and aspects sparked most conversation. Some parts were left out to avoid simply listing everything that was said. For example, some words were considered as very neutral in their connotation, and were thus omitted from the results. The aim was to describe the topics that the participants discussed most thoroughly and in contrasting ways. Some parts of the conversations were also excluded, because they shifted away from the main focus of this study, which is wlw. For example, some longer conversations about gay men

[1] Cis or cisgender means that one's gender matches the sex they were assigned at birth, as opposed to someone who is transgender.

were omitted as they are outside the scope of this thesis. Furthermore, the focus was on those terms and labels that the participants most identified with, and felt most comfortable discussing.

In terms of methods, I chose not to use thematic analysis or discourse analysis due to the limited amount of data and the fact that most of the relevant terminology was presented already in the interview questions. The interview data was analysed alongside the background material presented in chapter 2 – namely by close-reading (or listening) and examining the data alongside concepts such as indexicality, stance, community of practice, and performativity. The main aim of the results is to show how nuanced identity positions are constructed with language choices.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Personal Identity Labels

The first topic of discussion in the interviews is the participants' personal identity labels: which word(s) they like to use about themselves, how their choice of identity labels has changed and developed over time, and what factors affect these choices. The central themes that emerge during these discussions are the impact of the participants' coming out processes, the historical and societal implications of labels juxtaposed with personal preferences, and the nuanced situational differences of the use of identity labels. The examples in this section show that language is a central part in the construction of a wlw identity, and that the choice of identity label is not only an individual's way of naming their gender and sexual orientation, but can also index a multitude of refined social meanings.

Coming out is seen as an important, often lifelong process for people belonging to a sexual minority (see e.g. DeHaan et al., 2013; Guittar, 2014; Whitman et al., 2000), and thus it naturally came up in one way or another during conversations about the participants' own identities. One of the most recent coming out stories among the participants is that of Emma, who explains that she is not certain when exactly the change happened, but she has come out during the past year and is, 'not really sure what I would identify as but I say gay because […] to me that makes most sense.' She goes on to explain that she prefers gay as an identity label, because it feels like a more open term, whereas for example the label lesbian feels more definitive.

Emma's interview partner Anna, on the other hand, has a longer coming out story that begins in her teenage years. Anna says she first identified as bisexual, but realised quite soon that she was mostly interested in women, so she began referring to herself as a lesbian when she was about 17. Later, when Anna was in her mid-twenties, her partner came out as non-binary, which meant Anna had to reconsider her own identity as well, 'I had to kind of rethink the way that I approach my orientation, and now […] I think I'd more identify as queer.' In other words, as one would assume, identity does not exist as a separate entity from social relationships, or the surrounding culture and historical context, which will be further detailed in later examples.

Laura, who says they probably identified as straight in the very beginning, or perhaps 'not much as anything', shares a similar story that spans over a decade. Laura describes their process of coming out regarding both sexuality and gender by linking their use of different labels to the fast-paced changes that have happened in the lexicon of the LGBTQ+ community in the last 10-15 years. 'I started identifying as bisexual around like 13 or 14 because bisexual was the name for that at the time, and I mean, it still is […] But I guess pansexual. I just never really liked the word, but I mean that's the one that is the correct term.' Regarding their gender, Laura says they originally used agender, because, 'non-binary wasn't really around at that point. [It was] neut or agender, but later on when I heard other terms, I realised that's definitely not me, I have plenty of gender.'

Laura's interview partner (and long-time friend) Julia describes herself as a late bloomer when it comes to sexuality. Julia's coming out was a longer process, as she describes, 'I was really lost for a really long time. It caught me by surprise. I was really closeted for years, seeing guys. And when we met [with Laura], I was like maybe I'm bisexual. Nowadays I realise […] I had crushes on women […] even in my preteens. Later on it's easier to put those pieces together. Back then I wouldn't even say it to myself, or realise that I'm gay.' Here Laura and Julia laugh and share a story from the time they first met. Laura begins the story, 'Yeah when we met and I [told you I was] bisexual, and you were like "yeah I might be too" and I was like, "yeah yeah yeah, you don't have to be bisexual to have this conversation with me."' They go on to elaborate that this is sometimes the case when coming out to someone – they want to share their own experience of (possibly) being queer as well.

As the coming out stories of the participants exemplify, historical and societal context has an effect on the way people choose to identify. Julia, who identifies both as a woman and non-binary, explains, 'I think that's partly because I don't really know. It depends on the day also, how I feel. I like woman, cause […] I've been identifying as woman for a really long time, and also it's nice to […] appreciate feminism from that angle, as identifying as a woman […] Some days I feel like non-binary is a better term for what I'm feeling. But there's also a lot of different terms that can be used to describe being non-binary, like gender fluid […] in that field there's a lot of different terms. It's constantly evolving.'

On the other hand, as Anna describes, some terms can feel difficult to use because of their social and historical connotations, 'I've felt that there's more policing of a lesbian identity and […] maybe that's kind of a historical thing within the community […] there's been maybe a fear of women leaving their partners for men in the past, so then there's been

this want to keep it very exclusive, and I've felt like that's had a definite impact on the term "lesbian" and the way that I perceive it […] I feel like there's been a very biphobic history in the community.' This example shows that Anna's choice of using the label queer not only denotes her identity, but also indexes an identity that is decidedly separate from the biphobic discourse that is in some circles linked with lesbians. In other words, simply by using the label queer (which is, as is shown in a later section, one of the most inclusive terms) Anna is signalling that she is not biphobic. This does not mean that a lesbian identity automatically signals biphobia, but in Anna's experience, the label *queer* diverts from it more directly.

However, the connotations of these words are very personal and fluid. Contrasting with Anna's experience with the word lesbian, Julia says it is an identity that feels easy: 'for me, lesbian is such an awesome term because everybody knows it and I don't really change it in different situations.' Laura agrees, and says they have always envied having a word like lesbian, as pansexual is a less known term, and lesbians seem more like a group one can be part of. They also add that they like using the label queer in certain situations because it is, 'more descriptive in a way, I mean like you don't have to define too much "I'm queer, I'm not straight" that's what it tells you.' Queer is also a more group-related moniker that can refer to a wide range of LGBTQ+ identities and be used as a unifying label, as Laura says, 'At least then you can have a group you belong to. You can hang out with gay men, and you're like, "Yeah, we're all queer." Kind of like a nice umbrella.'

In addition to the personal, historical and societal factors that contribute to the choice of one's identity label, the participants also point out that their use of labels sometimes varies depending on the situation and whom they are speaking with. In other words, the participants' identity labels may shift according to the community of practice. Laura explains that when speaking with someone who does not know much about sexual minorities, they prefer to use the term bisexual rather than pansexual. The reasoning for this choice is twofold. Firstly, it is simply easier to use a term that is more well known, and then explain further that to them the prefix bi in bisexual refers to their own gender and others (as opposed to just two genders). Secondly, Laura explains that a misconception that is often associated with pansexuals is that because they are attracted to all genders that means they, 'want to have sex all the time with everybody.' They continue by explaining that a similar stereotype is associated with bisexuality, but perhaps not as strongly, 'Bisexuals also have that stigma, but it's much less […] People think you cheat more, because you're bisexual. Because it's "easier" to cheat when you have two different genders you can cheat with.' They add that pansexuals are often

also assumed to be polyamorous, which is not necessarily a negative stereotype, but a misconception nonetheless.

Anna shares a similar experience, adding to her earlier explanation of lesbian being a difficult term for her to use in certain situations. ‘I’ve noticed that it’s a lot easier to [avoid] certain terms that evoke a lot of emotions from people […] Like, say, lesbian. I feel like if you’re in a group of people, like, friends who are maybe not queer, and you say – you kind of bring up your lesbian identity for example, then it starts this discussion about, “how did you know?” and kind of immediately it goes into this exclusivity like, “why *not* men”, you know? And then you have to explain that actually it’s a bit more complicated than that, and they’re like, “but you’re not – then not a lesbian” and then, you know, it’s just easier to kind of avoid.’ However, with other friends who have a similar understanding of the fluidity of sexual orientations as she does, she feels comfortable using the label lesbian, because the word itself is ‘read differently’ by different people. Emma explains that while she uses the term gay almost exclusively, there are situations in which she prefers not using a label at all. In her own words, ‘I feel like I’m still working through things and kind of figuring it out myself, so then it kind of depends on the day – maybe not the day but kinda the season or the mood I’m in, like, what I say to people if I do talk about it. Whether I give it a label, or whether I kind of more try to explain.’

4.2 Links, Hierarchies and Interchangeability

After the first part of the interview, which focused on identity labels, I shifted the focus of the discussion towards a more general level. The participants were presented with the list of commonly used words in the wlw community that I collected during the group discussions, and the rest of the interview was spent discussing these terms from different perspectives In addition to going through the list verbally, I added it to the chat column in Zoom so that the participants were able to refer back to it during their discussion. The list included the following words: *lesbian*, *queer*, *gay*, *bisexual*, *pansexual*, *femme*, *butch*, *chapstick*, *wlw*, *Sapphic*, *dyke*, *pillow princess/queen*, *stone*, *agender*, and *non-binary*. The formal definitions of these words were specified in the previous chapter (section 3.1.1).

The first topic of discussion regarding the aforementioned terms is how the participants interrelate the words with each other – whether links, hierarchies, or the

possibility of interchangeability exists between certain words. During this discussion the theme of personal, historical, and societal factors that affect the meaning of words re-emerges. Julia gives an example of this division by explaining that on a personal level, *gay* and *lesbian* are often interchangeable in terms of semantics. On the other hand, on a historical level the words *gay*, *lesbian* and *bisexual* are linked, because they are the ones that, '— are kind of the general words that have been around for a really long time, and people who identify as straight or cis, or maybe aren't that familiar with terminology probably know those words.' She continues by explaining that the words *butch* and *femme* are linked on both a personal and historical level, saying that they are, 'Very strongly related to lesbianism, and the history of being a lesbian […] When I hear femme and butch […] I don't maybe use that in my own language [but] I know a lot of people do, looking at Lex (a text-based dating app for lesbians and queer people) pretty much everyone identifies as either way. It's femme or butch, or then top or bottom.'

Furthermore, Laura says that for some people the historical reasoning for using a certain term is important, such as the choice of using *bisexual* as an identity label rather than the newer term *pansexual*. According to Laura, for many people *bisexual* and *pansexual* are completely interchangeable in practice, but for others it is important to make the distinction, 'a lot of bisexual people do actually mean it in a way that they are interested in all genders […] They want to keep using the word bisexual because it's an old, historical word. And then pansexual people are more like, "Let's just get rid of the binary part of it." In a sense, those often are the same sexuality, it's more about the term they use.' This can be seen as an attempt at political correctness, which Hall and Livia (1997) describe thus: 'Each time there is a movement toward political correctness in speech, an outlawing of specific lexical items as demeaning to a particular group, there will be a counter move among members of the group seen as marginalized aimed at reclaiming the terms at issue because of their affective force.' Furthermore, Laura's description indicates a stance where they understand and relate to both of these labels in different ways: *bisexual* is a word with a longer history and it can be used in the same capacity as *pansexual*, which in turn is a more contemporary word that clearly indicates that one questions the mainstream binary gender divide.

In terms of hierarchies, according to the participants there are multiple overlapping ones. The terms *queer* and *gay* are named as the topmost umbrella terms, which can be used to cover most, if not all, of the other mentioned terms. *Queer* is unanimously seen as the overarching term for all of the rest, while *gay* encompasses all identities that relate to same-

sex attraction. Another umbrella term is *wlw*, which is also one of the newer terms. Anna describes *wlw* as an umbrella term for all the terms that relate to queer women, and later on adds that it is a term that is not a word she often hears people use as an identity label, but rather as a word that refers to queer women as a group or community. Laura shares the same notion, saying it is, 'an umbrella term for all of us.' In regards to hierarchy, *lesbian* is an interesting term, because it is seen as somewhat an umbrella term, as the words *femme*, *butch*, *chapstick*, *Sapphic*, *dyke*, *pillow princess/queen*, and *stone* all are considered to belong underneath it. On the other hand, *lesbian* is not used as the umbrella term for all *wlw*, as opposed to *gay* that has extended as a term to mean all sexual minorities in some contexts. As Laura points out, it is not uncommon that someone who identifies as *bisexual* also refers to themself as *gay*, and when referring to a group 'gay people' can mean a variety of sexual orientations. *Lesbian*, which historically could be seen as the feminine counterpart of *gay*, is a more exclusive and policed term, as Anna stated previously.

4.3 Inclusivity and Exclusivity

The way different words are perceived regarding their inclusivity or exclusivity also depends on historical, societal, and personal factors, as already the previous section indicates. Unsurprisingly, the words that are considered umbrella terms are also regarded as the most inclusive. Anna and Emma agree that *queer* as an identity label is very inclusive, and that almost anyone could identify as *queer*. Anna likens *queer* to the Finnish word *sateenkaareva* (lit. 'rainbowy'), which is a word that is often used for sexual and gender minorities in Finland. Emma agrees, and adds that in her experience *queer* is a more vague term that can be used if someone does not want to '100% identify themselves as something specific.' *Wlw* is another term that is mentioned to be among the most inclusive, as it has presumably been coined for the exact purpose of having a unifying word for lesbian, bisexual, and pansexual women. Emma describes *wlw* as a term that 'anyone who identifies as a woman and likes other people who identify as a woman can go under.' Here, Emma and Anna discuss the fact that *wlw* is a term that is more often used of a group or community, or perhaps as a descriptor for an event, rather than as a personal identity label.

In a similar manner, according to Emma and Anna, the word *Sapphic* is rarely used as a personal identity label, but rather as a descriptor for e.g. literature or poetry of, 'a lesbian or

queer nature.’ As Anna points out, this usage is linked to the Archaic Greek poet Sappho: ‘Sapphic is often associated with lesbianism, because of the obvious historical root.’ Julia and Laura’s conversation around *Sapphic* indicates the same association with literature and the arts, and Julia points out that in her experience it is very limited in everyday use. They come to the conclusion that it can be considered exclusive, as it is a term that, as Laura words it, has an, ‘artsy, academic feel to it’, and understanding what it means without a further explanation requires one to know who Sappho was. In other words, using the word *Sapphic* could be argued to index not only a lesbian or queer identity, but also knowledge about lesbian history and literature.

The terms *femme*, *butch*, and *chapstick* are placed somewhere in the middle of the inclusive-exclusive binary. From one perspective, they can be seen as exclusive, as they are historically aligned with a lesbian identity (Jones, 2012), and are still considered to be terms that belong under the lesbian, or wlw umbrella. However, as Emma and Anna point out, these three are terms that have more to do with an individual’s presentation and style (in contemporary discourse) than a set-in-stone identity label. As Anna says, ‘I feel like *femme* is at one end and then *butch* is at the other […] and *chapstick* is in the middle, and then you can kinda fluctuate anywhere between.’ Emma agrees with this description, and adds, ‘yeah [you can] one day be more towards one end and the next day more be towards the other end, and it depends on [who is] looking at you, if that makes sense.’ They elaborate that the observer’s own style and identity have an effect on how they perceive the style and identity of others, as Anna describes it, ‘if you’re a chapstick and you see somebody who wears lipstick but otherwise is rather […] not super femme, then that’s femme to you, like super femme to you. And then you have something like hyper femme, which is when you go out of your way to be very, very feminine and you do all kinds of these like feminine things and that’s kind of like a hyper form of femme.’ In other words, the terms *femme*, *butch*, and *chapstick* belong to an exclusive group of people, but within that group their usage can be flexible and inclusive in the sense that an individual may identify as none, one, two, or all three.

In terms of exclusivity and inclusivity, different participants perceive the term *non-binary* differently. Julia and Laura describe both *agender* and *non-binary* as inclusive terms, and Laura describes the non-binary community as being, ‘very much about saying that you don’t have to look non-binary, or do things [a certain way].’ In their experience, *non-binary* is a term that can be used as an umbrella term for any gender identity that does not fall strictly under the male-female binary, and generally people within the community do not police each

others' appearance or behaviour. However, in a different community of practice the same term has a different sense of exclusivity. In Anna's experience, experimenting with a non-binary identity has felt restrictive, as it is an identity that is sometimes ostracised in the lesbian community. In her own words, 'it's hard, especially being somebody who's been I suppose, like I still identify as a cis woman […] making that leap into non-binary […] it would immediately exclude me from some of the terms that imply that I'm a woman, so I feel like I couldn't use something like lesbian anymore for example […] it immediately deprives you of some of that variety so it's scary taking a step into something like being non-binary, because of the [lesbian] community being very exclusive about it.' She adds that many of these terms have very delicate connotations that are tightly linked with personal experiences and one's social circle. Between the two gender-related terms, *non-binary* and *agender*, Anna and Emma agree that *non-binary* seems like the more inclusive of the two.

The word *dyke* elicits a longer conversation between Anna and Emma about the history of the term, and how that has a substantial impact on its exclusivity and use.

Excerpt 1: *Dyke*

E: Dyke?

A: I think that's very exclusive.

E: Yeah. Yes, I agree.

A: Especially with like kind of the history of the word. That, you know, it's been used as like a derogatory term, so it's exclusive for people who want to identify as a dyke, to feel more kind of like empowered by claiming that. How do you feel, Emma, about dyke? In terms of like how you identify?

E: I don't know, I feel like it's not a word that I would use, I don't know why. It just, I don't know, maybe for that – because of the history kind of. I feel like I wouldn't be comfortable saying that.

A: Yeah. Yeah, I feel like, I don't know, I – I also have a really hard time identifying as a dyke because I feel like I – I'm not sure if I'm the person who can be empowered by that word in a way.

> **E:** Yeah to me it kind of like it feels like if you do say that, you're kind of like being radical in a way – which can be a good thing, but not maybe what I would want to do. I don't know.
>
> **A:** Yeah I kind of agree with that like I feel – I think I personally would feel a lot more comfortable using it if I had encountered the kind of stigma – or the kind of like, if somebody had come to me and called me a dyke then I'd feel a lot more […] wanting to claim that, but right now I don't feel like I have a connection to the word.
>
> **E:** Yeah. Makes sense.

Here Emma and Anna are referring to the history of the word *dyke* being used as a slur to refer to lesbians. As the above excerpt from their conversation shows, *dyke* as a label denotes not only a lesbian identity, but also a very specific experience of having been stigmatised for being a lesbian, and subsequently reclaiming the term. This, again, links to the notion that the use of identity labels is performative and that labels refer to a certain kind of personal history, rather than an inherent characteristic of a person. The use and reclaiming of slurs is further discussed in section 4.5.

Regarding inclusivity and exclusivity, Emma and Anna also point out that the current trend seems to be that people want to use as inclusive language as possible. Furthermore, Emma points out that the debate about 'correct' terms sometimes becomes a kind of redundant competition: 'Sometimes it starts to turn into this kind of like… not like fight, but a debate about who can come up with the most current [term] and you can always find something wrong with the terms that people are using and be like, oh but I know a term that's even better, kind of like – like what's the "right" thing to be right now. [For example] in the LGBTQ+ community it's become more acceptable to be pansexual than bisexual.' Anna agrees, and points out the potential problem with this kind of approach: 'For sure... Right now the trend is to find more and more inclusive terms for everybody. And the more inclusive the term, the better it is, even though simultaneously what you're kinda doing is you're maybe taking away […] at the end of the day, the queer community or the LGBTIQ community isn't a monolith. You have smaller identities and for good reason.'

4.4 Connotations

Discussing the connotations of the given terms proves more complex than one might presume. The participants all agree that connotations, much like the previously discussed aspects (links, hierarchies, interchangeability, inclusivity and exclusivity), depend heavily on social context, personal history and the terms' history within the LGBTQ+ community. In other words, any term in itself is not negative or positive, but rather the speaker and addressee, and their intentions and actions create the connotation. Furthermore, many terms have multiple different connotations that span a much wider web of meanings than simply positive, negative, or neutral.

Laura and Julia begin with light-hearted exclamations of 'aaall positive!' and 'yay, sexuality!' respectively, indicating that their personal relationship with all of these terms is primarily positive. However, their discussion quickly turns serious and they begin to analyse the more nuanced connotations the words have. Julia explains that in certain situations, she prefers to be referred to as gay rather than lesbian: 'I like it better when people call me gay and not lesbian. I think it has something to do with feeling sexualised. Because I've had people – it feels like the sort of thing where people I haven't come out to come to me and say like "hey, I heard you're a lesbian" […] it feels a lot more personal and also the people who say that, usually it feels like they are sexualising me.' They further elaborate that sexualisation is a specifically femme lesbian issue, while *butch* carries a different kind of connotation:

Excerpt 2: *Butch*

> **L:** Butch is definitely one of those words that are used a lot in like not so nice way and [...] the representation of butches is very, very bad, it's always like if you're butch, you're also kind of maybe dumb and kinda funny like you're comic relief … And you're like just trying to be a guy.
>
> **J:** If you're femme you're a human and if you're butch you're a freak.
>
> **L:** Yeah. If you're a femme you're a fetishized human and if you're a butch you're a freak […] and if a femme person who some guy likes is seeing a butch, then it's just like, "why date someone who's trying to be a guy, just date a real guy". [Butch] is also used for unattractive women even if they wouldn't be a lesbian, like if you're

> like bulky, or maybe like masculine clothes or don't look like what society thinks is an attractive woman, then you can kinda be called butch – which is also very not nice […] sort of not thought to be attractive because they are 'butch'.

Laura adds that they have had similar experiences with the label *bisexual*: 'Being bisexual is also fetishized in that way – like always a guy, they think "oh my god I didn't know you're bisexual" as in, they're like wishing that I would also now like to have sex with him and the girl I'm making out with.' They both agree that *lesbian* is a word that is often sexualised outside of the LGBTQ+ community, while *bisexual* and *pansexual* are sexualised by people within the community and those outside it. Laura also points out the common misconception that conflates *pansexuality* and *polyamory*, which also has an effect on how they label themself: 'there's the pansexual–bisexual war thingy [laughter] it's the one […] about pansexual people being nymphos, we just want to have sex with everybody. That kind of harmful stereotypes. And a lot of people who I know who identify as pansexual often are polyamorous or something like that, and it has that connotation for me sometimes and that's one of the reasons why I kind of steer away from it, being kind of demisexual myself anyhow. But I know it's not true. So it's kind of, I'm trying to own it. And move away from the connotations.'

Emma and Anna have a contrasting experience of the labels *pansexual* and *bisexual*. They both say that their personal experience with the term bisexual is positive, but when it comes to the wlw communities they are part of, it is often an ostracized identity compared with pansexual. According to Anna, a negative discourse around bisexuality has been present within the lesbian community for as long as she has been part of it. She further explains that biphobia among other wlw can be both overt and covert, but that invisible biphobia is most common: 'Bisexual […] at least in the lesbian community that I know of there's a certain narrative that's applied to a bisexual experience, really strongly, as opposed to pansexual. Bisexual definitely is associated with this "you date a bisexual and they'll leave you because they miss [men]." That's something you hear a lot, a lot a lot, and it's been around for the entire time that I've been in the community.' Emma agrees, and says that pansexual is a clearly more positively viewed label than bisexual in the discourse she has witnessed.

The terms *pillow princess/queen* and *stone* elicit a similar discussion between both pairs: pillow princess is often associated with laziness and selfishness, while stone is linked

with coldness. Anna brings up the underlying connotation: ‘on a community level, something like stone, because we have a less positive sense of femininity, we view these masculine traits as being slightly more positive, it carries that kind of activeness and those kind of positive senses in the community a lot more than pillow princess that’s a bit – a very negative word.’ The discussion around pillow princess is well summarized by Laura: ‘a thing you shouldn’t call someone if they don’t want to be called it, like “you’re spoiled and, you know, just wanna lay there.”’ However, Emma and Anna also point out that the label is going through a change in connotation towards the positive and empowering, at least in some wlw communities. Emma says she has seen women labeling themselves as pillow princesses on a reality show and on Tinder. Anna states that she is herself working on reclaiming the word: ‘I think I’m definitely trying to claim it. Being a confident […] I guess in practice, a pillow princess, but I feel like it gets a bad rep.’

While many of the labels seem to have negative connotations and stereotypes linked to them, Anna and Emma also point out that positive and accepting attitudes are much more common:

Excerpt 3: Connotations and attitudes

> **A:** There’s like a community perspective for the words, and the connotation it has within the community and then there’s a very kind of personal experience with a term that’s obviously coloured with what happens in your life and […] as a queer person you really want to […] most people want to be understanding of other people’s experiences and understand that some people have a certain identity and you respect that identity whether or not it’s something you apply to yourself.
>
> **E:** Words do have such different connotations depending on the context and the community and everything, and I think that really depends on not like one big LGBT community that has decided that this is positive and this is negative, there’s like smaller groups of – like groups of friends who’ll be like ‘well we all call each other dyke that’s our normal’ and maybe they don’t like being called lesbians or something.

4.5 Slurs

Out of the given terms, the participants recognise *dyke*, *queer*, *gay*, and *butch* as historical slurs, or derogatory terms, that have since been reclaimed by LGBTQ+ people. *Queer* and *gay* have both been reclaimed to the extent that they are used as labels both within the community and outside it, while *butch* and *dyke* are still in the process of being accepted as predominantly positive labels.

The participants all agree that *dyke* is perhaps the most contested of the terms, as Anna words it: 'it's still in the process of being reclaimed and definitely the most contentious I feel. And that one is definitely reserved for people who are, like, lesbian, or I guess wlw.' Dyke is described as a label that indexes empowerment, and being 'badass'. Interestingly, the participants all point out that while they have an admiring attitude towards *dyke*, none of them identify with the label. The reasoning for this is twofold. Julia explains that she would take it as a compliment if someone were to call her a dyke, but does not feel like she is 'cool enough' to identify as a dyke or a butch: 'I think both of those terms are – I would love to be them, but I don't feel like that, not every day at least.' Furthermore, *dyke* is a label that is reserved for those who have been subjected to its derogatory use in the past. As Emma and Anna explained in Excerpt 1, they do not feel like they can be empowered by using dyke as an identity label, because they have not been in a social context where it has been used as a slur towards them. However, Anna also points out that *dyke* can be used as a term of endearment among good friends, because 'between women who love women it's very much this camaraderie that you kind of say to your friend like "you're such a dyke" it carries this lovingness with it when you do it to your friends.'

Similarly to *dyke*, *butch* is described as a term that is exclusive to lesbians (and other wlw to some extent), and is still considered a slur outside of the LGBTQ+ community. According to Emma, it is a relatively neutral or positive label within the community nowadays, but is often used in a negative and derogatory way outside the community. Laura shares a similar opinion, and adds that 'the representation of butches is very, very bad, it's always like if you're butch, you're also kind of maybe dumb and kinda funny, like you're comic relief … and you're like just trying to be a guy.' They also point out that butch is sometimes used as an insult for a woman who does not look like 'what society thinks is an

attractive woman' regardless of sexuality. Julia concludes that calling someone a butch is only acceptable when the other person has indicated that it is a word they prefer, or if it is a shared identity label. Laura agrees and adds, '[it] depends on your own relationship with someone. Like if Julia came to meet me and they were wearing very butchy clothes that were really dykey, and I'd be like "oh my god aren't you butchy today, you dyke" that would be fine, because we're mates and I know – I know that would be well appreciated.'

Queer and *gay* are more clear cut in terms of use: the participants agree that (when used appropriately) they can be used by anyone regardless of gender or sexuality when referring to someone whose identity has been divulged to them. As Laura words it, 'Queer I think even a straight person can use, if it's not used as a slur. So like, if you're saying it like "there are queer people in the parade today" that's ok, because it is an actual term used […] Of course you don't wanna say "that's so queer" or stuff like that in a negative way.' The same sentiment is true of *gay*: if it is used as a legitimate identity label and not an insult, it is nowadays a term that can be used about a gay person by anyone inside or outside the LGBTQ+ community.

As a concluding remark, the participants point out that English slurs feel less offensive to them than Finnish ones, because there is no personal emotional connection. They all know that a word like *dyke* can be incredibly offensive, but to them it does not feel as offensive as Finnish words that they have a personal experience of being used as slurs, as Julia states, This is I feel like one area, where when your mother tongue is Finnish, it kind of affects how you view queer and dyke. Cause to me, I know their history, but to me they are only awesome words. Like, I haven't had to […] for example "homo" (Finnish word for "gay") is really irritating to me, because I've had to hear it quite a many times when growing up, whereas I feel like queer and dyke can sound the same to a lot of people.' The significance of English among Finnish wlw is discussed further in the next section.

4.6 English Use Among Finnish Wlw

The final discussion during the interview with Julia and Laura centres on the use of English in the Finnish wlw context in Helsinki. When asked about the role of English, Julia's immediate response is, 'It's huge basically [...] even if I were speaking Finnish I would use a lot of these terms in English, and for example I don't even remember the Finnish version of LGBTQ+.'

Laura's response is to first wonder whether a Finnish acronym exists, only to laugh a moment later when they realise that it does. In addition to the acronym, they explain that because of popular culture, the Internet, and social media, a lot of the terminology they use is in English.

Excerpt 4: English terminology

> **L:** Using Finnish terms is, also because most of like the terms that I know and use or like, come from either popular culture, so like movies and TV series, books, which I do read and watch or anything in English. So that's like where you kinda get them and enjoy them, or then from the Internet when you talk to people. Those are also in English, I wouldn't go to a Finnish chat to talk about like 'I'm a gayyy person'.
>
> **J:** You also read a lot of comments on Instagram in English.
>
> **L:** Exactly, like Instagram, Reddit, Lex, places like that. Well […] also, I don't have such a big, especially lesbian, friend group, so it's like, I don't 'speak lesbian' to Finnish people much. I have quite a lot of queer or gay men friends, but not too many lesbians around, so I kinda don't get to hear those words in Finnish so much.
>
> **J:** And I also… It was just easier to look up those words on the Internet. […] than like groups in Helsinki. There probably would be a lot of those spaces in Helsinki but I never really just found them or looked for them even. So a lot of my queer life is I think in English because of that.

It is important to note here that (as the rest of the discussions in this paper) these experiences and the presence of English in everyday language use naturally cannot be extended to all wlw in Finland or Helsinki. However, the affordances of the ever globalizing and digitalising world and the Internet do seem to be of special importance for LGBTQ+ individuals especially in the beginning of their realisation of their minority identity and coming-out experience (see e.g. DeHaan et al., 2013). Or, as Laura words it, 'Like said, we are a minority. And especially if you live in a smaller place than Helsinki, it might not be easy to find many people like you around you, so the Internet makes […] you feel like a part of a bigger group.'

4.7 Further Discussion

On the whole, the participants' discussions demonstrate that identity, terminology and labels are complex entities that are constructed and negotiated depending on social, historical, and personal contexts. In accordance with previous studies within queer linguistics and sociolinguistics, the interview data presented here shows that identity is a performative construct that can and does change depending on the community of practice one is taking part in, and that multiple communities of practice (as well as broader imagined global communities, such as the LGBTQ+ community or the wlw community) may overlap and be brought up in discussions regarding LGBTQ+ labels. Furthermore, the interviews exemplify the continuous development, and both global and local variation in LGBTQ+ language use.

The participants also bring up that identity labels do not simply denote one's own identity, but have different social connotations depending on context. In other words, identity labels are used to index more nuanced stances than only e.g. a sexual/romantic preference. For example, in a certain context using the label *pansexual* can be considered a positioning of oneself as validating of others' non-binary identities. Conversely, in a different context, using the label *bisexual* may indicate one's opposition to the often-cited biphobia that is present in some wlw discourse. When it comes to personal identity labels, many may use *bisexual* and *pansexual* interchangeably – altering the term they use depending on the social context and cues they get from others. This underlines the performative nature of identity; labels do not denote a pre-existing position, but rather language is used to construct an identity in relation with one's audience. Simultaneously, identity labels can be used to either distance from or associate with others. For example, the acronym *wlw* can be used to emphasize solidarity between lesbian, bisexual, and pansexual women.

According to the participants of this study, one's personal identity and the connotations of the used terms are nuanced, contextual and tightly linked to life experiences. Furthermore, the meaning and connotation of an identity label or term may differ on whether it is considered on a personal, historical or community level. In their experience, the current trend within the wlw community is to come up with as inclusive terminology as possible. The central theme of the interviews is summarized nicely in Anna's quote that, 'All of it, at the end of the day, is really experiential and kind of based on your individual experience. I think

all of these [terms] are really fluid and complicated. That’s why it’s difficult to talk about them as well.’

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has been a description and analysis of how a group of wlw in Helsinki, Finland construct their minority identity and how they relate to community-specific terminology and labels. As has been stated previously (Butler, 1993), 'identities are constructed iteratively through what are deemed to be processes of citation – a literal copying of the performances of others with the same identity.' This process of copying and re-iterating identity is apparent in the way the participants of this study describe their own identity and relate it to other identity categories within their community(ies) of practice.

Consequently, as Morrish (2002) words it, 'one's use of discourse interpersonally positions one and reveals affiliations.' In other words, the way in which the participants of this study utilise terminology and converse about it reveals their more nuanced identity positioning and which identity labels they affiliate themselves with, and which not. According to Morrish, 'This is particularly true of the gay or lesbian subject whose use of discourse may vary according to audience and context.' This is to say that those belonging to a minority sexuality may be more likely to shift their language use depending on the context they are in. In this study, it has become apparent that this group of wlw choose different identity labels (or lack thereof) depending on the social context. Furthermore, different identity labels may be used to index not only an identity, but also attitude and stance regarding other identities and social issues.

It has additionally been shown that different life experiences, and overlapping communities of practice in some cases result in different connotations of certain labels, even within a small group who are all acquainted with each other. The way in which the participants index their identity and take stance regarding different terms depends on not only historical and social, but also deeply personal experiences. This is to say that for example, a term like *dyke* may be seen as historically derogatory, but due to personal experience, it feel less offensive than another slur. On the other hand, a word like *lesbian* that is described as 'awesome' by one participant, is a difficult term to relate to for another. In terms of community of practice, for some participants the wlw community has been a part of their life (both online and offline) for years, while for others it may be a more faraway entity. However, a unifying perspective is that global (imagined) communities such as the LGBTQ+ community or the global wlw community are seen as some kind of authorities, which are referenced often during the discussion about different terms.

Furthermore, the interview data presented in the previous chapter shows that the participants of this study experience a social and linguistic connection to a broader community of practice through their minority identity, and that the English language plays a central role in the way they verbalise their identities. Whether or not the participant has been ‘out of the closet’ for years or a shorter while, they all mention ‘the community’ when speaking of their own identity and the terminology related to LGBTQ+ identities. This ‘community’ can be regarded as a kind of global imagined community of practice (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2007) that provides both a perceived authority on language use and a place of affiliation. For some, especially at the first stages of coming out, this global community of practice is the only place of connection with people who share their experiences.

All in all, this study provides a small glimpse into the language use of a specific group of people, and thus the results cannot be seen as generalizable to all wlw or queer people. However, qualitative studies such as the present one provide a more nuanced understanding of how identity functions in real-life language use, and are thus equally as important as quantitative research regarding LGBTQ+ language. It has been my endeavour to give one account of the complexity of wlw identity construction and the multi-layered meaning of language choices within this community.

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