

Talking sex and thinking sex: the linguistic and discursive construction of sexuality

In the film *When Harry Met Sally* there is a famous scene in which the female protagonist Sally apparently has an orgasm as she sits fully clothed at a table in the middle of a busy diner. In fact, both the man she is with, Harry, and the audience watching the action on screen know that she is faking it, to demonstrate that you can't tell the difference between a competent performance of an orgasm and the real thing. Part of the joke is the surprise, amusement and embarrassment her performance causes other customers in the diner, who cannot be sure whether the orgasm is real or faked. Also part of the joke is the chagrin of the man for whose benefit the performance is being put on; for if this is not a real orgasm, perhaps the female orgasms he has been party to in more intimate circumstances were not real either.

This scene provides an illustration of what is meant by 'the discursive construction of sexuality'. The man who believes that you can always tell whether a woman's orgasm is genuine is holding on to one of our most cherished beliefs about sex: that the body does not lie. According to this view, the outward expression of orgasm comes directly from the inner physical processes and sensations of orgasm, and in the absence of the physical stimulus the outward expression cannot be convincing. The woman, however, sets out to show that you can communicate an orgasm without actually having one, by producing the signs that conventionally mean 'orgasm' (these include both nonlinguistic signs like gasping and moaning, and linguistic signs like uttering (in English) 'oh' and 'yes'). Sexual experience, like other human experience, is communicated and made meaningful by codes and conventions of signification. Indeed, without those codes we would not be able to identify particular experiences as 'sexual' in the first place. Codes of signification are not only relevant to the doing of sex (e.g. communicating orgasm) but also to the understanding of what it is that we are doing, which in turn exerts an influence on what we do. What we know or believe *about* sex is part of the baggage we bring *to* sex; and our knowledge does not come

exclusively from firsthand experience: it is mediated by the discourse that circulates in our societies.

At this point it may be helpful to say something about the potentially confusing term 'discourse', which is used in rather different ways by the two main groups of scholars whose ideas we draw on in this chapter: linguists and critical theorists. For linguists, 'discourse' is 'language in use' – a discourse analyst differs from a syntactician or a formal semanticist in studying not the internal workings of some language system (e.g. 'English' or 'Arabic') but the way meaning is produced when a language is used in particular contexts for particular purposes. For critical theorists, on the other hand, 'discourses' are sets of propositions in circulation about a particular phenomenon, which constitute what people take to be the reality of that phenomenon. The critical theorist Michel Foucault (1972: 149) defined 'discourses' as 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak'. For example, the practice of administering certain kinds of tests to people, and then treating them for purposes of education and employment according to how they score on those tests, brings into existence such objects as 'IQ' and 'personality type', as well as categories of people defined on the basis of their IQ or personality, such as 'the gifted' or 'extroverts'.

Although the two definitions of 'discourse' are different, it is not difficult to make connections between them. On one hand, the critical theorist's 'discourses' clearly involve the linguist's 'discourse': the practices that form the objects of which they *speak* (or write) are to a significant extent language-dependent practices of definition, classification, explanation and justification. On the other hand, the instances of language-use studied by linguists under the heading of 'discourse' are socially situated, and must be interpreted in relation to 'discourses' in the critical theorist's sense. In this chapter we will not try to keep the two senses of 'discourse' separate and distinct, for we think of them as mutually implicated in the processes that interest us, namely the construction and contestation of the 'reality' of sex.

The dispute between Harry and Sally, for instance, is not just a self-contained speech event, but acquires much of its meaning from its relationship to discourses already in circulation about orgasms and the faking of orgasms. To interpret the scene, competent viewers must bring to bear certain presuppositions from that discourse, which need not be explicitly stated to be relevant. For instance:

- Orgasm represents the peak of sexual satisfaction for both women and men
- Orgasm is harder for women to achieve, but easier for them to fake
- Being able to bring a woman to orgasm is the sign of a skilled and considerate lover

These presuppositions (whether or not we take them to be true) are needed to understand why it has to be the female rather than the male character who fakes the orgasm in the diner, and why it is the man rather than the woman who wants to believe that orgasms cannot be convincingly faked. Since orgasm has come to be considered an indispensable element of good sex, and since the difficulties women may have in reaching orgasm during intercourse have been widely publicized, 'giving' a woman an orgasm has become a sort of test of a heterosexual man's sexual prowess. This constitutes a temptation for women to fake orgasms, in order to spare men's feelings (or perhaps to be rid of them faster). But from the men's perspective, the possibility that women are only pretending to have orgasms undermines their image of themselves as sexually skilled.

The presuppositions listed above are disputable, of course, and they would not be obvious, or even intelligible, in every time and place. For much of the twentieth century, the inability of some women to reach orgasm during heterosexual sex was not attributed to men's lack of skill and care, it was attributed to women's lack of sexual responsiveness, and, at the extreme, to the pathological condition of 'frigidity'. Men whose female partners did not have orgasms were not encouraged, as they often are today, to treat this as a challenge. Experts reassured laypeople that for many 'normal' women orgasm was not the most important goal of having sex, and the absence of orgasms was therefore nothing to worry about. Some held that not every orgasm was a good orgasm in any case: they asserted that there were two kinds of female orgasm, 'clitoral' and 'vaginal'. Only the latter represented true and mature sexual satisfaction.

Women's Liberation activists in the late 1960s and early 1970s set out to explode the presuppositions of then-current discourse on female orgasms. They seized on sexual findings suggesting that women are physiologically equipped for almost unlimited (clitoral) orgasmic pleasure. If many women were not realizing this potential, feminists saw the reasons as cultural, not physical. They pointed out that women are discouraged from exploring their own bodies and finding out what gives them pleasure; and also that the kind of sex that is held up as the norm and the ideal – sexual intercourse – is particularly poorly suited to ensure that women come. In her paper 'The myth of the vaginal orgasm' Anne Koedt argued that the idea of vaginal orgasm was not merely a product of widespread ignorance about female anatomy and physiology,¹ but a myth serving the interests of heterosexual men: it is they, rather than women, who find vaginal intercourse especially pleasurable. Koedt suggested that women 'must begin to demand that if certain sexual positions now defined as "standard" are not mutually conducive to orgasm, they no longer be defined as standard' (2000[1968]: 372).

What is illustrated by this discussion of changing ideas about female orgasm is that at any point in time, the ways people have of *discoursing* on sex shape

- their understanding of sex and how it should be (e.g. how important orgasm is in defining what counts as sex);
- their understanding of themselves as sexual beings (e.g. whether a woman's failure to achieve orgasm with a male partner is 'normal', a sign of 'frigidity' or the result of male incompetence); and
- their interpretation of sexual experience (e.g. whether a particular encounter constituted 'good sex', or whether a particular orgasm was 'vaginal' or merely 'clitoral' – not a question many people today would ask, because the discourse that supported that distinction is no longer current).

To say that sexuality is 'discursively constructed' is to say that sex does not have meaning outside the discourses we use to make sense of it, and the language in which those discourses are (re)circulated. Taken out of the context of other discourse, the orgasm-faking performance in *When Harry Met Sally* is just a party trick, like someone displaying their unusual ability to mimic the song of the humpback whale. Viewed in relation to other discourse, it becomes meaningful in other ways – for instance, as a comment on the sexual mores and gender relations of a particular time and place.

DEFINING SEXUALITIES: THE POWER OF THE WORD

It is a commonplace of contemporary discourse about sex that *talking about it* is intrinsically a good and liberating thing. There is a widespread belief that, until very recently, the subject was so veiled in shame and ignorance that it could hardly be broached in discourse at all, and that we are still in the process of breaking that silence. We are apt to congratulate ourselves on our openness to sex-talk, contrasting our modern, enlightened attitudes favourably with the prudishness of previous eras when such talk was taboo – censored in public discourse, and repressed even in private.

This account of recent history recognizes the significance of language and discourse in relation to sexuality, but from the perspective of most contemporary theorists it also misrepresents that relationship. It conceives of sexual desires, practices and identities as fixed realities which have always existed, just awaiting the sociocultural conditions that would permit them to be expressed openly in words. The alternative position, outlined in our earlier discussion of 'discourse' and adopted throughout this book, is that

the 'reality' of sex does not pre-exist the language in which it is expressed; rather, language *produces* the categories through which we organize our sexual desires, identities and practices.

If it were true that we are only now emerging from millennia of silence on the subject of sex, the implication of what we have just said would be that, for most of human history, sex itself did not exist. (We would have to take literally the poet Philip Larkin's sardonic observation that 'Sexual intercourse began in nineteen sixty three / ... Between the end of the Chatterley ban / And the Beatles' first LP'.²) However, the notion that there was no discourse on sex before the late twentieth century will not withstand critical scrutiny. The most influential of all theorists of the discursive construction of sexuality, Michel Foucault, began his *History of Sexuality* (1981) by taking issue with the belief that discourse on sex is a product of modern ideologies of 'sexual liberation'. He pointed out that societies and institutions conventionally considered to represent extremes of sexual 'repression' may produce copious amounts of discourse about sex for exactly that reason. Thus Roman Catholics for centuries have been required to confess to the activities and the desires which their Church prohibits: far from maintaining silence about sex, the pious were obliged to put forbidden desires into words. It was also, of course, in discourse that religious and legal authorities defined what was forbidden and what legitimate sexual behaviour. In so doing they produced a set of categories defining what range of practices – both legitimate and proscribed – counted as 'sexual'.

The discursive categorization of practices as sexual, and the division of those practices into the 'permitted' and the 'forbidden', is clearly a very old phenomenon. One of Foucault's most influential observations, however, concerns the rather more recent historical emergence of categories of *people* defined by their sexual desires and practices, prime examples of such categories being 'homosexuals' and 'heterosexuals'. What prompted this development was the shift, in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the West, from treating the regulation of sex as the exclusive concern of religious and legal authorities to treating it as more properly the concern of medical and scientific authorities. The Church and the courts had based their regulatory practices on notions of what was 'sinful' or 'unlawful', and they had focused on actions rather than actors. Certain sexual acts were prohibited, but people who committed them were not thought of as a natural class or 'type': they were penalized for doing what they did, rather than for being what they were. Medicine and science, however, as bodies of knowledge whose aim was to uncover the laws governing the

natural world, sought to regulate sex on the basis of a different distinction – not virtuous/sinful or lawful/unlawful but natural/unnatural or normal/abnormal. This shifted attention from the act to the actor, whose deviant behaviour was seen as manifesting his or her fundamentally abnormal nature. It gave rise to the novel idea that a person could be defined by their erotic desires – that those desires might constitute the core of their being and bestow on them a specific identity that linked them to others with similar desires.

The distinction we have just outlined, between treating sex as a form of behaviour and treating it as definitive of a person's identity, may seem arcane, but it can be clarified using a contemporary example: our understanding of the practice of paying a prostitute for sex. In English, there are terms in common use to describe those people (the great majority of them men) who pay prostitutes for sex, including 'customer', 'punter', 'john' and 'client'. However, words like 'client' allude to something a person does in a specific context (that is, exchanging money for sexual services), and it is not clear that the person's 'client' status has any relevance beyond that context. Is the same person still a client when he goes to work the next morning? Is he a client when he sits at home watching the news on a weekday evening, or when he reads his children a bedtime story? Do all clients have a similar nature, distinct from the nature of non-clients? Will researchers someday claim to have discovered a 'client gene'? Can we look at a six-year-old child and whisper, 'that boy's going to grow up to be a client'?

If these questions make little sense, it is because 'client' is not (at least at present) an *identity*. It remains a label for a specific relationship (of buyer to seller of sexual services), and only applies when the parties are actually engaged in a transaction. But if we substitute the word 'homosexual' for 'client' in the questions posed above, it becomes evident that we are dealing with a different kind of status – one that is considered to be both permanent and all-encompassing. A homosexual is not just a homosexual while having sex, but remains a homosexual in the office, watching TV or playing with the children. Some researchers have posited the existence of a homosexual gene, and many a concerned adult has looked at a six-year-old and seen a homosexual in the making.

Being a client and being a homosexual are both defined in some quarters as examples of sexual 'deviance'. Both carry a certain stigma, and each may attract legal penalties. The difference is, though, that in one case stigma and punishment are directed at a particular form of behaviour, while in the other they are directed at a category of persons whose sexual desires are held to constitute their identity. The latter approach is also the more recent, having

emerged fully only in the nineteenth century. In a much-quoted passage from *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault explains how 'sodomy', a term that principally denoted anal intercourse but also included a wider range of forbidden sexual behaviours, was transformed into the identity category of 'homosexuality':

The nineteenth century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology. Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions because it was their insidious and indefinitely active principle: written immodestly on his face and body because it was a secret that always gave itself away. It was consubstantial with him, less as a habitual sin than as a singular nature. *The sodomite had been a temporary aberration: the homosexual was now a species.* (1981: 43, emphasis added)

The nineteenth-century homosexual was not alone as a new species to be diagnosed, studied, experimented upon and, ideally, cured. Typologies were produced, cataloguing the innumerable forms deviance could take; sexual 'perversions' proliferated. Homosexuals were joined by a carnivalesque ensemble that included onanists, frotteurs, nymphomaniacs, zoophiles and fetishists. Also temporarily included in this rogues' gallery were 'heterosexuals': the term, coined in 1869 (the same year as 'homosexual'), originally denoted a perversion – having sex with someone of the other gender for pleasure rather than in order to reproduce. The first 'heterosexuals' were thus men who had sex with pregnant women, or who engaged in oral sex rather than intercourse. Women too could suffer from heterosexuality, but this was less common; and if women enjoyed sex with men too much there were other names for them anyway, as we will see in more detail below.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, heterosexuality lost its status as a perversion. This shift reflected the influence of arguments made by Freud and others to the effect that having sex for pleasure is not abnormal. It allowed the word 'heterosexual' to become what it has remained, an antonym of 'homosexual', denoting someone sexually attracted to persons of the opposite sex (see Katz 1995). With these contrasting terms in place, it became possible to think in the terms we consider natural and obvious today, assuming that every individual has a fundamental 'sexual orientation' towards either people of the same sex or else people of the other sex.³ This assumption, in turn, makes possible the construction and public display of social identities that are based on sexual orientation, such as 'gay man' and 'lesbian'.

A DIFFERENT FRAMEWORK: ROMAN SEXUALITIES⁴

According to the classicist Holt N. Parker (1997), sexual categorization in ancient Rome was based on a fundamental distinction between sexual activity and passivity, with no special attention being paid to the homo/hetero distinction that is fundamental for modern Westerners. 'Active' sexuality in the Roman system meant using the penis to penetrate one of three bodily orifices, the vagina, the anus or the mouth. The person who was penetrated was 'passive'. The Romans had one or more Latin names for each position in the resulting classification, shown in the table below (adapted from Parker 1997: 49).

	vagina	anus	mouth
active (penetrator, male)	futor	pedicator	irrumator
passive (penetratee, male)	cunnilinctor	cinaedus/pathico	fellator
passive (penetratee, female)	femina/puella	pathica	fellatrix

The active labels (*futor*, *pedicator*, *irrumator*, meaning 'one who penetrates a vagina/anus/mouth') can only be applied to men, since only men have a penis with which to perform the act of penetration. Women are by definition passive: the labels for a vaginally penetrated woman, *femina* and *puella*, mean simply 'woman' and 'girl'. Male/female, then, is a crucial distinction in this system, but Parker argues that hetero/homo is not. Each of the three active terms denotes a preference for penetrating a particular orifice, and while *futor* implies that the penetratee is female, since only women have vaginas, *pedicator* and *irrumator* do not specify the sex of the penetrated person. All the active positions were considered 'normal' male sexualities, regardless of whether the mouths and anuses men penetrated were male or female (or they didn't care which they were, which seems to have been a not uncommon attitude).

The passive positions may be occupied by either men or women, and the terms used to describe them are therefore gender differentiated. *Fellatrix*, for instance, is the grammatically feminine equivalent of *fellator* (both derived from *fellare*, 'to suck'). There is, however, an important difference between the masculine and feminine terms: a passive woman is normal, but a passive man is perverse. Both fellatio and cunnilingus were considered humiliating for men, because (however counter-intuitive we may find this) they were passive. Parker explains that 'for a man to give oral sex is disgrace is the same whether he is servicing a man or a woman' (1997: 52).

It will be evident that (what we would call) lesbian sex is absent from this classification, though it was certainly known to the Romans. However, a system which defines sex as the penetration of an orifice by a penis cannot accommodate women having sex with women. The commonest terms for such women were *tribbad* and *virago* (*vir* = 'man'), and the Romans thought of them as women who aped men, attempting to take active sexual roles for which they were not anatomically equipped.

Though some aspects of the Roman system may look familiar (e.g. the association of active/passive with masculine/feminine, which we return to below⁵), Parker argues that the ancient and modern systems simply do not correspond to one another – it is meaningless to ask about a Roman, 'was he a homosexual?', because homo/hetero preference was not what the categorization system was organized around. (Equally, it would be incomprehensible to inquire about a man today, is he an *irrumator*? Many men still do what the *irrumator* did, but there is no category or label for 'men who like to penetrate another's mouth'.)

One important motivation for categorizing people as 'homosexuals' (cf. other deviant groups such as 'criminals' or 'lunatics') was to subject the people so classified to various kinds of control, such as medical interventions purporting to 'cure' them. But when a classification of this kind becomes the basis for a shared social identity, that opens up the possibility that people who identify as members of the group will organize to resist their collective oppression. This is what has happened in the case of homosexuality. Movements for gay rights or gay liberation are based on an implicit acceptance of the categorization scheme (the division of people into two classes depending on their sexual orientation), but this is accompanied by an explicit rejection of the negative meanings that were originally attached to membership of the 'homosexual' class. Foucault calls this form of resistance a 'reverse discourse', because it appropriates the original gesture of classifying a group of 'deviants' ('yes, we are homosexuals') and turns it against the classifying authority ('and as a *bona fide* minority group, we now demand our rights').

One right which is often demanded when minority groups become politicized is the right to (re)name themselves – for instance, to substitute the community term 'gay' for the category label used by (often very unsympathetic) outside experts, 'homosexual'. Later we will return to the politics of naming and labelling; we draw attention to it here, however, to underscore the point that classification is a linguistic as well as a more broadly discursive practice: it simultaneously produces *and labels* categories, and the selection of labels is not unimportant in the process of defining what categories mean.

The kinds of expert discourse which have historically been most influential in shaping modern classifications of sexual desires, practices and identities are those of medicine, particularly psychiatry, and social scientific disciplines such as psychology and sexology. The work of early sexologists established many of the categories that are still in popular circulation today, such as 'sadism', 'masochism', 'fetishism', 'paedophilia'. 'Dysfunction' (e.g. impotence, premature ejaculation, frigidity) also provided grist to the classificatory mill. This urge to classify and label in the domain of sex has persisted: new categories still surface regularly, while older ones fall into disfavour and quietly disappear. Experts no longer have much to say about those once-familiar figures, the 'frigid woman' and her opposite, the 'nymphomaniac' – let alone the 'onanists' and 'frottists' who populated nineteenth-century texts. On the other hand we have recently made the acquaintance of the 'sex addict', an individual (of either sex, though represented more often as male than as female) who is pathologically dependent

on the 'high' produced by sex, in the same way that other addicts are unable to function without alcohol or narcotics.

As these examples illustrate, the categories in existence at any given time are not just random and unmotivated, and change does not occur only because of advances in scientific knowledge. Dramatic changes in expert opinion often mirror what are clearly ideological shifts in the wider society, as opposed to startling new scientific discoveries. Thus masturbation, presented by medical experts in the late nineteenth century as a public health emergency threatening the wellbeing and possibly even the life of any child who engaged in it, is now treated by experts as a normal part of healthy sexual development. This turnaround was not prompted by a controlled trial in which the 'masturbation is bad for you' hypothesis was decisively disproved. Nor did any purely scientific investigation lead to the removal, in 1973, of homosexuality from the US *Diagnostic and Statistic Manual of Mental Disorders*. That followed political campaigning by gay and lesbian organizations, and reflected a climate of greater public support for gay rights. The fading away of 'nymphomania', similarly, is not unconnected to feminist critiques of the sexual double standard that category reproduced (women were pathologized for expressing desires which were seen as normal in men). The new category of 'sex addiction' fills a similar slot, pathologizing individuals who show an 'excessive' desire for sex, but it does not specify the gender of those individuals, and thus avoids the charge of sexism. The particular form this new pathology takes must be understood in a broader context. Discourse on addiction in general acquired extraordinary potency during the 1980s and 1990s, partly because of the public attention given to drug addiction as a major social problem (this was the time when the 'war on drugs' was declared) and partly because of the cultural salience of the 'recovery movement' whose prototype was Alcoholics Anonymous. The narrative of addiction and recovery, repeated constantly on television talk shows and in interviews with troubled celebrities, became – and indeed remains – an obvious discourse in which to talk about all kinds of behaviour viewed as self-destructive or antisocial, including sexual behaviour.

WHAT'S IN A NAME? THE POLITICS OF LABELLING

We said earlier that the classification of sexual desires, practices and identities does two things simultaneously: it produces categories and it labels them, gives them names. In the preceding section we concentrated on the significance of the first effect, the discursive production of sexual categories. We wanted to emphasize that this is not just a matter of hanging linguistic

labels on a pre-existing chunk of reality which was always 'there' just waiting to be named. The production of the opposed categories 'homosexual' and 'heterosexual', for instance, reconfigures the reality which the labels purport to describe, bringing into view something – what we now refer to as 'sexual orientation' or 'sexual preference' – that had not been part of previous understandings of sexual behaviour. There was a great deal more to this reconfiguration than the invention of a couple of new vocabulary items. But since we use language to think with (individually as well as in conversation with others), any new way of thinking is likely to involve new ways of using language as well; and since the process of classification requires linguistic labelling, any novel classification of phenomena will tend to involve the coining of new words. All of which might prompt the question: how important are the words? Does it matter, not only whether we have a label for something, but also what that label is?

In order to answer that question, we need to consider what labels are used for and what arguments over labels are really about. Contests over what a particular group should be called (e.g. 'Black' versus 'African-American', 'the handicapped' versus 'people with disabilities', 'homosexual' versus 'gay') can easily appear – and are often presented by mainstream commentators – as pointless disputes about semantic trivia. Invariably someone will point out that 'reality' – material facts such as racial discrimination and violent homophobic attacks – cannot be changed merely by tinkering with names. But few if any of the activists who advocate renaming do so because they believe a change of label will magically eliminate material disadvantage. Rather they see renaming as a challenge to the *ideological* structures which make the subordinate status of the group appear natural, acceptable and inevitable.

This challenge is mainly directed outwards, to those sectors of mainstream society that actively oppress the group or tacitly condone their oppression. However, renaming may also have more 'inward-directed' objectives: in addition to challenging others' prejudices, one goal of proposing new identity labels is to satisfy the desire of group members themselves for names and self-descriptions they can readily identify with. Talking about, for instance, 'the gay community' or 'the Queer Nation' is one strategy for promoting group solidarity and cohesion, creating what the historian of nationalism Benedict Anderson (1983) calls an 'imagined community'. Anderson points out that even in a very small country, most people will not have direct contact with more than a tiny fraction of their compatriots: by contrast with, say, 'the village', 'the nation' is an abstraction, and identifying oneself with it requires some imaginative effort. Thus people's

sense of themselves as members of particular nations has to be constructed through various symbolic representations of nationhood: stories about a country's origins and history; maps of its territory; discussions of the 'national character'; texts addressed by a country's leaders to the people (e.g. the US President's annual 'state of the Union' address); anthems; flags; and collective rituals commemorating key events (e.g. independence days). Labels and names may also be significant resources for the symbolic work of nation-building (think for instance of the way 'Rhodesia' became 'Zimbabwe' following the achievement of Black majority rule). This insight about nations can be extended to all kinds of groupings that go beyond members' immediate social networks – 'the African diaspora', 'the Roman Catholic Church', 'the Conservative Party' or indeed 'the gay community'. However, these larger groupings are not homogeneous, and when there are differences within the group as well as between it and other groups, labelling proposals that attempt to rally group members to a single, shared vision of what unites them may be contested internally as well as externally. Wherever the contests are located, though, they are essentially power struggles carried on at the symbolic level: they are both about who has the right or the power to label a particular group, and about whose ideological presuppositions will be foregrounded in that labelling.

As we pointed out above, the displacement of 'homosexual' by 'gay' is, among other things, a rejection of an expert, clinical label invented and used by people who typically do not belong to the relevant group, or necessarily support their struggle. 'Gay', by contrast, originated in the 1930s as an in-group term, part of a code which only insiders or sympathizers understood (Butters 1998). Although the two terms, 'homosexual' and 'gay', have the same referential meaning – they identify the same group of people – their meanings in actual usage are not identical. The selection of one or the other can signify the difference between conceptualizing homosexuality as deviance or sickness, and conceptualizing it in other and more positive ways: as an alternative personal and/or political choice, for instance, or simply as one 'natural' variant of human sexuality, less common than heterosexuality but not by that token deserving condemnation.⁶ It can also be used by insiders to differentiate between those individuals who are 'out' and those who remain 'closeted' – the latter are 'homosexual' rather than 'gay' because 'gay' connotes a self-ascribed sexual identity, and closeted individuals deny their homosexuality.

In formal varieties of mainstream discourse there are signs that 'gay' has assumed the status of an unmarked and relatively neutral term, while 'homosexual' as a noun is now avoided in contexts where a non-pejorative

term is wanted. The BBC, for example, uses 'gay' in news bulletins, particularly in contexts where the reference is to an individual (e.g. 'the first openly gay member of the House of Lords'). This suggests that 'gay' has come to be regarded as a conservative, middle-of-the-road choice, and that for many English-speakers it now occupies much the same semantic space that 'homosexual' did previously. For some of those speakers, of course, that semantic space is not neutral but markedly negative, and 'gay' can be used as an insult.⁷ Nevertheless, it may be said that this particular symbolic struggle has resulted in victory for the in-group term: it has been accepted by important linguistic gatekeepers like the BBC, and consequently it is now the unmarked term in most 'respectable' public discourse. This should remind us how quickly things can change: as late as the early 1990s, anyone who used or advocated 'gay' in its 'homosexual' sense could expect to encounter vehement protests from people who argued that a deviant minority were stealing or ruining a word whose 'real' meaning the English-speaking community must preserve at all costs.

As we noted earlier, disputes about labelling may also take place within the group to which the labels apply. In the case we are concerned with here, one long-running dispute is about gender: many lesbians prefer the gender-specific term 'lesbian' to 'gay', which, they argue, obscures the presence of women by subsuming them under a label whose primary reference is to men. This argument was and is connected to a broader feminist critique of male dominance, from which gay men are not exempt (we discuss this issue further in chapters 3 and 4). Some lesbians question not just the gender inclusivity of the word 'gay', but more fundamentally the existence of a mixed 'gay community' in which women and men are united by culture and politics. Other lesbians feel they have more in common with gay men than with feminist women. This example illustrates another function of identity labels: adopting one label in preference to another is a way of signalling contrasting political stances.⁸

That point is also relevant when we consider the more recent emergence of the term 'queer'. 'Queer' exemplifies a labelling strategy that has been used by other subordinated groups too, that of 'reclaiming' a word whose primary use in the past has been to insult you. 'Black', at the time considered negative and insulting, was reclaimed within the Black Power movement; Women's Liberation activists in the 1970s reclaimed 'witch', 'bitch' and 'dyke'. A highly visible rap act in the 1990s named itself 'Niggas with Attitude', and there are radical groups of psychiatric patients which use the slogan 'Glad to be Mad'. The strategy is a confrontational one: it says, 'yes, we are exactly what you say – and what's more, we're proud of it'.

Queer activists had a similarly uncompromising message for their bigoted adversaries, trenchantly expressed in the slogan 'we're queer, we're here, get used to it'.

But in addition, 'queer' represented a bolder attempt to reshape the sexual-political landscape. It was not intended simply as a new label for the existing categories 'gay' and 'lesbian'; it was part of a whole discourse on sexuality whose aim was to produce a new category. That category was defined in a deliberately broad and loose way, to embrace all kinds of positions based on a rejection of orthodox, heteronormative assumptions. It would include, for instance, transvestites and other transgendered people – who might or might not identify as lesbian or gay, but who challenge heteronormativity in other ways. It would include people with 'deviant' desires regardless of their sexual orientation (e.g. sadomasochists and fetishists); it would even in principle include people who claim to have no sexual orientation, precisely because that claim challenges the logic of currently orthodox understandings of sexuality. 'Queer' was not conceived as a category of identity in the way that 'gay' was; what it signified was more a set of cultural-political positions, one of which, in fact, was being critical of the kind of identity politics represented by both the gay and the feminist movements during the late 1980s and 1990s. Queer activism was informed by queer theory (see chapter 3), an important strand in which was a sustained critique of the concept of 'identity', and the essentialist assumptions on which it depended.

We have made use of the past tense in some of the above remarks not because queer politics have ceased to exist, but because the *term* 'queer' has spread beyond the community that adopted it originally, and in the process it has acquired new uses and inflections of meaning. Today 'queer' is very often used as if it were equivalent to 'gay/lesbian', though with a hipper, more radical edge. One might say that 'queer' has moved into the space which 'gay' has vacated as it has replaced 'homosexual' in respectable mainstream discourse; one might also say that 'gay' was able to become 'respectable' for gatekeepers like the BBC partly because a new and more obviously 'extreme' word, 'queer', had entered the arena. Words do not change their meanings in isolation, but in dialectical relationships with other words. The near-equivalence of 'gay' and 'queer' in many contexts suggests that 'queer' has not succeeded in displacing the existing classification system and producing an alternative – or at least, it has not succeeded in doing this outside a small community of theorists and activists. But the present state of affairs is not the end of the story. Queer theory and activism have opened up a debate about identity and sexuality which is still ongoing, and the contested status of the label 'queer' (what it means, who it includes,

whether it is preferable to other labels) needs to be understood as part of that broader debate. As the debate continues, the meaning(s) of 'queer' and its relationship to other labels will no doubt continue to shift.

In this section about names and labels, we have argued that although words matter – as witness the energy expended over the years on arguments about labels like 'gay', 'lesbian', 'queer', etc. – words in isolation are not the issue. It is in *discourse* – the use of language in specific contexts – that words acquire meaning. Whenever people argue about words, they are also arguing about the assumptions and values that have clustered around those words in the course of their history of being used. We cannot understand the significance of any word unless we attend closely to its relationship with other words, and to the discourse (indeed, the competing discourses) in which words are always embedded. And we must also bear in mind that discourse shifts and changes constantly, which is why arguments about words and their meanings (much to the irritation of the 'pointless semantic trivia' brigade) are never settled once and for all.

We have focused so far on a particular type or set of words – category or identity labels – because of their particular salience in both scientific and political discourse on sexuality. However, not all words are of this kind, and meaning does not reside only in vocabulary. In the following sections, we want to broaden the discussion by undertaking a more contextualized kind of analysis, examining specific instances of language in use, and paying attention to grammatical patterns as well as vocabulary. We begin by focusing on the role played by language and discourse in the construction of 'common sense' about women's and men's sexuality, and the way common-sense discourse functions to reproduce gender inequality.

'AND THEN HE KISSED ME': SEX, GENDER, SUBJECTIVITY AND AGENCY

The feminist Catharine MacKinnon once wrote: 'man fucks woman. Subject, verb, object' (1982: 541). This observation encapsulates a pervasive and persistent piece of common sense about gender and sexuality: that only men can be active sexual subjects, while the role of women is to be passive objects of male desire. This common sense has negative consequences for women: on one hand it restricts their freedom to behave as actively desiring subjects themselves, while on the other it can make them vulnerable to sexual exploitation and abuse by men who treat them as objects rather than equal human subjects. Put another way, women are frequently in the position of not being able to have the sex they want, while at the same time

they may be forced to have sex that they do not want. Here we consider how language and discourse enter into this picture.

We will begin where Catharine MacKinnon does, with grammar. Elizabeth Manning (1997) analysed the grammar of verbs denoting sexual, romantic or intimate acts as these appeared in a corpus of 211 million words of (British and American) English. The verbs that particularly interested her refer to activities which are generally understood to be engaged in by two people on the basis of mutual desire (e.g. 'kiss', 'hug', 'caress', 'fondle'), and one mark of this is the fact that they can be used in 'reciprocal' constructions with plural subjects and no object (e.g. 'we kissed') and/or with 'each other' in the object slot (e.g. 'they caressed each other'). Verbs denoting sexual activity, such as 'fuck', 'screw', 'shag', 'make love', also permit these grammatical possibilities: one may say 'we fucked each other' or 'they made love'. However, Manning did not find such constructions to be as common in the corpus she analysed as the alternative pattern in which sex is represented as something done by one person to another. Furthermore, her analysis showed that for 'fuck', 'screw' and 'make love [to]', the commonest pattern in examples relating to heterosexual sex was for men to be in the subject slot and women in the object slot. Men are said to fuck / screw / make love to women far more often than the other way round. When women were the subject of the verb 'make love' it was more likely to be followed by the preposition 'with'; when men were the subject it was more likely to be followed by 'to'. The term 'shag' (an affectionate colloquialism for intercourse in British English) was more equally distributed in relation to the gender of the subject, though male subjects still slightly outnumbered female ones.

This pattern is not about grammar in the abstract, but about the way grammatical possibilities are actually deployed in discourse. In the English language as such, there is no grammatical rule that prevents speakers from representing sex as something women do to men, or something women and men do together; but in a large sample of discourse produced by users of English, the preferred representation of it was as something men do to women. The heading we have given to this section alludes to another notorious example. When the Beach Boys re-recorded a hit song originally performed by the all-female group The Crystals, 'And then he kissed me', they changed the lyric, as is usually done in these circumstances to preserve the heterosexual narrative of the original. They could in theory have done this by simply substituting 'she' for 'he', to yield 'And then she kissed me'; but in fact they changed it to 'And then I kissed her'. Speakers, writers and singers are not necessarily aware of any consistent logic underlying their

decisions about the most 'natural' or 'appropriate' grammatical form for sentences like these. But in making the choices they do, whether consciously or not, they reproduce the underlying logic of men's agency and women's passivity, and recirculate it to the recipients of their discourse.

Even when a writer wishes to represent women actively pursuing their sexual desires in a positive way, this remains remarkably difficult to do. Consider, for instance, the following piece of discourse, from a feature in a British newspaper about a US girl group called The Donnas (*Guardian Weekend*, 28 July 2001: 35):

Mostly they sing about getting laid, about getting laid as often as possible, with as many people as possible, about whom they know as little as possible... It's classic slapper rock... rather than the rude-girl rap-sluttery of, say, Li'l Kim. 'I wouldn't say we were sluts though. That would be stupid. We all have boyfriends.' Ford [Maya Ford, one of The Donnas] seems affronted by the suggestion, which is a surprise coming from the woman who wrote, 'Gotta get out tonight / got an itch underneath my pants / I can smell your sex from here / so I think I'll take a chance'... In London... a DJ asked her about 40 Boys in 40 Nights [the title of the group's most recent hit song]. [The DJ said] 'That's a bit fruity, isn't it?' [Ford] paused for slightly longer than is radio-friendly. 'How about 40 Girls in 40 Nights? Is that fruity enough for you?' At the same time, she's keen to make clear that if they're not sluts, it's only because of the paucity of acceptable menfolk. 'I mean on our last tour me and the drummer were single, and we tried to make out with fans, and found, like, two really cute guys, but most of them aren't cute enough.'

The frame which the journalist has used for this feature is a 'good girl / bad girl' frame – The Donnas are contrasted with virginal teen idols like Britney Spears, and the thesis is that there are signs of what the writer calls a 'paradigm shift' in US youth culture whereby the 'good girls' have had their moment and 'bad girls' like The Donnas are the next big thing. The writer is overtly in favour of this paradigm shift, describing Britney and her ilk as 'a gruesome tranche of poppets singing about chastity'.

The first observation one might make about this is that it would not be so straightforward to draw the same 'good/bad' distinction for young men. More exactly, while one could talk about 'good boys' and 'bad boys', the contrast would not be framed in terms of an opposition between chastity/virginity and sexual activity. Sex is considered a normal and legitimate interest for all kinds of boys, though how they pursue it and with whom might differentiate them along good/bad lines. The Donnas' status as rebellious 'bad girls', however, is based entirely on the enthusiastic attitude they display towards sex in their song lyrics. The title '40 Boys in 40 Nights' occasions the description 'fruity' from a male British DJ (in British

English 'fruity' means 'risqué' rather than being an allusion to homosexuality, which is what the American Maya Ford appears to take it as). Since there is nothing novel or remarkable in men singing songs about how many women they've had sex with, the 'risqué' quality of '40 Boys in 40 Nights' must derive from the mere fact that it reverses the usual roles.

The second observation prompted by the extract of discourse reproduced above concerns the appearance in it of the terms 'slapper' and 'slut' (the latter appears three times). Both these terms come from the extensive lexicon of English words which may be used to refer to women as prostitutes ([Penelope] Stanley 1973). 'Slut' is defined in dictionaries as meaning a slatternly or dirty woman, one who does not keep house properly, and it can still be used in that sense, but in contemporary usage its more specifically sexual sense is usually to the fore: a 'slut' is a woman who sleeps around. 'Slapper' has achieved wide currency among British English speakers more recently, and refers to a promiscuous woman of vulgar appearance and behaviour. These terms, and related ones like 'tart' and 'slag', have no masculine equivalents.

In this piece of discourse the terms 'slapper' and more especially 'slut' function in a complicated way. When the writer describes The Donnas' music as 'classic slapper rock', in the context of the whole article this is evidently not intended as an insult; on the contrary, it displays approval of the 'bad girl' posture The Donnas have adopted. Maya Ford, on the other hand, seems to be caught between her allegiance to the group's rebellious public image and her awareness that 'slut' is a pejorative term, something she and the other Donnas would not want to be called in mundane reality. Ford 'seems affronted' by the suggestion that The Donnas might be sluts offstage as well as on, and rebuts the implied charge by saying 'We all have boyfriends.' Later on, when she asserts that they would be sluts if the available men were 'cute enough', she nevertheless makes clear that this would only be acceptable under certain circumstances, noting that when she and the drummer 'tried to make out with fans', they were not cheating on anyone, for at the time they were both 'single'. While making no bones about her desire for sex as such, Ford also stresses her allegiance to the more traditional ideals of romantic love and fidelity – the very ideals that separate the chaste woman from the whore. One problem she is trying to negotiate here is that terms which represent women as active sexual subjects also tend to represent them as prostitutes; and prostitutes as a class of women bear an enormous burden of historical contempt. Attempts have been made by some feminists to reclaim 'slut' (e.g. Califia 1983), but it is evident that the

term still evokes ambivalent feelings, so that young women like Maya Ford cannot embrace it wholeheartedly.

Part of the difficulty of reclaiming terms like 'slut' for young heterosexual women is connected to the fact that the use of those terms is embedded in peer group practices with real and potentially devastating social consequences. In the 1980s, Sue Lees conducted research in British schools and found that the term 'slag' (which means much the same as 'slut') was a powerful weapon used by both boys and girls to police the behaviour of girls (Lees 1986). Girls lived in dread of being accused of being 'slags'; even if that accusation were totally groundless, it could lead to ostracism, both by the boys they might otherwise hope to form relationships with and by the girls who formed their primary peer group and support network. Therefore, girls consciously and systematically avoided forms of dress, speech and behaviour which they knew might call forth the epithet 'slag'. There was no corresponding epithet which could be used to police boys' behaviour, for unchastity or promiscuity does not devalue a boy's status in the way it does a girl's.

Debbie Epstein and Richard Johnson show in their more recent study *Schooling Sexualities* (1998) that not much has changed. Some young women do seem to enjoy the notoriety and the potentially glamorous 'outlaw' status that come from being known as sexually active, but the label 'slag' nevertheless retains significant power to shame, as is illustrated by this extract from a conversation involving Epstein, fifteen-year-old Tracy and Tracy's friend Sarah (Epstein and Johnson 1998: 120–1):

- DE cos you said people were looking at you like you were a slag. I wasn't quite sure what that meant.
 T oh it was like there were some rumours going round our area about me and this kid. And like, he spreaded it – someone spreaded it all around the Mid school, all around this school. People just looking at me, I couldn't hack it no more, and like I was
 DE you must have been really miserable.
 T oh no, not. I was really angry. I just wanted to take my anger out on anybody that come along really.
 DE sorry, what did you just say, Sarah?
 S no, I just said she was, she was upset and that.
 T I didn't come to school for about three days cos I couldn't face anybody.

Although Tracy initially describes a 'resistant' response to the criticism of her peers – anger – she admits, when challenged by her friend's statement that she was 'upset', that she absented herself from school because she 'couldn't

face anybody'. It is significant, too, that in Tracy's story the rumour is presented by implication as untrue. 'Slag', like 'homosexual' or 'sex addict', is a term that produces the category it names, and while young women like Tracy can and do deny that they are members of that category, they strikingly do not challenge its ontological status – in other words, the presupposition that *some* women are 'slags'. Their insistence that they personally do not deserve the label only reinforces its power, and reproduces the assumptions about gender and sexual agency on which the label is predicated.

AGENCY, RESPONSIBILITY AND CONSENT

While women and girls are not supposed actively to pursue their own sexual desires, they are regularly held responsible for provoking men's desire. They are also supposed to help men to contain the 'male urges' that might otherwise be expressed in inappropriate or antisocial ways. One situation in which these contradictory demands regularly become an issue is where a man is charged with rape or sexual assault. In this situation it is common for the behaviour of the complainant to come under critical scrutiny, with a key question being whether she made sufficient effort to prevent or resist the alleged assault.

The critical discourse analyst Susan Ehrlich (1998, 2001) has made a detailed examination of the construction of agency and responsibility in the discourse of rape and sexual assault proceedings. Her data are taken from a court case and a quasi-judicial disciplinary hearing in a Canadian university, both relating to the same two incidents (separated in time by a matter of days) in which the defendant, a university student whom Ehrlich names 'Matt', went back to a woman student's room at her invitation, but then proceeded to engage in sexual acts which the women concerned said they did not consent to. As happens in most cases involving alleged sexual assault by a person the complainant knew, the defence offered by Matt was that the women had consented to sex. He did not deny that the alleged acts had taken place or that he had participated in them. What he denied was that the acts were unwanted and unconsented to by the women.

As Ehrlich points out, in rape and sexual assault cases which turn on the issue of consent, especially if no additional physical injury has been inflicted, the evidence presented is likely to consist entirely of discourse – the conflicting accounts offered by the complainant and the defendant. The jury or disciplinary panel is not privy to the disputed event itself, but must base their decisions on what the parties to the case say about it after the fact. Analysing the proceedings in this case, Ehrlich observed a

difference between the way the same actions and events were represented by the complainants and prosecution lawyers on one hand, and by Matt and the lawyers defending him on the other. The women constructed sentences in which Matt was the agent and they the (unwilling) objects of his actions, such as: 'He took my shirt off and ... he unclasped my bra ... and he pulled my pants down'. Matt and his lawyers employed grammatical constructions that downplayed or elided his agency, such as plurals implying reciprocity and mutual engagement (e.g. 'we were fooling around', 'we started kissing') and passives which deleted the agent so that it was not clear whether Matt, the woman or both jointly should be held responsible for an action (e.g. Matt's lawyer asked, 'I take it that the sweater *was removed*?').

The grammatical strategy employed by Matt and his lawyers reverses the usual assumptions about gender and sexual agency. Matt, a member of the gender group which is usually cast as the 'active' partner in heterosexual sex, represented himself and was represented by his lawyers as having less than full agency, while the complainants, though members of the gender group which is usually cast in the 'passive' role, were persistently blamed for their passivity in not resisting Matt's unwanted advances more vigorously. Here it should be remembered that witnesses in judicial proceedings are not just free to tell their stories in any way they see fit, but constrained by questions asked by lawyers. In this case, a great deal of the questioning turned on why the women did not assert agency by resisting Matt with force. This was consequential for the outcome: Matt was not expelled from the university, and he was acquitted on one charge in court. The women's accounts attributing agency to Matt were not found convincing, because their own apparent failure to show adequate resistance was taken as supporting his claim that they consented to sex, or at least that he could reasonably have believed that they consented.

What lies behind the apparent contradiction here becomes clearer if we examine the discursive construction of 'consent'. Matt at one point in the proceedings elucidated his own definition of that term, explaining that if a woman 'didn't say "no", didn't say "stop", didn't say, uh uh jump up and say "no I want you to leave", I am assuming, OK? ... that that is consent' (Ehrlich 1998: 155). 'Consent' on this definition is inferred from the absence of strong resistance. The women complainants, on the other hand, insisted in their own accounts that they gave Matt all the evidence a reasonable person could need that they did not wish to have sex with him, by being unresponsive physically and by making comments such as that they were tired and wanted to go to sleep. Matt in their view should have deduced the absence of consent from these clues, without their needing to use explicit

commands like 'stop' or physically fight him off. (One explained that she was afraid to offer stronger resistance because she believed that if he became angry he would also become more aggressive and inflict serious harm on her.) The disciplinary panel seized on these conflicting accounts to interpret the incidents as cases of male/female misunderstanding. However, this is not an idiosyncratic or random kind of misunderstanding. It arises from a kind of discursive double-bind.

Sally McConnell-Ginet (1989) observes that whatever her individual intentions on a particular occasion, a woman cannot say 'no' to a man's proposal of sex and be confident she will be understood as meaning unequivocally to refuse. 'No' will often be interpreted as 'maybe', or 'keep trying'. This is not simply and straightforwardly because men do not understand what 'no' means in the English language. Rather it reflects societal assumptions about what is 'normal' (or normative) in this particular situation. The denial of sexual agency to women means that saying 'yes' to sex (or initiating it) is disapproved of. Nice girls should demur coyly in order to demonstrate that they are not sluts or nymphomaniacs, but this is a ritual, formulaic gesture and men should not be deterred – resistance is only to be expected from women, and women for their part are held to expect men to grind down their resistance.⁹ But this understanding of heterosexual courtship rituals puts women in the position of the boy who cried 'wolf': when they do want 'no' to mean 'no' they cannot be sure it will be taken as they intend.

In response to feminist critiques of this state of affairs, an unusual discursive experiment was undertaken in the early 1990s at Antioch College, a small, educationally 'progressive' institution in Ohio, USA. The college introduced a campus-wide sexual consent policy (drafted by a group of students, faculty and administrators) in which consent was defined not as the absence of 'no', but as the presence of 'yes'. The policy's central feature was a requirement that an affirmative response must be elicited for every act performed during a sexual encounter. A spokesperson explained to the press, 'The request for consent must be specific for each act... If you want to take her blouse off, you have to ask. If you want to touch her breast, you have to ask. If you want to move your hand down to her genitals, you have to ask. If you want to put your finger inside her, you have to ask' (quoted Cameron 1994: 32). While the college did not install surveillance technology to police adherence to the code, it required new students to attend sessions explaining it, and stipulated that any subsequent complaints of harassment and assault would be adjudicated with reference to it – if the subject of a complaint had neglected to follow

the code by obtaining their partner's consent, the complaint would be upheld.

This initiative occurred in the midst of public controversy about 'political correctness' on American campuses, and it soon attracted attention in the national and foreign media as an outstanding example of 'political correctness gone mad'. The tone of most coverage was incredulous, with incredulity focusing on two points in particular. One was the foolishness of the college authorities in imagining that the urgency of young people's sexual desires could be contained and regulated by *any* set of rules. The other was a more specific objection to the actual substance of Antioch's rules, and this objection is especially interesting in the context of a discussion of *language* and sexuality. What struck many critics as particularly absurd was the requirement that people must *speak* their desires. An idea that recurred was that talking about what you were doing or what you wanted to do must inevitably interfere with the business of actually doing it, destroying spontaneity and dissolving pleasure in a torrent of superfluous words. Good sex was implicitly represented as a passionate, wordless communion of bodies, a transcendent experience that cannot and indeed should not be verbalized.

However, interviews conducted with members of the campus community at Antioch (reported in Cameron 1994) suggested something rather different. The main aim of the consent policy had been rape prevention, and this was what administrators emphasized when they were asked what difference it had made. Yet when women students were asked the same question, a number spoke not of feeling safer, but of having better – more exciting, more varied and more pleasurable – sex. When asked how the policy had achieved that effect, they explained that it had impelled them to develop a language for representing their desires, both to themselves and to their sexual partners. They found themselves talking much more explicitly than they had previously been wont to do about specific sexual acts, and they claimed this enhanced the experience of sex. This view of what the code had accomplished for at least some members of the community¹⁰ was at odds with the media representation of Antioch as a puritanical institution intent on suppressing young people's 'natural' sexuality; it was also somewhat different from the 'official' view of what the policy was about, as represented by the college authorities.

In the Antioch college spokesperson's explanation of the sexual consent policy that we reproduced above – 'If you want to take her blouse off, you have to ask...' – the conventional presuppositions are in place regarding gender, agency and consent: sex is figured as something men initiate and women either assent to or refuse. This is somewhat misleading about the

actual workings of the Antioch policy, for although its main official goal was rape prevention, it was written to apply to both genders, and to same-sex as well as cross-sex encounters. Despite choosing the most common or conventional scenario (man coercing woman) to illustrate the principle of affirmative consent for the benefit of the press, the framers of the policy did not rule out the possibility that men, too, might wish to say 'no' to a sexual invitation.¹¹ This is an unusual move, for in conventional understandings of heterosex it is unimaginable that any man would ever pass up the opportunity to have sex. Refusing a woman's advance carries the risk that a man will be seen as somehow sexually inadequate – in particular, it may cast doubt on his credentials as a heterosexual and raise the suspicion that he is in fact gay.

So it is interesting that there is one circumstance in which male sexual refusal is construed sympathetically: when the unwelcome proposition comes not from a woman to a man, but from a gay man to a man who is or claims to be heterosexual. This suggests that there are conflicting discourses governing men's acceptance or refusal of a sexual invitation: if one assumption is that 'real men are always ready to have sex', another is that 'real men act in ways that affirm their heterosexuality, and do not act in ways that may compromise their heterosexuality'. Thus if the invitation comes from a woman, acceptance is the unmarked choice because refusal could imply non-heterosexuality; if the invitation comes from a man the reverse is true – refusal is the unmarked choice because acceptance implies non-heterosexuality. Not only is it seen as acceptable masculine behaviour to refuse sex if the invitation comes from another man, it is sometimes seen as reasonable for men to respond to such an invitation with physical violence. This is what lies behind the legal defence of 'homosexual panic', employed in cases where a straight man has responded to a (real, imagined or invented) advance from a gay man by assaulting or even killing him.

'Homosexual panic' was a psychiatric condition first proposed in 1920. In its original formulation, it did not refer to a fear prompted by advances from other men. Instead, 'homosexual panic' referred to cases where men who had been in intensively same-sex environments became aware of homosexual desires that they felt unable to control, and unable to act on. The original formulation of the disorder was based on the diagnosis of a small number of soldiers and sailors in a US government mental hospital after the First World War (Kempf 1920). These men were not violent – they were, on the contrary, passive. The disorder was characterized by periods of introspective brooding, self-punishment, suicidal assaults, withdrawal and helplessness.

Later, some experts extended the idea of 'homosexual panic' to explain acts of violence, suggesting that perpetrators had 'panicked' when a homosexual advance threatened to shatter their fragile heterosexual identity. In recent court cases where 'homosexual panic' has been offered as a defence, however, the argument has *not* been that the defendant overreacted because of his own sexual insecurities. Instead, his violent actions have been explained as an understandable and defensible response to an unwanted homosexual advance. To a heterosexual man, such an advance is said to constitute a kind of assault, and acts of violence committed in the resulting state of panic must therefore be regarded as justifiable self-defence.¹²

It might seem that there is a parallel between women resisting male heterosexual advances and straight men resisting homosexual advances, but on closer inspection there are important differences between the two cases. These may be linked to the point made above, that, for heterosexual men, refusing a proposition of homosexual sex is the unmarked choice – indeed the proposition itself is culturally construed as a provocation. When men make unwanted advances to women, the same assumptions are not in force. Thus women who complain of rape or sexual assault are frequently questioned about what they did to provoke or confuse the assailant, and it is considered important to establish whether they produced any explicit verbal refusal. (In Susan Ehrlich's study, Matt's credibility was strengthened and the complainants' weakened by evidence that they did not say 'no' or 'stop'.) In 'homosexual panic' cases, by contrast, courts do not seem to dwell on the issue of whether a defendant tried to deter the unwanted advance verbally before escalating to physical violence. Women are apparently considered responsible for saying 'no' to unwanted sex, but heterosexual men do not have the same responsibility. Their antipathy to propositions from other men is taken for granted. Furthermore, heterosexual men, unlike women, are not supposed to be in the position of refusing (or consenting to) someone else's sexual proposition anyway: they are supposed to be the ones who make propositions to others. In this sense, positioning a straight man as the object of another man's desire is a double provocation, impugning both his heterosexuality and his right to be the active initiator of sex. Whereas in many contexts, saying 'no' is a mark of the speaker's dominant status, in sexual contexts it is associated with a 'submissive' or 'feminine' role (this is a point we discuss further in chapter 5).

This is not the only peculiarity of 'no' when used in sexual situations. In many such situations, there appears to be a strong cultural presumption that 'no' does not straightforwardly or definitively indicate refusal: it is possible to construe it rather as a ritualized move in a game, used to signify

a formulaic resistance whose function is, precisely, to be overcome. The sexual double standard we have already discussed is one relevant factor in this construction of 'no' (i.e. if everyone knows nice girls don't say 'yes' to sex, 'no' will not always be taken as an unambiguous refusal). Also relevant, however, is the cultural tendency to eroticize power differences,¹³ so that initial resistance followed by eventual submission may be experienced as enhancing sexual pleasure. That tendency is acknowledged and discussed most explicitly among members of one particular sexual subculture, sadomasochists, who get pleasure from the ritual enactment of relations of dominance and submission. Because their erotic practices make explicit what is usually left implicit, it is instructive to look at how sadomasochists use the word 'no' and what they have to say about its use.

In consensual sadomasochistic (SM) scenes, where participants enact fantasies that may involve humiliation and pain, it is common to decide in advance on a 'safe word', a word whose utterance by one party will immediately cause the other to desist from whatever s/he is doing. However, one word that cannot function as a safe word is 'no' (another is 'stop'). Although its ordinary-language semantics might seem to make it the obvious choice, using 'no' as a safe word would rule out using it to indicate purely formulaic resistance. In SM scenes, which require one party's submission to the will of the other, the formulaic resistance function of 'no' is particularly important. If the submissive partner offers no token of resistance, the dominant partner cannot experience the pleasure of imposing his or her will on a powerless other, while conversely the submissive partner cannot experience the pleasure of being overcome by a more powerful other. Writers on SM often recommend choosing a safe word which will stand out in context as incongruous and therefore unambiguous (for reasons best known to practitioners themselves, the word 'pickle' seems a popular choice), or using a verbal 'traffic light' system where 'yellow' means 'be careful' and 'red' means 'stop right now'.

SM scenes are a clear case of sexual encounters in which 'no' conventionally does not mean 'no'. Other cases may be less clear cut, but since the eroticizing of power differences is not confined to SM, the potential exists in most sexual situations for 'no' to be interpreted as something other than an unambiguous refusal.

This might make us critical of the advice often given to women and children to protect themselves from sexual assault by making their refusals not only explicit but also as direct as possible – the 'just say no' approach. As well as glossing over the ambiguous status of 'no' in sexual contexts, advice of the 'just say no' type is difficult to follow for other reasons, as the

WHAT 'NO' MEANS IN SM: EXTRACTS FROM ADVICE LITERATURE FOR SADMASOCHISTS

Example dialogue from *The New Bottoming Book* (Easton and Hardy 2001: 39):

Top: 'Seems to me you deserve a good spanking with this hairbrush, my little slut.' Bottom (in role as obedient slave): 'If it pleases you, sir or madam' – or Bottom (in role as reluctant victim): 'No! Please! Not the hairbrush!'

Advice on choosing a safe word, from *Consensual Sadomasochism: How to Talk About it and Do it Safely* (Henkin and Holiday 1996: 89):

Words other than No, Stop, or Slow Down are usually designated [as safe words] because SM is a consensual eroticism in the realm of *erotic theatre*. If a bottom could just say 'Stop' to end a [sexual] scene, the illusion that the Top has total control might be threatened. Besides, many bottoms enjoy the fantasy of nonconsensuality and scream 'No, no, please stop!' – or words to that effect – when the scene is going very well; they would be upset, confused, and even angry if a Top actually did stop in response to their outbursts.

Note: the terms 'top' and 'bottom' are used in SM subcultures to denote, respectively, the dominant and the submissive partner in a sexual scene.

conversation analysts Celia Kitzinger and Hannah Frith (1999) have pointed out. In a critical discussion of rape prevention advice, these researchers present evidence from focus group discussions with a total of fifty-eight young heterosexual women which suggests that successful sexual refusals are very rarely performed in real life by saying 'no'. Kitzinger and Frith argue that there is a very good reason for this: saying 'no' is not normal conversational behaviour, whether in relation to sex or anything else.

In the terminology of conversation analysis, refusal is a 'dispreferred' move in response to an invitation or proposition, contrasting with the 'preferred' move, acceptance. What this means is not that people have a preference, in the non-technical sense of the word, for accepting invitations. Instead, it means that accepting an invitation is interactionally more straightforward than refusing it. Acceptances can be bald and direct, but refusals have to be more elaborate. Studies of naturally occurring invitations have found that acceptances are typically produced immediately, directly and briefly (e.g. A: 'how about a drink after work?' B: 'OK'). Refusals,

by contrast, are longer turns marked by hesitation, hedging, apologies, excuses and explanations (thus B might refuse A's invitation to have a drink by saying, 'uh, well, sorry, I'd love to but I've got people coming for dinner').

Kitzinger and Frith's data indicate that this pattern is also operative in sexual situations. Since it is not generally possible for social scientists to record naturally occurring sexual encounters, the researchers approached the question of how refusals are performed in real life by asking focus groups to talk about what they said when they were invited to have sex but did not want to. Participants were virtually unanimous that it was impossible to respond with an unelaborated 'no': only two said they would feel comfortable doing so. In general, 'no' was thought to be unnecessarily confrontational; some women added that they would feel foolish saying it. The approach they favoured instead involved the strategies mentioned above – hesitating, hedging ('well'), 'palliating' (e.g. 'I'm flattered / you're a really nice guy, but ...') and providing face-saving explanations such as 'I'm really knackered [exhausted].'

The conventions for performing dispreferred conversational moves are not gender-specific: a large body of research on ordinary conversation in English has shown that they are used routinely by both women and men. Sexual refusals are not exceptional in this regard. Kitzinger and Frith's informants spoke about strategies they had *successfully* used to avoid having sex, and, in their experience, men had no difficulty interpreting such strategies as refusals. The point, then, is that it cannot reasonably be claimed, as Matt claimed in the case examined by Susan Ehrlich, that anything other than 'no' or 'stop' is unintelligible as a refusal. (What the women told Matt – that they wanted to go to sleep – actually emerged in Kitzinger and Frith's study as one of the commonest effective refusal strategies.) It is disingenuous for men like Matt to plead ignorance of commonplace conversational strategies – strategies that actually occur more frequently than the direct 'no' they insist they would have understood.

In fact, advice to women that revolves around 'saying no' is misguided in two ways. Kitzinger and Frith show that the utterance of 'no' is not a *necessary* condition for refusal. But our earlier discussion showed that it is not a *sufficient* condition either, since there is often potential for 'no' to function (or be strategically 'misunderstood') as a token of purely formulaic resistance. In real communication there are no 'magic words' that will always have the same meaning no matter where, when, how or by whom they are uttered. It follows that words in themselves are neither the cause of sexual communication problems nor the solution to those problems. The real problem lies in the contradictory discourses on sexuality, gender and

power which are part of our culture's background knowledge about sex, and which are therefore brought to bear on interactions about sex. It is those underlying discourses, rather than specific verbal formulas, that should be the focus of efforts to change the sexual status quo.

CONCLUSION

As we have tried to show in this chapter, the notion that sexuality and sexual behaviour are expressions of natural impulses which cannot be constrained by rules, and that sex is or should be beyond language, could hardly be more misleading. Sexuality and sexual behaviour are always and everywhere constrained (and at the same time, importantly, enabled) by the rules and conventions, the categories and definitions, the conflicting stories and the competing arguments, that circulate in discourse. Since discourse about sex is not static and homogeneous, the rules, categories and definitions through which we organize our understanding of sex are not always and everywhere identical. They are, however, political. Many of the examples we have mentioned in this chapter – the discrediting of 'vaginal orgasm', the invention of 'sex addiction', the rise of 'gay' and later of 'queer', the redefinition of 'consent', the complex and contested meaning of 'no' – testify to ongoing power struggles over who may define and categorize sex, and from what point of view. Those struggles are conducted in discourse, and through language; it is clear, however, that their effects are felt not only in our discourse, but also in other aspects of our lives as social and sexual beings.