

## **Can you tell someone's sexuality from the way they speak?**

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As a sociolinguist who works at the intersection of language, gender, and sexuality, I get asked this is a question a lot. It's an interesting question, and something close to it is what drew me into this field in the first place; but the way that it's worded is almost as interesting as the question itself. When someone asks, "Can you tell someone's sexuality from the way they speak?" what they're really asking is, "Can you tell if someone is *gay* from the way they speak?" Or even more precisely, they're asking "Can you tell if a *man* is gay from the way he speaks?" It's not a question about sexuality in the abstract, but rather about a particular style of a particular kind of sexuality, presented in a particular way that is culturally meaningful.

Why do we ask our specific question in such a roundabout way, rather than coming out with it and asking about gay men, if that's who we're really interested in? There are a couple of possible reasons for being so circumspect. One might be that we're socially conditioned to try not to sound too nosy or judgmental, and by phrasing the question so broadly and generally, we're taking the sting out of it. Rather than pointing to an identifiable group of people and putting them under a proverbial microscope, we cast our net wide enough that we might be asking about everyone. On those occasions when I try to answer in the broadest sense – to actually talk about sexuality in the general sense – there's almost always an immediate series of follow-ups, and before long, we're talking about gay men.

Another reason for being roundabout, related to the first, could have to do with our sensitivity to loaded words. My mother tends to refer to me and my friends as *homosexuals*, which never

fails to make me cringe, while my use of *queer*<sup>i</sup> to describe myself makes her distinctly uncomfortable. We've had different experiences of those two words, and they mean different things to each of us. Rather than accidentally picking the wrong word, one with unintended political or social baggage, we may choose to ask about the more neutral *sexuality*, which is non-specific enough that people are unlikely to take offense. It's a safe way to ask a potentially awkward question.

A third possibility has to do with *markedness*: the extent to which we notice differences and measure those differences against a background 'normal'. If I say hello to someone at a bus stop, I almost don't notice it if they say hello back, because it's expected. I *do* notice it if they turn their back on me, or start shouting insults, because that's not following the social script of normalness that I'm expecting. Echoing a polite greeting is *unmarked*, anything else becomes *marked*. In most of the world, heterosexuality is unmarked, and so goes unnoticed, and unquestioned. We don't feel the need to interrogate and understand unmarked things, because they're so taken for granted that they're common-sense, obvious even. A woman holding hands with a man doesn't warrant closer inspection or classification, because it seems perfectly 'normal' and 'natural'. In contrast, two women or two men holding hands – especially two men – is marked enough that it sticks out to us. The same is true of how we use language: people who sound straight, whatever that means, go unnoticed and uninspected; they sound more or less like we expect them to. But anyone who deviates from that draws our attention, and with it our curiosity. We're not interested in what it means to sound 'straight' in the same way that we're not interested in someone saying "hi" back to us – it's normal, so who cares? What we're interested in are the places where things and people don't follow the script we're expecting.

## **Scripts and expectations**

Western societies, for better or worse, have a lot of scripts about gender and sexuality.

They're not the same from place to place, and intercultural miscommunications are quite common. My sister worked for a while in western Canada with a colleague who was visiting from Italy, and he couldn't understand why none of the women he met seemed interested in him, despite his best efforts at being charming and seductive. What was happening was that his flamboyant Italian machismo – which indexed heterosexual masculinity in Italy – was being interpreted by Canadian women as gay; his attempts at seduction came across as camp rather than passionate, and so his attempts at seduction weren't taken seriously. Similarly, when I first moved from Canada to New Zealand, it took me a while to realize that short rugby shorts with pastel shirts meant hipster-sporty, rather than queer. The point here is not the particulars of cultural customs, or of the differences between them, but rather that these social scripts for masculinities and femininities (both heterosexual and otherwise) exist in the first place. We are constantly taking in endless small cues about identity, and knitting them together into an understanding of people's social identities.

So what about sexuality and language? The way that someone speaks is one of the cues that we pay attention to when we're figuring them out. We take what they actually do – what they say and how they say it – and hold it up against the scripts in our head for comparison. At this level, we're mostly talking about stereotypes: how close does a given person come to the idealized notions we carry around with us? We all carry models of different types of women and men in our heads, based on our own experiences of actual human beings that we've met in the world, but also on what we're shown through media channels. If you've never actually met and interacted with a gay man, for example (that you know of), then your understanding

of what ‘gay men’ as a group look, sound, and act like will be heavily influenced by what you’ve seen on television and in movies. If you’ve got gay friends, on the other hand, then you may be attuned to a broader range of gay masculine identities than the relatively narrow tropes shown in the media. And if you yourself are part of a queer community, your awareness will be even more nuanced still.

When any new show comes on with queer principal characters, my friends tend to have one of two responses: half of them celebrate the visible representation of people who look and sound like them, while the other half roll their eyes and complain about the perpetuation of stereotypes. The queer identities that end up on our screens are often a simplistic line-drawing of a very complicated social space: it’s not that they’re wrong exactly, but they’re only showing part of the story. There are dozens of ways to be gay – dozens of different subcultures with their own identities and presentations – but only a handful of those ways are clearly interpretable to people outside of queer communities. Those queer identities that are easily interpretable are the ones that people grab onto and use as a guide to making sense of queer identities more generally.

Stereotypes also play a part in research on language and sexuality. For one thing, they can help identify the really salient aspects of language that highlight sexuality – the things that people notice about how gay men speak, for example, give us a good place to start in investigating differences in language use. How different is different enough to be noticed? What happens with differences that don’t get noticed? Stereotypes also tell us something about how we socially classify the language that we encounter. There was a really neat experiment done in Michigan, along the US-Canada border, that looked at the effect of social filters on the perception of language variation (Niedzielski 1999). There’s a particular

pronunciation of some vowels that is a stereotype of Canadian English, but that is also widespread in Michigan, although people from Michigan don't know that. What Niedzielski found was that people from Michigan only perceived the Canadian-like pronunciation when they were told that they were hearing a recording of a Canadian. When they were told that they were listening to someone from Michigan, they didn't perceive the Canadian pronunciation. What this means for us is that there are probably some linguistic features that have become stereotypically associated with the speech of gay men, even though they're also present in the speech of other groups of people, but we only notice them when our social filters tell us to. We can use stereotypes to help investigate similarities in language use as well as differences.

Of course, similarities and differences exist between any two groups, as they do between any two individuals. In one sense, individuals scale up into groups, and groups decompose into individuals. But that individual-group dynamic isn't always very straightforward: what seems true of a group isn't necessarily equally true of all of the individuals in that group, and the things that make people individuals get distorted when we start grouping them together. This can pose a methodological problem for language and sexuality research, or indeed any research that aims to understand complex social phenomena such as identity, and what effect those phenomena have on behaviour. If we want to understand the relationship between language and sexuality, should we be looking at the group, or at the individual?

On the one hand, we form impressions about groups of people based on patterns that we notice. If, for instance, I meet one left-handed person who sneezes a lot, I might not read too much into that: I might file those two observations (that she is left-handed and sneezes a lot) as two independent facts about her as an individual. But if I then meet another ten left-handed

people who also sneeze a lot, I might start to make an unconscious association between left-handedness and sneezing. And that in turn, is likely to affect both my perception of people who sneeze (I might decide that they're probably left-handed) and my expectation of left-handed people (I might start to look for reasons why someone *isn't* sneezing as much as I expect them to). And in fact, once I've got that association in my mind, meeting one or two left-handed people who don't sneeze won't necessarily shift my perception of that left-handedness/sneezing relationship: I can classify them as non-sneezing exceptions to the pattern that I've already identified, without having to rethink the fundamental basis of my classification system. Our perceptions of social phenomena are affected by our experiences (the things that we've noticed about the world around us), and we average out our multiple individual experiences according to the social categories relevant to those experiences (categories such left-handed people, or gay men). Ultimately, we end up with a kind of generalized set of expectations about the behaviours of groups of people, and use those expectations in interpreting what people do. Viewed from that perspective, then, it makes sense to study groups of people as a way to understand how we come to have the expectations that we do.

On the other hand, those averaged out generalizations don't actually represent the specific behaviours of individuals, so they're not a very useful tool for understanding what people actually do. For one thing, averaging out can selectively ignore meaningful differences, which is one reason why it's so easy to misrepresent statistics. My favourite cautionary tale on that point the following 'statistic': The average human being has one ovary and one testicle. Mathematically, that's not inaccurate – if you added up all of the ovaries, and then separately added up all of the testicles, and divided each number by the total number of people, you would end up with an average distribution of one of each per person. But that

ignores the reality of the distribution of ovaries and testicles, which is that for the most part, they come in mutually exclusive sets of two. The way that we calculated our ‘average’ erases an extremely relevant real-world distinction which significantly impacts on the plausibility of the thing that we’ve just calculated. A further problem with reporting ‘averages’ is that there are (at least) two distinct meanings of the word *average*: the first is a mathematical average, which is the adding-up-and-dividing exercise we abused a few seconds ago. The second is something closer to *normal* or *common*. It’s not always obvious from a sentence which of those two meanings is intended: “Testicles and ovaries have a mean distribution of one of each per person” is *not* the same as “Normal people have one ovary and one testicle”, but “The average person has one ovary and one testicle” casually invites both readings.

When we’re talking about something that is as obviously incorrect as the ovary-testicle example, where each of us has strong enough independent evidence to refute the conclusion, we can laugh about how ridiculous it is. But when we’re trying to understand something that isn’t as easily and straightforwardly observable, we have to trust what research tells us, which in turn means that we have to trust that the research does what it says it’s doing. The scientific peer review process helps with this, but good researchers are also careful about what they claim that their research shows. That doesn’t mean that they don’t have confidence in what they’ve studied, but rather that they’ve given a faithful account of what they’ve done, and they’re aware of its limitations. This kind of self-reflective practice can lead to changes in methodologies and approaches, which can lead to changes in understanding. In language and gender studies, for example, there has been a massive shift in the past two or three decades from thinking about “women” and “men” as fixed and unmoving demographic categories to recognising that femininities and masculinities are emergent social identities that are shaped by social expectations, and that simultaneously help to shape what those

expectations are. There has been a similar shift in language and sexuality studies, from trying to understand what “gay men” do with language to trying to understand how social identities of queer masculinity emerge through language use. Stereotypes are a starting point for that kind of research, but we also have to look further than what our intuitions tell us.

In the next few sections, we’ll look at some of the stereotypes that exist about queer men’s speech, and then at some of the research that’s been done by linguists to investigate and push past those stereotypes. Then we’ll think about the speech of queer women, ask ourselves why there are far fewer stereotypes about “sounding lesbian” than there are about “sounding gay”, and take a look at some more research around queer women and language. Finally, with a more fleshed-out understanding of some of the basics, we’ll circle back to the question that started this whole conversation: Can you tell someone’s sexuality from the way they speak?

### **Sounding gay: Masculine identities**

There’s an exercise I often do with undergraduate students in language and gender classes: I give them a sheet of paper, and two minutes to write down as many stereotypes as they can about how gay men speak. At this point we’re not looking for political correctness or accuracy here – I want them to produce a list of the conventional expectations and social norms that circulate in their communities and in the media that they consume. This gives us a baseline of popular perceptions of masculine sexualities, which is a great starting point for our subsequent discussions. In fact, I invite you try it out yourself: give yourself two minutes and a blank sheet of paper, and write down anything and everything that springs to mind about men who sound gay.



After their two minutes are up, I put my students into small groups and ask them to compare their lists. There are two things that I want them to realize. The first is the richness of the stereotypes that they're aware of, once they start thinking about it. Most people can come up with a list of ten to twenty different stereotypes without too much effort, covering different dimensions of language (from pronunciation of certain sounds, to word choices, to things they do with their voices more globally). The second thing that I want my students to notice is how similar their lists are to those of their classmates. Not only are there a lot of specific stereotypes in circulation, but it seems that they come together to form a remarkably coherent package. The particular kind of gay masculinity that these stereotypes address is usually pretty consistent: it's almost always white, generally quite young and urban, and more often than not interested in fashion and interior design. These are the stereotypes that we absorb from television and film, and although they're not representative of the full range of queer masculinities that exist, they do tell us something about what we as a society notice, and how we understand the social relations between different kinds of people.

One of the persistent stereotypes about how gay men talk is that they are somehow using "women's language", or at least speaking in a feminine way. This association between queer men and femininity has been around for a long time, possibly linked to the flamboyance of particularly camp personas or to a more general classification of non-heterosexual men as being more effeminate overall. It's hard to put a date to this association, partly because in Western societies, homosexuality was historically not widely discussed or documented outside of criminal records. In England, it wasn't really until Oscar Wilde's trial in 1895 that the homosexual man became an identifiable type of person; prior to that, men might engage in specific sexual acts deemed unacceptable, but those sexual acts weren't linked to personal traits such as being educated and articulate, soft-spoken, or interested in cultural, artistic or

aesthetic pursuits. Wilde's conviction produced a new social focus on masculinity, and a new interpretative lens for particular types of behaviour and mannerisms. Being different took on a new social meaning.

This link between effeminacy and gay male sexuality can be reflected on a linguistic level in things like the perception of word usage: gay men are said to be more descriptive than straight men (and so come closer to stereotypical women's language), particularly with respect to colours – words like *magenta* and *periwinkle* are thought of as feminine, and by extension when used by men, they seem gay. Robin Lakoff's 1973 article (and later book) called *Language and woman's place*, which more or less launched the academic field of language and gender, noted that "if a man should say ['The wall is mauve'], one might well conclude he was either imitating a woman sarcastically, or a homosexual, or an interior decorator" (Lakoff 1973: .49). Lakoff's point here is that colour precision marks either feminine attention to detail, or masculine technical specificity. This feminine attention to detail (presumably superfluous detail, since if it isn't superfluous then it would be considered a technical specification of a sort) is also linked to stereotypes of both women and gay men using more "empty" or over-the-top expressions, such as *divine*, *fabulous*, *super*, and *oh my god*. Of course, they aren't really "empty" at all, since they serve various communicative functions (showing emotional affect, aligning yourself with another speaker's position, showing that you're paying attention, etc.), but since those roles in a conversation are stereotypically seen as feminine, men who take up those roles may also be seen as effeminate. Another example of bleed-through from femininity into stereotyped gay masculinity can be found in terms of address. The phenomenon of gay men using feminine pronouns and titles (such as calling each other *girlfriend* and *Miss*, as in *Miss Jason is in a mood today*) has a similarly long track record: Gershon Legman's (1941) glossary *The*

*Language of homosexuality* mentions it explicitly, and it continues to circulate in film and television to this day.

On a smaller language scale, the “gay lisp” is also a long-standing stereotype – gay men are thaid to turn their etheth into TH thoundth. The precision and specificity of this observation make it a relatively easy one to examine linguistically. The difference in articulation between an S sound (which linguists represent with the symbol [s]) and a TH sound (which we represent as [θ] when it’s the sound in words like *thing*, and [ð] when it’s the sound in words like *this*) is basically about tongue position. For [θ] and [ð], the tip of your tongue is touching your upper teeth, and for [s] your tongue is touching a bit further back in your mouth, on the bony ridge behind your teeth. These two different places of articulation produce air friction at two different bands of frequencies, so we can figure out how far back in the mouth the tongue is positioned by recording someone’s speech and analysing the acoustic characteristics in the recording. With fricatives (sounds like [s], [θ] and [ð]), the further front in the mouth the tongue is, the higher that band of frequencies is going to be; further back means lower frequencies. Generally speaking, men produce [s] sounds with a lower frequency than women: Jongman, Wayland and Wong (2000) reported mean peak frequencies of around 7.5 kHz for women, and 6.1 kHz for men. This pattern has been found in many varieties of English, and although the specific frequencies vary from place to place, women generally have significantly higher frequencies for [s] than men.

This doesn’t happen in all languages, though – the effect is negligible in Japanese (Heffernan 2004) and German (Fuchs and Toda 2010), for instance – so it’s not a product of biological or anatomical differences. It’s a social and stylistic practice for signalling particular masculinities and femininities in English, and there have been some fairly robust differences

reported between straight-sounding and gay-sounding men. Research in California (Zimman 2013; Podesva and Van Hofwegen 2016), in Ontario (Hazenberg 2016), and New Zealand (Hazenberg 2017) has shown three things fairly consistently. First, there is a lot of variability in /s/ production by gay men, with some producing an /s/ that is phonetically indistinguishable from straight men, while others produce something much closer in frequency to what women produce. Given the multiplicity of gay male identities and styles, this variation shouldn't really come as a surprise. Second, there are regional differences in how /s/ is produced – in other words, sounding gay doesn't mean the same thing everywhere. The social meaning of language variation is always locally conditioned. An interesting example of this comes from Copenhagen (Maegaard and Phrao 2016): depending on whether you speak the more “standard” Copenhagen Danish or the more non-standard “street” Copenhagen variety, a fronted /s/ can signal gay masculinity (standard) or toughness and immigrant masculinity (street). Being able to recognise *gay* or *tough* masculinity in Copenhagen comes down to whether or not you can differentiate between standard and street Danish – local knowledge, in other words. Finally, these acoustic studies of /s/ tell us that, even though we *call* it a “gay lisp”, and we exaggerate the frontness (frontness) of /s/ when we stereotype gay-sounding men, it never is actually pronounced as /θ/ or /ð/. It moves forward into the range of /s/ as produced by women, but we don't have a stereotype of women lisping. We're over-generalizing and over-shooting when we perceive a “gay lisp”. This is because we filter what we hear against what we expect to hear – so when we hear a man producing /s/ at a higher-than-expected frequency, we “overhear”, and map it to stereotypes that we already have in our brains.

Things like /s/, *darling* and *fabulous* are clearly part of our stereotypes about how gay men speak, but we sometimes get a strong (and often accurate) sense that a man is gay even when

we don't hear such obvious linguistic cues. The fact that we can't identify what we think we're hearing makes it hard to figure out what it might be, and so makes it trickier to study. *Tricky* doesn't mean impossible, though, and there's a group of researchers in Toronto who spent several years trying to untangle that particular knot (see Smyth and Rogers 2002 for a summary of some of their findings). They examined a range of linguistic phenomena, including: /s/ frequencies and duration, how clearly articulated certain consonants are, the relative spacing of some vowels in terms of how close to each other they're articulated, vowel duration, and voice pitch. Several other researchers have also taken a stab at the question of how a perceptually gay persona is created and understood, particularly around voice pitch and intonation (see Gaudio 1994, Levon 2006, Podesva 2006 for some examples). It seems that people are generally pretty good at inferring sexual orientation from men's speech, but that the relationship between the pitch properties of their speech and how their sexuality is categorized isn't straightforward. Those pitch properties – such as the range of frequencies that a speaker uses, how much pitch variation there is overall, and how quickly and dramatically the pitch changes – don't correlate neatly with perceptual ratings in terms of femininity, homosexuality, or other personal traits linked stereotypically with gay men.

So the picture that emerges overall from these studies is a complicated one. When we try to isolate and study linguistic phenomena in isolation, we get messy and contradictory results. What seems to be going on is that there is a whole range of linguistic resources that people can deploy to create a gay-sounding voice, and any combination of those features will produce the same perceptual effect. But there's no particular reason why two people would choose the same subset of features, so studies that look at averages across communities are losing sight of the specific strategies that people are actually using. Most contemporary research on language and sexuality falls under what Penelope Eckert (2012) would class as

the “third wave” approach to language variation, which is to look at individuals across multiple contexts, examine what they’re doing and how they’re doing it, and then make indexical links between the context and the social meanings that the speaker is drawing on. It’s a labour-intensive approach, but it pays off in terms of the degree of detail we’re able to learn about how we present our social identities through language.

### **Sounding lesbian: Feminine identities**

We started our discussion of gay-sounding speech with a brainstorming exercise, which also seems like a good place to also launch this section. Get yourself another sheet of paper, reset your timer for two minutes, and jot down all of your stereotypes about how lesbians talk.

Most people have a lot more trouble coming up with clear stereotypes about lesbian and queer women than they do about queer men, so your second list is probably shorter than your first. There also tends to be less agreement among different people. The most common response I come across has to do with voice pitch: lesbians are said to speak with a lower voice than straight women, but that generalization is nowhere near as prevalent as a lot of the stereotypes that we have about gay men. While a lower pitch is also generally true of how men talk, it’s actually surprisingly uncommon for anyone to explicitly jot down “lesbians talk like men”. While there may be some kind of tenuous association between lesbians and masculinity that parallels the link between gay men and femininity, it is nowhere near as clear or conscious.

So why this difference? Why aren’t the two lists basically mirror images of each other? For some reason, we just don’t have as clearly defined stereotypes of lesbians as we do of gay

men. Partly this may be because women remain generally peripheral to men across most domains, which pushes queer women even further from the centre, out into the periphery of the periphery, as it were. There are also differences in how queer men and women position themselves; Arnold Zwicky (1997) observes that gay men construct identities in opposition to straight men, but that lesbians construct identities through greater affinity with women, not through opposition. And since we tend to notice difference more than similarity, social identities built on difference are unsurprisingly more noticeable than those built on solidarity. Queen (2014) points out that there *are* tensions between groups of women, including between some lesbians and some straight women, but those tensions have failed to produce any coherent stereotypes; possibly because they are more locally-defined, they fail to pick up enough traction to become widely circulated. Historical differences in access to public space (Cameron 2011) may also have played in a role in the lack of recognizably lesbian speech styles comparable to those available to gay men.

From a linguistic perspective, pitch – the frequency at which we speak – is quite straightforward to study, and so has been looked at periodically over the course of a couple of decades. In one of the earliest studies of lesbian speech, Moonwomon-Baird (1997) compared pitch characteristics of two lesbians and two straight women, and found little evidence of pitch as a marker of sexuality. She tentatively concluded that lesbian identities are constructed through discourse rather than phonetic details, unlike what we see with queer men. A later study (Waksler 2001) found no evidence that pitch range was indicative of sexuality for women, and Lutzross (2010, cited in Podesva and Kajino 2014) compared perception and production data, finding that although female voices with digitally-lowered pitch ranges were rated as more lesbian-sounding, there was no evidence that lesbians actually made use of that perceptual property when they were speaking. Much as we saw

with the speech of gay men, what we hear (or what we think we hear) does not necessarily reflect reality; we are categorizing as we listen, and to some extent, hearing what we want to hear. And, of course, lesbian identities are no more universal than those of gay men; just as there are different ways of being a gay man, which may be invisible to outsiders but which are nevertheless salient within the community, there are different ways of being a lesbian. Levon (2011) looked at pitch properties among two groups of lesbian women, arguing that their use of higher pitch in particular contexts reflected their divergent gender ideologies. More work needs to be done on different communities of queer women, in a way that has started to be done with queer men (see Rusty Barrett's 2017 book *From drag queens to leathermen*).

The lack of clear stereotypes does not mean, of course, that there isn't social marking going on in the speech of lesbians; it just means that we're not very good at identifying what we're attuning to. I have definitely met women who "sound lesbian" to me, and so have most of the lesbian and queer women that I know. Although much less research has been done on the speech of lesbians than on the speech of gay men, researchers (for example: Waksler 2001; Pierrehumbert et al. 2004; Munson et al. 2006; Podesva and Van Hofwegen 2016) have tackled many of the same areas, such as the acoustic properties of certain vowels and consonants, and prosodic qualities such as speech rate and segmental duration. As before, research shows varying degrees of difference between straight- and lesbian-sounding women, and very little consistency within groups of lesbian women.

As with gay-sounding men, then, it would seem that the properties of lesbian-sounding speech are hard to pin down to one or two salient features. Indeed, the situation is very likely the same as with gay men: there is a resource pool consisting of a number of linguistic



features and forms which are to some extent associated with non-heterosexual femininities, and any given individual woman can draw on some subset of those resources to encode her identity through language. Which women choose which resources will depend on a number of factors, such as which style of queer femininity she wants to present, where she lives, and how interpretable she wants her identity to be – whether she wants her identity recognized by everyone, or only by people in her close-knit communities.

The linguistic evidence for the existence of lesbian-sounding speech styles is about as strong as that for gay-sounding styles; although it has been studied less often, the patterns in the findings are quite similar. The principle difference between the two situations is one of social salience. While there are a number of strong stereotypes about gay men, there are very few about queer women, and those that do exist aren't nearly as widely-spread as those of gay men.

### **Can you tell someone's sexuality from the way they speak?**

So we come back to where we started: *Can* you tell someone's sexuality from the way they speak? The short answer is, *It depends*.

It depends on whether they're presenting an identity that aligns with our expectations of what queer people sound like. If we're relying on a handful of stereotyped features popularized in the media, and someone isn't ticking those particular boxes, our intuitions may be unreliable. It also depends on how familiar we are with the range of possible identities that they might be presenting. Our knowledge of different communities – gay, lesbian, queer, online or in the real world – influences how we make sense of someone's presentation. There are straight

cultures and communities that we might not be able to categorize accurately, either – so it depends on whether we have enough local knowledge to tease sexuality apart from other dimensions of their identity. We are always presenting multiple identities, and there may be bleed-through from one into the other. Think of my sister’s Italian colleague, whose European flamboyance was misunderstood as Canadian gay masculinity.

Ultimately, whether or not we can tell someone’s sexuality from their language depends on whether they’re choosing to make their sexuality known to us. Although we may have a strong nosy urge to categorize people’s sexuality, they are under no obligation to fill us in.

### **Further Reading**

For the general question of the way in which language might reflect sexuality, see Barrett (2017), Cameron and Kulick (2003) and Livia and Hall (eds.) (1997).

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## Note

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<sup>i</sup> The use of the term *queer* gets a lot of people in trouble. I'm using it here as an umbrella term to refer to identities other than strictly heterosexual. In the past, people have preferred initialisms such as LGB (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual) or LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) or LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer *or* Questioning) – that initialism can get very long, and inevitably excludes identities (which is why it keeps getting longer). We're living in a time when identity labels are proliferating rapidly, so having an inclusive term to encompass everyone is a useful shorthand for a chapter like this. That said, I freely acknowledge that *queer* does not sit well with everyone, and in using it as I do, I'm not trying to push it as the only acceptable term for talking about the collective community of non-heterosexual people. It's just the one that *I* use.