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Why should we care about multilingualism, gender, and sexuality?

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ABSTRACT

In this introductory essay, we lay some theoretical ground to the special issue on *Queering Multilingualism*. We outline what we mean by 'queering', and why it is necessary in relation to multilingualism. Ultimately, our argument is that a focus on gender and sexuality allows us to expand our understanding of the complexity of power relations in multilingual settings, encounters, and lived experiences. With the help of examples from the contributions to the special issue we not only illustrate how language classrooms and learners' interactions are constrained by cis-genderism and heteronormativity, but we also show how language teachers and learners can challenge gender and sexual normativities. Based on the narratives of multilingual speakers, we also argue for the importance of considering gender and sexuality in relation to other identity categories such as age, ethnicity, race, and social class. Theoretically, this requires bringing queer theoretical approaches into dialogue with intersectionality. We conclude with some reflections on the relationship between multilingualism and sexual desire, especially in contexts of conflict.

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Introduction

What is the first thing that comes to your mind when you think about bilingualism or multilingualism? This is a question that we have posed many times to our undergraduate and graduate students on the first day of our classes on multilingualism. The answers include, but are not limited to, ethnicity, conflict, migration, multiculturalism, identity, and globalization. Interestingly, sexuality, or even gender for that matter, are never mentioned. Of course, the results of such informal polls are anecdotal. However, as Deumert and Mabandla have pointed out, 'anecdotalism has a logic of its own and is important in achieving phenomenological understanding' (2017, 402). In our case, the anecdotes not only indicate that the link between multilingualism, gender and sexuality does not seem to be an obvious one; but they also tell something about the unwitting erasure of the lived experiences of people like the two of us, who strongly identify as both queer and multilingual.

That sexuality and gender do not make the top-ten list of multilingualism hits is also demonstrated by the table of contents of a recent prestigious handbook (McKinney, Makoe, and Zavala 2023), which according to its promotional blurb, seeks to provide 'a *comprehensive* survey of the field of multilingualism for a global readership and an overview of the research which situates multilingualism in its social, cultural and political context' (McKinney, Makoe, and Zavala 2023, emphasis

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added). While the handbook is impressive for its geopolitical breadth and decolonial impetus, it does not include a single chapter entirely dedicated to sexuality and/or gender. And even when the words gender and/or sexuality are mentioned in the handbook chapters, they occur in lists of categories (e.g. gender, race, and social class), but are not thoroughly investigated in relation to multilingualism. Granted, this absence is not unique to this volume but is yet another unfortunate instance of a more widespread pattern of erasure in mainstream handbooks about multilingualism (see e.g. Auer and Wei 2007; Bhatia and Ritchie 2012; De Houwer and Ortega 2018), despite the fact that there has been an increase in monographs and edited collections about multilingualism, gender and sexuality over the last few years (see e.g. Cashman 2018; Paiz 2020; Paiz and Coda 2021; Pakula 2021; Banegas and Govender 2022 to name just a few).[1] We do not wish to fall into the trap of unfounded speculations about the reasons for such absences. Nor do we wish to convey that the downplaying or exclusion of sexuality and gender from all these handbooks was intentional. We are aware of the difficulties and constraints involved in editing books of such magnitude. But we also know that, whether intentional or not, choices have specific effects. And, in this specific case, the consequence is sending the message that sexuality, gender, and multilingualism have nothing to do with each another – they are not a throuple made in heaven.

Against this backdrop, the aim of this special issue is to partly counter the downplaying, invisibilization and/or erasure of gender and sexuality by seeking to bring these two axes of social differentiation more to the center of mainstream multilingualism research. In such an endeavor, we are not suggesting that anyone should abandon their research foci and jump onto the multilingual gender and sexuality bandwagon. Rather our point is that sexuality and gender should be considered more seriously in the field of multilingualism, not least because such a focus allows to expand our understanding of the complexity of power relations in multilingual settings and encounters.[2] Before presenting an overarching theoretical argument about the relationships of multilingualism, gender and sexuality, we first want to clarify what we mean by language and multilingualism, more specifically.

We take a social approach according to which language is 'a set of resources which circulate in unequal ways in social networks and discursive spaces, and whose meaning and value are socially constructed within the constraints of social organisational processes, under specific historical conditions' (Heller 2007, 2). This definition highlights how languages are only equal for linguists, while for people in the street, linguistic phenomena have different values; they carry different meanings, and these values and meanings are contextually specific; that is, they are the result of specific historical processes. Put differently, a social approach views language not as a bounded entity that can be described and dissected (what many linguists typically do) but as a set of meaning-making resources (including the body and visual images) loaded with a variety of ideological values.

But what kind of ideological values are we talking about? We refer to a specific type of ideologies, namely language ideologies, which have been the object of inquiry for sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists for the last thirty years or so. As Woolard has pointed out, language ideologies 'envision and enact *ties* of language to identity, to aesthetics, to morality, and to epistemology' (Woolard 1998, 3, emphasis added). In other words, language ideologies operate through the creation and sedimentation of indexical links between linguistic forms, social images of their speakers and moral and aesthetic universes. It is important to highlight that the state and its institutions (such as the school system) play an active role in the promotion of specific language ideologies (and not others). However, it is also significant to point out that indexical links are not fixed; they can undergo processes of change and most importantly they can be activated differently by different speakers. In multilingualism research, then, using a social approach and working with a notion of language as a resource allows us to focus on the ways in which speakers mix and match what they have in their linguistic repertoire, using linguistic features, language varieties and other semiotic means, for the ideological *affordances* that such semiotic resources bring with them.

Queering multilingualism

In our view queer theory can offer a useful framework through which to understand gender and sexuality in relation to multilingualism. While it lies beyond the scope of this introductory essay to give an extensive theoretical overview, suffice it to say that queer theory is not so much an all-encompassing theoretical scaffolding. Rather, it consists of many, very different anti-essentialist approaches or lenses. As Halperin puts it, '[q]ueer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without essence' (Halperin 1995, 61–62). Emphasizing even more an anti-normative stance, Warner states that queer theory 'rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal' (Warner 1993, xxvi). Such an anti-normative attitude has been powerfully encapsulated in the well-known activist slogan 'not gay as in happy but queer as in fuck you!'. These two definitions highlight how queer is less about a stable condition than an active process. Therefore, it is perhaps more productive to think about it as a verb – the act of *queering*, which aims to problematize 'normative consolidations of sex, gender and sexuality – and that, consequently, is critical of all those versions of identity, community and politics that are believed to evolve 'naturally' from such consolidations' (Jagose 1996, 99).

Underpinning such a skeptical perspective on gender/sexual identities is the view that 'identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression' (Butler 1991, 13–14). This is not to say that identities should be abandoned or not be mobilized for political action. Rather, it is a reminder of the potential limits and pitfalls of identity politics and its tendency to homogenize people, erasing differences *within* collectives that coalesce around a specific form of identification (see also Cohen 1997; Yep 2016). Such an inherently destabilizing spirit of any identity category can be particularly appealing in contexts of language learning. This is because queer theory can 'provide a more flexible, open-ended framework for facilitating inquiry, particularly within the intercultural context of ESL' (Nelson 1999, 377); or *any* other second language learning, one could add, because 'it shifts the focus […] from affirming sexual minority sexual identities to problematizing *all* sexual identities' (Nelson 1999, 373, emphasis added).

However, giving priority to the sexually marginalized and deconstructing all sexual identities are not necessarily mutually exclusive pursuits. As Thurlow aptly puts it, queer theory 'centers the lives of marginalized sexual identities for scholarly attention' and concomitantly 'surfaces more complex, nuanced ways of thinking about sex/sexuality' (2016, 490). For example, all the articles in this special issue center primarily on the lived experiences of individuals who do not easily conform to gender and sexual norms. At the same time, such a focus is the starting point from which to mount broader arguments about the problematic nature of *any* stable form of gender and sexual categorization, and of the regulatory practices that police them in everyday contexts. Moreover, casting analytical light on gender and sexuality allows the contributors to gain fresh insights into key issues that have long been at the heart of multilingualism research such as power negotiations in and out of school, migration, as well as questions of language in relation to peace and conflict.

Overall, scholars influenced by queer theory have had and still have very strong disagreements about what a queer perspective entails. These important and interesting differences notwithstanding, the common denominator underpinning queer approaches is taking a critical stance on (1) the processes that lead to the congealing of specific gendered and sexual identities as normal while others are cast in the domain of abjection, and (2) the circulation or not of specific sexual desires (see Cameron and Kulick 2003, 149). As we will see in the next sections, both these processes happen within certain sets of constraints. In what follows, we begin with a discussion of the discursive production and contestation of gender and sexual identities in relation to heterosexuality as the norm; we then move on to complicate the gender/sexuality nexus by bringing other identity categories into the picture, and we conclude with a discussion about the politics of desire.

Queering heteronormativity in second language learning

From a queer theoretical perspective, gender and sexuality are not static identities that we are but the results of dynamic processes that we *perform* with the help of meaning-making resources (language(s), visuals, the body, etc.) within what Butler would call a 'highly rigid regulatory frame' (Butler 1999, 33) of heteronormativity. This frame or matrix can be defined as

> a hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality (Butler 1999, 194)

Here, Butler highlights how heteronormativity operates (1) by normatively stitching together sex and gender. This is also called *cisgenderism*, an ideology that 'denies, denigrates, or pathologizes self-identified gender identities that do not align with assigned gender at birth' (Lennon and Mistler 2014, 63); and (2) by presenting the sex/gender dyad as a set of allegedly opposite and complementary poles that are mutually attractive. In this way, heterosexual desire is presented as 'natural' and 'normal' while same-sex desire is portrayed as 'abnormal' and 'unwanted.'

Analytically, then, language-oriented research inspired by queer theory has sought to illustrate the ways in which such a frame is reproduced through meaning-making means in a variety of settings (see e.g. Motschenbacher and Stegu 2013; Leap 2015; Gray and Cooke 2018; Jones 2021). In a now classic study, Liddicoat (2009) explored interactions in second language classrooms in which teachers assumed that students were heterosexual and corrected gender agreement in Spanish and French when students were asked to describe their partners, as in the case of *mi novia es alta* (my girlfriend is tall'), instead of *mi novio es alto*, or *ma copine* ('my girlfriend') instead of *mon copain* ('my boyfriend)'. With the help of conversation analysis, Liddicoat argued that these interactions are not just about the discursive production of sexual identities: the teachers' implicit attribution of a heterosexual identity to their students and the performance of a gay or lesbian identity by the learners; but they were also moments of language assessment about linguistic success versus failure. As Liddicoat explains, 'the prevailing heteronormativity of the language classroom conditions a response to students' implicit coming out not as the self-disclosure of a minority sexual identity, but rather as a problem of linguistic competence' (Liddicoat 2009, 199). As a result of such a rigid regulatory frame (Butler 1999), sexually non-normative language learners find themselves facing a set of difficult quandaries: (1) they can pretend to be heterosexual and thus be deemed a successful learner by the teacher. While conforming brings with it certain benefits, it has also 'identity costs', in the sense that it requires hiding one's sense of selfhood; (2) language learners can also try to dodge the question altogether. However, this is a strategy that might require a degree of interpersonal and linguistic skills, especially when speaking in a second or foreign language; (3) learners can openly confront the language instructor, but they may then be subjected to a variety of repercussions from the teacher and/or their classmates.

Crucially, heteronormativity does not only frame teacher/learners interactions such as those analyzed by Liddicoat but is a much more pervasive and taken-for-granted cross-cultural matrix of intelligibility, as transpires in Akiyama and Ortega's (this issue) insightful investigation of a *Google Hangouts* exchange between Amy, an American student of Japanese and Yoko, a Japanese student of English. When Amy declares that she is in a same-sex relationship, Yoko experiences what she calls a 'culture shock.' Here, Akiyama and Ortega rightly point out that 'the ascription of her surprise to a cultural difference helps mitigate what might be seen as a homophobic reaction.' Amy, however, does not deflect the topic but stands her ground normalizing same-sex desire with replies such as 'There are a LOT of gay people in Boston' and 'So it's really normal here'. While the interaction between Amy and Yoko became an occasion for intercultural engagement that led to interpersonal bonding and enhanced their friendship, it is interesting how the link between sexuality and culture made by the two language students also reproduced rather problematic stereotypical views of the United States as more 'queer friendly' and accepting country that Japan.

An even more powerful example of how second-language learners actively challenge cisgender and heterosexual norms is presented in Moore et al.'s article (this issue), which offers a synthesis of the results of three larger separate studies: (1) an investigation of 16 queer/trans adult learners of Japanese as a second/foreign language, (2) an analysis of adults learning Spanish and Mandarin through Teaching Proficiency through Story Telling practices, and (3) a participatory research project studying non-binary teenagers' experiences learning French and Spanish in U.S. high schools. With the help of the notions of *devices* and *queer breaches*, the authors convincingly illustrate how queer/trans learners perform moments of agency within the otherwise constraining cisgendering and heternonormative frame of the respective language learning settings. The article not only gives a detailed account of the devices that orient students to heterosexuality as the 'norm', thus limiting the possibility of gender and sexual fluidity within second language contexts, but also, and most crucially, illustrates moments during which queer and trans language learners perform 'queer breaches', and thus contest heteronormativity. These are also moments that 'opened a range of possibilities for exploration, community-building, and validation' (Moore et al., this issue).

By the same token, Knisely's study (this issue) gives a positive outlook on the possibilities of gender and sexuality inclusivity in the language classroom. Taking a quantitative approach, Knisely conducted a survey among 59 undergraduates enrolled in a fifth-semester French course in the United States. The aims of the survey was to understand students' attitudes towards trans people, and their knowledges and linguistic practices – what Knisely calls 'trans linguacultures'. For contextual purposes, it should be added that the course was designed and taught following a paradigm that fosters gender justice. So, the study also sought to understand whether the course had an impact on changing students' attitudinal stances. While most students had no prior experience with trans experiences in their French-language coursework, they were not at all hostile to the idea of knowing about trans linguacultures. Quite the contrary, the majority of them 'felt ready, willing, and able to learn', and whenever they expressed some reluctance, they justified it with emotional commentaries about 'feeling overwhelmed by the importance and perceived complexity of trans linguacultures' (Knisely, this issue).Only few students seemed to be uncertain about the importance of the topic for their language learning process. Moreover, the comparison between pre-course and post-course survey results testifies to a positive shift in their attitudinal stances, becoming more aware of why translinguacultures are important for them and 'demonstrating increased valuing of and interest in trans people and linguacultures' (Knisely, this issue). Put bluntly, a gender-just French language course ultimately had a positive effect on *all* students.

Intersectional queerness – queering intersectionality through multilingual lived experiences

We saw in the previous section that queer theoretical approaches highlight how heteronormativity operates in such way that gender and sexuality become imbricated with one other. This is certainly not to say that they are the same – they are not – but, as Butler has poignantly said, gender and sexuality have been 'casually entangled in knots that must be undone' (1998, 225–26). However, McElhinny (2003) has argued that to 'suggest or assume that there is a closer relationship between sexuality and gender than between either of these and any other aspect of social identity […] [is] a question which itself deserves empirical investigation' (2003, 26), and she goes on to suggest that

> the ways in which gender is imbricated in other axes of identity, the ways in which certain notions of gender can reinforce or challenge other notions about class and ethnicity, is part of what we must begin to investigate more closely. (McElhinny 2003, 26)

In saying so, McElhinny voices a well-established Black feminist concern about the privileging of two forms of social categorization while losing sight of other axes of social difference that may mutually

constitute them. Already at the outset of queer theory as a field of inquiry, Anzaldúa drew upon her own lived experience as a bilingual queer Mestiza writer/speaker to point fingers at the inherent hypocrisy of the term queer, which, in her view, under a veneer of inclusivity, only signified the preoccupations of a white, middle-class, gay male minority. This, Anzaldúa would say, led to 'mak[ing] abstractions about us colored queers', and 'limit[ing] the ways in which we think about queer' (Anzaldúa 1991, 251).

It is noteworthy how Anzaldúa's work – especially her masterpiece *Borderlands/La Frontera* – has recently been (re)discovered by some scholars committed to southern/decolonial perspectives on multilingualism (see e.g. Heugh 2017). What is unfortunate, though, is that these scholars' exclusive interest in Anzaldua's 'richness of linguistic fluidity, repertoire, and multilingualisms in which the language broker exercises agency and resistance' (Heugh 2017, 217) makes it impossible for them to appreciate how agency and resistance in this context refers to the complex intersections of gender and sexuality in relation to race/ethnicity and colonialism. The effect of such interpretations, then, is that Anzaldúa's contribution to the field of multilingualism is relayed as completely desexualized, and hence to a certain extent depoliticized.

Why then should we bring intersectionality to bear on queer theory? And how can we bring together a framework that relies on identity categories (intersectionality) with one that seeks to unsettle them (queer theory)? On the one hand, it is true that intersectionality heavily relies on the mutual constitution of identity categories (e.g. Black, woman, working class) in order to unpack the amplifying effect of mutually constitutive forms of discrimination (e.g. racism, sexism, classism). However, such categories are not treated as stable 'essences' but as socially and discursively produced forms of classification. On the other hand, the strategic emphasis put by (some) queer theorists on gender and sexuality has unwittingly led to their reification, which – albeit useful for political purposes – 'has served to reinforce simple dichotomies between heterosexual and everything "queer"' (Cohen 1997, 438). However, such a dichotomy is ultimately at loggerheads with a queer impetus to disrupt all forms of identification.

Against this backdrop, we would argue that intersectionality and queer theory can be engaged in a productive dialogue. On the one hand, intersectionality can function like a critical inner voice, which whispers a fastidiously valuable reminder of the intersectional nature of queerness, reiterating that 'identities and communities […] must be complicated and destabilized through a recognition of the multiple social positions and relations to dominant power found *within* any one category or identity' (Cohen 1997, 458, emphasis in original). On the other hand, if we concur with Butler that 'the term queer does not designate identity but alliance, and it is a good term to invoke as we make uneasy and unpredictable alliances in the struggle for social, political, and economic justice', then, queer theory should spur intersectionality to continually queer, that is, unsettle, forms of categorization in view of building capacious alliances that are not based on a common identity but on a 'shared marginal relationship to dominant power which normalizes, legitimizes, and privileges' (Cohen 1997, 458).

Methodologically, the cross-fertilization of intersectionality and queer theory can be put to work to investigating what Yep (2016) has called 'thick(er) intersectionalities,' which can be described as follows:

> An exploration of the complex particularities of individuals' lives and identities associated with their race, class, gender, sexuality, and national locations by understanding their history and personhood in concrete time and space, and the interplay between individual subjectivity, personal agency, systemic arrangements, and structural forces. It demands that we pay attention to the lived experiences and biographies of the persons inhabiting a particular intersection. (Yep 2016, 173)

One of us (Cashman 2018) has demonstrated how the notion of thick(er) intersectionality can be particularly useful in bringing into relief the role played by multilingualism in navigating different complex experiences of marginalization as queer, Latinx, and bilingual in Phoenix, Arizona. Adopting an approach that takes thick(er) intersectionalities into consideration has important

analytical implications: researchers should not fall into the temptation of 'clean[ing] up the everyday messiness of participants' lived experiences' and should also avoid 'assuming a priori that participants with similarly intersecting identities have similar experiences' (Cashman 2018, 12). Moreover, since a thick(er) intersectionalities approach highlights the fleshiness of participants' experiences and the most private and often most painful moments in their biographies, researchers should treat this 'data' humbly and carefully and acknowledge that participants may be well ahead of researchers in *theorizing* intersectional multilingual experiences (see also Moita Lopez 2017).

An example of such a careful treatment of research data is provided in Mashazi and Oostendorp's analysis of Samson, a 22-year-old South African man, who speaks 12 languages and identifies as Black and queer. Although the authors do not overtly rely on Yep's notion of thick(er) intersectionalities, the article offers unique insights into the complexity of this young man's lived experiences. Using a framework that draws upon language portraits and language biographies (Busch 2017), Mashazi and Oostendorp quote Samson at length in order to bring to the fore his identity as a 'language theorizer'. Re-read through the lens of Trinh T. Minh-Ha (1992), it could be argued that the authors speak *nearby* or *alongside* Samson, rather than about or on behalf of him, thus avoiding the risk of 'becoming the authority that tells his story back to him' (Mashazi and Oostendorp, this issue). Interestingly, each of the languages in Samson's linguistic repertoire offers important affordances in Samson's lived experiences: for him, isiZulu and English are languages of empowerment because of the language ideological processes that have linked these codes with tougher masculinity and colonial domination, respectively. It is thanks to such language ideological loadings that isiZulu allows Samson to perform the 'right' kind of masculinity that will allow him to overcome the potential threats he could face as a queer man using public transport in South Africa. Though English is in many ways a problematic colonial language that has been used as an oppressive resource against black South Africans, its language ideological links to power enable Samson to perform forms of resistance against the bullying he has experienced because of his queerness. And through Sesotho he unsettles the norms of how a Sotho man should look like and behave. Overall, Samson's embodied experience encourages multilingual researchers to be careful about issuing too quick verdict of guilt when examining strategies which, from an analyst's perspective, might seem to problematically reproduce a normative status quo. For these strategies might simultaneously be 'forms of resistance when people negotiate intersecting forms of belonging in relation to their multilingualism' (Mashazi and Oostendorp, this issue).

Queering sexual desire: multilingualism and conflict

We mentioned in the introduction that 'queer theory is concerned to investigate critically those processes that produce sexed bodies, sexual relations and – importantly – *sexual desires*' (Cameron and Kulick 2003, 149, emphasis added). On the basis of this, Cameron and Kulick (2003) went on to encourage scholars of language in society to take sexual desire as their analytical object. In saying so, they were not suggesting that sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists should turn into psychoanalysts, but they should develop approaches that investigate 'the social mediation of desire: to construct a view of desire that is simultaneously internal and individual, and external and shared' (Eckert 2002, 100). The operationalization of a social approach entails 'showing how particular desires seek to attach to a varieties of bodies, objects, statuses and relationships' in such a way that, for example, 'differences of race, age or class may be extremely important in some people's erotic lives' (Cameron and Kulick 2003, 144). And, as Cameron and Kulick would point out, such a desire for particular forms of social differences is not idiosyncratic but is the result of specific forms of socialization and institutionalization. Inspired by Cameron and Kulick's theoretical discussions, a variety of scholars have pursued empirical investigations of the different linguistic facets of desire, which include, but are not limited to, flirting (Speer 2017; Kiesling 2013), online and

offline dating (Coupland 1996; Mortensen 2015), and speed dating (Stokoe 2010; Korobov 2011). While offering insightful analyses of what enables and constrains erotic attraction, and what other axes of social difference (e.g. race and class) impinge on it, these studies have been characterized by an overwhelmingly monolingual bias.

In contrast, emotions more broadly, but not primarily desire, have long been the object of investigation of a large body of work within the field of multilingualism, which has demonstrated how a language learned later in life, and often in more formal settings like the classroom, feels less embodied than the languages acquired in early life (Pavlenko 2005). As Pavlenko (2017) has cogently pointed out, such a foreign language effect can have potentially negative consequences because 'speakers dealing with moral dilemmas and financial scenarios in a foreign language are less concerned about negative consequences and less averse to risk' (Pavlenko 2017, 74). However, a language learned later in life can also offer 'emancipatory detachment' (Kellman 2000) as has been expressed in the memoirs of multilingual writers who found in their additional languages 'new, "clean" words, devoid of anxieties and taboos, freeing them from self-censorship, from prohibitions and loyalties of their native culture' (Pavlenko 2006, 20).

Bringing together emotions, multilingualism and sexuality, King (2008) studied five Korean learners of English, who identified as gay but 'display[ed] dissatisfaction with gay identity construction in Korean (both culture and language)' (2008, 232). Such a feeling of frustration, as King explains, was not a personal characteristic of these men, but is 'endemic in the queer Korean community' (232). Here English, with its indexical ties to global mobility and connectivity, offered these men a resource through which to perform a rewarding gay identity *inter alia* thanks to the access this language afforded them to gay (imagined) communities in the anglophone world. By the same token, a recent investigation of refugee survivors of persecution on the basis of their sexual orientation (Cook and Dewaele 2022) demonstrated how English offered these victims 'emancipatory detachment' that 'enabled them to bear witness to their trauma, express their same-sex love more easily and be more self-accepting, and contributed to the (re)invention and performance of a 'new' self' (2022, 215). Perhaps the most comprehensive study about the relationship between multilingualism and (sexual) desire is Takahashi's (2013) investigation of a group of Japanese female learners of English in Australia. These young women were motivated to learn English – what Takahashi calls language desire – because of their romantic and erotic attraction to white English-speaking men, an attraction which, in turn, was linked to a desire for international mobility and the promise of a Western lifestyle that for these women had the appeal of being less constraining than the highly gendered structure of Japanese society.

Read together, these studies offer important insights into the ways in which a variety of emotions, including desire, are linked to sexuality and multilingualism. However, what has remained somewhat unexplored empirically is Cameron and Kulick's (2003) suggestion about 'focus[ing] on whether and how different kinds of relations emit desire, fabricate it and/or block it/exhaust it' (2003, 111). Put differently, we still know too little about the ways in which sexual identities and desires circulate, are managed, or can be *barred* via meaning-making means (multilingualism included).

While there are many theorizations of affect and emotions (see Milani 2023 for an overview), we believe that Ahmed's (2006) work on the cultural politics of emotions and Wetherell's (2012) notion of 'affective practices' can be particularly useful to capture not only the linguistic/discursive production and circulation of sexual identities and desire but also the *blockages* Cameron and Kulick (2003) referred to. According to Ahmed, emotions are performative: they 'do things, […] align individuals with communities – or bodily space with social space – [and] mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective' (Ahmed 2004, 119). From such a perspective, then, emotions should not be studied ontologically, as something personal that resides somewhere in an individual's psyche, but phenomenologically, as something social that *sticks together* or *separates* individuals and groups and can be felt in the body. And, as Wetherell (2012) pointed out, language, and discourse more broadly, play a key role in the social life of emotions because

> feelings are not expressed in discourse so much as completed in discourse. That is, the emotion terms and narratives available in a culture, the conventional elements so thoroughly studied by social constructionist researchers, realise the affect and turn it for the moment into a particular kind of thing. What may start out as inchoate can sometimes be turned into an articulation, mentally organized and publicly communicated, in ways that engage with and reproduce regimes and power relations. (Wetherell 2012, 24)

For Wetherell, analyzing emotions can only be conducted with the help of a promiscuous methodology, 'a set of approaches that need to be packed in the researcher's suitcase' (Wetherell 2012, 96). These include *inter alia* conversation analysis, critical discourse analysis, critical multimodal analysis and discursive psychology. And, we would add, attention and sensitivity to multilingualism. Whichever analytical framework one might wish to choose, Wetherell strongly suggests taking 'affective practice' as the unit of analysis. This is because practice requires paying attention to *who* is doing *what* and *for what purpose*. As such, a practice approach seeks to avoid decontextualizing affect, and mystifying it as 'untethered, a kind of mysterious social actor in itself' or an object that 'seems to swirl, move, and 'land' like a plastic bag blowing in the wind' (Wetherell 2015, 159). Instead, taking affective practice as the unit of analysis requires casting a critical eye on the 'consequential set of sequences in social, cultural and institutional life, and mak[ing] connections between the emotional performances and other ordering and organizing constituents' (Wetherell 2015, 159).

It is precisely the relationship between practices of desire and broader social orderings in a context of conflict that is brought under the spotlight of Milani and Levon's analysis of Fadi, a queer Palestinian man, and his emotional turmoil for falling in love with a Jewish Israeli soldier. Milani and Levon propose the notion of the *checkpoint* as a discourse analytical tool through which to investigate how Fadi, in interaction with his friends, uses code-switching between Arabic, Hebrew, and English to navigate the broader social ordering in Israel, according to which sexual and romantic relations between Jewish Israelis and Palestinians are discursively blocked. As Milani and Levon point out, checkpoints are not only material infrastructures that block the movement of Palestinians in the space of Israel/Palestine, but they can also be internalized 'technologies of the Self' (Foucault 1988) and 'structures of feeling' (Williams 1977) that affect how people police themselves, and their desire for others. What is most important for the purpose of this special issue is that, in the case of Fadi, multilingualism 'play[s] a key function in regulating the interactional push-and-pull of desire' in a context of conflict such as Israel/Palestine. Analogous to the examples of Samson analyzed by Mashazi and Oostendorp (this issue), different languages in Fadi's repertoire offer him different ideological affordances because of the indexical ties that such languages have developed to broader sets of values, cultural models and moral worlds. While Hebrew is tied to rather problematic homonationalist ideologies of Israel, and Tel Aviv more specifically, as a gay 'paradise' where same-sex desire can flow, Arabic is viewed as the language in which same-sex desire (especially for a Jewish Israeli soldier) is *blocked*. Interestingly, English emerges as the code through which Fadi and his friends can manage this impasse. Because of its language ideological links to a global depoliticized gay culture, English constitutes a resource through which 'a suspension of conflict of sorts [can be reached], one in which love and mutual desire trumps everything, even the clash of diametrically opposite political and ideological views' (Milani and Levon, this issue).

In lieu of a conclusion: the potential pitfalls of centering sexual margins

We began this introduction by openly acknowledging that one of our hopes is to bring gender and sexuality more to the center of mainstream multilingualism research. However, such an endeavor is not without problems from a queer theoretical standpoint. If we concur with Butler that

> If the term "queer" is to be a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and future imaginings, it will have to remain that which is … never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes. (1993, 228)

For the act of queering to retain its radical potential, it needs to stay in the margins and actively resist institutionalization and mainstreaming. We cannot agree more with such a position. And we can already hear how a critical reader would point out at this juncture that we want to have the cake and eat it too. Well, only partially. In line with Wiegman and Wilson (2015), we believe that the preposition/adverb *athwart*, which means transversally from side to side, can be particularly useful to capture the duplicity of our endeavor (see also Hall, Levon, and Milani 2019), bringing gender and sexuality more to the core of multilingualism research at the same time as retaining some distance and continuing to cast a critical self-reflexive eye on the field and our own research. But, of course, this is a matter of further *queering*.

Notes

1. An earlier edition of the Routledge Handbook of Multilingualism contained an excellent chapter on multilingualism and gender (Takahashi 2012), which also mounted important arguments about language desire.
2. In a similar vein, multilingualism should be taken more seriously by language, gender and sexuality scholars (Cashman 2021).

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