



Language in the Fictional World of Lesbian and Gay Law Enforcement Characters

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1. Introduction and Rationale

When going over previous studies in linguistics performed by former students in both Vänersborg and other universities in Sweden, I have found that there are a number of gender studies dealing with male and female talk and interaction in detective fiction. These studies have investigated how men and women differ in their speech pattern and how they use certain features and styles specific to males and females. Mesthrie et al lists some of the “specific features of conversational style that are said to differentiate between female and male speakers” (2000:230). Men are supposedly more talkative than women; the men interrupt women speakers more than they are interrupted themselves. Female speakers, on the other hand, use minimal responses, hedges and tag questions more than men do (230).

This study, however, will take these findings one step further, and investigate the speech patterns of two homosexual characters in detective fiction; one male and one female. These characters are both a part of the law enforcement community and are, in the novels, interacting mainly with other characters having to do with their work.

The two novels I have chosen for this study are The Last Precinct by Patricia Cornwell and Doctor Death by Jonathan Kellerman. In The Last Precinct I will take a closer look at the character Lucy who is the protagonist’s niece. Lucy is a former FBI agent, helicopter pilot, and a lesbian. The character I will focus on in Doctor Death is Detective Milo Sturgis who is an openly gay homicide detective and side-kick to the protagonist Dr. Delaware.

The study will also touch on the subjects’ appearances and the way the characters dress and present themselves.

2. Aims and Research Questions

In the book Queerly Phrased: Language, Gender, and Sexuality, Livia and Hall (1997) discuss the lack of research on gay-focused linguistics (4). They assume that in previous research gay men were included among male subjects and lesbian women among female, “a classification based on the unspoken assumption that shared gender provides a commonality that overrides considerations of sexual orientation” (1997:4). My aim with this paper is to investigate whether or not a specific male homosexual detective has the speech pattern of a man and a specific female homosexual FBI agent that of a woman. I will also investigate whether the characters are portrayed as stereotypical gay/lesbian when it comes to appearances or not.

3. Literature Review

In this section I will look at some of the research done on gender, speech acts and appearances. When looking at gender and speech it is important to first recognise what gender is all about. Almost everyone is born either female or male but that does not mean that everyone feels like a girl or a boy. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet talk about how gender is taught and “that one must learn to perform as a male or a female, and that these performances require support from one’s surroundings” (2003:17). They also point out that “gender is not an individual matter at all, but a collaborative affair that connects the individual to the social order” (31). These male and female performances apply not only to heterosexuals but to homosexuals as well. “Personals looking for lesbian partners, for example, often specify that respondents should be ‘feminine’ in appearance ... And men who look or act ‘feminine’ face discrimination in some gay male communities” (30).

Moving on from gender definitions to gender and speech acts, one can see that a great deal of the research being done points to certain speech patterns that vary depending on the gender

of the person talking. In Women, Men and Language (1993) Coates talks about the different speech patterns that are said to be typically male or female. There are some stereotypical notions on how men and women talk. Women are said to be talkative and gossip a lot and to be more polite than men. Men, on the other hand, are said to swear more than women. (107) Coates has found that men dominate conversation in mixed groups and that women in a single-sex group cooperate rather than compete when they talk. Coates has listed some categories that are relevant “for understanding how women’s cooperative discourse is achieved” (138):

1. *Topic and topic development*

Talk is central to women’s friendships, and women typically choose to talk about people and feelings, rather than about things [...]

2. *Minimal responses*

Women use minimal responses to signal their active listenership and support for each other. They also use them to mark their recognition of different stages of a conversation, e.g. to accept a new topic, or to acknowledge the end of a topic.

3. *Hedges*

Hedges are used to respect the face needs of all participants, to negotiate sensitive topics, and to encourage the participation of others [...]

4. *Questions*

Questions often function as information-seeking devices and in conversation, a speaker can take on the role of ‘expert’, while other participants ask the expert questions. Women avoid the role of expert in friendly conversation [...]

information-seeking questions are consequently rare in all-female discourse [...]

5. *Turn-taking*

Simultaneous speech (that is, two or more people speaking at the same time) is common in all-female discourse, yet it is rarely a sign of conversational malfunction. It seems that female speakers use a turn-taking model where the rule of one-person-at-a-time does not apply [...] Simultaneous speech also occurs when speakers complete each other's utterances, or repeat or rephrase each other's words. Finally, overlapping speech is found when two or more speakers pursue a theme simultaneously [...]

(Coates 1993:138)

Studies suggest that from an early age girls and boys adopt different conversational styles “with boys developing adversarial speech, and girls developing a style characterised by collaboration and affiliation” (Mills 1995:13). An all male discourse is said to be information-focused while an all-female discourse is interrogative and inviting. While men use questions to gain information, women use them as a way to make conversation continue and “to check that what is being said is acceptable to everyone present” (22). The public arena has, so far, consisted of male, dominant speech patterns that are competitive rather than cooperative. Women in high positions in society face one of two problems: either they use a female approach when it comes to speech patterns, and risk being viewed as weak, or they adopt the male speech pattern and are seen as unfeminine.

According to Barrett in Livia and Hall (1997), most studies of homosexual male language have focused on white, middle-class, gay men which “serve to maintain stereotyped exclusive identity categories that place many gays and lesbians outside both queer communities and communities constructed on the basis of ethnicity” (185). Since the male character in my study is a white, middle-class, gay man, this is to my advantage rather than a problem.

Finding typical gay and lesbian language can prove to be difficult, since most parents are unlikely to encourage their children to talk like homosexuals while growing up. “Gays and lesbians are not isolated from straight society, and assuming that queer communities can be isolated does not convey the realities of living in an (often homophobic) hetero-sexist society” (Barrett 191). In other words, they adopt the same speech patterns as do straight people growing up in the same environment.

Some of the stereotypes regarding speech of gay men are the use of hedges and “boosters (such as “like”)” (Barrett 192). These are lexical items that are also said to be typical of female speech. As when people talk in general, gays use different kinds of speech depending on the context or setting. The art of code-switching is quite common among gay men. It can be used to “determine the sexual orientation of one’s interlocutor”...”Exploratory switching ... represents an important site of contact between gay and straight settings, as it may be used covertly to establish gay solidarity even in entirely straight settings” (196).

Moonwomon-Baird (Livia and Hall 1997) suggests that there are a lot of assumptions and stereotypical views in society when it comes to gay and lesbian speech pattern. The norm in mainstream American society is a straight, white, middle-class male. Gay men are often caricatured as overly feminine in their speech and lesbian women are expected to talk like a man (204).

Coates and Jordan (Livia and Hall 1997) wanted to find out if sexual orientation in women matters. “In other words, does being lesbian or nonlesbian make a difference to how women talk?” (214). The subjects of their research were young women who had developed a friendship within a feminist community. All the women were white, middle-class, and well educated. Some of them were straight and some lesbians. What Coates and Jordan found was that the way these women interacted was collaborative rather than competitive, the same way that women are said to interact in single-sex, straight groups (214ff). Queen (Livia and Hall

eds.1997) claims that not only does lesbian linguistics stretch from that of “stereotypical white, middle-class female” to “stereotypical white, working-class male”, but it also includes “examples of lexical items that tend to be marked as stereotypical gay male” (247).

Rainer Emig in West and Lay (2000) talks about how “‘straight’ men have adopted ‘gay’ consumerist ideals” and refers to an article in Arena Homme Plus, “the leading men’s fashion magazine in Britain” (207). This article claims that

Only straights like footballers dress ‘straight’ now, and the rest of you have looked more gay with every year of the Nineties. Tight V-neck jumpers, hip-hugging Farahs, three-quarter length trousers, tanktops and Levi’s, slick city blousons, skinny-rib Ts, smart white casuals and Gucci-oochi anything...

(West and Lay 2000:207)

This observation has got nothing to do with how gay men talk but in my research it will be a valuable tool when it comes to analyzing appearances. When watching TV-series and movies you often encounter a stereotypical image of a homosexual person. Gay men are often portrayed as being fashion conscious, and lesbian women are often seen as dressing and behaving very masculine.

The theories and findings above are only a small selection of the vast research that exist on the subjects gender, language and appearances and I will try to apply these theories to the way the homosexual characters in the books I have chosen for this study, speak and present themselves.

4. Methods

The two primary sources I will use for this study are The Last Precinct by Patricia Cornwell and Doctor Death by Jonathan Kellerman. The former is about a medical examiner and her niece Lucy, who just happens to be a lesbian and an FBI agent, and the latter about a psychologist and his friend, detective Milo Sturgis, who is a homosexual homicide detective.

I will use qualitative discourse analysis in my study and focus on hedges, minimal response, turn-taking, and questions. I will use these features and compare the character's speech with the norms (male/female) mentioned above. I will also consider how they are portrayed when it comes to appearances. This has nothing to do with how they speak but it could be an indication to whether or not they can be considered stereotypical homosexuals.

When analysing discourse it is important to have a clear view of what the word 'discourse' means to the analysts. Johnstone (2000) offers one definition that is, if not the best, an easy way for a layman to understand; "language in use". Discourse analysts "study records of language in use: written texts or tapes and transcripts" (104). The texts I will analyze contain conversations, but these conversations are constructed by the authors and perhaps do not give us an accurate account of everyday speech. However, they do provide an analysis from a pop-culture form, detective fiction, that surely mirrors at least some contemporary social conversations and attitudes to and of gays/lesbians.

5. Delimitations and Limitations

The primary sources I will be using for my analysis are both part of longer series with the same characters. My reason for choosing these particular books is that the characters I will analyse have quite a large space in conversation, which gives me room for a more thorough analysis. The limitations in this study will be that even though the authors have chosen to use homosexual characters in their books, I do not think the authors themselves are homosexuals. I know that Jonathan Kellerman has been married for a long time to a woman and that Patricia Cornwell was married for a while to a man. If the authors are straight, this may well influence the way they make their characters speak.

6. Definitions

Hedges: “Hedges are linguistic forms such as *I think, I’m sure, you know, sort of* and *perhaps* which express the speaker’s certainty or uncertainty about the proposition under discussion”. (Coates 1993: 116)

Minimal Response: “such as *yeah* or *mhm* ... are a way of indicating the listener’s positive attention to the speaker, and thus a way of supporting the speaker in their choice of topic”. (Coates 1993: 109)

Gay: according to most English dictionaries, the noun ‘gay’ means a homosexual person, especially a man.

Queer: is referred to as an offensive term for a gay man in English dictionaries. Kroløkke and Sørensen however refer to queer as becoming a word “that in certain

contexts at least, signifies pride and strength”

(2006:57). It has taken on a political tone.

7. Findings

In this section I will analyze conversations within the texts where the characters analyzed are speaking, and also their appearances and how they dress. I will look at each part separately and give, if there are, examples from both characters and also from people interacting with these characters. But first I will give a brief overview of the books and the characters being analyzed. The novels I have chosen for this analysis are both detective fiction dealing with crimes and people within the law enforcement community.

7.1. The Novels

7.1.1. The Last Precinct

The Last Precinct by Patricia Cornwell was published in 2000 and is the 11th book about medical examiner Kay Scarpetta. The character I will focus on is Scarpetta’s niece Lucy. Lucy has a long background as an FBI agent specialized in computer crimes and is currently with the ATF (Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives). She is also a lesbian. The first time she is mentioned in this book is in the aftermath of an assault on Dr. Scarpetta where Lucy saves her life. They are talking to each other on the phone and Dr. Scarpetta thinks to herself: “I know from Lucy’s voice that she is scared. Rarely is my brilliant, forceful, helicopter piloting, fitness-obsessed, federal-law-enforcement-agent niece scared” (9). This thought sums up a great deal of Lucy’s character and gives us a glimpse of a woman in a typical man’s world. Lucy has tried all her life to make her aunt proud of her and takes unnecessary risks in order to do so. When saving her aunt’s life, Lucy is accused of being too

trigger-happy and finds herself suspended. She reflects on the gender angle of the suspension. “If one of the guys almost killed Chandonne, the suits in D.C. would be applauding his restraint, not nailing him for *almost* doing something. How can you punish someone for *almost* doing something? In fact, how can you even prove someone *almost* did something?” (55).

After selling some computer programs she has developed, Lucy has become rich and is able to buy her own helicopter. She and a friend/girlfriend start a business called *The Last Precinct*, which specializes on solving cold cases that the police or FBI hasn’t been able to solve, or as Lucy describes it: “The Last Precinct – where you go when there’s nowhere left” (88). Their first case is not a cold one, but it involves Dr. Scarpetta being accused of murdering a police official, Diane Bray, and making it look as if her murder was that of the serial killer Chandonne.

Besides Dr. Scarpetta and Lucy, there is one more character worth mentioning in this book. This character is Pete Marino, a Richmond Police Captain who has worked with Dr. Scarpetta since book one. Marino is a brute, overweight, homophobic man who is having trouble coping with Lucy’s homosexuality. Despite that, Lucy sees him as a surrogate father in some ways (he has been in her life since she was ten) just as she considers Dr. Scarpetta a surrogate mother. Pete Marino is an example of how looks can be deceiving. Scarpetta reflects: “Marino may look like a redneck, talk like a redneck, act like a redneck, but he is smart as hell, sensitive and very perceptive” (2). Even though Marino has problems with Lucy’s homosexuality, it was he who “introduced her to trucks and big engines and guns and all sorts of so-called manly interests that he now criticizes her for having in her life” (12). These three characters may seem as contrasts to each other, but that apparently works to everyone’s advantage.

7.1.2. Doctor Death

Doctor Death by Jonathan Kellerman was also published in 2000 and is the 15th book about psychologist Alex Delaware and his good friend Detective Milo Sturgis. Milo Sturgis is a gay homicide detective who does not try to hide what he is, but he does not flaunt it either. Most of his colleagues are aware of his sexual orientation and gave him a hard time in the beginning. When Dr. Delaware recaps what Milo has been doing during the summer, he concludes that: “Four murderers hanging around long enough to be caught. It kept his solve rate high, made it a bit – but not much – easier to be the only openly gay detective in LAPD” (2).

Doctor Death deals with the gruesome murder of a doctor who is famous for assisting terminally ill patients in committing suicide. Detective Sturgis is the officer in charge, and he calls on his good friend Dr. Alex Delaware, a psychologist, for help. Their cooperation goes back a long way and they know each other well enough to feel relaxed when addressing both personal and professional issues. Where Milo is shabby and unhealthy, Alex tries to look after himself regarding health and fitness as well as physical appearances. He is, in a sense, more stereotypically ‘gay’ than Milo when it comes to appearances as well as sensitivity.

7.2 Hedges, minimal response, turn-taking, and questions

Hedges and minimal response are said to be more frequent among women than among men and Robin Lakoff (cited in Coates 116), saw the use of hedges as a sign that women are more unassertive than men (although she had no empirical evidence of this assumption) and argued that “this is because women ‘are socialised to believe that asserting themselves strongly isn’t nice or ladylike, or even feminine’” (116). The use of minimal response is used more by women “at points in conversation which indicate the listener’s support for the current speaker” (116). In the beginning of The Last Precinct, both Lucy and her aunt Kay use

hedges in conversation such as “I *guess* they don’t want you in there either” (Lucy to her aunt) (7), and “I *guess* Jo’s with you at the hotel, then” (Aunt Kay) (10) (My Italics). These hedges are not a sign of unassertiveness but more questions and inquiries. I have only found three additional places where words like these are being used by Lucy. These are; “*I think* Teun’s found me an apartment on the Upper East Side.” (105), “*Probably* Teterboro” (106), and “*I kind of* hate to, because there’s nothing definitive.” (483) and none of them are used in an unassertive way. When it comes to minimal responses, I have found none uttered by Lucy at all (although there is a rich amount of conversation and I might have missed it).

Also in Doctor Death there is a rich amount of conversation which makes it hard to get an overall view of the different parts. Detective Sturgis does not use either hedges or minimal responses. He does, however, use a lot of questions, and they are information-seeking, with Dr. Delaware as the expert. This is seen by Coates (1993:138) as rare in all-female conversation and thus a typical male attribute. Lucy in The Last Precinct also uses questions for information-seeking and not to, as Coates describes women as doing, “check that what is being said is acceptable to everyone present” (Coates 138). In both novels the conversations between the characters of my choice are very fluent and non-interruptive. They take turn and let each other finish a sentence before responding. This, of course, may have to do with the conversations being constructed by authors and not naturally occurring. Detective Sturgis’ speech consists of either rather long monologues such as:

She claims she didn’t hear about it till yesterday. Was up in Nepal somewhere – climbing mountains, the Amsterdam thing was the tail end of her trip, big confab of death freaks from all over the world. Not the place to choke on your chicken salad, huh? Anyway, Zoghibie says she had no access to news in Nepal, got to Amsterdam three days ago, her hosts met her at the airport and gave her the news. She slept over one day, booked a return flight. (56)

or short, almost incomplete utterances like: “Composing herself. Her quote” (57) or “Our tax dollars at work.” ... “Was he living alone?” (153). These examples are typical for Detective Sturgis’s speech throughout the novel. He sometimes has to give orders to his subordinates and these could perhaps be seen as typically female in being suggestions rather than direct orders: “So how about you write up that warrant for his mail, see if you can get hold of his credit card bills, too. Maybe there’ll be a travel agent charge somewhere in there and you can verify your vacation hypothesis” (157). This type of politeness is, as mentioned before, a typical female feature (Coates 1993:107).

7.3 Appearances

In the later half of the 1800s, there were numerous accounts of women in California dressing as men and being arrested for it. The law at that time prohibited “public appearance ‘in a dress not belonging to his or her sex’” (Sears 4). A woman, Eliza De Wolf, showed up in public dressed in men’s clothing “advocating that women adopt bifurcated pantaloons or ‘bloomers’ as a rational and hygienic alternative to heavy skirts and petticoats” (4). This attempt to reform women’s clothing was ridiculed by the media with hints of her either being a lesbian: “...leaning on the arm of what appeared to be a man although it might have been a woman”, or her husband being “henpecked” and Eliza “wearing the breeches” in their relationship (5).

Lucy is, in The Last Precinct, described as beautiful in a nonchalant sort of way. “We spot Lucy at the same moment a gang of loud, turbulent boys do...lusting after my niece, who is wearing black tights, scuffed Army boots and an antique flight jacket she rescued from a vintage clothing shop somewhere” (Cornwell 101). None of the boys seem to think Lucy is a lesbian simply because she is wearing army boots and a flight jacket, which could be seen as

typical men's wear. I can not help but recall the film Top Gun that came out in 1986, in which the leading lady Kelly McGillis is wearing a flight jacket. After that there were a lot of straight women copying her. Army boots have been in fashion among women off and on during the 1980's and 1990's. Some of my female, straight friends bought them and wore them with either tights or a dress. These days it is a lot harder to establish whether or not a woman is lesbian or straight only by looking at what she wears.

The way people dress and present themselves is often the first impression you get of a person. There are preconceptions of how, for instance, a gay man dresses and acts. In the very first book by Jonathan Kellerman, When the Bough Breaks, with Detective Milo Sturgis as one of the protagonists, we get a quite common glimpse of this preconception. When Dr. Delaware first learns that Milo is gay, his reaction is: "You expect them to be mincing, screaming, nelly fairies; leather-armored shaven-skull demons; oh-so-preppy mustachioed young things in Izod shirts and khaki trousers; or hiking-booted bulldykes" (27). None of these descriptions matches Milo. He looks, dresses, and behaves more like Detective Marino in The Last Precinct, who is a very straight, homophobic, shabby man with no fashion sense at all. Where Lucy in the beginning is portrayed as "brilliant and forceful", Milo is described as looking "tired, washed-out, worn down by violence and small print" (6). His appearance is not that of a "gay consumerist" as mentioned above, but rather that of Detective Marino in The Last Precinct; "He [Marino] is a hulk of a man with a swollen beer belly, and a big disgruntled face, and his hair is colorless and has unattractively migrated from his head to other parts of his body" (Cornwell 6). When we first encounter Detective Sturgis in Doctor Death he is meeting up with Dr. Delaware wearing "a fuzzy-looking green tweed jacket, brown twill pants, white shirt with a twisted collar, string tie with a big, misshapen turquoise clasp. The tie looked like tourist junk" (Kellerman 5). Even if Detective Sturgis dresses like Detective Marino, he does not use as many swearwords as Marino does. Marino's vocabulary

can only be matched by Lucy in The Last Precinct. She uses a lot of swear words and profanity such as: “Nothing Italian about that shit you’re mixing” (464) and “Redneck bastard” (465), which could be either a sign of her talking more like a man than a woman or simply a result of her growing up under Marino’s influence.

8. Summary

Being homosexual is nothing new in this world. There are mentions of both lesbians and gay men throughout history. The Greek poet Sappho who died around 570 BC was considered bisexual “because she wrote love poems addressed to both women and men. The word "lesbian" derives from the name of the island of her birth, Lesbos” (“Sappho”. Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sappho>>).

In this study I have analyzed whether or not homosexual characters in crime fiction have the speech pattern of the majority of their own gender, or if they have adopted any features from the opposite sex. I have looked at the use of hedges, minimal response, questions and turn-taking. I also took a detour into how they present themselves appearance-wise and found that they do not fit into any stereotypical category but have developed a style based on both gender and environment.

The research being done on gender and language is extensive yet, perhaps, somewhat restricted. How women talk is far more represented than how men do. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet point out that “the data on men’s conversation is sparse, and gathered in what one might call ritual situations that make men feel called upon to render masculine performances” (2003:122). The conversations taking place in my primary sources do so in an almost exclusively law-enforcement setting.

Law-enforcement is a very public domain, especially in this media age. Both Lucy and Milo have spent a great deal of their lives in this domain, and could thereby have been

schooled into talking in a certain way. Neither Lucy nor Milo use typical female speech so one can conclude that as far as Milo is concerned, although being gay he still talks like a stereotypical male (except for being a little more polite and using very few swearwords). Lucy on the other hand talks more like a man than a woman, but this has probably got more to do with being in an all-male profession than being a lesbian. Having Dr. Scarpetta as a hero and a role model has presumably helped as well, since she has a high status in society and therefore uses a more male approach to language.

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