

Workshop proposal for SWL 2024

Title: The Grammar of Sex

Organisers:

Simon Overall (Otago University) simon.overall@otago.ac.nz;

Rita Eloranta (Hanken University) rita.eloranta@hanken.fi

The proposed workshop marks the beginning of a cross-linguistic research project into how sexual activity is represented in language, with a particular focus on grammatical encoding. The project follows the model of Newman (ed.) (2009) *The Linguistics of Eating and Drinking*, in documenting the grammatical and lexical representation of a specific semantic field. Like eating and drinking, sex has a universal “fundamental, life-sustaining role for humans” (Newman 2009: vii), but it is also a sensitive topic that tends to be avoided or disguised in discourse. The workshop will bring together original research on a selection of languages, especially under-documented ones, with the goal of deepening our understanding of the range of variation and the cross-linguistic similarities in the grammatical and lexical encoding of sexual activity.

In any given language, we expect to find a wide range of lexical representations available to describe sex, given the roles of taboo and euphemism (Allan & Burridge 2006). An important question to ask is what euphemistic processes are cross-linguistically frequent, for example the use of light verbs such as *do*, or metaphors associated with eating (Newman 2009).

With respect to grammatical encoding, the structure of clauses expressing sexual intercourse may vary across and within languages. English may use a transitive verb such as *screw*, or a lexicalised light verb + noun + PP construction such as *have sex with*, *make love to*. These constructions can also be used intransitively with a plural subject giving inherently reciprocal meaning (*they screwed*, *they had sex*), giving subtle semantic distinctions.

The observed variation in the transitivity of clauses expressing sexual activity reflects the fact that the semantic agent is also affected by the verb’s action – this semantic field is part of the middle voice domain (Kemmer 1993). Again, this situation parallels that of verbs of eating and drinking, which show lower transitivity due to the affectedness of the agent, reflected in grammatical structures such as objectless clauses or non-canonical marking of the subject (Næss 2009). A focus on grammar can offer insights that may not be evident from lexical or discourse approaches (cf. Abe 2022 on grammatical reflections of trans identity in Japanese).

One obvious area of grammar that overlaps with sexual activity is gender. We can usefully ask questions such as: do lexical items for sexual behaviours encode a binary conception of gender? Are male and female roles encoded differently? For example, are there different verbs for male and female subjects of verbs expressing sexual activity? To what extent does the linguistic expression of sexual activity reflect and reinforce heteronormative practices, and how are non-normative/queer sexual activities expressed? (cf. Motschenbacher 2022). In recent years research into the grammatical expression of gender has focused on the use of gendered pronouns (Conrod 2018), and speakers of languages that encode binary gender in grammatical paradigms may switch pronouns to reflect non-normative gender roles in sex (for example the use of a feminine pronoun to address gay men in Hausa, as described by Gaudio 2022). Widening the scope of research into the linguistic representation of non-normative sex and gender forms the basis of queer or trans linguistics (Kibbey 2024, Zimman 2018).

The aim of the proposed workshop is to provide an empirical base of linguistic data which can then feed into neighbouring fields such as anthropology and gender studies, and practical applications in the fields of healthcare and law. This is an important topic for various reasons:

- The research has the potential to inform and improve cross-cultural communication in a healthcare context, both looking at specifics and typological patterns;

- Non-normative/queer sexual behaviours are often the subject of stigma and taboo, and it is important to understand how this is reflected in their linguistic expression (cf. Konnelly 2021);
- To the extent that heteronormative gender roles are implicit in the linguistic encoding of sex, are sexual and gendered violence encoded in language use? An answer to this question has the potential to guide efforts to reduce possible harms (Couper 2018, Erlich 2003, 2022).

We are aware that this is a potentially very delicate topic, with the possibility of triggering discomfort or even personal risk to language consultants. Researchers must be sensitive to this possibility, and we welcome contributions that explicitly address the logistics of undertaking fieldwork-based research into the topic of sexuality (cf. Gaudio 2022).

We expect this to be a full day workshop, with about ten presentation slots as well as time for an introduction and final discussion. A number of potential participants have already expressed interest in participating. The project aims to produce an edited volume of selected papers.

References

- Abe, Hideko. 2022. Indexicality of Grammar: The Case of Japanese Transgender Speakers. In Kira Hall and Rusty Barrett (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Language and Sexuality* (online edn, Oxford Academic, 23 Aug. 2022), accessed 31 Dec. 2023.
- Allan, Keith and Kate Burridge. 2006. *Forbidden Words: Taboo and the censoring of language*. Cambridge University Press.
- Conrod, Kirby. 2018. Pronouns and Gender in Language. In Kira Hall and Rusty Barrett (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Language and Sexuality* (online edn, Oxford Academic, 10 July 2018), accessed 31 Dec. 2023.
- Couper, Shannon. 2018. Neoliberal Pleasure: Intimate Talk about Female Sexual Experience. In Kira Hall and Rusty Barrett (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Language and Sexuality* (online edn, Oxford Academic, 10 July 2018), accessed 31 Dec. 2023.
- Ehrlich, Susan. 2003. Coercing Gender: Language in sexual assault adjudication processes. In J. Holmes, M. Meyerhoff & J. A. Holmes, (eds.) *The Handbook of Language and Gender*, pp. 645–670. John Wiley & Sons.
- Ehrlich, Susan. 2022. Language and Sexual Violence in the Legal System: “He Said/She Said” Accounts and Beyond. In Kira Hall and Rusty Barrett (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Language and Sexuality* (online edn, Oxford Academic, 23 Aug. 2022), accessed 31 Dec. 2023.
- Gaudio, Rudolf P. 2022. Talk About Intimate Subjects: Ethnographic Approaches to Language, Gender, and Sexuality. In Kira Hall and Rusty Barrett (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Language and Sexuality* (online edn, Oxford Academic, 23 Aug. 2022), accessed 31 Dec. 2023.
- Kemmer, Suzanne. 1993. *The Middle Voice*. John Benjamins.
- Kibbey, Tyler Everett. 2024. A queer(ed) science of language. In T. E. Kibbey (ed.) *Out of the Closet: The Interdisciplinarity of Gender and Sexuality in Language Science*, pp.1–10. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Mouton.
- Konnelly, Lex. 2021. Both, and: Transmedicalism and resistance in non-binary narratives of gender-affirming care. *Toronto Working Papers in Linguistics*, 43(1).
- Motschenbacher, Heiko. 2022. *Linguistic dimensions of sexual normativity : corpus-based evidence*. New York, NY : Routledge.
- Næss, Åshild. 2009. How transitive are EAT and DRINK verbs?. In J. Newman (ed.) *The Linguistics of Eating and Drinking*, pp. 27–43. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Newman, John. 2009. A cross-linguistic overview of ‘eat’ and ‘drink’. In J. Newman (ed.) *The Linguistics of Eating and Drinking*, pp. 1–26. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Zimman, Lal. 2018. Transgender Language, Transgender Moment: Toward a Trans Linguistics. In Kira Hall and Rusty Barrett (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Language and Sexuality* (online edn, Oxford Academic, 10 July 2018), accessed 31 Dec. 2023.