Is gay talk a sociolect?
Towards a sociosemiotics of queer discourse
Reflecting illness in conversations of German gay and HIV-positive men

Ernest W.B. Hess-Lüttich & Ivan Vlassenko*

The paper presents a survey on recent developments in queer linguistics with special emphasis on (i) discourse oriented approaches, (ii) German studies in the field, (iii) sociolinguistic features, based on a corpus of conversations between gay men. Other than in Anglo-American research, there is hardly any empirical research in the German speaking countries on the question as to whether there is such a phenomenon as *Gayspeak* (Chesebro), and whether discourse in gay subcultures (cf. Kulick) can be described as a distinctive sociolect. The study provides a short history of the shift in focus from gay studies to queer linguistics, focusing, however, on an exemplary corpus-based investigation of new (multimodal) material from authentic interviews (transcripts and video) with gay men in German HIV-positive support groups.

That includes a report on concrete research results of a project examining the specific discourse structures of conversations of members of a minority (HIV-positive men) within a social minority (gay men) with a close look at the participants’ reactions to the information regarding their medical status, at their knowledge about (notions of) the infection, the virus etc. (subjective theories of illness), at their views on living with AIDS (coping strategies), their changes (if any) of sexual practices and their perception of the reaction of their social communities (gay, family, job, everyday life).

Outline

1 Queer discourse
1.1 Terminology
1.2 History 1 (context): Gay liberation
1.3 History 2 (science): The rise of gay language research
1.4 Queer linguistics
1.5 Sociolinguistics of gay talk
2 Conversations of gay men, diagnosed HIV-positive
2.1 Project outline
2.2 Data and methodology
2.3 Corpus analysis
3 Discussion
4 References

* Prof. Dr. Dr. h.c. Ernest W.B. Hess-Lüttich, University of Bern, Department of German, Laenggass-Str. 49, 3012 Bern, Switzerland, and University of Stellenbosch, Department of Modern Languages, Private Bag X1, Stellenbosch 7602, South Africa; Ivan Vlassenko, University of Bayreuth, Department of German Studies (linguistics), GW I, 95440 Bayreuth, Germany.
1 Queer discourse

1.1 Terminology

The history of research in the field of *queer linguistics* is fairly young. Its beginnings fell in the time of the emancipation of gay subcultures in Western societies. But it was not before the early 1980s that linguists, psychologists and sociologists began to ask whether there was such a phenomenon as a ‘gay language’. It soon became clear that simply collecting lexical items considered as gay and accumulating them as lists of gay vocabulary, dictionaries of gay slang etc., was not enough. A more substantial question arose: what exactly do we understand by gay speech, queer communication, gay discourse, and the like? Which were the main theoretical approaches and empirical methods of investigation in this new field of study? Is it one field of study at all, or is it rather a plurality of LGBTTSQQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, two-spirit, queer and questioning) identities and desires that is our object of observation? Is what is called *Queer Theory* nowadays a theory at all in the strict sense of the word or is it rather a political idea arguing for a re-conceptualization of categories of gender and sexualities which may have become ‘problematic’ (i.e. no longer unquestionable) in pluralistic societies (cf. Hark 1993: 103f.)? What exactly does it mean when Simone de Beauvoir claims “on ne naît pas femme, on le devient” (de Beauvoir 2001: 13) and does the famous quote apply to men in the same way? Is it true, as Judith Butler holds, that not only the sexual identity but also the biological male/female dichotomy of sexual orientation is in fact a cultural construct, produced in discourse governed by socio-political interests and power relations (Butler 1991: 24)? Should the differentiation between (biological) sex and (social) gender be given up altogether or is it still useful in our field of research?

After two decades of discussion, there still seems to be no consensus in sight. Therefore, let us offer a couple of definitions as a terminological starting point for our understanding. Following Mary Bucholz and Kira Hall in their contribution to *Language and Society* (2004: 470), we will use the term ‘sexuality’ as an umbrella term for all ideologies, practices, and identities by which the body gains a sociopolitical meaning, be it erotic or reproductive. And referring to Liz Morrish and Helen Sauntson and their book *Language and Sexual Identity*, published in 2007 by Palgrave Macmillan, we propose to understand ‘sexual identity’ as a part of social identity no matter whether the object of desire is male or female – which may be labelled as heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual orientation, depending on the sexuality of the desired Other, while a-sexuality, trans-sexuality and inter-sexuality is not referred to as sexual orientation.

1.2 History 1 (context): Gay liberation

Of course, all these categories are relatively new. All the famous figures in gay history did not refer to themselves as ‘homosexuals’ until (roughly) the 19th century, and it was not until the turn of the century that the first civil rights movements adopted the issue and initiated a more liberal attitude towards homosexuals. Their self-organisation probably started with the *Chicago Society of Human Rights*, founded in 1924, and, of course, the legendary *Scientific Humanitarian Committee* in Berlin, founded by the Jewish neurologist Magnus Hirschfeld, whose world famous Institute was soon destroyed by the Nazi regime.

In the German speaking countries it took another generation after World War II until the gay liberation movement (adopted at first in Cologne from the London based *Gay Liberation*
Is gay talk a sociolect? Towards a sociosemiotics of queer discourse

Front) led to some moderate legal reforms in the early 1970s. It was the time of a paradigmatic change from the perception of ‘homosexuality’ as a medical, if not pathological concept to one of socio-political and bodily identity. However, it was only in 1990 that the World Health Organisation (WHO) omitted ‘homosexuality’ from its list of psycho-deceases, and only in 1994 the ominous § 175 (introduced in 1872 and defining sex between men as criminal act) was deleted in German legislation.

Interestingly, this is also the starting point of what, since the early 1990s, has become known as Queer Theory, at first especially in the United States, in Canada and in Great Britain, but for quite some time not as widely adopted in the German-speaking countries as one would have expected. The change from an essentialist concept of sexuality to a constructivist model of a transitory identity was initiated mainly by the adoption of French Poststructuralism in the United States, especially of Michel Foucault’s writings and their fruitful application in Feminism and Gender Studies and mainly influenced in the 1990s by Judith Butler’s very successful books Gender Trouble (1990), Bodies that matter (1993) and The Psychic Life of Power (1997).

We cannot, and shall not, discuss them here and now, but we shall keep in mind her central hypothesis that gender was neither a status nor a substance but the result of cultural routines within a rigidly regulating framework; an ensemble of actions forming a continuing discourse for which she coined the term ‘performativity’ (Butler 1991: 60f.) – not to be confused with ‘performance’ in the linguistic sense of the term.

1.3 History 2 (science): The rise of gay language research

Before we come back to this hypothesis, let us quickly summarize some of the approaches and results of earlier studies on gay language in order to add the necessary background and context of the discussion on gay ‘sexolect’ as a ‘sociolect’. Most of these earlier studies regarded gay language more or less as a language variety of a social minority, which defined itself as gay. Rudolf Gaudio (1994), for instance, tried to find phonetic evidence for the stereotype of gay men ‘sounding different’ from straight men by comparing their pitch properties. The results showed that the pitch range and pitch variability in intonation did not correlate with sexual orientation in any statistically significant way. However, in some mysterious way, the listeners identified the gay speakers correctly. Gaudio (1994: 54) concludes that

the fact that the listeners fairly consistently judged speech as sounding either ‘gay’ and ‘effeminate’ or ‘straight’ and ‘masculine’ points to a need for sociolinguists to investigate the cultural sources of these judgements, not only in the area of pitch and intonation, but also in other phonological domains, such as the pronunciation of sibilants, duration of vowels, the use of standard versus nonstandard phonological forms, and voice.

Studies of this type follow the premise that gay men can be identified by their way of speaking. Another popular field of research, for example, is that of compiling word lists aiming at deciphering that mysterious ‘code’ shared by the members of the gay community. These studies date from the time when sociological and linguistic interests focussed on all kinds of subcultures. However, the more they learnt about their ways of internal communication, the more they began to doubt the notion of homogeneous subcultures altogether. In a paper entitled “Sexist slang and the gay community”, Penelope and Wolfe (1979: 1) noted that
any discussion involving the use of such phrases as ‘gay community’, ‘gay slang’ or ‘gay speak’ is bound to be misleading, because two of the implications are false: first, that there is a homogeneous community, composed of lesbians and gay males, that shares a common culture or system of values, goals, perceptions, and experience; and second, that this gay community shares a common language.

Similar studies – like the one by Conrad and More (1976: 22) – also come to the conclusion that “a lexical code or argot does not necessarily mark the parameters of sub-cultural identity.” Some such studies – like Rodgers’ *The Queen’s Vernacular* (1979) – are still regarded as standard reference works for gay lexis in English up to the present day. For the German language, it was Jody Skinner (1999) who collected thousands of lexical entries for his dictionary of gay vocabulary, which was supplemented by a second volume on its morphological, semantic, sociolinguistic, and diachronic aspects.

A third exemplary field of research in queer linguistics was, and still is, the use of female nouns and pronouns for male companions in the gay community. Anna Livia (1997) has shown this for French; Tal Morse (2008) for Hebrew. Morse’s research shows how language is used “as a social vehicle in order to subvert the gendered structure of society” (Morse 2008: 205). As Hebrew marks gender in nouns, pronouns, verbs, and adjectives, the linguistic strategy can be demonstrated with exemplary precision. We tend to agree with his conclusion that

the use of inverted appellation demonstrates gay critique on prevalent heterosexual perceptions of gender in society […] The inverted appellation strategy enables gay men to re-examine and challenge existing gender categories and question their naturalness (Morse 2008: 209).

What all three above-mentioned types of studies seem to have in common is that they give an answer to our initial question (what is ‘gay language’?) along the lines of suggesting that gay men speak ‘differently’ in one way or another. But the question remains: what exactly is that which we identify as ‘gay’ markers of the ‘code’? Is it the sexual orientation itself? Is it the stereotypes we all have about ‘gay language’? If so, can gays be identified by their language even before “coming out”, or even before they themselves know they are gay? These types of questions led us to new approaches in analyzing ‘gay language’ independently of a gay identity.

1.4 Queer linguistics

In his critical survey on the state of the art some time ago, Don Kulick (2000: 247) argued that

a marked feature of much of the literature [scil. on queer theory] is its apparent unfamiliarity with well-established linguistic disciplines and methods of analysis, such as conversation analysis, discourse analysis, and pragmatics. That the *Encyclopaedia of Homosexuality* could refer to sociolinguistics, in 1990, as “an emerging discipline” (Dynes 1990: 676) is indicative of the lag that exists in much of the literature between linguistic and cultural theory and the work that is done on queer language (Kulick 2000: 247).

This diagnosis was published in the *Annual Review of Anthropology*, and indeed, much of the work done in the field was initiated not by linguists, but by anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, philosophers and literary scholars. It is in fact only a fairly recent development that sociolinguists do not only look for correlations between social parameters and language behaviour, but also at how speakers create social roles. There is no such thing, we believe, as
a ‘gay language’ in the static sense of the word, but, as Kulick puts it, “language is used by
individuals who self-identify as gay” – in other words, to say they “sometimes use language
in certain ways in certain contexts is not the same thing as saying that there is a gay […]
language” (Kulick 2000: 247). Now this is quite a different perspective as compared to the
traditional sociolinguistic approaches to the observation of speech communities.

This new perspective owes much to the introduction of Queer Theory into gay-language
research. Inspired by Foucault, a new sensitivity towards role relations of power had emerged.
The focus now was on becoming gay and/or performing queerness, rather than being gay. In
a hetero-normative environment, one of the media of ‘staging’ queerness, is language. So our
interest now becomes: how is this particular use of language constructed and what are the
specific signs and sign systems, or ‘codes’, linguistic or otherwise, utilized in stagings of
queerness?

Therefore, Cameron and Kulick (2003) suggest looking at the expression of desire rather
than sexuality or sexual identity. Bucholz and Hall (2004), on the other hand, argue that after sociolinguistics, anthropological linguistics, and discourse studies have at last accepted the
necessity of analyzing the linguistic construction of identity in order to better understand how
culture and society are constructed, it would mean a step back not to also look at identity
anymore.

In the introduction to their reader Queerly Phrased, the editors Livia and Hall (1997) quite
rightly remind us that social concepts denoted by adjectives such as gay, queer, lesbian etc.
are historically and culturally specific; that they may be, or have been, very different at other
times and in different places, or not existing at all. But instead of giving up the enterprise
altogether, they plead for the application of the notion of ‘performativity’, which nowadays
has become an umbrella term in various branches of cultural studies (cf. Wirth 2002: 2). This,
of course, reminds us again of Judith Butler’s approach to performativity and its role in
creating and establishing social identities as members of a hetero-normative society, literally
‘incorporated’ in their bodies (as she puts forward in Bodies that matter, 1993). It is the very
act of naming a boy or girl as such that functions as normative instruction to behave like one
– i.e. boys are expected to act as (normal) ‘boys’, as girls are expected to perform as ‘girls’,
in complementary binary role systems, stabilised by iterativity, thereby losing the awareness
of their historical development, of their cultural relativity, and of the social conventions they
are based upon.

This is why “coming out” as gay or lesbian constitutes such a strong, or even heroic, act
of emancipation – to escape these normative role systems, this prison of expectations of
‘normality’. It is like discarding ones performative role identity; the “Zwangsjacke des
Subjekts” [strait-jacket of the social subject], as Andreas Krass (ed. 2003) put it in his
introduction to the Suhrkamp volume entitled Queer denken [thinking queer] – which, if we
are not mistaken, for the first time compiled contributions to Queer Studies in German.

This does not imply, however, that one can change sexual identities like one changes
clothes, but that it is their very performance which plays with and challenges normative role
systems in specific contexts, such as, say, the androgynous strategies and glamorous theatraics
of some of the rock and pop music in the 1980s.

As mentioned above, much of this has its roots in Freudian psychoanalysis, which may be
one of the reasons why so few linguists were interested in collaborative work. Many of them
were, and some (including myself, EHL) still are, somewhat sceptical towards approaches
which claim to be able to scientifically/empirically analyze psychoanalytical ‘desire’ with
linguistic tools. But for Kulick, for instance, it is absolutely necessary to take a closer look at
what is ‘behind’ identity, i.e. at what makes sexuality, namely “fantasy, desire, repression, pleasure, fear, and the unconscious” (Kulick 2000: 270), because, he continues, “what are specific to different kinds of people are the precise things they desire and the manner in which particular desires are signalled in culturally codified ways” (ibid. 273).

To a certain extent, we tend to agree with Kulick in this respect, but would maintain that this not only involves linguistics but, even more so, semiotics, if the analysis is not to be reductionist from the very start. Cameron and Kulick (2003: 95) see the bridge between psychoanalysis and linguistics in Jacques Lacan’s theory where ‘desire’ is a matter not so much of an energy, or a force, as in Freudian terms, but of absence, of deficit, closely linked with language, which has to bridge the gap between the I and the Other (the matter): “The gap between the need and its expression – between a hope and its fulfilment – is where Lacan locates the origins and workings of desire” (Cameron and Kulick 2003: 109).

According to Lacan, we become ‘boys’ or ‘girls’ in relation to the sexual roles of our parents: “Sexuality is the primary channel through which we arrive at our identities as sexual beings. In other words, gender is achieved through sexuality” (ibid. 97). From Lacan’s thesis would follow that the choice caused by the above-mentioned initial experience of a gap between the I and the Other would be incorporated in the body of the opposite sex, onto which the fulfilment of one’s own desire would be projected. If that were so, one would wonder why babies adopted by same sex couples may well become heterosexuals – but that is another story (a story of bio-genetics, etc.).

1.5 Sociolinguistics of gay talk

More importantly, it should be discussed whether and how the ‘desire’-hypothesis can be fruitfully applied in linguistics. So far, we are not entirely convinced by the results of the studies Cameron and Kulick (2003) refer to in their book Language and Sexuality. We shall refrain from quoting them here in detail, but suffice it to say that it takes a closer look at the verbal and non-verbal expression of desire (or its suppression) to allow for an answer to the question of how exactly, for instance, a gay man expresses his desire in the face of fear of discrimination in many more or less subtle ways in a hetero-normative society, and how this fear itself is expressed.

While Kulick maintains that research in queer linguistics had to overcome its “unhappy fixation on identity”, Liz Morrish and Helen Sauntson (2007: 13) harshly criticize this very argument in their book New Perspectives on Language and Sexual Identity:

To disinvest from notions of identity means breaking ranks with the rest of sociolinguistics, for example, how do we envisage the study of language and race, or dialect, or gender, without making identity the starting point and rationale for enquiry?

The authors agree with the premise that it is difficult, or even impossible, to separate sexuality and gender from language because for them

[…] it is clear that sexuality and language overlapped with gender and language and the two have influenced each other (and continue to do so), and in making performative statements about one, we are inevitably making performative statements about the other (Morrish & Sauntson 2007: 13).

Instead of trying to decipher and translate Lacan’s somewhat opaque metaphors into ordinary language, we should probably be more interested, firstly, in how gay speakers actually use language (among other sign systems) in order to overcome their individual contradictions
between their gender identity and their sexual identity, and, secondly, in what we regard as a much more severe social problem in many of our Western societies, that is the increasing tendency of performing masculinity according to traditional male role models we would have thought to have overcome a long time ago. Consider, for example, many young men ‘with a migration background’ (as it is put today in politically correct vernacular), in particular those of Turkish and Arab origin living in European cities, or the typical college boys in the United States, and how they perform a pronounced masculinity in their language in order to compensate for an inferiority complex and a severe insecurity, be it for economical, social, cultural or religious reasons, or for their helplessness in coping with unfamiliar gender relations between the sexes.

In her study on “the Role of Heterosexuality in the Construction of Hegemonic Masculinity”, Jennifer Coates has shown how one particular mode or model of masculinity has become dominant or hegemonic (again, one might add), which is in the interest of those in power and allows them to look down on and to suppress minorities challenging this role model, the key components of which are “hardness, toughness, coolness, competitiveness, dominance, and control” (Coates 2007: 42). Any deviation from this frame is considered ‘unmanly’ or effeminate, and therefore disgusting, ridiculous or immoral. Based on the analysis of a corpus of conversations recorded in pubs between British male students mainly from the upper middle class, many of whom displayed open homophobia in the data, Coates concludes that today hegemonic manliness is congruent with heterosexual masculinity “which claims power and the direct or indirect performance of violence towards those fellow men who do not axiomatically desire women and, therefore, cannot possibly be what they regard, and respect, as ‘real men’” (ibid.).

To conclude the first part of the paper, let us briefly summarize the main lines of our argument so far. We started out with some terminological statements and definitions in order to make clear what we are aiming at. We then looked back on the history of gay emancipation in the 20th century and the development of our field of research since the 1970s and 1980s. We mentioned some of the main approaches to the investigation of gay language in the search for a sociolect or a language variety by the use of which a gay subculture could be defined and recognized, i.e. used for a membership categorization (as understood by John J. Gumperz), and by which the members of this subculture express their identity and ‘declare’ their membership.

Next, we attempted to reconstruct the shift of interest in gay language research under the influence of the emerging Queer Theory developed at first in Cultural Studies, when language was no longer considered as part of one’s identity, but as an instrument of creating an identity in flexible response to changing contexts and circumstances. Our focus here was the so-called ‘desire’-hypothesis, as advocated by Kulick and others, i.e. on the ingredients of sexuality/sexualities and how they are expressed (or suppressed); how men signal their desire to the subject of desire. This approach is not exclusively interested in gay language, but investigates the relationship of language and sexuality, with special reference to Jacques Lacan and his specific combination of psychoanalysis and linguistics of metaphor.

In contrast to this line of research, we plead for a more empirical, corpus-based sociolinguistic approach, as represented, e.g., by the studies collected by Morrish and Sauntson or Sauntson and Kyritzis, supplemented by a socio-semiotic perspective in order to avoid the kind of reductionisms which would result from only allowing verbal data in the corpus material. Here, we see an almost unlimited potential for future research, provided that – and this is an expression of hope; probably a warning, rather than an expectation – the times...
Ernest W.B. Hess-Lüttich & Ivan Vlassenko

lie behind us where the apparent lack of research, as Kulick noted (2000: 24), “somehow is related to structures of discrimination in an academia that, until recently, actively discouraged any research on homosexuality that did not explicitly see it as deviance”.

Looking at the present situation in the United States, where Queer Theory started, and listening to the views on homosexuality expressed by the so-called Christian Majority, the Republican Party, the members of the ‘Tea Party’, and most religious congregations, we are not so sure about a bright future for investigations in academia there, so ‘Old Europe’ might have to take over and introduce, consolidate, and institutionalize an inspiring and prosperous field of scientific research, whatever label one chooses to affix to it.

2 Conversations of gay men diagnosed HIV positive

2.1 Project outline

Following Michel Foucault, Myrick (1996: 1) argues that, if people are defined by what they communicate themselves and what is said about them, “gay identity has recently become one of the consequences of communication about AIDS”. Several studies are devoted to the linguistic investigation of HIV/AIDS-related lexical items, metaphors, the language used in politics, public and scientific discourse concerning HIV/AIDS, as well as conversational practices in HIV/AIDS prevention (e.g. Sontag 1990; Liebert 1995; id. 1997; Klaeger 2006; Drescher 2006; id. 2009). In line with this more empirical linguistic research, we will now take a closer look at the spoken language of HIV-infected gay men when they talk about HIV/AIDS. We aim to identify the specifics of the language gay men use when expressing their mental representations of the HIV-infection. For this purpose, we will analyse data of narrative face-to-face interviews with HIV-infected persons.

Before presenting some selected results of our analysis, let us briefly sketch the theoretical framework of our approach, which owes much to current linguistic research on what is labelled “Subjektive Krankheitstheorien” [subjective illness theories] in Germany. This multimodal approach explores the communicative practices of expert-lay communication (between physicians and patients) in face-to-face interaction. In other words, the discourse analysis comprises verbal and non-verbal data of patients talking with doctors or other patients about their illness or other health-related topics. It is inspired by studies in the field of Health Communication, a multidisciplinary framework for the promotion of knowledge transfer between the scientific and the public spheres, which “involves creating, communicating, and delivering health information and interventions using customer-centred and science-based strategies to protect and promote the health of diverse populations” (CDC 2005).

Within this framework, much of current discourse analysis is devoted to face-to-face-interaction between medical expert (doctor, physician etc.) and patient, between experts, between doctor and staff, and other possible communicative settings of medical practice and in health institutions, in order to explore the linguistic techniques and conversational strategies experts and patients use in explaining medical issues and trying to understand each other (for an overview, cf. e.g. Hess-Lüttich & König 2012). One of the goals of this line of linguistic research is to contribute to a better understanding of the medical care process and its outcome.

While a number of different terms are used in German and English studies on mental frames of illness – such as ‘Krankheitsüberzeugungen’, ‘Krankheitskonzepte’, ‘Krankheitsre-
präsentationen’, ‘Subjektive Vorstellungen über Krankheit’ on the one hand, or ‘lay illness models’, ‘common-sense models of illness’, ‘lay cognitive models’ and ‘illness representations’ on the other (e.g., Flick 1998; Ney 2004; Leventhal et al. 1980; id. et al. 1984; Robbins & Kirmayer 1991; Armstrong & Swartzman 2001; Salewsky 2003) – the majority of German speaking authors (e.g., Faller 1991; id. 1997; Filipp & Aymanns 1997; Bittner 2005; Förster & Taubert 2006; Birkner 2006; Faltermaier & Brütt 2009) prefer the term ‘Subjektive Krankheitstheorie’ [subjective illness theory] to refer to “die gedanklichen Konstruktionen Kranker über das Wesen, die Verursachung und die Behandlung ihrer Erkrankung” (Faller 1991: 53) [the patients’ mental frames or models regarding the nature, cause and treatment of their illness].

In one of the first empirical studies in this field, Leventhal et al. (1980; cf. id. et al. 1984) presented data showing how patients developed implicit theories of illness for the understanding of health threats and the regulation of their health behaviour: “[…] individuals are motivated to regulate or minimize their health-related risks and to act to reduce these health threats in ways consistent with their perception of them” (Leventhal et al. 1984: 219). Such informal ‘subjective illness theories’ are mostly based on semi-professional knowledge, usually including common-sense explanations, beliefs and assumptions about the identity, cause, time course, consequences and curability of the illness. In other words, ‘subjective illness theories’ express a lay understanding of the illness in everyday life, which may differ considerably from standard scientific knowledge; they are based on the patient’s individual experience with the symptoms, and further developed during interaction within a certain socio-cultural context; they may also include hypotheses on treatment and medication, which play an important part in coping strategies and medication adherence; they are by no means static constructs, because they may change in the course of medical and scientific communication about treatment options, due to information on the availability of new medicines or the individual assessment of coping with the illness.

However, most studies of this kind, with their medical, psychological, sociological, or biological focus, fall short of taking the linguistic aspects of the data into account. To date, there are only relatively few linguistic studies concerned with the question of how patients use language in referring to illness in this way, for example articles published by Brünner & Güllich (2002), or Brünner (2011), which pay special attention to linguistic techniques and illustration procedures (including metaphors, exemplification, scenarios, concretization, and story-telling) used by chronically ill patients suffering from heart diseases.

Birkner (2006: 162), more specifically, identifies three dimensions of subjective illness theories in face-to-face conversations on pain and illness: what, how, and what for. The dimension of ‘what’ refers to the five elements of the subjective illness theory mentioned above; the dimension of ‘how’ refers to the signs (both linguistic and non-verbal) utilized by patients when describing their illness; the dimension of ‘what for’ refers to the theories of the patients with regard to the expert’s information, diagnosis, prescription, therapy, etc. For our specific interest in the talk of gay men on HIV/AIDS, the ‘how’-dimension is of particular relevance. From a non-reductionist semiotic perspective, this should include an analysis of the communicative process as a whole (multimodal interaction), i.e. the verbal (spoken language), para-verbal (prosody, intonation, pitch), and non-verbal (gesture, gaze, body language, proxemics) signs involved (cf. Hess-Lüttich 1978; id. 1979; id. 1983; Sidnell & Stivers eds. 2012). Given the limited space, however, we will only give a brief account of some of the results of our project.
2.2 Data and methodology

In this Bayreuth-based project, 21 HIV-infected gay men between 29 and 62 years of age took part, most of them German and living in Germany; the data are video- and audio-recorded narrative interviews. The medical and the socio-cultural context is relevant insofar as, in spite of some documented cases of discrimination against gays and lesbians, homosexuality is regarded as more or less accepted in political and public discourse in Germany. Also, the medical treatment of patients diagnosed HIV-positive has improved considerably in recent years, so that, unlike a couple of decades ago, they today have a chance to lead an almost normal life, despite taking daily medication and seeing the doctor regularly (cf. Rockstroh 2011). Therefore, the participants in this study, like other patients with a chronic decease, are actively involved in their own health care, making use of information from multiple sources (their doctors and social networks, medical research available on the internet, etc.), when developing their subjective illness theories on HIV/AIDS.

As in qualitative discourse analysis, the methods applied seek to reveal the successive and dynamic construction of subjective illness theories during face-to-face interaction. Thus, to facilitate a detailed sequential conversation analysis, the interviews are transcribed according to the ‘GAT 2’-format (Selting et al. 2009: Gesprächsanalytisches Transkriptionssystem):

Temporal and sequential relationship
[
= no break or latching between the turns by different speakers
_ no break or latching within the intonation unit by the same speaker

Pause
(.) micropause
(-), (--) short, middle, long pause (ca. 0.25 – 0.75 seconds of silence)
(2.0) long pause with numbers indicating silence when longer than one second of silence

Other markings
; ; :: prolongation or stretching of the sound; the more colons, the longer the stretching
ähm, ähhesitation signal, so-called ‘filled pause’
’ cut-off with a glottal or dental stop

Backchannels
hm one-syllable backchannel
hm_hm two-syllable backchannel

Emphasis
akZENT primary stress/accent
akzEnt secondary stress/accent
ak!ZENT! loud emphasis

Aspects of intonation
? rising intonation
., slight rising intonation
‘continuing’ intonation
; slight falling
. falling or final intonation

Transcriber’s descriptions
((hustet)) description of nonverbal events
<<hustend>> talk quality
Speech tempo
<<all>> > allegro
<<len>> > lento
<<cresc>> > crescendo
<<dim>> > diminuendo
<<acc>> > accelerando
<<rall>> > rallentando

Audible aspiration
°h, °hh, °hhh inhalation; the more h’s, the longer the inhalation
h, hh, hhh exhalation; the more h’s, the longer the exhalation

2.3 Corpus analysis

Marcus (M) and Kai (K), both 46 years old at the time of the interview, are best friends and roommates in the house they rent not far away from a city in Bavaria; Marcus has known of his HIV-positive status since 1994, Kai since 2003; the interview took place at their home; the context of the following excerpt is framed by subjective theories about HIV/AIDS.

“Bareback-Sex”

01 M: °h also ich DENke,
02 (. ) ha_i_vAu is was (. ) TRENnendes und verBINdendes,
03 °h und âh ich hab (. ) beSCHLOSsen,
04 °h mehr auf das: (-) tz_verBINdende zu schauen=
05 weil das auch zu geNIEßen.
06 [(schlagendes geräusch)
07 [wo ich-
08 wo es mir manchmal WEHtut,
09 is so:-
10 (-) <<dim> wenn ich bei gayROmeo> irgendwelche profIle LEse,
11 K: (unverständlich)
12 M: oder (--) <<cresc> bei a_beibe barebackCIty geht_s mir oft so>-13 da sind ja d=durchaus LEUte-
14 die SCHREIben,
15 dass sie NEgativ sind-
16 dass sie aber BArebacksex (. ) MAchen möchten,
17 °hh und (. ) <<all> wo ich dann immer denke>-18 wie verrÜCKT muss man sein,
19 °h âhm (--) ich kann den wUnsch aber verSTEhen=20 weil das war ja auch MEIN wUnsch;
21 und der ging ja auch in <<grinsend> erFÜllung>-22 wenn man das so SEhen °h wIll;
23 ich da (. ) KANN ja wieder ohne gÜmmi vögeln;

Marcus, with the conjunction “also”, initiates this turn expressing his subjective theory about HIV which he elaborated on before: he regards it as something both separating and connecting people (line 02), separating HIV-positive men from those with a HIV-negative status, healthy people from sick people on the one hand, and connecting infected people with each other, and
with those who are critically ill, for instance suffering from cancer, on the other. Marcus decides to focus on the connecting aspect of HIV/AIDS and to enjoy it (lines 04-05), but at the same time he is worried about gay men who consciously take risks and have sex without protection (condoms). The issue of “barebacking” among gay men is introduced in line 08: “wo es mir manchmal WEHTut, is so: -” [what hurts me is ...]. The announcement is of pragmatic relevance insofar as it opens the floor for the next narrative turn (Sacks 1974); it evokes tension and contains a tell-tale indication (tellability [Erzählbarkeit]) of what is going to be clarified next (Norrick 2000; Labov 2006); it also reflects an evaluative aspect of what is going to be reported. In the following lines, Marcus introduces terms like “Gayromeo” (line 10), “Bareback City” (line 12), and “Bareback-Sex” (line 16) without further explanation. These terms, unknown outside the gay community, presuppose the knowledge shared by its members. Marcus talks about HIV-negative men actively seeking unprotected sex. Indeed, his comment in line 18 – wie verRÜCKT muss man sein [how silly can you get] – reinforces the evaluation already made in his announcement. In the following line, however, he expresses understanding, syntactically in the adversative structure of the phrase ich kann den wUnsch aber verSTehen= [but I do understand this desire], followed by a causal clause in line 20 – weil das war ja auch MEIN wUnsch [because it was my desire, too] – in order to justify the connection between his own and others’ desire for sex without condoms. The three lines, i.e. the relativizing phrase (19) bridging the negative evaluation (18) and positive confession (20), form a sequential transition to Marcus’ own attitude towards unprotected sex. In a paradoxical way, Marcus’ desire can be fulfilled as he need not worry about catching HIV anymore: ich da (...) KANN ja wieder ohne gÜmmi vögeln [now I can once again have sex without a rubber]. The change in intonation, the smirk (21), and the modal particle “ja” (23) are mimical, prosodic and syntactic cues of (sarcastic) self-irony when trying to justify his infection.

The passage quoted above provides an example of how sexuality, indicated by such words as “vögeln”, “Bareback”, and “Gayromeo”, plays an important part in conversations among gay men (the German verb vögeln is a colloquial expression for engaging in sexual intercourse with somebody; Gayromeo refers to an internet site which is very popular within the gay community). Even more important in the context of this paper, however, are references to HIV/AIDS and the risks of certain sexual practices like barebacking. “Bareback City” is an internet site for gay – or bisexual – men interested in ‘bareback sex’, i.e. “casual, unprotected anal sex among gay or bisexual men who, while aware of the risks of HIV transmission, deliberately choose not to use condoms” (Haig 2006: 860). The term was attributed to the American gay porn star and writer Scott O’Hara (1966–1998), who used it 1997 in his book Autopornography. According to Shernoff (2006: 14), the term barebacking was first used by the American writer and AIDS activist Stephen Gendin (1966–2000) in his article “My Turn: Riding Bareback”, which appeared 1997 in the magazine POZ. As an analogy to the English expression for riding horseback without a saddle (‘riding a horse bareback’), barebacking was from then on used as a new term in the vernacular of the gay community. Although it does not necessarily specifically refer to gay specific sexual practice, it has been adopted worldwide by other languages and is associated with HIV/AIDS and gay (sub-)culture.

“Pozzen”

At the time of another interview in our corpus, Tim (T) is 40 years old and was diagnosed HIV-positive in 2005; the interview takes place at his home in a Bavarian city; the topic is his
HIV-infection and his subjective theory about the risk of transmitting the decease to a HIV-negative male sex partner when performing oral sex, i.e. giving him a blow-job (“ihm einen blasen”, in the German gay vernacular). He believes that there was no risk for the passive partner, the receiver of oral sex, which is why he does not feel responsible for any risk, but he does not seem to be as sure as some of the other gay men he mentions in the following excerpt of the conversation with the interviewer (I):

01 T: °h ja ich _ich ich KENne andere leute-
02 die also (. ) FREUND von mir-
03 der sacht,
04 âhm JA: er_f er Vögelt mit dem (. ) °h sOwieso=
05 =den KENNST du auch-
06 und der_is °h der_is âh NEgativ,
07 (--) un_hab geSAGT nAjA pff âh:
08 (-) mAcht_er_de mAcht doch kein !SPAß!
09 ((prustet)) _<<lachend> [weil ich gleich denke>,
10 I:                        [hm_hm
11 T: °h <<cres> nee_nee: der will gePOZZT werden>;
12 also (. ) der der [also es gibt auch [LEUte=
13 I:                  [hm                [was
14 T: [=die das RIsiko:] wollen;
15 I: [HEISST das; ]
16 (--) ge[POZZT werden;
17 T:  ~°h âhm es_is es gibt diesen beGRIFF,
18 âh ich POZ (. ) ich_p POZze dich-
19 oder ich POze [dich;
20 I:               [ja
21 T: un das HEISST âhm-
22 °h dass âhm (. ) <<acc> selbst im CHAT ist es auch oft so>,
23 °h dass âh (. ) NEgative,
24 (. ) <<all> LEUte suchen>-
25 <<all> die POsitiv sind>-;
26 <<all> um dann also POsitiv zu werden>.
27 I: okay
28 T: des_is wie so_n [russisches
29 I:                        [und DAfür steht es eben gePOZZT werden,=
30 T: =gePOZZT werden genau genau.

Tim initiates his narrative turn with a general reference to other people, but then (line 02) interrupts the relative clause setting a micro-pause after the relative pronoun “die” and the conjunction “also”; he starts a new sentence, with an emphasis on the word FREUND, to quote a friend of his who talks of engaging in sexual intercourse with another mutual acquaintance who, he presumes, is HIV-negative: âhm JA: er_f er Vögelt mit dem (. ) °h sOwieso= =den KENNST du auch- und der_is °h der_is âh NEgativ. The switch from a general reference (‘other people’) to the report of a personal experience with someone personally known to both speakers is supposed to make the statement more authentic; at the same time the narrative fulfils the pragmatic function of adding an evaluative
element (or comment) to the background information, indicating Tim’s personal attitude (cf. Labov & Waletzky 1973; Labov 1978; Norrick 2000): (-) mÄcht _er_ de mÄcht doch kein !SPAß!. Furthermore, the short narrative segment, with an insert of direct speech, reveals (in line 11) the core of Tim’s reasoning and the resolution element of the story: °h <<cres> nee_nee: der will gePOZZT werden>.

While Tim is about to evaluate the attitude of other gay men towards the issue (lines 12, 14), he is interrupted by the interviewer who asks what Tim meant by gePOZZT werden. The answer (in line 17ff.) is initiated by: °h ähm es_is es gibt diesen beGRIFF (there is this term), the deictic pronoun (“diesen Begriff”) indicating that Tim assumes the verb pozzen to be known and commonly used in the gay community. His attempt to explain the meaning of the verb starts with variations of the phonetic articulation of its inflected forms: he seems not sure about the vowel quantity, i.e. the chronemic duration of the phoneme o in the lexeme (po:z or pozz) – ich_p POZze dich oder ich POze [dich. The phonetic ambiguity is justified by the comment (in line 22) <<acc> selbst im CHAT ist es auch oft so> because in German gay chats both variants are found (even in the turns of the same writer). Tim then turns to the meaning again by referring to HIV-negative gay men who seek sex with HIV-positive men, taking the risk of being infected as a kind of game à la Russian Roulette. The interviewer ratifies his understanding – [und DAfür steht es eben gePOZZT werden,= and Tim completes the adjacent pair of turns, thereby securing mutual understanding and now shared knowledge =gePOZZT werden genau genau.

This excerpt of the conversation is quoted here to illustrate the negotiation of the meaning of a verb unknown outside the gay community: pozzen (or pozen), or sich pozzen (pozen) lassen, respectively, obviously refers to a consensual sexual practice between gay men with a high risk of infection. Here, its introduction in the interview as a quotation of direct speech also serves as a relevant element of the storytelling strategy of the interviewee: it creates an atmosphere of trustful immediacy and intimacy within the formal setting of an interview, typical of a sub-cultural in-group code.

Both words, barebacking and pozzen, are adopted from English and have found their way into the German gay sociolect. Poz is derived from positive, referring to people diagnosed HIV-positive (“poz guys”). Shernoff (2006) reports an increase of so-called ‘bareback group parties’ in the USA in the 1990s. Some time later, the phenomenon was also to be observed in some of the major cities in Germany, especially in Berlin. Today, one can find a variety of expressions for more or less the same phenomenon: ‘Bareback sex parties’, ‘POZ parties’, ‘HIV conversion parties’, ‘Bug chaser and gift giver parties’, etc. (Shernoff 2006: 171ff.). Meanwhile, those interested in this very special kind of scene have come to differentiate carefully between the various types of parties: ‘Bareback sex parties’ are attended by gay men knowing that there may be HIV-infected men at the party (thus HIV-negative participants willingly take the risk); ‘POZ parties’ and ‘HIV conversion parties’ are attended by those who know that the other participants definitively are HIV-infected (thus HIV-negative participants intentionally try to get infected). Within this sub-sub-culture some seem to have acquired a high degree of specialization. The idea of ‘serosorting’, for instance, “relies on men discussing HIV status with potential partners and only engaging in risky behaviours with those who are believed to be of a similar serostatus” (Shernoff 2006: 78).

It must be stressed, however, that this is a very special minority within the minority of gay culture, which is about as diverse as the majority of a society. Systematic research in German queer linguistics would have to take a closer look at the language use in gay culture in the German speaking countries and find a whole range of other scenes and facets of its various
segments, all with their special ways of interaction, such as the Tuntenszene, Lederszene, Bärenszene, S/M-Szene, Disco-Queens, Transenszene, Drag Queens (and Drag Kings, among lesbians), etc. A quick look in one of the many gay city magazines in German speaking metropolitan areas (Siegesäule or Blue or GayMaxx in Berlin, Hinnerk in Hamburg, rik or Box in Cologne, Leo in Munich, gap in Frankfurt, Schwulst in Stuttgart, display-magazin in Zurich, XTRA! in Vienna, etc.) would provide a first impression of the diversity of a very lively gay culture, the language use of which remains yet to be investigated in more detail. We cannot, of course, go into all of that here, so let us turn back to the two excerpts out of our corpus of conversations with gay HIV-positive men.

3 Discussion

William Leap (2010: 555) defines ‘gay language’ as a “set of discursive practices associated with a subject position (‘gay men’), and which has emerged in the context of gay liberation struggles in the 1970s”. He points out that the focus of research in this field has changed dramatically in recent years, and one of the reasons was (and still is) the HIV/AIDS crisis. The two excerpts presented above hopefully serve as an illustrative example of how some German gay men actually talk about the HIV/AIDS complex. The terms bareback sex and pozzen indicate a special development in the reflection of sexual practices in times of HIV/AIDS. Surely, these expressions, integrated into German from English gay vernacular, are not yet standard German lexicon (Duden online offers carjacking as an alternative entry for barebacking, and jazzen or Pizza for pozzen, respectively5), but they clearly reflect certain aspects of sexual behaviour in the age of HIV/AIDS as part of everyday experience within metropolitan gay culture in general and within the sub-culture of HIV-infected gay men in particular.

Their language is influenced by the idiosyncratic experience, subjective illness theories, beliefs, values, attitudes and backgrounds that HIV-infected gay men live with. It includes the usual linguistic strategies such as conversational storytelling, personal commentary, interactional knowledge sharing, prosodic and syntactic cues of irony, direct speech and so on. But the effects of HIV/AIDS on gay language are mostly expressed in some of the new terms German gay men use to verbalize their subjective theories about their illness or its threat to their health. The two expressions chosen here for illustrative reasons reflect new phenomena and specific attitudes within the gay culture, which Haig (2006: 860) calls “barebacking sex culture”, as “if it were an ethnic group” (Feldman 2010: 2). Leap & Colón (2010), for instance, argue that HIV/AIDS intersects with gay identity insofar, as any gay man is always aware of his risks when engaging in anonymous sexual intercourse with another man. Some of the interviews in our corpus seem to confirm a linguistic reflection of a ‘bareback identity’ as

[…] the relief of finally getting it over with, the relief of knowing that they are infected. Since, to these individuals, becoming infected with HIV is inevitable, they wish to hasten this inevitability and move on with their lives, no longer consumed with the worry (Shernoff 2006: 164).

What Shernoff calls a ‘bareback identity’ clearly correlates with what gay men construct in their subjective illness theories about HIV/AIDS. As mentioned earlier, people develop and perform subjective illness theories not only with regard to the illness itself, but also to its curability and control (Leventhal et al. 1980; id. et al. 1984). Thus, the decision to engage in
bareback sex is a reflection of how some gay men react to HIV/AIDS and how they intend to live with it (cf. Gauchet et al. 2007). With regard to Health Communication and HIV/AIDS prevention, we hope that linguistic research on gay language and queer discourse, related to subjective illness theories, may provide a better understanding of gay life under the permanent threat of HIV/AIDS and offer a contribution to the attempts to expand the boundaries of health intervention in dialogue and conversation, if experts outside the in-group are prepared to learn what exactly is communicated inside the group and how it is phrased (cf. Haig 2006: 872).

4 References


Brünnler, Gisela 2011: *Gesundheit durchs Fernsehen. Linguistische Untersuchungen zur Vermittlung medizinischen Wissens und Aufklärung in Gesundheitsdiensten*, Duisburg: Universitätsverlag Rhein-Ruhr


Martina Drescher & Sabine Klaeger (eds.) 2006: *Kommunikation über HIV/AIDS. Interdisziplinäre Beiträge zur Prävention im subsaharischen Afrika*, Berlin: Lit


Ernest W.B. Hess-Lüttich & Ivan Vlassenko


Parker, Andrew & Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (eds.) 1995: Performativity and Performance, New York: Routledge


Rodgers, Bruce 1979: Gay Talk. The queens’ vernacular: a lexicon, New York: Putnam


Sommer, Susan (1990): Illness as metaphor and AIDS and its metaphors, New York: Picador


Notes

1 Cf. Hess-Lüttich 1981 for a theoretical foundation of dialogue linguistics which systematically takes into account what Gerold Ungeheuer called ‘inner actions’ ["innere Handlungen"] and integrates their socio-semiotic analysis into a model of communication as a multimodal sign process.


3 POZ is a print and online magazine for people living with HIV. Since 1994, the POZ magazine is read by people who wish to state their positions, to know more about HIV/AIDS, to get information about AIDS service organizations, and so on. This magazine also focuses on HIV/AIDS prevention, treatment and community issues: http://www.poz.com/aboutus.shtml [20.03.2012].

4 The homepage of the LSVD (Lesben- und Schwulenverband in Deutschland) features a list of German-language media for gays and lesbians: http://lsvd.de/1162.0.html [04.07.2012]

5 See under: http://www.duden.de/ [04.07.2012]