

SOCIETY FOR LINGUISTIC ANTHROPOLOGY

## The Lavender Languages Conference Turns 21

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On February 14-16, 2014, American University's Department of Anthropology hosts the 21st annual [Conference on Lavender Languages and Linguistics](#). The Lavender Languages Conference is the longest running lesbian/gay studies-oriented conference in the US and, perhaps, in the world. And it is the only conference in the USA dedicated to discussions of lesbian, gay, bi, trans, queer and similar language/sexuality dissident themes.

The first Lavender Languages Conference was a half day event coinciding with the National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Equality in April 1993. We used the term "lavender languages" when planning the first conference program to indicate that conferences interests would not be tied to any single expression of identity, erotic practice or desire. Twenty-one years later, the conference discussions still engage a range of structural and post-structural approaches to language and sexuality studies. Now the conference is a three-day event and an international event, with speakers this year coming from Brazil, the Maghreb, Puerto Rico, Scotland, South Africa, Taiwan, as well as Canada and the mainland USA.

Yet the Lavender Language Conference has become more than a site of for academic exchange. Conference discussions of language and sexuality have examined pleasure, self-discovery, naming, narrative and significance in spoken, written and electronic media and other formats. While addressing sexuality, these discussions have also addressed the linguistics of regulatory power and exclusion, bilingual HIV/AIDS education; queer immigration and asylum; the regulation of public sex; homophobia and religious fundamentalism; school bullying; and the same-sex marriage debate. Importantly, scholar/activists, community organizers, and members of local communities have joined members of the academy in discussions have taken place. In addition, activities provide a welcoming space for those beginning their academic or political work as well as a space for seasoned scholars and practitioners.

For a long time the discussions that take place at the Lavender Languages Conference had no home in the mainstream academy. For one thing, a long tradition of institutionalized homophobia worked very hard to keep same-sex identified women and men in the margins of anthropology and linguistics. The Final Report of the AAA's Commission on Lesbian, Gay, Bi, and Trans Issues in Anthropology reviewed these conditions as of the mid 1990s, reporting a pervasive "don't ask, don't tell" attitude throughout the profession, with anthropological linguistics ranking as poorly as any other subfield in its willful erasure of sexual diversity among its colleagues. The report also found a fear of studying lesbian, gay, bi or trans topics on the part of heterosexual persons, for fear that the institutional practices producing homophobia would also assert that interests in such topics are always a reflection of personal identity.

There were forms of topical erasure, as well. "Homosexual language" was useful when discussing "gay accent" and other phonological stereotyping but otherwise irrelevant to the syllabus of the introductory linguistic class. It certainly was not relevant to course in syntactic theory, and was rarely integrated into discussions in narrative analysis or language ideology. Even today, "language and gender" features prominently in these discussions in introductory linguistics textbooks and often has its own chapter, yet research on "language and sexuality" is rarely cited and usually omitted from those textbooks.

At one time, these omissions could be explained by the limited number of articles and monographs addressing language and sexuality themes appearing in print during any calendar year. Happily, those conditions have changed: there are now enough individual papers and special issues in mainstream journals, as well as sole-authored monographs and edited collections to constitute a substantial body of literature in language and sexuality studies. These include *The Journal of Language and Sexuality*, the first international journal dedicated to the discursive formations of sexuality and using queer linguistics as its orienting influence ([www.benjamins.com/catalog/jls](http://www.benjamins.com/catalog/jls))

Much of that literature has its origins in presentations and subsequent discussions at Lavender Languages Conferences. One of the functions of the conference has been to support colleagues as they prepare research for publication, and in this area, we have been successful. Unfortunately, essays reviewing current work in linguistic analysis—including the SLA-sponsored reviews now published annually in the *American Anthropologist*—continue to overlook key publications in language and sexuality studies that have emerged during the review period. So, even with an emerging literature, an erasure of research findings is maintained. Some university authorities also question whether language and sexuality studies is real research and should count toward reappointment or tenure. Moreover, in some academic settings, workplace guarantees of equal opportunity and academic freedom do not extend to same-sex identified or gender variant faculty and students, nor to those who propose linguistic research engaging sexual sameness of gender variance. As a result language and sexuality studies can also be difficult to discuss in the classroom.

When hearing about the growing popularity of the conference in the 1990s, one prominent figure in feminist linguistics reportedly replied: gay and lesbian language, what next—the language of gas mask fetishists? Precisely so. The Lavender Languages Conference is a site where someone interested in examining the language of gas mask fetishists—or any topic related to any form of language and sexuality—can find an audience eager to hear what that colleagues has to say and to discuss how those idea engage pressing real-world conditions as well as interesting theoretical debates. Conference activities may not be eliminating the structural conditions that create and sustain institutional homophobia and privilege in academic settings. But conference activities do offer alternatives to these forms of homophobic and privileged practice that colleagues so often find in their home institutions, and conference activities are building networks of colleagues at international locations and at diverse academic ranks who share interests in language and sexuality studies and want to develop them outside of the constraints of academic normativity.

Information about this year's conference is available on the conference website: [www.American.edu/cas/anthropology/lavender-languages](http://www.American.edu/cas/anthropology/lavender-languages).

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