# Lavender Mandarin in the sites of desire: Situating linguistic performances among Taiwanese gay men

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

This paper explores how those with same-sex desire in Taiwan reconfigure Mandarin linguistic practices as western constructions of gay culture are now circulating globally. Ethnographic methods are employed to examine the linguistic stylization that enables Taiwanese gay men use to formulate identities. The nascent emergence of identity markers is first introduced. This study shifts its focus to the context in the study of gay language to avoid circularity. Three primary linguistic stylizations widely practiced among gay cliques are retrieved as (1) kinship soap opera; (2) geisha memoir; (3) celebrity stardom to illuminate the relationship between language and subjectivity. This study illustrates how these vernacular utterances and linguistic stylizations producing collective resources of resistance, accommodation and pleasure are discursively constructed and represented in a localized site in the intersection of an increasingly globalized queer culture.

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## 1. Introduction

Adopting a socio-historical perspective, this study examines lavender Mandarin Chinese through the practices and lived experiences of members of Taiwanese gay community. Simultaneously, the discussion examines the ways in which this lavender Mandarin is both constructed and deconstructed by several international power actors such as gay rights activists and transnational media texts in Taiwan. Given that the gay rights movements were initially led by middle-class, western-educated lesbians and gay men, the socio-historical analysis of linguistic registers will illuminate the dialectic process of how gay discursive practices function as hybrid sites of power, appropriation, resistance, and identity construction.

Goffman's dramaturgical perspective is useful in understanding lavender Mandarin. Similar to a myriad of ethnographic studies (e.g. Johnson, 2003) influenced by Goffman, this study explores gender and vernacular linguistic practices as an organizing component of social interaction. In dramaturgical theory, Goffman (1981) argues that all talk is performance, and speakers of a language are always performing in the sense that they are aware of alternative choices and their social meanings. Performance thus assumes agentive action, and intentional representation of language and other modalities to serve social meanings. Goffman's dramaturgical theory sheds a new light upon how speakers in everyday life, as performers, who innovate while following linguistic conventions. In fact, the study of linguistic choices is to understand how humans are "rational actors" who choose "communicative strategies" to achieve certain socially motivated ends in particular circumstances. The relationship between performer and audience is important in this context, as the performer is responsible for

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communicatively highlighting the process of communication, taking it to a higher level of signification than the referential (Bauman, 1986).

This study focuses on performance in terms of the dramatic "action" of everyday talk. While acknowledging the power and importance of performativity, this study examines audience and referee design (Bell, 1984, 2001; Bell and Gibson, 2011; Coupland and Jaworksi, 2009), and analyses both how speakers dialectically adapt their language style in response to their listeners, and how the creative use of linguistic features index a targeted group. Performance in this sense creates a dynamic reality both for others and the performer. The "non-standard" ways of speaking in everyday life has long been studied as a political engagement to resist hegemonic assumptions that "standard" ways of speaking have unique authority, and indeed authenticity. Accordingly, it has become necessary to reassess the relationship between language and authenticity and the phenomena that "vernacular" may be constituted in more complex ways than is often assumed (e.g. Coupland, 2003, 2007; Eckert, 2003; Rampton, 1995, 2006).

The convergence of different linguistic and cultural traditions has enabled gay citizens from around the globe, and with different ethnic and class backgrounds, to speak a common language of sexual citizenship (Boelstorff and Leap, 2003; Graf and Lippa, 1995). While scholars have generally identified the tensions and adaptations that occur as processes of globalization bring different systems of gay language into contact with one another, they have nearly neglected the nascent emergent Lavender Mandarin, the gay language potentially shared among the largest number of speakers globally, and the processes whereby it has melded or clashed with global gay English and its colonial past. This gap in the academic research is what the study tries to address. The study of lavender linguistics has witnessed a widespread engagement with the theoretical notions of intersectionality (Barrett, 1995), performativity (Livia and Hall, 1997), and globalization (Manalansan, 1995) in efforts to move away from a decades – long focus on binary gender differences. As much contemporary work conducted to analyze the existence of and variance among gay language, a central critique to this school of study is the occurrence of circularity fallacy and the likelihood of essentializing an identity category (Cameron and Kulick, 2003). To avoid circularity in the study of gay language, it shifts its focus of academic inquiry from "language and sexuality" to "language and desire." (Kulick and Willson, 1995) In fact, as posited in many studies, there are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions with which the gay men of analyses are connected. Additionally, there are cases in which such linguistic practices are indeed part of the speaker's selfhood and thereby have impact on the subjectivities of other individuals.

It is in such context that this study attempts to hone the focus on the language and desire and to examine how sexuality, as a form of social identity, is discursively constructed and represented in a localized site in the intersection of an increasingly globalized queer culture. Given that gay men and lesbians use language to form speech communities (Cameron and Kulick, 2003; Cameron, 2007), the study of gay discursive practices in Taiwan provides an insider's view of the dynamic interrelationships among Mandarin Chinese, English and sometimes Japanese in the construction of gay Taiwanese identity.

From historical perspective, communication among the Taiwanese gay community prior to the digital age was covert, gay personals on magazines or newspapers have imported, recreated or referenced internal or foreign texts to create a gridlock of meanings that can be decoded by certain readers only. For instance, in the early 1990s special identity registers have been created and enabled Taiwanese gay men on mainstream magazine personals both to pass in relation to mainstream readers and helped construct homosexual identities (Shiau, 2008). At a time when the common linguistic registers and presentations had not yet come into existence, magazine personals became a site of desire where a wide range of "linguistic performances" were executed. While the Shiau's ethnographic interviews with Taiwanese posters of magazine personal ads has illustrated how the shared identity markers can create a single, cohesive identity that in turn organizes political struggle as other transnational projects suggested (e.g. Morgan and Wood, 1995; Morrish and Saunton, 2007), the growing popularity of new technologies, along with the active LGBTQ civil right movement, has rapidly reshaped the sites of desire and their linguistic practices associate with them. Given such political, sociological and cultural changes, this study is set out to examine how the continuity and transformation of linguistic practices in relation to sexual identity in Taiwan, and how does it relate to the transmission of western constructions of gay culture.

## 2. Method: interpretative ethnography

Communication, practice, and identity are the building blocks of the study framework. Situated between the rhetorical and the critical; this study adopts an interpretive approach guided by ethnographic methods. Twelve Taiwanese gay friends as my key informants were recruited via personal social network to foreground these linguistic practices employed by Taiwanese gay men in everyday life contexts. At the time when the study started, I had known for more than two years. Table 1 illustrates socio-demographic background of twelve gay friends at greater details.

It should be noted that this study is building on friendship as method inspired by Jones's study (2007) with respect to gay friendship and solidary-building. I believe friendship as introduced by Tillmann-Healy (2003) as an explicit methodological concept, is insightful when used to illuminate the experiences of a marginalized group with a shared life trajectory. By researching friendship as method (Brooks, 2006; Tillmann-Healy, 2001), I have found a voice to describe what friendship means to me as a communication professor who has been an expatriate in the US for ten years. As seen in the socio-demographic data, my friends are by and large well-educated, probably more articulate than most Taiwanese gay men. In the years following recruitment, a further 11 informants became integrated into our different cliques, volunteering to speak with me, thus enabling this study to go beyond the originally targeted cliques. Interviews took place at café restaurants in Taipei's gayborhood, rendering an everyday life situation for participants. The conversations took place in various group sizes,