Gay Men's Language in Italy: In-Group Perceptions and Attitudes

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Gay Men’s Language in Italy:
In-Group Perceptions and Attitudes

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Linguistics from
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by

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The academic literature regarding gay language varieties has been steadily expanding since the mid-20th century, when a handful of scholars began to highlight the similarities between gay men’s language and other minority groups’ ways of speaking (e.g. Cory, 1951/2006), as well as the processes through which gay men distinguish themselves through speech (e.g. Sonenschein, 1969/2006). This vein of research remained sparse and underdeveloped until the mid-1990s, when Leap (1996) published the first monograph dedicated solely to gay men’s language. However, the majority of sociolinguistic work done in this area since the early 1990s has been focused on eliciting indirect attitudes towards gay and lesbian speech, including perceived sexual orientation of speakers, through the use of matched guise tests (e.g. Gaudio, 1994; Smyth, Jacobs, & Rogers, 2003; Pierrehumbert et al., 2004; Munson, McDonald, DeBoe, & White, 2006; Piccolo, 2008; Campbell-Kibler, 2011). As of yet, Mann (2011) remains the only study that has attempted to investigate direct in-group attitudes towards gay language varieties, as he puts it, “…as these ways of speaking actually exist in practice or as they are believed to exist in regularly circulating stereotypes” (p. 1). This thesis will attempt to supplement this key study, notably centered on what Mann calls “Gay American English,” by helping to develop the sociolinguistic study of gay men’s language in the Italian context.
1.1 Gay Language

Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT)\(^1\) ways of speaking differ markedly from other sociolects because LGBT people have traditionally accepted their sexuality only later in life, in early to mid-adolescence at the earliest and in mid- to late adulthood at the latest, if at all. It follows that if an LGBT-identified person is to develop a way of speaking that corresponds to sexual orientation, the process will generally begin during or after the coming out stage, the point at which one accepts or begins to accept one’s sexuality on a personal level (Leap, 1996). It is important to note that this thesis works under this assumption, as supported by Leap (1996) and Hayes (1981/2006), and reiterated by Mann (2011). Leap (1996) places heavy emphasis on the relationship between the coming out process and the socialization of gay men into the acquisition of “Gay English,” a term he defines as “an aggregate of distinct, gendered approaches to text making that are closely connected to other forms of social practice in gay experience” (xii). Similarly, Hayes (1981/2006) coined the term “Gayspeak” and describes it as a second dialect or register acquired later in life; this delayed acquisition is due to the heteronormative framework in which virtually all people grow up, a framework that ostensibly impedes the normalization of homosexuality. Such a timeline stands in stark contrast to the language acquisition processes of other minority groups (e.g. African American Vernacular English, Southern American English, and other varieties covered in the extant literature), which begin within socio-familial environments during early childhood.

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\(^1\) Virtually all sociolinguistic work dealing with LGBT language has focused on gay men and at times lesbian women. For this thesis I have decided to maintain my focus on gay men at the expense of paying much-needed attention to the LBT communities. This is because the language varieties used by each group deserve individual consideration, as they are too complex and unique to be conflated as a single variety.
Leap (1996) critically notes that not all gay men adopt Gay English as a way of speaking: “…some gay men know nothing about Gay English and deny the existence of this code…” (p. 159). In order to shed light upon this curious phenomenon, studying the explicit attitudes of actual LGBT people regarding LGBT language varieties, as opposed to indirectly eliciting attitudes through guises, is highly valuable. This thesis will draw upon the personal opinions of gay male speakers in Italy to further elucidate this issue with regard to what I term “Gay Men’s Italian.” Similar to Mann (2011), who utilizes the term “Gay American English,” or GAE, to refer to “multiple American English varieties used by gay men to various extents to index gay or queer identities” (p. 5), my use of “Gay Men’s Italian,” henceforth GMI, serves as an umbrella term to describe the assorted sexuality-related sociolects found amongst gay men in Italy that are generally perceived by the folk to constitute a single variety.

To date, virtually all extant literature concerning LGBT linguistics has been limited to the Anglophone world and, consequently, varieties of English. Though a few studies, notably Rodríguez (2015) in Mexico, have extended the matter of gay language to other languages and countries, the vast majority of work has been performed either in the United States or in the United Kingdom, as is the case with the historical gay language Polari (e.g. Green, 1997). During my own experiences in Italy, first as a high school exchange student (2011-2012) and later as an undergraduate linguistics student (2012-2016), I began to notice linguistic features in Italian that appeared to be used exclusively by gay men. After asking a few gay friends about these marked features, I suspected that such linguistic characteristics might constitute a distinct way of speaking based in the social practice of Italian gay male culture. I soon found that virtually no sociolinguistic work had been done in that country regarding LGBT ways of speaking, and I

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2 A similar approach has been taken regarding African American English in that not all African Americans speak AAE (e.g. Rahman, 2008).
thereupon decided to build upon the research of scholars such as William Leap and Stephen Mann by helping to introduce the study of gay language varieties to Italy.

1.2 Cultural Background of Italy

Before going any further, a brief introduction to the Italian culture and its relationship with homosexuality is necessary to better appreciate both my motivations in designing this project as well as the comments of the gay men I interviewed. Italy as a country is quite young, having been officially united only in 1861, though its roots as a civilization pre-date the Roman Empire. Before unification, termed the Risorgimento, the Italian peninsula comprised numerous city-states that came into violent contact with one another periodically throughout the Middle Ages, Renaissance, and Modern periods. As these city-states were rather suddenly thrust together in the mid-19th century during the Risorgimento, today there exists an interesting phenomenon by which Italian citizens are more likely to first identify with their city of origin rather than with their country (i.e. as Florentine or Milanese as opposed to Italian). After World War I the fascist dictator Benito Mussolini rose to power and ruled the country for a twenty-year period (1922-1943) known as the Ventennio fascista. Post-war Italy was stricken with poverty, and many residents of the agricultural South moved to the urban centers of the North (Milan, Turin, and Genoa) to work in factories. The mid-20th century saw an economic boom as Italy caught up to much of Western Europe and the United States, though the country subsequently experienced several decades of economic turmoil, political terrorism, and government scandals. Italy entered the European Union as a founding member in 1993 and has since suffered financial difficulties in the wake of the 2008 Great Recession.

The Catholic Church has been based in Italy since Early Christianity and today some 90% of Italian citizens consider themselves Roman Catholic, though only about one-third of the
population regularly practices. The Vatican has existed as an independent state, located in the city of Rome, since the Lateran Treaty of 1929, and continues to exert enormous political and social influence throughout the country on a number of issues. Though the current Pope, Francis, has expressed relatively progressive views regarding homosexuality when compared to previous papacies, the Church as a whole remains highly conservative, and many Italians consider it to be the leading hindrance in the country’s progress towards social justice for LGBT people. For example, the Church upholds the notion of the “traditional family” [“famiglia tradizionale”], ostensibly made up of a father, mother, and their biological children, and this campaign comes at the expense of non-traditional families, including those with a foundation of same-sex couples.

As in many parts of the world, urban centers in Italy are generally more open regarding the acceptance of LGBT people and the advancement of their human rights, while the more agrarian countryside tends to remain conservative and rather unaccepting. Interview participants in this study made regular references to the history of Italy as well as to the power of the Catholic Church, making this background beneficial to understanding the context in which gay men in Italy grow up and continue to live. The taboo and even invisibility that still affect LGBT people in many parts of the country pushed me to investigate this topic further, as sociolinguists had never asked Italian people what they think about this kind of language.

1.3 Research Questions

Mann (2011) points out that the aforementioned conflation of linguistic concepts means that the “attitudes toward and perceptions of [gay language], therefore, are also, to a large extent, attitudes toward and perceptions of sounding gay” (p. 7), and this claim reverberates throughout the analysis of the qualitative interview data collected for this study. The research questions of this project relate to these very perceptions of and attitudes toward GMI and are as follows:
1. Which linguistic features do gay Italian men perceive as gay language?

2. What are the prevailing in-group attitudes towards gay men’s language in Italy?

Past studies in the field, to be more given a more detailed analysis in Chapter 2, have attempted to establish definitive answers to similar questions in the American context through perception studies, albeit without regard for folk belief. One of the earliest findings, which remains a widespread notion today, was that gay men’s language is merely feminized speech. Interestingly enough, this idea is not limited to the folk. Though we have come a long way since the 1960s, when scholars (e.g. Sonenschein, 1969/2006) still espoused the Victorian claim that gay men are actually women confined by men’s bodies, and that their language thus undergoes a process of “effeminization,” as recently as the 1990s famed sociolinguists (e.g. Lakoff, 1990) have contentiously argued that gay men simply imitate women’s language. Such claims have provoked impassioned reactions within the community, with Gaudio (1994) directly responding to Lakoff by asserting that gay men “have particular ways of speaking which challenge conventional notions of what constitutes proper male and female behavior” (p. 32). With these two research questions I hope to uncover the prevailing beliefs of everyday gay Italian men with regard to the “particular” linguistic varieties associated with the gay community.

Here I must make an important note about the distinction between “sounding gay” and “using gay language.” While the former has to do with phonological features that have come to be identified with gay men’s speech, the latter involves all linguistic features related to such speech, including lexicon, morphology, semantics, and pragmatics. Throughout the interviews I conducted, however, gay men frequently conflate the two concepts, as if the phonological features that cause someone to “sound gay” were one and the same with “gay men having their own way of speaking.” As this study has its foundations in folk linguistics, and more specifically
folk dialectology, I have attempted to straddle the line between the etic views of linguists and the emic views of nonlinguists, or people who do not possess formalized training in linguistics. Consequently, the language ideologies of nonlinguists, often called the “folk,” are particularly vital to this thesis, especially when they diverge from the understandings of formal linguistic study. Again, this was often the case with the participants I interviewed.

1.4 Chapter Preview

In Chapter 2, I present a review of the extant literature concerning language attitudes and language and sexuality, two areas that are of central importance to the current study. I describe my data collection methodology in Chapter 3. In Chapter 4, I discuss my results pertaining to both the perceptions of GMI as well as attitudes toward it. In Chapter 5, I consider the significance of the findings and suggest possible directions for future research.

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3 See Chapter 2 (Section 2.1.2) for a more comprehensive explanation of this contrast.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Throughout this chapter, I discuss past findings in the area of language and sexuality (Section 2.1) as well as language attitudes in general (Section 2.2), focusing on the folk dialectology tradition (Section 2.2.1). As I explain more fully in Chapter 3, the methodological and analytical approaches I utilize are drawn predominantly from work done in folk dialectology. I close the literature review with a discussion of several studies focused on attitudes towards and perceptions of gay men's language with heavy emphasis on gay varieties of English (Section 2.3).

2.1 Language and Sexuality

In this section, I summarize several of the landmark studies focusing on language and its relationship with sexual orientation, homosexuality in particular. I begin with a discussion of the earliest work done in this area and conclude by reviewing more recent additions to the conversation.

One of the first inquiries into the language of sexual minorities surfaced with Cory (1951/2006), who claimed that minority groups create “special language” for three principal reasons: to use as code, to reclaim hurtful words, and to be descriptive in a creative manner. He noted that words with negative connotations had been traditionally used by out-groups (i.e. heterosexuals) to demean homosexual men and women,\(^4\) which led to an in-group push for

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\(^4\) According to Cory (1951/2006), these derogatory terms included *fag, cocksucker, fairy*, and *pansy* for gay men, and *dyke* or *bull* for lesbian women.
positive eponyms, the most successful of which being gay.\(^5\) Due to the lack of central “organized society of gay life” or a gay “public press” in the mid-20\(^{th}\) century, Cory (1951/2006) also pointed out that there is no one homogenous gay language, noting that variation exists between the East and West Coasts in the United States alone.

Sonenschein (1969/2006) discussed “the homosexual’s language” by attempting to establish the linguistic processes through which gay men distinguish themselves as a social group. He describes the following four mechanisms: “effeminization,” by which gay men imitate female speech because they are actually “women trapped in men’s bodies” (p. 42); “utilization,” whereby gay men borrow slang terms belonging to other groups; “redirection,” meaning a word retains its form but changes from a heterosexual to homosexual referent; and “invention,” when pre-existing words are taken and given unique meanings. Despite referring to homosexuals as “deviant,”\(^6\) Sonenschein (1969/2006) recognizes the gay community’s social complexity and posits the acquisition of gay language as a product of time spent within the highly structured gay subculture, participation in which purportedly requires a minimum adherence to “common behavioral patterns” including language.

Crew (1978/2006) approached language and sexuality in the United Kingdom.\(^7\) He theorized that the use of gay language in certain contexts could carry penalties of social and/or economic ostracization, a threat that would discourage gay men from adopting such language in

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\(^5\) He estimates that the use of gay to index homosexual men originated around WWI and enjoyed widespread usage in the United States by the 1930s.

\(^6\) Many of the classic studies having to do with the language of homosexuality contain a distinct note of homophobia, most likely a self-serving attempt to distance the authors from suspicion that they too might be gay or lesbian. By the 1980s, this trend had largely dissipated.

\(^7\) In addition to this study, Green (1997) discussed the secret gay “language” Polari used in Great Britain, a sort of vocabulary without syntax that grew out of Lingua Franca, the Occitan-based variety used for military and commercial purposes throughout the Mediterranean, which then became frequent among gay men. He notes that its use declined in the latter half of the 20\(^{th}\) century with the gay liberation movement of the 1960s and an overall diminished need for secrecy.
the first place. In addition, he resists the notion of a register belonging solely to gay men but rather supports the idea of gender-based registers that can be manipulated and mixed. In describing the discourse used by gay men, he distinguishes between male-intensified language—glorification of masculinity through sports, the bear subculture, and the like—and female-aligned language, including cross-gender references that appear to support solidarity between gay men.

Hayes (1981/2006) explored what he dubbed “Gayspeak” after having made personal observations within the U.S. gay community over a period of many years. Hayes (1981/2006) boldly declares homosexuals to make up “America’s largest subculture” and defines Gayspeak as the language of the gay community, to include lexicon, usage, imagery, and rhetoric. He proposes three settings in which Gayspeak is used: “secret,” in which one’s gay identity is hidden to avoid identification or stereotyping as gay; “social,” which represents the “dominant” gay jargon found in bars and clubs; and “radical activist,” described as highly political and jargon-free in order to support the assimilation of gay men into mainstream society. Though his assertions appear reasonable given the varying acceptability of homosexuality across social contexts, Gayspeak as a buzzword and topic of study never quite caught on in the sociolinguistic community, possibly due to his considerable reliance on anecdotal evidence as data.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, Leap’s (1996) book Word’s Out: Gay Men’s English was the first proper monograph to focus on the language of gay men. One of the most fundamental assumptions on which Leap’s arguments are based is that language functions as a valuable resource in the formation of gay men’s identities during adolescence. The period of preadulthood, according to Leap (1996), is fraught with sentiments of isolation, loneliness, and overall identity struggle for young gay men, and oral and/or written language becomes a mechanism through which boys can create “gay-positive” alternatives to the widely heterosexual
examples that surround them.\footnote{Leap (2006) notes that “‘compulsory heterosexuality’ (Rich 1980) continues to frame expectations about gender in this society and to promote fragmentary and often conflicting messages about alternative forms of sexuality” (p. 125).} In his argument, talking with others about gay issues, listening to or reading gay-oriented texts, and learning about gay culture from the popular media all serve to help young gay men accept their sexual orientation and form an identity. Leap hence describes “Gay English” as cooperative discourse, highly grounded in social experience, since cooperation is necessary in order for coded gay references to be fully received by addressees. Some of the discursive tools utilized in this linguistic collaboration include carefully negotiated turn-taking styles, descriptive imagery and metaphor, inference strategies, pauses, and strategically placed exaggerations.

An argument over the roles of desire and identity in the study of gay language followed the publication of \textit{Word’s Out}. Kulick (2000) in particular contends that “the only thing gay about the language analyzed by Leap is the fact that it is employed by individuals who self-identify as (or who Leap believes to be) gay” (p. 264). Instead of focusing on language and sexual identity, as proposed by Leap (1996), Kulick proposes a shift in attention towards the relationship between language and sexual desire. As Mann (2011) notes, Kulick believes that studies concentrating only on self-identifying gay men and lesbian women “risk taking the sex out of sexuality” (p. 31). This line of reasoning was taken up once more in Cameron and Kulick’s (2003) book \textit{Language and Sexuality}, which in its final chapters argues that research should not be confined to the language of non-normative (or queer) sexualities since sexual desire itself is not limited to sexual minorities.

Cameron and Kulick’s (2003) emphasis on desire at the expense of identity did not go unnoticed by the sociolinguistic community. Bucholtz and Hall (2004a) conspicuously assert that “processes [of identity positioning] are not restricted to intentional acts of self-labelling” (p. 929).
and criticize Cameron and Kulick (2003) for their assumption of “desire as an alternative rather than an addendum to identity” (p. 929). They also maintain that desire may not always be pertinent to sexuality, a claim taken up by Morrish and Leap (2007), who declare that “information will be excluded…if items other than desire are not addressed on the research agenda” (p. 18). Podesva, Roberts, and Campbell-Kibler (2002/2006) approach the issue through a stylistic lens, arguing that “identity and style are co-constructed” (p. 144). This means that stylistic variation does not merely reflect social identity, but that identity is produced in discourse through the linguistic means of style. It follows that a certain style may index multiple social identities simultaneously and that categories of style are fluid as individuals negotiate their identity across situations.

The research I present in this thesis takes into account each of these approaches to language and sexuality. Because my interview respondents do highlight the connection between desire and language, I do not discount views such as Cameron and Kulick’s (2003). However, given the strong arguments made by Bucholtz and Hall (2004) as well as Morrish and Leap (2007) regarding the importance of considering how gay identities arise in contexts independent of desire, and given the folk dialectological emphasis on understanding laypeople’s understanding of the world, I tend to focus my analysis on language’s relationship to identity. In addition, I consider Podesva et al.’s (2002/2006) support of a stylistic approach to the study of language and sexuality.

2.2 Language Attitudes

Two principal camps have emerged in the pursuit of folk attitudes relating to language. Social psychologists aim to indirectly elicit such beliefs and opinions, while folk dialectologists prefer to overtly ask the folk about their language ideologies (Niedzielski & Preston, 2003). In
particular, the invention of the matched-guise technique allowed social psychological researchers to veil their studies’ objectives so as to avoid social desirability bias on the part of their participants. Folk dialectologists, on the other hand, keep their intentions clearer. Section 2.2.1 below will address the folk dialectological approach in particular, as it is most relevant to this study. First, however, a note on the relationship between language attitudes and prestige is necessary.

Labov’s (1966) twofold concept of prestige has become highly influential in the sociolinguistic study of how speakers position themselves with regard to what may be termed standard and nonstandard varieties. A standard may develop “overt prestige,” a status assigned it by speakers due to associations made with upward social mobility, education, intelligence, and the like. Similarly, a nonstandard variety may obtain “covert prestige,” whereby speakers value the variety because of its utility in strengthening in-group solidarity, even though it may impede social mobility. These two notions of prestige become useful in accounting for language attitudes more generally, as a negative attitude towards a variety, for example, may index a lack of prestige, while the opposite may be true of a positive attitude.

2.2.1 Folk dialectology. While social psychologists take an indirect approach to eliciting language attitudes, notably through the matched-guise technique, folk dialectologists (or perceptual dialectologists) support direct approaches. The wider field of folk linguistics focuses

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9 Garrett (2010) has described social desirability bias as a phenomenon by which respondents give answers that they deem to be socially appropriate. This is similar to acquiescence bias, by which participants tell the researcher what they think s/he wants to hear in order to gain approval, especially when it comes to personal attitudes about minority social groups.

10 The premise of the matched guise is to make several recordings of a single speaker—who must be competent in more than one dialect or language—reading aloud a predetermined passage of text. These recordings are then presented to study participants, who are told that each recording was actually made with different speakers. Respondents then rate each “individual speaker” on Likert scales of solidarity and status characteristics, normally ranging from scores of 1 to 5 or 1 to 7. In essence, by “elicit[ing] the stereotyped impressions or biased views which members of one social group hold of representative members of a contrasting group” (Lambert, 1967, p. 93), social psychologists theoretically arrive at respondents’ private, unadulterated language attitudes.
on the language ideologies of nonlinguists, which have historically been discounted by sociolinguists as either innocent misunderstandings at best or foundations of prejudice at worst (Niedzielski & Preston, 2003). While these characterizations may be true at times, folk linguists recognize prescription as the basis of much popular linguistic belief. In other words, linguistic regulation promoted from a young age through education leads to a folk mentality whereby some language is considered correct or good, not because the people who speak that variety are inherently good or reputable, but because such language appears logical and clear with roots in a sort of deep-seated abstraction (Niedzielski & Preston, 2003). It follows that any variety falling outside this “logical conception” of language does not even count as real in the eyes of the folk.

The earliest modern interest in folk linguistics appeared with Henry Hoenigswald (1966), who asserted that what ordinary people (the folk) believe about language actually shapes how language changes and provides pointers to otherwise unexplained changes. Since then, Dennis Preston has almost single-handedly taken up the cause of folk dialectology and has published extensively on the subject. He notes that although traditional dialectology has focused on regional differences in speaker performance, folk dialectology’s goal of discovering nonspecialist belief about such differences, “…based on neither production of nor response to forms, provide[s] a helpful corollary to both production and attitude studies of regional (and other) varieties” (Preston, 1993, p. 333). Niedzielski and Preston (2003) cite the need for metalinguistic information from study participants by stating that all sociolinguistic projects

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11 Niedzielski & Preston (2003) give a clear explanation of the word folk used in this context:

We use folk to refer to those who are not trained professionals in the area under investigation…We definitely do not use folk to refer to rustic, ignorant, uneducated, backward, primitive, minority, isolated, marginalized, or lower status groups or individuals. That is an outdated use in folklore and an absolutely useless one for our purposes. (xviii; emphasis in the original)

12 Though virtually all folk dialectological work has been concerned with regional dialects, for this thesis I utilize similarly direct methods to ascertain folk belief regarding the language of a social group (i.e. gay Italian men).
“would be aided by healthy doses of respondent talk about language along a wide range of topics” (p. 32). Preston has also responded to numerous objections to the use of direct techniques in language attitude studies, in particular those regarding the observer’s paradox and the supposedly caricaturistic nature of folk linguistic ideologies.13

As I mentioned in Chapter 1, a complementary dichotomy of linguistic taxonomies differentiates the beliefs of linguists from those of nonlinguists. Preston (1998) explains that the linguistic taxonomy, representing the etic understandings of linguists, conceives of language as “a collection of all the rules of all the dialects of that language” (p. 265-6). This view contrasts with the folk taxonomy, expressing nonlinguists’ emic views, in which language is considered “the collection of language regulations which lies behind Good language use; related to, but clearly deviant from it, are the failures to apply these regulations—drunken speech, slips of the tongue, casual speech, and the like” (Preston, 1998, p. 265; emphasis in the original). As described in Preston (2004), there are three kinds of metalanguage at nonlinguists’ disposal. Metalanguage 1 comprises overt, conscious remarks about language. He describes Metalanguage 2 as “language use which refers to some property of language itself, but such reference does not focus the speaker’s or listener’s attention on those properties as ones of linguistic form” (Preston, 2004, p. 86). An example of Metalanguage 2 would be reported speech, such as the phrases “So Sarah goes…” or “Sarah was like…” Metalanguage 3 is the deeply rooted folk knowledge about language, as shared by members of a speech community. These beliefs lie behind Metalanguage 1 use; in other words, Metalanguage 3 consists of the prevailing views toward a language variety within a group.14

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13 See Chapter 3 for a more detailed review of Preston’s responses to such criticism.
14 The importance of these concepts to Research Question 2 is elaborated in Chapter 3.
Much of the criticism aimed at the aforesaid indirect techniques used in language attitude research, such as the matched guise test and early Labovian methods, originate amongst folk dialectologists. Edwards (1999), for example, does not find appropriate the matched guise’s use of a single speaker to represent an entire social group. Perhaps most notable is Preston’s (1999) observation that this vein of language attitude research has not traditionally determined where participants thought regional voices were from. Furthermore, indirect approaches do not allow researchers to know if respondents even have mental constructs of geographic place with respect to the speakers they hear. For instance, participants could rate a voice from New England as “nice,” “smart,” and “compassionate” as part of a matched guise test, but the conclusion drawn by researchers should not be that the respondents think of New Englanders in this way, since they might not even think that the speaker was from New England; perhaps the participants have no mental concept of New England dialects at all but instead thought the voice was from New Jersey. Preston’s argument may seem like common sense, but this flaw of indirect techniques has remarkably gone all but ignored by sociolinguists.

2.3 Attitudes toward and Perceptions of Gay Men’s Language

Here I review four attitude and perception studies that concern gay men’s language. Gaudio (1994) examined the pitch properties of self-identified gay and straight men in order to investigate the folk stereotype that out gay men possess a “dynamic” version of language that has traditionally been associated with women’s language. His methodology comprised a matched guise test. Edwards (1999) does not find appropriate the matched guise’s use of a single speaker to represent an entire social group. Perhaps most notable is Preston’s (1999) observation that this vein of language attitude research has not traditionally determined where participants thought regional voices were from. Furthermore, indirect approaches do not allow researchers to know if respondents even have mental constructs of geographic place with respect to the speakers they hear. For instance, participants could rate a voice from New England as “nice,” “smart,” and “compassionate” as part of a matched guise test, but the conclusion drawn by researchers should not be that the respondents think of New Englanders in this way, since they might not even think that the speaker was from New England; perhaps the participants have no mental concept of New England dialects at all but instead thought the voice was from New Jersey. Preston’s argument may seem like common sense, but this flaw of indirect techniques has remarkably gone all but ignored by sociolinguists.

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15 Preston (1993) notes that classic studies such as Labov (1966) showed that respondents reacted to different linguistic features but that they did not know which features were affecting their evaluations of performances.

16 Preston (1999) has suggested that this problem in matched guise studies could be partially remedied by first determining respondents’ mental maps of regional speech areas. Drawing perceptual maps as a methodology is a classic tool in folk dialectology when dealing with regional dialects.

17 Gaudio (1994) excluded closeted gay men from his interviews because, as he puts it, “gay male identity is a social phenomenon” (p. 31) that transcends the practice of sex between men, the realm to which closeted gay men are ostensibly confined. This echoes the sentiment expressed in Sonenschein (1969/2006).
guise test made with audio samples taken from interviews with gay and straight men; participants were asked to determine each speaker’s sexual orientation as well as rate them on scales of solidarity and status. The results showed that listeners accurately ascertained sexual orientation and considered speakers perceived to be straight more masculine than those perceived to be gay. Interestingly, Gaudio’s initial evidence suggests that pitch does not vary significantly across straight and gay speakers, a preliminary finding that would not support the folk belief that gay men possess higher pitch range and variability.

Munson et al. (2006) looked at speakers’ manipulation of phonetic features to index their social identity as gay, lesbian, bisexual (GLB) or straight. They found that groups of both men and women, divided into the larger categories of GLB and straight, did not possess significantly different acoustic characteristics; divergences appeared only across the sexes and not across sexual orientation. However, listeners were nevertheless accurate in identifying speakers’ orientation, as GLB people were consistently rated as more GLB sounding. Similar to Gaudio (1994), Munson et al. (2006) did not find GLB men’s speech to be higher pitched than straight men’s speech, as is popularly believed, but they did discover that GLB men were rated as clearer speakers than their straight counterparts.

Campbell-Kibler (2011) examined gay men’s language from a stylistic perspective based on the understanding that styles are made of clustered resources and social meanings. She advocates for the study of gay language by stating, “Despite the very real dangers of reifying gay men’s speech, the widespread phenomenon of speakers perceiving ‘gay accents’ represents a perceptual question worthy of investigation independent of its relationship to the observed

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18 Notably, theirs remains one of the few studies to have observed the language of bisexual speakers.
sociolinguistic behavior of self-identified gay men” (p. 54).

She contends that linguistic cues are not connected to sexual orientation itself but to styles, which represent “recognizable ways of being in the world” (Campbell-Kibler, 2011, p. 54). In other words, sexual orientation may function as one aspect of an individual’s multilayered identity that is conveyed in a stylistic performance. By using guises of digitally altered speech samples, she tested four acoustic variables to determine whether they influenced perception of both sexual orientation and masculinity. She found that some acoustic features, such as /s/-fronting, have indeed become what Labov (1972) terms “stereotypes,” in this case indexing homosexuality and an absence of masculinity.

By far the most influential study for this thesis is Mann (2011), a dissertation that brought the subject of “Gay American English” (GAE) to center stage and investigated both language attitudes and perceptions amongst gay male speakers in the United States. Through sociolinguistic interviews, focus groups, and a perception study, Mann (2011) ambitiously sought to uncover multiple aspects of gay language, including discourse, by utilizing both social psychological and folk dialectological methods.20 His qualitative analysis of attitudes towards GAE revealed a folk belief among gay men that they are more intelligent than straight men, a discourse related to gay men’s language; since GAE is considered a standard variety, its speakers are considered more educated and intelligent. GAE speakers in his study were also found to be likeable, kind, and sincere—traits all associated with solidarity. Such positive evaluations notwithstanding, GAE speakers were negatively considered to be “effeminate,”21 which

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19 This point in itself supports a folk dialectological approach to the study of perceptions of gay language, as opposed to long-term participant observation and/or recording of gay men’s speech, as in Rodriguez (2015).

20 I discuss Mann’s (2011) influence on my own study’s design and methodology in Chapter 3.

21 Gaudio (1994) cautions against researchers using loaded terms such as effeminate because such use would indicate an acceptance of folk stereotypes that might not have any factual basis. He adds that their use is acceptable in a more ethnographic sense when describing the metalanguage of nonlinguists.
respondents noted could act as a deterrent to social mobility. Mann also found that negative attitudes toward GAE decreased one’s probability of being perceived as gay when speaking, even though positive attitudes toward GAE did not increase this probability.

Having thus discussed the extant literature relating to language attitudes and gay men’s language more generally, I present my research methodology in Chapter 3 before presenting my results in Chapter 4.
Chapter 3: Methodology\textsuperscript{22}

Interest in language ideologies of the folk would suggest an approach of directly asking people about such beliefs, but sociolinguistic research traditions have been prejudiced against the pursuit of overt knowledge because of the observer’s paradox. Labov (1972) explains that to uncover the vernacular, or naturally occurring speech, researchers must “observe the way people use language when they are not being observed” (p. 61). Because the clandestine recording of speech is unethical, the only way to study the vernacular is through observation, hence the paradox. When individuals know that their language is the object of study, they will generally change their language based on previously described biases, such as social desirability or acquiescence. Aforementioned indirect approaches to language attitude research have attempted to mitigate the observer’s paradox in order to elicit the most genuine use of language, while direct approaches have been dismissed as unconcerned with the effects of the paradox. Preston (1993) submits the methodology of a “casual interview” as efficacious in uncovering the complexity of folk linguistic belief because it allows for observation of nonspecialists who are “caught in the act of reasoning about language” (p. 252). When dealing with the folk, such an approach becomes valuable because it more closely resembles everyday strategies of problem solving rather than an artificially constructed method in which static responses are consistently given to caricaturistic representations of a variety (i.e. the matched guise technique). He admits that while it may be true that the folk produce cookie cutter responses when asked about

\textsuperscript{22} The Institutional Review Board at the College of William and Mary granted approval for this project on May 15, 2015.
commonly studied linguistic phenomena, the goal of folk linguistics would be to take “[the folk] down paths which they have not previously trod” (Preston, 1993, p. 195). As this thesis utilizes folk dialectology as its principal foundation, my methodology is drawn from Preston (1993) and Niedsielski and Preston’s (2003) suggestion of directly asking nonlinguists what they think of language.

3.1 Interviews with Gay Men

The interview has been a central methodology in sociolinguistic research since classic Labovian work (e.g. 1963, 1966, 1972). Interviews are suited to folk dialectological study in particular because they utilize Metalanguage 1, explicit statements about language, to draw out Metalanguage 3, underlying beliefs about language use within a speech community (Preston 2004). The interviews I conducted aimed to follow this model of eliciting Metalanguage 3 in order to answer both research questions, reproduced here:

1. Which linguistic features do gay Italian men perceive as constituting gay language?

2. What are the prevailing in-group attitudes towards gay men’s language in Italy?

I discuss both Research Questions 1 and 2 in Chapter 4.

3.1.1 Interview participants. Interviews were conducted in June 2015 in Milan, Italy.23

A full list of interview participants is found in Table 3.1.24

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23 Interviews were recorded using a digital audio recorder (Zoom H2) and were backed up to a MacBook Pro.

24 To ensure not only confidentiality but also anonymity, pseudonyms were not used. A consent form was given to each interviewee before the interview began. A copy of the consent form can be found in Appendices B and C.
Table 3.1 Interview participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant #</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Years lived in Milan</th>
<th>Profession</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>undergraduate student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>undergraduate student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>undergraduate student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>undergraduate student; marketing intern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>graduate student; freelance translator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>university instructor and researcher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The ages of the six Italian men interviewed ranged from 20 to 32. All were white, cisgender males and self-identified as gay. All had strong ties to academia, as five were students and one a teacher and researcher. Their specializations included music, communications, public management, cinema, urban planning, and theatre. Four had grown up largely in Milan, while Participants 5 and 6 came from other cities and had lived elsewhere for many years before moving to Milan. None had any formal linguistic training, allowing me to regard them as members of the folk.

Participants were obtained through my personal network of friends and contacts in the Milan area, established during my year as an exchange student. When reaching out to potential participants, I made sure to withhold the specific linguistic focus of the study. Each interviewee was told that he would be taking part in a study about the personal experiences of gay men in Italy, as detailed in the consent form. The linguistic focus was not specified until about two-thirds of the way through each interview, and immediately afterwards I provided a debriefing form, asking each participant to reconfirm his participation in the study in light of my research goals. I did not control for age, though most participants were around my own age and were also students. Mann (2011) limited his gay interviewees’ minimum age to 30, since he believed that gay men in their twenties may have not had “sufficient exposure to [gay men’s language] to have socialized to it or to have developed clear attitudes to it” (p. 38). As I had already noticed my
twentysomething Italian friends using what I initially guessed to be gay slang, I decided that such a restriction would not be necessary.

3.1.2 The interview. The sociolinguistic interview, as Hoffman (2014) notes, should not have the semblance of a normal interview. This is because in order to assuage the effects of the observer’s paradox and thereby observe the most naturalistic speech possible, participants should focus on what they are saying and not how they say it (Labov, 1966). In keeping with the folk dialectological nature of this project, my goal was to ask participants directly about their attitudes and perceptions and not focus on specific linguistic variables (e.g. lexical, phonological, syntactic, etc.). However, I did not want interviewees to be aware of the linguistic nature of the interview from the start, as Labov (1972) notes that “an interview which has as its professed object the language of the speaker will rate higher on the scale of formality than most conversation” (p. 92). Given the proximity of the subject to my participants’ self-professed gay identities, I did not want to take the chance of inadvertently guiding their responses.

For this reason, and to moderate the observer’s paradox, I structured the interviews into two sections.25 I began with simple questions about where the interviewees were born, where they had grown up, their relationships with family and friends, and their social interests. I then steered the conversation toward their gay identity, beginning with the coming out process and then asking if they participated in social activities with other LGBT people. In order to broach the topic of gay men’s language, I asked respondents how they were usually able to determine a man’s sexual orientation. Many cited language as an important factor, and I then asked follow-up questions about “sounding gay” and “gay language” before reaching the second part of the...

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25 The full interview schedule may be found in Appendices F and G.
interview, in which I disclosed the linguistic nature of my study. Then I explicitly asked if they could characterize gay men’s language and concluded with questions about their personal views, in line with the folk dialectological tradition.

The two-part structure of the interview allowed me to address my research questions in two distinct contextual styles. Since interviews in and of themselves tend to be formal situations, in which interviewees utilize what Labov (1972) calls “careful speech,” I wanted to implicitly introduce the topic of gay language before explicitly explaining to participants the linguistic phenomenon I was actually studying, which inevitably increased the level of formality. I did this in an attempt to draw out what Labov (1972) terms “casual speech” as much as possible by quickly building a rapport with interviewees through questions relating to topics we had in common, letting them know that I, too, am gay. I suspect that these men would have been less likely to share personal and emotional experiences, such as the sometimes painful memory of coming out, with someone who did not also identify as gay. By utilizing these two contextual styles in my interviews, I was able to obtain both casual and careful speech regarding gay men’s language, and I treated each style as such in my subsequent analysis.

Each interview was conducted entirely in Italian at a private location chosen by the participant. As I had lived in Milan for ten months (2011-2012) as an exchange student, I was fluent in the Italian language and had maintained my bilingualism through upper-level undergraduate coursework in Italian Studies in the intervening three years. Metadata about each interview can be found below in Table 3.2:

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26 A copy of the debriefing form can be found in Appendices D and E.

27 The effects of my status as a non-native speaker are discussed in Section 3.3.
Table 3.2 Interview metadata

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant #</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Interviewer’s apartment kitchen</td>
<td>39:15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Interviewer’s apartment kitchen</td>
<td>32:42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Private study room at participant’s university</td>
<td>39:38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Interviewer’s apartment kitchen</td>
<td>50:12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Participant’s apartment office</td>
<td>48:43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Participant’s apartment dining room</td>
<td>47:10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I recorded the audio of each interview by placing a Zoom H2 audio recorder between myself and the interviewee, about two to three feet separating each of us from the device. Though the prominence of the recorder surely had an effect on the interviews’ formality, I could devise no way more practical to clearly preserve the speech of both interlocutors. My interview schedule was meant to last almost an hour, but in practice I had shorter interview durations, especially the first few I conducted, as I was still learning how to best navigate them.

3.2 Qualitative Analysis

After recording all six interviews, I began the process of transcription. To do this, I made use of the software ExpressScribe and avoided including minute details such as in a close transcription, as I was primarily concerned with producing a readable, naturalistic representation of what my participants had to say; acoustic features, for instance, were not relevant and thus not measured. I then used a thematic analysis technique to code the interview data for qualitative analysis. For each individual participant’s perceptions of the linguistic features that make up GMI, I noted every time he made use of Metalanguage 1, a descriptive reference to the way gay men speak; if he had not already characterized the features of gay language in part one of the interview, I made sure to ask explicitly about them in part two. For the participants’ attitudes toward GMI, I flagged each overtly positive, negative, and neutral comment regarding gay language. In this way I was then able to also quantitatively demonstrate the prevailing attitudes
amongst my interviewees (see Table 4.1 in Chapter 4). The qualitative analysis permitted me to give each individual man a voice, which would not have been possible had I conducted a purely quantitative study. By considering each interview qualitatively, I was also able to better understand the influence of the Italian cultural context on these men and their stories. I present the results of my analyses in the following chapter.

3.3 Limitations

Beyond the inherent challenges posed by the observer’s paradox, there are several limitations to consider in the current study. First, the age bracket represented in my sample of the gay Italian community is restricted to men in their early twenties to early thirties. In addition, all men chosen for interviews were well-educated and came from upper-middle class backgrounds in the North of Italy, most from Milan itself, causing a lack of socioeconomic diversity in my sample as well. All participants were ethnically Italian and therefore white, as is the vast majority of the Italian populace, though with more time I may have been able to access ethnically diverse immigrant peoples as well. The uniformity of my sample population was a practical issue I had to consider, as I had easiest access to potential participants in that age range, socioeconomic bracket, and ethnic group. I had not lived in Italy for several years at the time of my fieldwork, and to make the most of my limited time in Milan, I largely utilized my preexisting contacts. In the future this restraint could be overcome by expanding the scope of age, socioeconomic background, and geographic provenance of study participants. I personally would like to develop this research further by considering perceptions and attitudes of gay men from the South of Italy, as the cultural context is so different from that of industrial Milan.

Another major factor to take into account is my own non-native proficiency in Italian. Though I possess an advanced mastery of the language, it is by no means my native tongue,
meaning that the issue of accommodation must be considered. In other words, my interview
participants may very well have altered their own language use, even subconsciously, to help me
better understand them. Possible examples may have included speaking more slowly or choosing
more common lexical items over others. It is probable that had I been a native Italian speaker,
the data I obtained would have resulted different. I could have enlisted the help of a native
speaker in the administration of the interviews, but I wanted to maintain control over the topics
discussed in order to best gather data to answer my research questions.
Chapter 4: Perceptions of and Attitudes toward Gay Men’s Italian

In this chapter I assess my six participants’ characterizations of what they perceive to be a gay mode of speaking (i.e. Gay Men’s Italian) as well as their individual attitudes toward such a variety. In Section 4.1 I analyze the linguistic features that respondents identify as constituting gay language with the understanding that their views sometimes would not align with those of a linguist, who, as a language specialist, could study specific linguistic variables to determine quantitatively the actual usage of such features in the everyday speech of gay Italian men. I take their perceptions as indicative of personal opinions at the very least and, in the case of commonly shared ideas, potentially widespread folk beliefs in the gay male Italian community. This discussion will help to answer Research Question 1. Section 4.2 comprises my analysis of prevailing attitudes toward gay language and its use in order to answer Research Question 2.

Section 4.1 Perceptions of Gay Men’s Italian

In my qualitative analysis of perceptions of GMI, I grouped respondent talk into various themes that emerged as patterns across the six interviews. These categories of perceived language-related features are the following: recognizability, the ability of GMI to index sexual orientation; pitch, or acoustic qualities; feminine/women’s language, the relationship between the ways women and gay men speak; morphological feminization, a process by which grammatically masculine forms are used in the feminine; discourse, or common topics of conversation; community of speakers, or who speaks GMI and why; and lexicon, the actual words used. The following subsections, corresponding to these themes, include numerous examples of comments
drawn from the interviews and are meant to elucidate the linguistic features identified by participants as characteristic of this particular variety.

4.1.1 Recognizability. Four of the six respondents stated that they took into account a man’s way of speaking when trying to determine whether or not he is gay. This tactic suggests an element of indexicality in GMI, in the sense that use of this variety can point to a speaker’s homosexuality. Participant 1 employs such a strategy:

Excerpt 4.1.1: “Evident in the way they speak”

Ci sono alcune persone in cui è evidente dall’abbigliamento o dal modo di parlare, di gesticolare.

There are some people in whom [being gay] is evident in their clothing or in the way they speak, the way they gesture.

-Participant 1

This belief was repeated, albeit more hesitantly, by Participant 5 when I asked him the same question about how he ascertained the sexual orientation of strangers:

Excerpt 4.1.2: “Maybe also a bit the way of speaking”

Però, sì, soprattutto la posa, l’atteggiamento, forse anche un po’ il modo di parlare, non lo so. Non soltanto la- cioè, anche proprio il modo di argomentare le cose- non lo so. È difficile da spiegare.

But yeah, above all the posture, the behavior, maybe also a bit the way of speaking, I don’t know. Non just the- I mean, even the way of discussing things- I don’t know. It’s hard to explain.

-Participant 5

This speaker hedges several times when approaching the idea that a man’s way of speaking can index his sexuality to others. Interestingly, he later seems to solidify his views in this regard, becoming more confident in his assertion that language is a strong indicator of sexuality:
Excerpt 4.1.3: “A good ninety-nine percent chance”
Si, penso comunque che in molti casi abbia un buon novantanove per cento di possibilità di azzeccarci. Quello sì.

Yeah, I think anyway that in many cases there is a good ninety-nine per cent chance of getting it right. Definitely.

-Participant 5

Participant 6 displayed a similar line of reasoning as Participant 5, at first diplomatically stating that it is possible to determine sexuality in certain men but not in others, but later on saying that it is “absolutely” [“assolutamente”] possible for a way of speaking to indicate homosexuality, even declaring:

Excerpt 4.1.4: “Any heterosexual person”
Credo anche qualunque eterosessuale riconosca facilmente il fatto quando lo parla qualcuno che-si.

I also believe that any heterosexual person easily recognizes [that someone is gay] when someone speaks who- yeah.

-Participant 6

According to Participant 6, the indexical power of gay men’s language is so strong that even straight people notice it, a theory supportive of GMI as a social language variety distinct from a heterosexual standard. A possible explanation for the initial reticence of Participants 5 and 6 could be the presence of social desirability bias; neither wanted to express stereotypes about gay men and their language that might be deemed inappropriate by other interlocutors (i.e. me as the interviewer). As the interviews progressed and they felt more comfortable with sharing their personal opinions with me, they appeared to open up and express more forceful views.

4.1.2 Pitch. Several men commented on the inflection and tone of gay men’s voices. Though, as discussed in Chapter 2, the acoustic properties of gay speakers have been frequently studied and found to be indistinguishable from those of straight speakers, the folk belief persists that gay men utilize greater pitch variability and/or possess naturally high-pitched voices. In this
I will present excerpts relating strictly to comments describing these properties without reference to their potential link with women’s or feminine language, to be explored in Section 4.1.3. For Participant 1, some gay men simply possessed a more “cadenced” [“cadenzata”] inflection than the norm:

Excerpt 4.1.5: “A very cadenced inflection in their voice”
Esiste chi fa molte smorfiette, per esempio, con la faccia quando parla, chi ha un’inflessione alla voce molto cadenzata...

There are [gay men] who make little facial expressions, for example, when they speak, [gay men] that have a very cadenced inflection in their voice...

-Participant 1

Participant 4 begins by explaining that an “effeminate” [“effeminato”] voice does not necessarily indicate gayness, then immediately refers to his own “extremely high” [“altissimo”] voice pitch as an evident indicator of homosexuality, apparently conflating the two qualities.

Excerpt 4.1.6: “An extremely high tone of voice”
Però tendenzialmente sì, poi ci sono molti uomini che hanno un tono di voce effeminato ma sono etero, anche un modo di fare- più persone- è chiaro che il dubbio c’è...Vabbè, io parlo da ragazzo con un tono di voce altissimo, per cui mi metto un po’ da parte.

But basically yeah, then there are many men that have an effeminate tone of voice but are straight, even a way of doing- more people- it’s clear that there is some doubt...Anyway, I’m speaking as a guy with an extremely high tone of voice, so I’ll leave myself out.

-Participant 4

He speaks as if it were a given that effeminacy and higher voice pitch were indicative of being gay. His sentiment about pitch is shared by Participant 6, who makes an interesting comment when describing the voices of gay Italian men:

Excerpt 4.1.7: “A bit higher than it should be”
Ma, un po’...Un tono di voce- non so, un po’ più alto di quello che dovrebbe essere.

Well, a bit...A tone of voice- I don’t know, a bit higher than it should be.

-Participant 6
This respondent infuses his descriptive comment with a slightly negative attitude, implying that there is something abnormal about gay men’s tones of voice. Such an attitude was not uncommon throughout my interviews.

4.1.3 Feminine/women’s language. When asked directly whether there was any connection between gay men’s speech and the way women speak, my participants expressed sharply divided opinions. While some (e.g. Participant 1) believed that gay language is not based on women’s language at all (a view in keeping with Gaudio [1994]), others (e.g. Participant 2) readily recognized femininity as an inherent characteristic of gay language (a perspective more in line with Lakoff [1990]), while others still (e.g. Participant 3) expressed contradictory beliefs that seemed to support both sides of the argument. Participant 1 was adamant in his belief that gay men’s language existed as a distinct phenomenon from women’s language, repeating his conviction several times in a row:

Excerpt 4.1.8: “A gay accent”

_Credo che sia separata, non credo che sia una cosa femminile. [...] No, non credo che sia ricalcata su un modello femminile. [...] Non credo che sia uno scimmiottamento del modo di parlare femminile. Credo che sia proprio un accento gay, non so come dirlo._

I believe that it’s separate, I don’t believe that it’s a feminine thing. [...] No, I don’t believe that it’s patterned on a feminine model. [...] I don’t believe that it’s an imitation of the feminine way of speaking. I believe that it is really a gay accent, I don’t know how to say it.

-Participant 1

His mention of a “gay accent” [“un accento gay”] illustrates the result of a process of problem solving, championed by Preston (1993) as a fundamental objective of folk dialectology, as he begins by defining gay men’s language by what it is not—feminine language—and ends up with his own eponym for the variety. Though the word accent, when used by linguists, generally refers to a bundle of phonological features, often associated with a certain geographical region, here it is appropriated by the folk to refer to an entire social variety of language, again
demonstrating the folk’s blurring of the line between sounding gay and using a gay variety of speaking.

Participant 2 appears diametrically opposed to this view, as he identifies feminine qualities in gay language, while admitting that straight men sometimes possess similar characteristics in their speech:

Excerpt 4.1.9: “Some have a more feminine way of speaking”

For this interviewee, a feminine way of speaking equates to being more “deliberate” [“posata”], or conscious, of what is being said and how it is being expressed. The implicit suggestion is that more masculine speech does not involve such meticulous forethought. He defines “feminine” [“femminile”] in terms of the particular bodily movements that are generally associated with women, a paralinguistic observation that was echoed by other interviewees who mentioned the way gay men gesture when speaking. He is quick to qualify his statement about gay men indulging in feminine language patterns by pointing out that straight people, presumably straight
men, also do this\textsuperscript{28}, albeit in “a different way” [“in maniera diversa”], construing feminine language as an easily recognizable variety that can be imitated by assorted social groups.\textsuperscript{29} Participant 2’s description of gay language as inherently feminine also surfaced when I asked if he had any friends that sounded gay when speaking, as he responded:

\begin{quote}
Excerpt 4.1.10: “A pretty feminine way of doing things”
\textit{Si, ho un amico in particolare che ha un modo di fare abbastanza femminile.}

Yes, I have a friend in particular that has a pretty feminine way of doing things.
-Participant 2
\end{quote}

Here he immediately replies to my question about sounding gay with an affirmative—his friend sounds gay when talking because of his feminine mannerisms.

The opinion of Participant 3 initially indicates that the idea of gay language as feminine is purely stereotypical:

\begin{quote}
Excerpt 4.1.11: “Behavior doesn’t have anything to do with sexuality”
\textit{No, perché conosco vari ragazzi che hanno diciamo un modo di parlare, comportarsi più simili a quelli che nella società sono definiti femminili che poi nei fatti si scopano una ragazza dopo l’altra, quindi [RISATA] quindi tendenzialmente no, è una cosa molto di stereotipo. L’atteggiamento non ha a che fare con la sessualità. In generale la penso così.}

No, because I know various guys that have, let’s say, a way of speaking, of acting, more similar to those that in society are defined as feminine, who in reality fuck one girl after another, so [LAUGHTER] so generally no, it’s really a stereotype. Behavior doesn’t have anything to do with sexuality. In general that’s how I think about it.
-Participant 3
\end{quote}

Though in this excerpt he associates speech with behavior more generally, which he characterizes with a lack of indexicality in terms of sexual orientation, he later recognizes that a certain “feminine cadence” [“cadenza femminile”] does indeed index gay language:

\begin{quote}
\footnote{Participant 2’s frequent hedge-like clarifications are characteristic of his entire interview, as he appeared to be influenced by a strong social desirability bias, saying only what he thought I would deem appropriate, apparently feeling a need to tactfully present two sides to each of his personal opinions.}
\footnote{See Section 4.1.4 for a discussion of morphological feminization and its controversial standing in the Italian gay community.}
\end{quote}
Anyway, yeah so then a bit the feminine cadence maybe, yeah, can also be identified as a gay way of speaking, let’s say.

Participant 3

This revelation illustrates again the process of reasoning that I encouraged in each interviewee; while many gave me socially acceptable responses at first, later in the interview they would sometimes produce descriptive responses about GMI that contradicted previous comments they had made. Often these comments were made almost as afterthoughts or were blurted out, but they constitute some of the most illuminating perceptions I obtained.

4.1.4 Morphological feminization. Out of all the themes that emerged from my interviews with gay Italian men, corresponding to perceived linguistic features of the sociolect in question, consensus about the phenomenon of morphological feminization was by far the most uniform. Each of the six interviewees characterized gay men’s language as making use of the grammatical feminine gender when referring to men, rather than the standard masculine gender:

Excerpt 4.1.13: “That could be the most characteristic thing”
Quindi, che ci sia, si, magari c’è un modo gay di parlare, però adesso dirti esattamente da che cosa- cioè, la roba più evidente è forse quello di usare il femminile al posto del maschile, ecco. Quella può essere la cosa forse più caratterizzante. Tipo, non so, una “stupida”, “Cretina, che cosa stai facendo?”, “Guarda quella là”, cioè usarla appunto rivolgendoti poi tra di loro un po’ al femminile conficca il maschile. È l’unica cosa che veramente appunto si può caratterizzare forse.

So, that there is, yeah, maybe there is a gay way of speaking, however to tell you now exactly from what- I mean, the most obvious thing is maybe using the feminine instead of the masculine, yeah. That could be the most characteristic thing. Like, I don’t know, a “stupida”, “Cretina, what are you doing?”, “Look at her”, I mean, using it to address you amongst themselves a bit with the feminine jabs the masculine. It’s the only thing that can really be characterized maybe.

-Participant 6
For Participant 6, using the feminine gender instead of the masculine one is the most fundamental aspect of gay men’s speech, going so far as to declare it the “only thing that can really be characterized” [“l’unica cosa che veramente appunto si può caratterizzare”]. The examples he gives are the feminine forms of stupid [stupida], a word similar to idiot [cretina], and then a demonstrative pronoun for that one [quella]. Participant 5 reveals that even proper names can be feminized by changing the gender of the definite article used in front of them, a common trend in northern Italy, as well as the ending of the name itself:

**Excerpt 4.1.14: “La Fedessa”
Ma allora, si femminilizzano molte delle parole maschili, capito? Quindi, che ne so? Beh, allora, diciamo, anche questo. Si tende molto a dare dei soprannomi agli amici, ad esempio, no? Poi anche- li cambia, nel senso che queste sono delle cose che nascono quasi a volte spontaneamente. C’è ad esempio, non lo so... Però mi rendo conto che... Sì, ad esempio un mio amico si chiama Federico e lo chiamano tutti la “Fedessa”, no? La Fedessa. E veramente lui per tutti ormai è la Fedessa. Oppure, che ne so? Sì, cose del genere. Poi un’altra cosa che si- io non mi sono in realtà- non saprei... Sì, sai che poi in Lombardia si dice tradizionalmente, no? Se uno si chiama Marco, è il Marco, no? Questa cosa al maschile si usa meno rispetto a- al femminile si usa ancora invece. La Silvia, la Roberta, per cui si fa anche molto questa cosa qua.

So then, we feminize many of the masculine words, understand? So, what do I know? Well, so, let’s say, also this. We tend to give nicknames to friends a lot, for example, right? Then also- it changes them, in the sense that these are the things that originate almost spontaneously at times. There’s for example, I don’t know... But I realize that... Yeah, for example one of my friends is named Federico and everyone calls him “la Fedessa”, right? La Fedessa. And by now he is truly la Fedessa in everyone’s minds. Or, what do I know? Yeah, things like that. Then another thing that- I don’t know in reality- I wouldn’t know... Yeah, you know what we traditionally say in Lombardy, right? If someone is called Marco, he is “il Marco”, right? This thing in the masculine is less used than- but it’s still used in the feminine. La Silvia, la Roberta, so we still do this a lot.

-Participant 5

As he points out, though in contemporary Italian varieties spoken in Lombardy, masculine definite articles are no longer used with proper names, the feminine articles are still widespread; by changing the gender of a gay man’s name, he is able to adopt this grammatical trend that previously was unavailable to him. Participant 5’s indication that the feminization of names often
occurs “spontaneously” [“spontaneamente”] amongst friends supports other interviewees’ beliefs that this phenomenon has roots in amiable humor and joking:

Excerpt 4.1.15: “Referring to oneself in the feminine is something that is used as a joke”
La tendenza che c’è, che poi non so se c’è anche all’estero, però sarei curioso di saperlo, è quello di- niente di particolare- quello di- ovviamente parlando di uomini- di riferirsi al femminile, cioè utilizzare degli aggettivi o delle parole al femminile per chiamare un tuo amico, ecco. Per esempio, semplicemente dare del “lei” invece di “lui”, oppure anche magari dei termini, per esempio mi viene in mente un mio allenatore di acrobatica che ha un atteggiamento molto estroverso, molto appariscente, ecco, omosessuale, e alcune volte per scherzare dice- invece di dire “ricchione”, dice “ricchiona”, non in confronto a me ma in generale, così come, insomma, per fare ecco il simpatico. Mi viene in mente lui solo perché è una delle cose più recenti, però ecco- sì, comunque, riferirsi al femminile è una cosa che si usa così per scherzo, ecco.

The tendency is that, which I don’t know if it exists abroad, but I would be curious to find out, is that- nothing in particular- that of- obviously talking about men- to refer to oneself in the feminine, that is, to utilize some adjectives or words in the feminine to call one of your friends, yeah. For example, simply using “her” instead of “him”, or even some terms maybe, for example one of my acrobatics trainers comes to mind who has a very extroverted personality, very showy, yeah, homosexual, and sometimes when joking he says- instead of saying “ricchione”, he says “ricchiona”, not talking about me but in general, so that, I mean, to be funny. He comes to mind just because it’s one of the most recent things, but- yeah, anyway, referring to oneself in the feminine is something that is used as a joke, yeah.

-Participant 2

Participant 2’s acrobatics trainer achieves full reclamation of the traditionally pejorative word ricchione by feminizing it, rendering it humorous rather than distasteful. This is impressive, and it demonstrates the versatility of the Italian language because of its grammar; though several interviewees spoke of the static nature of their language when compared to English in terms of neologisms, some commented on the creativity afforded them by grammatical gender. The complex relationship between gay social identity, sexual desire, and femininity thus manifests itself through linguistic inventiveness.\(^\text{30}\)

\(^\text{30}\) The symbiotic relationship between identity and desire, previously debated by Leap (1996) and Cameron and Kulick (2003), will be further examined in Chapter 5.
4.1.5 Discourse. When I broached the subject of common topics of conversation in the gay community, most of my study’s participants adamantly maintained that gay men do not talk about anything different than straight men. Some balked at the very idea, displaying a telling desire for assimilation in a conservative society that already exerts plenty of prejudice against LGBT people. The only respondent to recognize gay-specific discourse was Participant 3:

Excerpt 4.1.16: “That way of doing things that’s always a bit explicit”
Poi con le amiche femmine, sì, cioè- che ne so, ovviamente se vengo da te e ti parlo di pene e addominali puoi pensare che è un modo abbastanza gay di parlare. [...] Sicuramente l’interessamento politico è una cosa che caratterizza, secondo me, abbastanza la comunità LGBT. [...] Non so, è un modo di fare- quel modo di fare così sempre un po’ esplicito, aperto, molto vitale, comunque può tipo fare ridere, ma in senso positivo.

Then with my female friends, yeah, I mean- what do I know, obviously if I come up to you and I talk to you about penis and abs you can think that it’s a pretty gay way of speaking. [...] Political interest is certainly a thing that pretty much characterizes, in my opinion, the LGBT community. [...] I don’t know, it’s a way of doing things- that way of doing things that’s always a bit explicit, open, really dynamic, anyway it can like make you laugh, but in a positive sense.

-Participant 3

He initially paints gay discourse as related to sexual desire: talking about “penis” [“pene”] and “abs” [“addominali”] can be identified as gay discourse because straight men ostensibly do not talk about the male body in such a sexually charged manner. Besides sex, he mentions politics as an important topic of concern. This is not surprising given that early in his interview, Participant 3 defined himself and his friends as activists, taking part in political protests and demonstrations to support the progression of LGBT rights in Italy. He ultimately defines gay language and behavior itself as both “explicit” [“esplicito”], evidently referring to sex-related topics, and

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31 This binary of gay versus straight men and their respective habits typified much of the understanding I gleaned of how gay Italian men define themselves as a distinct social minority.

32 In Section 4.1.6 I discuss conservative, oft religious, Italian culture as a factor influencing the use of GMI.
humorous, having the ability to make people laugh, a view in line with other study participants who perceived gay language as a vehicle for in-group banter.

4.1.6 Community of speakers. In this subsection I discuss participant comments relating to the perceived origins of this language variety: who uses it and why; the contexts in which it appears; and why it emerged in the first place. My interviewees had much to say about these topics and frequently related their hypotheses to the cultural context of Italy in general. Participant 1, for instance, characterizes gay language as a “defense mechanism” [“meccanismo di difesa”] against provincial homophobia. He speaks of the consequences of living in a religious environment:

Excerpt 4.1.17: “I believe that it’s a sort of defense mechanism”
Credo che sia una sorta di meccanismo di difesa. Se ti esponi così tanto, immagino che a quel punto non puoi più essere preso in giro, perché diventi un mostro strano, no? Magari, penso, è un piccolo paese in provincia molto cattolico- ma non necessariamente cattolico però molto, molto chiuso. Credo che se cerchi di startene un po’ per le tue, sei molto più un bersaglio rispetto a che se non cerchi di spaventare a tua volta i tuoi- chi ***, chi maltratta, con un’ostentazione, a un certo punto diventano un’ostentazione del proprio orientamento sessuale... [...] Immagino che sia uno dei meccanismi per cui si può sviluppare un modo di parlare omosessuale.

I believe that it’s a sort of defense mechanism. If you expose yourself so much, I imagine at that point you can’t be made fun of anymore because you become a strange monster, right? Maybe, I think, it’s a small, very Catholic town in the countryside- but not necessarily Catholic but very, very closed-minded. I believe that if you try to mind your own business, you are much more of a target than if you try to scare people- whoever ***, whoever mistreats you, with an ostentation, at a certain point they become an ostentation of their own sexual orientation... [...] I imagine that it’s one of the mechanisms whereby a homosexual way of speaking can develop.

-Participant 1

For him a gay manner of speaking becomes a way to defend himself in contexts dominated by religious thought that, as previously mentioned, tend to be less inclined to accept people that fall outside the famiglia tradizionale system. If a gay kid in the countryside [“in provincia”] shows off his sexuality to the point of scaring away other people with his divergence from the norm,
perhaps he will be called out less frequently. From this reasoning it follows that the use of a gay sociolect derives from a voluntary choice, which suggests that this is a variety, or a style as maintained by Podesva et al. (2002/2006), among many available to multicompetent gay speakers of Italian. Participant 5 shares this opinion:

Excerpt 4.1.18: “And many people feel good in that particular register”
Perché si sentono più liberi. E una volta in cui si sentono più liberi, in qualche maniera ci prendono anche gusto. Ciòè, sviluppano la cosa come uno può cambiare il modo di vestirsi. Ci passa dal vestirsi in modo casuale- non casual, ma proprio casuale- al vestirsi in maniera scelta. E ad un certo punto uno- ma non per forza nell’essere effeminato, in mille altri modi. Ciòè ognuno di noi, ad un certo punto, si ritrova, si riconosce in un registro piuttosto che in un altro, in un registro espressivo piuttosto che in un altro, decide che fa- che è il modo di esprimersi più efficace, in cui si trova meglio, non lo so, e molte persone si trovano bene in quel registro li. Sicuramente si.

Because they feel freer. And once they feel freer, in some way they come to like it. I mean, they develop this thing like someone can change the way they dress. They go from dressing in a random way- not casual, but really random- to dressing in a conscious way. And at a certain point- but not necessarily in an effeminate way, but in a thousand other ways. I mean that each of us, at a certain point, finds himself, recognizes himself as using one register as opposed to another, in an expressive register rather than in another, deciding what to do- that it is the most efficacious way of expressing himself, in which he feels most at ease, I don’t know, and many people feel good in that particular register. Without a doubt.

-Participant 5

He conceives of this type of language as a register that can be used pursuant to a personal decision, comparing the conscious choice of a linguistic variety to that of a certain way of dressing. Therefore, the decision to speak in a gay fashion is made on purpose because some men find it more comfortable to express themselves in that manner. In this case it is not a question of defense against homophobic attacks, rather one of expressive efficiency.

Related to the idea proposed by Participant 5, that some gay men “feel freer” [“si sentono più liberi”] when using gay language, is the theory of socialization developed by Leap (1996). Various interviewees expressed similar opinions regarding the connection between coming out and the acquisition of a gay mode of speaking. Participant 3 articulated the following:
Excerpt 4.1.19: “You feel more at ease with yourself”

Yes, there is a gay way of speaking that I see. I mean, I don’t know how once in my opinion, you see it above all once I might have started telling some of my friends about my sexuality, you feel more at ease with yourself, you might start having your first experiences in the sexual realm, you feel free, and so you become very explicit in your speech, more than heterosexual guys let’s say.

-Participant 3

He speaks of the freedom that one feels after having accepted his own sexuality in two senses: entry into the world of sex, and coming out to one’s friends. Both of these steps result decisive in the process of coming out more generally. This participant maintains that such phases allow a gay man to talk about more “explicit” [“espliciti”] subjects that previously would have revealed his sexual orientation. After such a long period spent in hiding for fear of being discovered as gay, he can finally discuss topics such as sexual desire openly. Participant 5 mentions the importance of “social experience” [“esperienza sociale”] in the attainment of a gay variety of speaking:

Excerpt 4.1.20: “In my opinion it’s also a product of a person’s social experience”

I don’t know [why some gay men use gay language and others don’t]. It’s a mystery. In my opinion it’s also a product of a person’s social experience. It’s not only linked to aspects of identity. It’s also linked to aspects of identity. It’s also true that certain people, the moment they tear down some of their, how do you say, fears, they deproblematize some things, they accept some things about themselves- this can be seen in millions of cases- they become more effeminate. Yes. Yes yes yes yes, I’ve seen a lot of them.

-Participant 5
When he mentions “tear[ing] down some of their…fears” [“abbattono alcune loro…paure”], he is referring to the fear of coming out. So, after having confronted the challenge of accepting oneself as gay, one’s identity changes and, as a consequence, his way of speaking as well. For Participant 5, the behavior of a recently outed man becomes “effeminate” [“effeminato”], a word whose use in this particular case reveals the deep-seated association between homosexuality and lack of masculinity, widely held by the folk. Later this same interviewee reaffirmed his hypothesis about why gay language is not universally found in the speech of gay Italian men:

Excerpt 4.1.21: “The socialized gays use it”
Allora, i gay socializzati lo usano. Quelli non socializzati non lo usano. Prima cosa. Seconda cosa, perché c’è una resistenza. Ci sono molti gay, ad esempio quelli che usano solo le chat per socializzare, che non usano queste parole. Non usano un gergo. C’è quello tecnico.

Okay, the socialized gays use it [gay men’s language]. Those who aren’t socialized don’t use it. First thing. Second thing, because there’s a resistance. There are many gays, for example those who only use dating apps to socialize, who don’t use these words. They don’t use slang. There’s the technical one.

-Participant 5

This was the most explicit comment made in all six interviews about the community of GMI speakers. His perception reaffirms Leap’s (1996) thesis and goes even further to suggest that socialization through the Internet is not enough to acquire gay language; one must apparently frequent gay bars, clubs, or other social venues in which gay men meet face-to-face. Homosexual Italian men who consider themselves discreet, in the sense that they are not out to their friends and family, but who nevertheless desire sexual experiences, are only familiar with the “technical” [“tecnico”] terms related to gay sex, to be elucidated in Section 4.1.7.

The last excerpt to be examined is rather long but full of acute perceptions regarding the origins of GMI and its speech community. Participant 6 believes that the development of gay
language is propelled by a process of identity construction on the part of gay men from southern Italy who move to Milan:

Excerpt 4.1.22: “They try to reconstruct a new identity for themselves”

Sicuramente dipende secondo me comunque un po’ dal contesto in cui vivi, cresci. Dipende da te. Secondo me in alcuni casi è veramente quasi per rivendicare qualche cosa. Anche se è fatto in maniera inconsapevole. Secondo me, come ti ho detto, io credo che tanto più appartieni- è una questione secondo me proprio anche appunto di classe sociale, nel senso in certe classi sociali...Io la vedo proprio i liberati che sono arrivati magari dal profondo sud Italia qua cosi e fanno- adesso arrivano a Milano e si sfogano. E proprio li vedi che sono dei personaggi costruiti. Cercano di ricostruirsi una loro identità che sono arrivati in città ***. Quindi tu vedi tutti che primo, quando erano ancora nelle loro famiglie, gente un po’ cicciotella, bruttarella, così. Poi arriva e vedi proprio il cambiamento, anche somatico quasi, di quando arrivano in città e poi appunto cercano di ripulirsi, nel senso rifarsi proprio un’identità. E finiscono magari dentro questa roba, ma io la vedo proprio come una cosa di non pensato, qualcosa di agito che l’hai fatto e così. Se tu invece sei già in un contesto in cui tutto sommato l’omosessualità è molto più accettata o tranquilla, cioè non hai bisogno di fatto di fare niente, magari li sarai un pochino- avrai certe cose, però...Calchi di meno i tratti. Calchi di meno i tratti.

In my opinion, it surely depends a bit on the context in which you live, you grow up. It’s up to you. In my opinion, in some cases it’s really almost meant to claim something. Even if it’s done subconsciously. In my opinion, like I told you, I believe that the more you belong- it’s a question, in my opinion, of social class as well, in the sense that in certain social classes...I see it especially in the liberated men who have arrived here maybe from the deep south of Italy and they do- they arrive now in Milan and they unload. And right there you see that they are constructed personalities. They try to reconstruct a new identity for themselves now that they’ve arrived in the city ***. So you see all of them that previously, when they were still with their families, fatties and ugly little things, like that. Then they arrive and you really see the change, almost somatic even, of when they arrive in the city and then they try to clean themselves up, in the sense of remaking their own identity. And they might end up in this stuff, but I really see it as a subconscious thing, something as an effect that you’ve done. If, on the other hand, you are already in a context in which homosexuality is much more accepted or chill, that is, you don’t need to do anything, maybe in that case you’ll be a bit- you’ll have certain things, but...You exaggerate your features less. You exaggerate your features less.

-Participant 6

Here we once again see the theory of socialization, though perhaps in a more dramatic manner: men from southern Italy who escape their conservative hometowns in order to start over in an urban center of the North. The choice of words in this passage shows a mentality that is rather common among northern Italians, which is that people from the South are typically “fatties”
[“cicciotella”] and “ugly little things” [“bruttarella”]. In fact, for Participant 6 the gay men recently arrived in the safe haven of Milan must “clean themselves up” [“ripulirsi”] in order to wash away something that he might define as their southern dirtiness.\(^{33}\) This interviewee thus sees a metamorphosis in southern men who unwittingly construct a new gay identity based on their sexual orientation, an identity that includes language as a major component. This change might also be described as a period of venting—he uses the verb sfogare, meaning “to vent” or “to unload,” given that these men have spent so much time in the closet—during which they are socialized into the Milanese gay community. Participant 6 also discusses a quite different situation in which one grows up in an environment more accepting in terms of sexuality, a sociofamilial context in which it would not be necessary to reconstruct one’s identity and, by extension, a new way of speaking.

4.1.7 Lexicon. I waited until the end of each interview, after having disclosed the linguistic nature of my research, to ask about lexical items specific to GMI. Most interviewees became quite visibly excited at the prospect of discussing gay “slang” [“gergo”] and gave me numerous examples. Often these words and phrases were historically pejorative terms used by an out-group—heterosexuals—to insult homosexual men, but it soon became apparent that most of these words were undergoing reclamation by the Italian gay community.\(^{34}\) Interviewees appeared to make a distinction between gay slang and gay ways of speaking, as most of them did not reference specific lexical items when characterizing gay language, at least not until I pointedly asked about them. This differentiation suggests that members of this particular speech community perceive slang as a separate phenomenon from everyday language use, considering

\(^{33}\) If this word choice seems indecorous, I will point out that Participant 6, in another part of his interview, calls southern Italians *terroni*, the most offensive word that a northern Italian can use to demean and insult a southerner.

\(^{34}\) For more about gay Italian men’s attitudes towards this phenomenon of linguistic reclamation, see Section 4.2.
slang a form of “casual speech” to be potentially excluded from what Preston (1998) terms “good language” in his description of the folk taxonomy, discussed in Chapter 2.

Many of my participants’ illustrations of gay slang related to epithets used to describe certain types of gay men, especially feminine men. A particular passage taken from my interview with Participant 4, by far the most loquacious of my respondents, provides many examples:

**Excerpt 4.1.23: “How to identify a particularly feminine guy”**

*Come identificare un ragazzo particolarmente femminile.* “Sei una sfranta”. “Sei una sfranta” significa “Sei molto molto gay, sei una donna, cioè ti vesti in maniera strana, hai degli atteggiamenti femminili”. Poi abbiamo “checca”, che è la stessa cosa, cioè un uomo gay è determinato come “checca”. Io personalmente se devo parlare con i miei amici gay, nel caso di un insulto, ti insulto come- non lo so, “Stai zitta che sei una sfranta”, cioè per dire- però chiaramente se me lo dicono al di fuori, cioè se mi danno del “ricchione” da una macchina, lì mi incazzo. Se me lo dà un mio amico scherzando, chiaramente no. Cioè io è raro che uso la parola “gay”. Io di solito uso la parola “finocchio”. [RISATA] Si! Cioè- ma sì, è brutto dire “È un mio amico gay”. Mi prende troppo sul personale, troppo serio. Oppure quando diciamo “Andiamo a una serata gay”, non diciamo “una serata gay”, mi chiedono “Ma è una serata frocio?” Questo è il modo di esprimersi.

How to identify a particularly feminine guy. “You are a sfranta”. “You are a sfranta” means “You are very gay, you are a woman, that is, you dress in a weird way, you have some feminine mannerisms”. Then we have “checca”, which is the same thing, that is, a gay man is determined to be a “checca”. I personally if I have to speak with my gay friends, in the case of an insult, I insult you as- I don’t know, “Shut up, you’re such a sfranta”, that is to say- but clearly if they call me that from the outside [of my friend group], I mean if they call me “ricchione” from a car, then I get pissed off. If one of my friends calls me that jokingly, clearly no. I mean, it’s rare that I use the word “gay”. I usually use the word “finocchio”. [LAUGHTER] Yeah! I mean- but yeah, it’s ugly to say “He’s a gay friend of mine”. It comes across to me as personal, too serious. Or when we say “Let’s have a gay night out”, we don’t say “a gay night out”, they ask me “So is it a frocio night out?” That’s the way we say it.

-Participant 4

There is plenty of material in this quote to discuss. First, a note on translation: the words *sfranta*, *checca*, *ricchione*, *finocchio*, and *frocio*, have all historically been used by heterosexuals to insult homosexual men. The last three in particular, *ricchione, finocchio, and frocio*, are extremely common and highly recognizable in Italy today, translating roughly as *faggot* in English, and are
still used pejoratively by straight people, as noted by Participant 4 when he mentions his experience with people calling him *ricchione* from passing cars. The first two terms, *sfranta* and *checca*, are less well-known outside the Italian gay community and refer almost exclusively to feminine gay men. Participant 4 illustrates the versatility of these two words by highlighting their use as neutral descriptors as well as good-natured insults amongst friends. His aversion to the word *gay*, by now the universal term in Italy used to denote homosexual men, surprised me, as no other interviewee made any similar comment in this regard. He prefers the words *finocchio* and *frocio*, apparently using these terms in a positive manner with his friends, demonstrating a completed process of reclamation, in that such terms are no longer negatively marked. Throughout this excerpt he uses the morphologically feminine suffixes of nouns and adjectives when referring to gay men; though some of the reclaimed epithets he uses do not exist in the masculine gender (e.g. *sfranta*, *checca*), when demonstrating a hypothetical insult to a gay friend, he uses the feminine adjective *zitta* instead of *zitto*, meaning *silent*.

Participant 1 describes the established nature of gay slang terms and repeats some of the terms mentioned by Participant 4 in the previous passage:

**Excerpt 4.1.24: “It’s very recognizable”**

Il gergo gay è molto- ormai è molto stabilizzato, è molto riconoscibile. Ci sono tante parole che hanno a che fare con la vita- si, con la vita LGBT, con gli ambienti sociali gay, o cogli stereotipi che tra di noi ci usiamo. [...] Dal semplice checca, ricchione, questo genere di parole qui, a tutte le varie categorie, per esempio io sono un musicista, e nell’ambiente dei musicisti è abbastanza famosa la melochecca che [RISATA] è una specie di omosessuale...

Gay slang is very- by now it’s very established, it’s very recognizable. There are a lot of words that have to do with the life- yeah, with LGBT life, with gay social environments, or with the stereotypes we use amongst ourselves. [...] From the simple *checca*, *ricchione*, these types of words, to all the various categories, for example I am a musician, and in the context of musicians the *melochecca* is pretty famous which [LAUGHTER] is a type of homosexual…

-Participant 1
While Participant 1 notes that many slang terms are related to gay social life, other interviewees emphasized the prevalence of words stemming from gay men’s sex lives:

Excerpt 4.1.25: “All pretty connected to the sexual environment”
Cioè, sono abbastanza tutti legati all’ambiente sessuale, quelli che conosco io. […] Per esempio, la passiva, la cosa, sì, queste cose- sì, sono tutti così, ma che usano- cioè, più specifici…. È che non frequentando locali, sono ignorante.

I mean, they’re all pretty connected to the sexual environment, the ones that I know. […] For example, the passive, the thing, yeah, these things- yeah, they’re all like that, but that use- I mean, more specific…It’s that since I don’t go out to bars, I’m ignorant.
-Participant 3

Here Participant 3 uses the feminine suffix on the word passive [“passiva”], meaning bottom in common English gay parlance, the receiving partner in anal sex. As opposed to the more standard masculine form, passivo, the feminine form appears to denote an especially feminine gay man who bottoms during sex. He also claims to be unaware of other potentially relevant slang terms since he does not frequent gay bars and clubs, an idea again related to Leap’s (1996) theory of socialization. Participant 4 even describes slang terms related to sex as “canonical” [“canonici”]:

Excerpt 4.1.26: “The canonical top, bottom, versatile”
Lasciamo perdere i canonici attivo, passivo, versatile, okay? E questa direi che è una cosa international. Ce l’abbiamo anche in altre lingue…

Let’s forget about the canonical top, bottom, versatile, okay? And this I would say is an international thing. We have it in other languages too…
-Participant 4

It makes sense that words related to sexual activity have become some of the most, if not the most, ubiquitous terms throughout the gay Italian community, just as is common in other gay communities worldwide. Indeed, in another part of his interview, Participant 4 mentions a trip he took to Belgium during which he learned the French equivalents of such terms as top, bottom, and versatile.
4.2 Attitudes toward Gay Men’s Italian

In order to answer Research Question 2, about the prevailing attitudes toward GMI, I determined the overall attitude of each interviewee by tagging their instances of Metalanguage 1 as positive, neutral, or negative. Positive refers to favorable commentary, including instances of covert prestige; negative refers to unfavorable commentary, including disapproval of GMI and its speakers; and neutral refers to indifferent commentary. Though almost every participant gave varying assessments, I was able to recognize a predominant attitude in each case, presented below:

Table 4.1 Interviewees’ attitudes toward Gay Men’s Italian

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Attitude toward GMI</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>ambivalent</td>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>ambivalent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>negative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While Participants 1, 4, and 6 expressed unequivocally negative attitudes with regard to gay language, the other three participants’ assessments were more ambiguous, including both positive, neutral, and negative elements, and I therefore assigned them “ambivalent” attitudes, as I will discuss in the following subsections.

4.2.1 Ambivalent attitudes. Because of the vacillatory nature of the comments made by Participants 2, 3, and 5, I have labelled their overall attitudes “ambivalent.” None of the comments made by any interviewee was explicitly positive to the degree that many other comments were negative, though some demonstrated covert prestige and thus appeared more positive, such as the following:
Excerpt 4.2.1: “Some fun conversations”

Mi verrebbe da dire dalle persone che frequentano locali gay e persone gay costantemente, e quindi uscendo in alcuni locali talvolta, può capitare di sentire- di assistere a, insomma, dei dialoghi un po’ simpatici.

I would say that the people who go to gay bars and constantly see gay people, and therefore going out to some bars every now and then, might hear- might witness, I guess, some fun conversations.

- Participant 2

This participant’s characterization of gay men’s “conversations” [“dialoghi”] as enjoyable was one of two overtly attitude-related comments I was able to obtain from him, the other being firmly neutral, in line with his cautiously presented perceptions, discussed in Section 4.1. Participant 3, on the other hand, made an equal number of positive comments as he did negative comments, for which I have assigned him a “ambivalent” attitude. When I first asked if it is possible to sound gay when talking, he automatically replied:

Excerpt 4.2.2: “As much as it might annoy me”

Ma diciamo sì, anche sì per quanto si può scocciare a me, sì, sì può. I can sound gay, immagino.

I mean let’s say yes, as much as it might annoy me, yes, you can [sound gay]. I can sound gay, I imagine.

- Participant 3

This passage is illustrative of the complex views held by gay men when it comes to gay language; though Participant 3 is annoyed by people who sound gay, he jokingly admits to his own ability to sound gay as well, even throwing in a phrase in English for emphasis. This negative comment is tempered by another remark he makes later in the interview:
Excerpt 4.2.3: “Breaking down the barriers between masculine and feminine”

Si! Non so, poi io ho una cosa che odio all’interno della comunità LGBT che è la discriminazione verso chi suona gay. Invece è una cosa che secondo me è fondamentale, la cosa di abbattere le barriere tra maschile e femminile. Quindi è una cosa proprio che non so come dire, che proprio apprezzo e che ne valuto il coraggio e la libertà che ne può derivare. È proprio una cosa a cui bisogna dare i valori.

Yeah! I don’t know, then there’s something I hate inside the LGBT community, which is discrimination against people that sound gay. For me it’s a fundamental thing, this thing of breaking down the barriers between masculine and feminine. So it’s really something that I don’t know how to describe it- that I really appreciate and that I value the courage and freedom that can derive from it. It’s really something that we need to give value to.

-Participant 3

By describing the phenomenon of sounding gay as a force that challenges conventional notions of masculinity and femininity, Participant 3 implies that sounding gay is not inherently masculine, reaffirming perceptions of gay language as related to effeminacy. Though he claims to support the right to sound gay and even celebrate it as a courageous act, he demonstrates a striking change of attitude when reacting to my question about morphological feminization:

Excerpt 4.2.4: “Like a diminishment of the entire fight”

Penso che se non sia questo il caso, in generale la trovo un po’ come uno sminuire tutta la lotta per- si, sono un maschio omosessuale, ma non sono una donna. Cioè la trovo comunque un po’ di- cioè, si, può far ridere, può essere una cosa simpatica chiamarsi “sorella” o così, però non è- non so, sono abbastanza bacchettone, cioè non tenderei a giocarci troppo su queste cose, cioè più che- o uno si sente tutto in un altro modo o no, diciamo. La penso così.

I think that if this isn’t the case, in general I find it a bit like a diminishment of the entire fight for- yeah, I am a homosexual male, but I am not a woman. That is, I find it in any case a bit- I mean, yeah, it can make you laugh, it can be a funny to call yourself “sister” and so on, but it’s not- I don’t know, I’m pretty much a snob, I mean I don’t tend to pay much attention to these things, I mean more than- either you feel completely different or you don’t, let’s say. That’s what I think.

-Participant 3

Though in Excerpt 4.2.3 he expresses strong aversion to those LGBT people who discriminate against gay-sounding men, here he appears to do just that, calling the use of the feminine gender on the part of men a lessening of the fight for equality. Indeed, as a self-professed activist, it is
not surprising that Participant 3’s attitudes toward GMI intertwine with his political beliefs. He seems to believe that gay men should only use feminine word endings if they personally identify as female. It should be noted that he may not have a mental concept of sounding gay and morphological feminization as related phenomena, and so his seemingly contradictory comments may not actually be in conflict after all. Even if they are, paradoxical folk attitudes can easily be explained by the folk taxonomy described by Preston (1998). In any case, this amalgamation of both positive and negative comments led to me determining his overall attitude to be ambivalent, despite the deceptively simple appearance of such a label.

I did the same for Participant 5, who employed a strikingly matter-of-fact approach in explaining various aspects of gay men’s language throughout his interview. He negatively assesses the use of the word *checca* by gay men, calling those who do so “homophobic gays” [“*gay omofobi*”]:

**Excerpt 4.2.5: “The homophobic gays use it”**
Però “*checca*” è una parola che i gay non usano. Perché “*checca*” ha una forte connotazione offensiva. Lo usano anche i gay. Lo usano i gay omofobi perché sono anche gay omofobi, o anche inconsapevolmente omofobi. Ma non è molto usata. È una parola che ha un certo impatto derisorio, offensivo perché “*checca*” è la parola tipica con cui un maschio eterosessuale insulta un uomo effeminato in generale o anche un gay.

However, “*checca*” is a word that the gays don’t use. Because “*checca*” has a strong offensive connotation. It’s also used by the gays. The homophobic gays use it because there are also homophobic gays, or at least unwittingly homophobic. But it’s not very used. It’s a word that has a certain derisive impact, offensive because “*checca*” is the typical word that a heterosexual male uses to insult an effeminate man in general or also a gay man.

-Participant 5

But he later offers a more neutral stance on the use of feminine words between gay men:
Excerpt 4.2.6: “If I call one of my [male] friends a whore, it’s very different”

Ad esempio, se io do della puttana a un mio amico, è molto diverso che se do della puttana a una mia amica. Se do della puttana a una mia amica, la offendo. Magari è stata detta scherzosamente- probabilmente si usa anche. Non lo so. Queste cose cambiano col tempo, però non me la sento di dare della puttana a una mia amica perché quella è anche se vuoi- si diventa maschilisti, se vuoi, nel momento in cui si usa un certo... Mentre invece dare della puttana a un mio amico, non faccio nessun problema. O se un mio amico mi dà della puttana anche se non lo sono, non faccio nessun problema.

For example, if I call one of my [male] friends a whore, it’s very different than if I call one of my [female] friends a whore. If I call one of my [female] friends a whore, I’ll offend her. Maybe it was said jokingly- it’s probably even used. I don’t know. These things change over time, but I would not feel comfortable calling one of my [female] friends a whore because that is also if you will- you become sexist, if you will, the moment you use a certain... While on the other hand I can call one of my [male] friends a whore, no problem. Or if one of my [male] friends calls me a whore even if I’m not, I don’t care.

-Participant 5

While both checca and puttana are grammatically feminine nouns, the attitudes expressed by Participant 5 highlight intricate views regarding what kind of language is acceptable within the Italian gay community. According to him, a historically pejorative word used by heterosexuals against homosexual men, checca [“faggot”], should be off-limits, while a historically pejorative word used by men against women, puttana [“whore”], is perfectly acceptable when used in gay male settings, demonstrating evidence of covert prestige.

4.2.2 Negative attitudes. Participants 1, 4, and 6 made almost exclusively negative assessments of GMI, each for unique reasons. Besides defining such language as “ridiculous” [“caricaturale”], Participant 6 disapproves of its artificial nature:
Excerpt 4.2.7: “It ends up as something extremely fake”

To me- I mean, sometimes- I mean, in small doses I’m okay with it, in the sense that it even makes me laugh. In other cases I find it excessive, just as I also find excessive the desire to talk- but I don’t know if it’s because everyone in Milan is a terrone in the end, which means that they all come from southern Italy, and that when they get here they have to try to refine themselves, so they try to modify their way of speaking, the language. However it ends up as something extremely fake, which then if you are open about being homosexual, it almost turns into something ridiculous. Yeah, those are the things that annoy me a bit in the sense that anyway…Nothing against them, for goodness’ sake everyone ***, however I will say- I mean that there’s nothing different between being homosexual, heterosexual. You could easily talk without certain affectations or certain things…

-Participant 6

Although this participant begins by citing the humorous nature of GMI, this positive comment is quickly tempered by several negative attitudes. In this excerpt he repeats his conviction that gay language is perpetuated by southern Italian men who move to Milan to remake their identities in an accepting environment. This time he states that the language used by this community bothers him and is unnecessary in everyday speech, holding that such men could “easily talk without certain affectations” [“potresti parlare tranquillamente senza fare certe moine”]. Despite openly expressing his annoyance at the use of this language variety, calling its speakers “terroni,” he claims to have no problem with the gay men who use it.

Participant 4’s negative criticisms of gay language stem from its indexicality of feminine attributes in its speakers. Though he enthusiastically admits to using gay slang terms with his
friends, as discussed in 4.1.7, his attitudes here seem to contradict his own usage, as he personally is not attracted to feminine gay men:

**Excerpt 4.2.8:** “I don’t want a would-be woman”

Quindi magari le vecchie personalità, sì, hanno dei modi di muoversi, dei modi di porsi verso le altre persone che sono molto femminili e che io non cercherei nemmeno in un altro ragazzo perché sicuramente se mi piace un uomo non voglio un uomo con diciamo delle particolarità femminili. Secondo me è questo. Se condividi l’idea- cioè- è brutto da dire perché sembra quasi una discriminazione interna, però una donna mancata non la voglio. Questo è il punto.

So maybe the old characters, yeah, have some ways of moving, some ways of interacting with other people that are very feminine that I would not even look for in another guy because without a doubt if I like men, I don’t want a man with some feminine features. In my opinion that’s it. If you share the idea- that is- it’s awful to say because it almost seems like an internal discrimination, but I don’t want a would-be woman. That’s the point.

-Participant 4

Just as he dislikes men with feminine characteristics, particularly those who interact with others in feminine ways, Participant 4 denounces the use of morphologically feminine words on the part of gay men:

**Excerpt 4.2.9:** “That is something that really annoys me”

Oppure l’utilizzo del femminile riferito a un uomo. Cioè, questa è una cosa che a me in particolare dà fastidio. Ripeto, se in ambito scherzoso, no. Però siccome alcuni ragazzi vengono e mi dicono “Oh guarda, la [nome del partecipante]”. No, allora, signore Dio mi ha dotato di un pisello, di una barba, e [RISATA] di un’identità maschile. Te ne prego??? da uomo di darmi del maschile, non del femminile. Quello mi dà molto fastidio...

Or the use of the feminine in reference to a man. I mean, that is something that really annoys me. I repeat, if in a joking context, no. But since some guys come up to me and say “Oh look, la [participant’s name]”. No, okay, the lord God endowed me with a dick, with a beard, and [LAUGHTER] with a male identity. I ask you, as a man, to use the masculine [forms] with me, not the feminine [forms]. That really annoys me...

-Participant 4

This excerpt is fascinating because it directly contradicts the examples he gives of gay slang that include feminine terms, again displaying the complex nature of folk language ideologies. Here he is particularly opposed to the feminization of his name—omitted to protect his anonymity—
which is achieved by some gay men who add the feminine definite article *la* and change the last vowel of his name to *a*. He feels that as a biological male, other people should respect his sex and call him what he is: a man. The only exception would come in the context of humor, relating back to folk perceptions of gay language’s usage; this means that amongst friends, it is okay to for gay men to use feminine forms, as long as no one seriously insinuates that they identify as female.

The last interviewee to hold predominantly negative attitudes is Participant 1, who was largely opposed to the exclusive use of gay language by men:

**Excerpt 4.2.10: “It seems so silly to adopt only one”**  
*Che il linguaggio così gay mi infastidisce quando è l’unico modo- quando è l’unica modalità che una persona ha per esprimersi. Trovo che sia molto divertente, molto espressivo, e che effettivamente ci sono delle cose che puoi dire solo in quel modo lì, però trovo-insomma, mi sembra più sano se una persona può giocare con i vari registri linguistici che possiede e uno dei registri sia il registro gay, no? Più che altro, l’italiano poi è una lingua che ha talmente tanti registri che è talmente sciocco adottarne uno solo, o eleggerne uno solo come proprio registro personale.*

Such gay language annoys me when it’s the only way- when it’s the only mode that a person has for expressing himself. I find that it’s very fun, very expressive, and that effectively there are some things that you can say only in that particular way, but I find- I mean, it seems healthier to me if someone can play with the various linguistic registers that he possesses, one of those registers being the gay register, right? More than anything, Italian is a language that has so many registers that it seems so silly to adopt only one of them, or elect only one of them as your own personal register.

-Participant 1

Here Participant 1 demonstrates an understanding of multicompetency, objecting to gay language only when a speaker uses it at the expense of other linguistic styles or varieties. Though he does not describe the specific men who do this, he implies that they are out there somewhere and that he has had enough contact with them to know that he disapproves of their language usage.

In this chapter I have presented the results of my interviews with gay Italian men, providing numerous excerpts of metalinguistic folk commentary. In the the following, and final,
chapter, I discuss these findings as they relate to my original research questions about perceptions of and attitudes toward Gay Men’s Italian.
Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

Throughout this paper I have presented metalinguistic commentary drawn from sociolinguistic interviews with six self-identified gay Italian men to answer my two research questions about perceptions of and attitudes toward gay language in Italy. In the following subsections, 5.1 and 5.2, I synthesize my results before considering possible ideas for future research in this area.

5.1 General Perceptions of Gay Men’s Italian

According to the qualitative interview data presented in Chapter 4, there are differing views as to which linguistic features characterize gay men’s speech. This is especially true of perceptions relating to femininity, as there seems to be a divide amongst gay Italian men as to the presence of parallels between women’s language and gay language. Speakers are believed to acquire proficiency in this variety for one or more of the following reasons: socialization into an urban gay community, the necessity to defend oneself from homophobic attacks in conservative regions, and expressive efficiency and/or comfort in such a variety. In addition, many gay men deny the existence of gay-specific topics of conversations while some believe that gay men tend to discuss more sexually explicit subjects than straight men.

That being said, interview participants throughout this project agreed on several other features of this language variety. In particular, GMI is believed to exist as a recognizable variety that indexes the sexual orientation of its speakers. One of its most commonly perceived features is the morphological feminization of adjectives and nouns referring to gay men, as well as the
feminization of proper names. In addition, its speakers are thought to possess a higher tone of voice, which is associated with effeminacy. Finally, lexical items prevalent in gay men’s speech commonly include historically pejorative terms, both those used by the out-group (e.g. *ricchione, frocio, finocchio*) as well as the in-group (e.g. *sfranta, checca*). The folk’s recognition of these words’ presence within in-group discourse and their ability to be used positively by some gay men suggest a process of reclamation that is ongoing.

The perceived linguistic features described by my research participants correspond well to the observed features of gay men’s language in Xalapa, Mexico (Rodríguez, 2015). By creating recordings of conversations between gay men, Rodríguez was able to identity and analyze indexical markers in their speech that helped them to construct a gay identity through language. One the largest parallels between her observed speech and the folk perceptions in my study is the use of morphologically feminine lexical items. My findings suggest the use of feminine forms amongst gay men as one of the most definitively distinctive aspects of GMI. While a similar study based on recorded language would need to be conducted in Italy to confirm the actual presence of such features in gay men’s speech, given these similarities between my research and the Xalapa study, it seems safe to say that gay Italian men are probably adept at perceiving at least some of the most common aspects of this sociolect, not to mention those features that most diverge from the heterosexual standard.

In addition, my results indicate a higher propensity amongst gay men to engage in sexually explicit dialogue, both through discourse and the use of sex-related terms, a feature noted in the Xalapa study as well (Rodríguez, 2015). The use of these sex-related lexical items helps to illustrate how gay Italian men construct their social identities based on a shared desire

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35 To my knowledge this is the only extant study that has attempted to delineate the parameters of a gay male sociolect through observation.
for same-sex contact. Such an approach to identity construction would reconcile the seemingly incongruous perspectives of Leap (1996) and Cameron and Kulick (2003), who place emphasis on identity and desire, respectively, as vital factors underlying gay language. I propose that gay social identity cannot exist without sexual desire, as to identify as gay one must be attracted to members of the same sex. On the other hand, gay sexual desire can and does exist independent of a social identity, as discussed in 4.1.6, for many gay men do not use gay language and may not even be aware of its existence.

Folk perceptions regarding who exactly speaks GMI and why support previous research done on Gay English (e.g. Leap, 1996). Men who have integrated themselves into a gay social group, such as the gay community of Milan, become exposed to new linguistic forms that may be acquired after prolonged contact. A case in point is that of southern Italian men who reconstruct their identities through language in the more open urban centers of the North. Conversely, gay men who remain closeted, for whatever reason, but still desire same-sex interaction, may be familiar with sex-related terminology but are unlikely to employ any other features of the gay sociolect in order to avoid detection in everyday life.

5.2 General Attitudes toward Gay Men’s Italian

Though my findings present conflicting attitudes within the Italian gay community with regard to this variety, an important point to highlight is a paucity of positive commentary. Several men cited gay language as funny and enjoyable and that it could make them laugh, and these positive attitudes should definitely be considered evidence of covert prestige. Half of the men interviewed held vacillating attitudes, including both neutral, positive, and negative views, collectively labeled as “ambivalent” for the purpose of this research, while the other half held staunchly negative attitudes. The tendency to regard GMI unfavorably, even when admitting to
personal usage, indicates that gay men consider this variety to possess low status. Those men who admit to using gay language as a mode of humorous banter demonstrate covert prestige, common amongst nonstandard varieties in general, but this prestige is clearly not shared by all speakers.

After having analyzed both the perceptions and attitudes of gay Italian men, I would like to propose GMI as a nonstandard variety, evinced by its small community of speakers, covert prestige, and controversial in-group standing, the latter due to the use of pejorative terms and feminine forms more than anything else. Indeed, the most fiercely negative views I obtained had to do with the reclamation of derogatory words on the part of some gay men, even though such linguistic reclamation may be considered a positive step forward by those who use such terms, just as Cory (1951/2006) theorized. Gay men’s language in Italy is also associated with effeminacy through a link drawn between perceived higher voice pitch and the use of feminine lexical items; as one participant pointed out, as a gay man he is attracted to other men, not a “would-be woman” [“una donna mancata”]. Perceptions of effeminacy render this sociolect a target of negative assessment both in-group, despite comments made criticizing in-group linguistic discrimination, as well as out-group.

These findings diverge from earlier work done in attitudes toward Gay American English (e.g. Mann, 2011), which found roughly equal amounts of positive and negative in-group attitudes. For instance, positive assessments of GAE were often based on the idea of gay speakers as more intelligent and educated than their straight counterparts, though no such connection was found in the current study of GMI. That being said, negative assessments of GMI as effeminate do resemble previous research, as GAE was found to suffer a lack of status and solidarity because of its effeminate traits (Mann, 2011). My results indicate highly conservative
cultural attitudes toward homosexuality in Italy, where tradition, largely sustained by the Catholic Church, has discouraged coming out and continues to castigate effeminacy, especially in rural areas. This mentality extends into the gay community of Milan, where some men claim to support gay language as a mechanism of creative self-expression, while others criticize it for holding back progress for the community at large. This interpretation of GMI as a hindrance to LGBT political equality highlights its nonstandard status as well as a continuing debate over the propriety of its covert prestige and general usage.

5.3 Final Thoughts

In this thesis I have concentrated on a language variety used by gay men in Italy, a variety I have termed “Gay Men’s Italian.” By investigating folk perceptions of this sociolect as well as attitudes held toward it, I have strived to demonstrate how gay men conceptualize their own language and that of others in their community, while also illustrating the in-group social status assigned to this mode of speaking. The actual existence of a gay variety of Italian has yet to be determined by sociolinguistic study, and indeed I have attempted to avoid reifying a gay Italian sociolect by presenting folk perceptions and attitudes. This is certainly an important direction for future research to take because as I mentioned in Chapter 1, the vast majority of sociolinguistic work relating to LGBT language varieties has been carried out in Anglophone communities. As LGBT people and communities are present the world over, there is still much to be understood about any potential similarities between them, and perhaps more interestingly, their differences, as Leap (2002) points out that not all LGBT people “share a commonality of subjectivity” (p. 139). In addition, this study’s support of the theory of language socialization should encourage further work in this area, as the external cultural pressures related to acceptance or disapproval of homosexuality in a certain social context are undoubtedly
interwoven with an individual’s likelihood to come out and/or experience contact with LGBT language varieties.
References


## Appendix A: Transcription Conventions

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<th>…</th>
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<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>abrupt pause</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>***</td>
<td>unintelligible speech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[RISATA] / [LAUGHTER]</td>
<td>laughter</td>
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Appendix B: Consent Form (Italian)

Dichiarazione di consenso

College of William and Mary

Protocollo: StudentIRB-2014-12-07-9986-ifosiapem

Titolo: Tesi di laurea: Identità e cultura gay in Italia

Investigatore principale: Davis Richardson

Io, ________________________________________________________, ho ricevuto le informazioni seguenti al riguardo della mia partecipazione in questo studio:

1. **Scopo della ricerca:** Imparare delle identità e le esperienze personali di uomini gay italiani.
2. **Procedura da seguire:** Come partecipante a questo studio, ti sarà chiesto di fare parte di un’intervista che consisterà di domande sulla tua vita come uomo gay in Italia oggi giorno. L’audio dell’intervista sarà registrato per uso futuro da parte dell’investigatore.
3. **Fastidi e rischi:** C’è un rischio minimo associato a questo studio. Discutere l’esperienza del coming out può scatenare ricordi dolorosi; per questo motivo puoi rifiutare di rispondere a qualsiasi domanda e/o ritirarti dallo studio a qualsiasi punto.
4. **Durazione:** La partecipazione a questo studio durerà circa un’ora.
5. **Accordo di riservatezza:** I tuoi dati personali rimarranno anonimi. I tuoi dati non saranno associati con il tuo nome affinché le tue risposte non possano essere collegate al tuo nome in nessun modo. Le informazioni identificative non saranno usate nel prodotto finale o in qualsiasi presentazione accademica seguente. Tutti i dati e dichiarazioni di consenso saranno archiviati su un computer accessibile esclusivamente all’investigatore.
6. **Partecipazione volontaria:** La partecipazione è volontaria. Sei libero di ritirarti dallo studio senza pena o perdita di benefici. Puoi scegliere di saltare qualsiasi domanda.
7. **Incentivo per la partecipazione:** I partecipanti non saranno compensati per la loro partecipazione.
8. **Benefici potenziali:** Non ci sono benefici conosciuti associati con la partecipazione a questo studio. Però la tua partecipazione contribuisce allo sviluppo della nostra comprensione delle esperienze degli uomini gay in Italia.
9. **Terminazione di partecipazione:** L’investigatore può terminare la partecipazione del partecipante se è determinato che il partecipante non è capace di completare i compiti richiesti.
10. **Domande o interessamenti** al riguardo della partecipazione a questa ricerca dovrebbero essere rivolti a: Dr. Jones +1 (757) 221-1693.
Io sono consapevole di dover avere almeno 18 anni d’età per partecipare a questo progetto.

Io sono consapevole di poter riferire le mie insoddisfazioni con qualsiasi aspetto di questo studio a Dr. Ray McCoy, Ph.D., il Presidente della Commissione per la Protezione dei Soggetti Umani, telefonicamente [+1 (757) 221-2783] o via email (rwmcco@wm.edu).

Io concordo di partecipare a questo studio e dichiaro di aver letto tutte le informazioni fornite in questo documento. La mia firma conferma che la mia partecipazione a questo progetto è volontaria.

_________________________________________________________________________ data _____________
Firma del partecipante

_________________________________________________________________________ data _____________
Firma del testimone

QUESTO PROGETTO SI ATTIENE AI REQUISITI ETICI APPROPRIATI ED È STATO ESONERATO DAL BISOGNO DI UN ESAME FORMALE DA PARTE DELLA COMMISSIONE PER LA PROTEZIONE DEI SOGGETTI UMANI DEL COLLEGE OF WILLIAM AND MARY (telefono +1 757-221-3966) IL 15 MAGGIO 2015 E SCADRÀ IL 15 MAGGIO 2016.
Appendix C: Consent Form (English)

Research Participation Informed Consent Form

Charles Center Interdisciplinary Program

College of William and Mary

Protocol: StudentIRB-2014-12-07-9986-ifosiapem

Title: Honors Thesis: Gay Identity and Culture in Italy

Principal Investigators: Davis Richardson

This is to certify that I, ____________________________, have been given the following information with respect to my participation in this study:

1. **Purpose of the research**: To ascertain the personal identities of gay Italian men and contextualize them within greater Italian culture.
2. **Procedure to be followed**: As a participant in this study, you will be asked to participate in an informal interview, during which you will be asked questions about your experiences living as a gay man in Italy. The interview will be audio-recorded for future reference by the researcher.
3. **Discomforts and risks**: There is a minimal risk associated with this study. Discussing the coming out process can trigger painful memories, and so you may choose to not answer any question or withdraw at any time.
4. **Duration of participation**: Participation in this study will take approximately 1 hour.
5. **Statement of confidentiality**: Your data will remain anonymous. Your data will not be associated with your name so that your responses cannot be linked to your name in any way. Identifying information will not be used in the final product or in any subsequent academic presentations. All data will be stored on a password-protected computer, and consent forms will be stored separately in a locked container accessible exclusively to the researcher.
6. **Voluntary participation**: Participation is voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. You may choose to skip any question.
7. **Incentive for participation**: Participants will not be compensated for their participation.
8. **Potential benefits**: There are no known benefits of participating in the study. However, your participation in this research will contribute to the development of our understanding about the experiences of gay men in Italy.
9. **Termination of participation**: Participation may be terminated by the experimenter if it is deemed that the participant is unable to perform the tasks presented.
10. **Questions or concerns** regarding participation in this research should be directed to: Dr. Jones +1 (757) 221-1693.

**I am aware that I must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this project.**

I am aware that I may report dissatisfactions with any aspect of this study to Dr. Ray McCoy, Ph.D., the Chair of the Protection of Human Subjects Committee, by telephone [+1 (757) 221-2783] or email (rwmcco@wm.edu).

I agree to participate in this study and have read all the information provided on this form. My signature below confirms that my participation in this project is voluntary, and that I have received a copy of this consent form.

_________________________________________________________ date______________
Signature

_________________________________________________________ date______________
Witness

**THIS PROJECT WAS FOUND TO COMPLY WITH APPROPRIATE ETHICAL STANDARDS AND WAS EXEMPTED FROM THE NEED FOR FORMAL REVIEW BY THE COLLEGE OF WILLIAM AND MARY PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS COMMITTEE (Phone 757-221-3966) ON 2015-05-15 AND EXPIRES ON 2016-05-15.**
Appendix D: Debriefing Form (Italian)

Modulo di debriefing

College of William and Mary

Protocollo: StudentIRB-2014-12-07-9986-ifosiapem

Titolo: Tesi di laurea: Identità e cultura gay in Italia

Investigatore principale: Davis Richardson

A questo punto nello studio, ci sono altri dettagli che ti devono essere comunicati. Si prega di leggere tutte le informazioni incluse in questo modulo di debriefing e di chiedere all’investigatore qualsiasi domanda prima di continuare con la tua partecipazione in questo studio. Ti sarà fornita una copia di questo documento.

La dichiarazione di consenso che hai firmato prima ti ha informato che avresti partecipato a uno studio che esamina le esperienze personali degli uomini gay in Italia. Non hai saputo allora che il fulcro dello studio è l’uso di linguaggio da parte degli uomini gay in Italia.

La seconda parte dello studio non ti richiederà più tempo. Durante questa fase l’investigatore compierà un’analisi linguistica dettagliata dell’intervista alla quale hai già partecipato. Poi l’investigatore ascolterà le registrazioni in cerca dei tuoi atteggiamenti verso il linguaggio usato dagli uomini gay.

Per preservare l’integrità dello studio, l’investigatore vorrebbe chiederti di non divulgare il fulcro specifico del progetto a partecipanti potenziali che non ci hanno ancora partecipato. Se hai altre domande sullo studio, se vorresti ricevere una copia del prodotto finale, e/o se vorresti consigliare alcuni partecipanti potenziali all’investigatore, puoi utilizzare le informazioni di contatto seguenti:

   Davis Richardson  
   Email: adrichardson01@email.wm.edu  
   Telefono: +1 (540) 479-0262 (WhatsApp)

Se hai qualsiasi domanda al riguardo dei tuoi diritti come soggetto di ricerca, puoi contattare: Dr. Ray McCoy, Ph.D., il Presidente della Commissione per la Protezione dei Soggetti Umani, telefonicamente [+1 (757) 221-2783] o via email (rwmcc@wm.edu).
La partecipazione ulteriore a questo studio è volontaria. Sei libero di ritirare i tuoi dati dell’intervista a qualsiasi momento nel futuro, per qualsiasi motivo, senza nessuna conseguenza negativa. Nel caso che tu voglia ritirarti dallo studio, le tue informazioni già fornite rimarranno anonime.

“Io ho letto il contenuto di questo modulo di debriefing e sono stato incoraggiato di porre domande di comprensione all’investigatore. Io ho dato il mio consenso di continuare la partecipazione a questo studio tramite il permettere all’investigatore di includere estratti testuali della mia intervista nel prodotto finale. Io riceverò una copia di questo modulo.”

__________________________________________________ data ________________ Firma del partecipante

__________________________________________________ data ________________ Firma del testimone

QUESTO PROGETTO SI ATTIENE AI REQUISITI ETICI APPROPRIATI ED È STATO ESONERATO DAL BISOGNO DI UN ESAME FORMALE DA PARTE DELLA COMMISSIONE PER LA PROTEZIONE DEI SOGGETTI UMANI DEL COLLEGE OF WILLIAM AND MARY (telefono +1 757-221-3966) IL 15 MAGGIO 2015 E SCADRÀ IL 15 MAGGIO 2016.
Appendix E: Debriefing Form (English)

Research Study Interview Participant Debrief Form

Charles Center Interdisciplinary Program

College of William and Mary

Protocol: StudentIRB-2014-12-07-9986-ifosiapem

Title: Honors Thesis: Gay Identity and Culture in Italy

Principal Investigators: Davis Richardson

At this point in the study, there are additional details about the research that need to be relayed to you. Please read all of the information on this debrief form carefully and ask the researcher any questions that you may have before making a decision to continue your participation in this study. You will be provided with a copy of this form for your records.

The initial consent form you signed informed you that you would be participating in a study examining the personal experiences of gay men living in Italy. You were not informed at that time that the more specific focus of the study is gay men’s use of language in Italy.

The second part of the study will not involve any further time on your part. During this phase of the study, the investigator will conduct a detailed linguistic analysis of the interview in which you have already participated. The investigator will listen to the tapes looking for your attitudes toward gay men’s usage of Italian.

In order to preserve the integrity of the study, the researcher would like to ask you to not divulge the specific focus of the study to potential participants who have not yet taken part. If you have further questions about the study, would like to receive a copy of the final product, and/or if you would like to put potential participants in contact with the researcher, you may use the following contact information:

    Davis Richardson
    Email: adrichardson01@email.wm.edu
    Phone: +1 (540) 479-0262 (WhatsApp)

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact:
Dr. Ray McCoy, Ph.D., the Chair of the Protection of Human Subjects Committee, by telephone [+1 (757) 221-2783] or email (rwmcco@wm.edu).

Further participation in this study is voluntary. You are free to withdraw your interview data at any time, for whatever reason, without negative consequences. In the event that you do withdraw from this study, the information you have already provided will be kept in an anonymous manner.

“I have read the contents of this debrief form and have been encouraged to ask questions. I have received answers to my questions. I give my consent to continue my participation in this study by allowing the researcher to include anonymous textual excerpts of my interview in the study’s final product. I will receive a copy of this form for my records and future reference.”

__________________________________________________ date ______________ Signature

__________________________________________________ date ______________ Witness

THIS PROJECT WAS FOUND TO COMPLY WITH APPROPRIATE ETHICAL STANDARDS AND WAS EXEMPTED FROM THE NEED FOR FORMAL REVIEW BY THE COLLEGE OF WILLIAM AND MARY PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS COMMITTEE (Phone 757-221-3966) ON 2015-05-15 AND EXPIRES ON 2016-05-15.
Appendix F: Interview Schedule (Italian)\textsuperscript{36}

1. Perché non mi racconti un po’ di te?
   a. Quanti anni hai?
   b. Dove sei nato?
      [Se a Milano:] Hai mai vissuto altrove?
      [Sennò:] Da quanto tempo abiti a Milano? Perché ti sei trasferito qui?
   c. Che lavoro fai? Hai sempre fatto questo lavoro?
      [Se non è studente]: Qual è il più alto livello di istruzione che hai raggiunto?
2. Raccontami del tuo rapporto con la tua famiglia.
3. Quando ti sei accorto di essere gay?
4. Sei dichiarato?
   [Se si:] Raccontami un po’ del coming out—chi è stata la prima persona a sapere della tua sessualità; se c’è qualcuno con cui non ne hai ancora parlato; etc.
   [Sennò:] Ci sono dei motivi specifici per cui non hai ancora parlato della tua sessualità con gli altri?
5. Come sono i tuoi amici?
   a. Hai diversi gruppi di amici in base a dove lavori, alla tua città di nascita, ecc.?
6. Che cosa fai nel tempo libero?
7. Partecipi a delle attività sociali con altra gente LGBT?
   [Se c’è bisogno di esempi:] Pride, bar/discoteche gay, spettacoli di drag, attivismo LGBT, Arcigay, etc.
8. Secondo te, gli uomini gay hanno interessi diversi dagli uomini etero?
9. Come fai a determinare se qualcuno è gay?
10. È possibile capire che qualcuno è gay solo sentendolo parlare?
11. Come caratterizzeresti il modo in cui gli uomini gay parlano?
12. Che cosa vuol dire se qualcuno “suona gay”?
   a. Cosa pensi delle persone che suonano gay?
   b. Secondo te, tu suoni gay?
   c. I tuoi amici?
   d. Secondo te, suonare gay porta vantaggi o svantaggi?
   [Se la risposta a #12b è sì, continua a #13; sennò, salta a #14.]
   [Svelare lo scopo linguistico del progetto]
13. Come pensi di aver sviluppato questo modo gay di parlare?
14. Secondo te perché non hai mai sviluppato un modo gay di parlare?
15. Perché alcuni uomini suonano gay ma altri no?
16. Quali sono alcuni degli argomenti più comuni nelle conversazioni tra uomini gay?
17. Mi potresti dare degli esempi delle parole o frasi più usate dagli uomini gay?

\textsuperscript{36} The order of questions varied somewhat across each interview, as I sought to make each interview flow without revisiting any previously discussed topics.
Appendix G: Interview Schedule (English)

1. Why don’t we start with you telling me a bit about yourself?
   a. How old are you?
   b. Where were you born?
      [If match with Milan:] Have you ever lived anywhere else?
      [If not:] How long have you lived in Milan? What brought you here?
   c. What do you do for a living? Have you always done that?
      [If not a student]: What is the highest level of education that you have completed?
2. Tell me a bit about your relationship with your family.
3. When did you realize you were gay?
4. Do you consider yourself out?
   [If yes:] Tell me about your coming out process—who was the first person you came out to; if there is anyone you have not yet told, etc.
   [If no:] Are there any particular reasons you have not told certain people about your sexuality?
5. What are your friends like?
   a. Do you have different friend groups based on where you work, your hometown, etc.?
6. What do you do in your free time?
7. Do you participate in any kind of social activities with other LGBTQ people?
   [If examples are needed:] Gay pride events, gay bars/clubs, drag shows, LGBT activism/Arcigay, etc.
8. Do you think gay men have different interests than straight men?
9. How can you tell if someone is gay?
10. Is it possible to tell if someone is gay by the way he speaks?
11. How would you characterize the way gay men speak?
12. What does it mean to “sound gay”?
   a. What do you think about people who sound gay?
   b. Do you think you sound gay?
   c. Do your friends?
   d. In your opinion, are there advantages or disadvantages to sounding gay?
   [If answer to #12b is yes, continue to #13; if no, skip to #14.]
   [Debriefing of linguistic focus]
13. How do you think you acquired a way of speaking that sounds gay?
14. Why do you think you never acquired a way of speaking that sounds gay?
15. What do you believe to be the reason that some gay men sound gay and others don’t?
16. What are some of the most common topics of conversation in the gay community?
17. Could you give some examples of the most common words or phrases used by gay men?