

The linguistic negotiation of heterosexuality in the same-sex marriage movement

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The Linguistic Negotiation of Heterosexuality in the Same-Sex Marriage Movement

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Introduction

The heated debate over same-sex marriage has been mired in linguistic controversy. Ideas about the importance of key words and concepts and their salience for social and political discourse have become central to the debate, even being a defining factor in constitutionality, constitutional amendments, and lawsuits and appeals nationwide. This debate is often framed in binary terms of gay versus straight. But many supporters and participants within the same-sex marriage movement are not gay or lesbian. This paper examines heterosexual participation within this movement and the ways linguistic tools are used by these individuals to negotiate their presence and participation in relation to their non-normative sexuality within this context.

1 Same-Sex Marriage in California: The Case of Proposition 8

The issue of same-sex marriage in the United States has arguably been most prominent in California. In 2000, the state's voters passed the California Defense of Marriage Act, known as Proposition 22, which amended the Family Code to prohibit the state from recognizing same-sex marriage. In protest against the law, San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom declared in February 2004 that same-sex marriage would be allowed within the City and County of San Francisco, but the marriages were later annulled by the California State Supreme Court, which ruled they were in opposition to state law. Later that year, Massachusetts became the first state in the nation to legalize same-sex marriages, and currently four other states (Connecticut, Iowa, New Hampshire, and Vermont) as well as Washington, D.C. have followed suit. In addition, Rhode Island, New York, Maryland, and in some cases California, recognize same-sex marriages from other states, but do not

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perform them.¹

Many legal battles concerning California's Proposition 22 followed, with several same-sex couples suing the state of California over the constitutionality of Proposition 22. In early 2008, the California Supreme Court deemed the law unconstitutional, and between June 16, 2008 and November 4, 2008, same-sex marriages were legally performed throughout California. During this time, a voter initiative known as Proposition 8 was placed on the November 2008 ballot to alter the state Constitution with the exact words of Proposition 22: "Only marriage between a man and a woman is legal and recognized in California."²

On November 4, 2008, California's Proposition 8 passed by a 52 to 48 percent vote, which repealed the right of same-sex couples to legally wed in California. This created a social and political setback to the marriage equality movement and left the estimated 18,000 same-sex couples who had gotten married uncertain of the legal status of their marriages. The Supreme Court ruled that the same-sex marriages legally performed between June 16, 2008 and November 4, 2008 would still be recognized within California, though this decision is considered problematic in light of the wording of the state Constitution. In late 2009, a lawsuit was filed in the 9th Circuit Court "to determine if California's same-sex marriage ban violates the Constitution."³ In a trial in early 2010, Judge Vaughn Walker determined that Proposition 8 was in violation of the U.S. Constitution, and at the time of publication, the case was being considered by a federal appeals court. The court case is ultimately expected to reach the U.S. Supreme Court.

2 Heterosexuality in Previous Research

Same-sex marriage has direct ties to issues of not only homosexuality, but heterosexuality as well. Research in language and sexuality has tended to be concerned with non-dominant sexualities (Livia and Hall 1997; Campbell-Kibler, Podesva, Roberts, and Wong 2002), and within this body of work, research is most commonly found to study gay men. Linguistic research on sexuality that pertains to heterosexuality, though increasing in scope and interest, has been more sparse and often entails underlying questions about gender (cf. Cameron and Kulick 2003). Scott Kiesling's (2002, 2005) work among fraternity men has been important for gender and sexuality research on heterosexuality in many ways, marking a key shift away from traditional linguistic research on gender that takes male identity, masculinity, and heterosexuality as normative or unmarked. Kiesling's work compares men not to women but to each other and examines the ways a heterosexual identity may be created among men, not merely taken as a given.

¹ Source: NCSL National Conference of State Legislatures: <http://www.ncsl.org/IssuesResearch/HumanServices/SameSexMarriage/tabid/16430/Default.aspx>

² Source: California Secretary of State Website: www.sos.ca.gov.

³ Source: New York Times. *Date Set for Proposition 8 Trial Final Arguments*. April 29, 2010.

Other language-oriented research has also brought heterosexual identity to the forefront in various ways. Eliason's (2003) work on heterosexual identity formation found that a majority of heterosexuals have a marked lack of identity awareness, taking their sexuality for granted. More recent research shows the ways that heterosexual identities are constructed and negotiated through talk-in-interaction (e.g. Kitzinger 2005) and how heterosexual desire is expressed linguistically (Mortensen 2010).

Throughout such research, the focus remains on heterosexuality as a dominant sexual identity, with attention often paid to issues of heteronormativity and heterosexism. This paper expands sexuality research by focusing on heterosexual participants in an environment in which their sexual identity is non-dominant: the same-sex marriage movement. Here a unique situation arises in which the dominant social group (heterosexuals) is positioned in an environment populated and controlled predominantly by individuals who claim a minority (homosexual) identity.

While the same-sex marriage movement is primarily concerned with the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community, amidst shifting societal views, there is a need to understand heterosexuality and heterosexual participation in the same-sex marriage debate, as heterosexuals make up the vast majority of the population and are increasingly accepting of same-sex marriage in American society.⁴ This paper uses the tools of corpus linguistics to examine a context in which heterosexuality is non-normative by looking at how heterosexual supporters of the same-sex marriage movement discursively represent their identities and negotiate their participation as minorities in a predominantly homosexual setting.

3 Methodology and Corpus Design: The MEUSA Corpus

The data source for this study is Marriage Equality, USA (MEUSA), an organization with a longstanding presence in the movement for same-sex marriage rights. MEUSA is a non-profit grassroots organization working to legalize same-sex marriage in several states and at the federal level. Based in the San Francisco Bay Area, MEUSA has been actively involved in California's efforts to legalize same-sex marriage for many years, including working on the No on Prop 8 campaign and the subsequent legal battles that continue today. One aspect of their operation includes getting feedback on many topics related to same-sex marriage and other gay rights issues from members of the community by collecting stories, opinions, and responses through on-line survey campaigns. These surveys ask various questions pertaining to same-sex marriage in California and nationally, including personal experiences of discrimination, experiences of being married, and opin-

⁴ Source: AP-National Constitution Center Poll: <http://www.ap-gfcpoll.com/pdf/AP-GfK%20Poll%20August%20NCC%20topline.pdf>

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ions about the 2008 campaign. Having worked as an intern for MEUSA, I have access to and take these survey responses as a data source, with express permission from MEUSA. I have compiled an initial corpus of many of these responses, which will continue to expand as new data is collected and processed. A corpus is not only “a collection of texts” but also a representation of elements of a language (Biber, Conrad, and Rippen 1998:246). The motivation behind this study is therefore to look at patterns of language use among respondents who are in favor of same-sex marriage, not only to add to our understanding of how language influences sexual identities but also to inform the movement and its leaders, as well as to inform future public policy and campaign decisions.

The full MEUSA corpus reports feelings, opinions, and reactions to the social issue of same-sex marriage, especially as it relates to California's Proposition 8. There are also responses and reactions to same-sex marriage as a federal issue, though this is a minority of surveys. Corpus data was collected via on-line surveys from May 2008 to the present.

Several thousand responses to the surveys were collected by Marriage Equality USA, though not all responses were included in the present corpus. To be included, responses needed to contain at least one complete clause (e.g. bullet lists and single word/phrase responses were omitted), and needed to be from a self-identified supporter of same-sex marriage, as the corpus is crucially designed to reflect the views of same-sex couples and their supporters. Although the corpus includes responses from multiple MEUSA survey campaigns, this project focuses only on a single campaign, conducted immediately after the passage of Proposition 8 in November and December 2008. As the largest single MEUSA survey campaign, it contains responses from over 3,000 respondents, primarily in California. The complete survey features nearly two dozen open-ended survey questions; responses to four of the questions are currently included in this corpus. Each of the questions was negative-leading (e.g. “During this campaign period, did you personally experience any homophobia, hate speech, threats or violence?”) and focused on harm, discrimination, or the local or federal repercussions that Proposition 8 and similar amendments had or could have on respondents.

An analysis using tools of corpus linguistics was chosen in order to focus on the use rather than the structure of language (Biber, Conrad, and Rippen 1998). These tools include the generation of frequency lists, searches for collocations and the analysis of concordance lines. Frequency lists show how often an individual word token appears in a corpus, highlighting common patterns in specific lexemes and concepts within the data. Collocations, or words that occur near other words, are useful for finding common phrases or terms that frequently appear near a specific word (or words) of interest. Concordance lines, or the contextual environments that a word is found in, are useful to find larger discourse patterns and common syntactic and semantic structures. Each of these tools builds upon the

others and creates a way to analyze large quantities of texts and data.

The corpus subset included in this analysis, which I refer to as the Prop 8 corpus, consists of 2,245 responses for a total of 122,473 words and 6,733 word types. Data processing was conducted using AntConc, a free concordance program that provides frequency lists, concordance lines, and collocate results. Taking the resulting data, I compared the responses from straight-identifying participants with those of LGBT-identifying participants in the data collected after the passage of Proposition 8.

4 Heterosexual Identity in an LGBT Movement

All responses were separated by demographic information on sexual identity (the survey options were Heterosexual or LGBT), as seen below in (1).

(1) Details of each data subset in the Prop 8 corpus:

Demographic Category	Number of Responses	% of Total Responses	Total Words	% of Total Words
Heterosexual	468	20.8%	24150	19.7%
LGBT	1777	79.2%	98323	80.3%
Total	2245	100.0%	122473	100.0%

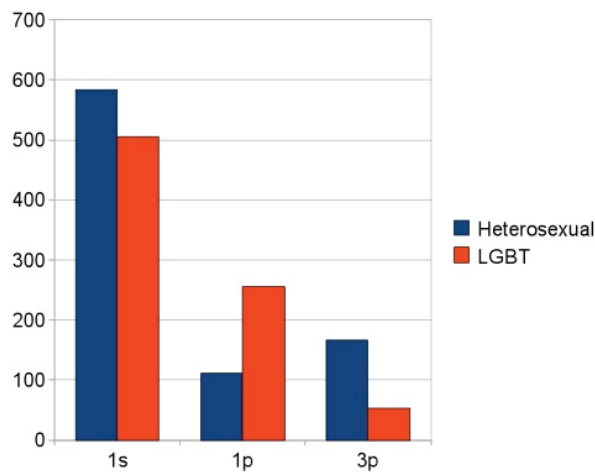
Searches were then conducted on each body of data separately. A focus was made on the collocates of present tense conjugated *be* constructions to highlight reported identities and characteristics of both the individual respondents as well as others mentioned in each response. Referencing work from Sacks (1992), Lerner and Kitzinger (2007:597) point out that “the selection of a self-reference term is intimately tied to a speaker’s situated identity because these terms reveal on whose behalf (or authority), or in what capacity, a participant speaks and thus what stance they are taking up towards the action implemented through their turn at talk.” Thus, in order to capture instances of self-reported identity, the research focus was narrowed to include only first-person singular (i.e. *I’m, I am*), first-person plural (*we’re, we are*), and third-person plural (*they’re, they are*) constructions in the present tense. This allows for an examination of individual and collective in-group identities as well as identities of the other. As a binary distinction is often present in American conceptions of sexual identity (and indeed also appears in the categorical demographic information collected in this survey), the inclusion of the third-person plural constructions was further useful in searching for patterns that may be present in the “we” versus “they” environment found in

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many same-sex marriage discourses.

To analyze the targeted pronouns, frequencies were determined and concordance lines were obtained for both full and contracted forms of all three constructions. All data has been given a normed count of instances per 100,000 words in addition to the raw counts found in the data. The graph and table below show an illustration of the proportional frequency of each of the three chosen *be* forms by identity category.

(2a) Frequency of conjugated present tense *be* forms in Prop 8 corpus:



(2b)

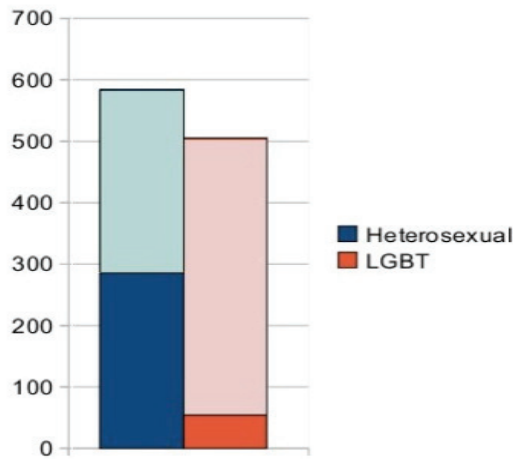
	Heterosexual	<i>468 responses 24,150 words</i>	LGBT	<i>1777 responses 98,323 words</i>
<i>be</i> construction	Frequency	Normed Freq	Frequency	Normed Freq
<i>I am/I'm</i>	141	584	496	505
<i>We are/We're</i>	27	111	252	256
<i>They are/ They're</i>	40	166	52	53

As seen above, similarities and differences emerge between the two groups. Both groups use a similarly high frequency of first-person singular *be* forms. LGBT respondents, though, use first-person plural constructions over twice as often as heterosexual respondents (256 times versus 111); by contrast, LGBT respondents use third-person plural constructions less than one-third as frequently as heterosexual respondents (53 times versus 166). The subsections below consider each construction in turn to identify reasons behind these patterns and the functions of each of the constructions in context.

4.1 Functions of First-person Singular: “I am” Heterosexual

While the data in (2) above shows a relatively similar frequency of first-person singular constructions between both groups, a look at the collocates of these constructions reveals striking differences between heterosexual and LGBT respondents. Among responses including the first-person singular *I*, perhaps the most contrastive difference between the Heterosexual and LGBT responses is the frequency of overt mentions of one's sexuality, as seen in (3) below:

(3a) Mentions of sexuality in first-person singular constructions:



(3b)

Category	Normed Freq.	Normed Total	% of Total
Heterosexual	285	584	45.4%
LGBT	54	505	10.7%

As seen above, heterosexual respondents were highly more likely to make explicit mention of their sexuality or their relation to someone in the LGBT community in their responses, with the dark areas in the figure in (3a) showing the normed counts of overt mentions of sexuality as a percentage of the total frequency of first-person singular constructions, represented by the lighter shaded areas. In fact, while nearly half of the responses from heterosexual participants include an overt mention of the respondent's sexuality compared with just over 10% from the LGBT participants, many other heterosexual respondents make indirect references either to their sexuality or to their connection to the LGBT community. Examples (4) and (5) below show concordance lines of both overt

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mentions of sexuality and qualifying statements, with italics showing the construction being examined and the underlined portion showing the portion of the response that highlights the topic being addressed. Both of these strategies are used to connect the respondent to the community to which they claim to belong through participation in the marriage equality surveys:

- (4) Overt mentions of sexuality:
 - (a) *I am a straight male.*
 - (b) While *I am not gay myself*, my favorite aunt is.
 - (c) *I'm not gay* but I have a lot of gay friends.
- (5) Access to community:
 - (a) *My gay cousin is deeply hurt, and I am furious.*
 - (b) Having *friends and family who are gay*, *I am* very aware of the unfairness...

This pattern is in stark contrast to LGBT responses, which highlight other aspects of respondents' identities as relevant. More important to the LGBT community were mentions of one's relationship status, profession, or ethnic/regional/national identity. (6) below shows common collocate pattern groups and their frequencies in the first-person singular constructions, with concordance lines illustrating each major category in (7)-(10) below:

- (6) Collocate patterns in LGBT responses:

Category	Frequency	Total	% of 1sg constructions
Relationship Term	153	496	30.8%
Emotional Term	93	496	18.8%
Social/Political Term	57	496	11.5%
Sexual Identity	53	496	10.7%

- (7) Relationship:
 - (a) *I am married to my wife.*
 - (b) *I am now unable to marry my partner.*
- (8) Emotional:
 - (a) *I am outraged that Prop 8 passed.*
- (9) Social/Political:
 - (a) I can't believe *I am denied my rights.*

(10) Sexual Identity:

- (a) *I am* a very out and proud gay man.
- (b) *I am* only a homosexual to them...

(6) above illustrates that for the LGBT respondents, their sexual identity within the community is treated a given, as it is only the fourth most common collocate category in these constructions. Instead of mentioning sexuality, many instead use the first-person singular construction to highlight other salient aspects of their personal identity, such as marriage status, or to give a personal evaluation of the situation, such as an expression of anger, hurt or outrage. Conversely, the heterosexual respondents, here seen as the out-group in a setting centered around same-sex marriage, use the first-person singular to make their sexuality explicit or justify their presence and belonging in the community.

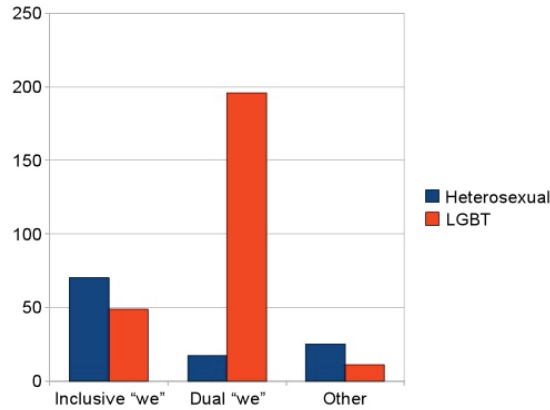
4.2 Functions of First-person Plural: “We are” a Movement

Like the first-person singular, first-person plural constructions are similarly used by heterosexual participants to signify belonging in the same-sex marriage community, but in a markedly different way. First of all, the first-person plural constructions are used nearly two and a half times as frequently by LGBT respondents compared to heterosexual respondents (256 times vs. 111 times). Furthermore, the referent of *we* is very different between the two groups. Two major referent types were seen in the data: an inclusive *we*, which references the entire group of same-sex marriage supporters or the same-sex marriage movement, and a dual *we*, which references exactly two people, typically the author and their significant other. Heterosexual participants, though using a first-person plural construction less frequently, almost exclusively use *we* to refer to the inclusive, all-encompassing group that constitutes the same-sex marriage movement. By contrast, LGBT individuals vastly preferred a dual referent, and rarely used “we” in an all-inclusive sense. (11a-b) below illustrates the difference in use by identity category, while (12) and (13) show examples of Heterosexual respondents’ use of inclusive *we* in contrast to LGBT respondents’ use of a dual *we*.

These examples show that while heterosexual participants frequently use collocates such as all with the first-person plural to create a stance of belonging and participation within the same-sex marriage movement, LGBT respondents are instead commonly highlighting their relationship status as the most salient information to report. This pattern works in some ways to reinforce the usage of first-person singular constructions that provide heterosexual respondents a chance to justify their participation in the movement by showing that they are concerned with the collective goals of the community as a whole. LGBT participants similarly reinforce their stance of individual reactions by continuing to focus on relationship status and emotional reaction to the passage of Proposition 8.

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(11a) Inclusive versus dual *we* in Prop 8 corpus:



(11b)

	Heterosexual	Total Normed Freq: 111	LGBT	Total Normed Freq: 256
Referent	Normed Freq	Percentage	Normed Freq	Percentage
Inclusive <i>we</i>	70	63.0%	49	19.0%
Dual <i>we</i>	17	14.8%	196	76.6%
Other	25	22.2%	11	4.4%

(12) Heterosexual responses (inclusive *we*):

- (a) I want my son growing up knowing that *we are all* equal.
- (b) *We are all* in a state of disbelief.

(13) LGBT responses (dual *we*):

- (a) *We are a gay couple* of 12 years with children.
- (b) *We are* fearful that our marriage will not remain legal.
- (c) We are in limbo because *we are married*.⁵

This focus away from the collective goals of the movement is further seen in the use of inclusive *we* in LGBT responses. Not only is there a difference between the percentage of inclusive versus dual *we* in these responses, but the times that inclusive *we* is found in LGBT responses, it is often found in contexts with negative semantics, or in ideological challenges to reality, as seen in the sentences in (14).

⁵ “We are in limbo” is another example of the first-person plural construction examined here, but is not highlighted in the example as it is not clear what the referent of *we* is until the second half of the statement.

- (14) Concordance lines of LGBT inclusive *we*:
- (a) We are all devastated in our community. (Negative semantics)
 - (b) We are still feared. (Negative semantics)
 - (c) It's about living in a country where we are all equal.
(Ideological challenge to reality)
 - (d) We are suppose [sic] to be one of the most modern civilizations
(Ideological challenge)
 - (e) Who we are is not “gross” and “unnormal” [sic]
(Negative semantics; ideological challenge)

The above examples further show the differing stances between the two groups. While heterosexual participants focus on inclusivity in the movement and the need to have a collective identity with which to move forward from the recent passage of Proposition 8, LGBT respondents focus on individualistic goals and ramifications of the same-sex marriage ban, and take a reactionary stance that removes them from the goals of the movement as a whole and focuses on the recent events and their effect on the individual lives of the members of the community.

4.3 Functions of Third-person Plural: “They are” Gay

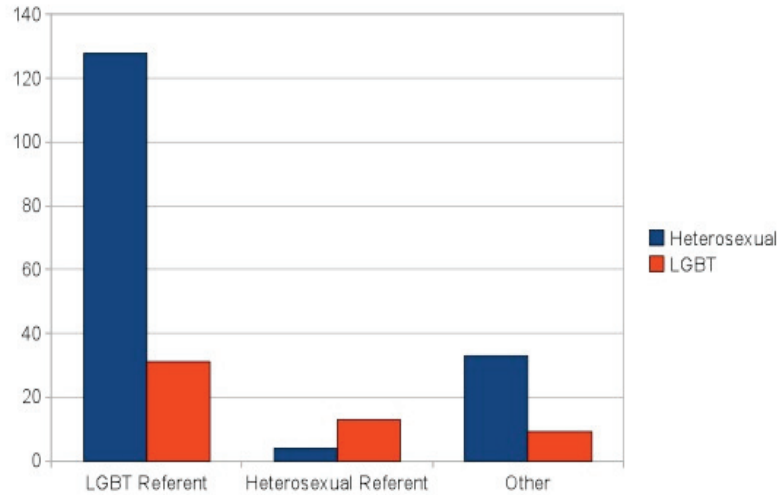
Third-person plural constructions in the data are used to refer to the identities of other groups. Heterosexual participants show a clear pattern of the expected “we” versus “they” dichotomy separating themselves as heterosexuals from the LGBT community. In normed counts, heterosexual participants are more than three times as likely to use the third-person plural constructions in their responses compared to LGBT respondents (166 times vs. 53 times) and most frequently use these constructions to reference the LGBT community, as seen below in (15).

While heterosexual participants’ use of the third-person plural constructions followed an expected “we” versus “they” distinction, with an overwhelming preference for an LGBT referent, LGBT responses did not follow a parallel pattern at all. Instead, LGBT participants also favored an LGBT referent, with the majority of these constructions referencing members of the in-group. Instances of this are seen below in (16) and (17), showing concordance lines from both heterosexual and LGBT participants.

These examples show that while heterosexual participants use the first-person constructions to align with the movement, their frequent use of this construction serves to maintain a level of separation from the core of the movement and highlight their marginal place within the larger community. As many of the survey questions from which this data stem ask about experiences of discrimination, it is likely that this distance comes from secondhand knowledge of events of discrimination that the respondents themselves did not face.

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(15a) LGBT and heterosexual referents of *they* constructions:



(15b)

	Heterosexual	Total Normed Freq: 166	LGBT	Total Normed Freq: 53
Referent	Normed Freq	Percentage	Normed Freq	Percentage
LGBT referent	128	77.5%	31	57.7%
Heterosexual referent	4	2.5%	13	25.0%
Other	33	20.0%	9	17.3%

(16) Heterosexual uses of *they*:

- (a) *They are* accepted by everyone in their families...
- (b) *They are* being denied the right to find love.
- (c) ...they feel hurt because according to California, *they are* second class citizens...

(17) LGBT uses of *they*:

- (a) ...for many of our friends, *they are* being stopped from enjoying the same respect
- (b) *they are* in a state that does not recognize same-sex marriage
- (c) Partners pay higher taxes. *They aren't* entitled to other financial benefits.

However, it also suggests an understanding that while they seek to participate and belong to the movement, they are not directly affected by the outcome of same-sex marriage bans in the same way that LGBT individuals are.

This pattern is further seen through the ways that LGBT respondents similarly use third-person plural constructions to predominantly refer to other members of

the LGBT community. Not only does this use create a marked lack of acknowledgment of heterosexual participation within the movement, but it further reinforces LGBT participants' concern with the ramifications of Proposition 8 for the relationship status of fellow LGBT community members.

5 Being Straight in a Gay Movement

When all three of these constructions are considered together, a pattern emerges showing a complex positioning by heterosexual participants through their responses to the MEUSA Prop 8 survey. Each construction functions somewhat differently to create a complete scenario in which heterosexual respondents negotiate their placement in the same-sex marriage community to highlight their marginality in the movement while simultaneously establishing and justifying their participation.

The first-person singular constructions identify the self as non-normative by revealing heterosexuals' perception of being outside the sexual norms of the same-sex marriage movement, while also providing a justification for who they are and why they are responding to a survey in support of marriage equality in the first place. First-person plural constructions expand on their identity of being in favor of same-sex marriage by reinforcing their participation and locating themselves within the larger movement. This pattern is seen through the respondents' focus on the goals of the movement as a whole and a concern for large-scale issues that relate to same-sex marriage. Finally, the third-person plural constructions work in tandem with the first-person singular constructions and in seeming contrast to the first-person plural constructions to maintain a level of distance from the movement and acknowledge the lack of direct implications of Proposition 8 on their own lives.

LGBT respondents meanwhile show a much more individualistic sense of identity within the movement, highlighting personal reactions and ramifications of Proposition 8's passage. With a focus almost exclusively on LGBT individuals, and particularly on those in committed relationships, their responses show a striking lack of consideration for the heterosexual participants within the movement, a perspective that may have led heterosexual participants to feel it necessary to justify their presence.

6 Conclusions

This paper illustrates how heterosexual participants in the same-sex marriage movement linguistically negotiate their position through identity placement and stance taking using pronoun constructions. In a situation in which heterosexuals have a non-normative sexual identity, linguistic resources become a powerful tool for negotiation within the community. These resources become especially im-

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portant in this particular setting due a lack of LGBT acknowledgement of heterosexual participation within the same-sex marriage movement, despite the fact that they make up a numeric majority of voters on both sides of this social issue. As the preceding analysis suggests, it therefore becomes important for heterosexual supporters who see themselves as part of the movement to place themselves within it and become visible through linguistic means, even despite their acknowledgement of their placement on the margins of the community.

The seeming lack of attention paid to heterosexuality among LGBT individuals in the data may simply be due to the genre of these responses (reports of homophobic discrimination) and the nature of the perceived audience (the leaders of the same-sex marriage movement), though it should be noted that the lack of acknowledgement of heterosexuality continues into the third-person plural constructions, where it could be expected that heterosexuals that may be *against* the movement could be seen in the data and are not. Moreover, as shown above, LGBT participants were most concerned with their own situations and lives as a result of the passage of Proposition 8. However, lack of attention to the marginalized heterosexual participants can be damaging for the movement in the long term. Heterosexual participants, seen in the corpus to be working to negotiate their place within the movement, should be used as a resource for LGBT activism instead of being overlooked.

The results presented here also enhance language and sexuality research by expanding our understanding of heterosexual identities in situations where a normatively dominant sexual identity is not automatically seen as default. In addition, this research can serve to inform the same-sex marriage movement's organizations and leaders to consider issues of identity, language, and community participation in future policy decisions and political actions. In a movement fueled by modern technology, internet-based communication, and social networking, language use is a powerful tool for identity construction and negotiation and is especially important for marginalized groups to identify themselves and place themselves within the ranks of groups to which they are seeking to belong.

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