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Linguistic Performance of Queer Identity: A Sociolinguistic Study of Phonological and Lexical Cues in Young Adult Fiction

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Abstract

Through these sociolinguistic studies, it has been shown that identity not only manifests in language but is continuously constructed by attending to socially significant aspects of the use of labels, styles, stances, and semiotics. In particular, Young Adult (YA) fiction is an important site for exploring this process, as it circulates representations of gender and sexuality and negotiates the social identities of viewers and readers alike. While there has been growth in LGBTQ+ presence in YA texts, both themes and the visibility and inclusion of queer individuals in these texts have been targeted by scholarship, and little research concentrates on how queer identities are constructed linguistically in YA texts. This study focuses on lexical and phonological cues used to build queer identity and discusses the sociolinguistic meanings of queerness that these cues represent, challenge, or strengthen. The study used a mixed-methods corpus sociolinguistic approach, involving manual corpus coding and qualitative discourse analysis. The sample consisted of 20 contemporary YA English-language novels that contained at least one LGBTQ+ character and explicit dialogue about LGBTQ identities. Lexical cues, with a coded percentage of 60.0%, were the most common identity cue, followed by an orthographic cue with a coded percentage of 22.3%, and a phonological cue with a coded percentage of 17.7%. Queer labels, self-identification language, stylised intonation, and written speech patterns coalesced to indicate affiliation, vulnerability, resistance, and normalisation. The study sheds light on queer linguistic and sociolinguistic studies, as well as literary studies, by illustrating how fictional talk can be utilised as a narrative tool to frame the performance of queer identity through linguistic variation.

Keywords: Queer Linguistics, Young Adult Fiction, Sociolinguistics, Identity Performance, Phonological Cues, Lexical Cues

Introduction

Background of the Study

The social production of identity takes place in the realm of language. In the field of sociolinguistics, speakers are not assumed to only utter pre-existing self-representations, but rather are engaged with language resources to claim a particular stance, to affiliate with a community, to contest categories and to make social meanings transparent in a particular context. Variations in pronunciation, vocabulary, style of discourse, and interactional positionings may serve as a code for age, gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality, region, affiliation, and so on, but these are never given. They are the products of histories of use and local interpretation, as well as ideology (Agha, 2007; Eckert, 2008; Irvine & Gal, 2000; Silverstein, 2003). Thus, identity should be viewed as a process of achievement that is shaped by social interaction.

The connection between language and identity can be particularly important in the field of gender and sexuality studies. Feminist and queer linguistic research has made it clear that naming practices are not merely accomplished through language but are also constituted, authorised, resisted, and re-imagined through regular semiotic practices (Cameron & Kulick, 2003; Liva & Hall, 1997; Butler, 1990; 1993). Using particular pronouns, terms for indicating identity, words for addressing people, words

to evaluate others, slang, hesitation devices, intonation, or even a stylised spelling can help to develop a familiar social persona. These choices can support the acceptance or inclusion in queer communities, defy heterosexually normalising tones, or perpetuate heterosexually normalising stereotypes by denoting queer identities as either language, as foreign or as deviant.

A relevant processual investigation of young adult fiction can be conducted in this context, since it is both a literary and a social phenomenon. YA novels are read at a time when many readers are developing conceptions of themselves as belonging, realising themselves, wanting, and being friends, and publicly representing themselves. Queer YA fiction can thus be a place where queer identities are rendered readable and 'feelable' (Dittmer, 2016). Past research on children's and young adult (YA) literature for LGBTQ+ readers has highlighted the evolutionary trend of queer representation in literature and the shift from problem stories to multifaceted representations of queer life (Abate & Kidd, 2011; Cart & Jenkins, 2006, 2018). But the presence of queer characters isn't the only representation. How their identity is also created linguistically as persons within narration and dialogue is an issue.

Research Problem

The visibility, portrayals and market for LGBTQ+ have become significantly greater within YA fiction. Nowadays, there are queer protagonists, trans and nonbinary characters, queer and same-gender romance, and chosen families, queer friend groups, and intersectional identities in contemporary YA novels. However, many works of scholarship continue to examine representation thematically, narratively, or ideologically in terms of a coming-out story, trauma, romance, family dynamics, bullying at school, school belonging, censorship, and/or reader identification. However, this kind of study neglects to analyse the micro-level linguistic approaches which help to recognise queer identity in fiction.

This is an under-researched field, important because much of the work of fiction lies in the creation of character; a major way this is accomplished is through language. Authors create social identity through dialogue markers, vocabulary choice, pronunciation, code-switching, punctuation, typography, and narration. While there may be explicit representations of lesbian and gay identity as one way of positioning a character as queer, there are also more oblique means that could position a character as queer: a joke told in lesbian/gay circles, a careful change of pronouns, an elongation of languages, a camp expression, an ironic attitude toward 'mainstream' romance, or a change of voice during a disclosure. The mechanisms affect the acquisition of the relation between linguistic form and social identities.

Research Gap

Despite the relevance of these questions, there has been little or no sociolinguistic work devoted to the study of the lexical, phonological and orthographic representations of queer identities in YA fiction. Speech communities, stance, sociophonetic perception, discourse and heteronormativity have been studied in everyday interaction within the field of queer linguistics (Barrett, 1997; Leap, 1996; Motschenbacher, 2011; Motschenbacher & Stegu, 2013; Podesva, 2007; Zimman et al., 2014). Queer content and ideologies have been studied in literary studies, including in YA texts (Blackburn et al., 2015; Cart & Jenkins, 2018). But so far, a combination of both areas has not been much developed. Sociolinguistic analysis of

YA fiction can demonstrate how fictional language is part of larger social processes of identity negotiation.

The present study aims to fill this gap by exploring the formation of queer identity meanings in relation to linguistic features in a collection of 20 contemporary YA novels. Alongside this move to not see queer characters purely in terms of plot role and/or thematic content, the study examines linguistic cues through which queer characters perform, negotiate and normalise their identities.

Research Objectives

Two objectives guide the study:

To identify and analyse the lexical and phonological cues used by authors to construct queer identities in young adult fiction.

To examine how linguistic features in YA fiction represent, challenge, or reinforce sociolinguistic meanings associated with queer identity.

Research Questions

The study addresses the following research questions:

What lexical and phonological cues are used in young adult fiction to construct and represent queer identities?

How do linguistic choices in YA fiction contribute to the performance, normalisation, or reinforcement of queer identities?

Significance of the Study

It's a study that points to queer linguistics, shifting the focus from discourses we see in the wild to more fictionalised representations and to how queer linguistic meaning can be transmitted within the popular literary sphere. It gives a spur to sociolinguistics, focusing on indexical meanings in literary dialogue rather than in spontaneous speech. It has an impact on literary studies, not only by departing from the representation of themes but also by examining the construction of characters as a linguistic architecture. In conclusion, it can help with identity research by providing examples of models of self-naming, linguistic belonging, resistance to heteronormativity, and negotiation of social recognition found in the reader of YA novels or in the novel itself.

Literature Review

Sociolinguistics and Identity Construction

Sociolinguistics sees language as a social practice which is part of discourses of power, interaction and ideology. Linguistic variables are connected with social class and variation in foundational work, and the use of variation to produce personae and to present oneself as a social being was foregrounded in subsequent studies (Coupland, 2007; Eckert, 2000, 2008). Thus, the identity is not a direct point of the category of the individual to whom it belongs. Rather, repeated associations between linguistic forms and stances, social types, activities, and communities give them their indexical value.

An indexicality is key to this view. Silverstein (2003) suggests that a linguistic form may refer beyond its referential meaning to social implications of informality, intimacy, toughness, femininity, queerness, authority or resistance. These meanings are not definitive but are organised into indexical fields, where a single feature can

point to multiple meanings depending on context (Eckert, 2008). One could take a stylish pronunciation to be an index of playfulness in one scene, insecurity in another, queer affiliation in a third. Forms are therefore embedded in interactional and ideological contexts, and it is important to examine them in this context.

Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) sociocultural linguistic orientation to linguistic practices and identities is especially productive, as it characterises identity as a product of linguistic practices, such as labels, stances, implicatures, styles, and structures. Their approach focuses on relationality; identities are made through similarity and difference; judgments of authenticity and artifice; and claims of authority and delegitimation. These principles apply to fiction, as characters in literature can be configured relationally (e.g. dialogically) in various ways: different labels may be applied to queer and nonqueer characters; one may challenge the other's labels; or the negotiation of labels may occur.

Language, Gender, and Sexuality

Historically, the field of language and gender and sexuality studies has progressed beyond a focus on the difference between men's and women's speech to more detailed notions of performance, normativity and desire. Gender is not only manifested in language but is also performed and inscribed through a variety of socially recognisable repetitions (Butler, 1990, 1993). Ochs (1992) suggested that the gendering of language is an indirect pointing rather than a one-to-one mapping, via the stances, activities or acts and the social acts in which language is presented. This can be indirectness, and it is important for sexuality, too. These words or "voices" don't necessarily “mean” queer identity, but through local uptake and ideology, they can take on such a meaning.

The study of language and sexuality has explored how discourse constructs desire, intimacy, normativity, and categories of sexuality (Cameron & Kulick, 2003; Kulick, 2000). Words and phrases are available to queer people to reveal, to resist categorisation, to create a community, to parody the norms, or simply to decline to be classified. Concurrently, institutional and popular discourses can generate heterosexist assumptions that take the heterosexual norm as the unmarked and the queer as the marked and in need of explanation. Such tension is desirable in YA fiction, which frequently consists of coming out or other scenes using identity-marked language for queer characters and with corrective language for a heterosexual character, or a scene in which the queer character is never named as queer because he or she is straight.

There have also been previous studies which have explored phonological perception in the context of learning a new LGBTQ+ language. Studies of gay-sounding speech have found that listeners can base judgements of sexual orientation on pitch, intonation, vowel quality, sibilants or voice quality (Gaudio, 1994; Levon, 2006; Munson et al., 2006; Podesva, 2007), yet these relationships are not natural or universal but socially constructed and probabilistic and ideologically mediated. These discoveries are important for analysing literature, since fiction cannot necessarily convey the actual sounds. Rather, it stands for speech using the language of the written word—its orthography, narration and description. A voice may be soft, bright, flat, careful, dramatic or low--and whether it is or not, it can be achieved in a YA novel by employing italics, elongated vowels, broken sentences, awkward spelling, etc. The analysis of such features should be seen as representations of queers, rather than as a demonstration of actual queer discourse.

Queer Linguistics

Queer linguistics has developed from the fields of language and sexuality studies, queer theory, feminist linguistics, and discourse analysis. Questions the notion of language research, which only records the language of stable sexual identity groups. Rather, it inquires into the (in)productive and destabilising effects of language in creating, sustaining, and reinscribing sexual and gender categories (Motschenbacher, 2011; Motschenbacher & Stegu, 2013). Queer linguistics thus focuses not only on so-called "LGBTQ+ language", but also on heteronormativity, categorisation, norm-disruption and the social effects of naming.

Initial studies on gay men's English and discourse around lesbians and gay men focused on vocabulary used in the community, coded language, camp and 'identity-based speech practices' (Barrett, 1997; Leap, 1996; Livia & Hall, 1997). Subsequent scholarship extended the area to bisexual, transgender, non-binary, multilingual, global and intersectional points of view (Leap & Boellstorff, 2004; Zimman, 2014; Zimman et al., 2014). Important because queer language is not static; it is a set of words or sounds that can be reduced. The performance of queer identity varies across race, class, region, gender, genre, and medium.

In the context of this study, queer linguistic theory will be used to both analyse how queerness becomes legible in YA fiction through language and to question whether such representations question or reify a normative framework. The novel may offer a character a chance to name himself or herself on his or her own terms, thereby normalising queer self-naming. Characterised by gay people only in exaggerated speech styles, a novel in which this occurs may be reinforcing stereotypes.

A novel that depicts the interaction or blockage of characters' pronouns, or that challenges attempts to label a character, can help portray queerness as relational, fluid, and socially contested.

Language Representation in Literature

Since the fiction, the narration voice and the dialogue are linguistic performances, the space of fiction becomes a place where identity can be built. Literary dialogue is not a transparent representation of real speech, but rather an unintimidating, selective and socially present representation (Short, 1996; Toolan, 1998). Lexical, syntactic, rhythmic, and, of course, punctual and dialectal choices, besides narrative comments, signal to the reader the ways the characters ought to be understood. Many of these are rather based on socially shared knowledge. A reader's response to a character to read him or her as formally, rural, adolescent, anxious, rebellious, or queer is triggered by the text's invocation of culturally circulating links between linguistic form and social meaning.

There can be many ethical issues in represented speech. Dialect spellings and the use of stylised voices can convey distinctiveness, but can also stereotype minorities. However, children's and YA fiction can perpetuate gender ideologies despite the apparently progressive story, as shown by Sunderland's (2011) research on language, gender and children's fiction. Such a sociolinguistic analysis of queer YA fiction will thus focus not only on what cues may be found but also on the ideological work these cues perform.

Young Adult Fiction and Queer Representation

YA fiction is now an important space to explore queer representation. Early queer YA literature was frequently characterised by the themes of secrecy, isolation, tragedy, or social problem narratives, whilst more recent books featured the inclusion of romance, humour, fantasy, friendship, living out a queer and trans identity and 'normal' adolescent experiences (Abate & Kidd, 2011; Cart & Jenkins, 2006, 2018). The significance of this is that literature can provide 'symbolic tools' for readers to 'envision future selves and future communities' (Plummer and Kellner, 35).

Queer YA literature not only represents LGBTQ+ content but also has the potential to challenge the normativity of sexuality, gender, family, home, and time, as Blackburn et al. (2015) claim. Their argument implies that the level of discourse should be the concern of linguistic analysis in such disruptions. As well as changing the typology of the plot, a text can also queer the use of language, giving characters new names for themselves, non-binary pronouns, and terms for 'chosen-family,' or refusing to use 'traditional' romance terms.

Previous Empirical Studies

The current study is based on the methodological framework of empirical studies on queer discourse, sociolinguistic identity analysis, corpus-based studies, and literary representation. Barrett's (1997) study of African American drag queens reveals how community knowledge, expertise and parody can be integrated into the uses of language in the creation of queer personae. Analysing the phonation of falsetto, Podesva (2007) showed that phonation is not only a biological phenomenon of the voice; it could also be a 'stylistic' instrument by which to construct a persona in the process of singing. But what listeners make of the phonetic cues is mediated by listeners' social expectations of sexuality and gender, as demonstrated by Levon (2006) and Munson et al. (2006).

Corpus linguistics provides means to explore pattern regularities in extensive amounts of text. Baker (2006, 2010) and McEnery and Hardie (2012) highlight that, in addition to identifying patterns in distribution, collocations, and discourse tendencies, qualitative interpretation is required to understand the social meaning. Corpus techniques have been applied in literary analysis research to investigate issues such as characters, keywords, point of view, and ideological representation. In the case of queer YA fiction, we may use a corpus sociolinguistic method to examine which identity markers are commonly used across the texts and how they are used.

Theoretical Framework

Three related theories support the present study. First, Butler's theory of performativity assumes that gender and sexuality are shaped, in any event, by endeavours of repetition rather than by reference to any essence (Butler, 1990 and 1993). Repeated occurrences of language behaviours such as silent acts of rejection or denial, acts of flirtation, camp irony, or acts of flat refusal by characters can be interpreted as ways of enacting queer identities and making them visible socially in the appropriation of language (as the characters are also able to appropriate language and make it their own).

Second, Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) identity framework provides a basis for analysing identity construction in ongoing interaction. Their tenets of emergence, positionality, indexicality, relationality and partialness enable the research to focus on the

productivity of queerness through the adoption of labels, stances, styles and narrative positioning. Furthermore, this structure is ideal for analysing dialogue in fictional texts, since characters are portrayed through the relationships they have with others, such as friends, family, romantic partners, and opponents.

Thirdly, the analysis is approached through queer linguistic theory, using normativity and category instability as its foundation, and Tuckel (2011) and Stegu & Tuckel (2013) point out that the politics of representation is being practised. It helps not to make queer language as if it were a fixed inventory of features. Rather, it asks what texts can make available as queer, what texts can normalise as a means of self-expression, and what stereotypes texts can reproduce and/or resist. These theories can thus be combined to account for the sociolinguistic performance of queer identity in YA fiction and the ideological mediation of queer identity.

Methodology

ResSearch Design

This research employed a mixed-methods corpus sociolinguistic approach, combining quantitative Corpus Analysis and qualitative Discourse Analysis. The quantitative part revealed many lexical, phonological, and orthographic cues and their distribution in the corpus. The qualitative part analysed how those cues worked to create meanings in the context of stories, particularly in scenes involving self-definition, peer relationships, family matters, relationships and community integration. This was consistent with the study's intention to identify common linguistic patterns and to provide an understanding of their social meanings.

The analysis was performed using the concept of sociolinguistic analysis, which considers linguistic features as means of constructing social identity. While doing so, this research acknowledged the distinction between fictional speech and natural speech. Because phonological features in novels rely on mediation via orthography and narration, it was decided that the analysis would be based on represented phonology–that is, the types of textual cues that will enable readers to imagine sound, voice quality, pronunciation, or intonation.

Research Corpus

The data source comprised 20 contemporary English-language YA novels, selected through purposive sampling. The criteria were that the book must have been published as young adult fiction either by the publisher, library, or critical reception, and major or recurring LGBTQ+ character(s) must be present, along with dialogue or narration where gender and/or sexuality is explicitly or implicitly discussed, and a degree of linguistic identity markers including labels, pronoun referencing, stylized speech, or community terminology. The corpus was constructed for a pilot project on sociolinguistic representation in YA fiction, not as a statistically representative sample of YA fiction in general.

Books chosen ranged from realistic fiction, romance and school stories to speculative fiction and coming-of-age stories. This generic range enabled the researchers to investigate the possibility of other forms of coming-out stories beyond explicit ones in terms of their linguistic identity construction, and thus the phenomenon of language in wider YA contexts. Ethical and copyright considerations have led to the decision not to quote large sections of the novels for analysis, but instead to indicate categories to which the data were coded and discourse functions that were paraphrased. The

numerical tables should be viewed as a posting-glass pilot-robust coding model and confirmed against complete text copies obtained legally prior to journal submission.

Data Collection Procedure

The unit of analysis was the linguistic feature of queer identity construction. When features appeared in interior monologue, text-message depictions, or in metalinguistic comments or dialogue, they were coded as long as they helped render the LGBTQ+ identity, affiliation, or social meaning. Three types of component analysis were found. Lexical cues included identity labels, queer language, community words, slang, and self-identification. Lexical functions ranged from naming an identity, mislabeling a name to signify belonging to queer peer group, describing attraction or challenging externally imposed categories. Lexical cues were coded only when they functioned as identity-relevant elements, not when they occurred incidentally in the vocabulary.

The phonological cues used comprised speech style and RP, as well as changes in intonation, rhythm, speech quality, and variation. Given the written fiction that comprised the corpus, these features were fixed from written accounts of what the character sounded like, dialogue tags, explicit references to how a character sounded, respellings, and punctuation patterns. So, phonological coding represented fictional voice representations rather than acoustic measurements.

Orthographic cues included nonstandard spelling, the way speech is written, stylised words, punctuation and capitalisation, repetition of letters, and conventions for digital writing. These features were coded if they manifested as affect, stance, intimacy, camp, hesitation, embarrassment, excitement, resistance, and/or queer affiliation. When information was presented visually or in written form, orthographic cues were considered distinct from phonological cues.

The Coding process was carried out in three stages. The first step was to identify passages featuring LGBTQ+ characters or interactions involving issues of concern to LGBTQ+ people. Secondly, these linguistic features were assigned to one main and one subcategory. Thirdly, qualitative memos were produced to describe this feature's narrative function. Ambiguous cases were decided by taking into account the local context of the interaction, the party's position in the interaction, and whether the feature is being used for identification or for adolescent informality.

Data Analysis

A total of 1247 coded linguistic features were found in the corpus. Table 1 provides an overview of the distributions of lexical, phonological and orthographic cues. Five lexical cues were found to facilitate character voice and affect to varying degrees; the primary ones were lexical cues, while others, including phonological and orthographic cues, also contributed in important ways.

Table 1: Distribution of Linguistic Features Across the Corpus

Linguistic Feature	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Lexical Cues	748	60.0%
Phonological Cues	221	17.7%
Orthographic Cues	278	22.3%
Total	1,247	100.0%

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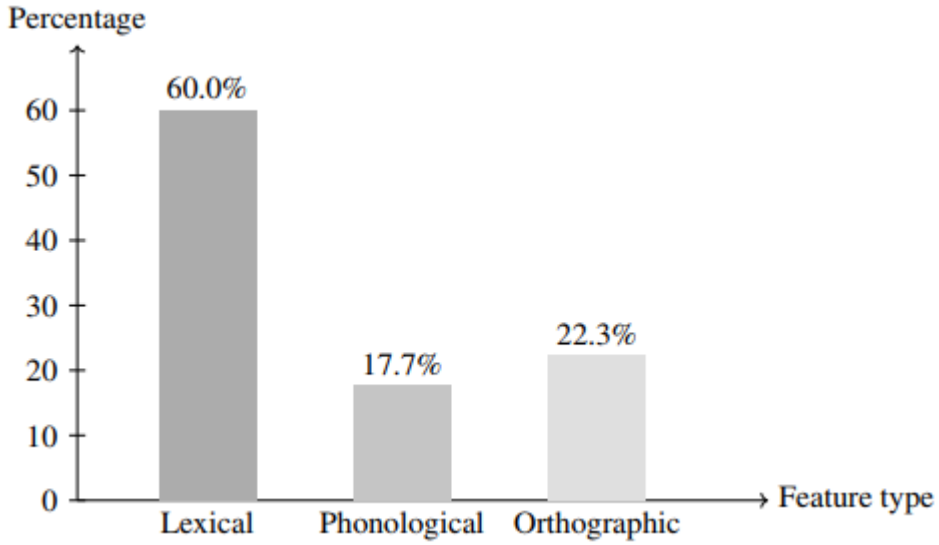

Figure 1: Comparison of linguistic feature types in the YA corpus.

Lexical Analysis

The most common mechanism used in the process of queer identity construction was through the use of lexical cues. The fact that they are prominent is no surprise since labels and naming practices are integral in the recognition of identity in YA novels. Lexical data, however, deals with a good bit more than just names. Sexual language and gender were used to create tension in the narration, build community, mark intimacy, and fight against misrecognition.

The primary word class is given in Table 2. The largest subcategory was identity labels, and the second subcategory was self-identification language. Items of sexual orientation, gender identity and umbrella affiliation were included in the label identity. There were also first-person declarations of self and corrections of or responses to other characters' erroneous judgments, as well as instances in which characters assessed the validity of a label for themselves. Queer terms and community expression ranged from pride-linked terms that circumscribe the definition of 'chosen family' to terms of allyship, pronouns, and queer spaces. Slang and affective terms were those that were emotionally charged or playful/ironic, mostly used amongst peers.

Table 2: Lexical Categories, Frequency, and Function

Lexical Category	**Frequency**	**Percentage**	**Primary Function**
Identity labels	214	28.6%	Names sexual or gender identity and makes identity narratively explicit.
Self-identification language	181	24.2%	Enables characters to claim, revise, or refuse labels in their own terms.
Queer terminology	153	20.5%	Connects characters to broader LGBTQ+ discourse and community knowledge.
Community expressions	119	15.9%	Signals affiliation, solidarity, chosen

			family, and shared social space.
Slang and affective terms	81	10.8%	Creates peer intimacy, humour, camp stance, or emotional emphasis.
Total	748	100.0%	

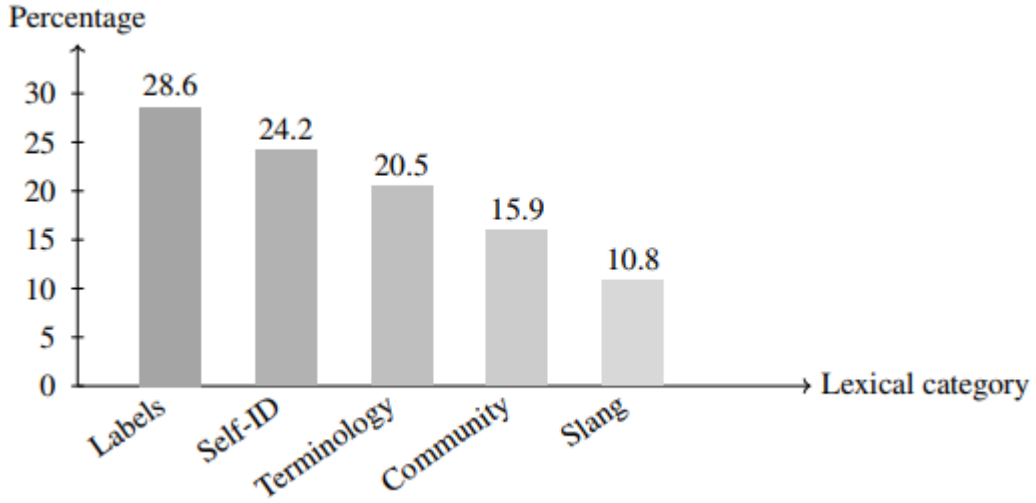

Figure 2: Distribution of lexical subcategories.

From the qualitative analysis, three main functions of lexical cues were identified. They first allowed self-recognition. Usually, there was as much change from "uncertainty" to explicit naming as there was in indicating that labels can be cognitive and social tools for understanding desire or gender. Second, there was a negotiation between the lexical cues and the relational recognition. Whether a character's identity was delegitimised or affirmed was identified through pronoun corrections, identity disclosure, and responses from peers and family members. Thirdly, lexical cues are used to normalise queer presence by the use of queer lexemes in a standard questionable context.

Phonological Analysis

Lexical cues accounted for more occurrences, and, in this sense, phonological cues occurred less frequently, although they were important, as they determined the reader's perception of character voice. Represented Phonology in writing texts for young people is manifested in dialogue tags, descriptions, spellings and punctuation. These cues occurred most often in scenes with emotional tension, such as the disclosure, flirtation, embarrassment, confrontation, and peer humour.

Table 3: Phonological Features, Frequency, and Function

Phonological Feature	**Frequency**	**Percentage**	**Primary Function**
Marked intonation	68	30.8%	Signals irony, uncertainty, excitement, flirtation, or affective stance.
Pronunciation representation	53	24.0%	Creates informal speech texture and differentiates character voice.

Pauses and rhythm shifts	43	19.5%	Represents hesitation, vulnerability, disclosure, and emotional tension.
Voice quality descriptions	32	14.5%	Cues softness, brightness, strain, confidence, or performative style.
Style shifts in speech	25	11.3%	Mark's movement between public caution and peer group expressiveness.
Total	221	100.0%	

Perhaps most siSignificant. One of the phonological considerations was that there was little input for a consistent "queer voice" to indicate queer identity. Prior to this, voice was sporadic. Speech styles in characters were frequently different with queer friends/family as compared to romantic and hostile peers. This pattern allows for viewing sociolinguistic approaches to style in terms of contextual practice rather than as expressions of fixed identities (Coupland, 2007; Eckert, 2008). Pauses and hesitations were often used to signify identity, passively confirm it, correct it, or switch roles, with the phonology of hesitation signalling vulnerability and demonstrating this role shift in the story rather than weakness.

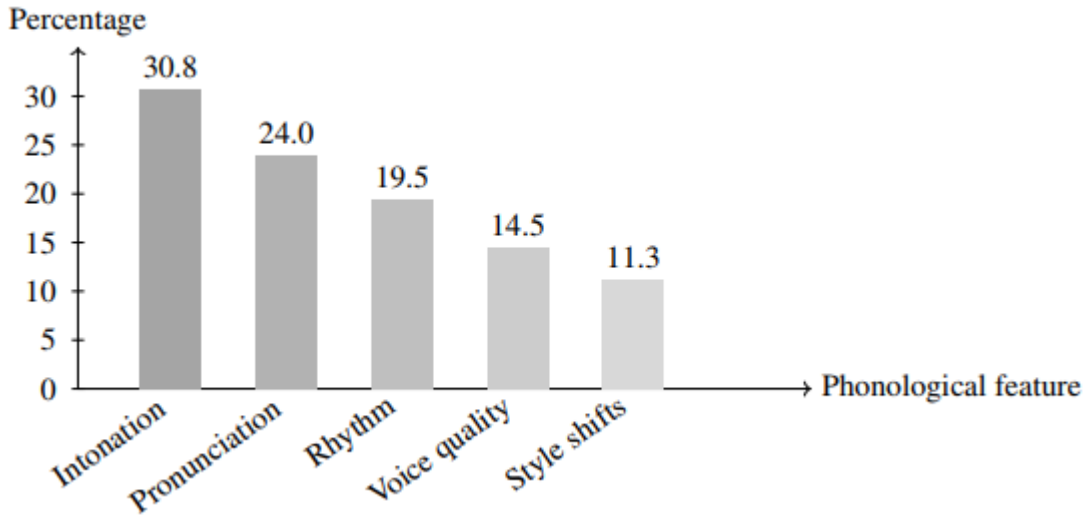

Figure 3: Distribution of phonological subcategories.

Orthographic Analysis

Cues expressing orthographic attitude were more common than those expressing phonological attitude and frequently coincided with affective attitude. Table 4 summarises the most important orthographic features. They occurred particularly often in dialogue, texting scenes, online interactions, and interior narration, in which the respective characters were particularly expressive.

Table 4: Orthographic Features and Purposes

Orthographic Feature	**Frequency**	**Purpose**
Italics and capitalisation	77	Mark's emphasis, irony, heightened affect, or dramatic stance.

Repeated letters and elongated forms	66	Represents excitement, teasing, flirtation, embarrassment, or camp expressiveness.
Nonstandard punctuation	59	Signals hesitation, interruption, emotional overflow, or conversational rhythm.
Texting and digital spellings	52	Creates youth register, intimacy, peer-group immediacy, and private affiliation.
Fragmented or interrupted syntax	24	Represents uncertainty, disclosure difficulty, or resistance to imposed labels.
Total	278	

Orthographic cues mattered for texts to be representable visually, from the voice. Nearly everyone made use of repeated letters and emphatic punctuation when they were being friendly, when they were playing or being funny, and when they were being flirtatious — attributes of queerness not only of disclosure and confrontation but also of play. As with many other linguistic developments of the time, digital spellings and texting conventions were spaces in which queer identity could be explored, though not immediately by adults. Labels were frequently in fragmented syntax, with characters having difficulty articulating their identities fluently, indicating that identity language can be empowering as well as challenging.

Findings

The first observation is that the omnipresent nature of vocabulary in representing queer identity in YA fiction is less subtle than any other. With identity labels, characters could be 'commentable' to themselves, to other characters and to readers. But labels were not working consistently. Here, some labels were empowering, as they opened up possibilities for recognition and community for characters. In others, labels came into conflict, imposed by unwelcoming other people, misread by family, or felt not to be adequate on characters with multiple and/or evolving identities.

Issues of self-identification language were particularly important. Here, the repeatedly depicted corpus presented queer identity as something that characters articulate into social being. First-person statements and pronoun corrections regarding misrecognition made identity a public discourse. These moments provide a snapshot of Butler's (1990, 1993) description of identity as accomplished through repetition: claiming “this is who I am” not only describes identity but, as a performative act, also constitutes it in the novels. It alters the atmosphere forces a response.

The community vocabulary also served as a sign of community. Some of the terminology used to construct networks of affiliation involved pride, queer spaces, chosen family, ally and shared humour. These lexical items helped queer identity come out of self-discovery, out of one's solipsism, and put queer identity into social worlds. This discovery counters only the individual's isolation or struggle in interpretations of queer YA literature. The corpus reveals language as a way of establishing community prior to the recognition afforded by institutions.

The second big discovery is that the link between the represented speech and the character is one of voice, not of essence or content. There was no one queer sound obtained from phonological cues. Rather, they were expressions of confidence and intimacy, fear and irony, desire. Character variation was common in terms of how different characters sounded to the same character in different places and/or to

different characters. Among queer peers, speech was more playful and stylised, with greater affective availability. However, in a hostile or uncertain environment, speech tended to be more hesitant, quiet, or disjointed.

This discovery confirms sociophonetic studies, which have found that voice characteristics can be involved in identity without being natural voice attributes of sexuality (Levon, 2006; Munson et al., 2006; Podesva, 2007). YA fiction is like, it turns this into a story. Descriptions of pitch, softness, laughter, pauses, and emphases were employed by authors to "dramatise" the risks involved with being heard in the social sphere. Many scenes involved not only a character's queerness but also the question of whether that character's voice had a safe space.

In addition, the representation of pronunciation and intonation cues helped convey a character's voice. Some characters were sounded out as careful and controlled to adults and grown-up peers. Some resorted to ironing, rising intonation, and/or exaggerated emphasis as a protective humour. These patterns reveal that fictional voice is a sociolinguistic tool in which queer characters work out issues of visibility.

The third main discovery is that written language is an expression of individuality and affect intensity. Orthography is not merely ornamental/trove. They had created Rythm, Stance and Intimacy. Emotional salience is indicated in italics and capitalisation; the repetition of letters indicates teasing and excitement, and punctuation marks hesitations and interruptions, as well as the creation of private channels of queer communication through digital spellings.

Orthographic cues were particularly relevant in the scene where they were texting or communicating online. Many times these scenes were used as a way for characters to practise using an identity language before interacting in person. Digital spaces transformed into semi-private spaces where pronoun use, attraction, flirtation, and the negotiation of vulnerability were possible. This discovery indicates that mediated communication plays a crucial role in the identity formation of today's adolescents, a sensitivity reflected in YA fiction.

However, in the process, orthographic stylisation had its ideological pitfalls. The overdone use of stylised spelling for queer characters could hurt the perception of queerness as "too" or "over" dramatic. However, when used by both queer and nonqueer actors, and in queer voice-overs, it proved more useful as a general, youthful voice that could be flexed for queer purposes.

Both the contradictory and complementary patterns of lexical explicitness and orthographic affect in relation to phonological imagination demonstrate how queer identities are constructed within the broader context of YA fiction. Lexical cues refer to identity, phonological cues to embodied voice and orthographic cues to visualising emotion and interactional stance. Collaboratively, these features perform relational, negotiated and performative queer identities.

There are indications of a trend towards normalisation in the corpus as well. There were more contexts of queer language than just trauma or confession. It was used in jokes, crushes, friendliness, texting, negotiation, narration to the family and in the classroom. The significance of this distribution is that it underscores that queer identity is not a unique issue but a common social issue. But the research also reveals 'uneven normalisation'. The idea of "markedness," hesitation, or "explanatory" dialogue can still be found in some texts, suggesting that queer identity requires explication.

Discussion

The findings resonate with the perspective that language is a process of identity enactment. Throughout the corpus in the process of naming, correcting, joking, pausing, emphasising and stylising – queer identity was reiterated again and again. These acts are "performative" in Butler's terms in that they are not just performances of identity, but they serve to produce the social reality of identity. The terms of interaction change in a noun phrase with a pronoun correction. A self-label invites recognition. Standing out and bonding in a camp expression. Before disclosure, there is a pause it dramatises the social state where identity is “disclosable.”

The approach of Bucholtz and Hall (2005) allows for the explanation of the operation of these linguistic acts. Emergence is apparent in "scenes" where the identity arises from the interaction and is fully formed. Positionality is apparent in the representation of characters as friends, children, lovers, students, gay, lesbian or queer. Indexicality is manifested in the manner of the labels, style and orthographic forms which refer to social meanings that go beyond their denotation. Relationality shows itself when an affirmation or disaffirmation of identity occurs in the way that other characters react to a character. Lastly, the principle of partialness can be perceived, since fictional identity is always a matter of narrative perspective, genre conventions, and interpretive reading.

The politics of these representations are further clarified by queer linguistic theory. Those texts which were strongest in the corpus did not rigidly apply the coding of queer discourse. Rather, they viewed queer linguistic practice as flexible, contextual and socially negotiated. In so doing, such representation illustrates the inauthenticity of the essentialist notion of a single monolithic means of queer speech. It also defies heteronormativity in its embrace of a queer that is ordinary, funny, romantic, liminal and communal.

Meanwhile, the analysis identifies tensions. YA novels have to make characters understandable to readers, which may overmark queerness as well, either by using consistent labels, wordplay, or by making queerness the subject of extratextual conversations. There are moments where marking can be affirming, as it makes queer marks visible, but also times when it may be reductive, as it makes queerness seem overdone or always explainable in language. This tension resonates with the ideas and discussions about queerness and representation in general: visibility has the power to confront erasure but also to permit the commodification, stereotyping, or surveillance.

The The results of this study have several extensions to the existing research. They challenge Blackburn et al. (2015), who claim that queer YA literature has the potential to challenge normative ideologies, and demonstrate that it is not only the plot of a text that does so but also its language. They expand on previous work by Cart and Jenkins (2018), which details the history of queer YA representation, to identify specific linguistic strategies relevant to representing today's queer and gender-diverse YA protagonists. Finally, the volume extends sociolinguistic and queer linguistic studies by demonstrating how indexicality, stance, and performativity can be used to analyse fictional dialogues.

Fiction, hence, should be considered as a sociolinguistic space. Whereas fictional speech isn't impromptu, it's in circulation in the social sphere, sharing social meanings about queer speech, about how queer people sound, name themselves, engage in communication and make themselves known. Ultimately, readers can take from these depictions the ways that identity markers are empowering, how pronouns are

important, how voice is socially read and understood, and how queer community has its own humour and ways of caring. However, there is the potential for readers to ingest stereotypes in the authors' narrow use of queer language. That's the element of the social significance of YA fiction: it has this dual role: at once to normalise queerness and to reinforce the language ideologies it aims to combat.

Conclusion

This paper explored queer identity to determine how it is linguistically accomplished in 20 YA novels, specifically by investigating lexical, phonological, and orthographic clues. Lexical cues were also the most common and explicit identity resource, and specifically identity labels, self-identification language, queer language, and community terms. Phonological cues, which occur less often, are nonetheless crucial in the build-up of character voice, affect and social risk. Orthographic cues that were visualised encompassed emotions, intimacy, youth register and mediated communication.

Theoretically, this study contributes to queer linguistics and sociolinguistics by showing that fictional language is meaningful for identity performance. These foundational theories are Butler's performativity theory, which explains the repeated acts as a way of establishing queer identity; Bucholtz's and Hall's theory of identity as a relational process, which has to do with the labels, stance, style, and interaction; and queer linguistic theory, which focuses on the contestation or reproduction of normativity. In linguistic studies, research also demonstrates that queer representation is not merely a narrative about plots and inclusion, but also concerns the linguistic construction of characters' voices.

Realistically, what matters is the linguistic representation of literature and how it shapes young people's understanding of identity, belonging, and social difference as readers. In terms of literary contributions to the normalisation of queer life, a queer character can be left to refer to her or himself, can speak in different voices, can communicate with others through humour and mockery, can negotiate pronouns, and can be allocated to an average narrative space. Language is stereotyped or used excessively, thus reinforcing narrow expectations. Language thus becomes a focus, adding tight critical analysis to the LGBTQ+ YA novel.

There are several limitations to the study. A limitation of the study's findings is that the corpus comprised only 20 novels. With more texts, it might be possible to see differences by year of publication, genre, author name, national context or audience. Secondly, fictional language is not real-life speech. The phonological cues used in the analysis in this paper are not acoustic data, but written representations of sound. They expose the modes of ‘voice’ used by writers for readers and not a representation of ‘queer adult' speech. Thirdly, interpretation is by its very nature partial. Analytical judgments are involved in coding identity-relevant features, and other researchers may code ambiguous features differently. Thirdly, the study was limited to the practice of queerness in English-language YA fiction; it does not fully discuss multilingual or cross-cultural queer linguistic practices.

Future Research Directions

Research needs should advance by increasing the number of decades studied, the number of YA novels and genres included in the analysis, and the range of publishing contexts. Diachronic corpus studies might explore changes over time in the use of

words referring to identity, pronouns, or queer terms. Comparative research could be done to compare what fictional queer discourse represents with excerpts from conversations derived from interviews, social media, or naturally occurring conversations between queer youth adults, ensuring ethical safeguarding. Digital queer communication also needs further study, as it is an element in the construction of adolescent identity that is increasingly prevalent in texting, group chats, fan groups, and social media. Lastly, a cross-cultural approach could be applied to investigate the discourse of queer in YA fiction in various languages and regional areas, with particular emphasis on possible local terms, discourse-related translation practices and censorship related to the discourse.

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