Locaspeak: verbal interaction in the Argentine gay *ambiente* of the 1990s

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Locaspeak: verbal interaction in the Argentine gay *ambiente* of the 1990s*

Horacio Federico Sívori *

The use of language is a singular and powerful marker of boundaries between social worlds. In the Argentine gay ambiente,[1] *homosexuales asumidos* ["out" gay men] who dramatize *mariconería* [queerness] imitating and exaggerating feminine stereotypes are called *locas*.[2] The terms *loca*, *marica* [effeminate apocopate], *mariquita* [effeminate diminutive] and *maricona* [effeminate superlative], all female-ended voices, parodying standard terms *puto* [fag, literally "male whore"] and *maricón* [effeminate male], designate the referent to as a male homosexual. But the frequency of use of the terms loca, mariquita, and maricona, unlike that of puto and maricón, is almost null among the rest of the vernacular-speaking community. The particular use of this first group of names indicates the presence of a restricted code. Speakers in no way associated to the homosexual milieu rarely utter the term maricona; instead they say maricón.

In this chapter I present a key set of sexual and gender terminology, paying particular attention to how it is used in the verbal register which I have come to call "*loca*speak."[3] I analyze its cultural and pragmatic contexts, i.e. the material and symbolic conditions and intentionality by which this code is used. The ensuing discussion aims at distinguishing the linguistic and discursive resources that are set into motion to produce categories of identity; as well as the construction of the homosexual milieu as a "speech community". Additionally, we will see how these same categories of identity and the notions of community at issue are also subjected to intense disputes.

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[1] In most varieties of contemporary Spanish *ambiente* colloquially refers to networks and spaces of interaction whose participants share a specific interest or status marker, such as *el ambiente artístico* [the art world], *ambiente teatral* [theatre scene], *de la noche* (the night scene). *Ser del ambiente* [being part of one] means belonging to one specific milieu and being able to manipulate that as an attribute of social value, or liable for its negative connotations. In speech interactions among peer insiders or aspirants, one tacitly refers to a shared milieu of value as "*el ambiente*," thus establishing a shared sense of belonging, and excluding those not in the know. In the case of the gay ambiente, the expression *de ambiente* (without the mark of the definite article *el*—*de* instead of *del*) adds a level of euphemistic ambiguity, as for those in the know it addresses the broad gay milieu indistinctively (if it were any other more restricted milieu, it would be *el* ambiente, and no 'ambiente' alone), while it is expected (with greater or lesser success) that outsiders ignore which ambiente the speaker is referring to; thus the potentially stigmatizing content of "gay" or "homosexual" is intentionally omitted.

[2] Privileged subject of this ethnography, a *loca* [literally mad female] in Spanish gay jargon is, depending on speaker intentionality, and speech context, either a flamboyant male homosexual (as opposed to a 'discreet' homosexual), or a gay male (as opposed to a male heterosexual). Accordingly, "queen" would be a rough equivalent of loca in gay English.

[3] Based on one chapter of my M.A. thesis at the New York University Department of Anthropology (Sívori, 1994), revised for publication in 2004.

The jargon spoken among those who identify as locas in Argentinean urban centres is mainly the result of transformations operated on the gender marks of standard Rioplatense vocabulary.[4] The particular stylistic component that operates in this register is synthetically described by the expression "*mariconear.*" The speaker can "act as a marica" (intransitive use of the verb), as well as "make an object marica" (transitive use).[5] In both jocular and injurious interactions under the sign of *mariconeo*, everything touched the speaker's name-calling power becomes feminine.

In locaspeak he person known as Juan reveals himself as "Juana"; what was his suit becomes "her dress," and his chest "her bosom." These operations configure a particularly disruptive use of language, by which the order that assigns a certain gender to every object and subject is inverted; in this case, feminized.

Locas "produce themselves" (an expression which in locaspeak also means "dressing up for the show") in speech in a way similar to the process transgender persons and drag queens undertake with their bodies; they "mount" (intransitive) on speech, and they also mount (transitive) a context and a series of objects of reference. The identity of the loca is performed by adopting this voice. Conversely, too, by making the process of code-switching a strategic issue, the same speaker intermittently uses and avoids using the code, takes it up, abandons it, and then takes it up again. Just as the voice of the *loca* is performed, the neutral voice is also performed strategically. In "heterosexual" contexts the code is avoided or another specific sub-code is used, only drawing the attention to the speaker's homosexual identity, inclination, or interest ambiguously. In locaspeak this operation is called "*tirar plumas* [throwing feathers]."[6]

The flip side of the coin is that the restricted code is by principle avoided by a variety of speakers. Among them are men who transit the gay milieu—and may or may not have sex or romance with gays or not—while maintaining a heterosexual identity, whom locas call *chongos*; as well as *tapados* [in the closet, literally "covered"], more discreet homosexuals; and the gays that elaborate an exclusively masculine presentation of the self. In certain contexts locas also avoid using the code, for example when flirting or when they are *de levante* [cruising],[7] in order to boost their male erotic capital on a sexual market that values a stereotypical form of masculinity.

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[4] *Rioplatense* refers the culture and people from the Río de la Plata region, comprehending parts of Argentina and Uruguay (Translator's Note).

[5] The syntax of the verb *mariconear* only allows for the intransitive use. I have not found a verb to describe the operation by means of which an object is feminized by someone, although the operation designated by *mariconeo* (noun form) indeed accomplishes that effect.

[6] The reference to feathers, as explained by speakers consulted on the matter, to the feathers on the colourful decor variety show female performers (called *vedettes* in the local theater jargon) wear. It is said that the feathers of a loca show out [*se le notan las plumas*] when his homosexuality, evident in his effeminate manners, is revealed. There is also a difference between the involuntary act when "her feathers drop or fall out" [*se le caen las plumas*], and the voluntary act of dropping or throwing feathers [*tirar plumas*].

[7] The noun *levante* derives from the verb *levantar*, which means "to pick something up" (TN).

The representation of a homosexual voice by the use of a restricted code is strategic, aiming at the creation and exploitation of opportunities to establish the legitimacy of an experience or a point of view recognized as homosexual. But no single experience is consensually represented as legitimate in the everyday life of the gay ambiente. And no single representation can encompass the wide spectrum of conducts and the variety of subjective identifications and itineraries that shape the homosexual universe. Every speaker is at odds with different sources of legitimacy, between different frameworks for the evaluation of socio-sexual and gender behaviour. A large proportion of urban middle class men who in countries of the Western Hemisphere identified as gay in the late 20th century found it viable and even desirable to act as men "who do not show" [*que no aparentan*] their homosexuality. The civil association *Deportistas Argentinos Gays* [Gay Argentinean Sportsmen], which grew impressively over its first three years of existence, by the end of the 1990s was introduced to the public as "a group who enjoys its identity but does not cry it out loud."[8]

Contrasting with the aforementioned model, *locas* express themselves "in feminine". In harmony or in dissonance with other gay styles, but with relative autonomy, they elaborate a linguistic ideology and practice that re-appropriates notions inherited from masculine domination and purity, while altering the object relations to which their subjection to those values gives substance. Pragmatics are key to assess the meaning of language choice and register in code switches. What does it mean to learn, to acquire the necessary competence, and switch to speak like a loca? What sort of operation is performed; what kind of social relationships are established; and cultural objects of what nature are produced when the voice of a loca is spoken? How does this process impinge on the construction of a particular homosexual identity? Intentionality guides two linguistic practices through which users of the code recreate different social contexts.

On the one hand there are the instrumental strategies of showing and hiding in non-homosexual contexts, aimed at identifying accomplices while remaining unrecognised by those who do not share the code ("passing"), which we have mentioned as *tirar plumas* [to throw feathers]. On the other hand, in homosexual contexts, intentionality works on a more expressive level–a gender role is dramatized by openly behaving like a *marica* ("*mariconear*") or like a loca ("*loquear*").[9] I shall refer to the latter.

The most distinctive operations involved in *mariconeo* are theatrical pose and the deliberate alteration of the gender endings of pronouns, nouns and adjectives from masculine to feminine. I present speech samples collected in conversation rounds in Rosario in 1992 and supplemented in Buenos Aires and Rosario between 1995 and

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[8] As stated on a flyer distributed during the "Buenos Aires Gay" festival in 2000.

[9] Hayes (1981) distinguished a third context of use for North American *gayspeak*: the activist context, in which, according to the author, a critical linguistic practice was mobilized. Although there is clear evidence of this register in Argentina (Brown, 1999: 118-19), in this study we have not explored them sufficiently to include them in this characterization.

2000. I will work on a set of nouns and pronouns—those are the limits of this study, expanding little on tone, body language and conversational analysis, which would be crucial to characterize locapeak as part of a more ambitious sociolinguistic study.

To perform what in sociolinguists' terminology is called code-switching (see Cameron and Kulick, 2003: 183), in this case from the neutral, unmarked variety of Rioplatense Spanish to locaspeak, the gender endings of nouns and pronouns referring to the speaker, the interlocutor or a third person, object of a humorous insult or of gossip, are changed from masculine to feminine. To a loca, someone who in "hetero" speech would be a maric*ón* is actually a maric*ona*. *Activo* ["top;" the one performing the inserter's role in penetrative sex] becomes *activa*. In the statement *Mirá cómo se hace la activa* [Look how she pretends she's a top], *hacerse* [to pretend] is understood as a spurious mimicry. A respectable male is *toda una señora* [an honorable lady]; someone miserable *una arrastrada* [a wretched female]; and the Minister of Economy was "*la*" [Domingo] Cavallo. The noun puto, which in the vernacular variety is considered a particularly offensive way to call a homosexual person, does not transfer its meaning to the variant *puta* in gayspeak, because this word has its own meaning. It means, also offensively, "prostitute" or "licentious woman" (slut). When used in humorous exchanges, its meaning is this latter one. Although both forms would be plausible in exchanges among homosexual men, *¡qué puto que sos!* [What a fag you are!] means "you are too homosexual;" while *¡qué puta que sos!* [What a whore you are!] means "you too slutty"—something perfectly admissible as part of the implied practice of feminization.[10]

This practice redefines the social milieu of interaction under the radical authority of locas as gender dissidents. Within the gay ambiente, sexual identity loses its quality as a diacritical marker of a social boundary. The identities at issue are, on the contrary, gender identities. Therefore, it is possible to isolate locaspeak—rather than some sort of gay or homosexual speech—as an empirically consistent unit of study. The social uses of the categories "gay" and "homosexual" involve, at least in Argentinean urban spaces today, a wide variety of identifications and speech positions, which cannot be reduced to an identity which would comprise them or reproduce over time.[11]

The theatrical effect of mariconería acquires meaning in the realm of gender. Altered, bent or diverted gender categories proliferate, inverting the order of masculine domination by making evident the arbitrariness of gender roles and identities. The code-switching operation described "marks"—which in linguistic terms means "distinguishes"—the following actions: it ascribes the speaker to an identity category, that of loca; and their belonging to a speech community, that of locas. In the social contexts where this

[10] The statement *soy puto* [I am a fag] is, in different contexts, plausible as an act of self affirmation and personal pride. While the speaker recognizes himself as homosexual, he does not formulate this in the feminine version of locaspeak, but in the standard variety.

[11] When I refer to homosexual or gay speech I do not strictly refer to the speech of the locas but of an "entendido" (in the know) register that is characteristic of homosexual sociability, independent of the speaker's sexual identity.

performance is deployed, it also serves to segregate categories not included in the speech community, particularly the masculine gays and the more discreet, or "covered" (in the closet) homosexuals (*tapados*), as they are called in the gay jargon. While, as we will see further on, there are certain material and moral requirements for the code to be used at a particular social space. Its use produces a context dominated by the authority of the subject that is speaking—the *loca*–, which de-legitimizes other homosexual subjects not using the code, as well as heterosexuals. By using of the code, the legitimacy of the voice of the *loca* is elaborated; and certain values are defended, whose efficiency is the condition of existence of a viable social space for the expression of this particular way to be homosexual.

Contexts of use

Several ethnographic reports on male homosexuality in contemporary Latin America have referred to the active/passive dichotomy of sexual relations as the organizing principle of the traditional distribution of social roles in the universe of men who have sex with men (Lancaster, 1992; Murray, 1995 and 2000; Parker, 1991 and 1999; Prieur, 1998; Cáceres, 2000). The gender identity of women, as well as the "passive" homosexual's sexual identity, are subordinated to the penetrating male. In sexual relations between two biological males, only those who are penetrated are socially recognized as homosexuals; those who penetrate maintain intact their identity as *macho*.

This classificatory principle is associated with codes of honour and shame that characterize the gender relations in the so-called Mediterranean complex (Passaro, 1997). Latin America is seen as a unique site, particularly in relation to domestic life, for the maintenance and revival of the traditions of the civilizations of Southern Europe, Northern Africa, and the Near East. In these traditions, interpersonal relations and the use of space, time, and language have persistently been structured around the pair masculine/feminine as dominant and dominated, respectively. In this economy of roles and status, the male is endowed with the honour of dominating or, otherwise, suffers the shame of losing that position; for example when he "behaves like a female" and is penetrated by another man. Over the past thirty years, with results analogous to the negotiations of power and privilege between men and women since "women's liberation" (Giddens, 1992), in modern cosmopolitan contexts, the egalitarian ideal of two equally endowed males–both "gays"–has replaced the hegemony of the "traditional" model of complementary roles and male domination (Fry, 1982; Carrier, 1995; Lumsden, 1996; Brown, 1999).

The attempt to classify local contemporary "sexual cultures" has overrated both the relevance of the tradition/modernity opposition as a determinant of gender relations at erotic sites, and the role of normative behaviour in the construction of sexual identities. In the speech community of locas, the of import of localizing their erotic regime within

a cultural tradition—as an echo of a common sense on hierarchical gender relations predominant in Western modernity—, obstructs the understanding of the actors' perspective in the process of construction of male homosexual identities. Although it is possible to empirically confirm the persistence of that model, I argue that it is necessary to distinguish contexts of use and pertinence of the active/passive dichotomy.

What are the aims of the sexual classification of tops and bottoms [*activos y pasivos*] in locaspeak? When they behave like a loca [*loquean*]—i.e. speaking and acting feminine—speakers call one another pasiv*a* [passive female] for fun. Inverting the gender mark of activ*o* [male], the names activ*a* [female] and, more frequently, pasiv*a* [female] are uttered. In this exercise, the referential function (alluding to the sexual role) remains diluted and subordinated to the intentionality of the humorous insult which, beyond its temporary intention, contributes to the construction or reinforcement of solidarity among peers. Although the value of the hierarchy active/passive is enacted in the gender switch, its argument semantically changes. Instead of the *sex* role of the passive male [*pasivo*], what is highlighted is the subordinate *social* status of the passive female [*pasiva*], as is the case in the following utterance, extracted from humorous gossip whose motive seems to be on the referential plane:

/¿*Acti:vo? ... Si esa es más pasiva que una puerta*/ [Active? ... But she is more passive than a door.]

"*Esa*" and "*pasiva*," as well as the allusion to a feminine attribute in "*más [...] que una puerta*,"[12] denote the code-switch. One speaks feminine. The humorous tone denotes the authority of the speaker to establish a shared truth about the feminine passivity of the one who dared claim to be active. The expression of doubt (the stress on the /i/) when pronouncing the masculine qualifier *activo* as a rhetorical question, and the ironic emphasis of the segment "in feminine" both introduce the contrast between the hetero register and locaspeak. Therefore, what is being discussed is not only the truth of (saying that the person of reference is not really active), but also the legitimacy to author the statement and the pertinence of the neutral code (standard "hetero"). It is not *ese* [that one male, he] nor *pasivo* [passive male]. The proper, more appropriate, code is forcefully imposed.

Commenting similar speech interactions in the North American contemporary gay milieu, Leap argues that what is at stake is not the meaning of the statement, but the performance of an identity (1997: 11).[13] What is performed is not merely a sex role, or a homosexual identity. On the one hand, it is conventional wisdom for person who identifies as a loca that sexual roles are, as a general rule, reversible. On the other

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[12] A door is flat, metaphorically without a phallus, like a woman.

[13] A "performance" here is the "production" of a material reality. When making fun of someone and calling him *pasiva*, the speaker feminizes himself and feminizes the object of the joke. This, strictly speaking, generates the feminine attribute in the act of speaking itself.

hand, to those who reject or lack familiarity with this sub-cultural context, it is less obvious that neither the status nor the identity of the person object of scorn is at issue, as if that were a universe of "actives and passives". According to the sexual ideology of locas, *activo* a permanent status or identity is a contradiction in terms, a possibility outside of the equation. In the expansive area of an ideology that would go as 'pan-homosexual,' male homosexuality and the desire to be penetrated are a universal fact: there is a homosexual in every man, as well as a passive sexual being that only need to be unmasked.[14] It is a given that all men are potentially homosexuals, that all can be passive. "They are all [concrete or potential] locas." Thus, in locaspeak, on the one hand there is the literal use of *pasiva* and, on the other hand, *activa* as a parody of the *loca atrevida* [daring loca]'s nerve–bearing in mind that all of them [*todas*] are *locas atrevidas*–to claim that she is active.

In that register, the referential value in the designation of sex roles ("active" and "passive") is deliberately subordinated to other aspects of interaction. In assessing the erotic potential of a prospective sex partner, for example, the inquiry "Are you active or passive?" is uttered in the neutral voice, clearly not in locaspeak. The use of 'heterospeak' is all too frequent in contexts of homosexual interaction. As unmarked speech it may well indicate no deliberate choice, but it often corresponds to (1) avoidance of the code by someone who, regardless his sexual conduct, does not identify as homosexual; or by someone who, while identifying as homosexual or even as gay, does not identify as loca. It can also connote (2) ignorance of the code by someone who has not (yet) acquired competence in its use; or (3) rejection of the code by someone who questions the use of locaspeak. Then again, the use of the code involves an elaborate *mise-en-scène* and a dramatization which appeals to an audience. It is therefore unlikely in intimate contexts such as flirting between men, where masculinity is mobilized as erotic capital, or on the realistic stage of a clinical interview, be it medical, legal, psychological, socio-epidemiologic, or by law enforcement.

Although the value of the insult or *cargada* [mockery] "*¡pasiva!*" nurtures the shame and the image of degradation the effeminate male carries as a stigma within a system of heterosexist values which also prevail in the gay milieu, the authorship of such texts belongs to the locas. Authorship means a symbolic conquest of no lesser importance than the value of parody as self-deprecation or of the insult as a disqualification of the opponent. A "genuine" statement by a loca recreates her authority as a producer of texts, and an idea of community. Leap, evoking Sapir, concludes that "the production of gay texts speaks to authenticity in gay experience, since it allows apparently ordinary, vulgar and offensive events [...] to become 'optimistic, valuable and vitally endearing,' opportunities for a genuine and not a spurious exchange" (1996: 11).

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14 I thank Stephen Murray for his help to refine this point.

Reverse hierarchies: the chongo

Legitimacy and genuine values produce boundaries; they are invested at the expense of what is left out, classified as spurious. The linguistic production of the *chongo* (male noun),[15] which designates the reverse, gender opposite of loca, exclusively used with that meaning in locaspeak, allows to assess that aspect in the linguistic construction of social legitimacy. What is, according to a loca, a true, i.e. genuine, chongo? This question condenses a hot dispute about criteria of authenticity and authority in male homosexual culture.

The everyday use of the term chongo refers to a man whose masculine appearance and demeanour is deemed "natural," not "produced," where the artificiality of the latter would signal femininity. Homosexuals that "pass" as heterosexuals, about whom "nobody notices it" [*no se les nota*], are also often called *chongos*. A young homosexual who is not effeminate can be described as "*bastante* [quite] *chonguito*" [diminutive, referring his young age]. Nevertheless, their public or intimate behaviour can eventually reveal that an apparent *chongo* is in reality a *mariquita*, a *loca*.

Can then a gay man of masculine appearance, who acts like a heterosexual, be called a chongo? This is a question locas often ask themselves, who answer in no–"no way!" Someone identified as homosexual is not a true chongo. In locas' value system, homosexual behaviour–more so identity–always implies some, and often great–loss of masculinity. José (33 years old), for example, told me in 1992: "a chongo doesn't kiss." "If he kisses you, then he is not a chongo." Expressing affection toward a homosexual partner challenges the masculine integrity of the *chongo.*

The "true" chongo is an ideal type. As complement to the loca, defined by effeminacy and homosexuality, the chongo must be manly and heterosexual; he must not desire other men. The sexual regime prevalent in Argentina until the 1970s–the chronology is not precise as the process was gradual–provided some materiality to the figure of the chongo. Within that regime, the "passive" participant in the homosexual relation (meaning the insertee in penetrative sex), feminized by virtue of that role, was considered more deviant than the "active" one (meaning the inserter in penetrative sex), whose virility could remain virtually unchallenged (Cf. Murray, 2000). A man could have sexual relations with other men without *being* homosexual. By the 1980s in the larger urban enclaves, a 'gay' model consolidates, according to which every man or woman who sexually desires a person of the same sex is considered homosexual (Brown, 1999: 118; for the Brazilian case see Fry, 1982). Under this regime it is literally impossible–a contradiction in terms–for a man to construct his sexual male companion as *a chongo.* In 1999, Miguel (43 years old) expressed with nostalgia and irony: "I understand that this marvellous animal is endangered species" [*en vías de extinción*].

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[15] *Lunfardo* (Rioplatense slang) term, of infrequent use in the standard vernacular variety, *chongo* means "vulgar," "common." Its–quite frequent–use in locaspeak associates that vulgarity to stereotypical masculinity; designating the male whose masculinity remains uncorrupted.

Regardless their current unavailability, *chongos* stories are crucial for the construction of locas as producers of ambiente texts. The chongo is a product of their authorship. You need a loca to say what a true chongo exactly is, or, more likely, impugnate false statements of *chongohood*: when a supposed *chongo* is in reality "a closet fag" [*un puto tapado*] or a *mariquita*. A chongo can neither admit (and those who construct themselves as chongos must avoid doing so) to have competence in a homosexual register, as in the case of gayspeak. Calling oneself chongo, thus using of the category, therefore the code, reveals the speaker as a loca.[16] Self-affiliation to this particular category is a contradictory operation, constructed as culturally spurious.

The status of the chongo is also at risk in another of the various semantic fields around which the authenticity of male homosexual identity is constructed: the idea of *asumirse* [roughly equivalent to "coming out of the closet"], i.e. declaring one's homosexuality, would be a contradictory operation for a chongo. To constitute oneself as a "real man," where manhood is associated to the value of honesty, a homosexual has to declare his homosexuality [*asumirse*] before his family, his friends and, principally, before his own self. Instead, "possible" chongos openly deny anything resembling a homosexual identity. Furthermore, males who associate with homosexuals but do not identify as peers, perform an exaggeratedly manliness around the locas, compensating for the risk they run. In a loca's assessment, "they are not man enough" to act out, let alone declare, their homosexuality. The place of a real chongo is an impossible one. It is expected that someone who present themselves as a chongo complies with the sexual role of penetrator, "active" partner in sex; but doubts prevail as to whether that is their true desire. They are at the same time desired and despised. Raúl (45) said to me in 2000: "I use him and I throw him away". Male hustlers [*taxi boys*] and other men who have sex with gays in exchange for a reward of some sort are also called c*hongos*.

Authorship and authority

Locas establish their authority in the field of sexual and gender conduct as authors of homosexual texts. Who has the attributes that make them a true chongo? –Only a loca can decide. When, intrigued, I started to directly ask what a true chongo was, as someone with little competence in the code would, my friends quickly replied and debated, as this is an issue of genuine cultural value. According to the ideology of gender and within the system of values that permeates the linguistic practices in the gay male milieu, gender is determined by the sexual behaviour. That normative vision clearly contrasts with actual behaviours which, in contradiction to the model, are widely recognized and discursively accepted. Just like the loca often "pretends to be active" [*se hace la activa*] penetrating other locas, and so-called chongos turn out not to be

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[16] Just like some men avoided the use gayspeak to avoid being identified as gay, beginning to do so was up to the 1990s a transition that young homosexuals underwent as they became part of the homosexual world.

real ones, a true chongo would have to be active and it is assumed that the loca in reality always wants to be passive. But the male/female (translated to masculine/feminine), active/passive object relation that operates in the distribution of honour and shame between those alternative, complimentary sites is perfectly inverted when the loca, as author and authority constructs himself as the only legitimate subject of the gay milieu. It is of paramount importance for locas to clarify who is a true chongo and who merely pretends to be one. It is conventional wisdom in the gay milieu that gender performance is in fact more relevant than the dubious claim of a sexual role. And the loca is the only subject with linguistic authority to determine the efficacy of that performance. The competence to use the code is constructed as a cultural good, whose circulation generates and (re-)produces homosexual identity. It shapes the group of the locas as a community and the *ambiente* as their own space.

From the point of view of a loca, the fake performance of the chongo, his deceit, denounces his trick. Homosexual stigma and female identity, positively re-semanticized and formulated as function of a (sexual) desire, are constructed as primordial seal in locaspeak, more foundational than heterosexuality and masculinity, less elaborate, more true. Male domination by the chongo is generated "from below" by the loca, and it is, in turn, reversible. Like transvestis, locas always suspect and in their accounts confirm the will of the chongo to turn around [*darse vuelta*] (Cf. Kulick, 1998). Locas' discursive skills call into question their own subordinated place in the gender hierarchy. If a chongo, or any heterosexual man, for that matter, unlike the loca, does not have the authority to speak of himself as a "woman," what authority has he have to call himself "man"? Locas, on the contrary, exercise both authorities on an everyday basis. Being "a man" or "a woman" are declarations that they make alternately. In the sub-cultural horizon of the gay ambiente, outlined not by sexual practices but by ideologies and linguistic and discursive practices, identities are not the cause but the effect of those practices. They are not defined by presumed sex roles, but by gender-specific performances and relations. The legitimate use of gayspeak as a restricted code is patrimony of the *loca*, whose linguistic authority is not called into question, at least on this account.

Roles and identities

Several authors, among them Roger Lancaster (1992), whom I read while doing fieldwork in Rosario, and Richard Parker (1991), preceded by Peter Fry in an 1982 article, intrigued by the peculiar system of attribution of homosexual identities they had found in urban Latin American contexts, considered the emergence of the homosexual identity of the modern gay man expressed a "modernizing" transition. The "traditional" hierarchical model, based on a fixed dichotomy between the active (penetrator) and passive (penetrated) roles, only segregated the identity of the sex partner who performed latter as a homosexual, assigning him a subordinate social role and status. The modern "egalitarian" model identifies everyone who has this inclination as homosexual, without

a fixed distinction of roles, or of gender identities. Following a long culturalist tradition in anthropology, and nevertheless critical of the heuristic value of opposing—on the ground of the tradition/modernity dichotomy—social universes of a national scale as homogenous systems, the authors associated the first, hierarchical model to whole territorial and social units: the Mediterranean, Latin America and the lower metropolitan classes whose members were not yet modernized. The sexual ideology sustaining a strictly structured relation between penetrators and penetrated was the expression of the gender system that opposes men as male dominators, and dominated non-men (women as well as men of homosexual orientation, feminine and feminized respectively). These latter, homosexual men suffered the loss of masculine honour that is constitutive of this system of values (Lancaster, 1992).

One of the problems with that argument, which caused me certain discomfort when I compared it to my field experience in the Rosario gay ambiente, was the idea of a strict correspondence between that gender system and supposedly self-contained territorial and social units, which was specifically put forward for the case of the Latin American lower classes. I found that that this classificatory scheme neglected the internal heterogeneity as well as the complex history of the territorial and social units to which it made reference. Another problem I found, which I will discuss in more detail here, was the conceptual slippage derived from the assumption that "active" and "passive" worked as categories of identity in the homosexual milieu.[17] This would probably be the case if we exclusively took into account how homosexual identities are constructed in the public imagination of each national society, which is, strictly speaking, Lancaster's argument (1992). Nevertheless, locas tell a different story.

Active and passive, from the point of view of "*homosexuales asumidos*"–in both "traditional," as well as in "modern" contexts–, are sex roles in a hierarchical system where the one who adopts the former dramatizes the role of dominator and the one who adopt the latter dramatizes that of the dominated. Despite their use as claims of authority and as categories of accusation, these categories are not adopted as further reaching social identities in social life in contexts of interaction of a larger scale, as is the case of categories like man, macho, loca, chongo, gay, or even puto. Unlike these latter, the use of *activo* and *pasivo* is restricted to quite specific communicative contexts. Furthermore, I have argued that beyond these specific contexts their value is often reverted.

The categories active and passive refer to what a person does sexually or desires to do, not to what the person *is* beyond the specific pragmatic context of sexual performance. The predication that is actually uttered is "to *play* active" [*hacer de activo*] or "to *play* passive" [*hacer de pasivo*], and that is the actual meaning of the statements "I am

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[17] Murray (2000), while understanding the attributes of *activos* and *pasivos* as social identities, criticises the idea that only the passive men are classified as homosexuals, as well as the idea that this would make them lose their honour.

active" and "I am passive". What I perceived during my fieldwork, which made me doubt about the role of sexual ideology in this moral economy, is that identities are constructed in more complex ways; the meanings they acquire in a particular context cannot easily be transferred to another. Furthermore, the value of sexual practices, the ways in which they are named, and their relation with the social identities are all social facts which are mediated by individual projects. In the more public contexts of homo-social interaction of the gay ambiente, it is not coital positions that are negotiated, but social identities of a broader reach. In these contexts, one does not physically penetrate or gets penetrated, but dramatizes, in a humorous way, the status of the other as penetrated—his shame for being dominated—, or puts into doubt, through irony, the status of the penetrator and his honour for that role. It is not the identity of active or passive that is at stake, but that of loca, chongo, or gay, constructions that play with those roles in complex ways.

Speech makes the loca

Thus avoiding the deterministic framework of a "sexual culture," the empirical selection made here corresponds to a linguistic category: locaspeak, a restricted code available to a particular speaker in a particular speaking context, both marked as "effeminate." In this, I depart from the foundational projects by Hayes (1981) and Leap (1995), who studied North American gayspeak. Those authors considered the different linguistic varieties used in different contexts of linguistic interaction by men who identified as homosexuals. What the different sub-codes had in common was that all of them were spoken by homosexuals. Therefore that identity was assumed precede speech. For Hayes, it guided linguistic choice; while for Leap it guided text-making and discurse. What I proposed here, instead, is to look at the performativity (Butler, 1990; Cameron and Kulick, 2003) of language choice, i.e. how its use defines the ways speakers individually and collectively self-represent, thus generating a set of identities and of discourses about such identities.

Although as a speech genre, locaspeak is a sub-cultural register, it is nevertheless conceived independent of the existence of a subculture as a self-contained unit. It is linguistic choice, the marked use of this genre, which makes it possible to imagine a speaking community, in this case of locas. The existence of that community does not take precedence as a prerequisite for linguistic practice. And it is through linguistic practice that community boundaries—both internal and external—are drawn.

The gay ambiente in 1992: linguistic disputes

In relatively public contexts of verbal interaction associated to the gay ambiente in Rosario, although sex sometimes came up as a subject of conversation, it was not issues related to sexual intercourse per se that were at stake. In the sexual knowledge

circulating in conversations gay peers which were not marked as intimate, sex itself was not the central topic. In the productive context of the humorous affront (in Rioplatense, *cargada* [mockery]), for example, sexual categories were evoked as a resource for irony, to call into question inherited concepts about the relation between gender, sexuality and social order. Although in everyday conversation, allusions to the males' attributes as "active" or "passive" abounded, such allusions were not intended to transmit true information about the issue for a practical use. The speaking context in this case was analogous to that established in male, juvenile speech where the statement *tirame la goma* [suck my dick] is often made as a public challenge, which only in a naïve—and dangerously—literal way could be understood as an order or invitation to fellate the speaker. The effect of the first statement was not to catalogue anyone's sexual activity, like that of the appeal between male adolescents was not an invitation for sexual intercourse. As far as both are speech acts with a performative value (Austin, 1962; Butler, 1990; Morris, 1995), they generate a comment about roles in a hierarchical structure, that of gender, and its exaggeration and inversion among the subjects that intervened in the verbal exchange.

Instead of identifying somebody, sex-bending and gender-bending categories are usually found in appellative contexts, such as serious or humorous insults, accusations and jokes. In contexts of verbal interaction whose pragmatic aspect is more important than the referential value of its content (Jakobson, 1984), the accusations made through humorous insults are used not so much as signs attributed to certain subjects or practices, but in function of how they operate on certain social issues of more personal importance for those involved. In the contexts observed, self-ascription to categories that are essential to identity became manifest as a rather problematic subject. Like in the case of homosexual relations and transvestism, the linguistic and discursive attributes that alluded to a unique homosexuality or to a gay culture were actively avoided as sources of self-definition. They were instead used with irony to refer to the gay ambiente as universe of peers.

Although many individuals did positively identify as gay or homosexual in their intimacy, great care was exercised in public contexts to avoid precise definitions. Comparatively, the most used descriptive categories were those of more neutral value, like "gay" or *de ambiente.* But "gay" often alluded to practices or preferences, rather than an identity, or something one indistinctively was. In the context of a cruising or flirting in public spaces, sexual or romantic availability was commonly expressed through certain patterns of gestural communication. Those worked on the one hand as hints, indicators, and on the other hand permitted a more controlled ambiguity than verbal strategies.

Entendidos [those "in the know"] provoked relatively secretive exchanges without incurring into a permanent self-definition as gay or de ambiente. Among men who saw each other as potential sex or romantic partners, or in order to exchange information or contacts in these ambiguous contexts, the expressions used to identify who was

available were the verb *entender* [understand] and, among youths relatively new to the scene, *tener onda* [to be on the same wavelength] and *curtir* [in slang, to enjoy]. Another, slightly outdated, way of signalling the same was the verbal phrase *estar en la joda* [to be in the game], used by older individuals who were more *tapados* [closeted], i.e. more 'discreet' homosexuals. The timely use of "*estar* en la joda," as opposed to the pair "ser gay" and "*ser* de ambiente"[18] suggests and reveals the socially imposed restrictions on the way in which gay activity was conceived in the more clandestine contexts of interaction.

Subjects and categories

I will now recall a list of subject categories which, in their contexts of use, were expressive of the variety of positions and subjective trajectories constructed in Rosario's gay ambiente in 1992.

Gay referred to males who had adopted, or to whom a homosexual identity was attributed. It also applied to things, places or subjects linked to homosexual sociability. A "gay" was a person that presented himself as a homosexual. There were also gay discos, a gay literature, gay areas, and gay styles. The use of the term had already spread beyond the milieu. Its use had become generalized in the enlightened middle sectors, and particularly among the younger generations.

Asumido ["internally accepted;" adjective and noun form, participle of the verb *asumir*, corresponding to the reflexive form of the infinitive: asumir*se*] meant the affirmative handling of a homosexual preference by the person to whom this name was attributed. The term is a loan from the psychoanalytical jargon and was used in a similar sense as the Anglo-American expression "out of the closet". Nevertheless, the connotation of "*asumirse* [to accept oneself]" had existential implications that were constructed in a mostly personal and private way. For reasons further explored below, in counterpoint to how the homosexual closet was conceived in the United States, going public was not constructed as a necessity for the homosexual males who were my interlocutors in Rosario in 1992.

Tapado [literally undercover], as opposed to "*asumido*," was someone who expressly hid, always or selectively, with or without success, his homoerotic inclinations. Nevertheless, the opposition between *asumido* and *tapado* allowed certain nuances. A man could "feel" homosexual, accepting this inclination in diverse degrees, but hiding that actively before those whose knowledge could become a threat to his moral integrity as a person. One could at the same time be *asumido* to a certain degree, and *tapado*

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[18] Translator's Note: While the copula *to be* in English refers to either permanent or ephemeral attributes of an subject or object, as in "to be a man" and "to be tired," in Spanish those two alternative types of attributes determine the use of either the verb *ser* (permanent attribute) or *estar* (ephemeral attribute); in our examples, "*ser* un hombre" and "*estar* cansado."

in certain particular contexts, for example at work or, most frequently, with one's family. *Chongo* was (1) someone who, although "*no asumido*", interacted in the ambiente in a coveted way and successfully "tried to pass as heterosexual" [*la iba de homosexual*] "pretended to be a macho" successfully within or outside of the ambiente; or (2) someone who, although privately "asumido," exhibited what my interlocutors considered an overacted masculine style and behaviour. The term was applied also (3) to any man who did not show homosexual inclinations, remaining free from this social stigma.

Nevertheless, among the urban middle sectors, the frequency use of the noun "gay" had risen in everyday speech, principally among homosexual persons and their sympathizers. The term operated as a floating signifier, just like "*ser de ambiente*" did among homosexuals. The word "gay" was the term of choice, alternatively, (1) to refer directly to persons, objects and issues marked as gay, as in, for example, "gay disco;" or (2) to allude to homosexuality as a trivial attribute in contexts where the issue was taboo, for example "Is he gay?," instead of "Is he homosexual?". The word "gay" did not allow any ambiguity as to what it meant in reference to persons or things, but its use did reflect different interpretations about the social value of that attribute. In the first example, "gay" could represent the marginality or exoticism of the milieu of gay discos. In the second example it connoted a degree of queerness or deviance—not deemed necessarily negative—in contrast to the ideas of perversion or defect that could have been associated to "homosexual."

The use of the term constituted a problem for the negotiation of social relations in situations in which ambiguity was the rule. For example Daniel, one of my most frequent interlocutors during my 1992 fieldwork, at the time 24 years old, spoke to me about the surprise he felt when a young man of his age who was trying to pick him up, cruising in the street, asked him: "Are you gay?". The young man had omitted all discreet roundabouts and euphemisms expected in this kind of approach.

It can be said that the transition from "homosexual" to "gay" in everyday use reflects a degree of reduction in the intensity of the social stigma attached to homosexuality. Also between speakers foreign to the ambiente, although "homosexual" continued to be widely used and in many cases the use of "gay" was ignored, the frequency of the latter was on the rise as a more neutral form, highlighting the queerness of the gay lifestyle, rather than the pathology of an identity, as was the case with the former. The replacement of "homosexual" by "gay" also corresponded to the treatment currently conceded in Argentinean public urban culture to an issue which question its system of representation. the context of origin of the term "gay" was constructed as foreign, which also expressed how homosexuality was evaluated when the term was used: as something alien, foreign to socially sanctioned criteria of normality, as a conduct that was merely tolerated.

Self-un-identifying

The nouns forms *chongo*, *tapado*, and *asumido*, whose specific referents were very restricted, were used exclusively by persons effectively included in gay networks. The use of these terms in particular "marked" the speaker as belonging to those networks. It can be said that speech "made" the speaker: the use of certain forms allowed other to recognize the speaker as gay. Likewise, deliberately avoiding such terms and speech mannerisms highlighted the intention to "unmark oneself." Avoiding the use of the gay dialect was an important strategy for ambiente regulars who at the same time did not want to be identified as homosexuals—called *chongos* and *tapados* by gays. As stated above, a chongo therefore would use the label "chongo" with reference to himself because it was a gay idiomatic expression. He would prefer to identify as "macho" or (not so simply) "a man," although the category "man" was equally claimed by all segments and also most gays stated to be "very macho."

Other individuals processed their access to homosexual interactions verbally by using other particular key verbs or phrases. For instance they would state that "they understand" [*entienden*] or that "they are in the game" [*están en la joda*]. This strategy made it possible to allude to homosexual interaction without making an explicit reference to semantic fields, such as that od "gay," whose taboo status remained, in certain contexts, intact. Phrases like *tiene onda* [he is on the same wavelength] and *que curte* [who enjoys it] were also used, in particular by younger speakers, to refer to persons whose performance was more ambiguous. In order to find out their availability, or out of a combination of curiosity and sociability drive, one did not ask whether someone was gay, but rather, if he "is on the same wavelength," or "enjoys it."

Individuals who openly expressed their homoerotic preferences and highlighter effeminacy in their behaviour were, in general pejoratively, called *maricas* or any of its derivatives: *maraca*, *mariquita*, *maricuela*, *maricona*. The term *loca* was the most widely used to identify individuals who had a more affirmative attitude about their own homosexuality. Both categories, the latter more than the former, highlighted the stigma and moral pollution associated to homosexuality. However, this value was frequently inverted, as a declaration of resistance. While in some contexts a subject was called *loca* in order to disqualify him, in others that same name could also express communion and solidarity among locas as an inclusive 'we,' In spite of that, still today many gay males feel offended when called "*loca*" by a stranger, whether that stranger be gay or not.

The distribution of expressive use: hetero and homosexual categories

Let us recall that, like *chongo*, *asumido* and *tapado*, the terms *marica* and *loca* are marked categories, i.e. their use is expressive of a certain social otherness. The inclusion of the category in a sentence operates a shift of register. They are gay idiomatic expressions,

of exclusive use by gays. The words *puto* and *maricón*, otherwise, whose referent is the same as that of *loca* and *marica* respectively, are widely used by non-gay speakers. In this sense they are hetero expressions. When the terms *puto* and *maricón*, like homosexual, are used in rounds of friends of the milieu, the speaker is representing or appropriating the hetero use, reproducing or resisting the stigma.

The distribution of the use of certain categories within and outside the milieu reveals the most significant social aspects on each side of the boundary of the subculture. *Loca* and *marica* are gay idiomatic expressions. A loca is a shameless marica without, proud of its role. In hetero terms, the words *puto* and *maricón* perform the same operation: a *puto* is a shameless *maricón.* But there a third category, while alluding to the same semantic field, bears the name to the stigma itself: "homosexual." The meaning of "homosexual," of public use, was in 1992, as it is today, very different from the more neutral and descriptive "gay." The former is borrowed precisely from a context of origin–Victorian (moral, medical-legal) pathological thinking–, from an era when many considered this inclination a vile vice.

Instead, in a variety of other instances of ambiente social life in 1992, homosexuality was not called into question, it did not have to be "explained," but was considered as something natural, just as heterosexuality was not called into question as a norm by heterosexual common sense. Within, as well as outside the ambiente, the legitimacy of homosexuality became questionable only when "heterosexual common sense," no less than hegemonic in the wider society, was voiced. In the ambiente, an explicit reference to homosexuality was pertinent only when adopting a hetero voice.

Authenticity: asumirse

In the pragmatic context of name distribution among persons identified as homosexual, an idiomatic nuance relevant in relation to the micro-politics of that identity is the lexical choice in the use of the verb "*asumirse.*" In Argentinean urban learned everyday speech, the uso of the verb *asumir* connotes a reflexive action, i.e., self-directed; while the verb *aceptar* (a close equivalent) connotes transitivity, i.e., an action directed toward, an inanimate or animate, abstract or concrete, object. The use of "asumido" as predicative for the copula ("*ser asumido*") in statements about homosexuality (as in statements about any other personal attribute considered problematic) indicates an action which is reflexive in its full scope. The object, subject, and agent are–all–the subject itself. It is interesting that the reflexive pronoun -*se*, meaning 'one's self,' here stands, metonymically, for one's homosexuality. "*Asumir*" one's own homosexuality is only conceived as an act by the individual in relation to something constructed as a deeply personal and intimate affair; whereas "*aceptarla*"–just like accepting anyone else's–would refer to something objectified as a much more public affair, relative to an issue not so intimately bound to the speaker's subjectivity.

The choice of the verb *asumir* in reference to one's own homosexual desire connotes the combination of the speaker's acceptance of their homosexuality ("asumir *la homosexualidad*") with his own acceptance as a whole person (asumir*se*). Although stripped of its cultural reverberance, *asumirse* might translate as the Anglo-American expression *coming out of the closet*, what is privileged in the act of accepting one's own homosexual desire expressed by the verb phrase *asumirse* is not the declaration and public demand for recognition—"take me as I am." Instead, the paramount value in that act, according to the value of that expression in the vernacular variety, is the intimate process of self-acceptance—"I take myself as I am." In this verbal economy, self-acceptance (*asumirse*) is not necessarily as relevant to an ethics—in this case public—of visibility or publicity, as it is to a popular psychology of the intimate self. In that narrative, a male homosexual must undergo an intimate process of self recognition, rather than "leaving the closet behind" towards a more public sphere.

The divergent value attributed in this verbal economy to the concrete act of *asumirse* as a gay person, on the one hand and, on the other, to the virtual, always dubious, virility of the *chongo*, were moral issues about which norms—often expressing conflicting values—about "the right way" to be homosexual were being defined and contested. To become a "real man," a male homosexual must *asumirse*. A "true" *chongo* was a man who could prove that he was not gay, someone who "truly" did not feel attracted by other men. According to this construction, a "gay chongo" would be a lesser chongo, not the true thing. The substance according to which the "correct" use of the term was assessed constituted the highest moral ground and source erotic appeal in the ambiente: a man's virility and his heterosexuality. Therefore, the production of a "true chongo" and of a "well resolved" gay man represented opposite sources of legitimacy in this configuration: one public, attributed to the heterosexual world, and the other proper only in relation to the individual's most intimate circle.

(In)definitions in dispute

Within ambiente contexts of interaction, the homosexual stigma was transformed and displaced towards other conducts which were deemed improper, attitudes which were considered indecent. The verbs "*putanear*" (acting slutty) and "*loquear*" (acting queer) referred to shameless, morally contaminating homosexual conduct. That generally applied to loitering and sex in public places, as well as a self-presentation deemed too feminine. But that moral framework also generated resistance by those who cultivated "*putaneo*" [noun] and "*loqueo*" [noun] as personal or community forms of affirmation. Of no lesser importance to the construction of gay subjectivities than "*asumir*" homosexual desire and exhibiting a virile decent self presentation, was the recreation de original notions about beauty, namely a gay esthetics. The verbal and non-verbal language operations that I have designated as "gender bending," e.g., the inversion and parody exaggeration of both female and male attributes, on the one hand, and the stylization of

ambiguity on the other, created a scene in which any sex/gender attribute constructed as natural lost consistency and its truth became irrelevant. At ambiente venues, particularly in conversations y gestural performances by individuals who presented themselves as locas, it was taken for granted that all present were homosexual. And they were permitted to refer to everyone else, indiscriminately, as "locas."

That homosexuality was taken for granted represented a challenge to the avoidance or lack of definition by many other individuals regarding those very issues. Whether "tapados" or not, to them, participating ambiente everyday life always entailed some degree of potential exposure, and a threat to their moral integrity. Many individuals found themselves in trouble for taking part in situations of homosexual intimacy; particularly if they also had to keep up with the requisites public hetero-social life and more so when they frequented homo-social gay venues and public spaces, whose existence was becoming more public in the 1990s. The tension generated by that predicament produced two paradigmatic forms of rejection. The categories "*pasiva*" y "*tapado*" evoked the two most extreme sources of homosexual shame. A *pasiva* is a male whose gender status has been degraded for taking the female—subordinate—role, for giving away to another male's power. A *tapado* is a "repressed homosexual," constructed as a coward, frightful of *asumirse*. The stigma passivity and the moral value attributed the virile body and soul of the *chongo* remit to an ethics of male domination, while the stigma of the homosexual secret and positive value of *asumirse* remit to a gay ethics of desire. Between those two frameworks individuals had to construct alternative subjective positions to negotiate the public and intimate contexts of interaction that they visited in their everyday itineraries.[19]

[19] Lago's findings about bisexual identities in Rio de Janeiro support this hypothesis. The author refers to male bisexuality as a "negotiated identity." I thank Mario Pecheny for point out to that third sexual identity claim, not mentioned in my framework of analysis due to its focus on locaspeak alone.

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