A Preliminary Study of Gay Spoken Language in Ho Chi Minh City

Tri Hoang Dang, M.A. Applied Linguistics

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I. INTRODUCTION:

Sociolinguistics is the study of language in relation to social factors which include gender, social class, age, ethnic origin, and so on (Coupland & Jaworski, 1997; Wolfson, 1989; Richards, Platt & Platt, 1997). It can be said that one of the sociolinguistic areas, for the past decades, which has attracted various studies by researchers, linguists, educators is language and gender. In fact, there is various research that has been carried out on heterosexual or men's and women's language, especially differences in their speech (Wolfson, 1989, p. 162).

However, compared with the blossoming of interest and research on men's and women's language, there is the small amount of research conducted on "*gay-focused linguistic scholarship*" or gay language in the simple sense. As Butters (1989, cited in Gaudio, 1994, p.30) says "*any notion of what might constitute gay sociolinguistics, and gay linguistics in general is virtually non-existent. One looks in vain for references to materials on homosexual subjects.*" The reasons why not much attention is paid to gay language studies are that society has a homophobic attitude towards gay men, and gay speech is stereotypically been thought of being similar to women's.

In recent years, this field has started attracting researchers who have debated whether gay men use language in a way that differentiates them from heterosexuals. Some assume that gay language is similar to that of women, whereas others say that gay people use language in a different way from heterosexuals in terms of their lexicons, intonation, and pragmatics. From my point of view, I totally agree with the latter argument since gay language can be considered as "*a linguistic phenomenon*" that has its own discourse. Therefore, the study of the ways gay people use and structure their language will give us insight into "*the construction and maintenance of gay identity across multiple contexts.*" (Baker, 2002, p.10).

In Vietnam, homosexuals have become victims of discrimination and condemnation. Therefore, there are not any studies conducted on gay language here in comparison with those in other countries in the world. For this reason, this research aims at investigating the features and function of language used by gay men in Ho Chi Minh City; especially I would like to explore some of the ways in which Vietnamese gay men use Vietnamese language in everyday life. This study also aims to contribute to the literature of gay sociolinguistics in Vietnam in general and in the world in particular.

II. RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

This study aims at answering the following research questions:

1. What are the major linguistic features of Vietnamese gay men's speech?
2. Why are there such linguistic features among Vietnamese gay men?

III. LITERATURE REVIEW:

In this part, the literature relevant to the study will be reviewed in three sections: (1) definitions of gay language, (2) characteristics of gay language, (3) function of gay language.

1. <u>Definition of gay language</u>

According to Cage (2003, p.23), gay language is defined as a particular register or variety of language that is employed in certain socio-cultural contexts by gay people. That is to say, this kind of language has its narrow use in some situations and contexts but in others involving "*the social system of the gay co-culture*".

Red (1999, p.41) defines gay language is a type of code used in the gay community for the purpose of preventing people from outside the group (herein refers to heterosexuals) making sense of it and helping link them in "*their own discourse*". This definition calls our attention to "*anti-language*" by Halliday (1976, p.570) which is "*a special form of language generated by some kind of anti-society*". This anti language uses words and expressions with additions and alterations in meaning aiming at creating and retaining its identity (Cage, 2003, p.25).

2. <u>Review of studies on characteristics of gay language</u>

As mentioned earlier, gay men have a way of speaking in the gay world that is different from speech in the heterosexual world. Some of the typical characteristics of the so-called gay speech from studies are lexicon, the use of gendered pronoun, pronunciation, and informal language.

LEXICON

It can be said that lexicon, one of the noticeable linguistic features of gay language, is created in different creative ways with the semantic shift to that of the original words, depending on the gay communities in the world. In fact, in his study on gay language in Indonesia which is called "***bahasa gay***", Boellstorff (2004, p. 255-258) states that lexicon is more than just a collection of words but "*a set of patterned derivational processes that together constitute **bahasa gay**, or gay language in Indonesia*" pertaining to the coinage of new words. The two main derivational processes in coining new words are "*syllabic substitution*" and "*suffixation and vowel shift*."

"*Syllabic substitution*" used to make gay terms is related to keeping the first syllable of a standard Indonesian word and then altering the last part. For example, ***jelek*** "bad" is

replaced by ***jelita*** "lovely", or the standard Indonesian phrase ***ya ampun*** "Oh my God!" is replaced with ***ya amplop*** "envelop" in ***Bahasa gay*** terms. (See Table 1).

"*Suffixation and vowel shift*" pertains to changing a standard Indonesian word or a bahasa gay word by using the three suffixes *–ong*, *-es*, and *–i*. However, Oetomo (2001, 65) claims that *–ong* and *–es* are the most common suffixes. In the case of *–ong*, the vowel of the preceding syllable of the word is shifted to ***eù***. The same process happens with *–es* suffix. For instance, ***beùncong*** from *banci*, and ***neùpsong*** from *napsu* (see Table 2)

Table 1: Syllabic substitution in *bahasa gay* (Boellstorff, 2004, p.255)

Bahasa gay term	Original meaning in Indonesian	Replaces Indonesian term	Meaning
amplop	envelope	*ampun*	Oh, my God!
jelita	lovely	*jelek*	bad
sultra	silk	*sudah*	already
tinta	tint	*tidak*	no

Table 2: Suffixation and vowel shift in *bahasa gay* (Boellstorff, 2004, p. 257)

Indonesian or bahasa gay term	Meaning	New bahasa gay term
berapa	how much?	***breùpong***
dandan	put on makeup	***dendong or dendes***
homo	homosexual	***heùmong***
loco	masturbate	***Leùcong, leces, or leùci***

Unlike the derivational processes of Bahasa gay in coining new term, gay language in the Filipino gay community called ***swardspeak*** or ***gay lingo*** (Manalansan, 1995, p.203) is related to using words that are part of a mainstream language (Filipino or English) in a metaphorical way (Suguitan, 2005, p.3). It means that the Filipino gay community uses words without changing their form but with different shades of meaning or connotative meaning. For instance, in English "*anaconda*" refers to a huge snake, but in gay lingo it is used to refer to women or gays who deliberately seduce committed men, and "hammer" is a tool for carpentry, but it describes "slutty women" in ***gay lingo***.

Another lexical feature of ***gay lingo*** that I find really interesting is coining new words by using the names of famous local and international features which connote different meaning (see Table 3). These proper nouns can be used with different parts of speech

(Casabal, 2008, p. 98-113). Some functions as nouns, adjectives, and others functions as verbs. Let look at examples below:

Did you know that he died of *Anita Linda*? (*Anita Linda* is a <u>**noun**</u> that means *AIDS*)

Wow, she's such a *Churchill* woman. (*Churchill* is an <u>*adjective*</u> that means *wealthy and elegant*)

Table 3: Common Nouns and Proper Nouns (referring to names of people) in *gay lingo* (Casabal, 2008, p.100)

Proper nouns/names	Meaning	Common nouns	Meaning
Anita Linda	AIDS	*boyband*	fat kid
Cathy Mora	horny	*junk shop*	drug addict
Churchill	wealthy and elegant	*48 years*	after a long time
Stevie Wonder	to turn a blind eye	*antibiotic*	bitch
Tom Jones	hungry	*rendezvous*	to run away

In Britain, according to Baker (2002, p.40), there is "Polari", a secret language used by gay men. It is mainly a lexicon from a variety of sources including rhyming slang, back slang, drug-user slang, and so on. "Polari" consists of a lot of words for types of people, occupation, body parts, clothing and everyday objects. For example, *antique* refers to an old gay man, *aunt nells* refers to ears, *plates* refer to feet, *winkle* refers to small penis. Generally speaking, all of the words in Polari are used in a metaphorical way that outsiders find very difficult to understand.

GENDERED PRONOUNS and PROPER NOUNS

Besides the words themselves, a striking feature of gay language is the way in which gay men use gendered pronouns. In his study in the USA, Legman (1941, p.1155, cited in Cameron & Kulick, 2003, p.82) noted, "*A very common usage in the speech of male homosexuals is the substitution of feminine pronouns and titles for properly masculine ones. Male homosexuals use the terms* <u>***she, her, hers, Miss, Mother, and girl***</u> *in referring to themselves and each another, where one expect* <u>***"he", "him", or "his", "Mr", "Father", and "man" (or "boy")***</u>". It is obvious from this statement that gay people usually, in their speech, address each other by employing feminine pronouns in the same way as women do.

Interestingly, Cage (2003, p. 30) who carried out his study on the spoken language used by gay men in South Africa which he called *Gayle* also found the same phenomenon of

using feminine pronouns nouns. These words include *"she"*, *"girl"*, *"girlfriend"*, *"woman"*, *"bitch"*, *"slut"*, and so on. He called this phenomenon *"the feminization technique"* that African gay people use widely to refer to one another. For example, it is quite usual to hear to hear a gay man speaking about another gay man like *"Who does she think she is?"* One question arises: why does this *"feminization technique"* become popular in **Gayle**? He answers that it functions as the maintenance of *"group cohesion and identity"* in the African gay community.

As mentioned earlier, gay lingo in the Philippines pertains to the coinage of new words through using the proper nouns of famous people including male and female names with different shades of meaning; however, **British Polari** (the language of the British gay men) (Baker, 2002, p. 41) and **Gayle** in South Africa (Cage, 2003, p.28-29) use "camp names" in certain contexts of the gay co-culture. "Camp names" are women's names that gay people give each other, which "are usually alliterative with their given male names". So Martin becomes Martina, John becomes Joan, Harold becomes Harriet, and Maurice becomes Maureen. This phenomenon of "camp names" is used to reflect a personality trait that suits a particular person.

PRONUNCIATION

One of the features that can be considered as markers of gay identity is pronunciation in gay men's speech. As Boellstorff (2004, p.258) notes, "s*peaking in what is considered to be an* effeminate manner is also sometimes asserted to be indicative of gay language".

In his study on Gay Male Stereotyped Speech, Crist (1997, p.68) recorded both gay and straight men reading the same passage twice, once in an "ordinary" voice, and again in a "queeny" voice and then compared the two group. His result showed that word-initial /s/ and /l/ are lengthened in gay male stereotyped speech. In other words, when gay men pronounce two phonemes: voiceless alveolar fricative /s/ and voiced alveolar lateral /l/ in their initial position, they tend to prolong them.

According to Bowen (2002), the indicator that helps us identifies who is gay through his sound production. However, it should be noted that not all gay men produce the "gay sound". For instance, voiceless alveolar fricative /s/, voiced alveolar fricative, and voiced alveolar lateral /l/ are prolonged and produced in a "hyper-articulated way" by gay men. For example, "**ss**o **ss**pecial", and "ama**zzz**ing". Not only are consonants lengthened, but vowels are prolonged as well, for example, "s**oo** g**ooo**rgeous".

In the aspect of intonation, Bowen (2002) , Boellstorff (2004, p.258), and Gaudio (1994, p. 30-57) agree that many, not all gay men use the high-pitched tone and rising utterance-final intonation.

INFORMAL LANGUAGE

Baker (2005, p.174) conducted a research on the language of gay men and lesbians and found that gay men's language is informal, non-standard and often impolite, whereas lesbians' language is more polite, more affectionate and more standardized. Gay men use informal language not only in spoken discourse but also in written discourse.

So far, we have had a general picture of the so-called features of gay language through some studies conducted by researchers in some countries in the world. We would like to raise a question: why do gay men employ such linguistic phenomenon in their speech community? Let us move to the next part that will review some literature on the function of gay language.

3. Function of Gay language

Any language has developed since it has a function or a number of functions. For example, Halliday (1973, cited in Marasigan, 1983, p.58) suggests some functions of language in general in oral conversation that language serves to express social and personal relations (interpersonal), to represent an experience, to impart factual information, to control the behavior of others (regulatory), to get involved in fantasies, and to show one one's identity (personal). Gay language also serves one of these functions. However, as mentioned earlier, gay language is considered "anti-language", so it serves more different and special functions.

CONCEALMENT

As we know, homosexuals still receive discrimination and condemnation in several countries in the world although people have a more open-minded attitude towards them today. For this reason, gay language functions as a form of "*defense mechanism*" against homophobic society (Baytan, 2002, p. 260). In other words, in the homophobic environment, shielding one gay's identity is important if one would like to avoid "*persecution and prosecution*" (Cage, 2003, p.35).

Even in some countries where concealment of gay identity is not necessary any more, for example in the USA, Australia, Canada, the Philippines, and so on, gay language is still used as "*a secret language*" to send secret messages that are "*inaccessible to others*", that is, to people who do not belong to their sub-culture. This situation of language use is described by Hayes (1981, p. 28) as the "*secret setting*" in which homosexuals use their own language within the dominant, or straight society without wanting to "*draw undue attention to themselves, even if they are not ashamed to admit their identity.*"

IDENTIFICATION

The use of gay language gives member of a group a means to identify with one

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another, as well as with the group. Speaking gay language or using gay slang is a way

demonstrating overtly that one belongs to a certain group. That is to say, not only does the use of gay language function to foster a sense of belonging to a community but it also has an intrapersonal function in that the language forms part of the gay man's identity and allows him to show his identity and self-image (Oetomo, 2001, p.67; Cage, 2003, p.36).

REVELATION

Similar to the identification mentioned above, the revelation function allows gay people to reveal overtly that they are gay and are candidates to be included in a particular social set (Cage, 2003, p.36). In a more open society today, this function helps gay people affirm their identity in the gay world and the heterosexual world.

However, there is another subtler use in that this function will allow gay men to identify the sexual orientation of other men, that is, through the use of language in a conversation, gay men can tell us whether other men are gay or not because in their language, their some gay discourse markers that indicate their gayness.

IV. METHODOLOGY

1. The Subjects:

The participants are randomly selected gay men in the Jasmine Garden Cinema (Ho Chi Minh City) where they usually gather. They were informed about this study one week before the taping.

2. The research instruments:

The first instrument used in the data collection is tape-recording natural conversations of the gay men in the Jasmine Garden Cinema (Ho Chi Minh city). A tape recorder was used to gather the data because "studying how people talk in natural setting by recording them is one of the most obvious and valuable methods" (Paul, 2005, p.3). This research received the subjects' consent for tape-recording their speech. They were told that their conversations would be taped but not told when it would happen. After the taping, the recorded conversations were played back to them, and no one requested to erase any part of the recording but all of them would like their names to be kept confidentially.

The second instrument is structured interviewing. After a week, the researcher will carry out structured interviews with ten gay men in order to further investigate the linguistic features as well as other noticeable characteristics in their speech as indicated by the tape-recorded findings.

All the interviews will be conducted in Vietnamese to ensure their understanding of the questions.

3. The Data Analysis:

The taped conversations will be transcribed for analysis. Because there are many pieces of conversations, the researcher will transcribe and describe specific forms of verbal interaction relevant to the study.

The qualitative data from the structured interviews will be recorded and transcribed

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results of the study based on the tape-recorded interview data analysis. The discussion of the findings is also reported here in order to attempt to answer the three research questions mentioned above.

1.DERIVATION

Based on the tape-recorded data, the first noticeable characteristic of Vietnamese gay men's speech is lexical usage. I call this process "derivation" which is defined by Richards, Platt & Platt (1997, p.103) as *"the formation of new words by adding affixes to other words or morphemes"*. Before going into detail on this process, let us have a look at a conversation among three university students in the Blue Sky Club who were talking about a cute guy:

A: Ê mấy gái, nhìn **ăng thì o đí kìa**, **ep đị** không? (Hey girls, that guy over there is handsome, isn't he?)

B: ừm, **ê đĩ ương thi** quá! (Wow, so cute!)

C: không biết **o ní ai phỉ ong bí** không? (I don't know if he's queer)

From the conversation above, the bold and italicized words are actually incomprehensible to a normal Vietnamese person, because this kind of language is only popular among Vietnamese gay men. This derivational process is the encrypted version of normal speech and *–i suffixing*. In this process, the initial consonants of a word are moved to the end followed by the *suffix –i*. However, in words that begin with vowels, the *suffix –i* is added to the end of the words. For instance, thằng (guy) becomes **ăng thì,** đó becomes **o đí,** đẹp (handsome) becomes **ep đị. Thus, the sentence "ằng thi o đí ep đị" is rewritten in original Vietnamese language as "**

thằng đó đẹp" (*that guy is handsome*) (see Table 1). Vietnamese gay people call this linguistic phenomenon *"Tiếng i"* which literally means that words are coded and suffixed with the *–i* sound.

Original Vietnamese words	*Vietnamese gay words (Tiếng i)*	Meaning
thằng	*ăng thì*	guy
đó	*o đí*	that
đẹp	*ep đị*	handsome
dễ thương	*ê dĩ ương thi*	cute
bóng	*ong bí*	queer

Table 1: *"Tiêng i" in Vietnamese gay men's speech*

Another important derivational process in Vietnamese gay men's speech is *"kh- prefixing* (they call it *"Tiếng kh"* in Vietnamese language). That is to say, an original Vietnamese word remains unchanged, and then the original word is divided into two segments in that the first segment will be deleted and the second segment of the original word is prefixed with *"kh-*. Obviously, this rule is somewhat complicated, even though the user knows the rule, he or she may have trouble understanding unless he or she practices this process frequently. For example, *bao nhiêu* (how much) becomes **bao *kh*ao nhiêu *kh*iêu**. *"Kh-prefixing* process is illustrated in a recorded conversation between two gay men in the Jasmine Garden Cinema who were saying behind somebody's back

A: Ê, tao nói nghe nè. (Hey, listen!)

B: Chuyện gì vậy con đĩ? (What's wrong, slut?)

A: **coi *kh*oi chừng *kh*ưng con *kh*on đĩ *kh*i** đó nha mậy. (Careful with that slut)

Let us have a look at the bold sentence in the above mentioned example: **coi *kh*oi chừng *kh*ưng con *kh*on đĩ *kh*i** which is not standard Vietnamese language since

it is coded by Vietnamese gay men in the process of their interactional conversation by employing *kh-prefixing*. By applying the aforementioned *kh-prefixing* rule, this sentence can be recoded in original Vietnamese only by omitting words prefixed with *kh-*: *coi chừng con đĩ* (*khoi, khưng, khon* , and *khi* are deleted in this case)

The findings mentioned above show that Vietnamese gay men's speech involves two derivational processes including *-i suffixing* and and *kh-prefixing*. It can be said that this linguistic phenomenon is similar to that of Bahasa gay in Indonesia that was aforementioned in the Literature Review. However, while Bahasa gay involves coining "neologisms", new words without retaining a prior meaning of its own, that is, new words with new meaning are created; Vietnamese gay men's language pertains to transforming words without changing their original meaning.

One question arises as to why do Vietnamese gay men employ these derivational processes? Frankly speaking, for the first time of listening to the tape-recorder, I completely make no head or tail of this kind of language. Henceforth, in order to find out the reasons, structured interviews were carried out with 10 gay men (see questions in Appendix), the results of which are stated in the following

All the subjects (N=10) explained to me that they use *"Tiếng i"* (*-i suffixing*) and *"Tiếng kh"* (*kh-prefixing*) because they could speak freely about their homosexual desires and experiences without worrying that other people could understand what they were saying. In other words, this kind of language functions as a form of concealment. In addition, they also stated that they use it because they want to integrate into the gay community, "*a sense of belonging to a community*" (Oetomo, 2001, p.67; Cage, 2003, p.36). For example, here are comments from two students in two groups of subjects to account for the use of this derivation:

> *I often use "Tiếng i" and "Tiếng kh" when I refer to something or someone that I don't want the outsider to know, especially when I say something bad behind one's back (Laughing). (Subject A)*

Sometimes, I find it confusing to use this language. But I guess it's useful to say behind someone's back without being heard or beaten (Laughing). It helps me get along well with others in the gay community. (Subject B)

2. USE OF TABOO WORDS

Similar to the findings on gay language conducted by Baker (2005, p.174), Vietnamese gay people use a lot of taboo words in their speech. From the tape-recorded conversations, I discover that almost every gay man use informal language including taboo and swear words related to sex, sex organs (see Table 2)

It can be said that these "dirty" words sound derogatory and unacceptable; so many people avoid using them. However, these words are widely used in Vietnamese gay men 's speech.

Spoken Discourse	Keywords	Meaning
Vietnamese gay men's language is informal, and often impolite	lồn	cunt
	đéo / đụ	fuck
	đụ má mày	fuck you / motherfucker
	con đĩ	slut/bitch
	mê cu	cocksucker

Table 2: *Keywords showing spoken discourse among Vietnamese gay men*

Vietnamese gay men' language is characterized by the use of taboo words because all the subjects (N=10) explained that they always use such informal language when they get together in their gay community. In other words, this kind of language helps them stabilize social relations, creating a sense of similarity and belonging. They also added that these taboo words function as humorous effect, and they like to use them for doing for fun, having a laugh in their sub-culture. For instance, Subject C shared his experience of using taboo words.

I use such words only when I'm with my gay friends, because I want to mix with them. Also, when using these words in interactional conversations I feel happy and comfortable. (Subject C)

As you know, when you're in a gay community, unless you use such words, you'll feel isolated from that group.So, you use them to get along well with other gay men. However, I hardly ever used taboo words in the heterosexual world. (Subject D)

3. USE OF FEMININE PERSONAL PRONOUNS & "CAMP NAMES"

The first finding that strikes me from the tape-recorded data is the way in which Vietnamese male homosexuals employed feminine personal pronouns as forms of address. This finding is similar to that of Gayle in South Africa investigated by Cage (2003, p. 30) and the study conducted in the USA by Legman (1941, p.1155, cited in Cameron & Kulick, 2003, p.82).

The result shows that Vietnamese gay men use such terms that are used only by women as "*chị, chế* (older sister), *bà* (Mrs), *má* (mother), *gái* (girl), *đĩ* (slut), *cô* (aunt)" in addressing each other. In this case, these words function as personal pronouns in which "*chị, and chế*" are the first and second personal pronouns, and "*bà, má, gái, đĩ, and cô*" are both the second and third personal pronouns and employed for addressees. (See Table 3).

In Vietnamese forms of address, "*chị, and chế*" are used for the older female addresser and older female addressee to show respect. However, Vietnamese male homosexuals use these words to refer to themselves and others regardless of their young or old ages. Similarly, "*bà, má, gái, đĩ, and cô*" are typical of Vietnamese gay men's speech and used to refer to both young and old addressees. The use of the feminine personal pronouns for addressing each other is exemplified in the following conversations among two groups of Vietnamese male homosexuals:

1.   A: **chị** nói cho **gái** biết nha không có tình yêu thật sự trong thế giới pê đê đâu

        (I want to say that there's no true love in the gay world.)

        B: Sao **chị** nói vậy? (Why do you say that?)

2.   A: ê, hôm qua nghe nói bà **Bình Nhi** cua được trai tươi lắm. (hey, it was said that Bình Nhi courted acute guy.)

        B: **gái** đó hên thiệt nha. (That girl's so lucky.)

        As can be seen from the two conversations above, **chị** is used as the first and

second personal pronouns. That is, speaker A refers to himself as **chị**, and speaker B calls speaker A **chị** in the first conversation. The word **gái** in the conversation 1 is the second personal pronoun referring to speaker B; however, **gái** in the conversation 2 is used as the third personal pronoun referring to **Bình Nhi** about whom they were talking.

Feminine Personal Pronouns		
The 1ˢᵗ personal pronouns	**The 2ⁿᵈ personal pronouns**	**The 3ʳᵈ personal pronouns**
Chị, chế (older sister)	Chị, chế (older sister) Bà (Mrs) Má (mother) Gái (girl) Đỉ (slut) Cô (aunt)	Bà (Mrs) Má (mother) Gái (girl) Đỉ (slut) Cô (aunt)

Table 3: *Feminine Personal Pronouns as forms of address by Vietnamese gay men*

One more striking finding concerning the feature of Vietnamese gay men's speech is the number of "camp names" used in their conversations. As mentioned earlier in the Literature Review, "camp names" are female names used by gay men in South Africa and Britain. Vietnamese male homosexuals also use "camp names" to refer to themselves. They usually choose female singers and actresses at home and abroad for themselves and others. For example, the following female names are found in the data: Nghi Văn (a Vietnamese singer), Miêu Thúy Hoa (a character in a Hongkong movie), Trish Thùy Trinh (an oversea singer), Basua (a Korean actress), Tracey (a singer in the Spicy Girls), and so on.

These female names, according to the subjects' explanations, do not have any specific meaning. Therefore, they are completely different from those of Gayle in South Africa, and gay lingo in the Philippines that have both grammatical functions and specific meaning. For example, In Gayle the names Vera means vomit, Erica means erection, and Nora means stupid. In gay lingo, Mariah means cheap, Eva Kalaw means feces, and so on.

As regards the use of feminine personal pronouns and "camp names", first of all, all the subjects (N=40) stated that they like using the feminine personal pronouns

all the time when they integrate into the gay community. By using these pronouns, they feel comfortable and easy to talk to one another. They also added that if they do not use them, they will feel isolated from the group or community. For this reason, a conclusion can be reached that the use of gendered or feminine personal pronouns by Vietnamese gay men functions as a means of bringing these male homosexuals to "sameness and belonging" to their own community (Boellstorff, 2004, p.259).

With reference to "camp names", they choose female names for themselves and others by basing on each gay man's characteristics. That is, a gay interviewee explained that if a gay man looks so girlish, or "out of the closest", he will be given a name like "Mai Quế Lộ" because the word "Lộ" means girlish, or "out of the closest", which is really similar to his characteristic. "Camp names" help them express their identity and reveal that they are gay in a particular social set. Vietnamese gay men consider "camp names" as a revelation function which becomes their badge of identity in the gay world.

4. USE OF HOMOPHOBIC LEXICAL ITEMS

What is surprising with regard to Vietnamese gay men's speech is the high frequency of homophobic words. This large number of words actually does not originate among Vietnamese gay people, but are used by heterosexuals as derogatory terms for gays. These include words like "pê đê", "bóng", "xăng pha nhớt", "hifi", and "lẹo cái", "bán nam bán nữ" (see Table 4). Even though these words have pejorative implications, because no Vietnamese gay man really likes to be called "bóng" (faggot), they are widely used words in the Vietnamese gay vocabulary.

This linguistic phenomenon is similar to that of Gayle in South Africa conducted by Cage (2003, p.33) who calls this use of homophobic lexical items "the linguistic process of reginisation". That is, although these words bear negative or derogatory attitude and meaning towards gays, gay people like using them to refer to themselves in "an in-your-face confrontational style". For example, the word "queen" is an important element of gay speech, whereas the word "bóng" is the most often

used word for Vietnamese gay men.

HOMOPHOBIC LEXICAL ITEMS	MEANING
pê đê (a French loanword)	queer / moffie
bóng	faggot / fruit
lẹo cái	faggot / fruit
xăng pha nhớt	bi-sexual
hifi	bi-sexual
bán nam bán nữ	bisexual

Table 4: *Homophobic words with derogatory meaning used by Vietnamese gay men*

During tape-recording these conversations and my observation, I was surprised to hear these words used among Vietnamese gay men. All the subjects (N=10) explained to me that these homophobic words function as humor. They use them to do for fun, and to have a laugh in their subculture.

> *I usually call my gay friends as "pê đê", or "bóng" because these words sound very funny and make us self-identified as gays. (Subject E)*
> *For the first time, my friends called me "bóng". I didn't like it at all because it sounds terrible although I'm gay. Gradually, I get used to it and use it to call my friends. I guess these words are like parady and sel-irony for humorous effects. (Subject F)*

5. PRONUNCIATION

The final feature in Vietnamese gay men's speech is pronunciation. The result from the tape-recorded conversations shows that they tend to lengthen final sounds with the high-pitched tone and rising intonation which we usually associate with "images of femininity and softness" (Boellstorff, 2004, p.258). Examples are illustrated below:

1. Trời ơiiiiiiii

2. Thôi đi máaaaaaa

3. Vừa phải thôi chứuuuuu

The three examples mentioned above indicate that Vietnamese gay men's pronunciation is divided into two steps. The first step involves lengthening or

prolonging the final sound, for instance the word "ơi" will be prolonged into "ơiiiiii", and the second step pertains to the use of rising intonation.

VI.CONCLUSION

As mentioned earlier, this research paper aims at investigating the features and function of language used by Vietnamese gay men in Ho Chi Minh City, especially their spoken discourse. In this brief section of conclusion, the findings presented above are summarized as follows

First of all, as regards the linguistic features of Vietnamese gay men's speech, there are five major characteristics including the derivational processes that involve –i suffixing and kh- prefixing (which are called "Tiếng i" and "Tiếng kh" by Vietnamese male homosexuals), the use of taboo words, the use of feminine personal pronouns and female names in addressing each other, the use of homophobic words, and the use of high-pitched tone, rising intonation and word lengthening.

Secondly, in terms of the function of these linguistic features, Vietnamese gay men use them in order to (1) foster a sense of belonging to their gay community, (2) conceal things from others, speak freely when they are around heterosexuals, and encourage the freedom of self-expression among gays, and (3) create the humorous effect through the use of homophobic words to have a laugh and do for fun.

This study has yielded original findings about the features and function of language used by Vietnamese gay men in Ho Chi Minh City. These findings contribute partly to current knowledge of gay sociolinguistics in Vietnam. However, because of a shortage of time and a small scale of the study which was conducted on the small population in two sites of Ho Chi Minh City, the findings are not somewhat

conclusive. Henceforth, an obvious implication is that more studies with much larger

sample sizes in different places are necessary.

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APPENDIX

STUDENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why do you use "tiếng i", and "tiếng kh" when you converse with your friends?

2. Why do you use a lot of taboo words in conversations?

3. Why do you use personal pronouns that are commonly used women and female names to address each other?

4. Why do you use homophobic words to refer to each other?