Talking Sexuality
Religious Identity Construction in Rural Canada
Kate Power

Introduction

Stereotypes abound concerning the relationships between religion and sexuality. In twenty-first century Canada, for example, negative attitudinal stances towards the legalization of same-sex marriage (hereafter SSM) became widely “bound” (Sacks [1972] 1986, 335) to conservative Christianity as churches and parachurch organizations weighed in on legal, media and public policy debates around that issue (Reidel 2009). Concomitantly, positive stances towards SSM have come to function as “predicates” (Watson 1983, 41) of more “liberal” religious identities (Walls 2010).

Scholarly inquiry into the relationships between religion and SSM has commonly focused on tracing the history of SSM, including the legal framing of LGBT rights and religious freedom. Some studies have documented changing attitudes towards SSM expressed by government policies and public élites, including media representations of SSM and the official stances of different religious groups. Others, by contrast, have investigated non-élite public opinions – in particular, the attitudes of both LGBT and religious individuals. Few studies, however, have focused on the linguistic resources with which attitudes to SSM are expressed.

Land and Kitzinger (2007) use Conversation Analysis to document how gay men and lesbians talk about their relationships against the backdrop of civil partnership legalization in the UK. Rodgers (2010) provides a discourse analytic study of how queer university student media represents SSM, while Boys (2010) argues – contra Kitzinger and Wilkinson (2004) – that LGBT advocates should use legal (rather than mental health or social justice) discourse to pursue the legalization of SSM. Finally, Tracy (2011) investigates stance-taking on SSM by U.S. Supreme Court attorneys and judges. Yet, scant consideration has been afforded to the language with which non-élite religious individuals discuss SSM. How do the relationships between religion and SSM play out in the speech of everyday Christian Canadians? How do Christians draw on and recontextualize religious and other discourses when discussing SSM? And how does
attitudinal stance-taking around SSM contribute to the discursive construction of religious identity?

Drawing on Membership Categorization Analysis (Schegloff 2007b) and stance analysis (Du Bois 2007), this chapter uses interview and group discussion data from rural Canada to analyze how Christian Canadians identify themselves in relation to religion via attitudinal-stance-taking around SSM. It pays particular attention to (i) Christian Canadians’ engagement in collaborative stance-taking; (ii) their precise choices of stance object; (iii) the linguistic resources with which they project different stances; and (iv) the support offered for those stances. In doing so, it highlights oft-neglected intra-group differences and shows how multiple religious identifications can be negotiated, not only across different settings but even within a single turn-at-talk – thereby bringing some complexity to confront the negative stereotypes in terms of which religious individuals are often depicted.

Discursive Constructions of Religious Identity

Religious individuals are not merely the “animators” of pre-existing religious discourses; they are also active “authors” (Goffman 1981, 144), who construct their own (and others’) religious identities by using, combining, reinterpreting, even subverting discourses associated with specific religious traditions. Usage of the term “discourse” has multiplied exponentially during the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, giving rise to considerable confusion (as criticized by Fairclough 2005, 58). In this chapter, discourse is used as a count noun to refer to “the language used in representing a given social practice from a particular point of view” (Fairclough 1995, 56). Discourses reflect and contribute to shaping the ways in which individuals are positioned in social life (Johnstone 2008). Consequently, they are closely linked to identity and social relations (Fairclough 2003).

Religious discourses are often characterized by distinctive lexis (Mooney 2005), but religious traditions also share common discourses – such as the discourse of “loss” (Bramadat and Seljak 2008, 15), in terms of which many Canadian Christians decry the diminution of Christian influence in public life and the growing disjunction between Christian values and Canadian social norms. Moreover, multiple discourses are always found within a single religious tradition (Greene 2009). For, although particular discourses may be closely associated with certain religious groups, these associations are often neither definitive of – nor necessary to – the religious identities in question.