Preface

It is true there is not enough beauty in the world.
It is also true that I am not competent to restore it.
Neither is there candor, and here I may be of some use.
Louise Glück, 'October (5)'

I suspect that, like myself, the vast majority of readers have been confronted by pronouncements along the lines of, 'it's not that I have anything against gay people', perhaps delivered in a manner meant to be reassuring, 'it's just that what you do in your own bedroom is no one else's business'. Typically uttered by someone who objects to a political or cultural project that would bring non-heterosexual and non-cisgender people into the broader social fold, this stock rejoinder or one of its many variants is neither particularly uncommon nor particularly original – although it is certainly very maddening.

Such statements and their performance are part of widely shared discourses, understood in either the Foucauldian (1971) or the Lacanian (viz. Milner, 1995) senses, i.e. as systems of meaning and knowledge creation or as structures of power. In the broadest manner, these frame and are framed by shared notions of privacy, personal or public morality, citizenship and democracy, as well as the intersections between these and other ideational constructs. Interactional moments like the generic citation above seem to pass by without notice for the many, inevitable as a light breeze, whereas for the few, they are as damaging and painful as a tornado, manifestations of forces that are to be feared and countenanced. I am among the latter group, which may explain my tendency to respond in kind, frequently with a flippant, 'I don't care what you do in your bedroom, either, but that's not the point' (more often than not inserting an expletive for good measure).

Recent decades have seen compelling work taking homophobic discourses to task, accomplishing this from a number of angles, from the

political to the artistic, the academic to the economic. Underlying each is the presumption that these communicative events are representative of a retrograde conceptualization of community life, are imbued with bias and run counter to a collective sense of fairness and equality. However, this presumption begs a question that is rarely fully attended to: if such speech is homophobic, what in particular makes it so? Imagine that the hypothetical speaker of the above lines denies he holds animus, perhaps adding 'hey, you live your life, I'll live mine' or 'some of my best friends are gay'? What if he were to insist that he is merely expressing a personal opinion, a sacrosanct right in most contemporary democracies? Would it still be possible to describe this communicative act as rooted in hostility, or would it be necessarily understood as an uncomfortable, if ill-formed, point of view, one opinion among many, the forbearance of which is demanded by the very civil society it offends?

We who seek to create a more balanced, more inclusive, more just society are faced with a dilemma when it comes to the subtle daily biases given form by language practices such as these. Peeling back the layers of communication and looking at underlying messages offers one means of countering them, hopefully also suggesting another way of being in the world and in relation to each other. Responding to such allegedly reasonable opinions, we can point out their foundational heteronormativity (the choices of heterosexual and cisgender people are celebrated, institutionalized and protected) or reduction (as if the only thing that mattered about a person's orientation and identity were the sexual acts he or she engages in). We may also demonstrate their effect on our fellow citizens, especially when spoken or written by someone with social capital and power, and list any number of alarming statistics, e.g. frighteningly high rates of suicide among young people who don't identify with sexual and gender norms or the socioeconomically disadvantaged position in which many same-sex families find themselves. We should do this more frequently, not to mention more boldly, and certainly demand that persons in power do the same. But is this all that can be done? When it comes to confronting prejudice, are we limited to pointing out the logical flaws and underlying biases of others?

Given that it is very likely the majority of discourse is realized in and through language, I believe it imperative that we scrutinize the means by which discourses are practiced and examine the mechanics of their actuation, i.e. the ways they are made tangible. After all, the devil, not to mention his mercenaries, is more often than not found in the details. This is where the linguist can step in, and where my scholarly journey in teasing apart homophobic language began (as a gay man, my personal experiences

with the subject go back more years than I care to reveal). Any linguistic examination would require the close description and analysis of forms and structures that are shared by speakers of a cultural community and that are deployed in its formation, transmission and reception. Obviously, this enterprise is of interest to scholars whose work touches upon language: I believe that it should also be significant to everyone who confronts or is confronted by acts of communicative homophobia, which is to say virtually anyone who lives within a community that has conceptualized sexual orientation and gender identity along such lines.

It was in fact a moment of confrontation that served as impetus for the present book. This occurred several years ago during a social event in Italy, where I was one of several guests: at some point, I became entangled in a discussion with friends of a friend concerning (then only hypothetical) civil unions. One of them, a man in his 30s whom I knew somewhat distantly from academic circles, expressed his discomfort with the public nature of what he considered private sexuality. As we chatted, mostly amicably, over *aperitivi*, I became increasingly intrigued at the means by which he articulated his point of view: on the one hand, he explicitly claimed a position of non-homophobia, enumerating his friendliness and civility toward openly lesbian and gay individuals (presumably he included me in this number); on the other, his stance against possible civil unions erased the equally sexual (or equally non-sexual) nature of heterosexual matrimony, as if its institutions and structures operated apart from politics and culture. (A similar discursive logic is examined in Chapter 4, focusing on the Sentinelle in Piedi, although I have no reason to believe my interlocutor was a member of that group.) Days later, having had time to reflect, I recall being struck by the similarities between this conversation and others I have been a part of, in other languages that I use on a regular basis: I also recall being curious about any differences arising from cultural anchors and their manifestation in language forms and structures. Indeed, the claims of 'non-homophobia' and objections to sociocultural change made in Italian by one member of this speech community were both different and similar to what I have experienced in Dutch, English and French. From this moment, the specifics of which have been largely lost to the imprecisions of memory, arose a belief that the careful dissection of linguistic data may offer a richer understanding of homophobic language and discourses. This conviction – along with, I freely admit, the frustration I felt in that and similar moments – have guided this project from its initial conceptualization, to its problematization (a process that will likely never be complete), to the publication of these pages.

All of this is well and good, of course, but many will wonder what such linguistic exploration would look like, let alone what it might accomplish. Reconsidering the banal 'it's okay what you do in your bedroom, but please don't make it a public matter' statement introduced above, investigation could consider several factors, e.g. the alternation between first- and generic second-person forms and the verbal semantics associated with them – the former with negated mental states ('I don't have anything against') and the latter with positive activity ('what you do'). Also interesting is the use of adverbial modifiers, such as the negation of the first clause and the restrictive *just* of the second, as well as pragmatic components whose interpretation implicates individual and shared knowledge of how to put an utterance together, direct it toward an audience of collocutors and expect that it will be received in the manner that is intended. Speech acts such as this one do not emerge out of thin air: they are thought out, consciously or subconsciously, in accordance with a logical, generative harmonic (obviously linguistic, but also cultural, ethical and so forth), and are born into the world of verbal communication through a complex, interwoven series of forms and structures that reflect this. Carefully describing and interpreting these facts offers tremendous power – to understand, to countenance and to disrupt.

As can be seen by this admittedly simplistic account, any serious attempt to rigorously re-examine the linguistic construction of discourses requires a good deal of intellectual baggage and methodological practice, especially if it aims to supersede descriptive simplicity. Imagining the token was uttered by an English speaker residing in California (if only because this is where I currently live and work), anyone who wishes to rigorously examine such a discourse practice would have to know a thing or two about North American English lexical forms, morphosyntactic structures and semantics, not to mention the ways members of this speech community use these patterns for pragmatic ends. Language is a complicated beast, a structured symbolic system that the vast majority will study only superficially, if at all (linguists being among the notable exceptions). This, however, is hardly a real impediment: complicated systems are widely studied, even if only by a minority. Our physical bodies are complicated systems, for which a majority has only the most basic understanding, even if we know ourselves to be physical creatures whose very existence depends on biological factors. We don't think about metabolism when we eat or the pathways of infection when we cut our finger: we consume food following culturally transmitted habits and bandage a wound because this is what we've learned to do. If things get worse, say if we suffer from stomach pains or our finger begins to swell,

we consult a medical professional, from whom we expect more advanced expertise and treatment surpassing anecdotal knowledge. How curious, then, that we don't react similarly when language is the source of concern or cause of injury.

Just as we are embodied beings, so are we enlanguaged. We may not reflect often or at all on the means by which language and experience interact, but we cannot deny that this has a primary, if not fundamental role in our existence. When it comes to homophobic language, which we know has harmful, often devastating effects on our fellow citizens, why is there so little interest on the part of linguists? Why is so much of the most important and compelling work done on homophobic discourses ignorant – if not downright dismissive – of the forms, functions and pathways of language, those things that linguists view as akin to organs, chemical processes and metabolic pathways? There are some notable exceptions, of course, but generally speaking, we appear to have something more comparable to a premodern medical awareness when it comes to homophobic speech. For scholars like myself, this state of affairs is far from ideal. Hence this book, which attempts to bring linguistic postures (i.e. ways of thinking about and questioning language), theories and methods to bear on the study of homophobic discourses and to ground the interpretation of such practices in observable data.

Recognizing that the stuff of language is intricate, I have made no attempt to simplify or gloss over the density and weight of this task, even if I have at moments chosen to concentrate on the evidence that I believe to be more relevant. I do not pretend to have a definite answer, be able to access hidden truths or hold a superpower that would allow me to infer another's mental state. However, I do possess expertise that can be applied to the evidence before me, facilitating stronger and better-grounded inferences and arguments. Of course, the analyses I propose are not the only ones that can or should be made: I don't subscribe to and certainly don't wish to be thought of as promoting a myopically dogmatic stance vis-à-vis the complexity and importance of the subject at hand. Beyond this, the topics of case studies in Chapters 3 through 5 – populist groups operative in French, Italian and Flemish Belgian speech communities, respectively – can rightly be considered too occidental or Euro-centric. To this I can only reply that my personal preference and intellectual bias is to involve myself in data for which I have intuitions and experience (a stance taken up in Chapter 2). I also believe that the investigation of related, but at times profoundly distinct speech communities stands to challenge some of the implicit biases we all inevitably hold and which all-too-frequently calque the expectations of one linguo-cultural milieu onto

another. Beyond language, some readers might say that this work doesn't give enough attention to the lives affected by homophobia, that I don't take a strong enough stance in condemnation of the authors of specific acts or that by building my analyses on lexical, grammatical, pragmatic and semantic foundations, I am reiterating the power of these praxes.

These are fair and perhaps inevitable critiques. Rather than argue against them, I can only acknowledge them and reply that, in the end, I am attempting to balance intellectual scales and fuel counter-discourses. In so doing, I wish to increase the space available for disruption and cast greater light on the phenomena of homophobic communication, itself. I hope that, for all its density and complexity, this book encourages us all to reconsider the power we give language in our activism and scholarship, as well as in our private lives, while also reminding the community of linguists that language is not only the stuff of abstract theorization, but one of the constitutive fibers of social and civic life.