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# The Queerest Click

## A Lesson in Linguistic Marginalia from Drag Queens

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**I** NSTITUT FÜR  
**A** SIEN- UND  
**A** FRIKA-  
**W** ISSENSCHAFTEN

# Talking points



## 0 Introduction

## 1 The tongue pop

1.1 'What': a multi-modal expression

1.2 'Where': distribution in natural language

## 2 'Why': what the tongue pop means

2.1 Discourse pragmatic function

2.2 Sociopragmatic function

## 3 Clicks: not so *queer* after all ...?

## 4 Conclusions



# I The tongue pop: what?

## Tongue pop 101



- the 'tongue pop' is part of the performative language use of drag queens (see e.g., Barrett 1998, 2017; Rickford & Rickford 2000)
- popularised by contestants on RuPaul's Drag Race (RPDR) - in particular by Alyssa Edwards on/since Season 5 (2013)
- a deeper - undocumented? - history in the queer community (and beyond?)



Credits:  
Alyssa Edwards)  
Wow Presents (Youtube channel)  
Alyssa Edwards' Secret - Tongue Popping 101  
| 2.12.2013  
[URL: https://youtu.be/h3SxqJAyVr0?t](https://youtu.be/h3SxqJAyVr0?t)

# I.1 ‘What’: a multi-modal expression



## Sound

- A single ingressive ‘click’ consonant: **appears** to be a plain, laminally produced post-alveolar-to-palatal click\* (i.e., not a proto-typical palatal click [ɥ])
- Evidence largely impressionistic: based on my expertise with click languages and audiovisual queues (e.g., mouth shape, pitch)
  - *however*, comments by Alyssa Edwards are informative...



Credits:  
Alyssa Edwards)  
Wow Presents (Youtube channel)  
Alyssa Edwards' Secret - Tongue Popping 101  
| 2.12.2013  
URL: <https://youtu.be/h3SxqjAyVr0?t>

\*Thanks to Bonny Sands for drawing me  
to this likely hypothesis

# I.1 ‘What’: a multi-modal expression

## Gesture

- Hands: draw the attention towards the speaker with exaggerated yet choreographed movement
  - Can include framing the speakers face
- Face: on release of click, mouth (and eyes) is opened widely and left in suspension
  - Auditory effect of making the tongue pop louder



Images: Bob the Drag Queen, screenshots from <https://youtu.be/sl0DmvVWjoVk?>

# I.1 ‘What’: a multi-modal package

## **Gesture + Sound = Expression (Tongue pop)**

- Gesture delineates/frames the expression and as such modifies the ‘intensity’ (i.e., length) of the expression
- The expression becomes a “quotable” gesture (Kendon 1992; Seyfeddinipur & Gullberg 2014)
- Formally, the expression is highly marked



Images: Bob the Drag Queen, screenshots from <https://youtu.be/sl0DmvVWjoVk?>

# 1.2 ‘Where’: distribution in texts



## Data and methodology

- Analysis of | | context/utterance-bound tokens from 6 drag queens
  - Tokens taken from naturalistic-*esque* texts/dialogues (i.e., not scripted, but still performed?)
  - Context-based analysis of communicative function
- Tokens are sourced from:
  - RPDR ‘after shows’ (e.g., ‘*The Pit Stop*’) presented by former contestants of RPDR (Youtube)
  - ‘*Dancing Queen*’ (Netflix series starring Alyssa Edwards, former contestant of RPDR)
  - NB. the plausible collective international viewership of the chosen tokens is in the millions!!
- As no IPA symbol exists for a laminal palatal click, and no current way to encode the tongue pop, I opt for the interrobang: **?**



# 1.2 ‘Where’: distribution in texts



**Independent utterance (type I):** the tongue pop is a stand-alone utterance or can be interpreted as being disjointed from the previous utterance

In (I), the tongue pop is unambiguously a complete utterance:

(I) BTDQ	[Explains outfit choice]
Aja	You won that challenge, too
BTDQ	{ <i>Gesture: Frames face using hand</i> } ?



Credits:  
Aja and Bob The Drag Queen (BTDQ)  
RuPaul’s Drag Race (Youtube channel)  
The Pit Stop S12 E7 | 11 April 2020  
URL: <https://youtu.be/sl0DmvWjoVk?t=150>



# 1.2 ‘Where’: distribution in texts



**Utterance-final (type 2):** the tongue pop appears at the periphery (end) of an utterance, simultaneously encoding the end of the utterance

- (2) Alyssa E | {*“I have never forgotten where I come from...”*}  
A lady was on a budget back in the day,  
you know,  
this is before she was cashing those cheques ?
- (3) Alyssa E | {*Celebrates Thanksgiving and discusses the things she is thankful for*}  
I’m thankful for my health, my family,  
and world peace ?

# 1.2 'Where': distribution in texts



**Utterance final (type 2):** the tongue pop appears at the periphery (end) of an utterance, simultaneously encoding the end of the utterance

In (4), the tongue pop terminates a chain of discourse markers:

- |     |        |  |  |
|-----|--------|--|--|
| (4) | BTDQ   |  | So, <b>WHO</b> would you say is the biggest competition there? |
|     | Violet |  | <b>Shea</b> , down, the house, boots, mama, Ru, <b>ʔ</b>       |



Credits:  
Violet Chachki and Bob The Drag Queen (BTDQ)  
RuPaul's Drag Race (Youtube channel)  
The Pit Stop S5 E2 | Date unspecified  
URL: <https://youtu.be/wEdvqxTWxSI?t=308>

# 1.2 ‘Where’: distribution in texts

**Utterance medial (type 3):** The tongue pop occurs within an utterance

In (5), the tongue pop follows the dislocated adverbial *visually*:

(5) BTDQ | So, RuPaul walks over to Blair and she’s like  
“alright, I’m doing Ellen [DeGeneres]”  
which visually **?**, that makes sense,  
but there is a problem with doing comedians



In (6), the tongue pop clause-internal:

(6) Shea C. | [...] so when I heard that news I was **?** shocked



# 1.2 Summary



The tongue pop is a highly marked, multi-modal expression involving facial expression, hand gesture/framing of the face, and a laminally-produced palatal click sound

## Open questions

- What is the formal role of being in drag?
- What is the actual phonetic realisation? Is there speaker variation?
- Do all formal types (1, 2, and 3) arise in all users of the tongue pop?

Hypothesis: I suspect not: type 3 is not the ‘popular’ tongue pop typical of RPDR Queens **ALTHOUGH** it is certainly the most interesting ...

## 2.2 ‘Why’: what the tongue pop means



### Tongue pop as an interjection

Most tokens conform to a cross-linguistic description of interjections (see e.g., Ameka 1992) both in terms of **form**

- ...a non-elliptical utterance
- ...phonologically and morphologically anomalous
- ...(typically) at the periphery of an utterance

The tongue pop is a *primary* interjection as it is not sourced from existing words (e.g., the use of **fierce** and **werk** as interjections)

## 2.2 ‘Why’: what the tongue pop means



### Tongue pop as an interjection

Most tokens conform to a cross-linguistic description of interjections (see e.g., Ameka 1992) both in terms of form and **function**

Category	Function
<i>Expressive</i> (emotive & cognitive)	symptomatic of the speaker’s mental state, e.g., <i>yuk! eugh! wow! ouch!</i>
<i>Conative</i>	direct at an auditor with the intention of seeking a reaction, e.g., <i>psst! sssh! hää?</i>
<i>Phatic</i>	establishing and maintaining communicative contact, e.g., <i>uh-huh, yeah</i> (“backchanneling”)

The tongue pop covers **expressive** (and **conative?**) functions but not **phatic**

## 2.2 ‘Why’: what the tongue pop means



### **Tongue pop as an interjection**

Most tokens conform to a cross-linguistic description of interjections (see e.g., Ameka 1992) both in terms of form and function

**BUT** examples (5) and (6) do not conform to such a form/function description



## 2.2 ‘Why’: what the tongue pop means



In (5), the tongue pop follows the dislocated adverbial *visually*:

- (5) BTDQ | So, RuPaul walks over to Blair and she’s like “alright, I’m doing Ellen [DeGeneres]” which **visually ?**, that makes sense, but there is a problem with doing comedians



Credits:

Jinkx Monsoon and Bob The Drag Queen (BTDQ)

RuPaul's Drag Race (Youtube channel)

The Pit Stop S5 E5 | 4.7.2020

URL: <https://youtu.be/a2LMrSMohXs?t=270>

- Fronted/marked position of *visually* correlates with a marked pragmatic status i.e., as a contrastive topic (*visually* as opposed to something else e.g., *strategically*)
- Tongue pop – itself highly marked - becomes integrated into the formal marking strategy (‘information structure’ cf. Lambrecht 1994)

## 2.2 ‘Why’: what the tongue pop means



In (6), the tongue pop is clause-internal:

(6) Shea C. { -- describes that she learnt that other contestants were colluding against her -- }

I think I played fair and fun with everyone,  
so when I heard that news,  
I was ? shocked



Credits:  
Shea Couleé and Trixie Mattel  
RuPaul's Drag Race (Youtube channel)  
Trixie Mattel crashes the set of AllStars5| 12.7.2020  
[https://youtu.be/LaFR\\_BAm4j0?t=287](https://youtu.be/LaFR_BAm4j0?t=287)

\*Thanks to Tom Güldemann for drawing me  
to this likely hypothesis

- Tongue pop occupies position accorded to intensifier, e.g., *very*, *really*, *fucking*
- High integration is suggestive of grammaticalisation: interjection → intensifier\*
- Q: What does this mean for phonological status of the tongue pop (a click!) if it functions as the member of a ‘core’ word class?

## 2.2 ‘Why’: what the tongue pop means



### Sociopragmantic function: the tongue pop: *camp*?

“This term identifies messages about transgressive sexuality and other unconventional topics, when given **bold** expression, **exaggeration**, **provocative** imagery, and **unrestrained creativity**—so much so that the details of presentation assume more significance within the speech event than does the message itself [...]

[...] camp identifies a *process* of **exaggeration**, **flamboyance**, and **excess** which, in most instances has a **performative** effect on speakers and spectators: Camp, a form of doing, creates forms of being.” (Leap 2020: 20)

## 2.2 ‘Why’: what the tongue pop means



“I am not interested in linguistic forms as members of a set based on structural characteristics but rather of a set based on social or psychological import. [...] The premise underlying this approach is that **all linguistic codes or varieties** come to have **social and psychological associations in the speech communities** in which they are used.” (Myers-Scotton 1998: 5)

Further research could incorporate the **Markedness Model** (Myers-Scotton 1993; see also Barrett 1995) and performativity studies.

## 2.2 Summary



- Corpus study illustrates variation in discourse function of the tongue pop
  - Many examples conform with typology of interjections
  - Tongue pop also behaves like ‘core’ words (= grammaticalisation) **DESPITE** highly marked phonetic shape
- Interjections have long been a neglected part of language studies and deemed marginal...

“Interjections are only the outskirts of real language.  
Language begins where interjections end” (Miller 1862: 366)

- Far from being peripheral, interjections are emblematic of the social-interactive essence/core of language (see e.g., Dingemanse 2017)

# 3 Clicks: not so *queer* after all...?



What does the tongue pop teach us about clicks in human language?

And why we must shun long held prejudices about clicks in human languages in light of the tongue pop (and other evidence)

# 3 Clicks: not so *queer* after all...?

Clicks are...

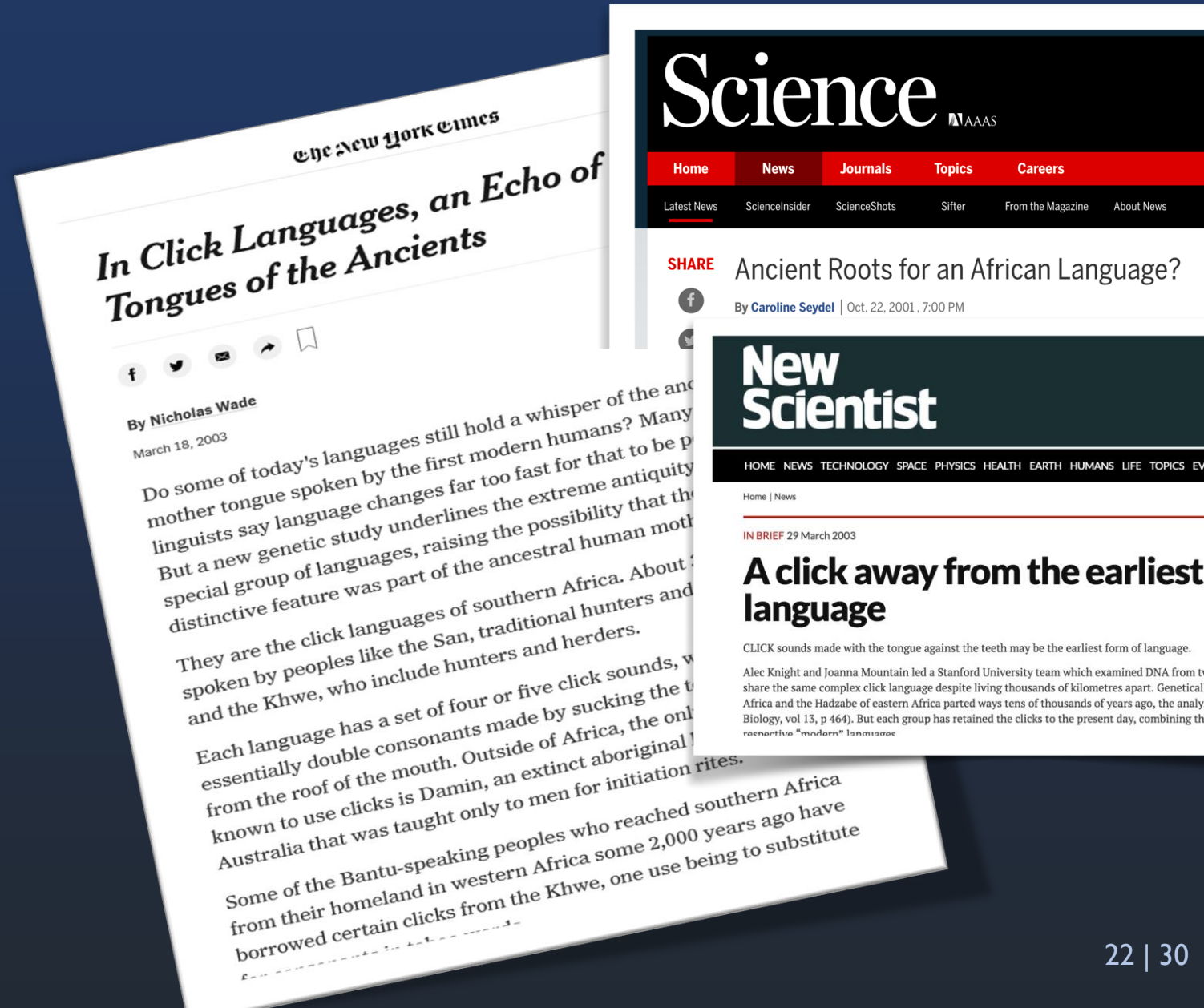
Rare ... ???

Exotic ... ???

Primitive ... ???

Ancient ... ???

**Queer!** (Not the LGBTQ+ kinda queer!)



## The New York Times

### In Click Languages, an Echo of Tongues of the Ancients

By Nicholas Wade  
March 18, 2003

Do some of today's languages still hold a whisper of the ancient mother tongue spoken by the first modern humans? Many linguists say language changes far too fast for that to be possible. But a new genetic study underlines the extreme antiquity of a special group of languages, raising the possibility that this distinctive feature was part of the ancestral human mother tongue. They are the click languages of southern Africa. About 100 are spoken by peoples like the San, traditional hunters and gatherers, and the Khwe, who include hunters and herders.

Each language has a set of four or five click sounds, which are essentially double consonants made by sucking the tongue against the roof of the mouth. Outside of Africa, the only language known to use clicks is Damin, an extinct aboriginal language of Australia that was taught only to men for initiation rites.

Some of the Bantu-speaking peoples who reached southern Africa from their homeland in western Africa some 2,000 years ago have borrowed certain clicks from the Khwe, one use being to substitute

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By Caroline Seydel | Oct. 22, 2001, 7:00 PM

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IN BRIEF 29 March 2003

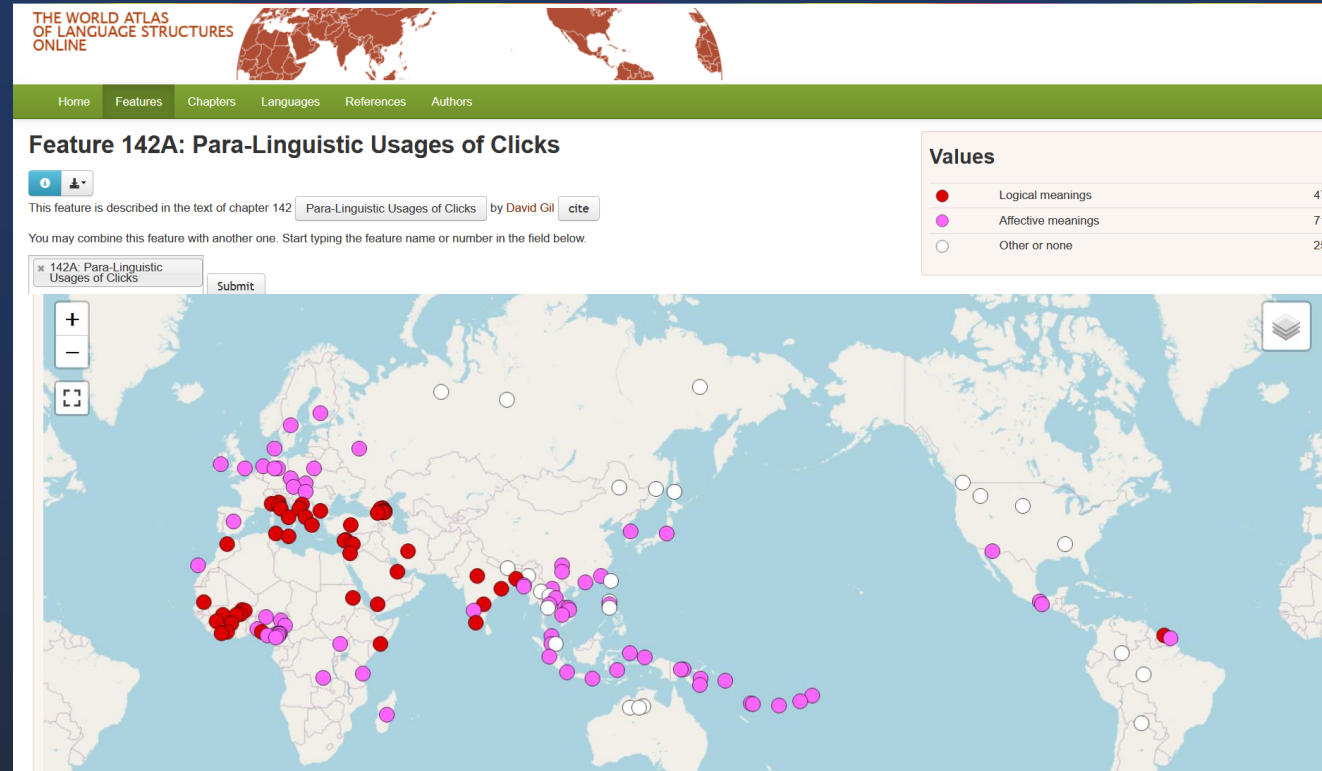
## A click away from the earliest language

CLICK sounds made with the tongue against the teeth may be the earliest form of language.

Alec Knight and Joanna Mountain led a Stanford University team which examined DNA from two groups of people in southern Africa to see if they share the same complex click language despite living thousands of kilometres apart. Genetical evidence suggests that the San and the Hadzabe of eastern Africa parted ways tens of thousands of years ago, the analysis published in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, vol 13, p 464. But each group has retained the clicks to the present day, combining them with other sounds to form their respective "modern" languages.

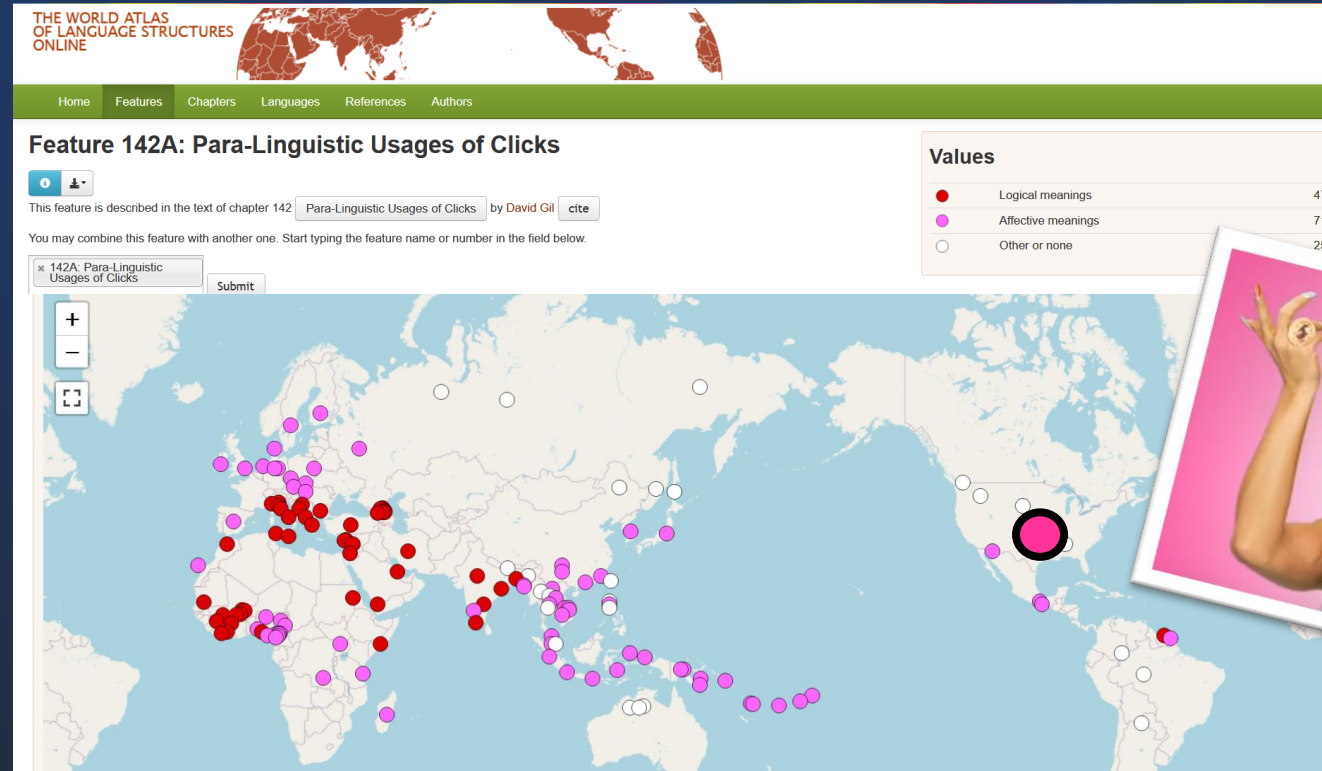


# 3 Clicks: not so *queer* after all...?



- The widespread paralinguistic use of clicks proves that **clicks are not rare** (e.g. Gil 2013, Sands 2020) – many examples of clicks as interjections (the dental *tut-tut!*)

# 3 Clicks: not so *queer* after all...?



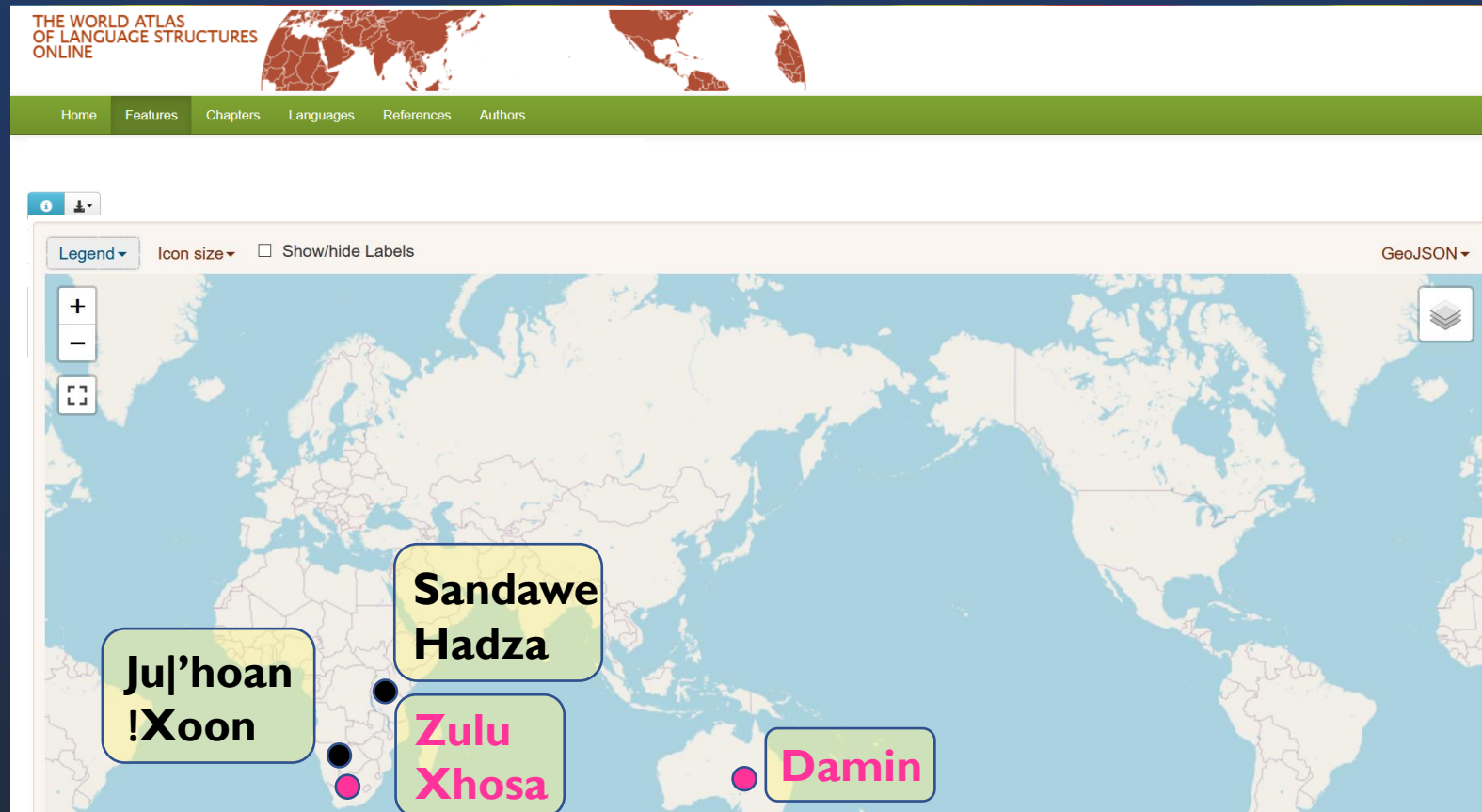
- The widespread paralinguistic use of clicks proves that **clicks are not rare** (e.g. Gil 2013, Sands 2020) – many examples of clicks as interjections (the dental *tut-tut!*)
- The tongue pop is evidence for recent, independent innovation of clicks – and their borrowability into other languages

# 3 Clicks: not so *queer* after all...?



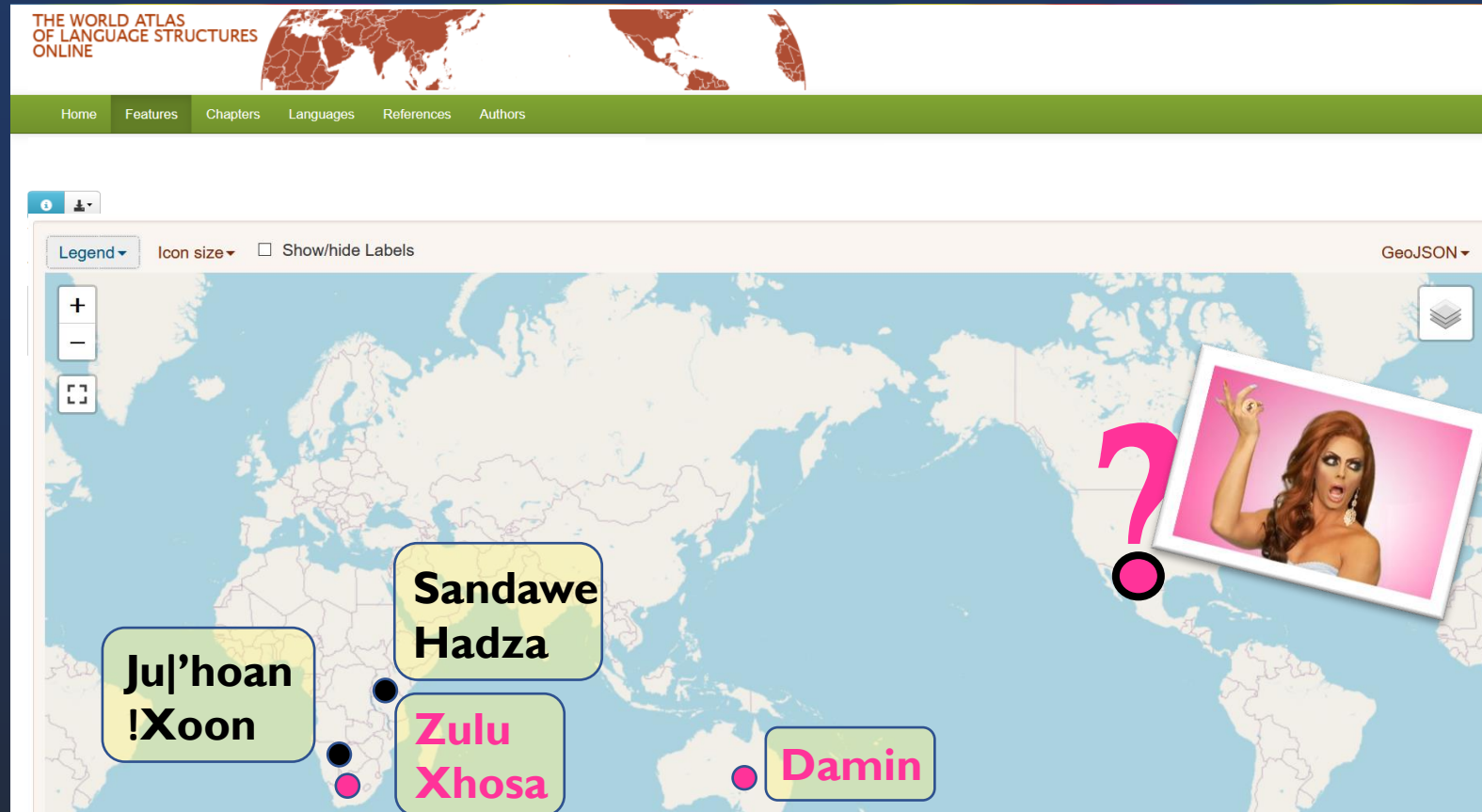
**Phonemic clicks**, however, are rare ... and exist only in the so-called Khoisan languages of Southern Africa (e.g. Ju|'hoan, !Xoon, G|ui), two language isolates in East Africa (Sandawe and Hadza), some Nguni languages (e.g. Zulu and Xhosa), and the special register of Damin (Australia) for male initiates

# 3 Clicks: not so *queer* after all...?



In Damin and Nguni, phonemic clicks may have been introduced via clicks arising in special registers that then become regularised over time (see e.g., *Hlonipha* in Nguni, Finlayson 2002; Sands & Güldemann 2009; see also Andrasson 2017 for ideophones in Xhosa)

# 3 Clicks: not so *queer* after all...?



Are we witnessing the same in varieties of (Queer) English?

# 3 Clicks: not so *queer* after all...?



- The development from clicks as paralinguistic signs or their use in special, culturally and linguistically marked language registers to integrated phoneme is evidence **AGAINST** notions of ancient, proto-language relics (e.g. Knight et al. 2003) and **FOR** recent, independent origin of phonemic clicks (Güldemann 2007)
- The tongue pop is modern, unique, and **OBSERVABLE** evidence of this: from salient, marginal symbol in the stylised language culture of the drag community, to regularised and integrated element



# 3 Clicks: not so *queer* after all...?

- ‘Click genesis’ in ‘Queer Englishes’ with rapid regularisation
  - Special register: performative language use/language games/language culture of queer community
  - Formidable role of the internet (as an instrument of observation as well as development)
  - Lack of documentation of the tongue pop prior to RDPR – lack of evidence not evidence of absence
  - What is the phonological status of the click in these language varieties: “[...], the challenge to phonology is to render a sensible account of the ‘peculiarities’ of interjections and to integrate this into the overall phonological description of a language” (Ameka 2020)

2013



Alyssa Edwards competes in RPDR 5. Her tutorial on tongue popping has 761k+ views



2016



music single  
“Tongue pop the halls”  
906k+ views

2018



Evidence of grammaticalisation of towards a discourse marker/intensifier. Combined viewership of 1.3m+)

2019



2021



Tongue pop appears in a scripted Netflix series



# 3 Clicks: not so *queer* after all...?

- Tongue pop spreads around the world with the spread of RPDR/drag culture
  - with evidence in other varieties of English (UK, Australia) and typologically very different languages including (Queer) Hebrew and (Queer) Thai
- Tongue pop is part of a repertoire that indexes an **international** queer identity, its allies, and ideals (see e.g., Leap & Boellstorff 2003)

2013



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2019



2021



Tongue pop appears in a scripted Netflix series

# 3 Clicks: not so *queer* after all...?



## Tongue pop interjection in 'Queer Hebrew'

\*Thank you Emmanuel Danan ©



Credits:  
Suzi Boum | בום '110  
(Youtube Channel)  
24.2018  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9jTAZMAZVS4>  
(48k+ views)

2013

2016

2018

2021



Alyssa Edwards competes in RPDR 5. Her tutorial on tongue popping has 761k+ views



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Evidence of grammaticalisation of towards a discourse marker/intensifier. Combined viewership of 1.3m+)



Tongue pop appears in a scripted Netflix series



# 3 Clicks: not so *queer* after all...?



## Tongue pop interjection in 'Queer' Thai

\*Thank you Julia Paas ☺



2013



Alyssa Edwards competes in RPDR 5. Her tutorial on tongue popping has 761k+ views



2016



music single  
"Tongue pop the halls"  
906k+ views

2018



Evidence of grammaticalisation of towards a discourse marker/intensifier. Combined viewership of 1.3m+

2019



2021



Tongue pop appears in a scripted Netflix series

# 4 Conclusions



- The tongue pop is a highly dynamic, highly marked, complex multi-modal expression
- Most common function: interjection – a historically marginalised part of language use
- Significant formal and functional variation with evidence of grammaticalisation in certain speech communities
  - Interjection > discourse marker > intensifier
- It is a(nother) sociolectal index of an international queer community and its allies
  - borrowed into typologically different Lavender Languages (English, Hebrew, Thai...)
- It is fabulous proof of independent click innovation and regularisation
  - opposes the notion that clicks are ancient – marginality can be explained by other means
  - further illustrates the (seeming) universality of paralinguistic clicks
  - introduces phonetically novel paralinguistic click into English (i.e., in addition to dental and lateral clicks that already exist as interjections in English)
  - how far will the tongue pop develop? *Lavender Click Languages?*

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