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Signalling gender identity through speech

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Recent research in language and gender emphasises the ways in which individuals “construct” their gender identity in interaction. Instead of assigning women and men to pre-determined biological or social categories, and then examining the speech features which correlate with those categories, current researchers focus on the way people’s interactions constitute gender performances. We are constantly “doing gender”. The way we move and dress, and all aspects of the way we speak are relevant to the construction of a gender identity. As Cameron says,

“one is never finished becoming a woman, or a man. Each individual subject must constantly negotiate the norms, behaviours, discourses, that define masculinity and femininity for a particular community at a particular point in history.....” (1995: 43).

Particular ways of speaking are associated with degrees of masculinity and femininity; these concepts are clearly end-points on a continuum, rather than discrete categories. In this paper I will demonstrate that gender identity is a complex construction, and that all levels of linguistic and pragmatic analysis are involved in “doing gender”.

Linguistic signals of gender identity

When we examine the ways in which women and men use speech, there is abundant evidence that pronunciation is one important means by which people signal their gender identity. Indeed recent sociolinguistic research in some speech communities reveals that, for some phonological variables, gender is more fundamental than social class. So, for example, men on Tyneside, regardless of social class, prefer local variants such as glottalised voiceless stops and conservative realisations of particular diphthongs, while women avoid these marked local forms (Milroy 1992).

Similarly, syntactic features can be manipulated in the process of constructing a particular gender identity. In a story collected from a New Zealand working class Maori woman, Geraldine, in which she describes how she won a street fight, vernacular features such as multiple negation and uninflected forms of the copula *be*, are used to construct a tough “masculine” identity¹. Here is an excerpt from her account.

Example 1

G = Geraldine (a pseudonym); I = Interviewer + signals 1 second pause
Material between slashes / is uttered simultaneously.

- G hehheh and she goes + she kept tryin’ to push away from me I says you better put those arms down because that’s fightin’ material for me hehheh
- I yeah
- G yeah + and she goes oh what have I have I done + she goes um ++ she says you can’t fuckin’ do nothin’ to me and I says d’you wanna bet hehheh + yeah
/so that was the end\
- I /is she is she small\ is she a small woman
- G nah she’s same size as me
- I yeah
- G but the cops came up behind me eh ’cause they were there when I was /doin’ it\
- I /yeah yeah\
- G and they come up behind me they says oh I think you better let her go ++ and they says um +++ it’s alright + hehheh you know just let her go she be right and I says yeah well if she keeps that up she be dead
- I yeah yeah

Here Geraldine exploits her awareness of male speech norms to achieve her effect. In addition to consistent vernacular pronunciations such as [ɪn] for the (ING) variable in words like *trying* and *nothing*, she also uses vernacular syntax at a level more typical of male than female members of her social and ethnic group (Holmes, Bell and Boyce 1991). She deletes auxiliary HAVE (eg *you better*), uses multiple negation (eg. *you can’t fuckin’ do nothin’ to me*), and uses uninflected BE in the clauses *she be right* and *she be dead*. These forms contribute to Geraldine’s construction of a particularly tough, masculine gender identity for herself as a participant in the events she is recounting.

¹ The Maori people are the indigenous inhabitants of New Zealand, currently constituting about 15% of the population.

Discourse analysis and gender identity

Women and men also use components at the level of discourse to construct particular gender identities. Pragmatic particles, such as *you know* and *I think, just* and *so*, pragmatic devices such as tag questions, and discourse strategies such as supportive feedback (eg *yeah, mm*) express social meanings such as assertiveness, tentativeness, facilitation, rapport, and solidarity. Speakers draw on these social meanings in their construction of relatively feminine or relatively masculine gender identities. In the following example, taken from our corpus of language in the workplace, Heke, a Maori manager, seeks advice from his senior manager about his management approach. He uses a range of hedging devices (in bold) in this interchange, constructing a relatively feminine identity and emphasising his subordinate status².

Example 2

Heke: **actually** I- I wanted to- get your advice about that I want to do a **bit of a wee sort of** ra ra speech at the beginning of **like** of planning day tomorrow we ARE stretched people ARE starting to feel the pressure + but it's it's just the kind of thing **you know** it's- if we want to be in the business you're gonna have to live with it **you know that kind of thing** I just I do want to say that

Heke here uses a large number of hedging devices in a short period of time, signalling the tentative nature of his suggestions, while at the same time claiming common ground with his addressee by his use of pragmatic devices such as *you know, that kind of thing*. Both these strategies are associated with feminine rather than masculine styles of speaking.

Turning to more extended examples, we can examine the kinds of gender identity people construct for themselves and others in their narratives of personal experience. As Schiffrin (1996) points out,

“We can say that telling a story provides a self-portrait: a linguistic lens through which to discover peoples' own (somewhat idealised) views of themselves as situated in a social structure” (1996: 199).

In the following extract taken from a long narrative we find Helen, a middle class, middle-aged, Pakeha New Zealander, in conversation with a female friend of similar background, constructing rather conservative identities for herself and her daughter, Andrea - namely doting mother and sweet little girl³.

² See Stubbe and Holmes (in press) for a fuller discussion of this example.

³ The term “Pakeha” refers to New Zealanders of European origin.

Example 3

- H. we went and swam at the pool
Andrea did SEVEN lengths
- J. goodness me
- H. with a little breaks in between
but she's never swum a length of that pool before
/and she just suddenly discovered\
- J. /(that's so good)\
- H. she could swim a length [laughs]
and got so keen she didn't want to stop
she said I'll just do another one and then
- J. /that's terrific\
- H. /I'll do another one so that\ was so fun
so she looked like a [laughs]
Liz was there with her friend John
and he said /she\ looked like a goldfish you [laughs] know s-
- J. /mm\
- H. /(there's) a little head ()\
- J. /[laughs]\ (he'd find out when we-) yeah
- H. a- a rolling in the water
- J. /[laughs] oh\
- H. [laughs] and legs sort of sagging in the water o-
and breaststroking away /you know\
- J. /good on her\
- H. but she was obviously really sort of getting a kick out of the achievement

Helen achieves the construction of Andrea's very feminine identity by a variety of linguistic means, including the effective use of diminutives such as *little* and attenuators such as *just* and *so*, the pragmatic particles *sort of* and *you know*, the adverb particle *away* in the phrase *breast-stroking away*, and the repetition of phrases and syntactic patterns (*I'll just do another one and then I'll do another one*). These components all contribute to Helen's affectionate picture of an endearing little girl swimming gamely away, as does the paralinguistic laughter, and the attribution to an observer of a comment that emphasises how sweet and amusing Andrea's behaviour is. In the process of constructing this picture of her daughter, Helen also constructs herself as a “good mother” who takes responsibility for her children's activities, and, in particular, looks after her little girl by taking her swimming, encouraging her efforts with admiration, and taking pleasure in her achievement.

It is interesting to note that Helen's gender identity as a middle class female is also expressed through her use of phonological variants which are more frequent in New Zealand women's speech than men's. To give just

two examples, Helen consistently uses the standard variant of (ING) throughout the excerpt (eg. *rolling, sagging, breast-stroking, getting* etc), and she uses a conservative, aspirated variant of intervocalic /t/ at a level typical for middle-aged middle class New Zealand women (45%).

So talking to a 'straight' middle-aged, conservative friend, Helen focusses on a conservative aspect of her own gender identity – her role as a loving mother – and produces a construction of her daughter as a feminine and endearing little girl. In a different setting, with a different audience, Helen constructs rather different gender identities for both herself and her daughter – much less traditionally feminine, more challenging and radical identities.

Men's narratives also construct gendered identities which vary along a scale of masculinity-femininity according to the context in which they are told. They often emphasise the narrator's control of the situation, his competence, practical expertise, and so on. These points are illustrated in a long story told by Tom, a middle-aged, professional man, to Gary his friend and colleague about how, after dealing with a range of problems, he eventually overcame the problem of getting his complicated new video machine to record a film (see Holmes 1998b). The story is followed by a discussion of the inadequacies of the television company in providing accurate programme information to viewers. In this story, Tom constructs himself as competent and intelligent by describing in detail his achievement in mastering the programming of the video. He describes each step in the process, giving the impression of an orderly, methodical approach to the challenge he faced. For men, then, "doing gender" often involves the narrator presenting himself as in control, knowledgeable, competent or, if things go wrong, as self-aware, sophisticated, and reflective.

Often gender interacts with other social factors such as social class or ethnicity. Some Maori narratives can be distinguished from those told by Pakeha New Zealanders, for instance. The Maori narratives often reflect the narrators' awareness of ethnic boundaries, and Maori men tend to present themselves rather less heroically than Pakeha. The following example with its two compressed mini-stories is part of a long sequence in which two young Maori men are reliving past shared escapades when they regularly visited the video game parlour:

Example 4

B. and we tried to take spoons remember /[[laughs]\

A. /[[laughs]\

B. tryin' to wire up the game /eh [laughs]\

A. /[[laughs] yeah with a spoon \ it's just you actually think about it eh

A. /[[laughs]\

B. /[[laughs]\

A. we're the spoons tryin' to fuckin' we were the spoons [laughs] all right oh what eggs man

B. I- I felt like cryin' one time when we lost you know we [laughs] died fuck we got to walk all the fuckin' way home [laughs]

A. [laughs] yeah I'll say we had to walk all the way home

B. fuckin' hell we only got down with eighty cents and that was about bloody four or five games worth

Maori identity is expressed though a range of phonological and pragmatic features, including the particle *eh*. At the discourse level, these two men jointly construct a narrative which presents their younger selves as rather mischievous and somewhat "dumb". In the process, they indicate their current level of sophistication, while also conveying a sense of their earlier behaviour as appropriately wild and "crazy" for young city boys. These themes recur in other Maori male narratives where narrators similarly construct a "rascally", misspent youth, and present decidedly masculine anti-heroes as the central characters.

Conclusion

Much recent sociolinguistic research has adopted a social constructionist approach to the analysis of gender. From this perspective, gender is analysed not as a fixed category but as a dynamic social construction. In this paper, I have drawn on my own recent research to illustrate some of the insights I believe such an approach can offer⁴. I have presented a brief outline of a variety of ways in which New Zealand women and men construct their gender identities through their use of language.

It is important to bear in mind that gender is only one aspect of a person's social identity, and it is an aspect which will be more or less salient in different contexts. In some contexts, for example, it may be more important to emphasise one's professional expertise or one's age than one's gender. Moreover, the contextual relativity of the construction is also worth remembering:

"we may act more or less middle-class, more or less female, and so on, depending on what we are doing and with whom" (Schiffrin 1996: 199)

Finally, it is also worth noting that a more dynamic approach to gender identity indicates the possibility of altering social perceptions of what it means to act like a woman or a man. Over time, by adopting behaviours which challenge the social stereotypes, we can change what is perceived of as "appropriate" feminine or masculine behaviour. By "doing gender" differently, we can alter societal gender norms. Social constructionism offers an interesting analytical framework which is capable of accounting for such changes.

⁴ See, for example, Holmes 1997, 1998a, 1998b.

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M Current Research

A new doctoral dissertation in English literature from Göteborg University:

Helena Ardholm. 1998. *The Emblem and the Emblematic Habit of Mind in Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights*.

In her dissertation, Helena Ardholm argues that the study of the emblem (a Renaissance genre) and the study of literature may be brought together to propose an emblematic approach to reading *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*. Ardholm traces the reception of the devotional branch of emblematics from the Renaissance to nineteenth century England to show how the Brontë sisters are able to use emblematic discourse, or the creative principles of the emblem genre, to structure and interpret a variety of spiritual matters in the two texts. Ardholm concludes that the existence of emblematic discourse in the novels not only suggests that the Brontës participate in a larger context of nineteenth century Christian exegetic habits, but also that the novels invite the reader to explore and critically examine a discourse that "reads the world" from the perspective of a particular world view that has been reiterated in devotional practices as well as in English literature at least until the mid-nineteenth century.

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Feminism and the "Difference Fix"

Can feminism still fuel changes for women? Although the question may seem drastic, an increasing theoretization of feminism, characteristic of the 90's, has resulted in a growing body of academic criticism which has brought the issue of the relevance of feminism to the fore. Moreover, the very intensity of the debate on its future alerts us to the fact that an affirmative answer can no longer be taken for granted. What we may perceive as a crisis in feminism can be ascribed to a gradual dismantling of second-wave feminism's ideal of a united sisterhood striving for collective emancipation from the oppression of patriarchy. Feminism has become more diversified; it has become increasingly centred on the individual, and it has been forced to become more responsive to a wider range of political and ethical issues. One notable result of the wider scope of feminism is that we have seen the birth of queer studies, of studies of masculinities, and of a growing body of postcolonial feminist studies. This has been a positive development, but it has been accompanied by serious attacks on some of the cornerstones of second-wave feminism. The ardent advocacy of women's rights by Anglo-American feminists and the focus on the political goal of achieving equality between the sexes have been particularly controversial issues as they are beheld as significant mainly for Western, white, middle-class women.

A central feature of the theoretical evolution of feminism is the escalating attention given to the concept of "difference". As Rita Felski contends, difference seems to function "as a value in itself, seemingly irrespective of its referent or context. Difference has become doxa, a magic word of theory and politics radiant with redemptive meanings" (1997, 1). In this context, the notion of difference is used in two distinct ways, sometimes applied separately, but often in conjunction. On the one hand, "difference" functions as a marker that feminists are aware of differences between women. Race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, and nationality are all categories which diversify the experience of being oppressed and make it inconceivable to think of women as a homogeneous group. For instance, as Bell Hooks argues, "race and class identity may create differences in the quality of life that take precedence over the common experience women share" (1984, 4). Because we know that women lead different lives and have different experiences, many feminists find it inadmissible to perceive the struggle for emancipation for women as a unitary project with one clear aim. On the other hand, the extolling of "difference" in contemporary feminist thinking can be attributed to influences from language-centred post-structuralist or psychoanalytic