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# **Language, gender and identity**

**Pia Pichler**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Whereas the ideology of women and men's language use as categorically and innately different remains significant in popular debate, most language and gender research in the last couple of decades has problematized the view that we are somehow pre-programmed to speak in a specific way because we are either women or men. The notion that gender is neither fixed nor homogeneous but that it is 'constructed' in specific sociocultural, historical and situational contexts is not entirely new but has constituted an ever-increasing influence on language and gender theory, methodology and research.

This chapter will capture some of the complexity, heterogeneity and even contradictory nature of gender performances that are at the core of the social constructionist approach to language and gender with a particular focus on the rich and varied talk of adolescents and young adults. This focus will allow for a fresh perspective on many of the most important developments in the field at the same time as presenting data from an age range of speakers that will be of particular interest to many of the readers of this handbook.

The first section of the chapter will trace the development of social constructionist thinking about language and gender. The second section will clarify the main two aspects of language that this chapter will focus on; (conversational) style and discourse, providing a brief overview of early language and gender research on conversational style. The third and main section of this chapter considers a range of important issues on the basis of recent language and gender research. It introduces language and gender studies which highlight

what can be gained from moving beyond a discussion of conversational style to include a focus on discourse. It discusses the interplay of gender with other sociocultural variables and the contributions ethnographic and community of practice studies have made to capture the heterogeneity of gendered performances. The section will also highlight how scholarship on language and sexuality as well as on gender structures has shaped our recent understanding of language, gender and identity. The chapter will conclude with some recommendations for future practice in language and gender research.

## **HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES**

Several different approaches have influenced the thinking of language and gender scholars adopting a ‘social constructionist’ approach to their work, including post-structuralist theories about subject positions created in discourse (Foucault 1972) and about performativity (Butler 1990) but also ethnomethodological ideas about people’s own sense-making of everyday action and identities (Garfinkel 1967). Both Conversation Analysis (CA, e.g., Schegloff 1997) rooted in ethnomethodology, and Judith Butler’s (1990) performative model of gender have been particularly influential, but differ vastly in their understanding of and approach to the study of language and gender. The latter is interested in gendered performances and their constraints, thereby inviting an engagement with gendered ideologies and structures which may not be directly visible in spoken interactional data but nevertheless shape the talk and identity constructions of social actors. CA takes a decidedly bottom-up approach to the discussion of (gender) identity and warns against analysts imposing their a-priori assumptions (e.g. about the relevance of macro-social categories such as gender) on the data. It aims to focus the analysis mostly on the interactional data (and not beyond) in order to examine participants’ own understanding of

the interaction, the relevant context and (interactional) positions in their talk. The debate between proponents of CA vs. performativity studies has been a lively and often antagonistic one in language and gender studies (e.g. Benwell and Stokoe 2006; Cameron 2005; Holmes 2007; Wetherell 1998). CA has contributed valuable micro-analyses of turn-taking, of the way speakers position themselves from one turn to another in interaction, and, together with Membership Categorisation Analysis (e.g. Benwell and Stokoe 2006: 64-86), of interactional stances and local identity positions which may have been overlooked in discussions of macro-social categories of gender, social class, ethnicity etc. Of course, micro-linguistic discourse analysis of natural talk has never been the exclusive territory of CA. Moreover, both linguistic anthropological/ethnographic research with its focus on cultural context (e.g. Hall 2009), and pragmatic understandings of language which focus on inferential meaning (e.g. Cameron 2005), argue that a pure CA restriction to speakers' explicit orientations to the relevance of gender misses out on important levels of meaning-making.

In their seminal paper on sociocultural linguistics Bucholtz and Hall (2005) resolve some of these methodological debates by drawing on the concept of indexicality to show that there are many different ways in which gender can emerge as relevant in language, including overt references to gender as well as very indirect ideological associations between language forms and gender. Elinor Ochs (1992) famously argued that there are only very few linguistic forms (such as kinship terms) which index the gender of speaker directly in the English language. Much more common is the occurrence of indirect indexicality which relates 'gender to language through some other social meaning indexed' (ibid: 342-343). Thus, for example, linguistic forms first index different stances, such as toughness, or acts such as 'swearing', or activities such as 'gossip'. These stances, acts and activities then in turn come to index macro-identities such as gender. Although unrelated, one of Judith

Butler's most frequently quoted explanations of the concept of performativity can shed light on the formation of indexical links over time, 'Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a rigid regulatory frame which congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a "natural" kind of being' (Butler 1990: 33). The congealing that Butler refers to can also be thought of as the emergence of indexical ties which link linguistic practices to stances and, ultimately, to gender.

## **CRITICAL ISSUES AND TOPICS**

The various extracts from language and gender studies discussed in this chapter will exemplify many different identity relations and indexical processes summed up by Bucholtz and Hall (2005). Some will focus on gendered meanings of phonological or grammatical variation although the central focus of the chapter will be on conversational style and discourses.

Language and gender studies' interest in conversational style was very well developed already before current social constructionist scholarship began to view it as a resource for identity construction. It is already evident in Robin Lakoff's (1975) pioneering work on what she sees as women's tentative use of language. Subsequent critiques of Robin Lakoff's introspective work are framed as empirical studies of recorded and transcribed extracts of women's and men's talk, focusing on interruptions and minimal responses such as 'mhm', (tag) questions such as 'isn't it' and hedges such as 'maybe' and 'you know'. Several studies explore patterns of conversational dominance exerted by men over women in heterosexual couples, arguing that interactional asymmetry in private contexts reflects power differences between women and men at large (e.g. Fishman 1980; DeFrancisco 1991; Zimmerman and West 1975). This so-called 'dominance' model of language and gender

stands in opposition to what has become known as the ‘difference model’ which highlights and even celebrates gendered (conversational) styles; i.e. women’s collaboration and men’s competition (Coates 1996; Goodwin 1988; Pujolar 1997; Tannen 1990).

This interest in conversational style remains at the centre of much current language and gender research taking a social constructionist approach and will feature prominently in the discussion of specific examples of research of the language of young women and young men in this chapter. However, some of these studies have extended their focus to other aspects of communicative and even non-verbal style and several have incorporated a focus on different types of discourse (e.g. sexist, feminist...) that speakers voice when they interact with one another. ‘Discourse’ here refers to language practice that is shaped by and has the potential to shape or even constitute ideologies, social practices and identities (e.g. Gee 1996: 127). By examining discourses and features of (conversational) style in the talk of usually comparatively small groups of speakers, language and gender scholars have been trying to capture how speakers ‘construct’ identities or are constructed (as gendered), as the remainder of this chapter will demonstrate.<sup>2</sup>

## **CURRENT CONTRIBUTIONS AND RESEARCH**

### **From conversational style to discourses**

Both Deborah Cameron (1997) and Jennifer Coates (1999) combine an interest in conversational style with an analysis of (gendered) discourses in their work on the informal talk of young speakers. Coates highlights the interplay of language, gender and age by showing how the talk of a group of young white middle-class women changes as they get

older. When the girls are 12 years old their talk does not exhibit much conversational support, nor any mitigation or hedging; moreover the girls interrupt one another when they want to speak. By the time the girls are 15 years old they have acquired the type of collaborative conversational style that Coates's (1996) pioneering research found to be characteristic of white, middle-class adult women friends. They develop topics jointly over several minutes and mirror one another's self-disclosures, they also show their support with minimal responses and take each other's face needs into consideration with the use of hedges such as 'sort of' and 'like'. The girls' talk at different ages contains traces of a range of different discourses, including scientific, maternal, romantic, repressive and feminist discourses, which allow them to experiment with different and frequently contradictory femininities. However, Coates also argues that the data of the girls at 15 contains much less resistance to and subversion of dominant discourses (e.g. about their bodies or about being 'a bitch') than when they were younger. Coates therefore asks the question whether the gender positions the girls in this particularly privileged group construct for themselves in their talk are in fact as liberated as one may assume.

Deborah Cameron (1997) discusses the talk of five 21-year-old, white, male US university students from suburban, middle-class backgrounds. Despite engaging in gossip and using some features of conversational support such as hedging, latching and repetition the young men are far from resisting dominant gender norms, as Cameron points out. On the contrary, their gossip about women or fellow students including one they call 'that really gay guy', shows their clear alignment with hegemonic masculinity which informs the young men's views about the speech, clothing and bodies of "real" men (Cameron 1997: 53-54). Cameron's analysis demonstrates that conversational collaboration and competition are not necessarily mutually exclusive (see also Eckert 1993; Sheldon 1997). Above all, the study highlights the importance of considering discourse(s) in language and gender studies; 'I

hope that it might make us think twice about the sort of analysis that implicitly seeks the meaning (and sometimes the value) of an interaction among men or women primarily in the style, rather than the substance, of what is said' (ibid: 62).

The importance of a discourse of heterosexuality for the construction of hegemonic masculinities is also evident in Scott Kiesling's (2002) work on male US fraternity members. By participating in a weekly ritualised narrative event that heavily relies on the telling of 'fuck stories', or by using gendered and frequently derogatory address terms such as 'honey', 'Hazel', 'bitch' or 'bitchboy', the young men's gender performances display both their heterosexuality and their superiority over women and other men.

The research discussed in this section captures what can be gained from introducing a focus on discourses into a discussion of gender and conversational style. The next section will show what can be gained from moving beyond the talk of young, white, middle class speakers.

### **The interplay of gender with other sociocultural identities**

Social constructionist critiques of what have been branded 'essentialist' notions of language and gender (see Holmes 2007) encourage us to think about how gender interacts with other factors and aspects of identity, including social status and ethnic culture. Early research on conflict negotiation among adolescents found that, unlike (white) middle-class girls, working-class girls make use of face threatening acts such as playful disputes and insults (Eder 1990; Goodwin 1990; Hasund and Stenström 1997). These findings suggest that the lack of direct, unmitigated challenges found in Coates's (1999) research of older adolescent girls could be attributed at least partly to their middle-class background.



Pichler’s (2006; 2009) research captures the use of multifunctional teasing in a group of Bangladeshi girls from a working class area of the East End of London. In their teasing episodes the girls display verbal toughness, but teasing also allows them to bond and it constitutes a fun activity in its own right.

*Extract 1: I don’t think so.: (Pichler 2009: 117-119)*

(1)

Rahima *{mocking}*[WE AIN’T **THAT**] **DUMB**

(2)

Ardiana [we know Rahima you are]

Rahima we’re (in comprende)*{mock Spanish/French accent}*

Varda YOU WAS TAL[KING QUITE DUMB]

(3)

Ardiana (1) we know you are*{teasing}*

Rahima (1) /what (-) **oh::** that’s because **you** are

(4)

Ardiana I don’t think so somehow I (get) **good** grades*{sl. provoc.}*

? *{faint chuckle}*

(5)

Ardiana in English you know (.) I’ve got A-star (.) [right]

Rahima *{mock impressed}* (.) wo:[::w]

(6)

Ardiana .hhh*{nasal}* [I think] I (said yo[u:-]) [(are

Rahima [wow] [yeah] that’s [why

(7)

Ardiana you doing that])

Rahima you’re doing \*Found]ation yeah I understand (-)

Dilshana *{laughs}*

\**foundation level of exam*

(8)

Ardiana I did \*Higher \*\*tu janishne (-) =really >what do

Rahima *{higher pitch}* \really=

? *{yawn}*

\**higher level of exam; \*\*Bengali: “do you know?”*

(9)

Ardiana you [mean really<] [REALLY REALLY] =did /I::

Rahima [you done Founda]tio[n with me /right]=

(10)  
 Ardiana >I don't [think] so (somehow)<{teasing} >I don't think soo:: ::<  
 Rahima [yeah] yeah you di::d{teasing}

It is tempting to interpret the use of competitive teasing captured in this extract as simply reflecting the speakers' working class backgrounds (for an in-depth discussion of this transcript see Pichler 2006; Pichler 2009: 119-120). From a constructionist perspective it becomes more appropriate to ask how the girls use competitive (and other types of) teasing to construct their identities. For the girls in this group, who frequently comment on the 'loudmouth' culture of their peers in their form-group, teasing constitutes a resource to construct themselves as tough. This toughness together with the girls' pronounced anti-school stances indexes a type of ladette femininity which is valued in their immediate peer group. It is also worth noting that these tough femininities allow the British Bangladeshi girls in this group to position themselves in opposition to stereotypical notions of young "Asian" femininity.

This tough femininity is neither the only important subject position for these young Bangladeshi girls nor is it equally valued by all young British working class women. Another group of Anglo-Irish young working class girls from the same school does not only refrain from tough teasing but also distances itself from stereotypical representations of working class femininity; e.g. the school truant, the promiscuous girl or future teenage mother (see Pichler 2009). Instead the girls present themselves as sheltered and responsible, aspiring to what Skeggs (1997) describes as respectable middle class femininity.

Ironically, this respectable and sheltered middle class femininity is positioned as much less desirable in a third group of young women from one of the most prestigious private schools in the UK (Pichler 2009). The talk of these young women highlights their efforts to index

what to them are alternative forms of cultural capital, in the form of “cool” non-conformity with school values or streetwise knowledge of music and drugs. This amount of coolness needs to be pitched carefully, in order not to be mistaken for ‘toughness’. That is, familiarity with soft drugs is acceptable as is moaning about school, whereas drug addiction or truanting are not.

Moreover, the girls’ gendered performances as ‘cool’ and ‘real’ are balanced by their displays of dominant cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984; see also Skeggs 1997) in their conversations about literature, arts and science and have to be seen in the context of their privileged (economic, social) backgrounds and life styles as well as their trajectories towards elite university education.

Research which aims to capture some of the ways in which gender intersects with other social categories has often been designed as small-scale, ethnographic studies of ‘communities of practice’, as the next section will show.

### **Heterogeneity of gender identities: ethnography and communities of practice**

The concept of the community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991) was introduced to language and gender research by Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet (1992). Penny Eckert’s now classic ethnographic study of jocks and burnouts, the two most prominent communities of practice in US highschools, exemplifies this practice-based, local view of gender. Eckert describes both linguistic (phonological and grammatical) and social practices (including clothing, participation in sports and/or extra-curricular activities, use of alcohol and/or drugs). Differently from what might be expected from previous variationist research which showed women using more standard variants than men (e.g. Trudgill 1974),

burnout girls actually use more advanced, that is vernacular (or non-standard) variants of the variables (uh), (ay) and (ae) than any of the other (jock or burnout) boys (Eckert 2011). Eckert argues that for the burnout girls, who lack some of the more physical resources (including street fights) available to their male peers, the linguistic capital in the form of the (local) vernacular of Detroit becomes particularly important in the construction of their burnout identities. Clearly, gender interacts with the local identity categories of jocks and burnouts, which themselves represent local interpretations of social class; with jocks displaying the very pro-school values aimed at middle-class trajectories which are so vehemently rejected by the burnouts.

Mary Bucholtz's (1999) subsequent work on a third community of practice in the US highschool shows how young Californian women identifying as nerds avoid the use of certain linguistic practices (including slang and non-standard lexis) to distance themselves from cool teenagers such as the burnouts and jocks. At the same time nerds use other linguistic practices such as Greco-Latinate lexical items and hypercorrect phonological forms to construct their identities as intelligent.

Robert Lawson's ethnographic work on young Scottish masculinities explores the identity constructions of 14-15-year old pupils, identifying four different communities of practice in the school, which he labels 'the Alternatives, the Sports, Neds and Schoolies' (Lawson 2013: 373). In his 2013 paper Lawson focuses on the masculinity of the Neds which relies on (the frequently also physical) displays of traditional working class toughness, especially in their talk about fights.

Lawson's discussion of his data is at pains to avoid a characterisation of the young men's talk as purely competitive. For example, in the following example Phil's friend Nathan

needs to resolve the dilemma of insisting that he actually does remember Phil crying ('greeting') whilst preserving his friend's face by allowing him to hold on to his performance of tough masculinity.

*Extract 2: 'I really wasn't greeting' (from Lawson 2013: 382)*

1 Phil:           So I- I re:ally really wasn't greeting,  
2                   just because-  
2                   (.)  
4                   [S-  
5 Nathan:       [Aye, but it did look like it.  
6                   I- I- I wasn't saying you were greeting,  
7                   but it did look like you were greeting.  
8 Phil:           (.)  
9                   No, it's think- it's just cause my eyes,  
10                  it looks like [I'm greeting.  
11 Nathan:                               [Ah but-  
12 Phil:          Do I look as if I'm greeting now?  
13 Nathan:       (.)  
14                   N:o but-  
15                   No but I did see something coming [out-  
16 Phil:   [No, it's  
17                   because of the colour  
18                   of my eyes are always [like all thingied.  
19 Nathan:                               [I know.  
20 Phil:          Look as if I'm greeting now?  
21 Nathan:       No, but I did see something.

What may stand out for many readers of Lawson's data is the dominance of hegemonic masculinity based on (physical) toughness in this group of Glaswegian Neds. However, Lawson's main point is that the young men avoid direct and open confrontation in various ways, including Nathan mitigating some of his challenges and subsequently offering support to his friend's version of events by stating that he is familiar with Phil's problem of watering eyes being misinterpreted as crying by others. Lawson highlights the importance of tracing subtle shifts in the positioning of speakers (see also Wetherell 1998), caused by their efforts to preserve their friendship whilst contesting one another's version of events in their performance of tough masculinities.

Recent ethnographic research has also provided insight into performances of tough femininities, which may at times offer young women alternative gender positions (e.g. Moore 2004; Pichler 2009; Mendoza-Denton 2008). In Germany, Inken Keim (2007) captures the performance of tough, rebellious femininities in a group of German-Turkish girls, the 'Powergirls', from a Turkish migrant neighbourhood in the inner city of Mannheim.

Drawing on ethnographical data including biographical interviews and long-term observation Keim (2007) argues that the identity performances of young Turkish-German women are heavily interconnected with their educational trajectories. The Powergirls belong to a 10-20% minority of young Turkish-Germans who commute out of their local immigrant neighbourhood to pursue better educational and professional pathways. Particularly in *Gymnasium* (grammar school) the percentage of pupils of migration backgrounds is extremely low and 'for the first time in their lives, they experience the negative image of the Turkish migrants in terms of abuse such as *scheiß ausländer* ('fucking foreigner') and *dreckiger* ('dirty') or *dummer Türke* ('stupid Turk')' (Keim 1997: 159). Together with the new linguistic and educational demands this new environment is experienced by many as what they describe as *Schock des Lebens* ('shock of their lives') and it is against this backdrop that the Powergirls form as a group at the age of 12/13.

Whereas much recent work on language and ethnicity has celebrated the performance of hybrid ethnic cultures (e.g. Pichler 2009), Keim's data and discussion also focuses on the struggle of the Powergirls against the alienation they experience both from their German school and from models of deferential Turkish femininity they associate with their parents' generation.

Extract 3: 'they are so terribly obsequious' (Keim 2007: 164)

1 AR: die sind so furschbar unterwürfig \* bedienen die älteren \*  
'they are so terribly obsequious they wait on the older ones

2 AR: servieren tee↓\* und gehn wieder still in die ecke↓  
serve them tea and then they go quietly into their corner

3 AR: des find=isch einfach schre"cklich↓  
I think that is really terrible'.

The Powergirls' rebellion is expressed at different levels of style; including clothing, make-up and piercings, dating of boys, clubbing and experimenting with drugs. Their linguistic style includes disruptive turn-taking behaviour, ritual insults and coarse language. It includes formulas such as *'halts Maul länger* ('shut up, man'), *verpiss dich* ('piss off'), and *siktir lan* ('fuck you, man'), or terms of abuse such as *orospu* ('whore') and *orospu çocuğu* ('child of a whore') (Keim 2007: 168). Several of these practices orient to the talk of young Turkish men, including the use of verbal duelling and coarse sexual formula, positioning the girls in opposition to traditional Turkish femininity at the same time as distancing them from teachers and their school. Their opposition to their German school world' is expressed also in their choice of language varieties, particularly their choice of 'Mannheim Turkish', used by second and third generation speakers, especially in interaction with their elders, and German-Turkish mixing, which was the preferred in-group code choice for the Powergirls. Monolingual German only gradually gains in importance to the Powergirls and frequently goes hand in hand with the acquisition of a more polite conversational style. The girls first accept this style into their repertoire in interaction with their favourite German-Turkish youth worker in their youth club and monolingual German then gained in prominence as they get older and begin to enter professional and higher educational domains.

Keim's work shows how the Powergirls' repertoire of style develops over time, and how they were increasingly able to mobilise different styles appropriate to the requirements of the context. Hand in hand with this change of style went a change in the girls' self-perception from the rebellious Turkish Powergirl 'to a socially and professionally successful' young German-Turkish woman (Keim 2007: 171).

There are now several examples of ethnographic studies of ethnic minority femininities that investigate young women's performances of rebelliousness and (verbal) toughness which position them in opposition to traditional models of femininity encouraged by their parents' generation (e.g. Keim 2007; Mendoza-Denton 2008; Pichler 2009). However, there does not appear to be a consensus about the extent to which this toughness ultimately empowers the girls. Mendoza-Denton's (2008: 169) discussion of Latina gang girls in a Californian high school highlights the emancipatory potential of a discourse of 'being macha', which is all about 'taking charge of one's own self'. On the other hand, Keim's study suggests that whilst the Powergirls retain many of their original markers of their adversarial and mixed language style for their in-group communication, it is their acquisition of a more mainstream style of (polite monolingual) German which ultimately empowers them by allowing them access to higher education and professional success.

### **Indexing gender and sexuality**

The interplay of gender and sexuality has already been captured in several of the studies discussed above, for example in Cameron's 1997 analysis of the talk of male US College which positions the speakers as 'red-hot blooded heterosexual males' (ibid. 61). Celia Kitzinger (2005) demonstrates that more subtle displays of heterosexuality are contained in many everyday conversations, for example in references to spouses and (pronominal) positioning of the speaker as part of couples. Language and gender studies have begun to



extend their scope to include what could be described as performances of non-normative (gender and sexual) identities. Kira Hall (2003: 375-375) sums up this important shift to include what she calls 'exceptional speakers' in the following way:

The practice-based and ideological models of language and gender that developed in response to these critiques, such as queer linguistics, seek not to describe how women's language use differs from men's, or how homosexuals' language use differs from heterosexuals', but to document the diverse range of women's and men's linguistic repertoires as developed within particular contexts.

This focus on the heterogeneity of gender performances, on queering gender, stands out in Rusty Barrett's now seminal (1999) paper on African American drag queens. In this paper Barrett highlights the difference between 'performed gender' and 'self-categorized gender' on the basis of drag queens who 'maintain "male" gender identity alongside "female" gender performances' (ibid: 318). Barrett also shows that it would be a mistake to interpret the drag use of white women's style as performance of white femininities. White women's style, in addition to African American Vernacular English and gay male speech are all used in the performance of 'polyphonous' drag queen identities in this specific context.

Barrett's work thus asks us to consider how (gender) identities are indexed in a specific situation. This question of indexicality is central to Kira Hall's (2009) ethnographic work with young women in New Delhi who identify as 'boys' rather than as 'lesbians'. Both 'boys' and 'lesbians' participated in a support group for 'women who are attracted to women' at a New Delhi non-government organisation, the 'Centre' (Hall 2009: 140). Whereas all the participants were bilingual and from what can be described as middle-class backgrounds, the performance of their sexualities intersected in interesting and different ways with gender and social class.

Extract 4: 'She calls me woman! (Hall 2009: 146-147)

- 1 Liz: I'm saying for the individuals in this group.  
 2 today.  
 3 who we are (.) sitting with.  
 4 Is there no room to be a fe:maile  
 5 and yet to be: (.) masculine.  
 6 in that role.  
 7 to ↑be: like that.  
 8 Jess: I th[ink]-  
 9 Liz: [Why] doesn't society allow for that.  
 10 Why can't we be like tha [t. ]  
 11 Jess: [Well] because  
 12 that's -ss uh one of those things,  
 13 You have to follow a pattern.  
 14 You're a woman so you have to  
 15 ↑[BE::: this this this] this.  
 16 Liz: [Yeah but ↑WHY::.] Why?  
 17 You're- you're also- you're a woman,  
 18 but you are attracted to other women.  
 19 That's not acceptable to society,  
 20 But you are being like that,  
 21 Jess: <quietly, rapidly> <gālī detī hai.  
 22 mujhe woman [boltī hai.]>  
 23 Liz: <falsetto> <[↑Well just]> [[feh-]]  
 24 Jess: <loudly, rapidly> <[[ gālī]] detī hai  
 25 woman boltī hai mujhe.  
 26 terekō abhī ag lagtī hū māĩ.>  
 27 Sarvesh: [<laughs>]  
 29 Priti: [<laughs>]  
 30 Bijay: [<laughs>]  
 31 Liz: <rapidly> <NO. GUYS.>  
 32 I am just asking a question

*Hindi translation (for lines 21-32)*

- Jess: <quietly, rapidly> *She insults me.*  
*She calls me woman!>*  
 Liz: <falsetto> <[↑Well just]> [[feh-]]  
 Jess: <loudly, rapidly> <*She insults me.*  
*Woman she calls me!*  
*Now you think I'm fire (to burn you alive) >?*

In this extract Jess performs a particular type of masculinity that is, as Hall argues, recognized by the other boys. Male physicality is important to the boys, who long for moustaches and sexual reassignment surgery. Liz, the group facilitator, on the other hand offers to the boys a very western, postmodern understanding of gender, suggesting that masculinity does not necessarily require male bodies. Jess's rejection of this model of

performed (sexual and gender) identity goes hand in hand with a switch to Hindi. This switch does not only index a particular adversarial stance, but it exploits ideological associations of the use of Hindi (vs. English) to index a masculinity that is marked by ‘its defiance of upper class norms of politeness’ (ibid: 159) and therefore stands in opposition to the lesbian identified participants of the Centre whose language preference is English.

Hall’s linguistic anthropological research design allows her to see how language ideologies (about Hindi vs. English) play out at the local level and are used by speakers as resources to index sexual, gender and classed identities in specific contexts. Like Keim’s work it presents an important example of (language and gender) research that balances a focus on local language (and gender) practices with an interest in larger-scale structures; ideologies of language, gender and social class.

### **Gender structures**

Although studies of situated, local performances of gender have dominated the field for a long time, debates about gender structures (e.g. ideological, political and economic) have never entirely gone away and have featured particularly in language and gender studies interested in institutional settings. Pioneering studies of institutional talk, such as West (1984) on doctor patient talk, orient to the ‘dominance’ model of gender and are framed as studies of (asymmetrical) turn-taking rights and practices, frequently aiming at establishing if gender overrides occupational roles or vice versa (e.g. Woods 1989). Although studies of institutional practices of turntaking or interactional dominance remain significant, the social constructionist model of gender has encouraged researchers to explore also the many different ways in which gender interacts with occupational or institutional roles in specific settings, or communities of practice (e.g. Holmes and Schnurr 2006; Ostermann 2003;

Shaw 2006). Some of this research has focused particularly on the gender structures which frame and constrain the performances of speakers. For example, Susan Ehrlich's work on Canadian trial discourse in sexual assault or sexual harassment cases demonstrates how the agency of the speakers is constrained by identities being imposed onto the speaker (e.g. as 'participants in consensual sex', Ehrlich 2006) or by powerful gender stereotypes (e.g. of women not communicating their lack of sexual consent clearly enough, Ehrlich 1998). This type of research shows how gender ideologies can have 'the effect of obscuring and neutralizing the power dynamics between women and men' in situations of sexual assault (Ehrlich 1998: 169).

Language and gender research in educational settings allows for an insight into ideological constraints on gender performances of young speakers. Julia Davies's (2003) work on 14-year old pupils in the north of England analyses the ways in which single sex groups tackle work set by the teacher in their English lessons. Whereas the girls adopt a highly collaborative style which allows everyone to engage fully with the literary work, boys who want to do the same are frequently met with a display of what Davies calls 'Macho discourse' which, for example, positions an in-depth exploration of a poem as 'gay' or 'queer'. Davies presents evidence of what appears to be an overarching gendered conversational style in the English classroom, constrained by dominant gender ideologies that position 'conformity to educational expectations [as] feminine' (Davies 2003: 129). Davies' research, or that of Sian Preece's (2009) work on performances of laddish masculinity by young working class British Bangladeshi men in higher educational backgrounds, is very much concerned with the constraints on gendered behaviours that are likely to affect not only the discourse practices but also, potentially, the educational success of the speakers, particularly if the display of laddishness cannot be compensated by a

display of more traditional cultural capital, a balancing act that may be easier for students from elite backgrounds, as Preece (2009: 134) observes (but see Keim 2007).

## **FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

Social constructionist language and gender research in the last couple of decades has foregrounded the heterogeneity of gender performances, highlighting the ways in which gender interacts with other aspects of (sociocultural) identity such as ethnicity, age, social class and sexuality. Frequently the focus of this research has been on interactional stances or the local, situated practices of speakers which have been studied from an ethnographic and/or community of practice perspective. This research varies in the extent to which it balances an exploration of the local (gender) performances of identities in spoken interaction with an examination of macro-social constraints on these performances. The fact that the prime source of data for most language and gender scholars is precisely language (rather than, for example, data on women's representation in politics or managerial posts, gendered access to education or distribution of wealth – see Mills and Mullany 2011: 23-24) may well explain the recent focus on speaker agency in language and gender studies<sup>3</sup>, particularly in work on informal spoken interaction. However, as Cameron (2009: 15) argues 'To make sense of what [humans] are doing as creative, agentive language users, we also have to consider the inherited structures (of belief, of opportunity or the lack of it, of desire and of power) which both enable and constrain their performances'.

Language and gender research may do well to examine more closely the relationship between the agency that speakers display on a micro-linguistic level and the (constraints on the) agency of speakers beyond the local context of their interactions. For example, we may

want to ask to what extent the instances of interactive resistance to dominant gender norms and performances (e.g. of heterosexist or tough masculinity, of respectable or even servile femininity) that were evident in the data of many of the studies discussed above are indicative or constitutive of grander-scale disruptions of the gender order. Equally we may want to evaluate the performances of the cool or tough stances adopted by young women and men which have been described in this chapter against the background of the social norms, physical acts, spaces and structures which frame the ‘performances’ of gender and sexual identities. Some of the studies discussed in this chapter have already managed to balance these micro-and macro perspectives on gender performances. Other language and gender scholars may feel that cross-disciplinary collaborations will allow us to explore the complexities of gender performances more fully.

**Word count: 7390 (all included except bionote)**

#### **ENDNOTES:**

- 1) For a more detailed overview see Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 588 and Cameron 2005: 323.
  
- 2) Although many language and gender students interpret the term ‘construction’ to connote speaker agency above the level of consciousness, it is important to bear in mind that this can but does not necessarily have to be the case; see Bucholtz and Hall’s excellent summary (e.g. 2005: 606); or Cameron and Kulick (2003) who adopt the differentiation between ‘identity’ (conscious) and ‘identification’ (non-conscious).
  
- 3) I accept Bucholtz and Hall’s (2005: 606) argument that agency should not be confused with intentionality, but I wish to highlight that language and gender studies would benefit

from an increased/renewed interest in the larger social constraints of local (gender) identity performances.

## **TOPICS**

Language and gender; adolescents; young adults; social constructionism

## **FURTHER READING**

Coates, Jennifer and Pichler, Pia (eds.) *Language and Gender. A Reader. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition.* Oxford/Malden: Wiley-Blackwell. This reader provides a very good overview of language and gender research, including classic and more recent papers discussed in this chapter.

Eckert, Penelope and McConnell-Ginet (2013) *Language and Gender. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition.* Cambridge University Press. This textbook will be particularly valuable with respect to the social constructionist model of gender.

Holmes, Janet and Miriam Meyerhoff (2003) (eds.) *The Handbook of Language and Gender.* Oxford: Blackwell. This is a rich resource, offering some chapters which are very accessible and suitable as introductory reading, and others which require previous knowledge on the subject.

Mills, Sarah and Louise Mullany (2011) *Language, Gender and Feminism. Theory, Methodology and Practice.* London: Routledge. This book presents a range of theoretical

perspectives, methodological and analytical approaches, linking language and gender studies firmly to their feminist roots.

Pichler, Pia (2009) *Talking Young Femininities*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan. This book presents a discourse analytic exploration of the interplay of gender with social class and ethnicity on the basis of the talk of three groups of British girls from different socio-cultural backgrounds.

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