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Discourse and Conversation

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2.3 Discourse and gender

Early work in the analysis of gender and discourse looked at the relationship between the use of language and the biological category of sex. This has now moved to an examination of the ways language is used in relation to the social category, or rather the socially constructed category , of gender . Thus, from the moment a female child is born and someone says 'It's a Discourse and Society 19 girl!' that child learns how to do being a girl in the particular society and culture, from the way she talks through to the way she walks, smiles, dresses and combs her hair (Butler 1993 , Livia and Hall 1997). Gender, then, is not just a natural and inevitable consequence of one's biological sex (Weatherall 2002). It is, rather, 'part of the routine, ongoing work of everyday, mundane, social interaction'; that is, 'the product of social practice' (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003 : 5). Gender, further, as Swann (2002 : 47) has pointed out: has come to be seen as highly fluid, or less well defined than it once appeared. In line with gender theory more generally, researchers interested in language and gender have focused increasingly on plurality and diversity amongst female and male language users, and on gender as performativity – something that is 'done' in context, rather than a fixed attribute. Simone de Beauvoir famously said 'one is not born, but rather becomes a woman'. Performativity is based on the view that in saying something, we do, or 'become' it. A person learns, for example, how to do and, in turn 'display', being a woman in a particular social setting, of a particular social class. People perform particular identities through their use of language and other ways of expressing them□selves in their interactions with each other. Mostly, this is done unconsciously as we 'repeat acts' such as gestures, movement and ways of using language that signify, or index a particular identity. These acts are not, however, natural nor are they part of the essential attributes of a person. They are part of what people acquire in their interactions with each other Many of the conversations in the TV show Sex and the City are examples of the way the lead characters, through their use of language, do gender. In the following extract, Miranda asks Carrie why she accepted her boyfriend's proposal of marriage. In her response, Carrie both enacts and affirms, through her use of language, her gendered identity, that of a woman who, because she loves her boyfriend, has to accept his proposal of marriage: Miranda: I'm going to ask you an unpleasant question now. Why did you ever say yes? Carrie: Because I love him . . . a man you love kneels in the street, and off ers you a ring. You say yes. Th at is what you do. (King 2002) The discussion of how men and women speak, and what they do as they speak, has also been extended to how people speak about men and women. Holmes (2004), for example, compared the use of the terms woman and lady and found that the social significance of these terms has changed over the last 30 years. She found woman , for example, has moved from being marked as impolite to a situation where this is no longer the case (although woman is more frequently used in written British English than in spoken British English). She also found that while lady/ladies may be used as a politeness marker in formal settings nowadays, however, in informal settings it is also used to trivialize 20 Discourse Analysis and patronize (see Mills 2008 , Mills and Mullany 2011 for further discussion of sexist language). As Holmes (2004 : 156) argues, language choices are often enactments of who's in charge and 'whose values will prevail'. Identity is, equally, conveyed through writing as well as through speech. Richardson's (2000) study of the use of disparaging language and sexually humiliating formulae by male members of a cricket club in

their newsletter to talk about women provides an example of this. Richardson found that the men in her study used their language and the traditional 'women only' discourse of gossip to create solidarity as a group, and to construct their heterosexual masculinity, as did Cameron (1999) in her study of talk between fraternity brothers in the United States. The students writing in Richardson's cricket club newsletter used a language they called 'Dross' as a way of creating an in-group identity as members of the club. One of the members she interviewed said 'It's the one thing that really does set [the Club] apart from other Clubs' (60). The members also gossiped about women, sex and alcohol in the newsletter as a way of creating solidarity among themselves. This was often done through the use of formulaic language such as Rumour has it that . . . to indicate that what was about to be said was gossip, and may not necessarily be true. Richardson argues that the members' identities presented in the newsletter are constructed through differentiation. That is, the members of the cricket club defined themselves 'by that which they are not' (65). They wrote, they said, in ways that are different from members of other cricket clubs. They also described the club as a heterosexual-only zone by using terms such as 'poofter' and 'poofs' (derogatory terms for gay men) as out-group naming strategies, reinforcing the expectation that members of the club will be heterosexual and that the identity of homosexual male is not appropriate for membership of the club. The following extract from the newsletter illustrates this: [The Cricket Club]'s Presentation Night for 97/98 will be at the MCG [a cricket stadium] on April 3. Players, partners, parents, patriarchs, presenters, poofs (sorry, no poofs) are all welcome to attend. (Richardson 2000 : 70) Hall's (1995) study of the use of language by telephone sex workers in the United States provides a further example of how speakers create gendered identities through their use of language. Not all of the sex workers in Hall's study were heterosexual, although this was the persona they were projecting; nor were they all female. One was a male Mexican American who took pride in being able to 'replicate' Asian, Latina and Black women's personas though his use of accent, intonation, voice quality and choice of vocabulary. The workers, thus, used 'gendered styles to construct sexual meaning' (Cameron and Kulick 2003 : 59). Gender, then, is 'not something a person "has", but something that a person does' (Cameron 2005a : 49). Gender (and in turn other identities) is not a result of what people (already) are but a result of, among other things, the way they talk and what they do. Discourse and Society 21 As Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003 : 4) argue: gender doesn't just exist, but is continually produced, reproduced, and indeed changed through people's performance of gendered acts, as they project their own claimed gender identities, ratify or challenge other's identities, and in various ways support or challenge systems of gender relations and privilege. Sex and the City provides many examples of the lead characters doing gender identity of a certain kind (among other things, independent successful professional New York City women of a certain age and certain social class) not only in the way they talk but also in the way they dress, and the way they behave as they speak to each other, their lovers and their friends. What to some people, then, may seem natural in their interactions is a result of what Butler (1990 : 33) calls 'a set of repeated acts' and a 'repeated stylisation of the body'. These gendered identities are then 'reaffirmed and publicly displayed by repeatedly performing particular acts' (Cameron 1999 : 444) in accordance with historically and socially constructed cultural norms which define (this particular view of) femininity. Gender identity then is a complex construction. All levels of language and discourse, as well as aspects of nonverbal and other kinds of behaviour are

involved in doing gender (Butler 2004). Gender, further, interacts with other factors such as social class and ethnicity (Eckert 2011). As Holmes observes: gender is only one part 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, one's ethnic identity, or one's age than one's gender. (1997: 9) As Cameron and Kulick (2003 : 57) argue, 'the relationship between language and gender is almost always indirect, mediated by something else'. The ways that people speak are, in the first instance, associated with particular roles, activities and personality traits, such as being a mother, gossiping and being modest (Cameron and Kulick 2003). The extent to which these roles, activities and personality traits become associated in a particular culture with being gendered lead to these ways of speaking pointing to, or indexing (Ochs 1992 , Bucholtz and Hall 2005 , Bucholtz 2009) a particular gender in the same way that particular ways of speaking may point to, or index, a person's social class or ethnic identity (Litosseliti 2006 , Baker 2008). The features of language use which do this are not at a single level such as a particular vowel quality, choice of vocabulary item, grammatical structure or language variety. This occurs, rather, at multiple levels, all at the same time. The use of language may be, in part, intentional and it may, in part, be habitual. Identity, further, is not something that is pre-assigned in fixed social categories. It, rather, is something that emerges in practice, through the use of discourse (Bucholtz 1999 , Bucholtz and Hall 2005). 22 Discourse Analysis In some cases, a person's different identities may be difficult to separate. As Cameron and Kulick (2003 : 58) point out: The actual balance between them is not determined in advance by some general principle, but has to be negotiated in specific situations, since meaning is not only in the language itself, but also in the context where language is used by particular speakers for particular purposes. A person, then, will have a multiplicity of identities or personae (Eckert 2002) which may be at play all at the same time, at different levels of prominence. They may not all be equally salient at a particular moment (Sunderland and Litosseliti 2002). Rather, one or more of these identities may be foregrounded at different points in time and for different (conscious or unconscious) reasons. Different aspects of identity, further, may be inseparable from each other (Bucholtz 2011). Cameron's (2000) study of the use of language in telephone call centres in the United Kingdom is an example of this. Here there is a mix of both professional and gendered identities, both of which are salient at the same time. Cameron talks about a process of styling the worker where male and female workers are trained to use what is popularly thought of as a feminine communication style and expressive intonation to project rapport and to establish empathy with their callers. The worker's supervisors, managers and 'mystery outside callers' in some cases use checklists as they listen to the workers' calls to ensure the training they have been given is producing a particular gendered style of speech. The point here, then, is that: no way of speaking has only one potential meaning: the meanings it conveys in one context are not necessarily the same ones it conveys in another, and it may also acquire new meanings over time. (Cameron and Kulick 2003 : 57) People, further, ' do perform gender differently in different contexts, and do sometimes behave in ways we would normally associate with the "other" gender' (Cameron 1999 : 445) such as the case of the workers in Cameron's call centre study and the telephone sex workers in Hall's (1995) study. The relationship between language and sexuality further complicates the topic of gender and discourse by adding the notion of desire to the discussion. While

gender is something that is socially constructed, sexuality has a much more unconscious basis, based in the notion of desire; that is, a person's intimate desire for connection to others that exceeds their conscious control (Cameron and Kulick 2003). The lead characters' conversations about men in Sex and the City , for example, are guided by their sexual desire in just the same way as a personal ad on a gay website is guided by the gay man's desire for intimate connection with another man. So while Carrie and her friends' conversations index their gender, it is their unconscious desire that motivates their desire for intimate connections with men and heterosexual men in general, an identity that they express through their language. Identities, thus, are built moment by moment in social and linguistic interaction (Bucholtz 2011). Discourse and Society 23 A person may, however, perform a certain identity in their conversation, as Carrie and her friends do in Sex and the City , where this may not, in fact, be the case. Rock Hudson, for example, did this famously in many of his movie roles (and in the performance of his public persona) where he 'played the straight man', displaying and maintaining male heterosexual□ity in his discourse when he was actually gay (Kiesling 2002). Jude Law gives a similar simu□lated gendered performance in the film Closer when he has online sex with Julia Roberts' future boyfriend. Masquerading as a heterosexual woman, Jude Law simulates (his view of) a woman having cybersex in an internet chat room. The character at the other end of the line, played by Clive Owen, believes Jude Law's performance to the extent that he makes a date to meet his online sex object the next day, with the view of going to a hotel and having sex with 'her'. Discussions of language and sexuality, then, take us beyond discussions of language and gender and into the world of language and desire. These desires, further: are not simply private, internal phenomena but are produced and expressed – or not expressed – in social interaction, using shared and conventionalised linguistic resources. (Cameron and Kulick 2003 : 125) Carrie and her friends do just this in Sex and the City . The meanings that they express are not just the result of their intentions, but are shaped by forces they 'have no conscious awareness of, let alone willed control over' (ibid.). Thus, whereas gendered identities may be socially inducted (and capable of being simulated or, indeed, faked as we have seen above), sexual desires are not, even though these desires and associated identities may be displayed in linguistically recognizable (and regularly repeated) ways (Cameron and Kulick 2003). Saunston and Kyratzis (2007) discuss how people use language to construct sexual iden□tities and relationships, how this varies across cultures and how people express love and desire through language. Morrish and Leap (2007) discuss 'desire-centred' approaches to the study of language and sexuality, as in the work of Cameron and Kulick (2003) and 'iden□tity-centred' approaches to the study of language and sexuality, as in the work of Bucholtz and Hall (2004) and Morrish and Saunston (2007). Morrish and Saunston (2007) and the other contributors to their volume New Perspectives on Language and Sexual Identity present data which illustrates the interrelationship between language, gender and sexuality, arguing that both gender and sexuality are inseparable. In making statements about one, including how it is both performed and constructed through discourse, we are also making statements about the other. Bucholtz and Hall (2004) argue that the move, in some research, to replace identity with desire in language and sexuality research 'is founded on an overly narrow and restrictive vision of what sexuality is, and it misses how sexuality is negotiated beyond the individual psyche in the social, cultural, and political world' (507) (see

Wilkinson and Kitzinger 2007 , McConnell-Ginet 2011 for further discussion of the relationship between gender, sexuality and discourse).