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Discourse Analysis: Talking About Gender Identity with Alissa, Chris, and Josh

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the linguistic features of a conversation, recorded on March 23, 2010, that took place between interlocutors Alissa, Josh, and Chris. The features I will examine include analysis of the excessive use of the word "like," how and when distancing takes place, evidence of solidarity between Josh and Chris, self-presentation and stereotyping, and the cultural models about gender, sexuality, and biology that make this conversation possible. The conversation takes the form of an interview, with Alissa as interviewer and Chris and Josh as interviewees. This data was originally collected as part of a project exploring the ways that people experience their gendered and sexual identities. To that end, Alissa, herself a single bisexual female, interviewed several friends of various orientations, identifications, and relationship statuses, including Josh, a homosexual male in a monogamous relationship, and Chris, a married heterosexual male. This data comes from a portion of that interview. Except for a few introductory questions to establish names and self-identifications, interviews were entirely unscripted and evolved naturally from the subject matter at hand.

All three participants are friends with one another, although Josh and Chris have known each other for less time than either has known Alissa. At the time of recording, Alissa was 25 years old, Josh was 26, and Chris was 27. Alissa was born in southern California, but her parents divorced when she was two and she spent the remainder of her childhood between California and

central Illinois. Josh was born in Alaska but raised in Bakersfield, California, from a young age. Chris was born in Kentucky but raised in the Los Angeles area from the age of five. All three have lived their entire adult lives in southern California. The fact that the interlocutors are friends and share in a specific local knowledge is apparent in their immediately understood references to other people they all know: Josh's boyfriend Cliff, Chris' wife Lydia, and mutual friend Danika. Their intimacy is also apparent in the open and honest way in which they are able to communicate about difficult and controversial topics, and in the informality of the language that they use.

It's Like, You Know: Functions and Use of the Word "Like"

The feature that was most frequently mentioned by my colleagues in their written responses to this data and in our class discussion was excessive use of the word "like" by all interlocutors. "Like" is a multi-functional word, once used primarily to compare two similar things or to express an attraction toward something or someone ("like"). Although it still serves these functions, the word "like" has also come into use as a "filler" or cognitive processor, as well as to set off quotations, paraphrases, or thoughts. It can function as a connective, similar to a conjunction, and as a discourse marker to show the end or beginning of an episode (Bartelt). Definitions from the Urban Dictionary include: "every third word used in the LA and Orange County areas of Southern California" and "an idiot teenager conversation spacer that is virtually meaningless" (s6, Al). These definitions are particularly salient for our purposes, considering the background of all three interlocutors in this conversation.

The first use of the word "like" comes at the very beginning of the conversation, by Alissa in line 6: "Like, would you see me…" Here, "like" is functioning as a cognitive processor, giving the interlocutor time to formulate her question. Out of the thirty times that Alissa uses the

word "like," twenty-two of them appear to function as cognitive processor. This is particularly apparent on page 6 of the transcript, when Alissa uses the word "like" five times in the same chunk of monologue, with only one use, on line 263, potentially functioning as a connective, conveying a meaning similar to the word "because," while the four other uses are as a cognitive processor or "filler" (lines 263-4, 266-8). Twelve out of Josh's sixteen uses are as a cognitive processor, while only four out of Chris' eleven function as such. Chris more often uses "like" as a quotative or as a connective. As an example, in the phrases "Like, you were dating someone, thought it was a guy…" and "Like, if you told me that you were once a woman," the word "like" functions as a connective, conveying a meaning similar to "for instance."

It is interesting but inconclusive to note that Chris' use of like is less frequent and less often as filler. His age and cultural background are closely aligned with those of Josh and Alissa, and all three are influenced by the cultural model of "Valspeak," or the language use that is stereotypically associated with those living in southern California, popularized by television and films of the 1990s such as *Daria* and *Clueless*. "Many elements of Valspeak…are stable elements of the California English dialect lexicon, and in some cases wider American English (such as the widespread use of "like" as a hedge)" ("Valspeak"). While the natural assumption may be that those with a lesser degree of education would be more likely to overuse "like" as a nonsense word, this data would challenge that because Josh and Alissa both hold bachelor's degrees while Chris has only completed a high school education. A more likely explanation may be that for Alissa and Josh, excessive use of the word "like" is a way to solidify identification with southern California culture. Alissa, in particular, spent much of her childhood in Illinois but identifies as a native Californian.

Ms. McMahon suggested in her written response that the use of the word "like" could be an indicator of cultural background, and the urban dictionary definitions cited above support this interpretation (McMahon). Prevalent use of the word "like" is linked to both youth and southern California culture, and this data supports that cultural model. Another Urban Dictionary definition reads, "by opening any statement with 'like,' the speaker can avoid responsibility for it being entirely true or not" (DNG). This definition find support in the data as well, and is tied into what Mr. Dookhoo suggested in his written response: that the word's use as a filler indicates the interlocutors' discomfort with the topics being discussed (Dookhoo). When interlocutors become uncomfortable or uncertain, the word "like" appears with much higher frequency in their speech. This is particularly evident in Alissa's monologue in lines 262-70 and Josh's in lines 293-6. At these points, both interlocutors have entered into uncomfortable territory and are having trouble formulating their utterances, frequently interjecting "like" as they attempt to articulate.

Let's Not Go There: Distancing via Pronoun Shifts and the Word "Freak"

It was pointed out in our class discussion that Alissa, in particular, seems at her most uncomfortable in lines 262-70. Up until that point, she consistently speaks in first person: "*I* would still identify," "*I*'d want you to still treat *me*," "if *I* was biologically born a man," "if *I* were in a sexual relationship with someone" (lines 14, 52, 98-9, 181, my emphasis). In line 262, there is an abrupt shift, starting with the third person statement "*people* feel the need to get sex changes" (my emphasis), and continuing with the consistent use of the second person "you" through line 270.

Something interesting is going on here at the affective level, or "the level of meaning that conveys the language user's feelings, attitudes, and opinions about a particular piece of information or about the ongoing context" (Finegan 175). This switch from first- to second- and

third-person pronouns is a way of distancing herself from what she's talking about. Since this analysis is of my own utterance, I can reasonably hypothesize that this is probably due to the fact that while I understand intellectually that some people feel as if they were born into the wrong body, I cannot truly empathize with what it must feel like to be "a woman who identifies as a man" because I myself am a woman who identifies as a woman (line 264).

Though the entire conversation is hypothetical, up until that point, Alissa has been speaking about what would happen if her friends discovered that she had been born biologically a man but had undergone sex reassignment surgery, either by choice or due to parental intervention at birth. As such, she was still speaking from the position of a woman who identifies as a woman, whereas when she begins talking about what it must be like to be a woman who identifies as a straight man, she begins to flounder.

Chris does something similar in line 381 when he says that hermaphrodites are "freaks." "Freak" is a term that has conventionally been used to denote those on the outskirts of society, and has also been historically connected to hermaphrodites specifically. "Freak shows" once showcased and exploited intersexed individuals (the current politically correct term for hermaphrodites), among other human "curiosities" such as bearded ladies, conjoined twins, little people, and others with physical and/or mental deformities. To call someone a "freak" is an act of distancing that separates the speaker and the rest of society from the individual whose difference marks him or her as "freak." Chris and Josh both become extremely uncomfortable when Alissa brings up the topic of intersexed individuals, as evidenced by the way that both react immediately but are unable to articulate. Josh's first utterance is the monosyllabic "ho-ho," followed by a whistle, while Chris begins to speak but trails off and blows out air before he is able to formulate what he wants to say (lines 365-70).

The Boys Club: Josh and Chris in Solidarity

Several colleagues made note of the apparent solidarity between Josh and Chris. The two frequently speak at the same time: fourteen of the thirty-four overlaps are between Josh and Chris. However, this overlap is overwhelmingly cooperative and in the words of Ms. Arana "almost blends with back-channeling at times" (Arana). For instance, in lines 41-45, the overlap has a reinforcing effect, solidifying a position they both hold, which significantly differs from Alissa's opinion on the subject. Again in lines 332-9, Josh and Chris nearly speak in unison when they say, "there's gay guys out there," both expressing an opinion that they hold in common about the inaccuracy of stereotyping men on the basis of their sexual orientation.

Chris explicitly forms solidarity with Josh when he draws a distinction between men and women in terms of communication by saying, "cause there's guy talk and there's girl talk" (line 12). This utterance forms a bond between Josh and Chris, "the guys," which excludes Alissa, "the girl." He uses the term "guys" again in line 155, again aligning himself and Josh with the rest of the male population and necessarily excluding Alissa. The second definition of "guys" in the Urban Dictionary reads, "Rulers Of The World. The Male Population. The Bosses Of Society" (MackMan). This term is loaded with cultural significance that immediately calls to mind, for me, the image of the "tough guy," a cultural model that Gee says is emblematized by a Bogart movie, and indeed that referent is instantly recognizable as such in American culture (Gee 60). The term "guy" carries connotations of a "boys club" that includes and privileges all men. Both men possess this cultural knowledge and Chris uses this term to strengthen solidarity with Josh.

Josh makes a distinction between the sexes as well when he says in line 48, "you *do* treat a woman slightly different than you do… your guy friends." Again, we see the use of the

inclusive language "guy," which in turn excludes the female Alissa. In lines 163-5, Chris says, "see, that's the difference between male and female right there…thinking, well, I can't sleep with that person anymore" to which Josh responds with the affirmation, "Yeah." Both boys then laugh, sharing in a joke that plays upon the stereotype that men only think about sex. This exchange forms what Finegan calls an "adjacency pair" with Alissa's response: while Josh and Chris agree with each other and share in a laugh, Alissa then assesses and disagrees with their conclusion (line 296).

Let's Talk About Sex, Baby: Stereotypes and Self-Presentation

Chris says in line 155 that "guys think about sex about everything," and goes on to express that if he were to find out that someone he thought was a woman had actually been born biologically male, he would not be okay with it because he would think that he couldn't have sex with that person anymore. However, interestingly, he shifts his opinion somewhat when he makes the situation more personal and begins talking about how he would react if the person in question were his wife, Lydia. He presents himself initially as this almost stereotypical straight male who thinks "about sex about everything" and couldn't have sex with a male-to-female transsexual (line 155). When he makes it personal and imagines finding out that his wife was born a man and had sex reassignment surgery, he says, "it would be really hard for me to deal with," but "probably a couple days and I think I'd be fine with it," although "then I'd be all fucked up mentally with myself" (lines 196-7, 201).

This is an interesting shift in self-presentation away from the stereotype that "guys think about sex about everything," a stereotype that he aligned himself with only seconds before and that has additionally informed and been the foundation of his and Josh's position up to this point that there is something problematic about individuals who have had sex reassignment surgery

(line 155). The arguments that Chris and Josh use to support this position reinforce the stereotype, however, because it is apparent and explicitly stated that their main problem with finding out that someone had undergone sex reassignment surgery is the way that information would change their ability to view someone as a sexual object or not. Both boys immediately frame the question Alissa has posed to them in terms of dating, and Chris even turns it around on Josh by asking, "as a gay guy, would you date a man that had a sex change" (line 118). Both connect sex change to dating potential.

Chris again thwarts stereotypes later when he says, "I used to have a big thing for butch dykes" (line 278). There is a cultural model that straight men fantasize about having sex with lesbians, but the stereotypical idea is of one straight man and two "lipstick lesbians," or two women who are both very feminine. Chris turns this on its head by confessing his attraction to "butch dykes." The term "butch dyke" is part of an older model that oppressed and marginalized homosexual women, a once-derogatory term that has now been appropriated by the homosexual community, similar to the use of the "n" word among African Americans. So we see this frame of straight male attraction to lesbians, a model that has been strengthened by growing acceptance of homosexuality in American culture, alongside terminology from an older frame that was once degrading but has been appropriated to become empowering. All of this knowledge is held by the interlocutors, and this shared knowledge allows their conversation to unfold as it does, easily and without the need to explain these cultural contexts to the participants.

Biology Doesn't Matter: Creating a New Cultural Model

Evidenced in this data is also the emergence of a model that is new and very culturally specific. The denial of biological differences is prevalent and persistent in this conversation, and the interlocutors are participating in the creation of a relatively new cultural model that says

women should be taken the same as men (Bartelt). Alissa specifically says, "I *don't* think that your bio- that your biology means anything" (line 98). Neither Josh nor Chris challenge this assessment outright, but they are indirectly arguing against it when they talk about how difficult it would be for them to find out that someone they knew was biologically not the gender that had been presented. Implicit in this is an understanding that we live in a world in which that *is* a possibility. Sex reassignment surgery is a reality in today's world, and individuals do have the freedom to "choose" a gender, although it should be noted that these individuals generally do not see it as a "choice" but as a matter of making the outside match what they feel inside. This is evidence even in the preferred terminology: sex reassignment surgery, not sex change operation.

The idea of separating the dynamics of biology from other contexts, as Alissa does when she says "in a sexual relationship, yes, but my friends? No," is also part of this new model (lines 143-4). For her, there is a clear difference between finding out that a friend had once been the opposite gender and finding out the same information about a sexual partner. She is proposing and arguing in favor of a worldview that rejects the importance of biological difference and places emphasis on the identity of the individual outside of gendered construction. Theorists like Judith Butler, who sees gender as a performance, heavily influence this kind of thinking. The cultural model that is being formed here by queer theorists and intersexual rights organizations is one that says that identity does not have to be connected to gender. As Alissa says, "*I* would be exactly the same" (lines 101-2). Regardless of whether she had been born with a penis or a vagina or something in between, in Alissa's mind, she would still be exactly the same person internally.

This is a relatively new and radical idea. Gender has always played a large part in the way that we see one another, and often on a largely unconscious level. I'm reminded of the "Pat"

skits on SNL, which centered on an individual of indeterminate gender. The joke was that everyone was always trying to figure out if Pat was a man or a woman, because it makes people very uncomfortable not to be able to categorize an individual as either "male" or "female." This same discomfort shows up in this data, in talking about the possibility of marking someone as the "wrong" gender in one's mental Rolodex. The medical reality is that there is a great deal more variation than can fit neatly into the categories "man" and "woman." "If you ask experts at medical centers how often a child is born so noticeably atypical in terms of genitalia that a specialist in sex differentiation is called in, the number comes out to about 1 in 1500 to 1 in 2000 births," says the Intersex Society of North America's website, "But a lot more people than that are born with subtler forms of sex anatomy variations, some of which don't show up until later in life" ("How").

Alissa is in some small way contributing to the formation of this cultural model, in trying to get Chris and Josh to see that biology doesn't have to carry as much significance as they give it. Josh and Chris understand this new model, but both argue in favor of the older model that says biology does matter and that men and women are different and are treated differently, whether they should be or not. "You *do* treat a woman slightly different than you do… your guy friends," Josh says, and while he makes no value judgment on whether or not this should be the case, the cumulative body of his and Chris' arguments say that it happens for a reason and that biological differences cannot truly be ignored or denied.

Final Thoughts

This data provides a rich source for discourse analysis, and there isn't sufficient time or space to go into every linguistic feature contained therein. Some of the other features mentioned in class include Chris' pattern of interruption and the way that it often follows up on the

interruptions of others and can even be seen as playing an echoing role to these interruptions (Bartelt). I chose to address Chris' interruptions in terms of solidarity with Josh, and thus have not examined them as a separate linguistic feature. Attention was also brought to the fact that interlocutors make good use of Grice's "Cooperative Principle" and the maxims of quantity, quality, relation, and manner that fall under that principle (Grice 45). Their communication is very cooperative and the conversation flows smoothly with relatively little interruption. The interruptions that do occur are generally short in duration, and competition for the floor is minimal and friendly in nature.

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