

Speaker and listener in the construction of identity in discourse: A gender mismatch

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It has been amply shown in the literature that speakers construct their identities through/in discourse (e.g. Butler 1990; Litosseliti and Sunderland 2002). In the present paper we wish to highlight the active role of the listener/addressee in reshaping an identity originally designed by the speaker. The focus of this study is one aspect of the identity, namely gender. Although perhaps unintentionally, speaker's identity transpires as gendered, due to the agency of the audience conditioned by the socio-cultural context: "Gender is brought into being by the performance of certain acts which are culturally understood as gendered" (Cameron 2005: 484 referring to Butler 1990).

We have looked into the discourse of a single speaker, a radio presenter, whose speech style, and he himself, is perceived as broadly gender-inappropriate. In his attempt to construct a professional persona, he is using a certain speech style for the purpose of a forceful expression of emotions which however, through the association of females with emotionality, is perceived as feminine. At the same time, as if to balance this effect out, the speaker projects his masculine identity by endorsing values of heterosexual masculinity (Connel and Messerschmidt 2005; Cameron and Kulick 2003).

This mixture of symbolically feminine and stereotypically masculine styles is perceived as contradictory/ambiguous and perplexes the listener. In the process of perception, which involves activating social stereotypes, the speaker triggers somewhat extreme reactions of listeners puzzled by his incongruous performance. This brings upon him the risk of 'social cost', i.e. of a "negative evaluation of an individual breaking the gendered norms" (Mullany 2007: 24).

The corpus of the target's discourse has been analysed quantitatively and qualitatively. Additionally, in order to find out how the speaker's identity is perceived, we used a language/discourse perception test. The test was not gender-oriented, i.e. it did not bring up the gender identity at all. Yet, it brought to the fore very explicitly gendered interpretations of the data.

In our paper we demonstrate details of the discursive elements involved in this process which results in what we have called a 'gender-mismatch'.

Bibliography

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