Doing gender, doing categorisation:

Recent developments in language and gender research

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Introduction

In this paper, I consider the potential of membership categorisation analysis, an empirical tool in ethnomethodological inquiry, for language and gender researchers. To date, there has been no sustained attempt to incorporate this kind of approach into gender and language work. It is virtually ignored in feminist sociolinguistics, where the majority of research gets done and is seldom considered in overviews of the field (e.g. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003; Weatherall, 2002). However, I argue that MCA is a valuable method for examining the practical occasioning and construction of gender in discourse. To support this position, I begin by tracking the history and development of ethnomethodological approaches to gender and their practical translations. I argue that the 'doing' of gender in our society is constituted in people's situated categorisation practices, and that these practices are best explored using Sacks' (1992) machinery for understanding how the social and moral order is produced and maintained. Thus, this article aims to collect together previously dispersed pockets of feminist ethnomethodological writing, and the limited work on gender and MCA, in order to produce a coherent starting point for the development of a different way of exploring gender-in-interaction.

Ethnomethodology, gender and categorisation

In 1967, Harold Garfinkel, the founder of ethnomethodology (EM), wrote what grew to be a groundbreaking work on the social production of gender. His writing formed the basis for a branch of feminist theorising that has been increasingly influential across the social sciences and, in particular, within post-modern and discursive understandings of gender as a performance, enactment and dynamic social construction (Butler, 1990; Kessler and McKenna, 1978; West and Zimmerman, 1987). These ideas have been explored practically by conversation analysts who examine, in the turn-by-turn sequencing of talk, the way men and women 'do' gender in interactional routines. As a result, conversation analysis (CA) has become a well-established method for explicating the gendered order of social life, and its usefulness and appropriateness as a feminist tool of inquiry has been closely debated (e.g. Kitzinger, 2000; McIlvenny, 2002; Speer, 1999; Stokoe, 1998; 2000; Stokoe and Smithson, 2001; 2002; Stokoe and Weatherall, 2002; Wetherell, 1998). However, it has recently been suggested that a second ethnomethodological apparatus, membership categorisation analysis (MCA, c.f. Sacks, 1992), may be more fruitful for feminist researchers wanting to explore the everyday reproduction of gender (Stokoe, 2003). To date, it has been utilised far less as one of the numerous discursive approaches that are available to feminist discourse analysts.

Since their inception in Harvey Sacks' extensive writings, CA and MCA have developed along rather separate analytic trajectories (Hester and Eglin, 1997; although see D'hondt, 2002; Housley and Fitzgerald, 2002), with CA arguably the prominent approach to studying 'talk-in-interaction'. Whereas CA focuses on turn-by-turn sequencing and the organisation of conversational interaction, MCA focuses on members' categories-in-use. Sacks (1972; 1979; 1992) developed MCA in order to explicate the rules people draw upon in the course of talking together and going about their everyday lives. He focused on the local management of speakers' categorisations of themselves and others, treating talk as *culture-in-action* (Hester and Eglin, 1997). MCA is organised around the notion of the membership categorisation device (MCD). According to Sacks, the MCD explains how categories may be hearably linked together by native speakers of a culture. For example, he provides this now-classic example taken from data in which a child says: 'The baby cried. The mommy picked it up' (Sacks, 1972). Sacks claimed that we hear links between 'mommy' and 'baby', specifically that the mommy is the mommy of the baby. He provided an explanatory apparatus that allows this 'fact' to occur: the MCD. In this case, the MCD of 'family' allows the categories 'mommy' and 'baby' to be collected together. Categories (including 'members') are therefore linked to particular actions ('category-bound activities') or characteristics ('natural predicates') such that there are conventional expectations about what constitutes a 'mommy's' or 'baby's' normative behaviour.

MCA has developed into a thorough machinery for explicating the way people do descriptions, make claims, organise social relations 'and other aspects of the micropolitics of everyday life' (Baker, 2000: 99). This machinery includes a number of 'rules of application', which I summarise here (for concise overviews, see Silverman, 1998; 2001). For example, categories are *inference rich*. This means that 'a great deal of the knowledge that members of a society have about the society is stored in terms of these categories (Sacks, 1992: 40-41). Thus, the category of 'wife' infers 'being heterosexual' and 'running a household' (Tainio, 2002). Categories can be *duplicatively organised*, which means that they can be treated as a unit. For instance, 'mommy' and 'baby' go together as part of the same family, like 'defender' and 'striker' on the same team (Silverman, 2001). Similarly, categories often sit together in paired relationships that Sacks called *Standardised Relational Pairs* (SRPs, such as 'mommy' and 'daddy', 'husband' and 'wife'), each with duties and obligations in relation to the other.

One way in which the categorisation process occurs is via the inferential resources, carried in categories, that are available to members of a culture. For example, a woman may be correctly categorised as a 'mother', 'wife' or 'daughter'. Each of these categories carries with it a set of category bound activities, predicates, or 'rights and obligations' that are expectable for a category incumbent to perform or possess (Watson and Weinberg, 1982). From the category 'mother', we can impute the motives, expectations and rights that are conventionally associated with such a category (Widdicombe and Wooffitt, 1995). The categorisation process makes available a frame of reference within which the actions and activities of a person can be interpreted. For example, calling a 'woman' a 'slut' makes inferentially available a 'relevant category environment' (Jayyusi, 1984) in which subsequent descriptions of her activities can be understood. Members' practical categorisations form part of what ethnomethodologists refer to when they describe the ongoing construction and maintenance of 'facts' about social life, including our knowledge about gender identities. A membership categorisation approach to analysis allows us to examine, at the micro level, how the building blocks of fundamental cultural divisions are formulated and, as Nilan argues, membership categorisation devices forms the basis of this process. In this sense, MCA is an ideal method for exploring the constitutive role of interaction (Mäkitalo and Säljö, 2002) and the gendering of everyday life.

The approach to gender implied within MCA originates with Garfinkel's work on 'passing' and the 'managed achievement of sex status in an "intersexed" person' (1967: 116). Through a case study of Agnes, a 19-year-old male-to-female transsexual, Garfinkel aimed to make studyable the forms of commonsense reasoning that people use to produce themselves as gendered beings, as well as the recipes that regulate the 'seen but unnoticed' production of gender. Thus his task was to 'understand how membership in a sex category is sustained across a variety of practical circumstances and contingencies, at the same time preserving the sense that such membership is a natural, normal moral fact of life' (Zimmerman, 1992: 195). From his conversations with Agnes, Garfinkel produced a list of the properties of 'natural, normally sexed persons' as cultural objects (1967: 122). The crux of his work lay in his descriptions of Agnes' *social achievement of gender*, which he defined as 'the tasks of securing and guaranteeing for herself the ascribed rights and obligations of an adult female by the acquisition and use of skills and capacities, the efficacious display of female appearances and performances, and the mobilising of appropriate feelings and purposes' (1967: 134). Based on situations like Agnes's, a so-called 'breach' of the gendered order, Garfinkel produced the foundations for a theory of gender that makes observable '*that* and *how* normal sexuality is accomplished through witnessable displays of talk and conduct' (1967: 180).

Garfinkel's work, although subject to recent criticism by some feminist commentators (Denzin, 1990; Bologh, 1992; Rogers, 1992), formed the basis for two comprehensive ethnomethodological accounts of gender by feminist psychologists Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna (1978; McKenna and Kessler, 2000) and sociologists Candace West and Don Zimmerman (1978). Kessler and McKenna (1978) interviewed transsexual people to see how they worked to produce 'natural' gender: 'what today we might call the propositions of the dominant discourse and how it is reproduced and maintained' (Crawford, 2000: 9). They developed Garfinkel's work on 'passing' to see what it could tell us about the production of gender in everyday social interaction and aimed to show that the 'irreducible fact' that there are two sexes 'is a product of social interaction in everyday life' (Kessler and McKenna, 1978: 7).

A second elaboration of Garfinkel's work was developed in the 'doing gender' theory of sociologists West, Zimmerman and Sarah Fenstermaker. For them, gender is 'a situated accomplishment: the local management of conduct in relation to normative conceptions of appropriate attitudes and activities for particular sex categories' (West and Fenstermaker 1993: 156). Such a situated accomplishment works as long as it is congruent with 'normative conceptions' about what women and men can and should be. This means that doing gender 'consists of managing such occasions so that, whatever the particulars, the outcome is seen and seeable in context as gender appropriate or, as the case may be, gender inappropriate - that is, *accountable*' (West and Zimmerman, 2002: 12). In line with contemporary notions of gender as a discursively constituted, West and Zimmerman (1987: 126) argued that one must examine the construction of gender in 'interactional arenas'. In a now classic study, Zimmerman and West (1975) found that as males dominate in society, they also dominate micro-level interaction. They suggest that men 'do masculinity' by interrupting women speakers and denying their rights to interaction. Many other studies link different interactional patterns to gender, claiming that such patterns reproduce and maintain a particular 'arrangement between the sexes' (e.g. Ainsworth-Vaughn, 1992; Conefrey, 1997; Davis, 1988; De Francisco, 1991; Shaw, 2000; West, 1995; West and Garcia, 1988).

However, there are a number of related problems with this body of work (Stokoe, 2000; Stokoe and Smithson, 2001; 2002). First, conversation is analysed for particular interactional patterns that are then linked uncritically to gender. This application of CA to what ten Have (1999) calls 'non-CA purposes' is problematic because such studies tend to correlate gender (as a 'fixed' property) with a pre-defined category (such as 'interruption'). Gender is implicitly essentialised,

which runs contrary to the ethnomethodological position that gender is something one 'does', not something one 'has'. To correlate variables such as interruption and turn length with gender is 'undoubtedly to violate some of the most fundamental ethnomethodological assumptions on which CA is based' (Kitzinger, 2000: 170). Second, these studies assume power exists 'out there' as a social 'fact' affecting interaction in a 'top down' process, as well as treating gender as 'real' and ready to be linked to conversational patterns. This is linked to a further problem. According to conversation analytic theory (cf.: Schegloff, 1992; 1997) categories (e.g. 'gender') should only be understood within the context that is built up by interactants as they display their understandings of emergent social actions. In the above studies, speakers do not treat gender as relevant to their ongoing interaction, yet the analyst claims implicitly gender is 'causing' the patterns to occur. This work uses the technical aspects of CA to examine the sequential organisation of talk but prioritises the analysts' interpretation of events rather than members' own orientations.

I want to argue that a more nuanced and thoroughgoing understanding of the gendered order can be achieved through the examination of people's social and moral categorisation practices. Such practices constitute fundamentally the 'doing' of gender in our society and are arguably more central to the gendering of social life than, say, so-called 'gendered' speech patterns. As Nilan (1994: 141) notes, 'the means by which gender positioning is accomplished … is through the operation of membership categorisations, both inclusionary and exclusionary, in talk between social contemporaries about how specific others sound, act and appear'. I consider the links between the theory of 'doing gender' and membership categorisation in the next section.

Doing gender, doing categorisation

As discussed above, preliminary empirical translations of the 'doing gender' theory were carried out using conversation analysis to explore the ways men dominated their interactions with women. West's early work (with Zimmerman, 1975 and Garcia, 1988) focused on isolating the practices of patriarchal oppression. However, her most recent work focuses on categorisation processes, rather than interactional patterns, as fundamental to the everyday production of gender. Although West does not explicitly adopt a membership categorisation approach, her theoretical writing and most recent empirical work appears to be an unacknowledged translation of such ideas. Returning to Agnes, West and Zimmerman (2002: 9, emphasis in original) write:

> Agnes's claim to the categorical status of female … could be *discredited* … in this regard, Agnes had to be continually alert to actual or potential threats to the security of her sex category. Her problem was not so much living up to some prototype of essential femininity but preserving her categorisation as female. This task was made easy for her by a very powerful resource, namely, the process of commonsense categorization in everyday life.

West argues that when people engage in activities, they can be held accountable for their performance in terms of whether it is authentic, morally adequate or appropriate for the incumbents of one or the other sex category (West and Zimmerman, 2002). Thus women and men may risk 'gender assessment' if they do not live up to normative conceptions of femininity or masculinity. Thus the 'doing' of gender requires vigilance on behalf of members who must manage their behaviour according to cultural norms with regard to gender. Members' own actions and their descriptions and assessments of other people's conduct are accountable activities because there exists an 'ever-present possibility of having one's actions, circumstances, and even, one's descriptions characterised in relation to one's presumed membership in a particular category' (West and Fenstermaker, 2002b: 541).

West and Fenstermaker (2002a, 2002b) have explored these ideas empirically in recent analyses of a University Board of Regents' meeting. Here, they focused on how gender categorisation was 'made to matter for the conduct of participants at the meeting' (2002a: 147). They found that speakers regularly invoked gendered terms to mark 'the relevance of such categorisations to the content of the proceedings… through implicit references to where others "stood" with respect to … sex category membership, speakers invoked (and were seen as having invoked) the normative conceptions to which those others were accountable' (2002a: 164). Their interest in was not in the relative salience of gender in terms of how often it became relevant but how and that participants oriented to their conduct as incumbents of sex categories in the unfolding interaction West and Fenstermaker (2002a: 164) concluded that their findings, 'that explicit self- and other-categorisations render persons answerable to normative conceptions that legitimate social inequalities', have important implications for feminist politics. Once sex categories are invoked, and some assessments about gender normativity are displayed, these assessments function to reproduce, naturalise and legitimise the ''essential' distinctiveness of categorical identities and the institutional arrangements they support' (West and Fenstermaker, 2002b: 541).

West and Fenstermaker's studies provide a useful basis for reviewing hitherto 'hidden' work that has fully exploited and embraced MCA for feminist research purposes. In 1984, Maria Wowk published a paper in which she analysed a murder confession using MCA. More specifically, she investigated the way a suspect allocated some blame for his actions onto the alleged victim via a sexual description that relied, via subtle categorisation work, on normative conceptions of gender. Using MCA, she explored how 'gender is tacitly used as a background schema for performing 'other' actions, so trading on 'what we all know' about women and men rather than being directly used to make disparaging remarks about the victim' (1984: 75).

Wowk starts by taking issue with the feminist position that 'sexual politics' are a central and pre-given feature of social life. She argues that, rather than approaching analysis with an eye on potential manifestations of an imbalance in power between men and women, looking for instances of domination and subordination, she shifts the emphasis to an ethnomethodologically informed starting point that the social 'facts' of life are 'achievements through and through' (p. 75). Thus rather than treating 'sexual politics' as an objective, pre-given fact, 'with an existence over and above their production by members of society' she treats such activities as concerted social achievements that occur in everyday life.

Wowk's example of 'doing sexual politics' comes from a murder interrogation, whereby a male suspect is accused of murdering a woman. A central concern was to describe how culturally competent members are able to recognise the interaction as involving instances of sexual politics 'since when talking about sexual politics we are referring to actions and interpretations in everyday life, one locus of such phenomena may be not only where highly explicit references are made to gender, but also where gender is tacitly used as a background scheme for the performing of some 'other' actions' (p. 76). Wowk draws on Sacks' (1972) account of membership categorisation analysis in order to examine the commonsense reasoning revealed as he order to resists and attributes blame. Her central point is that the murder suspect's account turns on the categorisation of the victim as a 'slut' and 'tramp', yet he never uses these categories explicitly to describe her. Instead, through the delicate manipulation of categories, and by relying on the cultural knowledge that is imbricated within them, the suspect was able to draw upon conventional knowledge about how 'moral types of women' should behave. Wowk shows how 'certain attributes or actions are bound to the categories of the device 'gender' and in particular to the category 'female' or transforms of it such as 'girl' or 'woman'' and that the suspect 'trades very heavily on the known-in-common attributes of the membership category 'girl'' (p. 76).

The suspect's account, which included descriptions of the 'girl' as 'pretty well loaded' and as propositioning him, is littered with inferences about 'what type of girl' gets drunk and propositions men: activities that are not conventionally tied to the category 'female' (at least in 1984). For instance, 'characterological imputations' may be made when one considers the sequencing of activities between suspect and victim as set out in his account. Wowk notes that the adjacency pair 'proposition-response' is 'particularly sensitive to the 'who goes first' issue: 'one invocable background scheme for interpreting this is the use of gender categorisations. That is, we can categorise the 'who' in terms of gender. Moreover actions such as propositioning, if performed by an incumbent of a given gender category such as 'woman', may actually *increase* the degree of guilt to be attributed to that person' (p. 78). This claim relies on the commonsense knowledge about normative and appropriate behaviours for incumbents of the category 'female'. The customary view of women is that they are 'passive' and should 'wait until asked'. Wowk argues that 'the suspect is elliptically invoking from this sub-set a category such as 'tramp', which is, of course, a category with derogatory implications for a female, implying that she is a person of 'low moral character' (p. 76-77). The speaker and the hearers, whose inferential work makes the account 'pass' as an adequate description of events, are 'involved in producing a moral order out of the particulars provided by the suspect. They are making moral inferences about the character of the 'girl'' (p. 77)

Wowk's analysis shows how the suspect's practical categorisations allow for a host of consequential moral assumptions to be made about the victim. These assumptions rest of the known-in-common attributes that are associated with gender categories. She concludes that, 'in constructing and making sense of the suspect's account, both the suspect and the recipient are unavoidably engaged in the invocation and consultation of our cultural values with regard to gender. And insofar as this involves casting aspersions on the character of the victim on the basis of her gender we can identify this as *one cultural procedure for doing and recognising instances of sexual politics*' (1984: 77, emphasis added). A membership categorisation approach provides a method for revealing the mundane gendering of interaction that does not rest on making claims about women or men's interactional style. Rather, it displays how taken-for-granted 'facts' about gender-appropriate behaviour and characters are worked out in routinely in talk, as well as the emergence of a gendered culture.

A further illustration of the potential of MCA for feminist research can be found in a small series of studies by Pam Nilan (1994; 1995). In addition to exploring the way normative and moral gender identities are maintained and reproduced via members' categorisation work, Nilan aimed to examine the way categories and the meanings attached to them are 'challenged, preserved, overthrown and renewed' (1995: 71). She argues that, just as we can track the way membership categorisation devices come into existence and are maintained, we can also study the way new versions of MCDs are worked up in discourse. Across her two papers, Nilan focused on different interactional sites in which to study gender categorisation practices. She analysed high school pupils working as a group to write a play, in which the participants challenge the activities of the (male) character written by the (female) pupils. In addition, she analysed an interview with a lesbian woman about motherhood and the performance of a dirty joke during a drag act. For each context of construction, she explores instances of 'social identity boundary maintenance work' in which speakers categorise and position themselves and others in relation to particular conceptions of gender (1994: 142).

In her initial illustration, Nilan found that, in writing and rehearsing their play, the pupils displayed concern that the male and female characters were authentic with regard to their speaking style. They drew from cultural resources such as novels, television and other common sense knowledge to decide on the 'proper' ways for female and male play characters to talk. When the

girls wrote 'caring and emotional' characters for the male players, the boys then objected and 'refused the gendered positioning implied by certain kinds of talk' (1994: 143). For example, when writing the line 'thanks, mate' for a male character, the use of what the boys treated as overly female language put at risk the successful and authentic accomplishment of 'viable' masculinity. This supports West and Fenstermaker's (2002a; 2002b) argument that the doing of gender will always include some risk of gender assessment and accountability for one's performance as normative for incumbents of gender categories. Here, not only did the boys ensure that the male *characters* performed 'viable' masculinity, in making claims about the play they also affirmed their *own* category membership of the 'male' gender. For these boys, 'viable' masculinity is heterosexual and emotionally reserved. Nilan (1994: 158) suggests that this 'display of category knowledge positions them as powerful knowers of the 'right' way for 'real' men to act'.

Nilan's work, like Wowk's, shows how the rights and obligations of category members, in this case members of gender categories, are maintained as the category-bound activities and category-tied predicates for being 'male' and 'female'. In Nilan's examples, the speakers attempt to position themselves as members of particular social categories, often operating in a hierarchy of categorisations. This gender identity maintenance works partly by defining the conditions for assigned membership as well as by nominating the characteristics and activities of those who are excluded from particular categories. Both authors show us how language, gender and the social order are intricately linked through categorisation work. Membership categorisation analysis provides language researchers with the tools and framework for understanding the ordinary gendering of everyday life (see also Cromdal, 2002; Danby; 1998; D'hondt, 2002; Edwards, 1998; Eglin, 2002; Paoletti, 2002; Stokoe, 2003, forthcoming). It shows how participants are oriented to gender in their interactions, on what basis the gendered categorisations turn and on the practical reasoning procedures used by speakers as they classify themselves and others as incumbents of gender identity categories.

In sum, I have argued that MCA provides a tool for exploring, in fine detail, the way common sense and unnoticed assumptions about gender are 'locked into place' through categorisation processes (Baker, 2000). It reveals how, in the details of talk, members maintain the common sense 'discourses' or 'repertoires' that shape our gendered world and provides a 'critical edge' to ethnomethodological work (Baker, 2000; Paoletti, 2002) and allows us to track and make connections between some of the macro concerns of feminism about the societal regulation of gender and everyday experience (Smith, 1987). It is important to note that members' categorisation work has a sense of ordinariness and the mundane: the marking out of gendered positions is everyday and orderly (Nilan, 1995). In this way, normative gendered practices are hearably maintained in the interactional routines of social life. This 'mundane-ness' is important in the perpetuation of gendered assumptions and practices: 'the more natural, taken-for-granted and therefore invisible the categorisation work, the more powerful it is' (Baker, 2000: 111). This means that participants' categorisation work is central to the organisation of discourses because categories and their associated predicates are 'quiet centres of power and persuasion' (Baker, 2000: 99-106).

MCA, therefore, is a useful method for language and gender researchers because it allows analysts to see how participants both construct and manage their conduct in relation to conventional expectations for women and men's activities and character. As sex categories come interactionally or textually into view, differences between men and women, and their individual properties, are legitimised and given a taken-for-granted authenticity. Distinctive categorical identities 'and the institutional arrangements they support' are constructed as members 'do' gender via everyday categorisations (West and Fenstermaker, 2002b: 541). In other words, the differences between men and women that are created this way are then treated as 'fundamental and enduring dispositions' (West and Fenstermaker, 1993: 151). Gender is therefore 'done' in order to maintain

the status of the two categories; it is durable and institutionalised, yet at the same time 'the seeds of change are everpresent' (Lorber, 1987: 124).

Finally, I hope that this paper has demonstrated the theoretical utility of MCA for language and gender researchers and the centrality of categories as a members' resource for constructing the social world and as an analysts' tool for unpacking it.

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