

Drag Queens and Complex Positioning

RuPaul's Drag Race might prove to be an exceptionally good source for discourse analysis given the ever-present performed identity inherent to all aspects of drag, such as of gender, persona, and race. The show pits various drag artists against each other in a series of judged competitions and rounds including costume and makeup design, singing and dance performance, and overt measures of conversational skill through improvised comedy and persona construction. Participants get competitive and often disagree with choices made by judges, as in the passage below where Mimi (M) accuses Shangela (S) of unoriginality following a runway competition. Consider the following exchange from the show:

M: like, I'm not gonna come down the runway looking like you, like [you do you and I'm gonna be me.= [<<gestures to S and back to self>>

S: =what is [me and what is you?
[<<gestures to self and to Mimi in imitation>>

M: (1.0) what is you? girl, look at you, grab a mirror. you can come down the runway and look like you stepped off rodeo [drive like a goddamn supermodel.
I will [NE:VER: look: like: that: = [<<limp hand outstretched>>
[<<hands in prayer on every beat>>

S: =true (2.0)[you'll never be glamor.
[<<turns head and looks at M from side>>

M: OH just because you have a [sugar daddy who pays for everything for you?
[<<eyebrows raised, lips pursed>>

S: (1.5) <<leans forward>> time out, hold up, <<puts up palm>> hold up sweetheart. Let's get it together before you wanna read. (1.0) I don't have a sugar daddy, sweetheart; everything that I've had, I've worked for, and I worked for me to get and I built myself so I need you to know that 100% I don't have a sugar daddy I've never had a sugar daddy if I wanted a sugar daddy yes I probably can go out and get one because I am: what:? [(0.5) SICKening. You could [NEVER: have a sugar daddy because you
[<<stands and poses>> [<<points to M>>
are not: that: kind: of: GIRL: baby everything I've had I worked for and I've gotten myself I built myself from the ground up FUCKING BITCH! <<throws drink at M, leaves>>
//end

This exchange provides an excellent example of rapidfire changes in positioning in a performative interchange utilizing both personal stories and plays on ritual. In the beginning of this segment, Mimi is positioning as the martyr by indirectly referencing her

plus-size status as an additional hurdle to winning, and implying that she more than overcomes that by her originality. This is not overtly stated, as this discourse has frequently happened on the show (most notably with another contestant Eureka), but is heavily implied by the physical act of pointing. Shangela takes on a sort of 'learner' role by asking for clarification, and thus introducing a storyline of 'instruction'. Shangela's imitation of the pointing serves as the focus of her question, showing that she is in fact asking for the implication of the gesture. Mimi accepts the role of 'teacher', while doubling down on her prior positioning as a martyr by more clearly restating that Shangela is traditionally skinny and beautiful (aspects that importantly aren't a measure of talent), and implying that Mimi keeps up through talent. Shangela, instead of confirming this martyr position by adopting the complementary position of 'friend', breaks the ritual, and strategically repositions herself as a 'critic'.

This act changes the storyline: now, Mimi is portrayed as *both* disadvantaged due to her size and looks, as *well* as lacking charisma. Instead of being ending as a 'triumphant victor', likely the intended use of the 'martyr' position, Shangela repositions Mimi as 'helpless'. Mimi refuses to accept this shift and instead attempts to bring herself back to a 'critic' role by accusing Shangela of using a sugar daddy. In the culture, using sugar daddies are a sign of not being 'self-made' and lacking integrity -- it is a personal attack but not necessarily any worse than Shangela's assertions about Mimi. Mimi's intent here might have been to turn this exchange into a back-and-forth critique as a demonstration of an even playing field, much like trash talk.

Shangela's next move demonstrates clearly the assertion that people differ in capacity to position themselves and others (Langenhove & Harre 30). She skillfully challenges Mimi's move to critic by taking on an accountive positionings of both 'teacher' and 'defendant'. The forms of address, "sweetheart" and "baby" are intentionally patronizing and play into the intended power dynamic. Not only this, but the speech becomes rapidfire with no gaps, which more or less bars Mimi from taking back a turn; Shangela does this by repeating herself quite often. She delves into overt correction of Mimi's allegation, which quickly demotes Mimi's role to something of a 'misinformed critic'. Further evidence of deliberate self-positioning here is the stressing of agency, specifically that Shangela *could* have a sugar daddy if she wanted to. Shangela reframes her narrative not only as one where she has active control and decision-making in her personal life and career, but also that the mere possibility of having a sugar daddy is one of power and capability -- of being "sickening". This trait is actively demonstrated through standing up and striking a pose, which now brings an uneven power dynamic in posture: Mimi is sitting down and Shangela is standing, towering over her. In the same moment, she also verbally repositions Mimi back into the "helpless" position by doubling down on lack of charisma and beauty as the reason Mimi does not -- and cannot -- have a sugar daddy.

Shangela closes by positioning herself as 'defendant' and asserting and reinforcing her personal narrative of integrity and self-reliance. This sets the ground for viewing Mimi's comment as a deeply insulting lie worthy of moral reproach and

vengeance. Shangela is essentially placing the surrounding contestants (and by extension the TV viewers) into the role of 'jury', then quickly takes on that role herself by throwing her drink at Mimi as retribution for these perceived grievances. Shangela then immediately leaves the room, which allows for no further positioning between the two arguers.

Although the passage is merely a few turns long, the number of positioning changes is startling. The formulation of three narratives occurs rapidly and simultaneously. First, Mimi's career narrative is being built from the start as one of triumphant victory despite disadvantage. This explicitly is intended to shape an intended contrast with Shangela's career narrative. Third, the act of comparison itself is just one part of a developing conversation narrative, one in which Mimi ends up ostensibly deeply insulting Shangela. Gesture is heavily utilized, such as Mimi's pointing when making an implicature about body types, and Shangela's mimicking of the pointing to change the positioning to a 'teacher' and 'learner' one. The use of timing is also important, especially when Shangela begins to speak quickly with no pauses between sentences or phrases, functionally ensuring her monopoly on the conversation.

The rapidity and simultaneity of the positioning in the unfriendly discourse of the passage above should raise some question about the amount of forethought given in conversation management. While some degree of this can be deduced in the literature by analyzing intent of using a position like 'martyr' (Langenhove & Harre 18), there should be some question about how many roles can be simultaneously held by one individual. Mimi, for example, never wants to be in the 'helpless' role, yet Shangela firmly put her there. When she takes a role as a critic, which is to some degree acknowledged by Shangela through taking offence at the criticism, is Mimi both 'helpless' and 'critic', or is she some new role 'insecure underperformer'? Would Mimi objectively be this role if the audience was divided on the result of the argument? Upon close inspection, there are unanswered questions in how multiple positions might interact within the same person. Traditional positioning theory appears to claim that they compete for space (18), but in a scenario with three different storylines, as above, a single role at once per person is insufficient as Mimi needs to be simultaneously 'helpless' within her own career storyline, and a 'critic' in the conversational storyline. Could it be that storylines license positional roles?