Gender, language, conversation analysis and feminism

Discourse & Society

Vol 13(6): 707–713
[0957-9265
(200211) 13:6;
707–713; 027751]

ELIZABETH H. STOKOE
LOUGHBOROUGH UNIVERSITY
ANN WEATHERALL
VICTORIA UNIVERSITY OF WELLINGTON

In publishing this special issue of *Discourse & Society*, we had a number of objectives in mind. First, we wanted to collect together, for the first time, conversation analytic studies of gender and language. Our aim was to lend coherence to a previously disparate but distinct strand of language and gender theorizing. Related to this, we wanted to revisit the language and gender arena from an explicitly conversation analytic (CA) perspective, asking what it can contribute to the field. Finally, we wanted to provide a forum for debating the issues that emerge from the integration of feminism, CA and ethnomethodology (EM) so that the academic community can engage with, and see the potential of, feminist conversation analytic work. In this editorial, we set out the thematic and theoretical landscape within which the special issue is located.

The field of language and gender continues to stimulate discussion across the social sciences. A shift has occurred in recent years, from early attempts to define gendered speech styles to an approach that draws upon constructionist and performative treatments of gender (cf. Bucholtz et al., 1999; Weatherall, 2002). Somewhat obscured within this literature is a smaller body of work that uses CA/EM to explore how gender 'creeps' into talk (Hopper and LeBaron, 1998). LeBaron (cited in Tracy, 1998) neatly summarizes the conversation analytic approach to language and gender and contrasts it with traditional studies:

> we should not . . . say 'oh, look, here's a man and a woman talking; let's look at how they talk; oh, we can make these conclusions about gendered communication'. But rather we should say, 'gender only becomes an issue when the participants themselves make it one and we can point to different things about that'. (LeBaron, cited in Tracy, 1998: 15)

Accordingly, within a CA/EM approach, gender is relevant to talk only when participants in an interactional episode are demonstrably oriented to it (Schegloff, 1997). The challenge for feminist researchers who use this approach is to show

that and *how* gender is procedurally relevant for speakers. This position is consonant with the goals of ethnomethodological feminism, focusing as it does on explicating the mundane gendering of social life, the 'daily construction' of social structures and the 'rules' that regulate everyday interactions (cf. Stanley and Wise, 1983).

The CA approach achieves two things for gender and language research: first, it offers a timely corrective to the still-alluring focus on gender differences in interactional style. It has been widely argued that gender difference research is counterproductive for feminism because it reifies the gender dualism and perpetuates stereotypes (Hare-Mustin and Maracek, 1994; Stokoe, 2000). Owing to its underpinning assumption that gender is something speakers 'do', rather than something they 'have', the CA position obliges researchers to move away from a 'difference' trajectory. Second, it solves the problem, inherent in some empirical translations of gender performativity, whereby analysts implicitly maintain the gender dichotomy they seek to disrupt. By 'starting out "knowing" the identities' of the women and men whose identities are purportedly constituted in interaction, analysts risk producing tautological and essentialist arguments (Kulick, 1999: 6). In contrast, CA research 'may be more politically acute than the kind which elevates the researcher's politics and uses this to guide interpretation of what people have to say' (Widdicombe, 1995: 111).

Readers of *Discourse & Society* will be familiar with a set of critical responses to this position. Because the contributors locate themselves within this debate (the 'Schegloff–Wetherell–Billig' debate), we will simply summarize it here. In the article that opened the discussion, Schegloff (1997) argues, in contrast to a critical discourse analytic approach, that claims of gender relevance in interaction must be evidenced by *participants' orientations*; that is, analysts must attend to what is important for participants in talk rather than what is important to them in advance of approaching the data. Wetherell's response (1998: 388) challenges Schegloff's position. She suggests that 'a complete or scholarly analysis . . . must range further than the limits Schegloff proposes'. Kitzinger (2000) provides a reason for this. She complains that any approach which requires the explicit mention of a gender category for it to be deemed relevant to interaction is 'unbearably limiting', not least because 'few features of language directly and exclusively index gender' (Ochs, 1992: 340). Arguing from a post-structuralist perspective, Wetherell proposes that the productive analysis of data requires the import of extra-textual systems of meaning-making which members of a culture have available to them. A further consequence of the Schegloffian perspective is that it does not allow researchers to characterize interactions as, say, 'sexist' – no matter how tempting and 'obvious' such a reading might be – unless such concerns are attended to by participants (Beach, 2000). Finally, Billig (1999: 554) takes issue with CA's claims to neutrality and alleged disinterested observations of data, arguing that although conversation analysts may claim not to let the wider context inform their analyses, 'they may be taking such background for granted'.

It is important that these debates, and any attempts at resolution, do not get

reduced to unsophisticated glosses or caricatures (see Paoletti, this issue; West, this issue). Because many critiques of (sequential) CA target the version developed by Schegloff and his colleagues, other versions – including those that may prove more productive for feminist researchers – are often excluded from such discussions. For instance, membership categorization analytic (MCA) work is criticized by Schegloff (1992) for its potential for 'wild' analysis, in which the interpretations of the analyst might prevail over the evidence in the talk. For this reason, MCA has often been sidelined in CA's development. Although feminist MCA studies do exist and focus, for example, on identifying 'instances of sexual politics' in talk (Wowk, 1984: 77), they are seldom considered in language and gender or CA research. Furthermore, McIlvenny (2002) has argued that issues of gender, power, inequality, ideology and social change can be rescued from Sacks' (1992) original work: issues that have been variously 'glossed, forgotten, even dismissed in the CA literature' and that are central to many feminist projects.

The debates set out above figure centrally in many of the articles presented in this special issue. The contributors come from diverse international and disciplinary backgrounds. Their articles represent a variety of approaches to CA, an assortment of culturally diverse data types and sources and differing stances on the efficacy or otherwise of CA for feminist language and gender research.[1] The first contribution is an analysis of children's play in a Southern Californian elementary school (Goodwin). Goodwin combines ethnographic observation with CA to challenge 'the generalizability of accounts of female same-sex talk'. Moreover, she argues that the interactional workings of power – the traditional remit of critical discourse analysts – can be traced and made visible as *participants'* concerns. The second article also focuses on matters of power, dealing as it does with the topic of sexual harassment and assault (Ehrlich). Ehrlich examines court transcripts from a Canadian criminal trial and tracks explicit orientations to gender in both speaking (i.e. lawyers and witnesses) and non-speaking (i.e. the judge) participants. She argues that while particular understandings of gender were evident in the judge's decision statement, the speaking parties did not orient to gender. Ehrlich concludes that Schegloff's notion of 'participants' orientations' is 'too narrow and restrictive to adequately capture the significance of gender as an organizing principle of institutions'.

Participants' orientations also form the basis for the next three articles. In the third article, Tanaka and Fukushima analyse Japanese workplace interactions, focusing on participants' orientations to physical appearance. More specifically, they argue that a 'grammar and interaction' approach to CA, which considers 'the interpenetration of sequence, grammar, semantics and prosody', reveals an 'asymmetric gender orientation towards augmented rights of men to comment on, assess and demand standards of [women's] outward appearance'. Next, Weatherall explores the issue of 'gender omnirelevance': the claim by many feminist language and gender commentators that gender is *always* relevant to interaction. Drawing on children's talk in a New Zealand school, Weatherall

demonstrates 'that and how the pervasiveness of gender is achieved in talk-in-interaction'. She uses CA and MCA principles to show how gender can remain relevant over an extended series of utterances, in the background as an ongoing concern. In the fifth article, Speer also considers the notion of participants' orientations but takes the debate in a novel direction. She uses CA to interrogate a particular aspect of feminist methodology: 'the relationship between researcher and researched, and specifically, the impact of the former on the latter'. Drawing on a variety of focus group discussions, collected in the UK, Speer demonstrates how CA can provide the tools for carrying out much-needed reflexive practice in feminist work.

In contrast to much of the work described above, the next two articles draw on and debate MCA as a method for explicating how participants establish gender as an 'accountable feature' of their interactions (Eglin, this issue). In the sixth article, Paoletti analyses interviews with Italian caregivers of older relatives with disabilities. She uses MCA to 'describe some instances of the moral and relational universe in which caring practices are embedded' and show how caregiving is constructed as a gendered practice. The seventh article is located in the *Discourse & Society* Forum section. Here, Eglin provides a commentary piece to show how MCA may provide feminist language and gender researchers with the tools to make 'the categorisation work done by members . . . *observable–reportable for the occasion* as those of gendered beings'.

We conclude with an invited 'exchange' section between Baxter and West. In the opening article, Baxter sets out her own brand of discourse analysis: Post-structuralist Discourse Analysis (PDA). She positions the development of PDA within the 'Schegloff–Wetherell–Billig' debate and argues, via the analysis of English classroom interaction, that her approach shows how 'fluctuating power relations between speakers are continuously reconstructed through competing discourses'. In her response, West challenges Baxter's characterizations of the debate arguing, for example, that Baxter develops inaccurate glosses of certain literatures and methodological approaches that are easy to refute.

Baxter and West's debate engages with matters that have been central in the production of this special issue: the comprehensive synthesis of feminist theory and method and CA. Feminist CA, as a coherent body of research, is currently located in the margins of both the language and gender and CA fields. We hope that this special issue, which demonstrates the complexity and diversity of feminist CA, provides visibility for such work and stimulates continued debate and investigation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank the Editor for giving us space to publish this issue. We are grateful to Judith Baxter, Candace West and the Editor for inviting us to include their exchanges here. Special thanks are also due to Celia Kitzinger. Finally, we are indebted to the following people for their help at various stages: Charles Antaki, Christine Christie, Paul Dickerson, Derek Edwards, Mike Forrester, Brendan Gough, Ian Hutchby, Georgia Lepper,

Ivan Leudar, Paul McIlvenny, Pam Shakespeare, Sarah Seymour-Smith, Janet Smithson, Max Travers and Robin Wooffitt.

NOTE

1. Two other articles were accepted for this special issue but, due to space limitations, will appear in a forthcoming issue of *D&S*. The first paper (Tainio) provides an analysis of a telephone call between a Finnish male Member of Parliament and a schoolgirl. The call was used as evidence in a trial in which the MP was convicted of sexual harassment. A question therefore arises for conversation analysts: Given that neither speaker in the telephone call characterized their interaction as 'sexual harassment', what organizational features of the interaction led observers to categorize it as such? Tainio suggests that there are no unique features of 'sexual harassment' and that formal analysis must be supplemented by the analysts' cultural knowledge in order to explicate the interaction fully. The second paper (O'Hara and Saft) presents an analysis of a Japanese phone-in consultation TV program. By combining CA and MCA, the authors argue that the sequential structure of the interaction is used to invoke and reinforce ideological beliefs about women. They discuss the value of CA-informed research for feminist critiques of Japanese society.

REFERENCES

Beach, W.A. (2000) 'Inviting Collaborations in Stories About a Woman', *Language in Society* 29: 379–407.

Billig, M. (1999) 'Whose Terms? Whose Ordinariness? Rhetoric and Ideology in Conversation Analysis', *Discourse & Society* 10: 543–58.

Bucholtz, M., Liang, A.C. and Sutton, L.A. (eds) (1999) *Reinventing Identities: The Gendered Self in Discourse*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hare-Mustin, R.T. and Maracek, J. (eds) (1994) *Making a Difference: Psychology and the Construction of Gender*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Hopper, R. and LeBaron, C. (1998) 'How Gender Creeps into Talk', *Research on Language and Social Interaction* 31(3): 59–74.

Jefferson, G. (1984) 'Transcript Notation', in J.M. Atkinson and J. Heritage (eds) *Structures of Social Action: Studies in Conversation Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kitzinger, C. (2000) 'Doing Feminist Conversation Analysis', *Feminism & Psychology* 10(2): 163–93.

Kulick, D. (1999) 'Language and Gender/Sexuality', *Language & Culture Mailing list: Online Symposium*. Retrieved from http://www.language-culture.org/archives/subs/kulick-don/index.html.

McIlvenny, P. (2002, April) 'Gender- and Sexuality-in-(Inter)action: Recovering the Politics of Sacks' *Lectures on Conversation*', Paper presented at IGALA 2, Lancaster University, UK.

Ochs, E. (1992) 'Indexing Gender', in A. Duranti and C. Goodwin (eds) *Rethinking Context: Language as an Interactive Phenomenon*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sacks, H. (1992) *Lectures on Conversation* (Vols I and II, G. Jefferson, ed.). Oxford: Blackwell.

Schegloff, E.A. (1992) 'Introduction', in H. Sacks, *Lectures on Conversation* (Vols I and II, G. Jefferson, ed.). Oxford: Blackwell.

Schegloff, E.A. (1997) 'Whose Text? Whose Context?', *Discourse & Society* 8: 165–87.

Stanley, L. and Wise, S. (1983) *Breaking Out: Feminist Consciousness and Feminist Research*. London: Routledge.

Stokoe, E.H. (2000) 'Towards a Conversation Analytic Approach to Gender and Discourse', *Feminism & Psychology* 10: 552–63.
Tracy, K. (1998) 'Analysing Context: Framing the Discussion', *Research in Language and Social Interaction* 31(1): 1–28.
Weatherall, A. (2002) *Gender, Language and Discourse*. London: Routledge.
Wetherell, M. (1998) 'Positioning and Interpretative Repertoires: Conversation Analysis and Post-Structuralism in Dialogue', *Discourse & Society* 9: 387–412.
Widdicombe, S. (1995) 'Identity, Politics and Talk: A Case for the Mundane and Everyday', in S. Wilkinson and C. Kitzinger (eds) *Feminism and Discourse*. London: Sage.
Wowk, M.T. (1984) 'Blame Allocation, Sex and Gender in a Murder Interrogation', *Women's Studies International Forum* 7(1): 75–82.

ELIZABETH H. STOKOE is a lecturer in the Department of Social Sciences at Loughborough University. She has published several articles on gender, CA and MCA. She has also written about educational talk, media narratives and is currently working on a study of neighbour relationships. ADDRESS: Department of Social Sciences, Loughborough University, Loughborough LE11 3TU, UK. [email: e.h.stokoe@lboro.ac.uk]

ANN WEATHERALL is a senior lecturer in psychology at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. She has published several articles and book chapters that take a feminist and discursive approach to gender issues. Much of Ann Weatherall's thinking is presented in her book *Gender, Language and Discourse* (Routledge, 2002). ADDRESS: School of Psychology, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. [email: Ann.Weatherall@vuw.ac.nz]

APPENDIX

Most of the authors use the standard system of transcription developed by Gail Jefferson (1984), or a simplified version thereof, unless otherwise stated. This system is as follows:

1	Line numbers
A:	Current speaker (designated by a letter or name)
(.)	Micropause
(0.2)	Timed pause to the nearest tenth of a second
→	An arrow in the margin is used by the analyst to draw the reader's attention to a particular line of transcript.
(..) or (guess)	indicates an untranscribable passage or transcriber's guess.
((comment))	Comment by the transcriber
He huh	Laughter
'hello'	Quotation voice
<he is>	Talk in brackets is faster than surrounding talk
>she is<	Talk in brackets is slower than surrounding talk
Underlining	Underlined parts of talk indicate emphasis
She IS	Sections of speech written in capital letters indicate that it is louder than the surrounding talk
=	Latching – no pause between turns
yes[I agree] [ye:ah]	Square brackets indicate the beginning and end of overlapping talk

ye:ah	Colon indicates prolonged sound of preceding part of utterance. The more colons, the longer the prolongation
↑ and ↓	Indicate shifts to higher and lower pitch in the utterence that follows the arrow
°yes°	Indicates the speech enclosed is uttered more quietly than the surrounding speech
@yes@	Indicates the speech enclosed is said in an animated voice
?	Indicates rising intonation
!	Indicates excited intonation
.	Indicates falling intonation
‘	Indicates continuing intonation
wh. or wh-	Indicates an abruptly cut-off sound