The Place of Gender in Developmental Pragmatics: Cultural Factors

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This article offers a commentary on the studies by Kyriakidis and Guo, Goodwin, Nakamura, and Cook-Gumperz and Seymurski comprising the special issue. The special issue is situated in the history of gender studies in developmental pragmatics. The inadequately recognized role of cultural factors is highlighted.

After Lakoff (1973), at the crest of the U.S. women’s movement, stimulated a flood of studies on gender contrasts in speech, a list of differences became recurrent: compete—cooperate, command—suggest, assert—hedge, dominate—comply. Maltz and Borker’s (1982) seminal paper speculated that gender differences in talk had their origins in childhood gender segregation.

Maltz and Borker’s (1982) paper appeared, along with one by Tannen (1982) on marital miscommunication, in a volume of papers in which Gumperz and his students applied his theories of cross-talk. Gumperz argued that cross-cultural misunderstandings could arise from identifiable differences in discourse conventions, pragmatic systems, and the linguistic signals used to convey meaning and signal the frames in which talk was to be understood—the contextualization cues for interpretation. Maltz and

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of the addressees we like or want to impress, according to our abilities, and less like that of the addressees we do not like. In this case, girls playing with boys might change their activities and discoursce to accommodate.

On the other hand, divergence might lead to greater contrast in certain types of play. Some situational contexts maximize gender marking. If something in the context or activity evokes a different gendered reference group, we can expect that individual speakers might "monitor male," or masculinize, speech or "monitor female," or feminize, speech. Whether these changes are to what Labov (1966) called stereotypes in the usual sense, or to markers, remains to be seen. Speech accommodation theory has not been applied to pragmatic and discourse features. This is a call to the examination of situational effects on styles within the individual's repertoire, as for example in some of the articles in Eckert and Rickford (2001). Both group composition and activity effects appear in the work reported in this issue.

RANGE OF PAPERS

The articles in this issue draw on data that are varied in age, from infancy and preschool (Nakamura; Ky ratzis & Guo) to middle childhood (Goodwin; Cook-Gumperz & Szymborski). Social dynamics will change with social development; thus, comparisons across age present confounding problems. The focus of the collection is on cultural contrast among Chinese, Japanese, Mexican American children of recent immigration, middle-class White Americans, and a heterogeneous California school sample. The activities studied range from the child-controlled activity of playground jump rope (Goodwin) to adult-enabled but peer-controlled play in the presence of adults (Ky ratzis & Guo; Nakamura) to classroom activities where tasks are assigned by adults (Cook-Gumperz & Szymborski). There is a problem in comparison with so much variation; similar types of activities and the same ages across cultural environments cannot be contrasted directly. What can be hoped, given that range, is the emergence of some hypotheses about the factors involved and a look to future comparisons to fill in the gaps. In short, this is the hypothesis-forming stage of the enterprise. However, this evidence already disconfirms some widely believed generalizations.

CROSS-CULTURAL VARIATION

According to the separate worlds hypothesis (SWH), biology is not destiny, but it is social grouping by gender that produces results that look like genetic bias, as if males and females create separate subgroup cultures. Gender cultures could be similar from one American sample to another if there is a macrocultural effect from family or school socialization by adults or older children, or from corporate culture through commercial influences. A more serious test is whether the separate worlds exist, and are alike, cross-culturally. Whiting and Edwards (1988), on the basis of an extensive program of careful observation in many widely diverse societies, concluded that "girls get more practice in nurturance and pro-social dominance, boys in egoistic dominance and challenge" (p. 278). However, this difference, they added, could be the result of gender socialization through adult assignement of girls and boys to different settings and tasks in the societies they studied. It could disappear if these activity contrasts did not exist. Ky ratzis and Guo head straight for a cross-cultural critique of the SWH to which Ky ratzis (1992) contributed supporting data earlier.

SETTING AND ACTIVITY CHOICES

Where adult society sets up a model of strongly contrasting concerns and settings for men and women, should we expect children to pick up on that contrast? However, this would only happen if gender is salient in the local family and school culture as a social dimension. There is no reason to presuppose that girls do not want to be Superman, or boys to play mother. Ky ratzis (1994) found, indeed, girls who invented "Superkitty."

In Japan as in the United States, there were strong contrasts in the settings usually chosen by children in schools: rough-and-tumble play, trucks, cars, and superheroes versus playhouse and tea party for girls, but there was overlap in that both chose blocks and playing store. In the U.S. data, girls chose the dollhouse area more, boys the block area more, and Marx and Ky ratzis (1998) found active resistance by preschool boys to domesticplay as they got older.1 Marx and Ky ratzis confirmed, and Naka-
and culturally specified activities all will affect these groupings and the knowledge they provide.

The differences Kyatzis and Guo found in preschool group composition may also be related to the type of play normal in groups of various sizes. Kyatzis found that mixed-sex larger groups did borderwork that we might expect would maximize speech divergence. In the U.S. preschools she studied, she observed that in mixed groups of three or more, play occurred that downgraded female roles so that girls might have decided to play in girl-only groups instead. This cultural practice, which Kyatzis found but Guo did not see in Beijing, where teachers set up groups, can be consequential for group composition.

These issues definitely change with age, along with the type of play. In the middle childhood playgrounds Thorne (1993) and Goodwin studied, certain types of play were open and accessible to newcomers, and others were less so.

The composition of groups appears to affect speech in large measure through the choice of activities. Lampert and I, in an analysis of Garvey’s data on the CHILDES database, studied changes in children’s humor in preschool dyads that were selected as male pairs, female pairs, and recombined mixed pairs. We thus could see the same child with a different partner, as Guo could. There were strong gender differences in single-sex dyads. Boys engaged in more buffoonery and naughtiness, girls in verbal play and dress-up. The mixed groups were in between: Girls sang and did work play significantly more when paired with a girl than with a boy, but with boys they engaged in more physical clowning and less verbal humor (Lampert, 1996). It appears that children’s activities are negotiated, and as Marx and Kyatzis (1998) reported, the same child can shift with different play partners to different kinds of play, with consequences for gendered speech features. Kyatzis and Guo report that in mixed preschool U.S. groups, boys were dominant, girls compliant. Girls asked questions, asked permission, and gave explanations more than boys did in such groups. However, mixed groups in China did not reveal the same contrasts at all; therefore, we cannot assume that these differences are universal. As Kyatzis and Guo note, the relative number of boys and girls in a group may alter activity preferences and dominance.

In looking at situational effects on gendered features, Nakamura notes that when playing with other girls, girls’ speech had more beautification forms, hedges, collaborative sentence-final particles like ne and no, and speech acts such as asking questions and asking and giving permis-

sion. These feminine forms appeared primarily in role play, whereas the speech between girls out of role play was neutral. They must reflect the types of roles the girls were representing in their play.

With male peers, boys increased assertive speech and frequency of adversarial particles like yo and zo. Because they often played superheroes with other boys, it is not surprising that they had a high rate of making commands. In contrast, boys might play more feminine games with the mother when no peers were present, but we do not know how much their speech was adjusted to the context. These differences in form related to gender are more extreme cases of the types of speech act differences Kyatzis (1992) and Kyatzis and Ervin-Tripp (1999) found for same-sex best friend dyads in play settings.

CONFLICT

The “separate cultures” theory predicts that in mixed groups there should be evidence of culture clashes and misunderstandings. Speech accommodation theory predicts accommodation unless the children dislike each other or they are in a gender-marked activity. If we look at conflicts that occur in mixed groups, we see no such evidence of cross-gender misunderstandings.

Kyatzis and Guo (1996) found that conflicts in the U.S. preschool sample occurred mainly in terms of the planning of play. In the Chinese data in Beijing and Taipei, on the other hand, conflicts were part of role-play enactment or being funny (e.g., male–female teasing over “nuisance” behavior). There was no evidence that these conflicts arose from misunderstandings. In my data on Anglophones learning French from playmates in France (Ervin-Tripp, 1986), I found a theme in role play might be teacher and naughty pupil, allowing the teacher to display authority and punish the pupil. This naughtiness was programmed into the script by the children.

In the Chinese data, boys also play at “nuisance” with each other; therefore, it is not specifically reserved for mixed play. Kyatzis and Guo interpret teasing by being naughty as a form of establishing intimacy. This is an argument consistent with recent research on teasing showing that when done in a friendly, not hostile, key and equitably distributed, teasing increases group cohesion (Keltner et al., 1998).
EXPERTISE AND POWER

The question raised by Goodwin's results is the relation between territory and expertise. When boys and girls are assessed by the same criteria in mixed groups, traditional territorial dominance can give way. Does expertise trump territory? After 1 month of practice, as boys become more skilled, those who are most skilled issue directives and metaparticipants and receive questions. However, in the last game, girls still defined the important parameters of play.

"Boys begin to use the agitated directive style of girls when they become more skilled in the game. The use of imperative forms and counter moves is related to acquired skill rather than one's gendered identity," according to Goodwin.

Kyratzis and Guo raise a similar issue about expertise in their analysis of shifting dominance in the studies of interaction over a Play-Doh "machine." In the Chinese data, male and female dominance could be construed as based on domains of skill, with girls dominant in moral and emotional topics and boys in technical, gadget issues, even when the play materials were the same. Here changing the topic or activity can be a tactic for assuming dominance.

GENDER DIFFERENCES

Are speech contrasts simply a consequence of the typically different setting and activity selections by boys and girls? In some settings, no differences appear. A student in my lab, Elena Escalera, observing snacktime, found no gender contrasts at all in talk with a same-sex friend in an activity that is neutral.

Yet, gender often remains a strong variable. In some studies, even when the same toys are presented, boys and girls, on average, did different things with the same toys. According to Nakamura, preschool boys more often fight and throw things; girls spend more time planning than enacting with the same play material. Girls do more family scripts, boys do more good-guy–bad-guy scripts of the sort seen on TV (Kyratzis, 1992). When Nakamura tried to establish comparable situations, she found that boys' dialogue was still dominated by challenges, conflict, and commands and contained slang and masculine terms. The girls' talk was comparatively neutral. Boys might use feminine language with the mother but would not do so with other boys, whereas girls used some masculine forms when in rough-and-tumble play and fighting. Kyratzis and Guo (1996) found that even when Guo tried to control setting and materials with Play-Doh in China, the boys and girls focused on different issues, which then affected their dominance in the interaction.

We do not know how robust these gender differences are. Marx and Kyratzis (1998) found only a few children were consistently masculine or feminine in speech style; the other children accommodated to partners and changed speech with activity setting. Even so, on average there were differences.

AGE CHANGES

The subtlety of tactics noted in the studies of children in middle childhood reminds us of the importance of pragmatic development, which has not been mentioned in these studies. We know that children age 7 or older can be aware of the perspectives of others and control a wider variety of speech acts and speech events. The complexity of their discourse is greater because they are more able to plan joint events and anticipate the responses and arguments of the other. There are examples of such skills in my work on requests (Ervin-Tripp, 1982). In Cook-Gumperz and Szemanski's examples, we see a 9-year-old able to anticipate and thwart power moves and retaliate against public criticism in a complex way. Dramatic examples have been given by Goodwin (1990), such as the imbedding of narrative into argument, thus shifting the participation framework and removing ground from the antagonist by publicly making him the butt of the narrative. This skillful complexity could be strategically forward looking, rather than just a series of ad hoc tactical maneuvers.

MECHANISMS OF PEER CONTROL

The SWH, as Thorne (1993) pointed out, assumes either a shared norm or uniformity of behavior, which is belied by the evidence. The strongest data on this point are the individual cases pursued longitudinal-


