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## 8

### Lip Service on the Fantasy Lines

Kira Hall

When the deregulation of the telephone industry co-occurred with a number of technological advances in telecommunications in the early 1980s, American society witnessed the birth of a new medium for linguistic exchange—the 900 number. On the fantasy lines, which generate annual revenues of more than \$45 million in California alone,<sup>1</sup> women’s language is bought, sold, and custom-tailored to secure caller satisfaction. This high-tech mode of linguistic exchange complicates traditional notions of power in language, because the women working within the industry consciously produce a language stereotypically associated with women’s powerlessness in order to gain economic power and social flexibility. In this chapter, I refer to research I conducted among five women-owned fantasy-line companies in San Francisco in order to argue for a more multidimensional definition of linguistic power, one that not only devotes serious attention to the role of sexuality in conversational exchange but also recognizes individual variability with respect to women’s conversational consent.

The linguistic identification of women’s language as “powerless” and men’s language as “powerful” has its origins in early readings of the work of Robin Lakoff (1975), who argued in *Language and Woman’s Place* that sex

differences in language use both reflect and reinforce the unequal status of women and men in our society. After identifying an array of linguistic features ideologically associated with women's speech in American English—among them lexical items associated with women's work; "empty" adjectives such as *divine*, *charming*, and *cute*; tag questions in place of declaratives; hedges such as *sort of*, *kind of*, and *I guess*; intensifiers such as *so* and *very*; and hypercorrect, polite linguistic forms—Lakoff suggested that the association of indirect speech with women's language and direct speech with men's language is the linguistic reflection of a larger cultural power imbalance between the sexes. Her treatise, packaged beneath the unapologetically feminist photograph of a woman with bandaged mouth, has inspired two decades of heated debate among subsequent language and gender theorists. A number of feminist scholars have argued that Lakoff's identification of women's language as culturally subordinate serves to affirm sexist notions of women as deviant and deficient, and sociolinguists steeped in Labovian empirical argumentation have dismissed her claims altogether as quantitatively invalid (see Bucholtz & Hall, this volume).

I have no desire to reopen the academic wounds of what remains a divisive subject among language and gender theorists, but a discussion of my research on the discursive fictions produced by phone-sex employees in San Francisco would be incomplete without reference to Lakoff's early description of "women's language." The type of language that these employees consider sexual, and that for them is economically powerful, is precisely what has been defined by language and gender theorists since Lakoff as "powerless." The notion that behavior that is perceived as powerless can, in certain contexts, also be perceived as sexual may be old hat to anthropologists and sociologists, but language theorists have yet to address this connection explicitly. The very existence of the term *sweet talk*—an activity that, in the American heterosexual mainstream, has become associated more with the speech patterns of women than with men<sup>2</sup>—underscores the ideological connection between women's language and sexual language. By taking on the outer vestments of submissiveness and powerlessness, or, rather by appropriating the linguistic features culturally associated with such a posture, the female "sweet-talker" projects a certain sexual availability to her male listener so as to further her own conversational aims. Her use of this discursive style, which in its sexualized duplicity might more appropriately be dubbed the *Mata Hari technique*, is itself powerful; the speaker is not the naive, playful, and supportive interactant her male audience has taken her to be but a mature, calculating adult with a subver-

sive goal in mind.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps in an effort to underscore this very duplicity, Kathleen K. (1994), author of a recent book on her experiences as a phone-sex worker in the Pacific Northwest, chose the title *Sweet Talkers: Words from the Mouth of a "Pay to Say" Girl*.

In this chapter, I address the superficial conflict in the use of submissive speech for reasons of power. The adult-message industry has enjoyed considerable financial success during the past decade, grossing well over \$3 billion since its national debut in 1983.<sup>4</sup> As fear of the AIDS epidemic and the accompanying interest in safe sex spreads throughout the culture at large, the demand for women's vocal merchandise promises to expand into the next millennium. The growing success of this discursive medium in the marketplace calls for a new interpretation of the place of women's language in contemporary society. Its easy marketability as a sexual commodity and the profits it reaps for the women who employ it suggest that the study of cross-sex linguistic exchange must acknowledge the more subversive aspects of conversational consent.

#### **Antipornography Feminists Meet the Legislative Right**

The growing demand for fantasy-line services in American society has prompted the U.S. Congress to examine the legality of vocal pornography,<sup>5</sup> an undertaking that is perhaps not surprising, given the phone-sex industry's organizational similarity to prostitution. Live-conversation services, now available mainly through credit cards, allow the caller to engage in a live verbal encounter with a speaker who is paid by the minute to fulfill a phone fantasy. The customer calls the fantasy line and speaks directly to a switchboard operator who then processes his fantasy request. After screening his credit card number, the operator calls one of her home-based employees, explains the requested fantasy to her, and gives her the choice of accepting or rejecting the work. In a sense, then, the encounter mimics conventional sex work except that it is conducted entirely within the vocal sphere. In layperson's terms, the john calls the conversational brothel, files his request with the phone pimp, and gets connected to the oral prostitute of his choice. In contrast, prerecorded services, also referred to more colloquially as *dial-a-porn*, offer the caller a choice of predetermined sexually explicit messages, accessible through the appropriate button on the touch-tone telephone. The caller is greeted by a recorded woman's voice that informs him that he must be at least eighteen years of age in order to continue the call and then outlines the currently available fantasies. One service that advertises monthly in *Hustler*, for example, offers a choice of "oral fantasies," "oriental girl

fantasies," "housewives fantasies," "lesbian fantasies," "Swedish mistress fantasies," and even "women-in-jail fantasies."

In April of 1988, an upset Congress responded to complaints about the unregulated nature of prerecorded services, amending section 223(b) of the Communications Act of 1934 to impose a complete ban on both indecent and obscene interstate commercial telephone messages—a proposal referred to in the legal literature as the 1988 *Helms Amendment*, after its author Senator Jesse Helms (R-N.C.). In the battle that ensued between Sable Communications of California and the Federal Communication Commission, the FCC attempted to justify the ban on indecent messages by arguing in a U.S. district court that mass telephone message systems are analogous to public radio broadcasts. The government relied on *FCC v. Pacifica Foundation* (438 U.S. 726 (1978)), in which the Supreme Court, in response to a father's complaint against a radio's afternoon broadcast of George Carlin's "Filthy Words" monologue, ruled that the FCC could in fact regulate indecency over the airwaves on a nuisance basis. The plaintiff, on the other hand, compared dial-a-porn to the private medium of cable television, which a number of courts have declared may broadcast obscene and indecent materials. The district court found that the provision dealing with dial-a-porn was severable, deciding that although the First Amendment did not protect *obscene* messages, it did protect *indecent* ones. But because the official legal definitions of obscenity and indecency remained vague,<sup>6</sup> adult services that believed their messages to be indecent and not obscene could continue to transmit messages. In 1989 Congress amended section 223(b) a second time, requiring telephone companies to establish presubscription policies. Three years later, President Bush signed into law the Telephone Disclosure and Dispute Resolution Act, which, in broad terms, not only establishes uniform standards for the pay-per-call industry at the federal level but also ensures that consumers who call such services receive adequate information before they are charged any money.<sup>7</sup>

Congressional debates on the legality of this controversial form of communication coincided with recent feminist discussions on what has been called, since the 1982 Barnard College Politics of Sexuality Conference, the *pleasure/danger controversy*. Feminists like Andrea Dworkin (1981, 1988), Sheila Jeffreys (1990, 1993), Catharine MacKinnon (1987, 1993), and Diana Russell (1993), who stress the sexual danger brought on by male pornography, oppose feminists like Susie Bright (1992) and Pat Califia (1994), who emphasize the need for freedom of speech in the pursuit of women's sexual desire, embracing as powerful what has been traditionally thought of as "feminine" sexuality.<sup>8</sup>

Catherine MacKinnon in particular, in her argument that "pornography, in the feminist view, is a form of forced sex" (1987:148), blurs the division between representation and act, defining depictions of sex as synonymous with actual sex. Her arguments have unfortunately been appropriated by conservative legislators led by Helms who back the U.S. obscenity law, deeming images obscene either because they cause real-life effects (or in legal terms, appeal "to the prurient interest in sex of the average person"<sup>9</sup>) or because they depict sexual acts that are illegal under other sections of the criminal code. To make their case against photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, for instance, legislators cited the MacKinnon/Dworkin amendments to the Minneapolis antipornography ordinance in their own bill to set restrictions on the kinds of representations fundable by the state (Butler 1990). The strength of this discursive alliance between antipornography feminists and conservative legislators, albeit a superficial one, led the Senate to pass a bill forbidding the National Endowment for the Arts to fund artistic projects that depict "obscenity," which became law in September 1989. Additional legal equations of representation and act could have implications for the adult-message industry, where the representation, though vocal, invites comparison with actual prostitution. As the mediums by which people gain access to obscene and indecent material change (the most recent form being computer pornography, which provides formats for exchanging sexual messages and conducting on-line "modem sex"), courts and legislatures will have to determine which types of representation (e.g., visual, verbal, vocal) more closely approximate, or affect, reality.

Dworkin and MacKinnon are especially concerned with the issue of pornography because for them, sexuality is the basis for the constitution of power relations in our society; in MacKinnon's (1987:3) often-quoted words, "The social relation between the sexes is organized so that men may dominate and women must submit. This relation is sexual—in fact, is sex." But other feminists have argued that in their arguments against pornography, Dworkin and MacKinnon construct a definition of sexuality in terms of oppression, a definition that, in the words of Judith Butler (1990:113), "links masculinity with agency and aggression, and femininity with passivity and injury." Theorists such as Alice Echols (1983) and Gayle Rubin (1984), and more recently Marianne Valverde (1989), Carla Freccero (1990), and Lynne Segal (1993), have argued that in defining female sexuality as uniformly powerless and constructed by men, Dworkin and MacKinnon leave no room for women to construct their own sexual desires, much less to reclaim patriarchal ones.

Central to the work of these latter theorists is the notion that sexual

oppression, though certainly important, should not be emphasized to the exclusion of economic and social oppression. Freccero's (1990) work speaks to this claim directly as she criticizes North American mainstream feminism for its almost exclusive preoccupation with pornography. Arguing that sex workers, because they focus on the sex industry from the point of view of its labor force, "provide an important corrective to the middle-class intellectual feminists' debates about pornography and sexuality," Freccero asserts that feminism should be concerned neither with "the commodity itself (pornography) nor the 'private' sexual practices of individuals, but rather, their convergence in the marketplace" (316). The marketplace is also of central concern to phone-sex employees in San Francisco, who see parallels between their own situation and that depicted by contributors to collections such as Gail Pheterson's (1989) *A Vindication of the Rights of Whores* and Frederique Delacoste and Priscilla Alexander's (1987) *Sex Work: Writings by Women in the Sex Industry*. Because pornographic representation is an essential ingredient of their own economic livelihood, fantasy-line operators have necessarily had to ally themselves with pro-pornography activists. It is not my intention in this chapter to side with "pro-pornography" feminists as opposed to "antipornography" feminists; my own experiences with feminist activism in San Francisco have shown me that this division is itself superficial. Rather, I wish to suggest that the ongoing feminist debate over the notion of power can contribute to the study of conversational interaction, particularly as it points to the importance of contextualizing any definition of power within an array of intersecting influences.

#### **Fantasy and the Telephone**

The telephone, as a medium that excludes the visual, allows for the creation of fantasy in a way that face-to-face interaction cannot. In the absence of a visual link, the speaker is able to maintain a certain anonymity that can potentially allow for a less self-conscious and, in the appropriate circumstances, more imaginative presentation.<sup>10</sup> On the 900-lines, where the sense of anonymity is of course heightened by the fact that the two interactants have never met, callers must construct their conversational partner visually. Once they have created such a representation, they have already entered into a fantasy world of sorts, and the construction of any additional representations is facilitated by this entry. Although the majority of communication studies in the 1970s (e.g., Cook & Lallgee 1972; Goddard 1973; Rutter & Stephenson 1977; Short, Williams, & Christie 1976; ) support the assertion that the telephone's lack of visual access

restricts individual expression, it seems that today's users find that this lack in fact encourages creativity—a change of attitude that might explain the dramatic increase in phone-related devices, among them answering machines, cellular mobile telephones, cordless telephones, dial-up teleconferencing facilities, and electronic mail, not to mention the numerous varieties of 900 and 976 services. Even though the telephone has been around for more than a hundred years, it is only in the past twenty years that the system has undergone what G. Fielding and D. Hartley (1987:11) refer to as “explosive growth,” both in quality and scope. The advent of telephone deregulation in the United States and the increasing availability of the mobile telephone have prompted telecommunication theorists like Frederick Williams (1985:191) to argue that the telephone is shifting “from a ‘home’ or ‘business’ based communications link to an individual, personal based one.” This shift is nowhere more apparent than in the advertising strategies of the telephone industry itself, which regularly appeals to the personal, private, and expressive contact that it affords. With just one thirty-second AT&T telephone call, clients can find a long-lost friend, pacify a weeping mother, or “reach out and touch” that special someone. Perhaps it is not so strange after all to see advertisement after advertisement on late Saturday-night television for “romance lines,” “friendship lines,” “party lines,” “psychic lines,” “teenage date lines,” “therapy lines,” and “confession lines.”

Adult-message services have clearly capitalized on this shift as well, appealing to the private and expressive nature of the medium in their own advertising strategies. The company Call Girls offers “live conversation with a personal touch,” Linda's Lip Service declares that it is “friendly, personal, and unhurried,” and ABC International features “completely private, one to one, adult conversations.” Most services appearing on the back pages of *Hustler* and *Penthouse* advertise their numbers visually—with pictures of naked women in provocative poses talking on the telephone—but an increasing number of services are advertising themselves verbally, perhaps in an effort to represent a more personal, involved, and creative relationship between seller and consumer. The company Terry's Live Talk, for instance, advertises its number in the form of a typewritten letter, urging its readers to call its “very personal” service and concluding with the intimate salutation “Love XOXOXOXO.” The service Nicole Bouvier, which reserves an entire page in *Penthouse* for its letter of advertisement, opens romantically with a reference to the senses, equating phone talk with touch, smell, and taste and shunning the need for sight altogether: “My love, it doesn't matter if you can't see me. You can touch

me ... smell me ... taste me ... and then you will *know* and always *remember* me." Still other services choose to imitate the written format of the newspaper personals, listing prose descriptions of their fantasy-line operators (which are presumably fictional because most employers have never met their employees face-to-face) in an effort to set their employees apart from the generic phone-sex model.

Dial-a-porn clients use a medium that is intensely public, with one line potentially servicing as many as fifty thousand calls an hour in an anonymous fashion,<sup>11</sup> in order to engage in a subject matter traditionally thought of as intensely private. The unnaturalness of this interaction must be rectified by the fantasy-line performer, who presents herself through a unique mixture of public and private discourse. Lakoff (1990), differentiating genres of discourse with reference to these two dimensions, argues that participants in private discourse tend to express themselves with shared allusions, jointly created metaphors, and telegraphic references, promoting feelings of intimacy and trust. Participants in public language, on the other hand, because they cannot count on shared allusions, tend to express themselves in an explicit, concrete manner so that the larger public can understand. Because the fantasy-line operator has never met her male client, she clearly lacks the frame of reference necessary for private conversation; instead, she must create a feeling of intimacy by evoking a frame of reference that the majority of her male callers will understand and be familiar with—namely, that of male pornography. Within this rather limited field of discourse, she and her client are able to express themselves with the shared allusions, jointly created metaphors, and telegraphic references necessary for private communication, however stereotypical they may be.

For fantasy to be effective, it must somehow parallel reality, and if its intended audience is the culture at large, it must necessarily prey on certain cultural perceptions of what the ideal reality is. To sell to a male market, women's prerecorded messages and live conversational exchange must cater to hegemonic male perceptions of the ideal woman. The training manual for operators of 970-LIVE, a male-owned fantasy-line service based in New York City, instructs female employees to "create different characters" and to "start with one that resembles the ideal woman"—as if this is a universal, unproblematic concept. To train women to fulfill this ideal, the manual gives additional details on how to open and maintain conversations while preserving "professionalism":

*Create different characters:*

Start with one that resembles the ideal woman. Move on to bimbo,



nymphomaniac, mistress, slave, transvestite, lesbian, foreigner, or virgin. If the caller wants to speak to someone else, don't waste time being insulted. Be someone else. You should be creative enough to fulfill *anyone's* fantasy.

*To start a conversation:*

"What's on your mind?" "What would you like to talk about?" "What do you do for fun?" "What are you doing right now?"

Remember: Never initiate sex. Let the caller start phone intimacy.

*Ways to keep callers interested:*

Tell them crazy fantasies: Jell-O, honey, travel, ice cream, lesbian love, orgies. If conversation stays clean, tell them an interesting story: movies, TV, books, etc. Make it sound like it really happened. *Insist* that it happened.

*Professionalism:*

Do not talk to *anyone* besides a caller when taking a call. Always be bubbly, sexy, interesting, and interested in each individual caller. Remember, *you* are not your character on the phone.

[Reprinted in *Harper's Magazine*, December 1990, 26–27.]

What makes the ideal woman from a verbal point of view is reminiscent of Pamela Fishman's (1978) definition of *maintenance work*: encouraging men to develop their topics by asking questions (*What's on your mind? What would you like to talk about? What do you do for fun?*), showing assent (*Always be bubbly, sexy, interesting and interested in each individual caller*), and listening (*Don't talk to anyone besides a caller when taking a call*). Because the conversation will be meaningless unless it in some way approximates the male caller's understanding of reality, what becomes critically important to its success is for it to "sound like it really happened"—for the woman to "*insist that it happened.*" This realization, coupled with the fact that many clients may be calling the lines in response to the increasing threat of AIDS, has even led some companies to practice "safe phone sex." The number 1-900-HOT-LIPS, for instance, which advertises as a "steamy safe-sex fantasy number," has all of its fantasy-line operators "carry"—in the verbal sense, that is—condoms and spermicides to their vocal sexual encounters. The suggestion that an interactant might need to practice safe sex over the telephone wires is of course ludicrous; by overtly referencing this practice in its advertisement, however, the message service suggests that there is a very real physicality to the medium and simultaneously alludes to its inherently "safe" nature.

### The Prerecorded Message

The language promoted in the trainer's manual is precisely the kind of language sold by the prerecorded services—language that, through extensive detail and supportive hearer-directed comments, presents a certain reality. The two-minute prerecorded message reproduced below in (1) is played daily on a national fantasy line that advertises as "girls, girls, girls." The speaker is unquestionably the perfect woman: she loves to shop, she wears feminine clothes, she likes to look at herself in the mirror, and she lies in bed half the day fulfilling male fantasies.<sup>12</sup>

- (1) oo::f: - i'm so ((in breathy voice)) excited. - i just got a hot new job. (0.8) well, - ((in slight Southern accent)) i've been bored lately. .hh - i live in a small town and my husband travels a lot, (0.5) i have lots of time on my hands. - .hhh of course, i've always managed to stay busy. (0.4) lots of girlfriends, you know, - ((whispered)) i love to shop, - i ((laugh)) practically live at the mall it seems, but still. .hhhh (2.0) anyway. - this friend told me about this job i can do at home. - all i need is a phone. - and a lusty imagination. ((laugh)) yeah, you've got it - .hh i'm doing hot sexy phone calls these days. (0.5) i really get into it too. - .hhh i love that sexy hot fellows from all over the country call me and enjoy my ((whispered)) voice and my fantasies. (0.4) i like to dress the part too. - i went to my favorite lingerie ((in hoarse, breathy voice)) store, - victoria's secret? - and bought satin bikinis, lace thong underwear, - a tight black corset - and fishnet stockings, (1.0) ((in lower voice)) and a dangerous pair of red ((whispered)) spiked heels. ((smack)) - umhmm:. .hhh - then. when i'm in a dominant mode? .hh i have this leather g-string and bra and thigh-high boots. - ooh baby. ((giggle)) (0.5) when i dress up and look in the mirror, ((slower, breathy voice)) i - get - so - crazy. .hhhhh i just can't wait for that first ca:ll. (0.6) then, - i assemble all my favorite little (0.3) toys all around me, (0.4) lie back on my big bed with satin sheets .hhhh (1.0) and live out my fantasies with some mysterious stranger .hhhhhhh oo:::h hearing those voices. .hh - those excited whispers and moans, ((in breathy voice)) u::h, it gets me so- .hhhh - well, - you know. (2.0) then (0.5) i just go wild, - i have so many great ideas. - they come fa:st and furious, (in hoarse voice)) oo::h, i can't get enough. - .hh each call makes me hotter, - i just keep going, over and over, ((gasping)) o:h - .hhh yeah baby do it again - oo:f, .hhhhhhh - well. (2.0) i love my workday - but - by the time i put in a few hours on the phone? - i'm so relaxed hh, - and when my husband gets home ((smack)) - oo:h - he gets the treatment. - he loves it. - .hh but (1.0) shhh. ((whispered)) don't tell. - it's our secret.

In the absence of a visual link, this ideal is created solely through language (as the speaker herself says, "All I need is a phone and a lusty imagination"). She begins by constructing a visual image of herself with words popularly thought of as feminine: *girlfriends, lusty, lacy, lingerie, satin, and secret*. Her voice is dynamic, moving from high-pitched, gasping expressions of pleasure to low-pitched, breathy-voice innuendoes. Although this is unidirectional discourse, she makes it quite clear that she would be an admirable conversational partner in any female-male dyad—she "just can't wait for that first call" so that she can respond supportively to all those "voices" and "excited whispers." Additionally, she sets up her monologue so as to establish an exclusive intimacy with her absentee partner, referring to their conversational relationship as a passionate "secret" that should be kept from her husband.

Particularly telling is what happens at the end of this fantasy, when the speaker's verbal creativity comes to represent the sex act itself: *I have so many great ideas. They come fast and furious—ooh, I can't get enough!* An equation of the spoken word with the sex act is a common element in such messages, a fitting metaphorical strategy given the nature of the exchange. Often in the beginning of the fantasy scenario, the speaker will be reading a book at a library, selling encyclopedias door to door, or taking a literature course at the local college. By the end of the scenario, swayed by the voice and intellect of the suitor in question (who is often identified with the caller so as to bring him directly into the fantasy), she has discarded her books, her encyclopedias, and her academic pretensions for the bedroom.

In the fantasy reproduced below, for example, the speaker projects the persona of a young college student who is obsessed with her English professor. Having established the power imbalance inherent to this scenario—she, the eager coed; he, the aloof, self-involved intellectual—the student develops a preoccupation with her professor's voice, describing how it repeatedly "penetrates" her during lecture:

- (2) ^hi. - my name's vicky^, - and i guess i'm in deep trouble in one of my classes at college. (1.5) ((whispered)) it's my english professor. - he's got me cra::zy, (0.5) and i think i'm losing my mi:nd. - he's really (0.4) not handsome or anything. - it's the way he talks, (1.0) his voice gets deep inside me where it counts, - turns me to jelly, (1.5) i sit at the front of the class, - and i just can't seem - to keep ^still^, (1.5) i remember the first day, i wore jeans and a sweater. (0.5) and my long blond hair up in a bun. (0.6) i felt pretty studious, - but the moment i started listening to him, i knew i was gonna

change - all - that. (2.0) and the next session, i showed up in the shortest mini-skirt i could find. (0.5) ^i'm real tan^ ((in breathy voice)) and in real good shape. (0.5) and i knew i looked pretty good in that mini-skirt. - i wore a silk blouse that ((slowly)) should have had his eyes riveted on me, - instead - he hardly ^no^ticed, (1.0) ^o::h^ i was getting so ^cra::^zy. (2.0) well - after a few weeks, - the weather changed and it got real hot, - so i started wearing shorts and this great little halter top, (1.5) i know i looked okay, because guys in the class were stumbling over themselves to sit next to me. - but my professor - there he was, just a few feet away, and hardly a ^glance^. (1.0) and still i go back to my dorm room and lay in my bed, and dream about that voice, ((in breathy voice)) all of me reponds to it, (2.0) ((sigh)) hhhhh it's as if he's penetrated me, ((slowly)) reached the depths of my soul and won't let go. (1.0) i dream about the moment - when we'll be alone, - maybe it'll be after class, (1.5) maybe it'll be a chance meeting at a coffee shop or something, but when that moment comes, (0.5) i know i'm going to tell him what he does to me, - and i don't think he'll be surprised, - because i ^think^ he already knows.

The speaker begins the fantasy by establishing that she is attracted to this particular professor not because of his physical appearance but because of the "way he talks": *His voice gets deep inside me where it counts, turns me to jelly.* After several unsuccessful attempts to impress the professor by relaxing her studious stance and gendering herself with the appropriate apparel, the speaker goes back to her dorm room so that she can at the very least "dream about that voice." She concludes the fantasy by exclaiming, rather emphatically, that she becomes powerless before the sound of it: *All of me responds to it, it's as if he's penetrated me, reached the depths of my soul and won't let go.* Although in this particular text it is the speaker, not the hearer, who is the owner of the fantasy, the one-sided nature of the created exchange (that is, even though the coed talks incessantly in the hopes of attracting her professor's attention, he fails to offer her any individualized verbal acknowledgment) parallels the real-life interaction between operator and client. The caller, unable to respond to the emotional desires of a prerecorded voice, easily assumes the role of the coed's nonresponsive superior.

As this scenario nicely illustrates, the reality presented on the message line presents an interactive inequality between the sexes, portraying men as dominant (penetrating, powerful, intellectual) and women as submissive (penetrated, powerless, emotional). To have a successful conversation, the

fantasy-line recording must affirm this inequality, for it is essential to the frame of male pornographic discourse. Rosalind Coward (1986), with reference to visual pornography, argues that although images of women are never inherently pornographic, they necessarily become so when placed within a "regime of representations" (i.e., a set of codes with conventionally accepted meanings) that identify them as pornographic for the viewer. The captions and texts that surround such images identify them explicitly as figures for male enjoyment, affirming the differential female-as-object versus male-as-subject. In vocal pornography, because there is no visual link, this differential must be created through voice and word alone. The fantasy-line operator has been assisted, of course, by the many advertisements in adult magazines that have already situated her within this frame, but she must still actively assume a submissive position in the conversation. In the telephone advertisement below, for example, offered by a message service as a "free phone-job sample," the speaker sells the number by highlighting this very inequality:

- (3) ((in quick, low, breathy voice)) baby I want you to listen closely, - dial 1-900-884-6804 now for hard love, - for tough love, - for girls who need men to take contro::l. - dial 1-900-884-6804, - for women who aren't afraid to say what they rea::lly want, - for girls who need powerful men to open their deep desires, dial 1-900-884-6804, and go all the way. (0.5) deep into the secret places for a fantasy experience that just goes on and on and on, - dial 1-900-884-6804, and get a girl who wants to give you the ultimate pleasure, 1-900-884-6804, ((quickly)) just half a dollar a minute, forty the first. (0.5) now I can tell you everything, now i can give you everything you want, all you desire, i can do it now, i want to, i have to, ((giggle)) dial 1-900-884-6804.

In a low, breathy voice, the operator explains that the women who work at this particular company will provide the "love" (which is here overtly sexualized with the modifiers *hard* and *tough*) if the caller provides the "control." They are women who need "powerful men to open their deep desires"—who not only *want* to submit and give their callers "the ultimate pleasure" but "*have to*" do so.

Bonnie McElhinny (this volume) refers to Rosabeth Kanter (1977) and Arlie Hochschild (1983) in order to discuss the gendered division of emotional labor that characterizes corporate workplaces. Certain types of work structures, particularly those that involve women in typically feminine jobs, require female employees to perform emotional labor for their

bosses. As Catherine Lutz (1986, 1990) and other anthropologists have pointed out, such divisions follow from the way emotion has been constructed along gender lines within Western society, so that men are expected to be rational and women emotional—a construction that has effects on women's language and on societal perceptions of what women's language should be. What is noteworthy with respect to the present discussion is the way in which fantasy-line operators consciously appropriate ideologies of emotional language and sexual language (which are not always entirely distinguishable) in order to intensify the perceived power imbalance. As one fantasy-line operator explained, "My job is kind of a three-conversation trinity—one part prostitute, one part priest, and one part therapist."

#### **Interviews with San Francisco Fantasy-Line Operators**

The eleven women and one man interviewed for this study, all residing in the San Francisco Bay Area and working for services that advertise to a heterosexual male market,<sup>13</sup> were aware of the recent feminist controversy over pornography and were highly reflective of their position within this debate. Each of them had reinterpreted this debate within the vocal sphere, perceiving their position in the linguistic exchange as a powerful one. Their positive attitude may have much to do with the fact that in San Francisco, many of the adult message services are women-owned and -operated, with a large percentage of employees identifying themselves as feminists and participating actively in organizations such as COYOTE, Cal-Pep, and COP—political action groups established for the purpose of securing rights for women in the sex industry. For these individuals, many of whom are freelance artists, fashion designers, graduate students, and writers, work on the telephone brings economic independence and social freedom. To them, the real prostitutes in our society are the women who dress in expensive business suits in the financial district, work fifty hours a week, and make sixty-five cents to a man's dollar. They understand the adult-message industry as primarily a creative medium, viewing themselves as fantasy tellers who have embraced a form of discourse that has been largely ignored by the women of this sexually repressed society. Moreover, they feel a certain power in having access into men's minds and find that it empowers them in their everyday cross-sex interactions.

Before embarking on this study in 1991, I informed the San Francisco Sex Information Hotline of my project and asked for assistance in locating phone-sex workers who might be interested in being interviewed. Over the next few months I spoke with twelve people, including nine "call-doers" (as

fantasy makers are sometimes called), two managers, and a woman who is co-owner of one of the oldest phone-sex companies in the United States (K. G. Fox). Most of the interviews were conducted anonymously by phone because many of the participants did not wish to have their names publicized. Approximately half of the interviewees allowed me to record our interviews over the telephone. The race, age, sex, and sexual-orientation backgrounds of the operators I spoke with were roughly equivalent to those of employees working for women-owned and -operated services in San Francisco.<sup>14</sup> Six of the employees I interviewed were heterosexual, three bisexual, and three lesbian; eight were European American, two Latino, one African American, and one Asian American. The employees who granted me interviews ranged in age from twenty-three to forty-six; they were generally from middle-class backgrounds, college-educated, and supportive of the industry. Many of these women had sought employment with women-owned services in reaction to the poor treatment they had received from various men-owned services in the city, among them the financially successful Yellowphone.<sup>15</sup>

At the beginning of each interview I explained that I was writing an article on the phone-sex industry from the point of view of its labor force; only at the end of the interview did I disclose my particular interest in language use. The female participants all believed that both the antipornography feminism of Dworkin, Jeffreys, and MacKinnon and the pro-freedom feminism of Bright prioritize an issue that most of the women in this country—because they suffer from serious economic and social oppression—do not have the privilege of debating. The most important issue to the women I interviewed is not whether pornography is oppressive or whether women's sexuality is repressed but, rather, how they, as a group, can mobilize for a better work environment so that the job they have chosen will be as nonoppressive as possible. They spoke of the need for a sex-workers' union, for health-care benefits, and for approval from people working outside the industry. Each of them chose her or his line of work initially for the economic freedom and social flexibility it offered. Like the fantasy-line operators quoted in excerpts (4) through (6) below—who variously identify themselves as *militant feminist*, *humanist*, and *feminist most definitely*—they regard the issue of sexual oppression as comparatively unimportant to the other types of economic and social oppression they have suffered.

- (4) Yes, in one word, the reason I got involved in this work is Reaganomics. It doesn't filter down to people like me. I'm an artist. I refuse to deal with corporate America. I'm an honest person. I

have integrity, I work hard. There's no place in corporate America for me.... About a year and a half ago when the economy really started to go sour, I started thinking, well, I'm going to have to get a part-time job. I looked around at part-time jobs and it was like, you want me to dress in \$300 outfits when you're paying me six bucks an hour? Excuse me, but I don't think so. And I saw an ad in the *Bay Guardian* for a fantasy maker, and I thought about it for months, because I had an attitude that it was really weird and I was concerned that I would end up really hating men, and finally it got down to, well, you can go downtown and spend a lot of money on clothes, or you can check this out.

- (5) I moved out here a couple of years ago from Ohio, and one of the main reasons I moved out here is so I could still be as strange as I am and do a job. I have piercing - body piercing, facial piercing - and I have tattoos, and I'm an insurance adjuster. And I wanted to come out here and get the piercings, and I'd been having to wear make-up over the [tattoo] ring on my finger, and that kind of thing. And I thought, well, god, San Francisco! If I can't get away with it there, then where can I? Well, I couldn't get away with it here either - not in the financial district. So I started watching *SF Weekly* and the newspapers, and I originally went to a company called [deleted]. And they told me it was a chat line and there'd be a few fantasy calls and not to be surprised by that. And oh boy, I was like, yeah, this is great money, I love it! And so I said sure. And that's basically how I got into it.
- (6) For me, I can work at home, I can make my own hours. If I want to take off and go on vacation on last minute's notice and be gone for a month, I can do that and know that my job is there. And I like that flexibility and I like the idea of not really having a boss to answer to. In some ways, it's powerful and in some ways it's definitely not. [We're] people who are sort of marginalized, [there's a lot] that we don't have access to- like health care. It's like forget it, you get sick and you don't have insurance. We don't have any kind of union. I think it would be great if we could have some kind of sex workers' union. So it's a mixed bag, but I guess for me, in light of what the options would be for me to make a living at this point in time, it seems like the best thing I can do for myself. Definitely one of the best compared to the options I see out there, I'm pretty damn lucky with what I'm doing. Because I've tried to have a few sort of semi-straight normal jobs and I didn't cut it very well. I



don't deal very well with authority, especially if I feel like the person is not treating me with the respect that I deserve, and that I'm not getting paid what I deserve for the quality of work that I'm putting out- like I have to dress a certain way that I'm uncomfortable in.

All three women have balanced the patriarchal oppression found in corporate America against the patriarchal oppression in a capitalist enterprise like pornography and have opted for the latter (although they made it quite clear that the women-owned services treat them much more kindly than those owned by men, especially with respect to advertising technique<sup>16</sup>). The first of these women entered the industry for economic security in a reaction to "Reaganomics," but the other two did so primarily for social flexibility. When the final operator speaks of the phone-sex industry as a *mixed bag*, she is not referring in any way to the sexual subordination that such a job might require of her but, rather, to the subordination required by a society that has marginalized her line of work: she has no benefits, no sex workers' union, no societal support.

Because the income of these women is entirely dependent upon verbal ability, they are very conscious of the type of language they produce and often explain specific linguistic qualities that make their language marketable. The features that make the prerecorded message persuasive are the same features that these operators choose to emphasize in their live-conversation exchanges: those that have been defined by linguists working in the area of language and gender as powerless. They explained that they make frequent use of feminine lexical items, incorporate intensifiers into their conversation whenever possible, regularly interrupt their narrative with questions and supportive comments, and adopt a dynamic intonation pattern.

One operator, a thirty-three-year-old European American heterosexual who calls herself Rachel, pointed out that "to be a really good fantasy maker, you've got to have big tits in your voice." She clarified this comment by explaining that she creates sexy language through lexical choice, employing "words which are very feminine":

- (7) I can describe myself now so that it lasts for about five minutes, by using lots of adjectives, spending a lot of time describing the shape of my tits. And that's both - it's not just wasting time, because they need to build up a mental picture in their minds about what you look like, and also it allows me to use words that are very feminine. I always wear peach, or apricot, or black lace- or charcoal-

colored lace, not just black. I'll talk about how my hair feels, how curly it is. Yeah, I probably use more feminine words. Sometimes they'll ask me, "What do you call it [female genitalia]?" And I'll say, well my favorite is *the snuggery*.... And then they crack up, because it's such a feminine, funny word.

Rachel initiates conversation on the fantasy lines by creating a feminine image of herself through soft words like *curly* and *snuggery* together with nonbasic color terms such as *peach*, *apricot*, and even *charcoal* instead of black—a creation markedly reminiscent of Lakoff's (1975:8) early assertion that women are thought to use "far more precise discriminations in naming colors" than men. Another operator, a European American self-identified butch bisexual whom I will call Sheila, defines what makes her language marketable as an intonational phenomenon. When she explains that she "talks in a loping tone of voice" with a "feminine, lilting quality," she alludes to a vocal pattern identified by Sally McConnell-Ginet (1978) almost two decades ago as characteristic of women's speech:

- (8) I feel like definitely the timbre of my voice has a lot to do with it. I don't know, the ability to sound like, I hate to say it, feminine and kind of that lilting quality, and to sound like you're really enjoying it, like you're turned on and you're having a good time. I think that has a lot to do with it because they're always telling me, "Oh yes, you have such a great voice! God, I love listening to your voice!" I think that's a big part of it, it's just the sound of the person's voice. Some people will tell you that they really like detail and lots of description, and so I can provide that too. But I think so much of it is the way that you say things, more than what you're actually saying. That's kind of funny, you know- sort of an inviting tone of voice.

A third operator, Samantha, a manager of a San Francisco company established in 1990 by a woman and her male-to-female transsexual partner, emphasizes the maintenance work she uses to engage her male callers in a more collaborative exchange, mentioning that she tries to draw out shy callers with supportive questions and comments ("I stop a lot to say things like, 'Oh, do you like that?' You know, that kind of thing. I try to get them to talk as much as I can, because some of these people would sit here and not say one word. And if I get one of those, from time to time I say, 'Hello? Are you still there?'" ). K. G. Fox alludes to the importance of maintaining this conversational attentiveness when she explains, "You got to be in the moment, you got to pay attention, you got to keep it fresh. It's a

performance and you have to stay in time with your audience. After all, it's really a one-person show." To make the fantasy effective, then, these fantasy makers consciously cater to their clients by producing a language that adheres to a popular male perception of what women's speech should be: flowery, inviting, and supportive.

Even though an attentive and nurturing discursive style seems to be the primary posture adopted by the women I interviewed, many of them additionally explained how they embellish this style by incorporating more individualized linguistic stereotypes of womanhood, particularly those of age and race. Samantha, for instance, makes her voice sound "sexy" by performing four different characters: (1) herself, whom she calls Samantha; (2) a girl with a high-pitched eighteen-year-old voice who fulfills the "beach bunny" stereotype; (3) a woman with a demure Asian accent whom she calls Keesha; and (4) a dominating "older woman" with an Eastern European accent whom she calls Thela. That these performances serve to approximate linguistic stereotypes rather than reflect any particular linguistic reality is underscored by Sheila in her discussion below; she identifies the irony in the fact that European American women are more successful at performing a Black identity on the phone lines than African American women are:

- (9) Most of the guys who call are white, definitely, and for them talking to someone of a different race is exotic and a fetish, you know. So it's really weird. They have this stereotypical idea of how, like, a Black woman should sound and what she's gonna be like. So frequently, we'd have women who were actually Black and we'd hook them up, and they wouldn't believe the woman, that she was Black, because she didn't sound like that stereotype. So conversely, what we had to do- I remember there was this one woman who did calls and she had this sort of Black persona that she would do, which was like the total stereotype. I mean, it really bugged me when I would hear her do it. And the guys loved it. They really thought that this is what a Black woman was!

Sheila's irritation with her colleague's performance points to the restrictive nature of the discourse; operators must vocalize stereotypes that cater to the racist assumptions of their clients. Because the vast majority of male callers request European American women, Sheila explains that operators must also know how to sound "white" on the telephone. That women of color are often more successful than white women at doing so is underscored by the remarks of a second manager I interviewed, who acknowledged that

“the best white woman we ever had here was Black.” Certainly this is a very different realization of ethnic “passing” than that discussed by Mary Bucholtz (this volume), whose interviewees overtly resist such stereotypes, voicing their own assertions about their identity rather than affirming the expectations of the observer. On the fantasy lines, in contrast, we have the somewhat unusual situation of speakers’ being able to perform others’ ethnicities more “successfully” than their own. This fact not only points to the strength of stereotyping in the realm of fantasy but also demonstrates the inseparability of race and gender in the public reception of an identity.

This inseparability is particularly evident in the phone-line performances of Andy, a thirty-three-year-old Mexican American bisexual who poses as a female heterosexual before his male callers. As with the women interviewed for this study, Andy finds that his conversations are well received when he projects a cultural stereotype of vocal femininity: not only is he attentive to the desires of his unsuspecting caller, but he also projects a “soft and quiet” voice.

- (10) Believe it or not, it’s important to them that you’re basically in the same mood as they are, that you’re enjoying it too. So if you can sound like you are, then that’s the better, that’s always the better. And the other thing I’ve found over the years is it’s better to sound soft and quiet than loud and noisy ... if you’re a woman. ... [It’s] better to sound ((whispered)) soft, you know, softer. ((in natural voice)) You know, like whispering, rather than ((in loud voice)) OH HO HO HO, ((in natural voice)) really loud, you know, and scream-ing. ‘Cause basically you’re in their ear. And physically that’s a very strange thing also. Because with the phone, you know, you are in somebody’s ear.

To convince callers of his womanhood, Andy style-shifts into a higher pitch, moving the phone away from his mouth so as to soften the perceived intensity of his voice. This discursive shifting, characterized by the performance of the vocal and verbal garb associated with the other sex, might more appropriately be referred to as *cross-expressing*.<sup>17</sup> The parallel between such an undertaking and the more visual activity of cross-dressing becomes especially apparent in the excerpt below, when Andy performs a European American woman whom he calls Emily:

- (11) So here, I’ll give you the voice, okay? Hold on. (4.0) ((in high pitch, soft whisper)) Hello. (2.0) Hello? (2.0) How are you? (1.5) This is Emily. ((in natural voice)) See? It’s more- it’s more nostrily. I higher the phone- I lift the phone up. Right now I’m just talking regular but

I do have the phone lifted up higher. ...And then I lower my vocals (3.0) ((inhales, then in slow, high, breathy voice)) Hello:: Hi:: ((gasps)) Oh yes! (0.5) I'm so horny right ^no^:w... ((in natural voice)) It's funny how I've actually taped myself and then played it back, and it's actually two separate voices.

Andy's use of the term *the voice* for his female persona is telling. On the phone-sex lines, person and voice are indistinguishable, with the latter coming to substitute for the former. He begins the conversation by tailoring it to his interactant's state of mind (*Hello. Hello! How are you?*), even before offering up his own name. The phone receiver itself becomes an extension of his vocal apparatus, as he moves it away from his mouth and simultaneously lowers his voice so as to achieve the varied pitch range he associates with European American women's speech.

But female heterosexuality is one of the few constants in Andy's cast of phone-sex characters. He presents himself variously as Asian, Mexican, African American, and Southern, catering to the desires of individual callers. As with his performance of women's language, he garnishes his speech with features hegemonically associated with particular ethnic groups.

- (12) And then when I put the other little things into it, like- if I want an Oriental, then I have to put a little- you know, then I have to think Oriental sort of ((laughs)) and then it comes out a little bit different. Well it's- for example, okay- (1.0) ((in alternating high and low pitch)) hull^o^:: ^hi^i::, ^how are^ you::? This is Fong ^Su^u:. ((in natural voice)) See? Then you give them like- I think like I'm ((laughs)) at a Chinese restaurant, and I'm listening to the waitress- you know, take my order or something. And then the Hispanic is more like ((clears throat, in high breathy voice)) He:|lo::, this is *Ésta es Amelia, cómo estás?* (.hhhhh) *o::h lo siento bien*, (1.0) *rica*. ((in natural voice)) Then I think I'm like watching Spanish dancers or Mexican dancers- you know, with their big dresses? ((sings)) da:: dadada da:: dadada- the *mariachis*. (1.5) And then the Black is a little bit- you know, on and on it goes. [My Black name is] Winona-Winona. Like from the Jeffersons? No, I mean- not the Jeffersons, it was uh- the one guy, Jay-Jay? I can't remember the show name, but anyways the sister was named Winona or Wilona or something like that. And then there's the Southern sound, you know, and then like I say, there's a British sound and a French sound. For the Southern woman I'll use, like, Belle, ((laughs)) something Belle. ((laughs)) Oh, I play right up to it sometimes. ...You definitely have

to use ((in slow Southern accent, with elongated vowels)) a Sou:::thern a::ccent. ((laughs, in natural voice)) Absolu:utely, that has to come through. Shining. So that's a real concentrator, I have to really- you know, be really quiet.

Andy models his Asian persona on a submissive waitress, adopting a quiet voice that serves to highlight the inequality between himself and his conversational master; his voice, perhaps in attempted imitation of a tonal language, moves back and forth between two distinct pitches. His Mexican voice, in contrast, which he models on a flamboyant Spanish dancer, is more overtly sexual; with breathy inhalation and emphatic pronunciation, he manages to eroticize a number of very common Spanish expressions. Because the success of the interaction depends on the middle-class white male caller's ability to recognize the fantasy frame, the operator's language tends to recall dominant instead of localized gender and race ideologies—ones often deemed highly offensive by the group to whom they are ascribed.

Yet the fantasy maker, while admitting the often degrading nature of such an enterprise, nevertheless views her employment of this language as powerful and identifies her position in the conversational exchange as superior. The operators who participated in the study reported that they are completely in control of each conversation: they initiate and dominate the conversational exchange; they are creators of the fantasy story line and scenario; they can decide what kind of fantasies they will entertain; and they can terminate the conversation with a simple flick of the index finger. Indeed, Natalie Rhys (1993), a phone-sex worker in San Francisco who recently wrote about her experiences in the book *Call Me Mistress: Memoirs of a Phone Sex Performer*, comments that the real victims in the exchange are the customers, who feed their time, energy, and money into a noncaring enterprise that exploits them: "To the workers, pornography is a job no more exciting than any other job. To the owners and managers, it's a business. Both feel superior to the customers. If this attitude seems calloused, consider that it's difficult to have much respect for someone when the only contact you have with him is when you're exploiting his neediness. You might have compassion for him, but not respect" (119).<sup>18</sup>

In accordance with this outlook, most of the women I spoke with described their work first and foremost as artistic. Sheila calls herself a *telephone fantasy artist*. Rachel, whose self-definition is reproduced below, describes what she does for a living as *auditory improvisational theater on the theme of eros*:

- (13) I'm a good storyteller. A lot of what I do is wasted on most of these people. They're not bright enough to know some of the words I use. And then about every fifteenth call is one that makes it worthwhile. Because it's someone who will go, "God, you're really good at this! You really use language well! This is fun! I was expecting this to be really weird, but you're cool!" I have a large vocabulary. I read a lot and I'll use other words. I don't own a television. I think that's a big part of my greater command of language than the average human being. And since I've gotten into this, I've also decided that if I'm going to be a storyteller, I'm going to study more about storytelling. I've listened to Garrison Keillor for years, and in the last year or so, I've taped him several times and listened for the devices that he's using to be a more effective storyteller.

This particular operator has written erotica for a number of years and identifies herself primarily as a *good storyteller*. She explains that she actively incorporates storytelling techniques into her own fantasy creations, imitating Garrison Keillor of *Prairie Home Companion*, as well as a number of other well-known storytellers. She and the other fantasy makers would often jokingly refer to themselves as *phone whores* and their switchboard operators as *phone pimps*, but they did not perceive the conversational exchange as representative of any particular asymmetrical sexual reality. Like the woman in this excerpt, who mentions her "large vocabulary" and her "greater command of language than the average human being," the operators interviewed felt that they were so superior linguistically to the average man who called the service that male power was just not an issue. The only exchanges they did perceive as asymmetrical, and in which they consequently did not like to participate, were those domination calls where the male caller overtly restricted their freedom of expression by limiting their feedback to a subservient *yes sir* and *no sir*. Many of the women refused to take these calls altogether, although one operator did say that these low verbal expectations did at least allow her to get a lot of dishes done.

Still, the same fantasy operators would readily admit that they had to subdue their own creativity in order to please a comparatively uncreative audience. The fantasy maker above who considers herself a storyteller, for instance, explained that her linguistic creativity makes her less popular than some of the other fantasy operators because she often refuses to adopt the expected "stupid, pregnant, and dumb" voice:

- (14) If I'm in a surly mood and I get a call from a guy who sounds like he just let go of his jackhammer and graduated with a 1.2 average,

you know, I have a hard time with those guys. I mean, they need love too, but Jesus! Dumb people bug me.... It's hard to realize that you're a lot smarter than whoever it is you're dealing with, and number one, if you're really bright then you won't let them know it, and number two, if they do figure it out, then you're in trouble, because they don't like it, especially if it's a man. I mean, that's just the way it is. Girls are supposed to be stupid and pregnant, or just dumb, so that the testosterone type can get out there and conquer the world for you, or whatever it is that they do. ... I'm approaching this from the angle that I want to be a better storyteller, I want to increase my linguistic abilities. But that isn't what the average customer wants.

Another operator similarly explained that she had to "be constantly walking that line" between embracing a sexuality for herself and catering to customer expectations of her sexuality. Interesting in her interview, reproduced in excerpt (15), is that she describes her clients' perception of women's language as a submissive sexual position:

- (15) I wonder if it really is women's language or is it mostly that we're repeating what it is that the men want to hear and want to believe that women like and think. I think it's more what's in their heads. You know, scenarios where I'm being mildly submissive, even though they don't call it that, and they're like calling me a slut and a horny little bitch.... It's a total turn off, I never think of myself that way. And that definitely goes through their heads.... So having to sometimes sort of like repeat their ideas back to them because it's what they want to hear can be a drag. So sometimes it's more my idea than my language and sometimes it's there and it's what they're reading out of these stupid magazines, you know, that they really want to believe women are like.... It's interesting to be constantly walking that line where you're trying to make sure they're happy and please them and get them off and at the same time- you know, for me, I want to do my best not to perpetuate all the bullshit that goes on in their minds. It is a difficult task sometimes. It's a challenge to come up with ways that you can still turn them on without perpetuating all the bullshit about women that they believe.

She realizes that the male fantasy of female sexuality is so firmly rooted within our culture that even though she tries not to perpetuate it, there is



little she can do to dispel it. Her feeling is also shared by Andy. He states that being a man has given him more liberty to speak against such degradation, yet he also recognizes the negative influence such attitudes have had on him as an individual:

- (16) What I think has bothered me over the years more than anything about it has been the degradation of women that I've had to kind of feel because of the way [men] think and feel towards women - a lot of them. You know, there is a lot of degradation involved and basically it filters over to you if you're not careful, and you could yourself either feel degraded or degrade others. [I think I notice this] more than the girls, because the girls are interested, I think, in just pleasing, you know, and trying to do the best they could on the call, whereas I feel that I'm beyond doing good on the call.

Both Sheila and Andy speculated that for the male callers this interactive fantasy was in some sense very real, evidenced by the dismay of those callers who for some reason came to suspect that the voice on the telephone was not the beautiful young blonde it presented itself to be.<sup>19</sup> It seems that although these employees are aware of and wish to break away from the negative stereotypes about women's language and sexuality, they are restrained by their clients' expectations of the interaction, and they must therefore try to strike a balance between employing a creative discourse and a stereotypical one.

### Conclusion

What exists on the adult message lines is a kind of style shifting that is based primarily on gender and secondarily on variables of age, class, geography, and race. When on the telephone, the fantasy-line operators in this study, whether Asian American, African American, European American, or Latino, switch into a definable conversational style that they all associate with "women's language." Bourdieu (1977) might argue that these women, as "agents continuously subjected to the sanctions of the linguistic market," have learned this style through a series of positive and negative reinforcements:

Situations in which linguistic productions are explicitly sanctioned and evaluated, such as examinations or interviews, draw our attention to the existence of mechanisms determining the price of discourse which operate in every linguistic interaction (e.g., the doctor-patient or lawyer-client relation) and more gener-

ally in all social relations. It follows that agents continuously subjected to the sanctions of the linguistic market, functioning as a system of positive or negative reinforcements, acquire durable dispositions which are the basis of their perception and appreciation of the state of the linguistic market and consequently of their strategies for expression. (654)

According to Bourdieu, speakers develop their strategies for expression through their experiences within the linguistic market, a notion that he refers to elsewhere as *habitus*. In their interactional histories (e.g., at school, in the family), the female fantasy-line operators have received positive reinforcement for this particular style of discourse and are now, through additional reinforcement within the workplace, selling it back to the culture at large for a high price. Like examinations and interviews, fantasy-line conversations are situations in which linguistic production is explicitly sanctioned and evaluated. If the operator fails to produce the appropriate discursive style (one that is feminine, inviting, and supportive), she will lose her clients and therefore her economic stability. But for such a style to be so overtly reinforced within this particular medium of discourse, the same reinforcement must exist within the larger public, so that women at a very early age begin to, in the words of Bourdieu, "acquire durable dispositions" toward this particular strategy of expression.

The question then follows: How can current definitions of linguistic power account for the fact that on the fantasy lines, speech that has been traditionally thought of as "powerless" suddenly becomes a very powerful sexual commodity? Many of the authors represented in this volume have followed Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet (1992, this volume) in arguing that discussions of gender should be located within particular communities of practice. By studying the local meanings attached to interactions, researchers will develop a more flexible understanding of gender—an understanding that allows for variability of meaning within and among communities. These San Francisco-based fantasy-line operators challenge theories that have categorized women's language as powerless and men's language as powerful. Within the context of the adult-message industry, women have learned that manipulating the female conversational stereotype can in fact be powerful, and sometimes even enjoyable. It potentially brings them tens of thousands of dollars; it allows them to support themselves without having to participate in a patriarchal business structure; it lets them exercise sexual power without fear of bodily harm or judicial retribution. Clearly, there is another dimension to power besides the dichotomy

of oppressor-oppressed. To say that all women are powerless in sexual interaction, as MacKinnon does, or to say that all women are powerless when they assume a role traditionally thought of as subordinate in a conversation, denies real women's experience of their situation. The women quoted in this chapter view the success of their exchange in terms of how creative they can be in fulfilling a fantasy. Although they recognize that they often have to perpetuate the girly-magazine stereotype of women to maintain a clientele, they consider the men who require this stereotype so unimaginative that to attribute any power to them in the conversational exchange is ludicrous. This somewhat ironic state of affairs indicates that any theory of linguistic power in cross-sex interaction must allow for a variety of influences with respect to individual consent.

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#### Notes

1. This figure is given in Maretz (1989); it is quite likely that today's revenues are significantly higher.
2. Compare the less-sexualized term *smooth talk*, which is often used in reference to the genteel flattery employed by a participant in a business transaction. The term can of course be sexualized in certain situations, but it is usually men, not women, who are said to have "smooth-talked" their partners into bed. Similarly, when the term *sweet talk* is used in reference to men, it often implies that the goal of the talk, rather than the talk itself, is sexual. See Smitherman (1994) and Major (1994) for commentary on the use of this expression in the African American tradition.
3. Mata Hari, whose original name was Margaretha Geertruida Zella, acted as a

spy for the Germans during World War I. She hid her middle-class Dutch origin from her French audience, representing herself instead as the daughter of an exotic dancer in Southern India. By learning a vast repertoire of sultry dances with erotic movements, Mata Hari became so successful as an espionage agent that her name has become a synonym for the beautiful *femme fatale* who uses sex appeal to extract military secrets from men. I am grateful to Anna Livia for suggesting this parallel.

This estimate is somewhat conservative. I have based it on a 1988 estimate (134 *Congressional Record* E271, daily ed., February 17, 1988) that the dial-a-porn industry grossed \$2.4 billion between 1983 and 1988. Even with the 1992 governmental regulations, which according to Stern (1993) caused 900-number revenue to drop from a reported \$980 million to \$540 million, more than \$270 million of this is nevertheless attributable to the phone-sex industry. The industry is clearly continuing to thrive. An article in the *Economist* (July 30, 1994, p. 64), for example, reports on the expansion of the phone-sex industry overseas; telephone companies earned \$900 million in 1993 from international services, around 90 percent of which was phone-sex lines.

5. I have used the term *vocal* throughout this chapter when referring to telephone discourse in order to underscore the oral nature of this type of pornographic representation, distinguishing it from both visual representation (e.g., adult videos, adult photography) and writing.
6. That an obscenity judgment is necessarily subjective is nicely illustrated by Justice Stewart's well-known observation: "I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description; and perhaps I could never succeed in doing so. But I know it when I see it" (*Jacobellis v. Ohio*, 378 US 184, 197 [1964]).
7. For an outraged critique of the Supreme Court reception of the 1989 amendment, see the article by pro-pornography activist Pat Califia (1992). Recent legal reviews of the decisions surrounding the phone-sex industry include Burrington and Burns (1993), Davis (1993), Dee (1994), and Woolfall (1994).
8. The antagonism between these two views is said to have divided American feminism into the misleadingly labeled camps of "antipornography" radicalism and "pro-sex" liberalism. I have simplified the history and import of this theoretical division considerably; see Bacchi (1990) for an illuminating discussion of these two strands of feminist thought.
9. In accordance with the definition of obscenity established in *Roth v. United States* (354 US 476 [1957]) and refined in *Miller v. California* (413 US 15 [1973]), the Minneapolis code defines *obscene* as the following: "(i) That the average person, applying contemporary community standards, would find that the work, taken as a whole, appeals to the prurient interest in sex of the average person; (ii) That the work depicts or describes, in a patently offensive manner, sexual conduct specifically defined by the clause (b) [clause (b) includes representations of sexual intercourse, "actual or simulated," "sadosomachistic abuse," "masturbation," and "physical contact or simulated physical contact with the clothed or unclothed pubic areas or buttocks of a human male or

female.”); (iii) That the work, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value.”

10. This potential is pointed out by the female character in Nicholson Baker’s (1992) best-seller *Vox*, a novel that has as its story line a single conversation between a female caller and a male caller to an adult conversational service: “Well, I like [the telephone] too,” she said. “There’s a power it has. My sister’s little babe has a toy phone, which is white, with horses and pigs and ducks on the dial, and a blue receiver that has no weight to it at all, and I find there is an astonishing feeling of power when you pretend to be talking to someone on it. You cover the mouthpiece with your hand and you say in this dramatic whisper, ‘Stevie, it’s *Horton the Elephant* on the phone. He wants to speak to you!’ and you hand it over to Stevie and his eyes get big and you and he both for that second believe that Horton the Elephant really is on the phone” (58).
11. This information is quoted in Potter (1989:453); the original source is *Carlin Communications, Inc. v. FCC*, 749 F2d 113, 114 (2d Cir 1984).
12. The transcription conventions used in this chapter are adapted from Gail Jefferson (1984):
  - h        an *h* indicates an exhalation (the more *h*’s, the longer the exhalation)
  - .h        an *h* with a period preceding it indicates an inhalation (the more *h*’s, the longer the inhalation)
  - (0.4)    indicates length of pause within and between utterances, timed in tenths of a second
  - a - a    a hyphen with spaces before and after indicates a short pause, less than 0.2 seconds
  - sa        a hyphen immediately following a letter indicates an abrupt cutoff in speaking
  - ))        double parentheses enclose nonverbal movements and extralinguistic commentary
  - ( )        single parentheses enclose words that are not clearly audible (i.e., best guesses)
  - [ ]        brackets enclose words added to clarify the meaning of the text
  - underlining indicates syllabic stress
  - CAPS    upper case indicates louder or shouted talk
  - :        a colon indicates a lengthening of a sound (the more colons, the longer the sound)
  - ˆ        a period indicates falling intonation
  - ˊ        a comma indicates continuing intonation
  - ?        a question mark indicates rising intonation at the end of a syllable or word
  - ^ a ^    rising arrows indicate a higher pitch for enclosed word(s) or syllable(s)
  - ...        deletion of some portion of the original text
13. There are a significant number of services that advertise to the gay male market, and still others that advertise to the transgender market; only a limited

- number of services advertise to women. For a lively analysis of gay male phone-fantasy production, see Miller (forthcoming).
14. Because these services normally hire their employees by telephone instead of in person, precise statistics on employee identity are unavailable. The manager of a company established in 1990 estimated that the employees at her company were equally divided between European Americans and African Americans, as well as between heterosexuals and lesbians. In contrast, K. G. Fox, who has been involved with the San Francisco phone-sex industry since 1981, indicated that San Francisco employees tend to be middle-class white women, college-educated, between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five; she estimated that 20 to 30 percent of them identify as lesbian and 60 to 70 percent as bisexual or heterosexual.
  15. It is quite possible, indeed probable, that the women who did refuse me interviews felt more negative about the industry; for a less optimistic account, see Danquah (1993). Still, the perceptions of the phone-sex workers I interviewed in San Francisco are strikingly similar to those of the twenty operators interviewed by Simakis (1990) for the *Village Voice*, who, for the most part, speak positively about their experiences in the industry.
  16. The advertising strategies chosen by the men-owned services tend to be much more pornographic and sexually degrading to women than those chosen by the women-owned services. As one manager explained of her own company, "Since there's a woman owning it and another woman managing it, even though we advertise in *Hustler*, we have probably the most tasteful ads in it. The model has on a bikini-type thing, long blond hair, and she's not showing anything. But the rest of them are like, open wide! So there's a little class in it. And [the last four digits of] our number is KISS. So it's presented a little softer, a little nicer." The advertising strategies used by K. G. Fox's company are often subtle as well; one of the company's most successful ads was nothing more than a photograph of a telephone with the phrase *SEX OBJECT* underneath.
  17. Barrett (forthcoming a, b) has noted a comparable instance of discursive style shifting among a community of African American drag queens. Anthropological discussions of analogous performances include Gaudio's article (forthcoming) on Hausa-speaking *'yan daudu* and Hall's (1995a, b, forthcoming a) work on Hindi-speaking *hijras*. For a discussion of verbal cross-expressing in computer-mediated interaction, see Hall (forthcoming b).
  18. A very different perspective on the power differential between caller and operator is offered by Harry Goldstein (1991) in his sort article "The Dial-ectic of Desire": "The psychological effects of performing as a tele-sex operator are comparable to, if not more insidious than, being a flesh and blood prostitute, simply because working as a disembodied masturbation enhancement device denies the worker all sense of individuality and a large measure of control. ... Though most operators cling to the illusion that they control the call, in reality it is the man at the other end of the line, fingering his Gold Card and stroking himself to glory, who wields the mental paint brush, rendering his Perfect Woman on the blank canvas of the operator's voice" (33).
  19. In support of this statement, I had an interesting interaction, at the time I was

conducting this study, with my next-door neighbor, who in response to my project told me about "all the sexy women" he had seen in the 900-number advertisement section of *Penthouse*. When I later told him that all the women in my study had been hired by voice alone and had never met their employers, he responded in disbelief, "What? You mean it's all a scam?"

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