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Reinventing Identities: The Gendered Self in Discourse

Edited by Mary Bucholtz, A. C. Liang, and Laurel A. Sutton

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New York Oxford

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

1999

Purchasing Power

The Gender and Class Imaginary on the Shopping Channel

Language and gender in popular culture

The vexed question of women's position in popular culture has been answered, broadly speaking, by two opposing schools of thought within feminism. In the predominant, text-based approach, cultural forms—newspapers, magazines, advertisements, films, television shows, music—are mined for patriarchal ideologies in structure and content (e.g., Modleski 1991; Mumford 1995; Winship 1980). The utility of textual analyses is confirmed by the continuing resonance of this critical work in women's lives. Nevertheless, such interpretations are brought up short when they expand their scope to include women not only as the objects of popular representation but also as the consumers of them. Given the sexism inherent in popular culture and uncovered in earlier scholarship, women's enthusiastic participation in what is widely understood as "their own oppression" is frequently viewed as deeply problematic. Explanatory theories predicated on women's "self-hate" are not uncommon (Douglas 1994), and analyses often hinge overtly or covertly on the class position of the women who are thought to engage most completely in popular culture. Such theories assume that popular culture is the transmitter of monolithic gender ideologies (see discussion in Strinati 1995) and place the feminist analyst at the opposite pole from the deluded, less-than-middle-class female consumer. In response, scholars who are critical of this outcome have issued counteroffensives from a psychoanalytic perspective that emphasizes personal, even autobiographical, pleasure (e.g., Nochimson 1992). Others have moved away from text-centered interpretation altogether, espousing instead a more ethnographic approach that takes "real" women's cultural analyses as primary (e.g., Christian-Smith 1990; Hobson 1980; Radway 1991).

Both positions, however, suffer from a limited understanding of women's identities and relations to the popular: One views the woman-as-consumer as empowered by her quest for pleasure and the other sees her as mired in oppression. Language and gender researchers have not, for the most part, entered into this debate, although they have a great deal to contribute to it. Whereas textual analysis, influenced by literary criticism, considers popular culture only as a set of "texts" or products to be read and ethnographic studies give primacy of place to the individual consumer, the methods of linguistics, and especially of discourse analysis, allow researchers to examine both aspects and thereby provide a more complete and nuanced picture of women's complex relationships to popular culture (see, e.g., Cameron 1995; Talbot 1995). The fundamental insight of discourse analysis is that "texts," or stretches of discourse, take on meaning only in interaction and that, as consumers of cultural "texts," audiences are active participants in this process of meaning making (McIlvenny 1996). In particular, as both Jennifer Coates (chapter 6) and Marjorie Orellana (chapter 3) demonstrate in this volume, women and girls do not unthinkingly consume cultural forms but construct their own meanings and identities in relation to such forms. The crucial contribution of this work is the recognition that, because identities are forged in ongoing discourse, they are not fixed for all time but fluid, often slipping beyond the theory-laden explanations of scholars (see also Goodwin, chapter 20, this volume).

Discourse analysis also calls attention to the specificities of cultural production: Viewed as a set of discourses, popular culture splinters into multiple and sometimes conflicting representations that offer similarly conflicting resources for women's identity construction. New cultural forms that blend or transcend conventional boundaries of genre or register present special challenges to analysts, for they facilitate new identity formations that may contradict traditional feminist analyses (e.g., Hall 1995) or even traditional analyses of gender itself (Barrett, chapter 16, this volume; Hall 1996). The shopping channel—a pastiche of public and private, entertainment and consumption—is an especially rich example of this discursive instability.

As a distinct form of popular culture, home shopping arose with the advent of cable television services and the concomitant expansion of channels from which viewers may select. Although there are or have been several national shopping networks concurrently on the air or in the works that target different markets, such as teenagers, upper-middle-class viewers, and so on, the network that holds the dominant market share (Fabrikant 1994) and from which I take my data is QVC—"Quality, Value, Convenience."¹ Because the network is in many ways the archetype of teleshopping, I refer to QVC generically as *the shopping channel*.

The shopping channel is, in effect, a single continuous commercial for a vast array of products. The linguistic practice that results from this genre is a complex type of public discourse that combines the intimacies of private conversation with the exigencies of the marketplace (see also Richardson 1997). Viewers—who are primarily female—are invited into a homelike setting in the television studio in which professional teleshopping hosts, through a variety of talk-based performances, display and describe merchandise for mass consumption. Models may additionally be employed to display such commodities as jewelry, clothing, and exercise equipment. Although the channel airs regularly scheduled "programs" that focus on particular products, such

as "The Gold Rush" jewelry show, the network's basic format varies little throughout its 24-hour broadcasting day. Viewers participate in this economy by calling the network's toll-free telephone number to purchase products by credit card for home delivery. As the host presents and describes each commodity, the toll-free number is flashed on the screen and the discounted price is displayed while a clock in the corner counts down to the end of the product's availability. The sense of urgency created in this manner is, however, only illusory, because merchandise is made available to consumers repeatedly over the course of several days, weeks, or even longer.

If this were the extent of the shopping channel's offerings, it would be difficult to account for its impact on the cultural landscape and its billion-dollar annual revenue. However, the shopping channel differs from other recent and less successful at-home shopping forums, such as infomercials and the Internet, in its emphasis on audience participation, in which home shopping bears a certain resemblance to call-in talk shows.² This aspect of the shopping-channel experience is nowhere more evident than in the network's use of live, on-the-air telephone interactions between host and shopper. Occasionally, a new caller may be transferred to the host to be welcomed as a first-time teleshopper and to reveal what commodity she has purchased from the operator who took her call. But more often, frequent viewers will call up solely for the purpose of reporting their experiences with a product they purchased through the network. These telephone interactions establish a sense of community between caller and host, and by extension between all viewers and the network as a whole (see also Bucholtz forthcoming). Within this fictive community, callers and hosts discursively negotiate their own and each other's identities in relation to idealized positions of upper-middle-class authority and lower-middle-class authenticity. Callers accrue benefits in terms of both pleasure and power, but at the same time their constructed identities and those of hosts are easily destabilized and reworked within the commercial enterprise of the shopping channel.

Station identification: How to be a smart shopper

Callers frequently describe themselves with labels that link their identities to commodities: Viewers variously admit to being "a gold fanatic," "a bracelet person," "a jewelry-coholic," or simply a "QVC-ite." But such identifications should not be read as lasting elements of a caller's self-conception. These categories take on their meaning only in the context of consumption-based interaction, and within this frame the caller gains credibility as a discerning and experienced shopper. However, it is only by purchasing products offered by the shopping channel that viewers may gain access to the opportunities for discursive authority that the network may provide. Achieving the privileged position of on-the-air interlocutor with the teleshopping host requires a long-term commitment to viewing—and buying. "I've been waiting for six years to talk," states one waiting caller, and another reports, "I've always wanted to talk and I've *nev*—this is the first time I've *ever* been able to talk on the air." The pleasure of discussing shopping on television transcends even teleshopping itself; sentiments like "I'm just thrilled to death" or "This is so much fun!" are very common. These pleasures, of course, are profoundly gendered.

Women are the channel's target audience, as evidenced by the demographic profile of viewers and callers, by the kind of merchandise offered for sale, and by the discursive practices of the program hosts. Hosts speak directly to the camera, addressing the audience as singular *you* and gendering this virtual interlocutor as female, as shown in (1):³

- (1) H This kind of necklace reminds me of something you might wear to like a jazz concert,

The orientation to women prevails regardless of the gender of the host or the gender associations of the product being promoted for sale: Hosts often suggest husbands as potential recipients of gifts purchased from the shopping channel but rarely gender the viewer as a man who might buy an item for himself or as a gift for his wife.⁴

The primacy of women in the shopping channel offers them an opportunity for discursive power that may not be available to them in a less feminized realm.⁵ This privileged status is conferred on experienced teleshoppers, who call in to share their expertise with other viewers. Such callers speak with the voice of authority, which pervades both the content and the form of their discourse, as seen in (2).

- (2) (H = host, C = caller)
- 1 C .h I was calling about the um gold mesh watch?
 2 [I believe]=
 3 H [Uh huh.]
 4 C =it's: (.) twenty six eighty seven,
 5 I'm: not sure. /
 6 H /Yeah./
 7 C /I think that's the number.
 8 I have the gold one.
 9 (.)
 10 H Do you.
 11 C I have to say I get a lot of compliments
 12 I mean these people (.)
 13 I:ook at it twice you know because it's different.
 14 H Mhm.
 15 C You don't see that in the stores./
 16 H /R:ight.
 17 [<That exquisite>]
 18 C [A:nd] uh you know I really I [really]=
 19 H [piece.>]
 20 C =enjoy watching it I would tell anybody to uh (.)
 21 you know to purchase it,
 22 I don't think they'll be disappointed.

In this excerpt, the caller draws on numerous linguistic strategies to project her identity as a seasoned teleshopper. The caller's discourse is designed to bolster her au-

thority by offering arguments in support of her endorsement. After establishing that she owns the item and is therefore qualified to comment on it (line 8), she notes that others covet it (lines 11–13) and that it is difficult to acquire elsewhere (line 15). She concludes with a summary statement about the pleasure she derives from the product (lines 18, 20). The testimonial speech event is characterized by this enumeration of evidence, which is either volunteered by callers or, if necessary, solicited by hosts. Evidence offered in testimonials tends to fall into several broad categories: besides the channel's bywords—quality, value, and convenience—callers attest to products' uniqueness, versatility, and ability to elicit admiration from others. Adept callers manage to incorporate all six of these categories into their testimonials.

Associated with the normative content of testimonials is a set of conventional linguistic practices used both by callers and by hosts. For callers, shopping-channel discourse introduces the everyday, private pleasures of shopping itself into a more public, formal domain in which prior shopping experiences are shared as information for the benefit of other shoppers. This specialized knowledge is imparted with an equally specialized vocabulary that lends an aura of science and seriousness to the shopping enterprise. In addition to greater formality, the register is distinguished by its large descriptive and technical lexicon. Thus *purchase* replaces *buy* in line 21 above; elsewhere callers predict *great enjoyment* for those who buy a recommended commodity or praise a product as *delicate* or *exquisite*. Such word choices also suggest refinement, a displayed appreciation for the finer things in life, which in turn is linked to the complex class relations of the shopping channel (see the following discussion).

As a result of the abundance of descriptors in the shopping-channel lexicon, tremendously dense descriptions are applied to even the most mundane items, thereby producing the heavy noun phrases that typify this register and contribute to its technical tone (example 3):

- (3)
- H It's the seven and a quarter inch Z link tennis bracelet in Diamonique and go:ld and you're gonna absolutely love it.

The register involves additional syntactic quirks that pragmatically invoke shared knowledge. Thus referring terms are often assigned definite determiners even on first mention, signaling that the referent is salient in the discourse, as illustrated in line 1 in example (2) (*the um gold mesh watch*), as well as in example (3). Because home-shopping discourse is reiterative, with the same products offered for sale again and again, the channel's entire inventory of merchandise is perpetually available for mention. Thus it is constantly susceptible to definite marking.

By virtue of this assumption of shared background, speakers may also indicate the discourse relevance of referents in other ways, such as by deleting the head noun phrase in referring expressions, as in the examples in (4):

- (4a)
- C I bought the sixteen inch Figaro necklace?
<26 lines deleted>
- H Well,
→ I'm gl:ad you got the Figaro,

- (4b)
- H What are you buying tonight Lisa?
C Well, I got the advanced order for the P-Pinocchio.
H Wo:nder[ful]
C [Film.]
<102 lines deleted>
H Once again,
→ advanced orders only for our Pinocchio,

In the most extreme invocation of shared knowledge, references to commodities are made without the use of any description at all but rather merely by reciting their catalog numbers, as in Example (5a):

- (5a)
- 1 C I'm ordering.
2 a graduation gift.
3 for my niece,
4 who's graduating from college,
5 H Uh huh.
6 C and she's a very (.
7 <accelerated speech rate> {small blonde} petite (.
8 young lady,
9 H Mhm.
10 C and so I ordered J.
11 two seven.
12 oh seven.
13 six.

The possibility—indeed, the likelihood—of successful reference using a number underscores the fact that membership in the world of the shopping channel is available only to longtime viewers. Any competent participant in the discourse must display this referential facility, a task in which hosts are aided by computer monitors, hidden from viewers, that supply important details about each item as it comes up for sale. Nevertheless, on-the-air telephone interactions can become a test of memory for both callers and hosts, whose conversation may introduce products that do not currently appear on the computer or television screen. In fact, callers who have mastered the shopping-channel discourse may prove themselves to be even more knowledgeable than the experts—that is, the network hosts—as illustrated in example (5b), which continues the exchange begun in example (5a):

- (5b)
- 14 H Two seven oh seven six.
15 Which one is that. /
16 C / That's the: (.
17 H [.h ba- the (. <breathy> yes!]
18 C [the bracelet and necklace,]
19 the three tone? ~

- 20 H Yes.
21 The one that I have o:n.

Using a string of numbers referentially, the caller manages to stump the network host (lines 10–15). But her deft exhibition of discursive competence does not end here: in response to the host's confusion she provides a gloss of the catalog number, *the bracelet and necklace* (line 18), which, with its definite determiner in first mention, is itself part of the home-shopping register. She finally supplies another feature of the register, a headless adjectival phrase, to narrow down the item further still: *the three tone* (line 19). The caller gradually offers additional information, using increasingly specific referring expressions that are characteristic of shopping-channel discourse. In so doing, she prolongs her display of her own competent, insider identity at the expense of the host, who does not recognize the catalog number despite the fact that she is wearing the item under discussion. Such exchanges allow callers to take on interactionally authoritative roles, but this authority is sharply limited and sometimes entirely revoked. The redefinition of callers' discourse is a consequence of how class identities are constructed and projected on the shopping channel.

The shopping channel as a class act

The shopping channel's preoccupation with class positions is reflected in the frequency with which callers invoke the concept, as marked by arrows in examples (6) through (8). (Each exchange is between a different caller and host.)

- (6)
- H Well,
I'm gl:ad you got the Figaro,
it's nice <accelerated speech rate> {to be able to} have a shorter length when
you get into (.)
the uh deeper necklines that come in for spring and summer.
- C Yeah. /
- H /M[hm.]
- C [Yeah.]
- I like the (.) the look of it.=
- =It's real classy.

- (7)
- C I wear- wore it on two job interviews,
.h with a silver gray (.) pinstripe suit,
- H Oo:.
- C And it's just-
- it's so cla(h)ssy.
- H Did you get the job?
- C (.) No.

- (8)
- C Th:ank you:!
- H You're welcome Nancy,
it was my pleasure to speak with [you.]
- C [And-] thank QVC for the
- class.
act.

Callers' approval of class arrangements on the shopping channel, however, is not echoed by the network's outside commentators. A *New York Times* article headlined "Television Shopping Is Stepping Up in Class" opens with the overt snobbery that one would expect from the highbrow *Times*: "Gone are the hallmarks of the current crop of [home shopping] shows: the cheesy sets and dowdy hosts and the hours of hard-sell pitches for budget goods like cubic zirconium rings. . . . Home shopping executives have seen the future, and it isn't the fiftyish housewives from Dubuque" (McMurray 1994).⁶ This excerpt reveals the class dimension of the taste promoted by the shopping channel (cf. Bourdieu 1984), a dimension that is here linked to region, age, and, crucially, gender. However, the journalist, in charging hosts with "dowdiness," confuses the taste that the host professes to have and the class identity that she or he actually displays in self-presentation. This construction of class difference plays out in the network largely through discursive practices of displacement, a strategy for projecting class identities that Stanley Aronowitz (1992) has observed in prime-time television as well. Aronowitz notes that in many television shows working-class identity is displaced onto lower-middle-class characters—for instance, the cop is television's paradigmatic working-class male, although the occupation of police officer is not working class.⁷ An analogous displacement occurs in the shopping channel, where lower-middle-class taste is mapped onto representative middle-class or even upper-middle-class bodies, those of the network hosts. The purposeful mismatch between ascribed taste and displayed identity obscures the obvious class differences between viewers and the idealized consumer typified by the host by suggesting that middle-class status is associated with—and perhaps is even achieved by—the consumption of advertised products.

But the distance between the caller and this ideal cannot be bridged so easily; notwithstanding the premise of an *L.A. Law* episode that first aired in 1994, frequent tele shoppers are not generally granted the opportunity to become telehosts. In the host, the central figure in this drama of consumption, viewers are presented with a middle-class professional who, unlike most callers, speaks Standard English with little or no trace of a regional accent, yet whose reported tastes and consumer desires are representative of the lower middle class. The anomaly of apparently middle-class speakers selling lower-middle-class goods is, moreover, an arrangement that runs counter to the findings of William Labov's (1972) groundbreaking study of speech in New York City department stores. Labov suggests that sales clerks are in lower social strata than the clientele they serve; as he comments in support of his class analysis, "C. Wright Mills points out that salesgirls in large department stores tend to borrow prestige from their customers, or at least to make an effort in that direction" (1972:45). In the discourse of the shopping channel, the opposite influence is

at work: Customers strive for the prestige of the sales representatives (that is, the network hosts). This reversal is partly due to the mediated nature of the shopping channel. Hosts are not simply salespeople but television personalities, not mere facilitators of consumption but role models for consumers. Moreover, department stores and shopping malls increasingly aim at a upper-middle-class clientele, leaving lower-middle-class shoppers feeling that they and their tastes no longer belong. "As the malls have upscaled, they make it more and more uncomfortable for those of us who haven't," remarks a frequent QVC shopper interviewed by journalist Elizabeth Kaye. Kaye's rather condescending article on the network, published in the tony men's magazine *Esquire*, simultaneously reports on and reinforces this apprehension:⁸ "I wouldn't go to Worth Avenue," says a QVC shopper for whom the most ample size sold on QVC, a size 3X—equivalent to size 24—tends to be a trifle snug. 'Salespeople don't expect me to spend money and don't rush to my side. I would feel out of place. I would feel ignored'" (Kaye 1994). Yet even while the taste of the lower middle class is celebrated on the shopping channel, its voice is displaced from the discourse, for it has been taken over by the more authoritative voice of the host, just as the model-like body of the host stands in for the unfashionably large body of the typical viewer.⁹ The displacement of the lower-middle-class voice does not, however, lead to its complete disappearance, because it offers something that the shopping-channel host lacks by definition: authenticity. Viewers' class identifications beyond the shopping channel thus shape their interactional identities within it.

New and improved: Language repackaged

The language of most callers to the shopping channel indicates that they are culturally, though not necessarily economically, located in the lower middle class. That is, most callers have at least enough disposable income to make regular purchases from the network, but the taste that the channel cultivates is decidedly counter to the elite urban, bicoastal aesthetic. The class identity of shopping-channel viewers, however, cannot be read off from audience demographics, which are, in any case, closely guarded by network executives. Rather, it is a construct that emerges interactionally in shopping-channel discourse and, as already seen, in representations of the network in the wider U.S. culture.

Callers' identification with lower-middle-class "Middle America" is manifested in their regional accents and use of nonstandard forms. Examples of these are marked with arrows in (9) and (10):

- (9)
 C Um:,
 → I get a lot of gold from youse,
 and it's beautiful.

- (10)
 C You know another thing I was gonna s-
 → You know them: uh—

- What's her name that (.) uh exercise [person]
 H [Kelly]
 [Moretti]
 → C [Yeah.] You know them: uh—
 → you know for your arms <[amz]>?
 H Yes.
 Oh:.
 C You know I was wondering . . .

Callers to the network construct authoritative identities for themselves on the air, but in the context of the interaction between caller and host what began as a discourse of authority becomes a discourse of authenticity. This reworking is motivated by the fact that expertise is in no short supply on the shopping channel: Hosts are of course well versed in the network register, and their descriptive presentations of merchandise are supplemented by guest appearances by vendors, exercise trainers, celebrities, and other specialists. What the shopping channel lacks, and what viewers' language offers, is authenticity. On a network that sells ersatz diamonds and look-of-leather Western wear, believability is perpetually at risk. The warmth and enthusiasm of hosts can go only so far in fostering the sense that the shopping channel is a world peopled with just plain folks who want to bring viewers quality, value, and convenience. The discourse of the callers, refracted through the lens of class relations, provides this missing element.

Because callers' language is marked for class and region, it assumes a very different value in juxtaposition to the standard, middle-class speech of network hosts. As has been shown in numerous subjective-reaction and matched-guise tests, a middle-class voice carries authority or prestige, but it may lack authenticity or trustworthiness to listeners of lower social classes (for a survey of this research, see Fasold 1984). For this reason, on-the-air telephone conversations with viewers are vital to the network's marketing success.

The following examples illustrate how the linguistic practices of the host come to participate in a discourse of authority and expertise and how the practices of the caller are relegated to a discourse of authenticity and eyewitness testimony. This role assignment is due not merely to the juxtaposition of the two interactants' language varieties but to the discursive efforts of the host.

In (11), for example, the host controls the direction of the discourse, asking the caller to frame her relation to the commodity in terms of pleasurable experiences associated with it (lines 4, 7, 11, 14, 21–26). The host reshapes these reports into a general analysis of the product's quality (lines 29–35). What is paramount in the discourse of the caller, as recast by the host, is authentic experience with commodities and the pleasurable feelings that this experience engenders. The host's discourse, conversely, is characterized by the control of numerous facts about the item.

- (11)
 1 C Um I have K one zero seven nine?
 2 The French white nine-piece?
 3 H Mhm. (.)

- 4 H How do you like it?
 5 C Oh I love it.
 6 I use it for *everything*.
 7 H That's a nice set isn't it?
 8 C Yes,
 9 It is.
 10 (.)
 11 H And uh what is: the thing that you enjoy cooking in it
 12 most?
 13 C [Uh]
 14 H [Or] which of the pieces do you enjoy the most?
 15 C Well,
 16 I I use all of them. h
 17 Um.
 18 I do chicken a lot and um I like using (.)
 19 <low amplitude> {that for that.}/
 20 H /Mhm.
 21 And (.)
 22 do you find um (.)
 23 that if you're using something if you're doing like
 24 chicken on: uh an- any of the pieces like maybe the
 25 the two and a half quart that oval one?
 26 It- everything cooks nice and evenly in it too?
 27 C Yes.
 28 And it seems like it doesn't take as long.
 29 H Right.
 30 You know,
 31 Corning is: has been around forever.
 32 I mean if you (.)
 33 have had any Corning pieces ever in your life you
 34 probably still have them.
 35 Because they're so durable.

At the end of the exchange from which this excerpt is taken, the host sums up the call for the viewing audience, casting it entirely in terms of the caller's emotional response to her ovenware: "Liz was dialing in to tell us she absolutely loves her French white ovenware set," he reports.

Although the caller in (11) seems to acquiesce in the consignment of her discourse to the realm of testimonial, in example (12) the caller actively attempts to position herself as an expert. However, her voice quality undermines this project: her hoarseness throughout the interaction detracts from the authority of her assertion that her ionizer was effective in treating her allergies. Yet the hoarseness undoubtedly lends a good deal of authenticity. The host by contrast maintains a convincing authoritative stance, immediately launching into a lengthy scientific discourse (lines 35-66) in response to a question from the caller.

- (12)
 1 H Hello you're talking to us live on the air,
 2 Who am I speaking with?
 3 C <raspy voice throughout> Uh my name is Joa:n [from]=
 4 H [Joa:n]
 5 C =<city deleted> California.
 6 H How you doing tonight Joan?/
 7 C /All right./
 8 H /Terrific.
 9 Now have you purchased the Amcor?
 10 C Yes, I have two.
 11 H You [do?]
 12 C [As] you can tell from my voice,
 13 I suffer from allergies, /
 14 H /M[hm]
 15 C [and] this is probably the
 16 worst (.) time of season (.) for them,
 17 and I have one in the bedroom /
 18 H /M[hm]
 19 C [and] one in the
 20 family room./
 21 H /Mhm,/
 22 C /and we have about an acre behind us of (.)
 23 nothing but weeds.
 24 H O:h [so]=
 25 C [So]
 26 H =you have the airborne allergies.
 27 C Yes and uh these really have kept me (.)
 28 absolutely free.
 29 I'm able to sleep at night,
 30 to breathe at night, /
 31 H /That's wonderful.
 32 C I do have a question to ask you./
 33 H /Sure!
 34 C Why (.) is it necessary to have it away from the TV?/
 35 H /Oh because
 36 of the electrostatic field that the ionizer causes in this?
 37 It sometimes interferes and disturbs what's gon-
 38 what it's gonna do it's gonna damage your picture tube.
 39 So make sure that you have it I would say away from
 40 your picture tube at least five inches away from your TV.
 41 C [I-]
 42 H [Or] anything else that's electrical like that.
 43 Um: I: would not put it on the same desk as your computer?
 44 C Uh [huh.]

- 45 H [I:] would not put it next to-
 46 next to your radio.
 47 Just make sure it's a couple feet away.
 48 From- from all those (.) app[liances.]
 49 C [How about] a la:mp?
 50 H Oh if it's a touch lamp,
 51 I would keep it a little bit further away
 52 but a regular lamp should be just fine.
 53 As long as it's a lamp with a switch
 54 C Uh huh.
 55 Okay.
 56 [Thanks.]
 57 H [But if] you have a touch lamp I wouldn't put it on
 58 the same desk as a touch lamp [either.]
 59 C [Uh o:kay.]
 60 H It's primarily your uh your audiovisual equipment,
 61 your television,
 62 your V:CR,
 63 your audiotapes,
 64 um your videotapes,
 65 and your computers.
 66 Those are the main items you want to keep it away from.
 67 C Uh huh.
 68 Well I highly recommend it for anyone who suffers from
 69 allergies.
 70 H So you really have noted uh a big difference?
 71 C Oh indeed. [Yes. Uh huh.]
 72 H [Great. Great.]
 73 Well I'm glad we could help you out with it,
 74 and I hope it continues to work for you.

Unlike the caller in (11), who relies heavily on the host to guide her through the interaction, in (12) the caller offers a relatively long testimonial without prompting (lines 12–30). Through such a display she demonstrates her knowledge of the network's discursive conventions. But this assertion of authority does not go unchallenged by the host, who interjects a comment (*Oh: so you have the airborne allergies*; lines 24, 26) that, with its distinctive use of the definite determiner, asserts her own facility with the shopping-channel discourse while simultaneously positioning her as an expert on allergies. The host's own monologue following the caller's question continues across the caller's next bid for the floor (line 41), as well as across her acknowledgments, which are structurally sufficient to close off the sequence (lines 55–56: *Okay. Thanks*; line 59: *Uh o:kay*). The caller's final brief acknowledgment of the host's extended lecture (line 67: *Uh huh*) and her subsequent shift to her own expert discourse (line 68) suggest that she, like many of her fellow viewers, does not merely seek information from a knowledgeable source but hopes to share the spotlight with the host as coauthority. Moreover, the caller's responses to the host are information-oriented, whereas the host's acknowledgments are

primarily emotional (lines 8, 31, 72). Such responses redefine the caller's own turns as personal and emotional, not public and informational.

Another example recorded on a different date also involves the ionizer (recall that the same items come up for sale repeatedly), and again the host positions the caller in the world of feelings rather than of facts. At the same time, she locates herself as an expert despite her earlier appeal to viewers to call in with testimonials, which is referred to in the initial lines of the transcript.

- (13)
- 1 C You wanted to know about the/
 2 H /h /
 3 C /Amcor ionizer?
 4 H [Please.]
 5 C [I uh] <clears throat>
 6 ordered one last year for my pastor.
 7 H Mhm.
 8 C He has (.)
 9 so much trouble with allergies and was having so much
 10 difficult speaking you know [on Sundays]=
 11 H [Sure.]
 12 C =and other times.
 13 So.
 14 So I kept seeing this so I decided I'd order one and
 15 give it to him,
 16 and he has had very little trouble with his asthma since.
 17 .h And has thoroughly enjoyed having it.
 18 H Ruth you are a very very sweet person.
 19 A lot of times when .h someone is having a:l:lergy
 20 problems they go to the doctor and and they take the
 21 allergy shots and the medication and everything.=
 22 =A lot of doctors actually will recommend <pats machine>
 23 {something like this,}
 24 an ionizer air cleaner,
 25 because they really do make a difference.

In this exchange the caller reports her experience as an expert (lines 1, 3: *You wanted to know about the Amcor ionizer?*), and she goes on to say at the end of the conversation that she has called in because "I just thought it might be a little bit *different* than most of the calls that you get." But the host immediately recovers the authority for herself by launching into medical discourse (lines 19–25)—the network frequently dispenses medical advice that inevitably involves the purchase of advertised goods. (Note also that this move toward "scientific" discourse is again associated with the shopping-channel register's use of definite determiners: *they take the allergy shots and the medication and everything*; lines 20–21). Her positive evaluation of the caller also serves to effect this shift of authority: She praises her not for being knowledgeable but for being "sweet."

Some assembly required:
Competing constructions of identity

The ease with which hosts may reframe callers' discourse, however, does not guarantee that their own discourse is invulnerable to similar reframing. On the contrary, callers may also evaluate hosts in terms that bring their social identities to the foreground. These practices level the asymmetries between host and caller, placing both in the same discursive position as participants who may be evaluated. In my previous research on media discourse, I argued that the flexibility of mixed discourse genres such as panel discussions (or teleshopping) offers resources for participants' construction of their own and others' interactional identities (Bucholtz 1993, 1996). There I suggested that the conversational features of some public discourse genres enable participants to introduce apparently irrelevant aspects of social identity into the discourse. The earlier articles demonstrated that this strategy may be carried out in opposition to the institutional power of the media and its representatives. By contrast, in shopping-channel discourse, callers use discursive reframing to achieve solidarity with the telehosts, but, as in the panel-discussion study, they do so by eradicating interactional and social power differentials between participants (see also Tannen, chapter 11, this volume, for a discussion of the interrelationship of power and solidarity).

In offering a testimonial, callers may produce different kinds of evaluable utterances, each of which elicits a different evaluation structure from hosts. When a caller makes a general statement about a product's virtues—usually in the present tense and with generic rather than personal pronominal forms—the evaluative response takes the form of a confirmation of truth value (such as *Right*), as in the following excerpt from example (11), which is renumbered as (14). Here the host draws out a somewhat reticent caller; after he proposes an appropriate testimonial form, the caller contributes a testimonial of her own, to which the host responds with a confirming evaluation, marked with an arrow.

- (14)
- 26 H It everything cooks nice and evenly in it too?
27 C Yes.
28 And it seems like it doesn't take as long.
29 → H Right.

In positioning the caller's testimonial as evaluable the host also positions himself as an expert who is entitled to evaluate such utterances. Likewise, in (15), the host elicits a testimonial from the caller and then provides an evaluation.

- (15)
- H What do you like about the the tricolored jewelry,
where you have the silver and the rose and the y-
yellow gold./
C /<breathy> {You can wear it with anything!} /
H /Mhm.
→ That's right.

In other instances, callers' testimonials may be cast not as general statements of truth but as personal revelations marked by first-person pronouns and simple past- or present-tense verb forms. Such statements are met with emotional responses from hosts, as exemplified in (16) through (19), which are extracted from earlier examples:

- (16) = (4a)
C I bought the sixteen inch Figaro necklace?
...
H Well,
→ I'm gl:ad you got the Figaro,
- (17) = (4b)
H What are you buying tonight Lisa?
C Well, I got the advanced order for the P-
Pinocchio.
→ H Wo:nderful
- (18) = (12), lines 29–31
C I'm able to sleep at night,
to breathe at night, /
→ H /That's wonderful.
- (19) = (12), lines 70–74
H So you really have noted uh a big difference?
C Oh indeed. [Yes. Uh huh.]
→ H [Great. Great.]
→ Well I'm glad we could help you out with it,
→ and I hope it continues to work for you.

Finally, hosts may evaluate callers not only on informational or emotional terms but also on the basis of their character and competence, as in line 18 of example (13) (*Ruth you are a very very sweet person*) or in (20):

- (20)
- C It was great to talk to you.
It's the first time I got to talk!
→ H You did a great job.

It is at this more personal level that hosts themselves become vulnerable to evaluations by callers. Such evaluations comment on hosts' communicative competence in performing their duties on the air by discursively locating them within broader social categories, such as gender and race (examples 21 and 22):

- (21)
- C <breathy> {It's a pleasure} to talk to you,
you're my very.
fa:vorite.

- H Thank you.
 [(I appreciate that.)]
- C [You always do] such a wonderful job,
 but you're always just so-
 .h pre:tty,
 and (.) always so upbeat,
- H Oh well thank you.

(22)

- C Uh I just wanted to tell before I start off with what I want-
 what I called [for]
- H [Mhm]
- C is that you have such a pleasant—
 I'm sure you've been told this before—
 a pleasant speaking voice,
 especially for this hour of the mor[ning h]
- H [Oh thank you.]
- C And you're very articulate,
 you know?
 When you present something?/
- H /Oh thank you.

In (21) the caller describes the host's appearance and behavior in gendered terms (*you're always just so-h pre:tty, and (.) always so upbeat*), while in (22) the caller focuses on the host's linguistic abilities: his "pleasant speaking voice" and the fact that he is "very articulate." Given that the host is one of the few African Americans on the shopping channel, the caller's evaluation conjures up a larger cultural stereotype about the speech of African Americans.¹⁰ In praising the host's "articulate" speech the caller invokes European American assumptions of African American speech as nonstandard and "inarticulate."

Such examples demonstrate that although the hosts act as physical and linguistic exemplars of the middle class, their lower-middle-class audience feels qualified to evaluate their performance of this identity along lines of gender and race. Callers' approving comments about hosts therefore serve as a second kind of testimonial; in fact, the shopping channel explicitly encourages the commodification of those who pitch its products. When QVC shoppers phone in their orders, operators poll them about their host preferences, and hosts are awarded bonuses on the basis not of sales, as on the Home Shopping Network, but of their popularity among viewers. In light of this arrangement, callers may ultimately have greater power to evaluate the language of hosts than the reverse.

Conclusion

The complexities of language and identity on the shopping channel point up the limitations of traditional feminist approaches to popular culture. Textual analyses are

likely to interpret the shopping channel as monologic and to discount the active role that shoppers assume in on-the-air telephone conversations. Feminist theories that center on pleasure, however, may fail to see that callers' construction of interactional authority is not unfettered, for callers do not control the means of linguistic production. Thus women's discourse in mass culture faces far more constraints than exist in alternative cultural forms such as zines (see Sutton, chapter 8, this volume; cf. also Cotter, chapter 19, this volume). Even feminist discourse analysis may suffer from certain blindnesses, for by taking the interaction of host and caller as the central problematic it may render the larger corporate structure invisible.

Monotonic research methods tend to yield monotonic—and sometimes monotonous—results. Having cleared the ground with numerous well-focused studies of language, gender, and identity, feminist linguists may be ready to recognize the virtues of "quick-cut camerawork"—analyses that bring multiple aspects of the social world into focus in rapid succession, cutting away before the analyst can make a final pronouncement on their meaning. Particularly in the investigation of complex discursive matrixes such as the shopping channel, such a healthy unsettling of analytic focus may bring into relief the numerous ways that facets of identity combine and recombine in late modern culture.

NOTES

I am grateful to John Bucholtz, Colleen Cotter, Kathryn Galyon, Jennifer Gurley, Kira Hall, Robin Lakoff, Anita Liang, and Laurel Sutton for their invaluable help during the researching and writing of this chapter.

1. Among these are several other QVC channels, including a health network, a channel aimed at a younger and more affluent audience (onQ), and the Fashion Channel, which evolved into Q2 and then collapsed back into QVC's main program; Penney's Shop Television Network (later bought by QVC); Montgomery Ward's Valuevision; Spiegel and Time Warner's Catalogue 1; Fingerhut's "S" The Shopping Network; Black Entertainment Television's BET Shop; Time Warner's Full Service Network; TWA's Travel Channel; Microsoft and TCI's computer channel; and shopping channels associated with MTV, Macy's, and Nordstrom. Home shopping has also gone international in recent years, mainly through joint ventures with QVC itself. Shopping networks have been proposed or have aired in Canada, England, Germany, Japan, Mexico, Norway, and Spain, among other places.

Although many similarities exist between QVC and its main competitor, the Home Shopping Network, the latter is aimed at a working-class audience and engages in hard-sell techniques. QVC, by contrast, employs more conversational and information-oriented discourse forms. As I will argue, QVC's audience appeal is largely due to its reliance on this format.

2. Another limitation of online shopping is that women, who are the primary targets of such services, are less likely than men to use computers (White 1994). Such considerations may have been an obstacle to the unveiling of QVC's computer shopping service, Q Interactive.

3. All names in transcripts are pseudonyms. Transcription conventions are as follows:

- . end of intonation unit; falling intonation
- ,
- ? end of intonation unit; rising intonation

!	end of intonation unit; high intonation
-	self-interruption; break in the word, sound abruptly cut off
—	self-interruption; break in the intonation unit, sound abruptly cut off
:	length
<u>underline</u>	emphatic stress or increased amplitude
(.)	pause of 0.5 seconds or less
h	exhalation (e.g., laughter, sigh); each token marks one pulse
.h	inhalation
<>	transcriber comment; nonvocal noise
{ }	stretch of discourse over which a transcriber comment applies
<[]>	phonetic transcription
[]	overlap beginning and end
/	latching (no pause between speaker turns)
=	no pause between intonation units
→	text under discussion

4. Despite the relative dearth of men on the shopping channel (marketing researchers estimate that no more than 30 percent of viewers are male, and the figures are even lower for callers and hosts), they play a central role in the network's discourse, as I discuss elsewhere (Bucholtz forthcoming).

5. It has been suggested to me that this authoritative discourse is particularly prized because it may be rare in viewers' lives outside of the shopping channel, but I am extremely reluctant to make this claim in the absence of any supporting evidence. Indeed, it seems likely that callers' authoritative identities emerge in shopping-channel discourse not because such identities are lacking elsewhere in their lives but because they are already developed and available for use in a new discursive realm.

6. The irony of this assertion is evident in hindsight: Following CEO Barry Diller's highly publicized expansion of QVC, profits dropped sharply. The network has since returned to its roots among middle-aged, lower-middle-class suburban women.

7. See Bonnie McElhinny (1995) for a discussion of the historical and social processes that have led to this shift in class position.

8. That an article on teleshopping would appear in such a venue may seem odd but is in fact entirely consistent with the assiduous efforts of class-conscious publications to differentiate their readership from the lower middle class. Editors of the *New York Times* in particular seem to be fascinated by QVC: In addition to dozens of news articles, the *Times* has run at least three teleshopping-related features in its Sunday magazine over the past 5 years.

9. Kaye (1994) reports that the most popular women's clothing sizes on QVC are 18 and 20.

10. On the Home Shopping Network, only three of thirty-seven hosts are African American (Hayes 1995); QVC's figures may be slightly higher.

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From Folklore to "News at 6"

Maintaining Language and Reframing Identity through the Media

The linguistic subdisciplines of language and gender on one hand and language preservation on the other have rarely overlapped despite their shared concern with the relationship between language and identity. The traditional lack of interaction between the two fields is attributable to biases on both sides: language and gender scholars overwhelmingly study speakers of English and other thriving Western languages, and researchers of endangered languages are generally more focused on cultural and linguistic identity than on gender identity. Yet the revitalization of a minority language that is on the brink of extinction provides a rich opportunity to consider gender and other aspects of identity in a particular situation of use, and gender-based analyses may suggest promising new directions for language-maintenance programs. The approach in this chapter involves a blend of ethnographically and interactionally oriented examinations of language and culture, the language being both the Irish language and the discourse forms specific to media, and the culture being the symbolic referents of the community within Ireland, as well as the practices and norms of the discourse community of media practitioners.

From the turn-of-the-century emphasis on collecting folklore to the turn-of-the-millennium focus on integrating the Irish language in "modernizing" domains such as the news media, proponents of Irish language and identity have long appropriated textual strategies for renewing what are considered to be irreplaceable resources. In the process, women's roles in the public domain—if not entirely their voices—have expanded, so that their presence and fluency with media forms currently reflect their status as full participants in a prestige sphere. The analysis of the news data under consideration here, taken from Irish-language radio, is an attempt to illustrate that competence in the use of media-specific discourse forms accords women (and men)