

VOWELS AND NAIL POLISH: THE EMERGENCE OF LINGUISTIC STYLE IN THE PREADOLESCENT HETEROSEXUAL MARKETPLACE¹

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The challenge of a theory of linguistic practice is to locate the speaking subject within a social unit in which meaning is being actively constructed, and to investigate the relation between the construction of meaning in that unit and the larger social structure with which it engages. It is for this reason that Sally McConnell-Ginet and I (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992) have called for using the community of practice as the site for the study of language and gender. A community of practice, as defined by its originators, Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991), is an aggregate of people who, through engagement in a common enterprise, come to develop and share ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values — in short, practices. For the sociolinguist, the value of the construct ‘community of practice’ resides in the focus it affords on the mutually constitutive nature of individual, community, activity, and linguistic practice. For the student of language and gender, it offers the possibility to focus on the local construction of gender—to see how gender is co-constructed with other aspects of identity, and to identify what one might abstract from this as gender.

In the following pages, I will briefly sketch a series of events and developments, as a community of practice within a cohort of preadolescents moves through fifth and sixth grades². Originating in a loosely assembled collection of childhood playmates and

¹ This paper appears in Natasha Warner, Jocelyn Ahlers, Leela Bilmes, Monica Oliver, Suzanne Wertheim and Melinda Chen eds. (1996). *Gender and Belief Systems*. Berkeley: Berkeley Women and Language Group, 183-190.

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classmates, this community of practice develops in the form of a heterosexual crowd. The crowd's membership and practices are in continual and rapid flux as its members jointly move towards adult social heterosexuality. I will focus on the emergence of a local style among the female participants in this crowd—a style that they see as “teen” style but that others, depending on their point of view, might see as reflecting gender, ethnicity, class, attitude. Through an account of some day-to-day events, I hope to describe the nature of stylistic development, the interconnection of language with style in action and appearance, and its role in the co-construction of gender, class, age, ethnicity, and a number of interrelated terms of identity. These events take place at Hines Elementary School, a school in Northern California serving a low income, ethnically heterogeneous student population composed primarily of Mexican Americans, Asian Americans, particularly Vietnamese, and smaller numbers of African Americans, South Islanders, white Anglo Americans and other groups.

The passage from childhood to adolescence brings the emergence of a peer dominated social order. In the process, the very meaning of gender is transformed since it brings, most saliently, a transition from a normatively asexual social order to a normatively heterosexual one, transforming relations among and between boys and girls. While heterosexuality is quite commonly viewed as an individual development, observing preadolescence makes it quite clear that heterosexuality is above all a social imperative (Rich 1980), and changes in individual relations between boys and girls are mediated by a cohort-based heterosexual market. In *Gender Play*, (1994) Barrie Thorne documents the beginnings of the heterosexual market in elementary school. She notes the frenetic engagement in pairing up, fixing up, and breaking up; and girls' engagement with the technology of femininity—coloring nails and lips, frequently with age-appropriate semi-pretend cosmetics such as lip gloss and felt-tip pens; and the rejection of childish games.

The transition into a heterosexual social order brings girls and boys into mutual and conscious engagement in gender differentiation, in the course of which boys appropriate arenas for the production of accomplishment, and girls move into the elaboration of stylized selves. Both boys and girls come to view themselves as commodities on the heterosexual market, but while boys' value on the market is tied to the kinds of accomplishment that they have been cultivating throughout childhood, the girls' value is tied to the abandonment of boys' accomplishment, and the production of style and interpersonal drama. Girls become engaged in the technology of beauty and personality, learning to use a range of resources in which language use is elaborated along with the adoption of other resources such as nail polish, lip gloss, hair style, clothing, and new

walks. It is not uncommon in fifth grade to see girls and boys running around, making sudden movements, rolling on the floor or throwing themselves to the ground, using their bodies in much the same way. Increasingly in sixth grade, girls stop running and start monitoring their facial expressions, striking feminine and dramatic poses, adorning and inspecting their hands in a disembodied manner, arranging their breasts. And boys begin to subdue their facial expressions, control their hair, spread out their shoulders, develop deliberate tough or athletic walks and flamboyant moves on the athletic field or court, consciously deepen their voices. The process of objectification affects both boys and girls, as they work to produce value as complementary commodities on the market. But the nature of this complementarity is not neutral but involves qualitative changes in girls' place in the world. As boys take over casual playground sports, girls replace vigorous physical playground activity with observing, heckling, and occasionally disrupting boys' games, and with sitting or walking around in small and large groups. The practice of walking around has in itself symbolic significance. Moving away from the crowd and walking around slowly, intensely engaged in conversation draws attention to those who do it, by contrasting with the fast movements of their peers, with play, with the larger groups engaged in games, and with the louder tone of children's talk. This walking, furthermore, is a visible occasion on which girls engage in intense social affiliation activities, negotiating heterosexual pairings and realigning friendships.

Not everyone is engaged in the heterosexual market. Indeed, the market is located locally within particular communities of practice— heterosexual “crowds.” While any dyad or triad of girls can walk around and talk, only certain girls' walking and talking will carry status. The crucial ingredient is the public knowledge that they have something important to talk about—that the social relations they are exercising in their talk are important social relations—those of the emerging heterosexual crowd. The boundaries of the crowd are quite fluid, and part of community practice is the management of participation, marginality, and multiple membership. In particular, since among the girls much of the activity has to do with realignments, the management of fluidity is central to community practice. Thus it is not simple engagement in heterosexual social practice that signals the entrance into adolescence, but the cohort-wide co-construction of social status and heterosexual practice. Furthermore, the development of a “popular crowd” that is by definition heterosexual brings the cohort, simultaneously, into engagement with the world beyond the age cohort. Participation in the heterosexual market offers new possibilities for the construction of a public persona. The crowd dominates the public sphere, partially by inserting the private sphere into it. Heightened activity and style draw

attention to those who are engaged in it, and makes their private affairs public events. In this way, they take on status as public people. This “going public” is a crucial component of the process of maturation taking place in this age group. Such things as girls’ trips to the mall, and gang-oriented territoriality, are primarily about inserting and viewing the self as an independent agent in the public domain.

Both the negotiation of heterosexuality and relationships in general, and the technology of beauty and personality, become professional areas, in which girls are recognized as more knowledgeable than boys. Since it is still new and mysterious, this knowledge is respected and a source of status and admiration from both boys and girls. Heterosexuality is, in some important sense, a girls’ pastime, engaging girls more among themselves than with boys. Boys play a more passive role in the process, leaving the girls to do much of the initiating, and frequently passively participating in girls’ strategies. One boy, for example, broke up with his girlfriend of six months at the request of her friends, who wanted to punish her for being “a bitch.” There is an excitement about all this realignment, about venturing into the unknown. Seeking legitimate agency, girls opt for power and excitement in the heterosexual market. Seeing that they won’t gain recognition for the pursuits that boys are taking over, girls choose to call the shots, and to become experts in a whole new arena. Girls become heighteners of the social, breathing excitement into heretofore normal everyday people and situations, producing desire where none was before. The direction of all this energy to the sphere of social relations throws girls into a conscious process of stylistic production as they jointly construct group and individual styles, and in the process propel themselves into the public arena. This stylistic production brings together resources from a broad marketplace of identities, merging aspects of gender, ethnicity, age-appropriateness, heterosexuality, class, immigration status etc. into one highly meaningful local style.

Linguistic style is a way of speaking that is peculiar to a community of practice—its linguistic identity (California Style Collective, 1993). Briefly put, style is a clustering of linguistic resources that has social meaning. The construction of a style is a process of bricolage: a stylistic agent appropriates resources from a broad sociolinguistic landscape, recombining them to make a distinctive style. In this way, the new style has a clear individual identification, but an identification that owes its existence to its life in a broader landscape of meaning. Above all, that style is not simply a product of community practice—it is not just a way of displaying identification—it is the vehicle for the construction of this identification. It is precisely the process of bricolage that allows us to put together meanings to construct new things that are us and that place us in relation to

the rest of the world. This process of bricolage takes place within communities of practice, and to a great extent is the joint work of the community and of the tensions between individual and community identities. I relate the following series of vignettes in order to illustrate the emergence of a complex style as the age cohort moves into heterosexual social practice. This emergence of style is accomplished in a complex interplay between group and individual identity and style (see Wenger, forthcoming). In the following account, I focus on the interaction between Trudy, a stylistic icon, and the home girls, the community of practice that is most prominent in her school-based activities.

In February of fifth grade, as I walked out of the lunchroom onto the playground, Trudy and Katya, who normally played Chinese jumprope at recess, rushed over and invited me to come with them. They told me that they no longer always played at lunch time—sometimes they just talked instead. Katya said “just talk” with a hunch of her shoulders, wide eyes, and a conspiratorial grin. They led me over to some picnic tables, telling me behind their hands that what they talk about is boys, and that Trudy is “with” someone. Once we were seated on the picnic tables, Trudy and Katya hesitated, giggled, and looked around conspiratorially. Trudy then whispered behind her hands, informing me that it was Carlos that she was with, and then told us both that he had kissed her. Katya “ooooo”ed and looked wise. I asked where he’d kissed her and she laughed uproariously and pointed to her cheek. We sat for a few more moments, and then went off to play hopscotch.

A few weeks later, as I was playing Chinese jumprope with Alice and two other girls, Trudy, Katya and Erica came along and tried to join in. Alice, whose rope we were using, said they couldn’t join. In a fashion reminiscent of the way in which boys occasionally disrupt girls’ games Trudy and Erica jumped into the circle both at once, taking giant leaps onto the rope, creating chaos and laughter, simultaneously outjumping Alice and dismissing the game. Alice got upset and folded up the rope. This was the last time I ever saw Trudy play a “child’s game.” This is not to suggest that the transition away from kid stuff is abrupt—Trudy may well have played Chinese jumprope at home some more, as adolescent behavior is slowly incorporated into day-to-day practice. A year later, for example, Trudy reached into her low-slung baggy jeans to show me her new sexy lace underpants, saying, “Yesterday I wore kid pants” (meaning cotton pants).

Trudy moved quickly into the world of teen behavior, of heterosexuality, flamboyance, and toughness. She took to walking around the playground with a group of girls, talking

and heckling a group of boys as they played football. Together, this group of girls and of boys came to constitute a highly visible, predominantly Mexican American, heterosexual crowd. Trudy became a key player in this crowd, flamboyant in her style and highly active in pursuing relationships among both girls and boys. As fifth grade drew to a close and sixth grade took off, crowd activity progressed fast and furiously, as male and female pairings were made and broken, as girls' friendships shifted, and as drama built with girls accusing each other—or girls outside the group—of “talking shit,” and kissing or trying to steal their boyfriends. Trudy emerged as a stylistic icon: she had more boyfriends (serially) than anyone else, she was more overt in her relations with her boyfriends, she dressed with greater flair, she was sexier, tougher, louder, more outgoing, more innovatively dressed, and generally more outrageous than any of her peers. The highly prominent style that became Trudy's hallmark was simultaneously an individual and a group construction. The heterosexual crowd supported Trudy's activities, providing the social landscape, the visibility, and the participation necessary to make them meaningful. At the same time, Trudy made meaning for the crowd and for its members individually and severally, her actions drawing others into the adolescent world, taking risks in their name.

After school one day, a small group of girls fussed over Trudy, who was crying because her boyfriend had told someone that he wanted her to break up with him. “He won't do it himself, he wants me to do it,” she sniffed. The assembled group of admiring and sympathetic girls criticized the boyfriend. “That's what he always does,” said Carol. Sherry said “He just uses girls.” Trudy sniffled, “I like him so much.” In her heartbreak, Trudy established herself as way ahead in the heterosexual world—as having feelings, knowledge and daring as yet unknown to most of her peers. At the same time, she gave Carol and Sherry the opportunity to comfort her, to talk knowingly about her boyfriend's perfidy—to participate in the culture of heterosexuality. In this way, her flamboyance propelled Trudy and those who engaged with her into a new, older, sphere.

After the breakup, Trudy “got with” Dan. “I love Da:n,” she kept saying in my ear, the vowel nice and backed, “I love Da:n.” During hands-on science, my tape recorder sat turning in the middle of the table. Every once in a while Trudy leaned forward to the microphone and whispered, “I love Da:n.” Her group asked me later if I'd listened to the tape—they asked, with a frisson, if I'd heard what she was whispering. Her pronunciation of the vowel in Dan has special significance. In Northern California Anglo speech, /ae/ is splitting into two variants (Moonwomon 19#), raising before nasals and backing elsewhere. Latino speech is set apart from other local dialects with the lack of

such a split—all occurrences of /æ/ are pronounced low and back, and this pronunciation is commonly foregrounded as a stylistic device.

One day, a group of girls sat at the edge of the playground complaining that there weren't any cute boys (i.e. the boys in their class were hadn't become cute over the summer). As they talked, they kept their collective eye on the boys who were goofing around nearby. One of them pointed out that there was one cute boy, at which point they all called out in unison, "Sa:m!" As they intoned his name, pronouncing the vowel long and low, the girls attracted Sam's attention as well as that of the group of boys. They moved on to make humorous observations about other boys, and about each other's activities with boys, hooting loudly after each observation in a kind of call and response. The boys began to get agitated, and Jorge yelled something at them. Trudy stood up, stuck out her butt at him and called, "Kiss my ass, Jorge, you get on my nerves!" Linguistic devices, such as the pronunciation of /æ/, the meat of studies of variation, take on their social meaning in use—in the occasions on which they are given prominence in connection with social action. Trudy's use of language, like her use of other aspects of style, has a special status. Her flamboyance is a platform for the construction of meaning of all sorts. As other girls report her actions to each other, as they take on bits of her style, they are propagating sound change (the backing of /æ/) along with the meaning that Trudy and her community of practice have imbued it with. This meaning, though, is constructed not for the vowel in isolation, but for the larger style.

As sixth grade got under way, the girls' crowd expanded, and dubbed itself the "home girls." They took to greeting each other with a hug—in the morning as they arrived at school, and as they emerged from their different classrooms at recess, as they split up at the end of recess, and before they went home at the end of the day. At first awkward and self-conscious gestures among Trudy and a small handful of friends, the hugs spread and became stylized—a brief one-armed hug became the favorite. This greeting clearly indicated who was part of the crowd and who was not, at the same time that it endowed the crowd with an air of maturity. Fortuitously, in an attempt to regulate unwanted physical contact among students, teachers and administrators "outlawed" hugging when it began to spread, conveniently imbuing the hug with mild defiance as well. Hugging, therefore, had additional value as an act of defiance—particularly as the girls, on the way to the playground at recess, took to stopping by one classroom to give a quick hug to other home girls who were being kept in from recess because of unfinished work or misbehavior.

Girls' open defiance towards teachers was incorporated into home girl style in the course of sixth grade. But most girls found it difficult to display defiance in the classroom, and once again Trudy stepped in for them. Her defiance, however, only verged on being openly rude, and aimed to be an entertaining stylistic display. One day, for example, the teacher went around the class asking students how they rated a report they had just heard. Trudy was inspecting her long red fingernails, and clicking them loudly on her desk to the admiration of many in the room. The teacher called out, "Trudy?" Trudy answered, "What." The teacher, mishearing, said, "Did you say 'two'?" Trudy said, "No. I'm all 'what.'"

Trudy sprawled across her table, squirming and calling out unwanted answers and comments to the teacher. She told me she had had too much chocolate at lunch and she was feeling "hyperactive." When PE finally arrived, she burst onto the playground, jumping on and off a picnic table shouting "whassup? whassup? whassup?" She climbed on the table, struck a pose with hips out, told me she'd beaten up Sylvia "because she's a bitch," and gave me a blow-by-blow story of the fight that would have put any tough guy to shame.

One day, Alicia entered the classroom, standing unusually tall. She strolled over and rested her fingertips on my table, tilted her head back, hand on hips, and said, "Whassup?" In this way she signaled to me that she was now hanging with the home girls.

All of these—the ritual hugs, the greetings, the songs, the accusations, the fight stories—are part of an emerging style. The transition into a heterosexual social order brings boys and girls into mutual and conscious engagement in gender differentiation, in the course of which girls move into the elaboration of flamboyantly stylized selves. The development of flamboyant linguistic style is a key part of this elaboration, and inseparable from the emerging use of other aspects of gendered style such as nail polish, lip gloss, hair style, clothing, and new walks. These stylistic endeavors are inseparable from the construction of meaning for the community of practice, and from the construction of an identity for the individual as a participant in that community. At the same time, they are what provide the emergence of the adult from the child—and for girls, the transfer of meaning and excitement from the physical to the social. What is particularly important about this entire process is that what will later be adult endeavors with grave consequences, are initially engaged in for a kind of childish excitement and then for a sense of power in the heterosexual market, with no clear view of the subordination

that lies around the corner. The development of an adolescent persona is a gradual process that begins with playing with small stylistic components—nail polish, a watch, a hair arrangement, a pose, a dance step, a facial expression, a phrase, a pronunciation, a song. It begins with the development of “attitude” toward boys, transforming them into objects, in relation to which one can display new styles of behavior, and play out scenarios. Initially a terrain for the development of new initiative, it gradually transforms into a discourse of female objectification and subordination.

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