

How White Hegemonic English Reproduces Racial and Gender Hierarchies

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This paper shows how a local linguistic practice, which I call indexing the underspecified center, directly constitutes, reproduces and conceals racial and gender hierarchies by tapping into interlocutors' uncritically examined, hegemonic ideologies about what kind of social identities occupy the unmarked, rhetorical "center" in North American society.

1.0 Introduction

How is the normality, the centrality, the unmarkedness, and the neutrality of whiteness and hegemonic masculinity reproduced in face to face interaction? This paper describes the linguistic details of how users of elite rhetorical inquiry center whiteness and Hegemonic Masculinity (Connell 1987; Kiesling 1999, 1996) as well as directly reproduce racial and gender hierarchies owing to the linguistic structure of elite rhetorical inquiry itself.

2.0 Elite Rhetorical Inquiry

Elsewhere (Clark 2000, 1998, 1996) I have described the attempts of a high school teacher, himself a law student, to apprentice his students into using elite rhetorical inquiry as part of his law school's pro bono, community-outreach program.

What is elite rhetorical inquiry? What does it sound like? From a distance, interlocutors of elite rhetorical inquiry seem to talk as if they are reliable spokespersons for "the truth", as they often discuss propositions devoid of narrative histories and personal involvement. Scott Kiesling and I independently came up with the terms "godlike objectivity" (Clark 1998:118) and "deity mode" (Kiesling 1996) to describe what Thomas Kochman has described as the "white mode" of public debate; that is the discussion of ideas "as though those ideas had an objective life, existing independent of any person expressing them" (Kochman 1981). Beyond these impressionistic terms, what are some of the linguistic details of elite rhetorical inquiry or, to use Kiesling's term, White Hegemonic English (Kiesling 1999:2)? Example 1 shows the teacher from my study, Len, modeling this style for the students during class discussion of obscenity as an area where the First Amendment does not protect the Freedom of Speech.

(1) Setting: "Street Law" class in urban public high school on the U.S. east coast, 1993.

Students are African Americans of both genders, ages 15-19.

Teacher (L): African American male, graduate of private high school, elite university and law school, ±25

Student (J): African American male, 17

Student (A): African American female, 17

01 L: So Juan is they- [raunchy rap videos] are they obscene, should they be taken off, or are they not obscene and they should stay on, or--

02 J: Well, they doin' their *thing*. (*laughter*) They alright.

03 A: They, they do anything they gotta do to sell their lives.

In initiating inquiry on whether raunchy rap videos should be considered protected speech under the U.S. Constitution, Len does not elicit the students' opinions on this, nor does he--as the students do in turns 02 and 03--focus inquiry on the local, concrete motivations of the video dancers. Rather, Len asks the class whether the videos partake of abstract, nominalized "obscenity." The processes of passivization ("be taken off") and the lack of a human semantic experiencer for

the predicate “obscene” (<obscene to *whom*?>) further drain Len’s inquiry of human reference. Contrast Len’s depopulated rhetoric with the students’ response, which eschews abstraction and focuses on relatively concrete human actors.

A closer inspection of the linguistic details shows how he indexes such a powerful identity for himself and the students. In a word, Len constructs this rhetorical position from what is missing in his utterance, and what is missing are people. First, he uses the passive construction in saying “should they be taken off” (turn 1) and, in so doing, deletes the semantic AGENT of the predicate ‘take off.’ The deletion of the semantic AGENT in passivization is a well-known linguistic process that has both pragmatic functions (such as focus, economy of production) and ideological functions, as critical linguists Fowler and Kress (1979) have demonstrated. That is, without the explicit mentioning of the AGENT, it is not transparent *who* is doing the ‘taking off.’ Indeed, this paper’s topic concerns the ideological functions not only of passivization, but also of the deletion of other human reference from the surface.

In addition to the missing semantic AGENT of the predicate ‘take off,’ there is another predicate in turn 1 whose semantic argument the teacher does not explicitly state. Following generative *theta theory* (Radford 1988), the adjectival predicate “obscene” requires or “selects” an argument, just as the verbal predicate “take off” selects the thematic roles of AGENT and PATIENT. In this case, the name of the semantic role that “obscene” selects is EXPERIENCER, defined by Radford as “an entity experiencing some psychological state” (1988:373). In other words, a raunchy video is not just obscene, it is obscene to someone. Yet Len does not explicitly index any human EXPERIENCER for the predicate, “obscene.” Example 2 also illustrates how Len depopulates his rhetoric.

- (2) Teacher (L): African American male, graduate of private high school, elite university and law school, ±25
 Student (A): African American male, 15
 Student (L): African American female, 19

01 L: But is, “Pop that Coochie” [a raunchy rap video] a valuable idea or information?

- 02 A: To some people.
 03 L: Well, some people like it.
 (...)
 04 L: So you think those videos should be banned, you think MTV is right when it snatches all those videos off?
 05 L: Well, I don’t think so because I have a lot of brothers and they like that stuff so you know I just want to look at them and let them look at them too.

In this example, Len’s omission of a human EXPERIENCER for the predicate “valuable” stands out as the students supply the missing human entities, experiencing the psychological state of valuing something. Turn 04 similarly contains an agentless passivization structure, followed, albeit, with an explicit AGENT, MTV, snatching the videos off the air. Moreover, the personally distanced, depopulated texture of Len’s utterance is in contrast with Lakesha’s richly populated and personal response.

Len and other speakers of elite rhetorical inquiry downplay their own overt presence in relationship to the positions they are espousing, favoring questions and statements that pass off their propositions as autonomous objective truths rather anchoring their views to themselves or others. This practice plainly marks the subjective status of their opinions, as in 3(a) versus 3(b) in the following illustration derived from example 2:

- (3) a. <Pop That Coochie (is) a valuable idea or information (to
 ????)>
 b. <(Pop That Coochie is a valuable idea or information) to
 some people>

In example 3(a), the teacher (Len) does not explicitly state a relationship between the proposition and himself or any other human entity as the students do in 3(b). I argue that because such predicates assign *theta* roles regardless of whether or not their complement appears on the surface, Len *is* indexing a entity. The question becomes: Whom or what is Len indexing to fill those *theta* roles? The answer, I propose, is that Len is indexing what I call the “underspecified center.” Indexing the underspecified center is a rhetorical strategy in which “elite”

rhetoers at once distance themselves from opinion they are offering by not providing any overt linguistic indices toward themselves or any other human entity, while simultaneously insinuating themselves as qualified to speak on behalf of that “objective center.”

In indexing that abstract and omnipotent agentive entity that is capable of taking the videos off the air in example 2, or in indexing the abstract EXPERIENCER capable of judging what is “obscene” or “valuable,” Len insinuates himself and his interlocutors as worthy of speaking on behalf of this center. In their inquiry, they are no mere holders of opinion; rather, they are “spokespersons for the truth.” Len is operating, and encouraging the students to operate, in this deity mode in which one elevates an opinion to a godlike pronouncement of truth.

A local effect of this process, a process, also described in Keiko Emmett’s paper on the rhetorical practices of Japanese business folk (Emmett this volume), is a sort of autoexaltation of the speaker. Indeed, her findings indicate that use of “objective”-sounding, theme-oriented opinions are so exclusively the domain of social superiors (in dyadic and triadic talk) so as to be almost an indexical marker of power and status. This then is one local effect of indexing the underspecified center.

3.0 Constituting, Re/producing and Concealing Ideologies of the Center

I argue that beyond this local effect, this process forces interlocutors to fill these missing semantic roles with humanlike stand-ins derived from that location described by Pierre Bourdieu (1996) as the *habitus*. The *habitus*, as I understand it, is the repository of a socially-constructed individual’s deeply-sedimented, pre-reflective notions of how the world is. These commonsensical beliefs are conservative in the broadest sense of the term. The role of the *habitus* in social reproduction is greatest in real-time, face-to-face interaction¹ when interlocutors are burdened with the many demands of “doing interaction.” Burdened by the manifold demands of face-to-face interaction, while operating with a limited amount of short-term memory, what counts for “thought” on the interlocutors’ parts comes from the *habitus*,

¹ Including finding the “right words,” employing the correct syntactic, pragmatic and discourse structure, attending to the visual and/or verbal backchanneling responses of the interlocutor, “bathing oneself and one’s interlocutor” with the proper amount of deference and intimacy (Silverstein 1996), etc.

which is, as Erickson (1995) has suggested, a kind of practical consciousness. The *habitus* is not *unconsciousness*, but neither does it consist of more than a fraction of the fuller, more reflective awareness that humans are able to bring to bear with the more time and fewer demands that one finds while, for example, reading a written text. The *habitus* is not a hotbed of critical reflection. (Allwood this volume). Rather, it is the domain of the commonsense. Commonsense notions about which social groups and practices constitute the center would then be among those notions stored in the *habitus*. It is, then, from the *habitus* that interlocutors fill in the semantic roles missing in the surface structure of elite rhetorical inquiry; it is the *habitus* that provides the notions for what kind of person is capable of judging something to be valuable and reasonable or what kind of person is capable of banning the broadcast of raunchy rap videos.

3.1 The Center as White

Recent studies of white identity or “whiteness”² in America (Waters 1990; Frankenberg 1993; Roediger 1994; Weis & Fine 1994) show that whites and non-whites alike construct white identity to be the racial and cultural norm or “center” in North American society. In that white people are colorless (as opposed to “people of color”), “non-ethnic” (as opposed to ethnic), and “cultureless” (as opposed to people of a given culture), white identity acquires a neutral-insinuating centrality. Support for these findings of whiteness occupying an unproblematic center in American life comes from both historical texts³ and the received stereotypes—and their flouting⁴—of what constitutes, say, “all-American good looks.”

² See Hyde 1995 for a review of Waters 1990, Frankenberg 1993, Roediger 1994.

³ Witness “the American” as “Anglo-Saxon,” “Christian,” and male in the following excerpts, from a former president of a prestigious Ivy League University, entitled *The American As He Is* (Butler 1936):

“The first and chief cause (of the unity of an American type of mind) is the extraordinary persistence of the Anglo-Saxon impulse (...). It was in northern Europe, between the Vistula and the Rhine, two thousand years ago, that the impulse which finally made a great nation on the North American continent took its origin(...). Despite the large Irish, German, Slavic, Italian, Scandinavian, and Jewish additions to the original American population, the Anglo-Saxon impulse holds its own, (...). The original and persistent Anglo-Saxon impulse, now nearly two thousand years old, may conceivably lose its force. Its capacity to subdue and assimilate the alien elements brought to it by immigration may possibly be exhausted.” (pp. 3,4,5, 57)

“The United States is both in law and fact a Christian nation” (p.47)

⁴ An advertisement showing a picture of a Japanese American or a Native American

3.2 The Center as male

Abundant evidence in gender studies points out how maleness occupies a central, default position in the indexing of occupations, positions of authority, strength etc. A host of studies cited in Macrae, Stangor and Hewstone (1996:201-203) indicate that not only are the bizarrely named “masculine generic” linguistic forms overwhelmingly interpreted as being male-specific (terms such as “all men are created equal,” “each according to his need”), but also that terms *not* overtly marked with masculine gender--such as “anthropologist”---elicit consistently more male interpretations than a hyphenated “gender-neutral generic” term such as “male/female anthropologists” (Stahlberg, Sczesny, Otto, Rudolph & Sorgenfrey 1994).

Similarly, until recently, Anglo-American juries and courts had tried and decided tort law cases using the “reasonable man” construct. Most American courts have since replaced the ‘the reasonable man’ with the gender-neutral “reasonable person” or “the average person” in order to promote neutrality. While evidence exists that the textual use of gender-neutral generics over masculine generics does increase the perceived salience of women in society (Stahlberg et al. 1994; Bem & Bem 1973), it does so at the price on concealing the gendered male stereotype behind the gender neutral term. And once masked, the critical capacity to name the obvious sexist biases in deciding certain cases is frustrated. Accordingly, in *Rabidue v. Osceola* 1986, the Sixth District Court of appeals rejected the female plaintiff’s claims that her male supervisor’s sexually explicit gestures, innuendo and prominently displayed nude photos of women constituted sexual harassment because the “reasonable person” would view these things as harmless social interactions. In such cases, the clear, gendered identity of “the reasonable person” standard is revealed as male in that “the reasonable woman,” the court decided, would not view these behaviors as harmless social interactions.⁵

under the banner ““all-American good looks,” or the featuring of an elderly African American as the sole photograph on the cover of a book entitled *The American Experience* would derive their persuasive and expressive chutzpah precisely from the flouting of the received stereotype.

⁵ Indeed, the Ninth Circuit Court in *Ellison v. Brady* 1991 established the “reasonable woman” as the standard by which sexual harassment in the workplace is to be judged in the United States, citing that a supposedly gender-neutral standard “tends to be male-biased and to systematically ignore the experiences of women” (*Ellison v. Brady*, 924 F.2d 872 Ninth Circuit 1991, quoted in Sanger 1992).

In the same way that whiteness is seen as an American cultural norm and even gender-neutral, generic uses of language, such as ‘anthropologists’ and ‘reasonable person,’ do not fully decenter their preferred masculine interpretations, so must the identity of the underspecified center be understood in the North American context as white and male, among other attributes. Therefore, indexing the underspecified center as part of an overall “elite” rhetorical strategy of insinuating the center directly reproduces racial and gender hierarchies even at the microlinguistic level; interlocutors, lacking explicit and specified human actors to fill out semantic arguments (i.e., <a valuable idea or information to *whom*?, *Who* should take those videos off the air>) are forced to fall back on underspecified, generic entities. These entities, located in the *habitus*, in turn tend to index white, male subject positions that, returning to the local site of cultural production (e.g. a classroom debate), ask the interlocutors to evaluate the propositions at hand from these white male subject positions. For clarity’s sake I have outlined the cycle in an overly deterministic fashion. Indexing the underspecified center should not be considered synonymous with indexing white male subject positions. As Erickson (1995) reminds us, despite prior cultural learning and the prior-constructed constraints on the local social actors’ available choices, the human social actor still has a choice in the matter, yet the result of their choosing is probably social reproduction rather than resistance and change.

4.0 Coda

In Bonnie McElhinny’s (1999) study of police officer accounts of affirmative action policies, she noted how often police officers, especially white police officers, either remained silent or found themselves at a loss for words in discussing affirmative action hiring policies. The following example from her study shows an example of this phenomenon, which she calls “The Art of the Incomplete Utterance.” In this example, a white female police officer is pointing to all the spelling errors on police reports in response to the ethnographer’s question about how affirmative action hiring practices have affected the police force:

(4) Police Officer: female, white, ±35

I mean this is all easy shit you’re supposed to learn in grade school. I mean I’m not telling you who they ARE but (.) but hhh we’re gonna make it easier for those people to come on the job (.) so (.)”

Here, notice how the interlocutor must assign pronominal reference (“they,” “those people”) to an antecedent that is not only not present but also that the speaker explicitly refuses to name. Following McConnell-Ginet (1984), McElhinny points out that she or any other interlocutor is obliged to consult with one’s own inner, hegemonically racist script in order to fill in the antecedent as African-American.

Like indexing the underspecified center, the interlocutor is obliged to refer to an oppressive grand narrative of taken-for-granted white supremacy and black lack just to make sense of what the police officer is talking about; just to provide an antecedent for the underspecified references. Unlike the process that I’m describing herein, however, I would argue that this example is so important and so highlighted--indeed by the police officer herself--that the listener may well have the time and short-term memory available to scrutinize the proposition without being limited by the pre-reflective limits of the *habitus*, and can therefore interrupt or resist the reproduction of racism, at least on the listener’s part. In contrast, supplying human referents for “valuable,” “obscene,” and “take off” in the examples from my study, or the pronoun “we” in this most recent example, are comparatively mundane tasks--tasks, however, which real-time interlocutors must, on some level, attend to. It is here that the *habitus*, in all of its pre-reflective terror and glory, reigns supreme. For even if, at a glance, the interlocutor is able to interdict the racist logic of the police officer’s argument, she is likely to miss that the “we” in question here is likely to be indexed as white (double-meaning intended). Linguistic anthropologists must, therefore, study the most mundane details of everyday, real-time interaction (as well as the more floridly odious examples of hate speech) in order to interrogate the reproduction of centering some while excluding others.

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Racial and Gender Hierarchies

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