

“Tom-boy talk,” Girls from the ‘Cité’, and the Limits to Gender as Performance*

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This paper analyzes girls’ use of competitive verbal performances, slang, and ritualized insults that are associated with masculinity in the stigmatized space of a French cité, or low-income housing project. In addition to girls’ strategic use of these verbal performances, this paper addresses the conflicting ideologies surrounding girls’ use of masculine-styled language and stereotypically masculine behavior. The paper thus investigates how processes of language and gender socialization among adolescents are contingent upon local prescriptions for gender roles and language use.

1. Introduction

This paper examines “tom-boy talk” as a central performative feature of interactions among adolescent girls in a predominantly Algerian, Arab-origin neighborhood in Nanterre, France (15 kilometers west of Paris). Using recordings of spontaneous interactions in French among single and mixed-sex adolescent peer groups, I focus on girls’ use of what I call “tom-boy talk.” That is, adolescent girls’ use of competitive

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bragging, slang, and ritualized insults associated with performing masculinity in French low income housing projects (or *cités*). When analyzing linguistic styles associated with the *cité*, French scholars such as LePoutre (1997) and Seguin and Teillard (1996) have studied male speakers almost exclusively and have generally overlooked how girls use these styles. In the 15 months of fieldwork I conducted with adolescents (aged 13-16) in Nanterre, I observed adolescent girls using forms of slang, bragging, and insult rituals that are emblematic of masculine identity in the *cité* in order to construct verbal authority in performances, during moments of conflict, or for building personal reputation among peers, female and male. Girls' strategic use of stereotypically masculine styles of language and dress seem especially significant considering the predominance of Algerian-Arab culture in the neighborhood which dictates the strict gender stratification of most public space, that is, parking lots, parks, and local sports facilities. The prevalence of adolescent girls in my fieldsite who adopt "tom-boy talk" and masculine-styled clothing would seem to indicate that they are using local signs of masculinity to improvise a transgressive code for gendered behavior, perhaps in an attempt to circumvent local gender prescriptions.

In addition to girls' strategic use of these verbal performances, I wish to explore the conflicting ideologies that surround these girls' use of masculine-styled language and stereotypically masculine behavior. In particular, I examine instances where girls' verbal styles and appearances are explicitly deemed as male by peer audience members. In this way, I access the conflicting linguistic and gender ideologies that emerge when girls appropriate masculine styled talk and behaviors. For instance, at the same time that adolescent girls use masculine-styled verbal performances to achieve reputation among their peers, their participation in these very rituals and behaviors are also overtly noted and criticized. This pattern is particularly apparent in recurring meta-communicative comments by peers that describe girls who take on masculine-styled language and dress as "men." To address local linguistic and social constraints on female speakers, I analyze the audience-imposed limits of gendered performances in which "tom-boy talk" is marked as "men's" talk and thus re-appropriated by their male peers. In the context of the male-dominated public space of the *cité* in Nanterre, many girls use characteristically male linguistic and social behaviors to distinguish themselves among their peers, but they also get singled out and teased for it.

A particularly salient form of this linguistic and social "double-standard" is evidenced in the label "a girl from the *cité*" reserved for girls and young women who have subverted the local constraints for interactional habits by developing a social identity within the public space of the neighborhood. That is, they are seen publicly talking and hanging out with male peers and exhibit the clothing and communicative styles that are characteristic of the local urban space. Though the above label is often used to criticize, implying that these women are tough or "loose" in a way that is considered un-feminine, it may also be used in admiration of a young woman's street smarts and urban style. This label and the examples that I will explore in this paper evidence the close linkage among linguistic and gender ideologies, constructions of ethnicity and social class, and identification with local space. With respect to this entanglement, Roger Abrahams (1975) has described urban, working class African American women as being caught between the social bind of attending to masculine-styled "reputation" through verbal performance and to feminine-styled "respectability" through their own effacement from the public sphere. In a similar fashion, many of the girls I observed focus their energies on attaining reputational status at the expense of a more stereotypically feminine respectability, making them vulnerable to criticism by their peers.

2. "To Make a Blow of Pressure": Competitive Bragging Routines

In this section I analyze an example of the kind of competitive verbal performance that, I argue, contributes to girls' reputational status among their peers and potentially to their labeling as "men." One local genre of verbal performance that contributes to adolescent reputation is a form of competitive bragging called *mettre un coup de pression* (literally, 'to make a blow of pressure'). The importance of being able to successfully *mettre un coup de pression* contributes to the respect of one's peers, male and female. In this way, reputation is in a significant measure dependent on whether one is able to out-talk, out-brag, or out-perform one's peer. Oftentimes, an evaluation of the verbal performance is embedded within the performance itself as adolescent peers judge each other's attempts to insult or brag.

In order to give a feeling for the shape of these competitive performances, below is a brief example of a bragging exchange between female adolescents that ends with a peer's evaluation.

(1) Example of performing “a blow of pressure”¹

Sarah (S): female, 16

Brigitte (B): female, 15

Naima (N): female, 13

- 01 S: moi, mon pul c’est un Decathlon
me, my sweater is a Decathlon
- 02 et mon slip c’est un Sloggy, alors hein, ta gueule
and my underwear’s a Sloggy, so huh, shut up
- 03 B: et alors c’est quoi la marque! c’est quoi la marque!
and so what’s the brand! what’s the brand!
- 04 N: [pointing to the other girls’ sweatpants and then her
own]
hé Decathlon, Decathlon, Decathlon et k-
hey Decathlon, Decathlon, Decathlon and k-
- 05 et et Air Max
and and Air Max
- 06 alors s’il te plaît
so please
- 07 ta bouche maintenant
shut your mouth now
- 08 et **ka’ab** chez-toi don- **durk**
and **go** home no- **now**
- 09 B: hé Naima elle met des coups de pression en ce moment
hey Naima’s talking trash lately
- 10 j’n’sais pas ce qu’elle a dans le cul
I don’t know what she has in the ass

This example is the final exchange in a long series of verbal challenges among the girls, in which bragging, that is, “my sweater’s a Decathlon and my underwear’s a Sloggy” is paired with a verbal challenge “so huh shut up” (lines 1 and 2). Yet despite the challenging quality of this exchange, its performative and playful qualities are clear, for example, in Brigitte’s (“B”) ironic voicing of the all-important question “what’s the brand! what’s the brand!” (line 3). Naima (“N”) responds to the challenge by pointing out that she and all the

¹ Transcription Conventions

[] overlap	[] non-verbal cues	,	brief pause	[X] obscured talk
- self interruption	? intonation rise	!	exclamation	Arabic

other girls are wearing the Decathlon brand, and even better, are wearing Air Max sneakers (lines 4 and 5). Like Sarah, Naima tops off her bragging with a challenging insult “so please, shut your mouth now, and **go** home no- **now**” (lines 7-8). Codeswitching in Arabic (**ka’ab** [‘go’] and **durk** [‘now’]) further emphasizes Naima’s words as tough talk since Arabic loan words are often used for insults and verbal performances in the neighborhood.

A striking aspect of Naima’s response to Sarah’s challenge is its disfluencies—she repairs once (line 4), repeats “and” (line 5), and repairs her initial mispronunciation of “**durk**” (line 8). With respect to this disfluency, Brigitte’s assessment of Naima’s performance (“Hey Naima’s talking trash lately. I don’t know what she has in the ass.”) (lines 9-10) is interesting in that she names Naima’s competitive bragging a *coup de pression* in line 9 and yet doesn’t directly respond to her verbal challenge. Thus, Brigitte overtly recognizes Naima’s response to Sarah as a type of verbal challenge, but neither Sarah nor Brigitte choose to respond to it, perhaps because of its hesitant quality. Also, Brigitte’s final teasing comment “I don’t know what she has in the ass” (line 10) shows her both recognizing Naima’s aggressive stance and minimizing it as ultimately non-threatening. But despite the playful quality of this interaction, it shows how these girls value competitive verbal performances in the way that they perform, name, and evaluate them. Also, by including an example of a younger girl (Naima) who playfully challenges an older girl (Sarah), I hope to demonstrate how these girls strategically use competitive verbal routines in an attempt to distinguish themselves verbally and socially among their peers.

3. “That’s a girl?”: Narrative Bragging and Gender Identification

The next example illustrates bragging in narrative form in a gender-mixed group including two girls, Cécile (C) and Fatima (F), and a boy, Pierre (P). The example used here is the last few turns of talk in a long storytelling and bragging session about disrupting class, or as the kids put it *foutre le bordel* (literally “to make the brothel”, here translated as “raising hell”).

(2) “Making the Brothel”

Fatima (F): female, 16

Cécile (C): female, 15

Pierre (P): male, 16

Chantal (Ch): researcher

- 01 F: Chanudeau [teacher's name] t'sais s- on a retiré tout ch-
Chanudeau, y'know s- we took everything
- 02 on a tous foutu notre bordel chez Chanudeau hein [1.0]
euh cinq à six
we all raised hell in Chanudeau huh [1.0] uh five to six
- 03 surtout elle là [pointing to Cécile], avec euh F- Lati- euh
Salima
especially her there [pointing to Cécile], with uh F- Lati-
uh Salima
- 04 F: ils ont foutu leur bordel [[mais terrible, tu vois?
they raised their hell [[but horribly, you see?
- 05 Ch: [[avec Salima?
[[with Salima?
- 06 F: laisse tomber
forget it
- 07 et la prof, [laughs] au conseil de classe
and the teacher, in the class meeting
- 08 F: "Ah oui, pendant l'heure de colle ça [[s'est très bien passé"
"Ah yes, during retention it [[went very well"
- 09 C: [[qui c'est qui a foutu-
[[who raised-
- 10 C: [[le bordel dans l'école?
[[hell in the school?
- 11 P: [[dans votre classe c'est les *meufs*² qui foutent la merde?
[[in your class it's the *girls* who raise hell?
- 12 C: qui est-ce qui a foutu le [[bordel [XX]?
who it is who raised [[hell [XX]?
- 13 P: [[l'année dernière c'était la même chose
[[last year it was the same thing
- 14 F: Ça c'est une *meuf* ça?
That, that's a *girl*, that?

In this example, Fatima is bragging about her and Cécile's class

² The word *meuf* is an example of *verlan*, the French form of slang that inverts syllables of words to create new ones, e.g., *femme* (woman) is inverted to become *meuf*. Many *verlan* terms such as *meuf* are now codified elements of everyday French slang.

and describing the ways they disrupted the detention hour with a professor named Chanudeau. Fatima claims that although everyone was causing trouble in class, that is, "we all raised hell in Chanudeau's class" (line 2), Cécile and Salima (a girl who isn't present) were especially disruptive (line 3). Fatima's choice to brag about her friend Cécile's "bad" behavior is an example of adolescent peers valorizing each other for challenging verbal behavior, in this case, disrupting class. This example shows Fatima using her narrative about disrupting class to brag to Pierre, a young man who, despite his amiable personality, has a rather tough reputation for having hit a teacher.

Fatima's claim of transgressive behavior is met with Cécile's seemingly feigned denial ("Who is it who raised hell in school?" in lines 7 and 9) and Pierre's half admiring, half astonished response: "in your class, it's the girls who raise hell?" (line 8). In this way, Pierre plays right along with Fatima's bragging routine with a half incredulous, half appreciative response. Further, Pierre validates Fatima's claims by corroborating with her, "last year it was the same thing," thereby reinforcing the reputation for trouble that Fatima and Cécile are constructing for themselves.

Pierre's both appreciative and critical response to Fatima's narrative, "in your class, it's the girls who raise hell?" shows contradictory expectations for girls in that their transgressive behavior is both positively evaluated and criticized as mildly deviant. In this way, Pierre's response to Fatima's narrative both points to some of the contradictory expectations for girls' behavior and to shared expectations for how to respond to girls' transgressive acts, with a mixture of appreciation and derision.

Similarly, Fatima's parting shot about Cécile "that, that's a girl, that?" (line 14) raises the stakes of her claim that Cécile is engaging in transgressive behavior--her claim implies that, not only is Cécile not acting like a girl, she isn't one. Fatima's teasing comment further indicates the gender-markedness of the bad behaviors she has described in her narrative. By marking Cécile as masculine, Fatima can be seen as furthering her description of Cécile as a trouble-maker-she's so tough, she can't even be considered a girl. In this sense, Cécile's tough reputation is built upon behavioral choices that give her heightened status among her peers, but that also de-feminize her. Yet Fatima's comment

is no insult, but rather an appreciative form of teasing among adolescent peers who are determined to overpower and outsmart teachers.

Finally, Fatima's teasing points to an interesting contradiction in these adolescents' constructions of gender and behavioral norms. Although it was apparently the girls who "raised hell" in Fatima's and Cécile's class both this year and last, they still associate these behaviors with maleness. It would seem that although many girls are participating in combative verbal styles, these adolescents (and most interestingly the very girls who adopt these styles) identify these prestigious and status-grabbing styles as masculine.

4. "My name is Cécile": (Re)Voicing Gendered Selves

In the next example, one of Cécile's male peers, Salim (S), performs a version of Cécile's tough speaking style using my tape recorder to conduct a mock interview. Through performance, he subverts the toughness of her tom-boy style for humorous purposes.

(3) "My name is Cécile"

Salim (S): male, 15

Ahmed (A): male, 14

Cécile (C): female, 15

Tarik (T): male, 15

- 01 S: un question pour un pour un homme [to Cécile]
a question for a for a man
02 y a un homme devant moi
there's a man in front of me
03 j'n'sais comment il s'appelle
I don't know what his name is
04 comment tu t'appelles
what's your name
05 comment t'appelles tu
what is your name
06 A: Cécile= [laughing]
Cécile=
07 S: =comment t'appelles tu s'il te plaît?=
=what is your name please=
08 C: =ta gueule
=shut up

- 09 T: attends
wait
10 je m'appelle Cécile une **ka'haba**
my name is Cécile, a **whore**
11 S: nan mais là, mais **hachem**
no but there, but **shame on you**
12 S: [[attends
[[wait
13 T: [[attends attends attends
[[wait wait wait
14 S: nique Cerise³, je m'appelle Cécile [audience laughter]
fuck Cerise, my name is Cécile
15 alors je m'appelle Cécile
so my name is Cécile
16 en fait j'suis alcholique et toxicomane
in fact I'm an alcoholic and a drug addict
17 j'ai des miches
I have [big, strong] thighs
18 et euh, bon ferme ta gueule un petit peu hein [audience laughter]
and uh, well shut up a little huh
19 C: ta gueule [softly]
shut up

In this example, Salim, using my microphone as a prop for his French interviewer routine, addresses Cécile as a "man" and pretends not to know her name, ("There's a man in front of me. I don't know his name." in lines 2-3). When Cécile doesn't answer, Ahmed answers for her by laughingly replying "Cécile" (line 6). Prompted again by the same teasing question, Cécile tells Salim to shut up (line 8). Tarik then also makes a bid to mock Cécile by talking in a silly girl voice and insultingly calling her a **ka'haba** in Arabic, or "whore" (line 10). Salim protests, saying "no but there, but **hachem**" (or "shame on you") in line 11, implying that Tarik has gone too far, and takes the microphone. Rather than use a little girl voice, Salim performs Cécile as violently and exaggeratedly masculine, saying "fuck Cerise (the neighborhood

³ **Cerise** literally means "cherry" but here refers to the neighborhood association where the interaction takes place. The organization provides homework help and a place to hang out for middle school and high school students. I conducted much of my recording in this association, where I also volunteered as an English tutor.

association we're in) my name is Cécile" (line 13). Salim continues in another masculine voice of a burn-out: "so, my name is Cécile, in fact I'm an alcoholic and a drug addict" (lines 14-15) and ends with a generalized insult "so shut up a little, huh" (line 17). To his performance Cécile rather softly responds "shut up" (line 18).

This last example illustrates the centrality of verbal play in adolescents' constructions of gender roles, both in the performances that these girls use to appropriate masculine-styled status for themselves and in these boys' subversion of their performances (and status) for humor. In this way, both girls and boys can be seen using performance to strategically deploy gender categories, by subverting them, assigning them, and enforcing them. In so doing, these adolescents demonstrate that they know both the rules of gender and how to transgress those rules—as well as how to undermine those transgressions through re-establishing the dominant gender categories. For example, by humorously performing Cécile as male, Salim points out that, although she isn't a man, she acts like one and that's laughable. Thus the distinctive reputation that girls bid for when adopting typically masculine styles of talk is subject to a level of ironic mockery. While girls may be strategically performing masculinity, and thereby strategically constructing transgressively gendered selves, their performances are susceptible to ridicule, and through it, the reinforcement of strictly divided gender categories. Using Barrie Thorne's conceptual framework, this last interaction is an example of "borderwork" or "interaction based on, or even strengthening gender boundaries" because the performance represents gender as composed of two distinct categories and boys and girls as two distinct, antagonistic groups (1993:137). Furthermore, Thorne's observation that "borderwork is antithetical to 'crossing'" is demonstrated over the course of the above examples (139). That is, "borderwork" serves to re-establish the strictly divided gender categories that trans-gender "crossing" serves to transgress and blur, as demonstrated in the first two examples.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to show that adolescent girls' appropriation of stereotypically "masculine" verbal styles is both a means for creative strategies of self-presentation and an opportunity for adolescent peers to negotiate contested gender ideologies. As such, my paper is theoretically indebted to Marjorie Goodwin's groundbreaking work

on how language organizes gender among African American children in Philadelphia (1990). However, rather than address adolescents' peer groups as "'autonomous social worlds'" (13 after Harré 1974), I have attempted to examine how gendered performances among adolescents exist in relation to local gender norms and language ideologies.

In the examples that I have explored in this paper, girls' appropriation of masculine-styled language exists in tension with boys' subversion of their masculine performances for humor. The above examples thus illustrate how adolescent peers not only challenge the boundaries of gender through performance, but also the ideological limits to those performances. Thus, adolescents' performances demonstrate "gender as a structure of social relations that is reproduced and sometimes challenged in everyday practice" for which the same linguistic forms may serve to accomplish both actions (Gal 1995:175). As such, these performances of gender categories are not only a site for the creative construction of gendered identities, they are also a site for the public airing and contestation of language and gender ideologies.

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