

Taking the Mike: Performances of Everyday Identities and Ideologies at a U.S. High School¹

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1. Introduction

Within sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology, the notion of *performance* has played an increasingly important part of our endeavor to account for the complexity of language use. As suggested by those who have incorporated this concept into their methodological and theoretical approaches, speakers can actively highlight different identities at different times (Cameron 1997, Coupland 2001, Schilling-Estes 1998), often in unpredictable ways, as well as draw from a range of symbolic resources to do so (California Style Collective 1993). Our resources are not limited to the way we pronounce vowels and use particular words; they include the clothes we wear and the music we listen to. Through both “acts of identity” (Le Page and Tabouret-Keller 1985) and symbolic “bricolage” (Hebdige 1979, Wong and Zhang 2001), speakers do not merely react to the situations they are presented with, but actively reproduce, contest, and sometimes subvert ideologies that link language with social identity.

This paper seeks to contribute to our understanding of what it means to perform identities. My goal, however, is not to merely celebrate speaker agency by deftly replacing descriptions of ‘identity reflection’ with those of ‘identity performance’ but to demonstrate how a performance-based approach to identity can provide important insights into our understanding of exactly how speakers, in moments of talk, construct their identities through displays of communicative competence (Bauman 1977). Importantly, this approach seeks an understanding of the tying, untying, and retying of texts in different contexts (Bauman and Briggs 1990), thus highlighting the historical, socio-political, and everyday implications of poetic and playful language, such that novel practices and meanings emerge but always within the limits of the shared cultural assumptions of the local community. In this paper, I focus on the particular local ideologies within one high school community in the U.S.

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The issue of performance is specifically relevant to the kind of data that I frequently came across during my three semesters of research among students who would react in various yet patterned ways to my presence and, in particular, the presence of the microphone set before them. While considering the context of this particular “ethnographic encounter”—one which invited performance and play (Paredes 1977)—I analyze cases in which students spoke directly into the microphone on their own accord during recordings of daily conversations; I focus specifically on cases in which insults were uttered. Such instances can be seen as relatively marginal in relation to the everyday ways in which students used language, and they would never have occurred in their specific manifestation had I not been present, despite my goal of capturing some semblance of ‘naturalistic’ discourse when entering the field. In this sense, these moments of performance highlighted the research setting—the kind of data that some sociolinguists might have discarded from analysis because of the ways in which I had contributed to their ‘contamination’.

These performances might constitute ‘bad data’ in another sense, as many of the examples address taboo topics and language forms, a characteristic of some studies that have inadvertently reproduced stereotypes of certain communities (Morgan 1994). I focus on such instances, however, because I believe them to be a fruitful locus—that is, ‘good data’—for understanding the relationship between language and ideologies of race, gender, class, and sexual identity, which I had initially set out to examine. In particular, most of these instances involved humorous meanings and thus illuminate the locally specific ways in which students negotiated appropriateness when talk was framed as play (Goffman 1974). In Sherzer’s (2002) words, speech play can be “serious and significant” as it “explores and flirts with the boundaries of the socially, culturally, and linguistically possible and appropriate” (p. 1).

In addition to providing a window into local ideologies within this community, an analysis of these instances has implications for studies of performance and identity more generally. Specifically, I seek to demonstrate, on two levels, how these ‘out of the ordinary’ performances are tightly bound to the everyday language practices and ideologies of the local community. First, I show that the forms and meanings in these performances draw from those that circulate more generally at the school. And, second, I suggest that identity performance, in which communicative competence is both displayed and evaluated, is part of the everyday, and even unmarked, ways in which speakers carve out their social positions within a community.

2. Data

The data for this study are from 30 speakers of a range of ethnic backgrounds,² 10 of whom were female and 20 of whom were male. The examples come from 43 different conversations, primarily in English but sometimes in Korean, in which the speakers were part of a larger group ranging from 2-15 speakers. In addition to these performers, there were about 30 participants who never took up the microphone and whose language I do not focus on in this paper. I transcribed 210 separate turns, some of which were isolated

² The students self-identified as both mono- and multiethnic and included the following ethnic identifications: African American (or black), Filipino (American), German (American), Guamanian (American), Japanese (American), Korean (American), Mexican (American), Puerto Rican (American), Vietnamese (American), and white.

comments into the microphone and many of which were part of longer interactions in which the microphone exchanged hands.

In my analysis of the kinds of speech acts that these students performed, such as asking questions, insulting others, and bragging, among many others, I found that there were generally four functions—in the Jakobsonian sense—achieved, namely, the *referential*, *poetic*, *phatic*, and *metalingual* functions. Yet as Jakobson (1960) has noted to be the case with most messages, these performances generally fulfilled more than one function, as represented by the double-headed arrow. I present in Table (1) several of the most common genres and speech acts that the students engaged in and the *central* function with which they can be associated.

(1) Types of speech acts and genres performed into the microphone

Function	Act or genre	# of instances
Referential	Insult	70
	Revelation of secret	17
	Question	7
Poetic	Song	10
	Rap	7
Phatic	Greeting	6
Metalingual	Comment on recording	21

Bauman and Briggs (1990) have described performance as typically understood in linguistic anthropology as the “enactment of the poetic function,” involving language that is “artful” and “marked.” In their words, “[p]erformance puts the act of speaking on display—objectifies it, lifts it to a degree from its interactional setting and opens it to scrutiny by an audience” (p. 73). Examining the acts and genres performed by the students in my research, both ‘rapping’ and ‘singing’ might fall most neatly under this definition. The presence of the microphone might have motivated these performances given the common use of microphones for projecting the voice of a professional rapper or singer.³

3. Playful Insults as Performance

In the rest of this paper, I focus primarily on another kind of speech act, which I call the *insult*, because it not only constituted a third of the microphone performances but also illuminated local ideologies of humor and social identity. In addition, these instances allow a theoretical examination of the notion of ‘performance’ more generally, given the apparent marginality of insults as a performance genre.

What I call *insults* are, in fact, play at insults, or, in Bateson’s (1972) terms, “biting” that doesn’t really denote a bite. Table (2) provides some examples.

(2) Examples of insults

Conv-group	Speaker (gender)	Insult
6-D	Gabriella ⁴ (f)	He’s just talking crap.

³ But it would be inaccurate to claim that these performances were the product of the microphone alone, as students sometimes engaged in rapping and singing in their everyday lives.

⁴ All names are pseudonyms.

7-A	Luke (m)	Dan kuke ccake. 'Dan has a small thing [penis].' ((informal Korean))
8-A	Dan (m)	Sung's hair looks like poo.
8-A	Moon (m)	Sung look like a girl.
10-A	Dan (m)	Hello. Hyungmin is fat. Fat.
10-A	Brian (m)	Jinsoo-nun papo. I take that back. No I don't. Yes I do. 'Jinsoo is stupid. I take that back. No I don't. Yes I do.' ((Korean))
11-A	Luke (m)	((singing style)) Brian-un emsaljayng-I eyyo. 'Brian is a wimp.' ((polite Korean))
12-A	Sung (m)	He's gay.
14-A	Sungho (m)	Taesik hyeng. elkwul way ilehkey khe. h. Salamtuli nay elkwuli khuta kulemyen, nanun kunyang- Taesik hyeng khu- (m)a-) te khuta kulemyen, (hani) ta phwulipnita. h. 'Why is Taesik's (honorific) face so big? h. When people tell me my face is big, I just- if they say that Taesik's ((honorific)) is bigger, then my (bitterness) goes away completely.' ((formal Korean))
14-A	Luke (m)	Cincca mos sayngkyesse. 'She's so ugly.' ((informal Korean))
25-C	Karina (f)	Y'all are sick people.
30-G	Maggie (f)	Guys are retarded.
31-B	Mark (m)	I say this last guy is an insane crackhead.
31-B	Grace (f)	You sound very gay.
37-C	Jun (m)	This is not about you loser. You're not even Asian.
41-H	Kara (f)	Tricia is eating her boogers. Gross.

While a few of the insults described a person who was absent from the conversation, the vast majority of them were uttered to be overheard by the insulted individual, the insultee, and in a couple cases the second person pronoun *you* was even used, indicating the insultee as the primary addressee. I describe these insults as “play” because the referential content of the insults was typically constructed as exaggerations or fabrications, and the insulter and insultee generally were on good terms, if not close friends. In other words, the force of the insult was mitigated by the frame of play that was keyed (Goffman 1974) through the flouting of implicit socio-pragmatic rules typical of non-play contexts, namely, that ‘people should be truthful’, and that ‘people should not slander their friends in public’.

Clearly these insults were a kind of play, or at least framed as such, but to what extent can we call them performances? A loose classification of such acts as performance on the basis of the fact alone that they were directed into a microphone might seem to carelessly lump together a diverse range of speech practices, such as rapping, insulting, and greeting. In addition, such instances of insult may not seem to fit well with more commonly accepted understandings of performance in which attention is given to the artistic rendition of form; linguistic performance is often thought to be about the *poetics* of speech. Yet in most of the insults I examined, the formal features were likely not particularly marked or artful in the eyes—or ears—of the students. The insults might be described as structurally ‘basic’, typically consisting of a subject and a short predicate, unmarked phonology, and lexical items that are unremarkable in a high school context, for instance, *retarded*, *crap*, *fat*, and *boogers*.

However, I suggest that the very act of speaking into a microphone enhances the speech act and “[puts it] on display.” In other words, the microphone serves to magnify an utterance—metaphorically within the immediate conversation and literally for those who would listen to the recording—allowing for their extraction from the rest of the discourse that surrounds it. Part of this magnification is also due to what may be perceived as the risk of distributing slanderous talk to an ‘unknown’ audience. Insults into the microphone thus became marked and extractable texts, not because they were built from marked structural features but because insults, as economically packaged units of discourse, dangerously linked specific individuals with disparaging characterizations potentially audible to many listeners. It is such highlighting that makes microphone-directed speech a kind of performance that invited evaluation from multiple audiences, resulting in amusement, laughter, and, oftentimes, a playful response from the insulted overhearer.

4. Performances of Identity through Local Communicative Competence

The following example illustrates the potential for extended verbal play that these insults sometimes generated. During my fieldwork, I was also a tutor, and on one particular afternoon the rest of the class had gone to a school assembly while several students stayed behind to be tutored. In addition to myself, the participants included a student who identifies as “Black and German” named Triple X (a pseudonym that he had chosen for himself), and three students, Grace, Mark, and Tim, who each identify as “Korean and White.” Given that I typically did not record our tutorial sessions, much of the talk that day was oriented around the microphone as a medium not only to communicate to an outside world but also to engage in verbal play with one another. All of the students, who knew me quite well by this point, were aware that I was interested in the topic of Asian American identity. However, since I had not set any explicit “ground rules” for this interaction, the rules for performance into the microphone emerge through the course of talk.

(3) “[Mark Smith] is dumb”, Conversation #31, May 20, 2004⁵

“Grace” (Korean-White American, freshman, female)

“Mark” (Korean-White American, freshman, male)

“Tim” (Korean-White American, freshman, male)

⁵ Transcription conventions adapted from Goodwin (1990):

<u>(bold underlined)</u>	Speech directed into the microphone
-	Sudden cut-off
<i>(italics)</i>	Emphasis (pitch, amplitude)
:	Lengthening
.	Falling contour
?	Rising contour
//	Overlap
=	Latching (no interval between turns)
~	Rapid speech
((comments))	Transcription comments
(CAPITALS)	Increased volume
(xxx)	Problematic hearing
(probable utterance)	Probable utterance
[Pseudonym]	Inserted pseudonym
(h)	Breathiness, laughter

“Triple X” (German-African American, freshman, male)

Elaine (Korean American, researcher, female)

- 1 Grace: say something. ((into mike)) **[Mark Smith] is dumb.**
- 2 Mark: no i'm *not*. hh
- 3 Grace: hhh(h)
- 4 Mark: i'm the most intelligent being in the universe.=
- 5 Grace: ((into mike)) **=he thinks he's too good for avid= he thinks he's I.B. material.**
- 6 Mark: exactly. hh
- 7 Grace: ((into mike)) **this guy says he speaks korean fluently but he won't speak it.** ((referring to Tim))
- 8 ((Grace and Mark chuckle))
- 9 Tim: ((into mike)) **annyeonghaseyyo** (('How are you?'))
- 10 ((laughs))
- 11 Grace: ((laughing)) say more than that
- 12 ((Elaine and Triple X in background))
- 13 Elaine: who's taller.
- 14 Grace: you are. h the girl is. h
- 15 Tim: triple X?
- 16 Elaine: g(h)irl hh
- 17 Grace: hh (h)
- 18 Triple X: so me (naw) hh
- 19 ((Elaine and Triple X talk in background))
- 20 Mark: men are more intelligent than females.
- 21 Grace: ((into mike)) **huh? then how come we're the teachers the doctors and everything else and you guys are like the dumpster people.**
- 22 Mark: actually it's the opposite of that. // in some cases.
- 23 Grace: *no* it's not. h. we're the *veterinarians*,=
- 24 Mark: =there are hardly any (0.5) female neurosurgeons. they're mostly males. // that's one of the most-
- 25 Grace: that's~because~they're~m-((to Elaine)) he's saying that *men* are smarter than *women*
- 26 Mark: they *are*.
- 27 Grace: you don't see any *female trash* people=they're all men. // hh(h)h
- 28 Triple X: actually *women* are smarter than men=
- 29 Mark: =no actually //i do see some of those
- 30 Grace: cause
- 31 Triple X: what is that=
- 32 Grace: ((into mike))=**no i don't see any=i only see men like (xxx) // doing that.**
- 33 Triple X: (you are)
- 34 Mark: you're blind. blind as a bat in a dark cave.
- 35 ((Triple X grabs microphone))
- 36 Grace: ((to Triple X)) you're not asian, you can't speak
- 37 Triple X: ((into mike)) **i am a man? and i have to say that women are smarter than men, cause they got- they're-**
- 38 Grace: //and he's not *asian*, so you can't-
- 39 Triple X: **they got- they got better skills than men do.**

- 40 Elaine: really?
- 41 Mark: ((into mike)) i say this last guy is an insane crackhead.
- 42 ((Grace and Tim chuckle))
- 43 Triple X: ((into mike)) the last guy always sucks. // cause he's gay
- 44 Grace: (xxx)
- 45 Mark: ((into mike)) the last guy is a bitch and he hh
- 46 ((laughter))
- 47 Mark: ((into mike)) he's lying h
- 48 ((chuckles))
- 49 Triple X: ((into mike)) like i said he is the bitch. h ha ha
- 50 ((chuckles))
- 51 Mark: ((into mike)) exactly what he is.
- 52 Triple X: ((into mike)) why y'all's talking about yourself. you are the last
guy aren't you? hhhh
- 53 ((chuckles))
- 54 Mark: ((into mike)) yep? you are. h
- 55 ((chuckles))
- 56 Triple X: ((into mike)) i know hhh
- 57 ((chuckles))
- 58 Mark: ((into mike)) exactly. so shut up.
- 59 ((chuckles))
- 60 Triple X: ((into mike)) do i really hh have to. hh
- 61 ((chuckles))
- 62 Mark: ((into mike)) yep? because you're a bitch.
- 63 ((chuckles))
- 64 Triple X: ((into mike)) just a few minutes ago i thought you were.
- 65 ((laughs))
- 66 Mark: ((into mike)) well, you are now.
- 67 ((chuckles))
- 68 Triple X: ((into mike)) i'm sorry did we just change the sexes? h h
- 69 ((chuckles))
- 70 Mark: ((into mike)) yep you did, // you bitch?
- 71 Grace: you said "you are *now*?" so that means // you *were* a bitch h
- 72 Triple X: i know.
- 73 ((laughter))
- 74 Grace: you can put these tapes on comedy central
- 75 ((laughter))

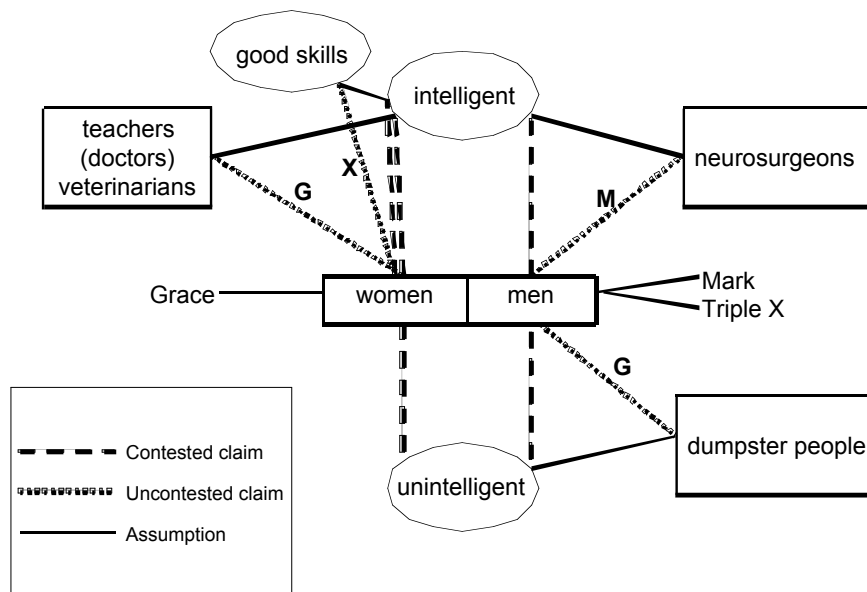
Exchanges such as this have a clear poetic patterning—an internal structural parallelism—as the microphone exchanged hands between turns. Their talk, however, can be seen not only as the performance of a genre with an emergent structure but also the performance of particular kinds of identities. The exchange begins with an example of a rather typical insult that, like other microphone-directed insults, is highlighted by the use of the microphone. This pronouncement, however, that “[Mark Smith] is dumb” (line 1) is more than just a descriptive act; it displays something about Grace’s communicative competence as a ‘playful’ person, namely, someone who is able to successfully key a play

frame and to navigate the boundaries of appropriate talk within this frame.⁶ Her words are framed as play given the shared local understanding that Mark is not, in her words, ‘dumb’. After all, as she notes in line 5, Mark has plans to transfer to ‘I.B.’—a program for the academic elite at the school. Yet as a mild form of slander, it is still dangerous talk, and like other insults recorded, the boundaries are stretched yet never broken, for instance, by revealing a particularly sensitive fact about Mark Smith.

The interaction involves other kinds of identity performances as well. First, both Grace and Mark, and eventually Triple X, perform their identities as ‘rational’ persons able to present succinct ‘logical proofs’ for their claims about gender and intellect. Like insults, these proofs are metaphorically highlighted through their invitation to evaluation by the other participants, even if some of the specific arguments are not directed into the microphone. While Mark does not speak into the microphone to enhance his words, and Grace and Triple X do so only part of the time, all three students can be said to offer arguments for evaluation by the immediate participants of the audience as well as potential overhearers.

These arguments, or logical proofs, are in the form of proposed indexical links between people and their typical characteristics or actions, something akin to the notion of “metapragmatic stereotypes” (Agha 1998) as seen in Figure (4).

(4) Indexical links of gender and class (re)created in the interaction



These logical proofs allow an understanding of the kinds of local ideologies assumed by these students. Grace highlights that more women are generally ‘teachers’, ‘doctors’, and ‘veterinarians’, while more men are ‘dumpster people’ (lines 21 and 23), as she argues her point that women are more intelligent than men. Mark, in response, notes that most

⁶ The fact that boundaries of appropriateness are culturally specific was evident in the fact that many of the students who had emigrated from Korea would based their insults on others’ physical appearances, while I never heard such insults in contexts that did not include these students.

‘neurosurgeons’ are men (line 24). Although they disagree as to whether women or men are more intelligent, they accept and reproduce, for the most part, the stereotypical gendering of these occupations, except when Mark contests Grace’s claim that more women are doctors. In addition, they both reproduce the idea that intelligence is linked to holding specific kinds of occupations, which are implicitly associated with particular class positions in society. For instance, Mark never questions Grace’s implication that ‘dumpster people’ lack intelligence. Importantly, neither student questions certain assumptions about gender identity: they both accept that gender categories are binary and mutually exclusive, that members of a particular gender category share traits in common with one another, and that these shared traits are distinct from those belonging to the ‘other’ gender category. In other words, despite the appearance of disagreement, the debate between Grace and Mark, in fact, implicitly reproduces particular shared understandings of gender and class identity. Their reproduction of these ideologies is part of the process of demonstrating, or performing, local communicative competence.

5. Performing Gender

I suggest that these displays of logical coherence are also tools for performing their gender identities. In this exchange, Grace and Mark have implicitly agreed upon an emergent rule of gender performance. Not only is Grace’s membership in the category of ‘women’ assumed and indexed by her use of the first-person plural pronoun *we* in lines 21 and 23, but one of the ways in which she performs her membership is by proclaiming this group’s intellectual superiority. In line 25, she even invites me, as the only other female member of the interaction, to participate in this performance. Mark, on other hand, assumes the position of defending the category of ‘men’ in his performance of his masculinity.

And yet in lines 28, 37, and 39, Triple X appears to violate this rule that has emerged between Grace and Mark when he asserts that women are in fact smarter than men. In line 37, he says, ‘I am a man, and I have to say that women are smarter than men, ’cause they got better skills than men do.’ While his claim proves an exception to the rule that has emerged, the specific contextualization of his claim as precisely an ‘exception’ reinforces the rule. In line 28, he uses the adverb *actually* to modify his proposition, implying that the reverse claim might have been expected from him. And his self-labeling as a ‘man’ is not so much a description of his gender identity as a metalinguistic commentary on his violation of expected and appropriate gender performance. Such an expectation may be why Grace initially attempts to silence Triple X in lines 36 and 38 after his initial attempt to speak. She says, ‘You’re not Asian, you can’t speak,’ claiming to enforce another rule within this interaction, based on her understanding of my research interests. Her attempt, which proves unsuccessful, depends on indexing Triple X’s non-Asian identity in contrast to the rest of the participants of the interaction.

The implicit and explicit claims to gender membership, which place individuals within social categories of identity and reinforce beliefs about members’ practices, are also inherently tied to relations of power and authority in several important ways. First, as described above, membership claims refer to hierarchically arranged social categories. Second, such claims locate speakers within the interaction in particular hierarchical relation to one another. Third, Triple X’s claim to manhood in line 37 may be a means of

achieving an authority⁷ that is dependent on the assumption of male superiority. His authoritative claim that women are 'smarter' may be interpreted as a 'strategy of condescension' (Bourdieu 1991) in which his 'gracious' symbolic gesture reproduces existing power relations between women and men despite the appearance of subversion. Finally, Triple X's assertion may gain credibility precisely because he is an outsider to the female community. With the expectation for these students to claim the superiority of their own social group, as described earlier, the legitimacy of Triple X's claim may be strengthened. The students may assume that his community loyalty has been trumped by the undeniability of women's intellectual superiority.

Given Triple X's transgressive performance, it is perhaps unsurprising then that Mark constructs Triple X's contribution as the words of someone who is psychologically aberrant—in his words, an 'insane crackhead' (line 41). Sparked by this insult, a play battle ensues between Mark and Triple X, and they attempt to insult one another by pinning the "last guy,"⁸ into the categories of people who 'suck', are 'gay', and are 'bitches' (lines 43, 45, 49, 62, 70, and 71). Much like the previous debate, there is disagreement as to who falls into these categories, yet some meanings are never challenged. Specifically, both boys assume a parallel undesirability of being 'gay' and being a 'bitch' likely because these identities threaten their presumed heterosexual masculinity, the maintenance of which was important for most boys at this high school.

These discourses that reproduce metapragmatic stereotypes and place social groups in hierarchical relation to one another were not specific to this interactional context but shared within the community more generally. In this sense, these performances are filled with the discourses and meanings of the everyday. In addition, the boundaries between everyday talk and microphone talk is unclear in this exchange, as speakers shift in and out of microphone-directed speech and engage in interactional practices similar to those found in more mundane settings.

6. Conclusion

This paper has illustrated that data performed by speakers while consciously aware of the research setting can be useful for understanding the language practices and ideologies that circulate locally within a community. Sociolinguists have generally accepted—albeit to different degrees—the assumption that the researcher's presence can negatively affect—or perhaps 'infect'—linguistic data, a phenomenon referred to as the 'observer's paradox'. A reflexive understanding of how the researcher's positioning can affect the language practices she observes is clearly important, but as Schilling-Estes (1998) has also argued in her work on 'self-conscious speech', so too is the understanding that performed speech shares many of the patterns of 'unperformed' speech. The practices in spectacular performance settings draw from the linguistic resources and ideologies of the mundane.

In addition, in recent years, there has been an increasing acceptance in studies of language and identity that even the performance of the spectacular can be found in the everyday, such as when speakers "put on" the style of another in fleeting moments of a conversation. Perhaps we might ambitiously broaden the scope of the claim that

⁷ I thank Elizabeth Keating for this insight.

⁸ Initially, the phrase "last guy" refers to the boy who spoke in the previous turn, although this ambiguous phrase is later interpreted as referring to the boy who spoke in the final turn.

performance is *found in* the everyday to the idea that performance is *part and parcel* of the everyday, through displays and evaluations that never cease. As Judith Butler (1988) has suggested in her work on gender performativity, our identities are the product of reiteration and sedimentation, both mundane and spectacular. Whether marked or unmarked, conscious or unconscious, spectacular or mundane, our performances are not just the fleeting artistic flourishes we sometimes wear but the very substance of who we are.

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