Language and Woman's Place in Drag: Power, Femininity, and Gay Speech

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1 Introduction

Lakoff's (1975) *Language and Woman's Place* identifies and explores a phenomenon Lakoff names "women's language" (henceforth WL). She identifies several language features she considers unique to the speech of women as opposed to that of men. Lakoff explains a constitutive relationship between women and the language she describes: women are systematically taught to speak with specific language features, and those language features are associated with a lack of power. By claiming a use of WL points to a lack of power, Lakoff champions the social indexical function of language. Expanding on this, it becomes possible to imagine these features as useable by any speaker to signify an "out of power" identity stance. The WL Lakoff identifies, then, is a set of linguistic features that have in common not gender, but rather a specific relationship to an ideological, gendered power structure.

The aim of this paper is to explore Lakoff's theoretical assumptions. If the features of WL are unified in their association with a lack of power, as Lakoff implies, then WL will only index femininity in specific, contextual uses of its features. Other uses of WL may be locally negotiated to point to a range of social personae that are somehow associated with a lack of power. In order to explore the extent to which WL is indexical of "out of power" rather than femininity per se, I draw on ethnographic data from my work with a drag performance troupe in Tucson, Arizona. I analyze the use of WL by the hostess, Bunny, on and off stage, utilizing Goffman's (1959) discussion of the presentation of self to understand the types of performances occurring in each social sphere. Although Bunny uses WL in the front and backstage, the features she utilizes and the identity she performs differ on each stage. Through this dual-stage analysis, I argue Lakoff is correct in her assumption that the features of WL are directly associated with a lack of power. This analysis points out not only the indexical possibilities of WL, but also the complex intertwinement of race, class, gender and sexuality that give these features their meaning as they are read in relationship to an ideological, gendered power structure.

Texas Linguistic Forum 53: 18-28
Proceedings of the Seventeenth Annual Symposium About Language and Society – Austin
April 10-11, 2009

2 Theoretical Background

Despite Lakoff's presentation of WL as associated with the speech of women, her essay hints at an understanding of WL as primarily pointing to a lack of power. She claims, "These words aren't, basically, 'feminine'; rather, they signal 'uninvolved,' or 'out of power.' Any group in a society to which these labels are applicable may presumably use these words; they are often considered 'feminine,' or 'un-masculine,' because women are the 'uninvolved,' 'out of power' group par excellence" (1975, p. 14). Lakoff furthers the picture of WL as indexical of "out of power" by hypothesizing that gay men and male academics may use WL in order to "reject the American masculine image" (p. 10). WL gains its meaning as it is read in relation to an ideological power structure tying together masculinity, power and direct speech. WL points to indirect speech and therefore distances the speaker from that image of power. If we frame Lakoff's exploration in terms of a gendered language ideology, then her description becomes less of a prescription for hegemonic subjugation of women and more of a useful analytic tool to explore gender negotiation (Hall, 2004).

The question then becomes, how is WL used in interactions and what gendered identities can it point to? Because of the tie between WL and ideological femininity, the features of WL have been understood to index a middle-class white woman (Eckert, 2004; Gaudio, 2004; Barrett, 1999). While this is certainly one possibility, if Lakoff is correct in her assumption that WL is associated with femininity *because* it points to a lack of power, then the indexical function of WL may depend greatly on the context of use. It may be locally negotiated to point to a range of marginalized social identities that have in common a specific relationship to an ideological, gendered power structure. If this is the case, investigations into local uses of WL have the potential to point out the complicated intertwinement of ideologies surrounding gender, race, class, and sexuality (Gaudio, 2004). If we take Lakoff's implications seriously and reframe WL as indexical of "out of power" rather then femininity per se, it "open[s] up the possibilities for thinking about sociocultural variations on gender identities that moved beyond the strict binarity of woman/man" (Queen, 2004, p. 294). An investigation into WL can delve into the complexities of social identities, recognizing the possibility for WL to form a multidimensional identity that does not easily fit into heteronormative gender identities.

Drag offers a useful site to explore the indexical range of WL. A drag performance is intentional and public, occurring in what Goffman (1959) deems the front stage, which is characterized by impression management. In drag, performers are conscientiously "doing drag" and utilizing signs pointing to a female persona. Goffman explains that the backstage, on the other hand, serves as the region to create the "illusion" performed in the front. On this stage, deviant performances can ensue. Because of the differing performances taking place on each stage, attention to the ways WL enters into each performance can shed light on the gendered identity performances that WL enables.

3 Field Site and Methodology

The data for this study were collected in 2007 during my fieldwork with a drag performance troupe in Tucson, Arizona. The troupe performs biweekly drag performances at a middle-class gay bar located near downtown Tucson. Although the gay bar's typical clientele (when no special event is occurring) includes middle-class, 30-something, white,

gay males, the drag shows draw a diverse (in terms of age, race, class, and sexual orientation) and unpredictable audience. Bunny, a middle-class, white, gay male, acts as hostess for each of the shows. Because the hostess is typically the only performer to speak during the performance (the majority of acts consist of a lip-synced song), the other performers' onstage speech data is not robust enough to make any claims on their front stage speech. I focus my analysis on Bunny's front and backstage uses of WL. The front stage data is taken from three video recorded three-hour performances. The backstage data is taken from an hour-long casual interview while Bunny was getting ready for a performance, as well as video recorded backstage interactions with the other performers.

4 "Women's Language" in the Front and Backstage

Reproduced here is a summarized version of the nine most salient features Lakoff attributes to "women's language" (Lakoff, 1975, pp. 53-56):

(1) Lexical Items: "Women have a large stock of words related to their specific interests, generally regarded to them as 'woman's work'"
Note: I include in this section lexical items Lakoff expands on in a different part of her essay: words and phrases later deemed "discourse markers" (pp. 9-10)
(2) Empty Adjectives
(3) Rising Intonation: "Question intonation when we might expect declaratives"
(4) Hedges
(5) The intensifier "so"
(6) "Hypercorrect grammar: women are not supposed to talk rough"
(7) "Superpolite forms"
(8) "Women don't tell jokes"
(9) "Women speak in italics"

The first five features Lakoff identifies as WL appear in the front and backstage data.[1] Although all five features occur on both stages, their frequencies differ according to the stage, as depicted in the following table:

Table (1)

WL Feature	Front Stage	Backstage
Lexical Items	**Common**	**Rare**
Empty Adjectives	**Rare**	**Rare**
Rising Intonation	**Rare**	**Common**
Hedges	**Rare**	**Common**
Intensifier "So"	**Common**	**Rare**

Through an analysis of these uses of WL and attention to context they enter, the remainder of this paper explores the local negotiation of WL as it enters into an identity performance.

[1] This is similar to Barrett's (1999) work with African American drag performers, although he found the first six features to be relevant in the front stage. These features were utilized to point to middle-class white femininity and intertwined with African American English to form a polyphonous drag identity.

5 The Front Stage: The Intensifier "so" and Lexical Items

In the drag performances I observed, the front and backstage are clearly marked, and painstaking methods are utilized to control the physical image of the performers stepping from the backstage to the front. No visual hints of masculinity are allowed onstage, unless purposefully deployed during a routine—following Barrett's definition of a "glam queen" (1999). This controlled stage fits well with Goffman's understanding of the front stage: "when one's activity occurs in the presence of other persons, some aspects of the activity are expressively accentuated and other aspects, which might discredit the fostered impression, are suppressed" (Goffman, 1959, pp. 111-112). Because the performers consciously attempt to perform a woman, we may expect the features of WL serve as a great resource for the performers to project an outward image of femininity. Upon investigation, however, it is clear the uses of WL are much more nuanced and complex, shedding light on the complexities of drag performance itself. For one, drag depends on the knowledge that it is a man performing—the performance cannot be so flawless as to blur the lines between drag and a "real" woman (Barrett, 1999).

For another, the social category "woman" itself is dynamic and multidimensional. Although the features of WL have been described as pointing to middle-class white femininity, we cannot assume a priori this is the type of femininity that will be performed in any drag space. In this drag space, a number of signs point to a pop diva aesthetic (Labotka, 2008)—an ideological woman tied to sexuality, independence, strength, and high class. These signs include the music, dress, meta-pragmatic discourse, and audience/performer tip exchange. This is an aspect of the context that must be considered when looking at individual semiotic phenomena in this space. As we will see, WL is both read in relation to this aesthetic and plays a large role in creating it.

The following example, taken from Bunny's onstage speech, begins to delve into the complex uses of WL in Bunny's drag performance:

Example (2)

1	Bunny:	Oh, I'm so glad you think so highly of yourself hugh.
2		Hugh. You ok? It's alright?
3		Oh my god. We're gonna start off with track number ten, Tim.
4		We're gonna do a little toast.
5		For you guys who have never heard my toast before—look out cause it's kinda cute.
6		If you've heard it before and you, and you, you're tired of it?
7		Me too, so too fuckin' bad.

This short example demonstrates four features of WL: Line 1 contains two uses of the intensifier "so": "so glad" and "so highly" (the "so" in line 7 is a discourse marker); line 3 the lexical item "oh my god" (to be discussed under example (3)); and line 5 a hedge and an empty adjective—"kinda cute." The use of the intensifier "so" is very common in Bunny's onstage speech, while hedges and empty adjectives are much less common.

Although Lakoff notes "so" is used by women and men, she makes the claim women use "so" as an intensifier when they want to strengthen an assertion but "felt it unseemly to show you had strong emotions" (p. 55). "So" in this usage, then, works as a weak

intensifier signifying the lack of (or rejection of) the power to make a strong assertion. Bunny's uses of the intensifier "so" in line 1, coupled with the empty adjective and hedge in this segment, index an indirect speech style, which may be associated with the type of femininity referred to in *Language and Woman's Place*—middle-class white femininity.

However, this short segment allows us to see the complexity of Bunny's performance and her drag identity—in line 7 she strongly asserts her own opinion (indexical of direct, ideological "masculine" speech) and swears. Lakoff (1975) specifically places swearing in opposition to WL. Swearing may be read as indexical of masculinity or deviancy. Barrett (1999), in his work with African American drag queens, attributes the combination of WL with such oppositional features as a move to point out the performance is "false"—that is, it is not a woman being performed, but rather drag. While the indirect speech style in Bunny's onstage performance may point to middle-class white femininity, its combination with such oppositional features creates a drag queen identity.

The following example further complicates the direct association between WL ideological femininity. It demonstrates the complexity of Bunny's on-stage drag persona through an analysis of her use of specific lexical items associated with WL:

Example (3)

8	Bunny:	But you know what, it's
		Walks over to bar
9		yes honey
10		I am honey it's all good
11		There were,
12		actually, there were like
13		there was one more, wasn't there?
14		{Laughter}
15		Yay, we're good?
16		Oh,
17		Amy?
18		Amy?
19		Are you coming?
20		Are those penis candles?
21		{Ow!}
22		Is that a penis cake?
23		{Laughter Whoa!}
24		Oh my god
25		We have penis candles and penis cake
26		{Laughter Whoa}
27		Does anyone want a bite?
28		{Whoa!}
29		Right honey?
30		It, it's a black penis
31		That's ok because twelve inches is a,
32		is a shame to waste, honey it's all good.
33		oh my god

One of the things immediately apparent in this and any segment of Bunny's onstage

speech is her frequent use of the phrases "it's all good" (lines 10 and 32) and "oh my god" (lines 24 and 33). I argue that these phrases are specific lexical items (discourse markers) as identified in Lakoff's discussion of WL. These discourse markers serve at least two functions in Bunny's speech: they organize her discourse marking shifts in conversational segments and are significant features marking her style.

One of the features Lakoff identifies as WL is a range of lexical items now referred to as discourse markers. In her description she explains: "we find differences between the speech of women and that of men in the use of particles that grammarians often describe as 'meaningless'" (1975, p. 9). Lakoff herself does not see them as meaningless, but rather states these features "define the social context of an utterance, indicate the relationship the speaker feels between himself and his addressee, between himself and what he is talking about" (p. 9). Here Lakoff predicts the extensive work on discourse markers to come, noting the very specific, meaningful, and communicative functions they play. Later work on discourse markers notes their organizational function (Schiffrin, 1987; Fraser, 1988) and upholds Lakoff's assertion that they serve to indicate speaker stance (Kiesling, 2004; Mendoza-Denton, 2008; Roth-Gordon, 2007).

Almost every segment of Bunny's onstage speech is filled with the discourse markers "it's all good" and "oh my god." Far from meaningless, these serve a very specific organizational feature in Bunny's talk: "oh my god" acts as an opener and "it's all good" as a closer. Because Bunny is speaking into the microphone, her performance is largely a monologue. Discourse markers allow her to frame the monologue in a conversational style—she uses them to mark shifts in who she is addressing (staff, the audience, a fellow performer, etc.) and in conversational topics. The two discourse markers often occur sequentially, as in lines 32 and 33, with "it's all good" (closing one conversational segment) immediately followed by "oh my god" (opening another). Bunny's patterned use of discourse markers organizes her monologue in a way that the audience can easily follow.

This patterned use is clear in example (3). In line 10, "it's all good" indicates the closing of an interaction with the bartender. Bunny then has two other "personal" conversations with staff, until she marks the shift from individual addressees to the audience as a whole with "oh my god" in line 24. When one audience member answers her in line 28, she begins to address her individually and closes that with "it's all good" in line 32. Finally, she addresses the audience as a whole again in line 33 with "oh my god."

The frequency of "oh my god" and "it's all good" likely serves stylistic functions as well. Like Lakoff, Roth-Gordon's (2007) work on Brazilian slang (gíria) links the frequent use of discourse markers to a marginalized group (poor black male youth). Although some discourse markers fall within the realms of legitimized speech and are unlikely to be marked as significant in a stream of speech (for instance "so" (Schiffrin, 1987), others are highly stigmatized (often categorized under the term "slang") and serve as sites to marginalize those who use them. Frequency of stigmatized discourse markers points to a positionality outside the power structure—markers that are likely denoted by those in power to be "meaningless." This association indicates the discourse markers Lakoff attributes to WL may be indexical of "out of power" in general, and perhaps secondarily to women depending upon the local uses of the feature.

Bunny's frequent use of the discourse markers "oh my god" and "it's all good" likely

index nonstandard speech and a marginalized identity in Bunny's performance. Because they are likely to stand out, we can assume these are salient in the construction of her drag identity. However, it is difficult to assess the indexical connections a stigmatized discourse marker will carry within a local interaction, especially due to the diverse nature of the audience at the drag performances, an audience that can change drastically from one performance to the next. The historical trajectory of these specific discourse markers combined with their co-occurring signs can shed light on possible local meanings. Exploring these possible meanings cannot give a definite answer regarding what the features index outside of "out of power," but it can expand the possible indexical realm of WL beyond a strict association with middle-class white femininity.

"Oh my god" is stereotypically tied to valley girl speech, perhaps the emblem of white hyper-femininity. D'Arcy (2007) notes the valley girl is an iconic image that permeates pop culture and has a huge influence on perceptions of certain linguistic features and styles (particularly the use of "like"). Bunny's frequent use of "oh my god" may index this very specific ideological femininity. The valley girl is a highly stigmatized identity that Daily-O'Cain (2000) claims is associated with a lack of education, intelligence, and interestingness, although it is also linked to attractiveness and friendliness. Bunny's frequent use of "oh my god" may associate her drag identity with these idealized hyper-feminine characteristics.

"It's all good" is a very different discourse marker, which has its roots in African American English. Lee (1999) notes that the phrase was popularized by a 1995 MC Hammer song by the same name and was appropriated by white culture thereafter. Because the phrase is heavily appropriated, it may no longer point to its historical roots. However, combined with the prevalence of the pop diva aesthetic in this drag space (an aesthetic whose roots also lie in black pop music (Labotka, 2008)) and other signs pointing to "blackness,"[2] "it's all good" may point to AAE in this particular social space. If this is the case, AAE has ideological ties that may shape its interpretation. Barrett (1999) describes AAE as ideologically tied to hyper-masculinity and hyper-strength. Bucholtz (1999) has specifically explored its use among white adolescents and similarly found it to be linked to hyper-masculinity. Bunny's use of the discourse marker "it's all good" may point to hyper-masculinity, associating her drag identity with the strength ideologically tied to the pop diva persona.

A final feature of this segment is the crudeness and joking in lines 20-32.[3] These two features explicitly lie outside Lakoff's WL. These may indeed play a role similar to the one discussed in example (2)—pointing out that it is drag being performed. Additionally, crude jokes like this add an element of strong sexuality associated with the diva persona.

Onstage, Bunny uses various features of WL in the creation of a multidimensional drag identity. Although the features can be said to index "out of power" identities, the specific connections in this space are not clear. Probably, her use of some of these features (specifically the intensifier "so") index ideological femininity. She is not simply pointing

[2] Including a general loudness of her onstage performance (loudness is a highly stereotypical trait ideologically associated with black femininity) and the frequent use of the addressee term "baby" to refer to both men and women (a feature of AAE—Morgan, 1996; Smitherman, 1977).

[3] A particular aspect of this joke is its racist connotations. Such joking is common in the shows I observed. Although this is a feature which deserves attention, it is beyond the scope of this paper.

to a female performance, however, but rather intertwining it with features associated with masculinity (direct speech and swearing) and marginalized identities (stigmatized discourse markers) to point out both that she is "doing drag" and that she is not performing a middle-class white woman (but rather a diva). Bunny's onstage usage of WL demonstrates that these features are not necessarily tied to ideologies of femininity, but rather serve as interactional resources born out of ideologies of power that can fulfill a variety of social aims as they are locally negotiated.

6 The Backstage: Hedges and Rising Intonation

The backstage of the drag show has an entirely different atmosphere than the front. As Goffman explains: "A back region or backstage may be defined as a place, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course" (1959, p. 112). Indeed, here the performers are preparing for the immense impression management we see onstage. They apply make-up to their entire bodies, cover their hair with hairnets and wigs, tuck their genitals, apply body padding, and put on elaborate costumes. During this "transition," we can assume the performers are not hyper-aware of their speech style, but rather casually interacting with one another (in a different type of performative stance which, according to Goffman, indexes familiarity and minimizes difference). Some of my backstage data is an interview setting, and this may make Bunny hyper-aware of her self-presentation. I argue this awareness would cause her to emphasize her gay male identity, as this was a very salient aspect of her identity, which she highlighted in the interview.

Example (4)

34	Bunny:	There's a lot of terms that people use, some say female illusionist, some say,
35		you know, female impersonator.
36		I, I don't (.)
37		mind (.)
38		any definition really?
39		It, it doesn't matter to me, but some people are very particular about it.
40		(.h) Um, there are (.)
41		I mean I, I, I take what RuPaul says,
42		you know, I heard RuPaul say this once in an interview,
43		you know, I'm, I'm not trying to be a woman, I'm.
44		He says I am a man,
45		I am a man in a dress that is drag to me.
46		I'm not trying to give you the illusion of a woman.
47		So, I just kind of go with, you know, what, what feels right, what looks fun, what looks good,

A striking difference in Bunny's backstage speech from her front stage speech is her shift in discourse markers. She uses "so" to fulfill many of the same roles the stigmatized discourse markers served in the front—we see it used in line 47 of this excerpt. This is not the use of "so" Lakoff identified, but rather follows Schiffrin's (1987) discussion of "so" as a non-stigmatized discourse marker. The features of WL Bunny does use in the backstage include hedges ("you know" in line 35 and 47, "just kind of" in line 47) and

rising intonation (line 38). The uses of "I mean" and "you know" in lines 41-43 may be serving as discourse markers to organize Bunny's speech rather than as hedges.

Bunny's use of hedges and rising intonation both point to indirect speech. According to Lakoff, these features of WL arise out of a feeling that one should not make a strong claim. Although this is one interpretation, such indirect speech features may also be interpreted as resources to point out one is not making a strong claim. Thus, because strong claims are indexical of heteronormative masculinity, hedges and rising intonation may point out that one is not performing this version of masculinity. Because Bunny is not "doing drag" in the backstage, these uses are not likely to be seen as pointing to ideological femininity. Rather, Bunny uses them to index her relationship to the ideological associations her outward image of masculinity presents: she is not the assertive, dominant, heteronormative male. She is performing a gay male identity by drawing on the association between WL and an "out of power" identity.

The connection between WL and gay men's English has been explored before. What has arisen through these explorations is a great deal of caution in making this connection. Leap (2004) explains his work connecting WL to gay men's English "could not be understood independently of social and cultural contexts or of the workings of power that unfold there" (p. 279). In a similar vein, Gaudio problematizes Lakoff's assertion that gay men "reject the American masculine image" (Lakoff, 1975, p. 10). He claims, "gay men's commitment to the goal of rejecting hegemonic masculinity has never been as strong or monolithic as Lakoff suggests…" (Gaudio, 2004, p. 286).

Gaudio's and Leap's assertions are both critical to an exploration of WL and gay men's English. However, it is not my intent in this paper to claim all gay men speak this way, or that all gay men wish to reject heteronormative masculinity. Rather, I want to re-frame WL as an ideological resource linked to an "out of power" identity stance. In this way, someone who outwardly appears to be a heteronormative male can draw on WL to index non-heteronormativity. This does not rest upon every homosexual male doing so, but rather individual, local choices, like Bunny's backstage interview, that draw on an association between heteronormative masculinity, power, and direct speech. And indeed, the connection between WL and a gay male identity may be heavily dependent on the social context as Leap suggests—Bunny is a white, middle-class gay male performing in a middle-class gay bar, and this study cannot claim WL will point to a gay male identity across all intersecting race and class identities or all contexts.

7 Conclusion

This analysis supports Lakoff's theoretical claims that WL is primarily associated with an "out of power" social identity. Bunny's front and backstage uses of WL make clear that it is not necessarily tied to the performance of a "woman." Over the course of one evening, Bunny draws on features of WL in the performance of a diva drag queen persona in the front stage (a many-layered identity that points both to a male identity and to the traits of femininity, strength, and sexuality tied to the diva persona) and a gay male identity in the backstage. Because the features of WL are unified in their association with a lack of power rather than a specific gendered identity, the uses of WL by the same individual can point to multiple social personae and various social characteristics in the formation of a complex, multidimensional social identity. The implications of this study are twofold: first, investigations into local uses of WL need to take into account contextual factors, co-

occurring signs, and intersecting identity categories to begin to delve into the emergent meaning of WL; and second, social identities are formulated out of complex intersections of various social categories and cannot be understood as simply "male" or "female." The intersection of power and gender that gives WL social meaning extends far beyond a male/female binary, embedding vast social meaning into the salient set of language features Lakoff identified.

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Texas Linguistic Forum 53: 18-28
Proceedings of the Seventeenth Annual Symposium About Language and Society – Austin
April 10-11, 2009