“I wish I had the guts to put my foot down”. Constructing and negotiating expertise and gender identities in the workplace.

Jo Angouri, UWE, Bristol
Overview

• A bit of background language and identity
• Current thinking in gender and language research: a snapshot
• Professional Identity, expertise and gender
• Method-Data
• Discussion-Conclusions
Talking identity

The relationship between language and identity has been studied in numerous ways in different sociolinguistic traditions.
Operationalising the concept

- social variables to be mapped against linguistic variables: e.g. relationships between age, gender, and social class and the frequency of use of certain linguistic features.
The difference ‘problem’

- a binary view (dichotomy)
- ignores similarities
- over-generalises
- “Biological explanations of gender differences can help justify male privileges and reinforce gender stereotypes that are damaging for both women and men”
  (Litosseliti, 2006)
... so I was reading this magazine while I stood in the checkout line at the grocery store - oh, I got the ice cream you like, by the way - and there was an interesting article that I didn't have time to completely finish because the man in front of me only had a few items, but one statistic in the article caught my eye - once I found my reading glasses that I thought I'd left in the bank, but then found in the bottom of my purse (I really need to clean and organize my purse) - anyway, this statistic said that women speak about 20,000 words each day compared to men who speak only 7,000 words.
Overall

Identity

► as a fixed set of attributes, often as something external to language and pre-existing language.

Drawing on poststructuralism ► as a process enacted in discourse
Identity theory and Social Identity theory

(Role) Identity theory (e.g., Stryker 1980) and Social Identity theory (e.g., Tajfel and Turner, 1979) >> how the roles an individual occupy (identity theory) and membership to (a number of different and overlapping) social groups (social identity theory) is inextricably linked to self identification processes
Stance

- Identities are dynamic in nature and enacted in talk.
- Identity as a process in a dialectal relationship with the roles individuals occupy and the groups to which they belong or aspire.
- Both group membership and role enactment however are not static and negotiated in interaction.
Method/Data

• Audio recordings—meeting talk
• Observations and Interviews
• Biologically male dominated industries vs. numerically balanced ones and specific case studies
• Heavy construction sites and a small but growing retail firm
  > Gender experiences – expertise/status
Meetings

• Have been identified as the microcosm of an organisation’s communication.
Engineers…who are they?
A normative masculine socialisation?

- McIlwee and Robinson (1992) note, “competence as an engineer is a function of how well one presents an image of an aggressive, competitive, technically oriented person” (pp. 20-21).
Workplace ‘culture’

• Influence every day practice
• Normative behaviours
• Expectations of performance—role enactment
Constructing a ‘macho’ norm:
Peter- We need to give him a copy of this but hmm we need to translate it
Fil- so uhh we[uhh]
Gabriel- [who] is going to tra[nslate]?
Peter- [either ] Mary or uh P[aul ]
Chloe- [But ] they need help to translate all this and it’s not their job=
Fil- =yes you are very right here I’m afraid
Peter - Ok tomorrow I will discuss with Mary to ( . ) and see if she can translate uhh
Chloe- hang on why Mary? Mary or Paul or both (.) that’s a lot of extra work for [Mary ]
Peter - [it’s ok] it’s easy to translate but it needs time (. ) some days to translate all these
Gabriel - Hmhh yes and what about ((he refers to a project part of which seems to be assigned to Mary))
Chloe - how long is this going to ta[ke because ]
Peter - [I don’t know xx]xx days (.) lets give Mary xxx days and Paul can take on ((Mary’s normal duties)) and we will take it from there.
Gabriel - Sounds ok [to me]
Chloe- [No ] that’s not good ((refers to project)) this is Mary’s (.) I want her to learn keep Paul out of this
Gabriel- Ok Chloe your wish is my command ((general laughter))
Chloe-Thanks Gab ((soft voice))
The role of an engineer

• *I think life here is difficult for women [...] the language we use here is often unpleasant for women [...] it was difficult for me in the beginning (. ) I don’t like all this ((power displays)) but you have to adjust*
Enactment of roles?

- [...] If there are 6 women out of 437 personnel this of course influences things. But there is something more to it. You can’t turn up in short skirt but equally I can’t turn up in shorts. It is about expectations.
Working with a woman site manager

I wouldn’t mind of course (.) but I would expect her to be respected and I am sure is more difficult for a woman engineer
Why?

> Numbers
> Perceived gap between the different teams of employees
> A number of cultures under the same roof (e.g. white and blue collar)
> High stakes activity
Gender is not always constructed as salient
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<table>
<thead>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sara 1</td>
<td>It is it is unfortunately the common practice</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cynthia 2</td>
<td>Yea ohh yea ((exasperation))</td>
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<tr>
<td>Robert 3</td>
<td>Very much so</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sara 4</td>
<td>And the way they talk from what Cynthia says ((comments))</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Cynthia 5</td>
<td>I am just thinking maybe I ve given them too much leeway maybe I was too polite (.).maybe because I am a young woman</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sara 7</td>
<td>No you haven’t given them too much leeway</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Robert 8</td>
<td>The opposite (.). they are out of their comfort zone here</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara 9</td>
<td>They are used to function differently</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Cynthia 10</td>
<td>I was talking about safety issues and they were like yes yes we know but the price ((of the product)) [...]</td>
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Angouri, 2011
 Complexity

- “they were trying to fool me (.) but I didn’t know why back then and I was thinking maybe because I am a young woman maybe because I am too polite I didn’t know I couldn’t understand why”
Cont’d

• [...] I know now it was all down to ((professional)) age and work experience. [...] it wouldn’t matter if I am a boy or a girl (.) a man or a woman (.), in the office it’s never an issue and they are all used to having a capable woman as their head ((director)).
The ‘expert’ (Angouri, 2009)

✓ Formulates a/the problem (or part of it)
✓ Takes ownership of a/the problem on behalf of a group
✓ Confirms/Attests ownership of a/the problem on behalf of a group
✓ Evaluates
✓ Suggests future steps
✓ Evaluates part of the suggestion
Perpetuating the gender order
In engineering

- The construction industry seems to be a by and large masculine domain where biological sex still seems to affect the professional development of female engineers
Vs.?  

- *In the beginning I thought it’s more difficult for women, but it’s the on the job experience that matters. Everybody around here knows what able women can do ((laughter))*
Do numbers make a difference?

- More women enter the workplace
- The university classrooms are reported as more inclusive (70-30 instead of 95-5)
- Some workplaces actively strive to change the under representation of women in their workforce
- Male engineers often see female members of their immediate families entering the profession
- Male engineers challenge the hegemonic masculinities
Thank you

• Angouri, (In press) “We are in a masculine profession…”. Doing gender in a consortium of two multinational engineering companies”. Gender and Language. Special issue on Gender and Language in the Workplace 5(2).


