On the pragmatics of an androgynous style of speaking
(from a transsexual's perspective)

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ABSTRACT: Since the publication of Robin Lakoff's *Language and Woman's Place* (1975), much has been written regarding the distinct language styles employed by men and women in Western culture. For instance, linguists in England and America have repeatedly found men to be more competitive and women more co-operative in discourse. Following the lead of psychologist Sandra Bem, Jennifer Coates has suggested that a speaker who shifts between masculine and feminine styles of speaking will have certain advantages in today's society, especially in the work environment. This paper considers the pragmatics of style-shifting as related to the experiences of Marty Gomez, a male-to-female transsexual who has met with limited success in passing as female under intense public scrutiny. It illustrates how Marty shifts between what has been considered two distinct styles of speaking in order to (1) maintain the illusion of femininity, (2) set clients of both genders at ease as they pose before an audience of strangers, and (3) entice clients to desire and purchase a product. Marty's situation reveals much regarding the underlying Western notions of gender and upholds the theories of modern linguists. However, it also shows the limitation of style-shifting when applied in her situation. If Marty appears too feminine, she may lose the sale; too masculine, and she runs the risk of revealing her male self. While Marty herself attributes much of her success in society to her ability to style shift, it is complicated and fatiguing work, not without danger.

INTRODUCTION

Since the publication of Robin Lakoff's *Language and Woman's Place* (1975), linguists have repeatedly shown that in Western culture, one may discern between two distinct, gender-based styles of communicating. Accordingly, Jennifer Coates has discerned between two 'distinct speech communities' (1986: 117) and Deborah Tannen treats these 'conversational styles' as the products of different cultures (1996: 5). Courtroom observations of O'Barr and Atkins suggest that what Lakoff has termed 'women's language' is best described as 'powerless language,' reflecting the 'generally powerless position of many women in American society' (1980: 94. See also Erickson et al., 1978). Men's language is conversely understood as powerful language (e.g., Kiesling, 1997; Coates, 1997), characterized as more competitive and egoistic.

Following psychologist Sandra Bem, Coates has predicted that the 'ideal' speaker 'would be able to switch from assertiveness to tentativeness as circumstances required' (Coates, 1986: vi). Individuals with the ability to switch between masculine and feminine styles of speaking should have certain advantages in today's society, especially as regards the corporate arena. This paper will consider this notion of an androgynous style of speaking as exemplified by the conversational style used by a biological male who passes as a female in Las Vegas, Nevada, even under intense public scrutiny. It will explore the pragmatics of an androgynous style of speaking as put to test in a fast-paced retail environment.

The consultant for this case study is Marty Gomez, a preoperative transsexual who has had silicone breast implants for the past four years and has been on estrogen therapy a year...
longer. I have observed Marty at home and at work many times since meeting her two years ago and have interviewed her at length regarding her motivations and desires as she goes through what she terms 'the cross over.' Today, Marty has no problem passing as female, and this is due as much to her use of language as to her silicon-sculpted figure and 'exotic' personality, as I have twice heard her described by male acquaintances.

It is fair to say that Marty's representation of a woman, which I perceive in part to be a performative act in appeal for increased social acceptance and status, may be considered stereotypical and often hyper-feminine. However, as Coates reminds us, while crude binary reductionism may seem trite to the academic mind, 'we should also remember that we belong to societies where the hegemonic ideologies represent gender as binary' (1997: 126). Marty's success in sales and her rapid advancement into management indicate that we should not underestimate the influence of gender stereotypes. As much as our sensibilities may loathe it, Mead's dictum still holds true: in most known cultures, 'men and women are socially differentiated, and each sex, as a sex, forced to conform to the role assigned to it' (1963 [1935]: xi).

**MASCULINE AND FEMININE SPEECH STYLES**

Before I may address Marty's experiences, it is necessary to distinguish between what has been called a masculine versus a feminine style of speaking. Women's speech frequently includes the use of 'empty' adjectives, such as 'divine, charming, cute'; tag questions, such as *don't you think?* or *isn't it?*, and other hedges, words expressing uncertainty, like *perhaps, I wonder if . . ., ya know?* (Graddol and Swan, 1989: 83). This style of speaking was perceived by Lakoff (1975) to expose feminine politeness and uncertainty. Other linguists followed, and the feminine style of speech has since repeatedly been portrayed as 'indecisive, imprecise, or mitigated,' reflecting the lower status of women in society (Bonvillain, 1993).

This is not to say that there are no advantages to the feminine style of speaking. In accordance with the polite and cooperative nature of feminine discourse, the topics raised in the conversations of women's groups may be discussed at length, often 'for half an hour or more,' with women cooperatively turn-taking, chaining their comments to the topic at hand (Graddol and Swan 1989: 82) citing Kalcik (1975). See Holmes (1995) on politeness strategies. Women tend to be 'especially sensitive to their co-participants' interest or 'face' ' (Bonvillain (1993: 198) citing Brown and Levinson (1987)), and they fill gaps in conversational turn-taking in a manner more cooperative than intrusive. Discussion is often centered around a particular topic, a locus of unity whereby group cohesion is centered and conversation maintained. Women's talk is thus collaborative, built on common themes and a sense of 'shared understanding' (Coates, 1996: 56).

In many ways, the masculine style of speech is directly counter to and 'opposite' from the feminine style. Men seem to 'avoid self disclosure, and prefer to talk about more impersonal topics such as current affairs, travel or sport' (Coates, 1997: 119). Men are prone to use stronger expletives, such as *damn, shit, or worse, than woman's oh dear, or goodness* (though this particular gender gap, according to de Klerk (1997), is rapidly closing) (Coates (1987: 108) citing Lakoff (1975)). Whereas women are more likely to discuss a topic at length, men 'jump from one topic to another, vying to tell anecdotes which center around themes of superiority and aggression' and are thus more concerned with promoting their own face over the needs of their interlocutors (Coates, 1986: 152. See
also Tannen (1986); Kiesling (1997)). Men's discussions 'consist of serial monologues' and 'scrupulous adherence to a one-at-a-time floor,' as opposed to the 'collaborative mode of conversational organization' preferred by females (Coates, 1997: 126).

**GENDER STRUGGLE**

These masculine and feminine speech patterns are thought to be the result of a social system that values the contribution of men over women and seeks to empower masculine authority while restricting or channeling influence of females. With this in mind, one might wonder why a biological male would every aspire to be identified as female? The answer is obvious when the weight of Marty's stigma as an *effeminate* male is considered. Marty, originally named Pedro, was physically and emotionally abused by parents and step-parents throughout her childhood, largely in reaction to her effeminacy. She started dressing and acting like a 'girl' about the time she was six years old. Her step-father started calling her 'faggot' by the time she was eight, and once he kicked her hard enough to land her in the hospital. Marty's step-mother was no better, having beaten her with a thorny rose switch, a garden hose, and even a board of lumber. When she fought back, pushing her pregnant step-mother to the floor after being struck in the face, she was incarcerated, at the age of 14, in the California Youth Authority, where her fight to define her own gender identity intensified.

Throughout her four-and-a-half years in the care of the institution, Marty resisted her psychologist's insistence that she identify with the masculine gender. Indeed, the more they tried to make her 'a man,' the more she insisted that she was 'a woman' and the more determined she became to assume a feminine identity. For years, she was forced to conform to a masculine style of living that included dress, haircut, manner, and sexual orientation. She was released after an attempt at self-castration, an event to be described at length in a separate paper. The Youth Authority ultimately relinquished, releasing her on the grounds that she was 'gender dysphoric' and they did not have the means to treat that condition.

In the six years since her release, Marty has gradually but increasingly become more feminine. Breast implants and estrogen therapy are largely responsible for her passing as female, but to maintain the illusion, her language, intonations, gestures, and manner of speaking have become intuitively feminine. Within the past four years, she has gone from appearing as an obvious and awkward-appearing cross-dressed male, to a stunning, elegant, and (dare I say it) well-endowed female.

Marty has long realized that the most challenging and important domain in which she must 'pass' is her place of employment. Indeed, as Marty is status-oriented and eager to succeed financially, she has targeted her persona specifically to this arena. Even while incarcerated, she has used every opportunity to learn and improve on her 'employability' and social skills. Despite her professionalism and training, Marty swears that her breasts have been the most significant factor in gaining employment, and her social standing dramatically improved as a result. She has become a dynamic and successful salesperson, making more money, receiving more positive attention from both males and females, and being more accepted into a broader social circle than she had ever been – or ever would be – as an effeminate male.

In an attempt to analyze Marty's behavior and better understand her success at passing, I observed her behavior in public for examples of gendered style-switching. This became
easy when she was hired by a photo imaging booth in one of the bustling shopping corridors that connect the casinos of the Las Vegas, Nevada, strip. Her job was to entice a potential client to pause on their way from keno to blackjack, and other such games, long enough to pose while she snapped a digital photograph of their face, which she pasted into a pre-selected visage of a supermodel or celebrity. There were hundreds of portraits for the client to choose from, most bearing the likeness of a hyper-masculine or ultra-feminine, scantily clad sex idol, often on the cover of a popular magazine. The results of this virtual transformation were displayed on several large monitors for passers-by to see. As she manipulated and tweaked the image, Marty joked over a public address system with the client; the observing audience, themselves potential clients; and one other salesperson-interlocutor who also wore a microphone.

**STYLE SHIFTING AND SATISFYING ‘FACE’ NEEDS**

The interaction between Marty and one other salesperson in particular, a woman in her early twenties whom I will call Sarah, was especially entertaining to watch, and the two of them frequently attracted an audience of 30 or more, often jamming the bustling, neon-lit corridor. Once a client selected an image or scene, Marty and Sarah created elaborate stories about the persona which Marty displayed on the main screen, turn-taking as they fabricated fantasy scenarios. For example, for one newly-wed couple, Marty started by creating individual portraits of the groom on the cover of *Playgirl* and the bride on *Playboy.* Sarah added that they had been introduced at a photo shoot. Next, Marty composed an image of them dressed in traditional wedding attire, and then, as she began to discuss the ‘hot honeymoon,’ she placed them within the still she called ‘Nature Lovers,’ which depicted a young and near-naked couple basking on a Bahaman shore.

Marty’s stories frequently involved status, success, and glamour. ‘Here she is, Little Miss Innocent,’ she would begin, addressing the on-screen image of a young woman draped in a fluffy cotton towel. ‘Then she came to Vegas and voila! She came out in red and black!’ (Flash to client now dressed as leather dominatrix.) Sarah would follow Marty’s lead, complementing and building on the scenario, often using a process of repetition and parallelism Goodwin (1990) has called format tying. Take, for example, the following turn:

Marty: Then they went on vacation to the Bahamas and look what she found on the beach!
Sarah: Woo-eee! She found a stud on the beach that day!

Goodwin noted that an extended sequence of format-tied exchange is structured ‘in an almost musical way’ (1990: 179) and indeed, Marty and Sarah would often burst into song while Marty performed her electronic makeover:

Marty (singing): ‘This is the way we brush your teeth, brush your teeth, brush your teeth ...’
Both (singing): ‘This is the way we brush your teeth here at [name of company].’

Marty felt that she was most effective when working in collaboration with an associate like Sarah. As she put it, ‘We have to be almost the same person. [Snaps fingers twice.] Have to be. And that’s why we did a big thing on chemistry. We had to work well with each other. We had to be able to cue in to each other’s calls ... And that’s the way it works. Sarah was good at that. She was real good.’

Goodwin (1990) and Kulick (1993: 521) have observed format tying in status negotiations and bouts of insults (both ritual and real), where each exchange would repeat yet
alter the previous statement ‘minimally in order to highlight opposition.’ Here, format
tying was used to create a fictional narrative in which the product was contextualized as an
integral part of the clients’ Las Vegas vacation, a memento by which to also remember
their time on the big-screen and their virtual vacation to paradise. The technique was
highly effective as Marty and Sarah consistently generated the highest sales in the store,
and Marty was rapidly promoted to supervisor.

Even while acting alone, Marty was remarkably quick at setting people of both genders
at ease as they posed before her camera. Through her magic, Marty could make virtually
any boy into a hero like Han Solo and any girl a Baywatch beauty. With the click of a
mouse, freckles were erased, hairlines proceeded, teeth and eyes whitened and gleamed.
Any discrepancy in skin tone was blurred, and blemishes could be added or erased at will.

For female clients, Marty would compare her work to that of a cosmetician giving a
makeover. ‘Women,’ she said, ‘want to feel beautiful. Women want glamour and
compliments.’ Therefore, Marty would flatter their new appearance through what have
been termed empty descriptive modifiers, such as when she said, ‘See? You like yesterday,’
or ‘Isn’t that great?’ or ‘Hon, you look fabulous.’ For women, who Marty perceives to
value physical esthetics, such terms would not be considered empty at all but signify a
desirable state of being.

For male customers, Marty would shift from descriptive to active terms, such as when
she cooed to a male client’s scantily clad, muscle-bound visage standing astride a Harley:
‘Oh, big Daddy, I’m gonna go on a ride with you!’ Marty was not afraid to use her sex
appeal on men, often to the point of blatant flirtation. If a man and his girlfriend/wife were
posing together, she might flirt with the male through the female, as when she said, ‘Girl,
you better hang on to him, because my finger doesn’t have a ring.’ In flirting with the man,
she also flattered the woman and thus cleared the way for a sale.

As has been seen, much of Marty’s success may be attributed to her attention to the ‘face
needs’ of her clients (see Goffman, 1967). Marty has a talent for making people feel
attractive and accepted while minimizing the imposition of the need for a transaction. For
these purposes, she frequently employed hedges and tag questions in a complex way as she
strove to control the salesperson-interlocutor, the audience of potential clients, and the
client at hand. ‘Would you like to see how you’d look as a Brunette today, Hon?’ ‘This
would look nice on a coffee mug, don’t you think?’ Sometimes she would direct a tag­
question towards the audience: ‘This guy’d look great on the cover of Playgirl, wouldn’t
he?’

Though there was never a shortage of male posers, men as a rule did not seem as
interested in looking great as they were in the ‘joke’ of the image and in getting a good deal
for their money. As men were not often drawn to the offer of a ‘free’ makeover, Marty
developed a promotion by which to catch their attention. She created a pair of large red
dice which, after posing for the camera, the customer could roll for a chance to win a prize
– usually a discount coupon towards the purchase of a ‘package.’ Of course, the dice would
be enticing to the female gamblers, too. As Marty explains it,

People do not see themselves coming to Vegas and buying photos. They come here to gamble, and
I needed to play on that. I figured that the best way to get them to sit on that chair and buy a
picture is to offer incentive – if they would sit down on this chair and let us give them a free
makeover on the computer screen, we’d give them a free roll on our big red dice which I hand
made myself, big, cute, oversized – they had no choice but want to roll. They all got real excited
about the gambling and would be more willing to sit in the chair and let us make them look good.

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According to this reasoning, the dice should appeal to individuals on both masculine and feminine levels at once. This is perhaps the best exemplified in how she used them. Marty would gently place the dice in the hands of a woman or girl, calling them ‘soft’ and ‘cute.’ With men, though, her behavior was markedly different. She would often throw one of the dice at a man who was passing by, especially if she judged him ‘wealthy or cute,’ challenging him to catch it and come play in her game. I never saw her throw a dice at a woman or girl. Again, with men and boys, the emphasis was on action, and if the guy would agree to just sit still for just one minute, she would let him roll for a chance to win a free picture of himself – on the cover of Men’s Fitness, if he’d like.

**STYLE SWITCHING AND ANDROGYNY**

Because of the different ways that Marty would use her dice, I began to see them – and her – in a slightly different light. In accordance with Lakoff, I had determined to keep an eye out for style switching – that is, times when Marty could be perceived as acting distinctly ‘masculine’ as opposed to times she was ‘feminine.’ And I could often make such a distinction. However, most usually, Marty’s ‘gender switching’ did not happen in nicely delineated segments. I could not easily determine when she had ‘crossed the line.’ Indeed, if there was a line, she often seemed to straddle it. In watching Marty work with her dice, I began to see them not as distinctly masculine or feminine, but with aspects of both: a locus of androgyny. They certainly had a trans-gendered appeal, representing both action and esthetics. But never were they the distinct territory of one gender or the other.

Once I began to see the dice in this manner, my perception of Marty began to change. Influenced by my research on transsexuals, or people who were in the process of ‘switching’ from one gender category to the other, I encountered Marty as a person who was nearly through the process, or almost a full-fledged social female. She was, after all, fooling hundreds of people, on a daily basis. Still, just as the dice were neither entirely masculine nor feminine, Marty herself was somehow in the middle – sometimes masculine, sometimes feminine, never entirely effeminate but certainly never ‘butch.’ Consider, for example, how Marty used hedges and tag questions – features commonly found in association with women’s or powerless language – in order to elicit a desired response and maintain control of the stage and situation – she thus used ‘feminine language’ in a masculine way. Conversely, her style of format-tying, which has been perceived by linguists as often used in a more masculine and combative way, was used to foster group cohesion and inclusion, which is more characteristic of women’s speech. In effect, she was turning my expectations of what would constitute women’s versus men’s speech upside-down.

Then, during one of the interviews in which we discussed my observations and her performance in the mall, Marty herself credited her success to her ability to ‘style shift.’ She called this her ‘number one skill,’ boasting, ‘I can go to this person and have this personality and then with the next person, change my hat and become a different person just for them. I can shift roles at the drop of a dime. I can give them all what they want that way.’ This is in accordance with Bem’s hypothesis that, to her or his advantage, ‘the androgynous individual should be able to remain sensitive to the changing constraints of the situation and engage in whatever behavior seems most effective at the moment, regardless of its stereotypes as appropriate for one sex or the other’ (1975: 634–635). Marty’s success at style-shifting illustrates that this is indeed so.

But sometimes, her style misfired, and Marty came off looking like a typical, high-pressure
She was often aggressive in her manner, never afraid to ask for a sale or counter a denial. Her employer commented that she 'had a comeback for everything' and counted this her greatest asset. But to some, the effect was perceived as domineering. After all, a sugar-coated directive is still a directive. Though Marty was consistently feminine in her manner, sometimes she became aggressive, overbearing, and distinctly un-ladylike.

Marty was usually a success at passing. She could stand on stage and pass as a woman before thousands of people, for hours at a time. But sometimes, in her bid to identify with a particular client, she would bluntly invite closer scrutiny. I was especially surprised when said to an adolescent girl who sat admiring her new visage as a buxom, bathing Aphrodite: 'See dear? Now you won't have to buy them, like I did.' When I asked her about this, Marty attributed the problem to letting her guard down. She told me, 'I lost my focus on my job, on the task at hand. I lost concentration. I have to stay concentrated. It's like a performance that can never be quit.' This statement is true, indeed. And I would suspect that the longer she maintains her performance, the more natural the 'act' will become. However, the manner in which a person speaks reveals much about his or her private experiences. This is known as the 'indexical' nature of language, pertaining to how 'a person's biography and social movements lead them to speak in a certain way' (Graddol and Swan, 1989: 140). For Marty, this means that there is always a danger that her language will betray her.

At times, Marty seems to have won in her struggle to be accepted socially as female. For her, the problem is not one of ability to pass, but rather a refusal to go all the way. Time after time, she gains new employment and rapidly starts her climb into management. And then, something happens. People get suspicious, or find out the truth, and within a few weeks, or two months at most, she is again unemployed. Though Ben has suggested 'the androgynous individual will someday come to define a new more human standard of psychological health' (1975: 643), Marty's experiences show that the penalties of androgyny are still severe.

It is a simple fact that androgynous persons exist in the world. In culture after culture, there have been documented cases of gender inverters, converters, and confounders. It is also a fact that in Western culture, there is no acceptable identity for those who are socially 'trapped' in the middle. Desirous of a loving home and a respected role in society, they often have no choice but to don the mantles handed them: Berdache, Hijra, Travestis, Freak. In America, the current vernacular maintains that if they work hard enough, pray hard enough, and pay hard enough, they will eventually pass from male to female, or female to male. Science has set up a series of steps, a rite-of-passage whereby the sigma can be lifted and even reversed. But, as this study suggests, for some, passing is not the answer. Gender switching, like style-shifting, means a boundary is crossed, a limit transcended. For some, this may be an apt metaphor. But for others, it is not.

CONCLUSION

As a self-professed transsexual, Marty is unique in that she does not mind being called androgynous. Anne Bolin's observation that the majority of transsexuals are antagonistic towards androgyny, calling it 'the antithesis of what transition was about,' meets with exception here (1988: 144). While Marty strives to be recognized and treated as a natural female, she knows that she will never truly become one, and she is content with that. That is not to say that she will not one day go through with the operation. But, in a Jungian sort
of way, she will never entirely forgo her masculine side nor seek to deny it. For Marty, transsexualism is not a temporary state of being until she can pass from male to female. Rather, it is the closest label she has yet found to define her situation, and she has embraced it, as Jason Cromwell (1995: 288) suggests, in order to 'dismember the stigma' and take pride in the unique and talented person that she has become.

The concept of style switching emphasizes the differences between males and females in society. It validates the notion that we are all sex-typed, channeled into behaving in the way appropriate to our sex. The concept switching also reveals the Western bias, prevalent even among scholars, of a disdain for the middle ground and a trend to only recognize as legitimate that which is at one or the other pole of a binary. The concept of code or style shifting, however, places the linguistic emphasis on this illusive middle ground and illustrates that, for some people, rather than tacking back and forth from one gender-typic style to another, the more appropriate conception of their gender affiliation or identity is in the middle, i.e., androgyny, and that rather than a schizophrenic switch from one personality to another, these individuals shift balance, so to speak, as circumstances require or permit. Like Marty's dice, they are a locus of unity by which the gender polemic becomes dialectic and the concept of gender 'opposition' is brought into question.

NOTES

1. This paper was made possible by a CSUN grant, the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and stems from a paper of the same title presented at the Fifth Annual Lavender Languages and Linguistics Conference, September 20, 1997, The American University, Washington, D.C.
2. This is a pseudonym.
3. While I acknowledge those who may be uncomfortable with my use of feminine pronouns throughout this paper, I use them out of respect for my consultant and also through habit.

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