



Identity matters: Language, practices and the (non)performance of rudeness in a Pupil Referral Unit

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ABSTRACT

Combining linguistic analysis of interactions with tools from the discipline of Science, Technology and Society (STS) I explore the material-semiotic character of practices to understand how 'rude' identities were achieved in Manchester's Secondary Pupil Referral Unit (England).

Using ethnographic methods, I identify three distinct subaltern practices, *banter*, *boyin* and *chatting shit*, and show how their entangled linguistic formats and normative assumptions were incommensurable with the interactional formats of British secondary education classroom practices.

I show that when these incompatible practices overlapped people might become rude, but they might also emerge as wits, winners, gibberers, liars or gossips, and which identities came to matter was contingent on the socio-material relations in play. I conclude that one way in which harmony was maintained during precarious moments of difference in a lesson, was through skilled staff who, in being able to participate in both classroom and banter/boyin practices, were able to mediate between the two when it mattered by crafting alternative identities.

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1. Introduction

It is January 2015 and I am sitting in a lesson in a Learning Centre, one of several belonging to Manchester's Pupil Referral Unit, which accommodates up to sixteen 14–16 year olds who have been excluded from England's mainstream secondary education system on behavioural grounds. These Centres are not typical inner-city high schools materially or socially: they are small, housed in former youth clubs, and managed by centre coordinators and classroom support workers, who are trained youth workers. Peripatetic teachers teach core curriculum subjects in year groups of up to eight pupils. Full attendance is uncommon and the configuration of people at any one time is unpredictable. In the room there are four boys, two girls, the teacher, a classroom support worker and me. Led by the teacher (T), Helen,¹ we have been discussing 'appropriate' clothing to wear for a job interview and one of the boys, Jamal, starts to "spit" (freestyle rap) very loudly, which results in the following exchange with the classroom support (S) worker, Michael²:

Extract 1: Non-performance of rudeness?

(Audio-recording of Preparation for Working Life lesson, 13/01/2015)

- 01 T-Helen: right I need you to write this in your exercise books please (2.5)
 02 Jamal: ((raps loudly)) now ma Gs and my associates (.) (wearing some) clothes called daggy it's appropriate
 03 S-Michael: shut up man!
 04 Jamal: what does that mean?
 05 S-Michael: I don't care what it means
 06 Jamal: mup[pet guy]
 07 S-Michael: [shut up]
 08 Jamal: from ((name of neighbouring county))
 09 S-Michael: ((laughs)) don't you worry where I come from, you hear
 10 T-Helen: I've given them pens [haven't I?]
 11 Jamal: [dead ends]
 12 T-Helen: Michael?
 13 Jacob: ((sings)) dead ends, no gyal
 14 Jamal: ((laughs then sings)) no gyal (.) no gyal, no man

Two things struck me about this exchange. Firstly, in the context of a lesson, it seemed to me to be rude largely because of the apparent lack of respect between the support worker ("shut up man!") and Jamal, and Jamal's subsequent challenge about the meaning of his lyrics and his derogatory retorts about the support worker's character ("muppet guy") and his home county as a dull place ("dead ends, no gyal, no man"). Secondly, I was struck by the fact that no one else in the room had given any indication that they had found it rude. I realised I had understood the situation differ-

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¹ All speakers except the author (SD) have been anonymised. Staff roles are indicated before the speaker's name in the transcriptions as follows: C—learning centre Coordinator; T—Teacher; S—classroom Support worker; P—work Placement student.

² Transcription conventions: [] overlapping speech; = interruption; ((raps)) contextual and paralinguistic information; (unclear) unintelligible speech; (.) pause

ently to the rest of the class, including the staff. The knowledge that I had brought to making sense of this interaction hadn't overlapped well with what everyone else knew and I felt I had missed something, but I didn't know what it was.

I experienced many similar disconcerting moments³ during the initial weeks of a year-long ethnography in two Learning Centres, and over the course of the field work I observed and participated in a large number of bewildering interactions which were sometimes enacted as 'non-rude', in the sense that rudeness was absent: it wasn't made to matter. Yet at other times in the same Centres, with the same speakers and similar utterances, rudeness was made overtly present. In this paper I explore this unpredictability and the fluidity and mutability of (non)rude identities in the Centres by considering how the material arrangements (including language) of particular contexts worked to craft specific local meanings. My aim is experimental: I contribute to current debates in sociolinguistics by combining linguistic tools for the analysis of situated interactions with tools from the discipline of Science, Technology and Society (STS) to explore ways of analysing the semiotic fluidity of language as it relates to other material-semiotic modes as part of specific practices. I make an uncommon move in linguistics by taking practices, rather than language(s), as my analytical focus.

2. Sociolinguistics: language, identity and social context

Sociolinguistic studies that have focussed on the dynamic and unfolding character of talk, have moved away from the static and bounded categories of language varieties to theorise language as 'repertoires' (Gumperz, 1986) of features, or linguistic 'resources' that speakers both know and know how to use in particular practices.

Repertoires may be described in terms of established and theorised linguistic analytic categories, such as styles, registers, genres, implicatures and stances that craft indexical relations between a concrete linguistic form observed in a local context and a set of possible 'macro' identity referents outside of that interaction. But this 'indexical field' (Eckert, 2008:454) is generated by the analyst's own knowledge or 'repertoire' of styles etc., and may not always tell us much about the realities and/or the identity work that is happening between speakers.

For example, using these tools, Blackledge and Creese (2010) experienced an investigative dead-end when they identified "'official' genres of teacher-directed discourse" and the "'unofficial', 'carnavalesque' genre of the market place" in their research in complementary school classrooms. In applying the sociolinguistic concept of stylised performance (Rampton, 2006) Blackledge and Creese generated a parodic relation between these 'official' and 'unofficial' genres, but this didn't enable them to trace the trajectory of, or the work done by, pupils' utterances that didn't seem to fit with the immediate interactional flow:

"The introduction of the highly stylised, American-accented voice of Barney Gumble, a character from 'The Simpsons' ('hey Homer, thanks for the Duff beer'), is apparently unconnected with anything that goes before or after" (Blackledge & Creese, 2010:142).

I faced a similar problem with the transcript of Extract 1: Jamal's sudden rap appeared largely unconnected with what had gone on immediately beforehand (although his rhyme hooked into the lesson topic on 'appropriate' clothing), and what followed on from it was an interaction that I couldn't confidently categorise. I wanted

to find a way to practically explore such data that ended in a dead end if I focussed only on the interactional turn-taking. How could I find out what Jamal was doing? His rap hadn't been plucked from nowhere, it was linked to other practices (as Blackledge and Creese also note about their Barney Gumble moment), which he had brought into relation with the lesson. But I didn't have all the tools to explore it. I had transcripts and discourse analytic tools, but I also had rich ethnographic descriptions in which to locate these interactions and I wanted to bring them together to explore how language worked alongside other semiotic modes to craft identities in specific contexts, or practices.

Moving away from essentialist notions of identity as static 'macro' categories typically limited to ethnicity, class, age and sex, recent work in the overlapping fields of interactional sociolinguistics, linguistic ethnography, linguistic anthropology and variationist sociolinguistics emphasises the importance of the social context in which identities are performed, and significant attention has been paid to re-theorising the role of language in the realisation of identities. Identities are increasingly theorised as emergent in interaction (e.g. Bucholtz & Hall, 2005) rather than as fixed and stable attributes of groups or individuals. In line with this way of thinking I refrain from imposing externally generated macro-social identity categories onto the participants and, drawing on approaches in STS that treat realities (including identities) as *relational effects* (rather than indexical relations), I use the notion of 'identity' to include all ways of being that are performed and therefore made to matter in an interaction, however fleeting. The identity categories I use are generated by the data (I indicate where appropriate which labels are my shorthand for the participants' performances or descriptions) and I use the term 'identity' to cover all enacted ways of being (e.g. teacher, wit, ninja, waffler, muppet, smoker, pool-player, tired, bored) that may be more usually theorised as 'styles', 'roles', 'registers', 'stances' etc. in sociolinguistic analyses.

The rest of this paper therefore responds to the call made by Martin-Jones, Blackledge and Creese (2012) for

"new approaches, of a critical, ethnographic and discourse analytic nature to the multilingual realities of the current global age, and to the investigation of the specific ways in which contemporary mobilities and shifting concepts of time and space have reshaped communicative practices in speech and in writing, in different media, in different genres, registers and styles and in different semiotic modes." (p2)

As I mentioned above, I will combine tools from STS for exploring the materiality and fluidity of practices with linguistic tools for analysing language as one of several semiotic modes of practices, and I start by explaining how a material-semiotic approach understands the notion of 'practice'.

3. Material-semiotics: socio-material practices

There is a large body of work and a number of theoretical positions on 'practice'⁴; in the social sciences and there are therefore multiple understandings of the term. I apply an approach to 'practice' drawn from STS, which is used widely in a range of disciplines including geography, feminist technoscience studies, anthropology and postcolonial studies. This approach explores social issues by asking how they are generated in material practices or, put another way, how realities (e.g. identities, normative assumptions, truths etc.) are crafted in the relations between humans, technologies and other material objects (e.g. Law & Singleton, 2005; Mol, 2002;

³ Verran (2001) describes "disconcerting moments" as troubling interruptions to the researcher's usual ways of thinking which highlight assumptions they are making in the field about their object of study.

⁴ See Reckwitz (2002) for a summary of prominent theories of practice.

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