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## 14 Indexing gender

ELINOR OCHS

### Editors' introduction

One of the pioneers in the field of developmental pragmatics, Elinor Ochs (formerly Elinor Ochs Keenan) carried out one of the earliest longitudinal studies of children's conversational competence (Keenan 1974, 1977). Ochs, especially through her long-term collaboration with Bambi Schieffelin, was one of those most responsible for giving new impetus to the field of language socialization (Ochs and Schieffelin 1984, Schieffelin and Ochs 1986). Strongly grounded in ethnography as a research method, the study of language socialization focuses on the process of becoming a culturally competent member of society through language activity. Within this domain, Ochs has been stressing the importance of looking at the larger cultural context in which adults communicate with a child. This means that stylistic characteristics of language used to, by, and around the child should be understood *vis-à-vis* local theories and local practices of child rearing, including the social relationship between the child and her caretakers and the notion of task (Ochs 1982, 1988). The important discoveries of this line of research go beyond the empirical discovery that Baby Talk is not universal (Ochs 1982) to include theoretical hypotheses about how cultural accounts of this register are based on local epistemologies and theories of social order.

Another important insight in Ochs' work is the idea that a theory of language socialization rests on a theory of indexicality (see also Hanks, this volume). In the model presented in this chapter, indexicality is depicted as a property of speech through which cultural contexts such as social identities (e.g. gender) and social activities (e.g. a gossip session) are constituted by particular stances and acts. Linguistic features index more than one dimension of the sociocultural context; the indexing of certain dimensions is linked in a constitutive sense to the indexing of other dimensions (e.g. tag questions may index a stance of uncertainty as well as the act of requesting confirmation/clarification/feedback; these two contextual features in turn may index/help constitute female gender identity in certain communities). Hence children's acquisition of linguistic forms entails a developmental process of delineating and organizing contextual dimensions in culturally sensible ways.

Ochs' earlier work on developmental pragmatics and her more recent research on language socialization come together in her current analysis of indexicality. Across the world's speech communities, there are pragmatic universals in the linguistic indexing of stance and act. That is, children everywhere are developing similar pragmatic competences. This accounts for why we can communicate at

some level across societies. On the other hand, each social group has specific ways of organizing the distribution of stance and indexical action across social identities, relationships, and activities, with different values associated with each set of indexicals. Cultural competence entails developing knowledge of these more complex indexical systems. This research has also implications for our understanding of miscommunication across groups: communication across social groups may flounder as one group assumes the other shares not just stance and act meanings but the whole indexical network (see Gumperz' article, this volume).

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### Indexing gender

#### 1 The micro-ethnography of gender hierarchy

Gender hierarchies display themselves in all domains of social behavior, not the least of which is talk. Gender ideologies are socialized, sustained, and transformed through talk, particularly through verbal practices that recur innumerable times in the lives of members of social groups. This view embodies Althusser's notion that "ideas of a human subject exist in his actions" and his rephrasing of Pascal's ideas in terms of the imperative "Kneel down, move your lips in prayer and you will believe" (1971: 168). Mundane, prosaic, and altogether unsensational though they may appear to be, conversational practices are primary resources for the realization of gender hierarchy.

In the course of the following discussion, I will argue that the relation between language and gender is not a simple straightforward mapping of

linguistic form to social meaning of gender. Rather the relation of language to gender is constituted and mediated by the relation of language to stances, social acts, social activities, and other social constructs. As such, novices come to understand gender meanings through coming to understand certain pragmatic functions of language (such as expressing stance) and coming to understand local expectations *vis-à-vis* the distribution of these functions and their variable expression across social identities.

With respect to gender hierarchy, the following discussion argues that images of women are linked to images of mothering and that such images are socialized through communicative practices associated with caregiving. Although mothering is a universal kinship role of women and in this role women have universally positions of control and power, their communicative practices as mothers vary considerably across societies, revealing differences in social positions of mothers. Mothers vary in the extent to which their communication with children is child-centered (i.e. accommodating). Differences in caregiver communicative practices socialize infants and small children into different local images of women. These images may change over developmental time when these young novices see women using different communicative practices to realize different social roles (familial, economic, political, etc.). On the other hand, continuity in women's verbal practices associated with stance and social action in the enactment of diverse social roles may sustain images of women that emerge in the earliest moments of human life.

The discussion will compare communicative practices of mothers in mainstream American households (Anglo, white, middle class) and in traditional Western Samoan households. Insights concerning mainstream American mothers derive from numerous child language development studies, particularly earlier research carried out by Bambi Schieffelin and myself on language socialization in this community (Ochs and Schieffelin 1984; Schieffelin and Ochs 1986a, 1986b). Insights concerning mothering in Western Samoan households are based on a longitudinal language acquisition and language socialization study conducted in Falefaa, Western Samoa, during 1978-9 and in 1981 (Ochs 1982, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1990).

#### 2 Social meanings and indexicality

Before turning to the communicative practices of mothers and their impact on socialization of gender, let us turn our attention to a more general consideration of language and gender, both how it has been examined and how it can be more fruitfully examined. These comments on language and gender should be taken as exemplary of a more general relation between language and social meaning.

Sociological and anthropological studies of language behavior are predicated on the assumptions that (1) language systematically varies across

social contexts and (2) such variation is part of the meaning indexed by linguistic structures. Sociolinguistic studies tend to relate particular structures to particular situational conditions, or clusters of structures to such conditions. The meanings so indexed are referred to as social meanings, in contrast to purely referential or logical meanings expressed by linguistic structures. Hence two or more phonological variants of the same word may share the identical reference but convey different social meanings, e.g. differences in social class or ethnicity of speakers, differences in social distances between speaker and addressee, differences in affect. In every community, members have available to them linguistic resources for communicating such social meanings at the same time as they are providing other levels of information. This system of multifarious signalling is highly efficient. Competent members of every community have been socialized to interpret these meanings and can without conscious control orchestrate messages to convey social meanings. Sociological and anthropological research is dedicated to understanding these communicative skills, interpretive processes, and systems of meaning indexed through language.

Research on indexicality has been carried out within several major disciplinary frameworks. Current thinking about social meaning of language draws heavily on the theoretical perspectives of the Soviet literary critics and philosophers M. Bakhtin (1981) and V. N. Vološinov (1973). This approach stresses the inherently social construction of written and spoken language behavior. Part of the meaning of any utterance (spoken or written) is its social history, its social presence, and its social future. With respect to social history, Bakhtin and Vološinov make the point that utterances may have several "voices" – the speaker's or writer's voice, the voice of a someone referred to within the utterance, the voice of another for whom the message is conveyed, etc. The voices of speaker/writer and others may be blended in the course of the message and become part of the social meanings indexed within the message. This perspective is a potentially critical one for investigating the relation of language to gender, where gender may generate its own set of voices.

A second tradition examining social indexicality of language is sociological and anthropological research on speech events and speech activities. Here Bateson's (1972) and Goffman's (1974) work on keying and frames for events, as well as discussions by Gumperz (1982) on contextualization cues, Hymes (1974) on speech event keys, and Silverstein (1976) on shifters and indexes are all useful in analyzing the social potential of language behavior. Silverstein provides further specification of indexes in terms of whether social context is indexed referentially or non-referentially. That is, social conditions may be communicated through the referential content of a word, phrase, or clause or through some linguistic feature that has no reference. With respect to indexing of gender in English, referential indexes include such items as the third person pro-

nouns "he" and "she," and the titles "Mr." and "Mrs.," "Sir" and "Madam," and the like. Referential indexes have been a major source of discussion among those concerned with the linguistic construction of gender ideology (see especially Silverstein 1985).

From a sociolinguistic point of view, however, referential indexes are far fewer than non-referential indexes of social meaning, including gender. Non-referential indexing of gender may be accomplished through a vast range of morphological, syntactic, and phonological devices available across the world's languages. For example, pitch range may be used in a number of speech communities to index gender of speaker. For example, research on pre-adolescent American male and female children indicates that young girls speak as if their vocal apparatus were smaller than young boys of the same age and same size vocal chords (Sachs 1975). Here it is evident that pitch has social meaning and that young children have come to understand these meanings and employ pitch appropriately to these ends. Other studies (see especially Andersen 1977) indicate that children as young as four years of age can use pitch to index male and female identities.

A concern with indexicality is also at the heart of linguistic and philosophical approaches to the field of pragmatics, the study of language in context (Levinson 1983). Here a major concern is broadening the notion of presupposition beyond logical presupposition to include pragmatic presupposition, i.e. context-sensitive presupposition. Thus an utterance such as "Give me that pen" logically presupposes that there exists a specific pen and pragmatically presupposes that (1) the pen is some distance from the speaker and (2) the speaker is performing the speech act of ordering. From this perspective, we can say that utterances may pragmatically presuppose genders of speakers, addressees, overhearers, and referents. For example, in Japanese, sentences that include such sentence-final morphological particles as *ze* pragmatically presuppose that the speaker is a male whereas sentences that include the sentence-final particle *wa* pragmatically presuppose that the speaker is a female.

### 3 The indexing of gender

The notion of gender centers on the premise that the notions of men and women / male and female are sociocultural transformations of biological categories and processes (cf., for example, Ortner and Whitehead 1981, Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974, McConnell-Ginet, Borker, and Furman 1980, Gilligan 1982, West and Zimmerman 1987). That is, social groups organize and conceptualize men and women in culturally specific and meaningful ways. Given that language is the major symbolic system of the human species, we would expect language to be a source and moving force of gender ideologies. In other words, we should expect language to be

influenced by local organizations of gender roles, rights, and expectations and to actively perpetuate these organizations in spoken and written communication (Bourdieu 1977). In relating sociocultural constructions of gender to social meaning of language, an issue of importance emerges: **few features of language directly and exclusively index gender.**

In light of this, we must work towards a different conceptualization of the indexical relation between language and gender. In the following discussion, I suggest three characteristics of the language-gender relation. The relation of language to gender is (1) non-exclusive, (2) constitutive, (3) temporally transcendent.

### 3.1 Non-exclusive relation

In looking at different languages and different speech communities, the most striking generalization is the paucity of linguistic features that alone index local concepts of men and women or even more minimally the sex of a speaker/addressee/referent (Brown and Levinson 1979, Ochs 1987, Seki 1986, Silverstein 1985). Most linguistic features, particularly if we go beyond the lexicon (e.g. kin terms that index this information), do not share such a strict, i.e. presuppositional, relation to the semantic domain of gender.

Rather, overwhelmingly we find that the relation between particular features of language and gender is typically non-exclusive. By non-exclusive, I mean that often variable features of language may be used by/with/for both sexes. Hence, strictly speaking we cannot say that these features pragmatically presuppose male or female. What we find, rather, is that the features may be employed more by one than the other sex. Thus, for example, in British and American English, women tend to use prestige phonological variants more than men of the same social class and ethnicity. Indeed women more than men in these communities overuse the prestige variants, producing "hypercorrect" words (Labov 1966, Trudgill 1974). Women in New York City, for example, overuse the postvocalic /r/ to the extent that they sometimes insert an /r/ in a word that has no "r" in its written form, e.g. instead of saying "idea," they hypercorrect to "idear" (Labov 1966). In this and other examples, the relation between language and gender is distributional and probabilistic.

In addition, non-exclusivity is demonstrated by the fact that many linguistic forms associated with gender are associated as well with the marking of other social information, such as the marking of stance and social action. Thus, for example, tag questions in English are associated not only with female speakers (Andersen 1977), but with stances such as hesitancy, and social acts such as confirmation checks. Certain sentence-final particles in Japanese are associated not only with male and female speakers but with stances of coarse versus delicate intensity. This system of

linguistic forms conveying multiple social meanings is highly efficient from the point of view of linguistic processing and acquisition (Slobin 1985). Further, the multiplicity of potential meanings allows speakers to exploit such inherent ambiguities for strategic ends, such as avoiding going "on-record" in communicating a particular social meaning (Brown and Levinson 1987, Tannen 1986).

A question raised by such facts is "Why this distribution?" How does the distribution of linguistic resources relate to rights, expectations, and other conceptions of men and women in society? These questions seem more in line with those asked by social scientists concerned with the position of men and women *vis-à-vis* access to and control over resources and activities.

### 3.2 Constitutive relation

By positing a constitutive relation between language and gender, I mean that one or more linguistic features may index social meanings (e.g. stances, social acts, social activities), which in turn helps to constitute gender meanings. The pursuit of such constitutive routes is a far more interesting activity than assessing either obligatory or probabilistic relations between language and sex of speaker/addressee/referent, for here we begin to understand pragmatic meanings of features and their complex relation to gender images.

Let me provide a few examples of constitutiveness. Many of the linguistic features that in the literature are associated primarily with either men or women have as their core social meaning a particular affective stance. As noted earlier, certain linguistic features associated with men's speech in Japanese coarsely intensify the force of an utterance, while those associated with women's speech typically convey an affect of gentle intensity (Uyeno 1971, Seki 1986). We can say that the former features directly index coarse intensity and the latter a soft or delicate intensity. The affective dispositions so indexed are part of the preferred images of men and women and motivate their differential use by men and women. When someone wishes to speak like a woman in Japanese, they may speak gently, using particles such as the sentence-final *wa*, or to speak like a man they may speak coarsely, using the sentence-final particle *ze*.

Similarly, we can find particular linguistic features directly indexing social acts or social activities, such as the imperative mode indexing the act of ordering in English or respect vocabulary terms in Samoan indexing the activity of oratory. These acts and activities in turn may be associated with speaking like a male or speaking like a female and may display different frequencies of use across the two social categories.

It is in this sense that the relation between language and gender is mediated and constituted through a web of socially organized pragmatic

Figure 14.1 Indexing gender in Japanese

Linguistic form	Direct index	Indirect index
ze	coarse intensity	male "voice"
wa	delicate intensity	female "voice"

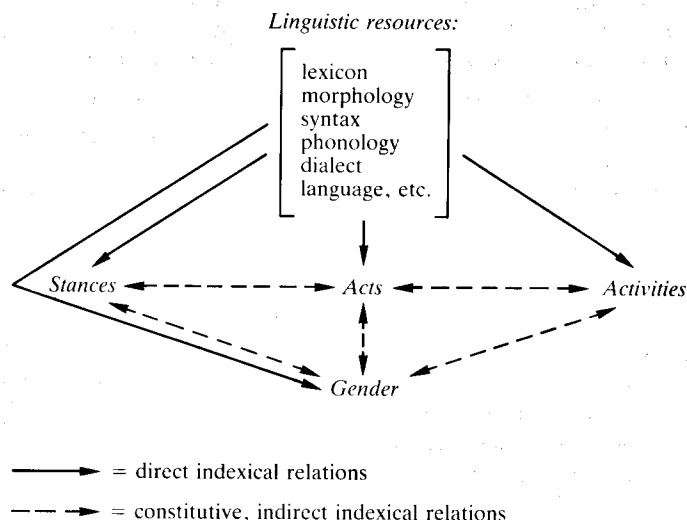


Figure 14.2 Language and gender

meanings. Knowledge of how language relates to gender is not a catalogue of correlations between particular linguistic forms and sex of speakers, referents, addressees and the like. Rather, such knowledge entails tacit understanding of (1) how particular linguistic forms can be used to perform particular pragmatic work (such as conveying stance and social action) and (2) norms, preferences, and expectations regarding the distribution of this work *vis-à-vis* particular social identities of speakers, referents, and addressees. To discuss the relation of language to gender in these terms is far more revealing than simply identifying features as directly marking men's or women's speech.

A more favorable model relates linguistic forms to gender either indirectly (through other social meanings indexed) or directly. This model displays different kinds of language-gender relations and begins to specify the kinds of meanings men and women are likely to index through language, the relation of these patterns to the position and images of men and women in society.

A model displaying how linguistic forms help to constitute gender meanings is presented in Figure 14.2. In this model, linguistic forms are resources for conveying a range of social meanings. Further, particular social meanings may be constituted through other social meanings. Although our discussion has focused on gender, the model can be taken as exemplary of how language conveys social identities more generally. Further, the model indicates that constitutive relations obtain between stances, acts, and activities as well as between each of these and gender meanings.

This model indicates two kinds of relations between language and gender. The first and less common is the direct indexical relation, as when a personal pronoun indexes gender of speaker or a kin term indexes gender of speaker and referent. This relation is represented by radiating lines from linguistic resources to social meanings. The second relates gender to language through some other social meaning indexed. In this second relation, certain social meanings are more central than others. These meanings however help to constitute other domains of social reality. That is, a domain such as stance helps to constitute the image of gender. This sort of constitutive relation is represented by two-headed arrows.

This model puts gender in its place, indicating that it enters into complex constitutive relations with other categories of social meaning. Indeed the model indicates that gender is not the only category of social meaning that may be impacted by a different social domain. For example, speech acts contribute to the establishment of speech activities and the other way around, the expression of stance contributes to the definition of speech acts, and so on.

A more complex representation of language and gender would specify which types of conversational acts, speech activities, affective and epistemological stances, participant roles in situations, and so on enter into the constitution or construction of gender within a particular community and across different communities. A more refined model would also introduce the notion of markedness. Certain acts, activities, stances, roles, etc. are frequently enacted by members of a particular sex, that is, they are unmarked behaviors for that sex. Others are less frequent behaviors, and yet others are highly unusual for that particular sex. These behaviors would be interpreted differently than unmarked behaviors. Where the behavior is highly marked, one sex may be seen as assuming the "voice" of another (Bakhtin 1981), or as acting like the other sex.

One of the major advances in language and gender research has been a move away from relating isolated linguistic forms to gender differences and toward specifying clusters of linguistic features that distinguish men's and women's speech in society. This shift represents a move toward defining men's and women's communicative styles, their access to different conversational acts, activities, and genres, and their strategies for performing

similar acts, activities, and genres (Borker 1980, Gal 1989, Goodwin 1990). The starting point for this perspective is functional and strategic rather than formal. That is, researchers have focused primarily on what men and women do with words, to use Austin's phrase (Austin 1962) and have in this endeavor then isolated linguistic structures that men and women use to this end. Studies that start out by isolating particular linguistic forms associated with male or female speakers/addressees/referents tend not to reach this kind of functional or strategy-based account of men's and women's speech. Such studies do not initially focus on activities and situations and examine men's and women's speech *vis-à-vis* those social contexts. These studies, rather, describe a distributional pattern of linguistic forms across the two sexes. Once this pattern is isolated, some *ad hoc* accounting is inferred.

We now have access to a range of studies that are stylistic and strategic in orientation (cf., for example, Gal 1989, Schieffelin 1987, Philips and Reynolds 1987, Brown 1980, Zimmerman and West 1975, West and Zimmerman 1987). Several studies have noted the tendency for men to participate more in speech activities that involve formal interactions with outsiders and women to be restricted to activities within family and village contexts. In these cases, men and women display different competence in particular genres, including, of course, their grammatical and discourse structures (cf., for example, Gal 1989, Keenan [Ochs] 1974, Sherzer 1987, Shore 1982).

Other studies have emphasized ways in which men and women attend to the "face" of their addressees in performing conversational acts that may offend the other. Studies of women's speech in several societies (e.g. Tenejapa [Brown 1979, 1980], American [Lakoff 1973, Zimmerman and West 1975], Japanese [Uyeno 1971]) indicate that women tend to be more polite than men. Brown's study of tenejapa Maya society is by far the most compelling and detailed. Her research indicates that Tenejapa women talking with other women tend to be more polite than men talking with men. When women and men talk to one another, they are equally polite. Tenejapa women talking with other women tend to use different kinds of politeness features than do men with other. They use linguistic structures that show support, approval of another, what Brown and Levinson (1987) have called "positive politeness," whereas men tend to use linguistic forms that indicate a sensitivity to the other's need not to be intruded upon, what Brown and Levinson have called "negative politeness."

The association of women with greater politeness is not universal. My own research among the Malagasy (Keenan [Ochs] 1974) indicates that men are far more polite than are women. Women are seen as abrupt and direct, saying exactly what is on their mind, whereas men are seen as speaking with care and indirectness. Hence women are seen as

inappropriate spokespersons in formal speech activities involving other families where delicacy and indirectness are demanded. Women rather are selected for other activities. They are the ones to directly confront others, hence the primary performers of accusations, bargaining with Europeans, and gossip. Men control oratorical genres as well as a wide range of poetic and metaphoric forms highly prized in this society.

Similarly, in a more recent study of men's and women's speech in Western Samoan rural society, I have not found that Samoan women are more polite than men of the same social status, except in one particular context. As listeners to narrative tellings, women tend to use more positive politeness supportive feedback forms than do men of the same status. In other contexts, however, the expression of politeness differs more in terms of social rank of speaker (e.g. titled person or spouse of titled person, untitled person) than in terms of gender. With the exception of Brown's study, research on men's and women's attention to face and expression of politeness needs to be pursued more systematically, taking into account a range of situational parameters (the speech activity, the speaker-addressee-author-audience-overhearer-referent relationships, the genre, etc.). A wider data base is needed to understand differences in men's and women's communicative strategies and to resolve contradictory findings within the same society (cf. for example Connor-Linton 1986 on politeness among American middle class adolescents).

### 3.3 Temporally transcendent relation

Thus far we have considered how linguistic forms may help constitute local conceptions of male and female at the time a particular utterance is produced or is perceived. Japanese speakers index femaleness as they use the sentence-final particle *wa*, for example. Language in this sense has the power to constitute the present context. The constitutive power of language, however, transcends the time of utterance production/perception, hence the property of temporal transcendence. Language can also constitute past and future contexts. I call the constitution of past contexts "recontextualization" and the constitution of future contexts "precontextualization" (Ochs 1990). Each of these functions can be carried out through a variety of verbal practices and forms. For example, the practice of speculation can recontextualize past events or precontextualize future events by changing "certain" events into "uncertain" events (Ochs 1982). Similarly, the practice of praising can recontextualize a past act as an accomplishment, and accusations can recontextualize past acts as wrongdoings and personal characters as irreputable. All conversational acts that function as first-pair parts of adjacency sequences (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974), e.g. questions, invitations, compliments,

precontextualize the future in that they set up expectations for what the next conversational act is likely to be (e.g. answers, acceptances/declines).

The relevances of temporal transcendence to this discussion of language and gender is that societies establish norms, preferences and expectations *vis-à-vis* the extent to which and the manner in which men and women can verbally recontextualize the past and precontextualize the future. The roles and status of men and women are partly realized through the distribution of recontextualizing and precontextualizing acts, activities, stances, and topics.

The potential of language to recontextualize and precontextualize will be of import to our discussion of mothering. The status of women in mainstream American society and Western Samoan society is in part constituted through the particular ways women as mothers recast the past and precast the future in their interactions with infants and small children.

#### 4 Communicative styles of mothers and other caregivers

##### 4.1 Underrated mothers

One of the major concerns in gender research has been the social and cultural construction of gender in society. A logical locus to examine this process is interaction between young children and older members of society. By examining the kinds of activities and acts caregivers of both sexes engage in with children of both sexes and the manner in which these activities and acts are carried out, we can not only infer local expectations concerning gender but as well articulate how these expectations are socialized. One important tool of socialization is language. Not only the content of language but the manner in which language is used communicates a vast range of sociocultural knowledge to children and other novices. This use of language we call "language socialization" (Schieffelin and Ochs 1986a, 1986b; Ochs 1986, 1988, 1990). Language socialization includes both socialization through language and socialization to use language. In the following discussion, I will propose a relation between the position and image of women in society and language use in caregiver-child interaction.

Although mothering is a universal kinship role of women and in this role women have positions of control and power, their communicative styles as mothers vary considerably across societies. Such variation in the language of mothering reveals differences across societies in the social position of mothers *vis-à-vis* their young charges. The discussion here will contrast caregiving communicative styles among mainstream white middle class (WMC) Americans with Western Samoan caregiving styles. Based on research carried out with B. Schieffelin (Ochs and Schieffelin 1984; Schieffelin and Ochs 1986a, 1986b), I will argue that images of women in WMC American society are socialized through a communicative strategy

Figure 14.3 Verbal strategies that constitute mothering

	Mainstream American (child-centered)	Samoaan (other-centered)
<i>Production strategies</i>	Extensive simplification	Little simplification
<i>Interpretive strategies</i>	Express guess and negotiate meaning	Display minimal grasp
<i>Praising</i>	Unidirectional	Bidirectional

of high accommodation to young children. A very different image of women is socialized in traditional Samoan households, where children are expected to be communicatively accommodating to caregivers.

In their ground-breaking volume on sexual meanings, Ortner and Whitehead (1981: 12) comment that "women's universal and highly visible kinship function, mothering, is surprisingly underrated, even ignored, in definitions of womanhood in a wide range of societies with differing kinship organizations." I will argue that the white middle class social scientists' dispreference for attending to the role of mothering is an outcome of the very language socialization practices I am about to describe.

In the analysis to follow I focus on cross-cultural differences in strategies associated with three pervasive verbal practices of mothers and other caregivers:

- (1) verbal strategies for getting messages across to young children (**message production strategies**)
- (2) verbal strategies for clarifying messages of young children (**interpretive strategies**)
- (3) verbal strategies for evaluating accomplishments of children and others (**praising strategies**)

I will demonstrate that through each of these verbal strategies, mainstream American mothers, in contrast to traditional Samoan mothers, construct a **low image** of themselves. The strategies adopted by mainstream American mothers minimize their own importance by (1) lowering their status, (2) giving priority to the child's point of view, and (3) even denying their participation in accomplishing a task. The strategies to be discussed are represented in Figure 14.3.

##### 4.2 Organization of caregiving

Before detailing these strategies, let us consider briefly the organization of caregiving in the two societies under consideration. In traditional Samoan



households, caregiving is organized in a somewhat different manner from that characteristic of mainstream American households. First, caregiving is shared among a number of family members of **both genders**. Mothers are primary caregivers in the first few months of their infant's life, but they are always assisted, usually by siblings (both brothers and sisters) of the young infant. Once the infant is somewhat older, these sibling caregivers assume most of the basic caregiving tasks, although they are monitored at a distance by older family members. In the village in which I carried out research, siblings took turns staying home from school during the week to care for a younger child. This type of caregiving arrangement is characteristic of most of the world's societies (Weisner and Gallimore 1977).

As is widely documented, Samoan society is hierarchically organized (Mead 1930, Sahlins 1958, Shore 1982). Social stratification is evident in the political distinctions of *ali'i* "chief," *tulaafale* "orator," and *taule'ale'a* "untitled person"; in titles within the rank of *ali'i* and within the rank of *tulaafale*; and among untitled persons along the dimensions of relative age and generation. Hierarchical distinctions are evident in domestic as well as public interactions.

Of particular concern to the discussion at hand is the fact that caregiving is hierarchically organized. Untitled, older, higher generation caregivers assume a social status superior to younger untitled caregivers who are co-present in a household setting. Further, caregivers enjoy a higher status than the young charges under their care.

Among the demeanors Samoans associated with social rank, direction of accommodation is most salient. Lower ranking persons are expected to accommodate to higher ranking persons, as in other stratified societies. Lower ranking caregivers show respect by carrying out the tasks set for them by their elders. They provide the more active caregivers, while others stay seated and provide verbal directives. Samoan caregivers say that infants and young children are by nature wild and willful and that accommodation in the form of respect is the single most important demeanor that young children must learn. A core feature of respect is attending to others and serving their needs. A great deal of care is taken to orient infants and young children to notice others. Infants, for example, are usually held outwards and even spoonfed facing the social group co-present.

#### 4.3 Message production strategies

One of the outstanding observations of mainstream American mothers is that they use a special verbal style or register (Ferguson 1964, 1977). This register, often called "Baby Talk" or "Motherese" (Newport 1976), is a simplified register, and it shares many of the features of other simplified registers, such as Teacher Talk, Foreigner Talk and talk to the elderly.

lowers, and to pets. Characteristics of this register include the following: **reduced lexicon**, Baby Talk words (child's own versions of words), **shorter sentence length**, phonological simplification (such as avoidance of **consonant clusters** in favor of consonant-vowel alternation, e.g. **tummy** versus **stomach**), morphosyntactic simplification (e.g. avoidance of complex sentences, copula), topical focus on here-and-now versus past/future, exaggerated intonation, slower pace, repetition, cooperative proposition-making with child (e.g. expanding the child's utterance into adult grammatical form, providing sentence frames for child to complete.)

Baby Talk register has been a major area of investigation over the last decade or so in the field of language acquisition. The existence of such a register was argued by many to indicate that language acquisition was facilitated by such input. More recently, cross-cultural observations of child communication indicate that simplified registers are not characteristic of this communicative context in all societies (Heath 1982, Ochs 1982, Ochs and Schieffelin 1984, Schieffelin and Ochs 1986a, 1986b, Ward 1971). We now know that the process of language acquisition does not depend on this sociolinguistic environment. Western Samoan, Kaluli New Guinea and black working class American children are not surrounded by simplified speech of the sort described above and yet they become perfectly competent speakers in the course of normal development. Given that such simplification is not necessary for the process of language acquisition, we might ask why then do caregivers in certain societies choose to communicate in this fashion with their children whereas others do not.

In Ochs and Schieffelin (1984), we proposed that Baby Talk is part of a more pervasive cultural orientation to children among mainstream Americans. In particular, we proposed that mainstream American society is highly child-centered and that there is a very strong expectation that those in the presence of young children will **accommodate to children's perceived wants and needs**. Such accommodation is both non-verbal and verbal. It manifests itself in a vast range of child-oriented artifacts such as child-proofing of the home, baby bottles, safety catches on cabinets and electrical outlets, miniaturization of furniture and clothes, and so on. Adults in the presence of sleeping children will similarly accommodate to them by lowering their voices.

In the domain of verbal communication, accommodation takes many forms. Beyond the use of Baby Talk register, a widely observed behavior of mainstream American mothers is their participation in conversation-like interactions with tiny infants. Mothers have been observed engaging in greeting exchanges with infants as soon as twenty-four hours after birth (Stern 1977). To pull this off obviously requires quite a bit of communicative accommodation on the part of the mother. Indeed what is characteristic of these proto-conversations (Bates *et al.* 1977) is the mother's willingness

to take on the conversational work of the infant as well as her own. Thus mothers "ventriloquate" through infants (Bakhtin 1981) and in this way sustain "conversations" for some time.

Throughout the course of their infancy, children are thus participants in exchanges which are strongly scaffolded (Bruner 1975) by their mothers. Mothers are able to enter into and sustain communication with small children by not only speaking for them but as well by taking into consideration what the child is holding, what the child is looking at, what event just took place, when the child last slept and ate, and a variety of other child-oriented conditions that may assist in the interpretation of children's gestures and vocalizations. In this way, mothers are able to respond to children in what they perceive to be communicatively appropriate ways.

This scaffolding is also manifest in non-verbal interactions between mothers and children, as when mothers assist young children in building play structures or to realize some intention associated with other tasks. In Vygotsky's terms (1978), mothers are providing a 'zone of proximal development' for their children, where a socially structured environment enhances the attainment of particular skills.

Such extensive verbal and non-verbal accommodation on the part of mothers and others in caregiving roles is expected as part of the mainstream American caregiving role. Being a "good mother" or "good teacher" is to empathize with and respond to the child's mind set. Once a caregiver believes that she or he understands this mind set, a good caregiver will either intervene or assist the child in carrying out her or his desired activity.

In the sociocultural world of traditional Samoan households, where children are socialized to accommodate to others, it is not surprising to learn that mothers and other caregivers do not use a simplified register in speaking to infants and young children. Such a register indexes a stance of accommodation by speaker to addressee. Samoan does have a simplified register, but this register is used towards foreigners, who historically have been missionaries, government representatives, and others who hold a high social position. In this context, a stance of accommodation is appropriate, just as host accommodates to guest.

In the case at hand, we see that linguistic forms in collocation convey particular stances – here simplified speech conveys accommodation to addressee – and these social meanings in turn help to constitute and index particular social identities. Of cross-cultural significance is the observation that societies differ in the social identities of speakers and addressees associated with this stance. Hence the same set of linguistic features that directly index one social meaning, i.e. accommodation, in two speech communities (mainstream American, traditional Western Samoan) indirectly index different social identities (i.e. caregivers and children,

members to foreign dignitaries). Simplified registers display accommodation in that they respond to a perceived communicative desire or need of the addressee, e.g. the need or desire to decode a message. Accommodation is universally associated with demeanor of lower towards higher ranking parties. That mainstream American mothers use a simplified register pervasively has a constitutive impact on the image of women in that this practice socializes young children into an image of women as accommodating or addressee-centered in demeanor. In traditional Western Samoan households, mothers and other caregivers rarely simplify their speech to young children. This practice socializes young children to be accommodating, i.e. to attend carefully to the non-simplified speech and actions of others.

#### 4.4 Interpretive strategies

A second manifestation of child- versus other-centeredness or accommodating versus non-accommodating verbal practices is located in cross-cultural differences in mothers' and other caregivers' responses to children's unintelligible utterances (see Figure 14.3).

With simplified registers, Western Samoan and mainstream American speech communities generally display similar verbal practices in responding to unintelligible utterances. However, important differences lie in the social conditions under which particular practices are preferred and appropriate. In both communities, unintelligible utterances may be (1) ignored, (2) responded to by indicating unintelligibility (e.g. "What?," "I don't understand," "Huh?," etc.), or (3) responded to by verbally guessing at the meaning of the utterance (Ochs 1984). The two communities differ in their preferences for using these strategies when speaking to young children. Overwhelmingly, mainstream American mothers prefer to respond to young children's unintelligible speech by verbally guessing. Overwhelmingly, Western Samoan mothers and other caregivers prefer to ignore or point out the unintelligibility of the child's utterance.

These differences reinforce different images of mothers and other caregivers in the two societies, i.e. more/less child-centered and more/less accommodating. Verbal guesses are more child-centered and accommodating than simply indicating unintelligibility in two senses:

- (1) Expressed guesses entails greater perspective-taking, i.e. taking the child's point of view. Guessing involves attempting to formulate the child's intended message, which in turn may entail taking into consideration what the child is looking at, holding, what the child just said, and other cues. Pointing out that the child's utterance is not clear does not entail this kind of socio-centrism, and if the child wishes to get a message across, he or she must reformulate the message to better meet the recipients' communicative requirements. Otherwise the utterance will be ignored.

- (2) Expressed guesses are hypotheses or candidate interpretations presented to the child for confirmation, disconfirmation, or modification. Expressed guesses thus allow the child to participate in negotiations over the meanings of utterances produced by the child. Another way of looking at this phenomenon is to say that in verbally expressing a guess, mothers give the child the right to influence mothers' interpretations of the child's utterances. In contrast, displays of non-understanding do not engage the child in such negotiations.

Once again we can see that verbal practices and the linguistic forms that realize them (e.g. yes-no interrogatives helping to constitute guessing, particles such as "Huh?" expressing minimal understanding) participate in the construction of local images of mothering.

Another way of analyzing message production practices and interpretive practices is to say that Samoan and mainstream American mothers define different goals in their interactions with young children and that these goals in turn entail different linguistic practices. Mainstream American mothers often set the goal of engaging infants and small children as conversational partners, and they do so from within hours of their child's birth for lengthy stretches of time (Ochs and Schieffelin 1984). Once they establish conversation as a goal, mothers are obliged to make enormous linguistic accommodation for that goal to be accomplished. Children who are a few hours old, for example, can hardly be expected to speak for themselves, therefore the mainstream American mother who insists on such conversations takes on both conversational roles, speaking for the infant as well as herself. The generalization of importance here is that mainstream American mothers systematically set goals that are impossible for a child to achieve without dramatic scaffolding by the mother.

The Samoan way is different, for Samoan mothers and other caregivers do not establish goals for the child that demand such extensive accommodation from others. They do not engage infants in proto-conversations, which demand that the caregiver assume the perspective of the infant and speak for the infant, as characteristic of American WMC interactions with young babies. Samoan caregivers simply do not place infants in communicative contexts that demand this kind of verbal scaffolding. The Samoan way is to delay such communicative exchanges until the child displays more verbal and communicative competence.

#### 4.5 Praising strategies

The final strategy relevant to the construction of gender meanings in society concerns mothers' and other caregivers' evaluative comments on an activity involving a child (see Figure 14.3). In this discussion, we attend to the property of language introduced earlier as "temporal transcendence," i.e. the capacity of language to recontextualize the past and precontextual

the future in addition to contextualizing the present. Among their many functions, evaluative comments reframe or recontextualize a past act or set of acts. Praising, for example, recontextualizes a past act/activity as an accomplishment. In this sense, praising has a backwards performative function. Through the uttering of a praise, the speaker turns any act or set of acts into an accomplishment. Of interest to this discussion is the fact that mainstream American and Western Samoan mothers and other caregivers recontextualize past acts/activities as **different** kinds of accomplishments, and (2) these different contextualizations help to constitute weak and strong images of the mothers and others.

In the discussion so far, you are aware that mainstream American mothers provide extensive assistance in communicating with young children by simplifying, guessing, and even speaking for them. We have also noted the tendency for mothers to heavily assist children in carrying out joint activities, e.g. constructing a toy, drawing a picture, tying a shoelace. From a Vygotskian perspective, such activities may be seen as "joint activities" (Vygotsky 1978), accomplished by mother and child. In contrast, however, mainstream American mothers typically recontextualize such activities as solely the child's accomplishment (Ochs and Schieffelin 1984). This is accomplished by directing praises at the child such as "Good!" or "Look at the beautiful castle you made!," with no mention of the mother's role nor any expectation that the child should praise the mother for her part in accomplishing the task at hand. In other words, these mothers deny their own participation; through their own praising practices, they make themselves invisible. It is precisely this kind of verbal scaffolding that socializes infants and small children into images and representations of mothers.

In Ochs and Schieffelin (1984), we noted that this kind of behavior makes the child as more competent than she or he may actually be. (The child could not do these activities without the caregiver's scaffolding.) This behavior as well lowers the position of the caregiver (usually the mother). As we have claimed that these behaviors along with the widespread use of "talk" and other verbal behaviors serve to minimize the asymmetry in knowledge and power between caregiver and child. Indeed we have noted that caregivers in mainstream American society are uncomfortable with asymmetry and they mask differences in competence by acting as if they were more competent and they less competent. Hence with respect to other societies, caregiver-child communication in current mainstream American society both reflects and creates (socializes) a more egalitarian relationship. This is not to say that these caregivers do not exercise power and control over their charges (cf., for example, Corsaro 1987), but rather that they do so less than in other societies. Mainstream American caregivers do not claim "ownership" to products of joint activity, they speak like small children (simplified register), they take the perspective of

the child and do not expect the child to assume their perspective until rather late in their development.

In contrast to American middle class households, in traditional Samoan communities, activities are often recognized as jointly accomplished. This recognition is realized linguistically through a praising practice distinct from that typical of mainstream American praising. Whereas in mainstream American interactions, praising is typically unidirectional, in Samoan interactions, praising is typically bidirectional. There is a strong expectation that the first one to be praised will in turn praise the praiser. Typically the praise consists of the expression *Maaloo!* "Well done!" Once the first *maaloo* is uttered, a second *maaloo* is to be directed to the producer of the original *maaloo*. In these *maaloo* exchanges, each *maaloo* recontextualizes the situation. Like mainstream American praising, the first *maaloo* recontextualizes an act/activity of the addressee as an accomplishment. The second *maaloo*, however, recontextualizes the act/activity as jointly accomplished. The second *maaloo* acknowledges the support of the first speaker as contributing to the successful achievement of the task at hand. In other words, the second *maaloo* recontextualizes the congratulator as someone to be congratulated as well. Children in Western Samoan households are socialized through such bidirectional praising practices to articulate the contribution of others, including mothers.

## 5 Gender hierarchies

In summary, I have suggested that mothering cannot be taken for granted in assessing gender identity across societies. While women's position in society has been reckoned in terms of their roles as sisters and wives, very little ethnography has been devoted to assessing their position as mothers. I have suggested here that mothering demeanor cannot be taken for granted. At least in the realm of verbal behavior, we can see significant cultural patterning. When I examine transcripts of children's interactions with others, I see a set of cultural meanings about the position of mother, hence about women, being conveyed to children hundreds of times in the course of their early lives through linguistic forms and the pragmatic practices these forms help to constitute. I do not pretend to have a handle on women's position in either current WMC American society or traditional Samoan society (cf. Mead 1928, Shore 1981, 1982). From a sociolinguistic standpoint, however, Samoan mothers enjoy a more prestigious position *vis-à-vis* their offspring than do mainstream American mothers (as currently observed in the developmental psycholinguistic literature.) On a communicative level, they are accommodated to more often by children and starting at a much earlier age than is characteristic of American households. Further, they socialize young children to recognize the contribution of caregivers and others to achieving a goal, in contrast to

American middle class mothers, who tend to socialize their children to ignore or minimize the role of the mother in reaching a goal. Finally, Samoan mothers have command over human labour in that they are typically the highest status caregivers present and have the right to delegate the more time-consuming and physically active caregiving tasks to younger, lower status caregivers at hand. Thus even among caregivers they are the least accommodating, and the linguistic record indexes this demeanor in numerous ways.

Samoan women enjoy their prestigious position in the hierarchy of caregiving and in caregiver-child relationships. Mainstream American mothers use certain indexes of power in their communicative demeanor, but not to the extent manifest in Samoan mothers' speech. American mothers enter into negotiations with their children over the meaning of children's unclear utterances; Samoan mothers (and other caregivers) do not. Mainstream American mothers treat even the tiniest of infants as conversational partners (Ochs and Schieffelin 1984); Samoan mothers do not. And the list of communicative manifestations of the relative statuses of mothers in these two societies goes on.

We are now in a better position to evaluate Ortner and Whitehead's remark that the role of mothering "is surprisingly underrated, even ignored, in definitions of womanhood" (1981: 12). This state of affairs is precisely what we would predict from the language socialization practices in mainstream American households in the United States and much of middle class Western Europe as well. "Mother" is underrated because she does not socialize children to acknowledge her participation in accomplishments. "Mother" is ignored because through her own language behavior, "mother" has become invisible.

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