

## **Notes on Masculinity and Academic Discourse**

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The theme of these notes, which grow out of a presentation at the Activity Theory Congress in Aarhus Denmark (1998), is that academic discourse is a gendered, and in particular a masculinized discourse form. The notes however branch out into many related and more basic questions having to do with an adequate theorization of gender as a social meaning category, the role of discourse in the construction of personal and positional identity, and the politics of social solidarities based on notional categories such as gender or sexual orientation (or for that matter social class, ethnicity, race, or age).

The most fundamental theoretical proposal to be made is that gender, sexuality, class, age, and ethnicity or race are all aspects of a single unified social semiotic system for positional classification of persons and so none of these notions can be adequately theorized outside its relations to all the others.

Beyond this, I will try to outline a view in which social systems construct ideologically functional categories of these kinds out of more general matters of quantitative variation by degree along very many dimensions of socially significant appearance and behavior. What is ideologically functional is not simply the stereotypes for each category, or their hierarchical value relations, but the reduction of the space of diversity from a very high dimensionality to a very low one. While the reduction itself is typical of linguistic and cultural categorization, for purposes of economy of reference in well-defined contexts, the reification of the simplified, low-dimensional categories naturalizes them and makes possible the gross over-simplifications of stereotypes.

The most significant characteristic of stereotypes in this model is not their positive content, but rather the obligatory associations they create among the concealed dimensions. Thus a stereotype says that there is such a thing as masculinity, and being masculine implies that one is, say, both sexually active and interpersonally aggressive, and that it is natural for these traits to be positively correlated to a high degree. In fact such correlations can be rather low in a population, and there can be many individuals high on one and low on the other, but the mystique is maintained that they ought to go together. In this way, for our particular example, aggressivity, which may be valuable for military enterprises or coercive proxy control (goons, police), is promoted through sexual desire. There need however be no necessary link between male sexuality and aggressivity, as for example in those gay men whose sexuality favors passivity. The need to naturalize a stereotype of masculinity that serves the interests of dominant groups in a society correspondingly leads to a de-normalization of the many real cases that belie the generalization. This is equally true for stereotypes about femininity, about being middle class or working class, about racial and ethnic stereotypes and even stereotypes about age groups.

I will propose that we examine the social semiotics of social classification in light of (a) social functionality and dysfunctionality, (b) formal logical connections among categories along different dimensions, and (c) ideological reduction of a high-dimensional space of relatively independent variations by degree to a very low-dimensional system of stereotypically contrastive, and evaluatively ranked, social categories.

Regarding the specific matter of academic discourse, I will examine in what ways its semantic features are used to reinforce stereotypically masculine elements of the identities of the male academics who deploy the discourse. In a functional socio-linguistic model of discourse, it is plausible that the semantic features have evolved *inter alia* to make this possible, or at least not to interfere with the sense of masculinity. But to do this we will have to consider such matters as the difference between working-class and middle-class masculinities, and between heterosexual and other stereotypes of possible masculinities. It will remain largely implicit that we are speaking of eurocultural masculine stereotypes for males across the wide middle range of age grades.

### **Identity and Meaningful Action**

In analyzing the masculinity of academic discourse we begin by recognizing that it is one of the primary functions of a culture-specific discourse formation to mediate the construction of identity for self and others. Academic discourse primarily mediates the construction of the identities of middle-class, early to late middle-aged, eurocultural, heterosexual, masculinized males, both historically (which matters more to the persistent forms of the discourse) and contemporarily (which matters more to how the discourse is deployed).

We will assume here that discourse always functions as an aspect of material activity, serving to mediate interactions among persons, technologies (artifacts-in-use), and elements of the local ecology, regarded as both material systems (bodies, objects, elements) and as meaningful units or signs (e.g. persons, tools, foods); cf. the actant-networks of Latour. There is no foundational mentalism in this perspective, no ideas or concepts which operate in any other realm than that of customary physical space-time and its matter-energy relations. We do however also assume that material processes construe meanings, that such semiosis is a general feature of complex, evolved, far-from-equilibrium systems (and not just of humans or even of evolutionary late animals), and that we need to look at very large networks or systems of interdependent material-ecological interactions among persons, artifacts, etc. in order to understand in material terms how social and cultural meanings are made in communities.

Fundamentally, people participate in activities which are both material interactions and meaningful practices, and which tie our ecosocial webs together. Participation in a form of activity, among other effects, both constitutes and shapes (a) identity choice, (b) identity display, and (c) identity construction. Over biographical time individuals who tend to participate in similar kinds of activities, taking similar roles in them, develop common dispositions (cf. Bourdieu's *habitus*) toward further action of the same kind. Such dispositions are features of communities, and over historical time, of

cultures and their constituent and token subcultures. They give rise to recognizable sociotypes, i.e. to a statistical tendency for persons who acquire dispositions of one kind in one aspect of human activity to also acquire culturally associated dispositions in other kinds of activity. Thus social stereotypes are like self-fulfilling prophecies: if we learn to believe we should act in certain ways, then acting in those ways is liable to make us into stereotypical persons. Sociotypes are the dynamical attractors of habitus-creating activities; the sum of social forces shaping our behavior tends to lead us toward one or another of them. The system of sociotypes, which are meaning effects rather than instances of material discrete entities (you can construe a real person as an instance of a sociotype, but you cannot actually point to an embodied sociotype as a material entity), provides the semiotic resource system for the construction of identity. It defines the differences that make a difference in who are we to ourselves and to others. We may seek a certain identity defined in these terms (identity choice), we may display the features that index such an identity (identity display), and we may work in activity to construct ourselves and others as persons with the dispositions to choose and display these features (identity construction).

Discourse features are an important subset of these resources. How we speak and what we say, in relation to various topics and occasions, helps to define us as tokens of various possible sociotypes. In fact of course we produce vast amounts of discourse, not consistently with regard to any such ideal types, so that if we take frequency of production as a measure, we construct for ourselves some degree of membership in contrasting social categories. Our identities are always mixed from the point of view of the ideal social types, and they may be relatively more consistent in some settings vs. others, or even may construct different (and from the viewpoint of the culture, conflicting) identities in different activities.

Identity is thus a positioning of self or other in a system of meaning-relations and in a network of material practices, including a system of power relations. One of the most important such systems of meaning relations are those which define the salient social categorization of a culture. For the culture I am examining here, these appear to be primarily based on distinctions said to index: gender, sexuality, social class, age, and ethnicity or race. In some cases distinctions with regard to religious affiliation or occupational group also play a role, but in the broad picture a lesser one. All of these distinctions form together a single unified semiotic system of social categorization. It posits discrete and contrasting, and invariable value-hierarchized categories, and tends to marginalize, ignore, or stigmatize as abnormal or unnatural all exceptions, hybrids, feature-combination anomalies, and matters of degree. I will call this semiotic system the **SOCIAL CASTE** system. Discourse in general serves to construct identity and positioning with respect to this system of meanings. Academic discourse serves to reinforce a particular identity and position with it.

### **Gender/Sexuality/Class/Age/Ethnicity: A Unified System**

<p><b>Typological Model:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Masculine v. Feminine</b></li> <li>• <b>Hetero v. Homosexual</b></li> <li>• <b>Middle v. Lower Class</b></li> </ul>	<p><b>Topological Model:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>all traits by degree</b></li> <li>• <b>all traits compatible</b></li> <li>• <b>a single semiotic</b></li> <li>• <b>hi-D cultural clusters</b></li> </ul>
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Age grades [weak]</b></li> <li>• <b>Distinct cultures</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>different gender identities by class, age, sexuality, e</b></li> </ul>
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Before we can consider how academic discourse is gendered, or how it serves to help constitute gendered identities, we need to understand in a more fully theorized way just how the social caste category of gender is itself defined in relation to less abstract and more directly observable traits and behaviors of persons, defined as meaningful and as relevant to gender categorization, by a culture. In particular we must distinguish between what the culture says gender is: a bipolar contrast pair of universal categories (masculine vs. feminine) rooted in dichotomous biological difference (male vs. female) and how it actually construes gender categorizations semiotically out of other meaningful traits and behaviors it recognizes.

Gender differences are construed out of complexes of traits and behaviors that are multi-dimensional and quasi-continuous matters of degree, rather than bi-polar or categorial distinctions; real human beings always exhibit some degrees of traits that are stereotypically, or in their extremes, considered markers for idealized masculinity and for idealized femininity; the distribution of all humans in such a trait-space shows a number of overlapping patterns of correlation (gender sociotypes), which are themselves social-cultural artifacts (as explained in the previous frame).

The correlational patterns for high gender-loading traits are distinctive for persons of different sex, but also for persons of different age, social class, sexual orientation, and ethnic culture; each of these latter variables is also no more than another such multi-dimensional correlation pattern among some of the same as well as many other traits, and all are also socio-cultural constructions, both as salient cultural categories and as objective correlational phenomena

Semiotically, gender, sexuality, class, age, and ethnic-culture/race form a single system of interdependent meaning-alternatives and meaning-degrees.

The simplest possible adequate gender system would need four categories: +masc/-fem, +fem/-masc, +fem/+masc, and -masc/-fem. In practice, these should be fuzzy categories with membership-by-degree. The first corresponds most closely to traditional masculinity, the second traditional femininity, the third to androgyny (usually in weak degree on both axes), and the last to neuter. Real people usually have some positive degree of membership in both masc and fem.

### **Some Salient Dimensions for Gender-Identity Typing**

- **chromosomal [XX, XY, XXY, XYY, other]**
- **cellular, neurohumoral [e.g. hormone concentrations]**
- **reproductive anatomy [e.g. genitalia]**
- **other salient anatomy [e.g. secondary sex characteristics]**

- **somatotypes** [e.g. body proportions, surface fat distributions]
- **figure/physique, face**
- **movement quality, body hexis, voice**
- **dress, hairstyle, ornamentation**
- **personality/behavioral dispositions**
- **occupations, avocations**
- **interests, attitudes**
- **modes of action in particular situation types**
- **opinions, beliefs, values**
- **discourse styles, discourse formations**
- **ways of categorizing persons, situations**

Evidence for the interdependence of the gender system with age, class, sexuality, and culture includes:

- the fact that the ideal of masculinity is working-class masculinity, but the ideal of femininity is middle-class femininity
- the observation that degrees of masc or fem traits are normatively low for the very young and the very old and highest at the age of sexual maturity; every age grade has distinct ideal norms of masculinity and femininity
- gay males of a particular social class, age, and ethnic cultural background have distinct forms for gay-masculinity and gay-femininity, which are in some respects different correlational patterns from those for heterosexuals; thus "top" and "bottom" or analogous categories "butch" vs. "queen" have a complex relationship to heterosexual masculinity/femininity and neither invert, nor solely parody them, but are autonomous constructions in a different but related semiotic; I assume a similar situation is true for lesbians
- the forms and norms of both real and ideal masculinity and femininity vary considerably and systematically with social class, especially across extremes of social class subcultures
- the forms and norms of masculinity and femininity also vary dramatically as between ethnic cultural traditions and variants within those traditions

- traditional ideologically functioning categories for gender, sex, age grade, class, and ethnic culture are low-dimensional, biased, and unrealistic representations of a high-dimensional space of human biological and cultural variation
- the observation that if we refer to the composite system described above as a gender-caste system, then typically this gender-caste system is reduced to a stereotypical contrast of two folk categories, masculine and feminine, and conflated semiotically with a similarly reduced representation of the biological diversity of human sexual characteristics, i.e. folk notions of male and female, to create a normative exclusion (male > masc, female > fem) of most of the actual correlational diversity of human sex- and gender- relevant characteristics
- the fact that the selection, weighting, and privileging of particular traits as markers of sex and gender is caste-specific and culturally arbitrary (i.e. it is a historical result which could have been in any particular respect otherwise)

## **Modes of Masculinization in Academic Discourse**

### ***Dialogical:***

- **Domination**
- **Distancing**
- **Objectification**
- **Adversarial**
- **Categorical**
- **Evaluative (extremal)**
- **Authoritative**

### ***Monological:***

- **Abstraction**
- **Formalization**
- **Universality**
- **Power topics**
- **Power metaphors**
- **Gendered lexis**
- **Conservative/radical**

Academics are primarily heterosexual, upper middle class, middle-aged european and euro-american, and in this gender-caste the primary +masc traits are:

- autonomy, independence, self-reliance, freedom, mobility
- moderated aggressivity, dominant posturing and bids for dominance
- within established dominance hierarchies, expressions of fealty to superiors
- risk-taking, adventurousness
- abstraction, theoretical-formal rationality
- 'strong-mindedness' 'hard objectivity' , distancing from subject'

Projections of the masculine fantasies of the apex gender-caste, primarily a desire to emulate the fantasy ideal of working-class masculinity or of upper-class pre-modern masculinity *appears mainly in deniable metaphorical usages* around such themes as:

- physical strength and fighting power (including use, possession of weapons)
- sexual prowess and control of sex objects (including master-slave, rape)

- success in physically dangerous undertakings
- extreme wealth and economic power, direct domination of males and females

## Semantics of Masculinization

### *Orientalist semantics:*

- **relative status superiority, formality, distancing**
- **rhetorical solidarity, heteroglossic oppositions**
- **adversarial genres, disputational rhetorics**
- **authoritative voice, extremal evaluations for certainty, importance, desirability, normativity**
- **objectification of evaluations**
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### *Presentational semantics:*

- **nominalization of processes (maximal degree)**
- **classificational, implicational relations (maximal degree)**
- **semantic closure (dichotomies, small-n paradigms)**
- **non-finite verbals, aoristic/habitual tense-aspect**
- **“masculine” topicality, metaphor, lexis**

Features of monologic masculinization: abstractionism, formalism, authoritativeness, objectification, distancing, "mastery of reason" i.e. achieving mastery by means of rationalistic discourse

Note the important link between the principal monologic strategy of abstractionism and the Mode selections in the textual metafunction, esp. regarding nominalization and the "written mode" grammatical metaphor patterns (nominal-relational, with process as thing or quality, relation as process, and condensation by subclassification of participant-Things and re-nominalization).

Note connections to Walkerdine's arguments in *Mastery of Reason*; but it is only abstract formalistic rationality, not all modes of reasoned action (cf. Lave) that represents masculinized identity.

The relation of abstractionism to the domination principle is that the more abstract argument, by being more general, takes precedence over any argument about an instance; the more abstract and presumptively general or universal, the more 'foundational' a principle and the only way to counter it is at the same or a still higher level of generality and abstraction. A strong counter-argument against this principle was made by Lev Vygotsky in his famous phrase of “rising to the concrete” and more generally in his argument that greater abstraction results very often in “empty verbalism” and pseudo-concepts that are impossible to actually apply to real concrete instances. It is the concrete application of a concept to some specific instance that represents the higher intellectual process, not the mere verbal display of the abstraction. But this is a difficult argument to make in a masculinist discourse universe.

Gender and class domination relations are conflated in the abstraction principle, since it is based on discourses that imply *centers of calculation* (Latour's phrase) distributed over wide geographical, social, and in some cases historical extension from which females and lower-caste males are differentially excluded.

### **Why does it matter?**

- **Exclusions and intimidations**
- **Fragility of monocultures**
- **Ideological imbalance in inquiry**
- **Technocratic discourse and public policy**
- **Complicity in the hurting of bodies**
- **Inadequate models of humanity and ecosocial complexity**

*Because of the exclusions of both persons and discourse alternatives, including:*

- women, less masculinized males, identifiable gay males
- less structured and dichotomizing discourses, non-universalizing discourses
- discourses that do not make extreme evaluative claims about certitude, etc.
- discourses that use +fem metaphoric frames
- discourses on topics that do not bear on power hierarchies
- discourses that subvert claims for the necessity of abstract reasoning and control hierarchies

*Because it encompasses complicity in the legitimation of:*

- physical abuse of women, children, gay people, cultural/racial others
- legal restrictions of the human rights of all these
- denial of resources and educational/social opportunities to them
- categorization discourses, and evaluations in terms of conformity to masculinized notions of intelligence, ability, competence, etc.

Note the need to sustain "contradictions" between political solidarity discourses and category-deconstructing discourses in opposing masculinism and the whole gender-caste system of unequal power relations.

Thus categories like "Black people" "Gay people" and even "Women" or "the Working Class" serve a need to create political solidarity through discourse in order to resist oppressive conditions, but these categories are themselves still gross over-simplifications of the complexity of human diversity with respect to all the traits that go to define any such category.

By and large such simplistic categories are the characteristic tools of oppressors, and intellectually it is their deconstruction in favor of a less politically freighted, less stereotyped awareness of separable variability across all human traits that seems most humanely progressive.