Gendering Talk
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Albert Camus wrote a midcentury philosophical essay on the dilemmas of Sisyphus. Sisyphus is a character in Dante's Hell whose torment is to roll a heavy boulder up a hill, only to watch helplessly as the boulder rolls back down again. Then Sisyphus must push the boulder uphill again, with the same consequence, for eternity. Camus casts a terrible sociological fable on the futility of work.

Camus resolves this problem by focusing on a fictional interlude in Sisyphus's story. Right after the boulder begins to roll down the hill, and in full sight of the meaningless labor ahead, Sisyphus enjoys a moment of respite, a moment when he is not pushing, a time when he is somehow greater than his rock. At that moment, Camus imagines Sisyphus laughing. That redemptive laughter gives Sisyphus the strength to get up and do what needs to be done. Or at least to do what must be done again as it has been done before, but with increased understanding and compassion.¹

Considering the futilities of authentic action in the world of gendering talk, I admire the tenacity of Sisyphus's laugh. A bit less often, I am able to return to laughter as the rolling boulder of "natural" gender undoes my attempts at visualizing rational action on a level playing field. There is a fleeting and partial escape from recurrent problems in a redemptive interlude of laughter. Today as a happily married cancer patient celebrating my first grandchild, I understand this point with greater compassion for self and others than I did ten years ago—when I stood like the man in Matisse's "Conversation," looking at the gendered other across a colorful window.
Can laughter redeem some of our reflexive performances of gender? Can even midlife marrieds share amusement at their predicaments in the arrangement between the sexes? Can the object of a vile street remark laugh the laugh of Sisyphus? Can both the feminist and the neorepublican laugh about political correctness in the language of James Finn Gardner’s portrayal of little Red Riding Hood?

On the way to Grandma’s house, Red Riding Hood was accosted by a wolf, who asked her what was in her basket. She replied, “Some healthful snacks for my grandmother, who is certainly capable of taking care of herself as a mature adult.”

The wolf said, “you know, my dear, it isn’t safe for a little girl to walk through the woods alone.”

Red Riding Hood said, “I find your sexist remark offensive in the extreme, but I will ignore it because of your traditional status as an outcast from society.”

This text permits reading by both the advocates of changing language habits and those who oppose such changes as ridiculous. What response to a recurrent problem shows more strength and compassion than an invitation to laughter?

To put the problem this way is to admit that I cannot figure out how to end this book. Another summary is superfluous. One more argument will not convert you, unless you “got it” long ago. To add a series of prescriptions for interaction also seems unnecessarily repetitive of what you have already read. If you’ve got it, you are already performing some of it. Maybe it’s time for one more sexual joke, this one on men:

Q: Why does it take over a million sperm to fertilize a single egg?
A: The little guys won’t ask for directions.

This joke turns a stereotype on itself and dissolves it as we laugh. Maybe that is because the joke is on the powerful party, and yet the stereotype seems incidental to imbalances of power.
One problem with the division of thinking reflected by the chapters in this book is that certain fragments of data relevant to the puzzles of gender in talk have been omitted due to lack of fit within any of the chapter headings. The treatment of male-female speech differences in chapter 9, for example, gives attention mainly to ideas relevant to language and power hypotheses. We must remain alert to gendering talk that fits none of the preconceived categories of our theories. Throughout the current project, I have collected, yet rarely written about, instances of talk that struck my intuitions as gendered—but for no particular reason. I exemplify this ragged edge of analysis with some discussion of the laughter of women and men.

**TARZAN AND JANE: COURTSHIP AND DIFFERENCE**

Sometimes I hear someone laugh and reflect: That sounded like a feminine kind of laughing. In some cases, this intuition seems stimulated by a particularly marked and raucous laughter that goes on for some time, often at a high pitch. Conversation analyst Gail Jefferson, the foremost contemporary expert on how we laugh, suspects that a woman (interacting with a man) will accept a man's invitation to laugh more often than a man will accept a woman's invitation to laugh. She tested this notion quantitatively and found, as have most investigators of male-female difference speech patterns, few and mixed indications of such differences. Still, however, she argues that in certain cases gender and laughter are connected in a way that contributes to and grows from gender stereotypes. She writes of these possibilities using the terms "Tarzan" and "Jane" to emphasize the reflexive relations of her hunches to stereotypes.

Jefferson, who invented the conversation transcription system used to describe tape-recorded speech samples in this book, insists on transcribing every spoken syllable in recordings of talk, including nonword vocalizations such as laugh tokens. When transcribed this way, some laughter shows itself to be shared laughter or laughter in which more than one person joins, usually answering an invitation by the speaker of some laughable utterance. In two-party conversation the speaker of the laughable adds laugh tokens in order to invite the other to share.
Rick finishes a story and laughs. Jessy immediately joins in the laughter, sharing her judgment of the punchline’s funniness.

About a third of all first laughs are shared. Sometimes, following apparent invitations to laugh, the conversation partner declines the invitation:

Joy playfully instructs Pete to call that weekend and take a group of her friends to a movie. Joy laughs after this apparent mock proposition. Pete, however, plays it straight, apparently agreeing to call but not sharing the laughter.

Many laughs are not apparently performed in order to be shared. For example, some laughter expresses mocking or derision at the other. Some laughter expresses self-deprecation or self-criticism. Most usually, a social partner does not share these laughs. The old rhyme: "Laugh and the world laughs with you" is only partly true.

With that background, Jefferson argues that Janes are "laugh receptive" to Tarzans, but Tarzans are "laugh resistant" to Janes. Specifically:

- A Jane will join a Tarzan’s laughter even when she does not see anything to laugh about, except
  - A Jane will not join a Tarzan’s laughter if he’s disagreeing with her, and
  - A Jane will not join a Tarzan’s laughter if he talks about a trouble he’s having

- A Tarzan will not join a Jane’s laughter if he does not see what’s funny, except
—A Tarzan will share laughter during flirting
—A Tarzan will join in a Jane’s laughter if she is talking about a trouble she’s having.

In other words, Jefferson argues that there are stereotypical positions for men and women out of which they share laughter with a member of the opposite sex. Phillip Glenn, Erica Hofmann, and I found that Jefferson’s claims describe laughter shared by dating partners better than laughter shared by other male-female pairs.¹ Laughter in courtship also occurs more often in the service of ridicule than that of affiliation. Female courters invite laughter more than males, and most often invite laughter at self! Courting men laugh at the expense of women more often than the reverse, and women frequently join in laughter at self.

This suggests an unequal political economy of humor within courtship. These findings echo the patterns of female criticism in family dinner narratives studied by Ochs and Taylor (chapter 6). Above all, this repeats the suspicion that links the myth of gendered difference in stereotypes about intimate sexual couples.

Even when laugh partners are not members of a sexual couple, practices of flirting raised by laughter can be used for a variety of nonamorous purposes—including racist put-downs.

**PAUL AND DYAN: GENDER/ETHNICITY**

Consider a unique laughter-laced episode that occurred on a televised talk show broadcast on the North American Univision Network. The show’s bilingual host, comedian Paul Rodriguez, skillfully interviews guests who speak Spanish and guests who do not, such as actress Dyan Cannon, for a largely bilingual audience. In her interview Dyan displays a number of partially informed opinions about Hispanic language and culture, culminating in an assertion that Hispanic men show their feelings more than Anglos. Paul disagrees, citing his own frustrations with machismo mythology, especially the “myth of the Latin lover.” This utterance sparks a sex-play episode in which Dyan enacts a stereotyped blonde flirt role in which laughter helps her to pin an ethnic slur on Paul. A videotape of this scene shows that
• The woman (Dyan) laughs more than the man (Paul) during this highly gendered episode,
• Dyan uses laughter to perform the role of a sexy blonde,
• Dyan uses this sexy persona to launch flirtatious sexual teases at Paul, and
• These sexual teases help Dyan prevail in an argument about Latino sociology as she manipulates Paul to assume a stereotyped role of "the Latin lover."

Here is a transcript of this laughter-laced segment:

[3] Paul Rodríguez Show

Dyan: I think that your audience [Hispanic] men show their feelings more [than Anglos]. Do you think so?
Paul: No, I disagree with you, I think- I think we especially Hispanic men are saddled with something that we inherited from our parents, from our- specially from our fathers, this machismo stuff we have to live up to uh to- to an image that we- just like for example you know the- the Myth of the Latin lover how we're endlessly craving for love, and- and you go all night long, uh [look,
Dyan: [Sounds good to me: huh huh huh huh huh 
[ [huh huh huh huh huh huh huh
Paul: [Well let me tell you Dyan, we're goo:d now,
[ [don't get us wro::ng, you know-
Dyan: [hah hah hah hah hah hah hah hah

Audience: (Laughter, whistles ➣)

Dyan: [hah ha ha ha, hah hah hah hah hah hah
Paul: [<huh- uh huh you kno:w
But- but all night lo: ng, come o:n.
Dyan: Oh- oh [ho hoh hah hah huh huh huh huh huh hah huh
Paul: [Only- three, four ho:urs, okay.

Dyan:  
huh huh huh huh huh huh huh
[...

Paul:  
[You know, even / could do that, huh huh

Dyan:  

hhuh huh hah hah huh-
O::h, I bet you could go all night lo:ng, Paul.

Audience:  
(gasp) OO<OO [OO ◄

Dyan:  

[...]

Paul:  

[Yeah I could,

After Dyan poses the culturally naive hypothesis that Hispanic men are more expressive than Anglos, Paul sketches some burdens that machismo stereotypes place upon Hispanic males. His sociological seriousness shows in the words “image” and “myth.” His statement includes the first-person plural pronoun “we,” which claims firsthand experience in these burdens. Yet late in the utterance, Paul shifts focus from machismo in general to one example: stereotypes about Latino sexual performance. He exaggerates his intonation of the cliché phrase “all night long,” and rolls his eyes. Paul’s formulation of male sexual adequacy goes over the top, although he packages this utterance to project a coming punchline (“look”).

Dyan interrupts this turn unit to project a surprising and approving uptake on his sexual cliché. “Sounds good to me” cuts across Paul’s serious discussion of a negative aspect of cultural stereotyping by responding as if Paul had been bragging. This response casts Dyan as a sexually experienced woman who might appreciate a man’s extreme virile performance. Dyan uses a singular pronoun, “me,” to shift Paul’s speaking on behalf of Latinos (“we”) toward a more personal focus. Dyan’s tease reframes Paul’s sociological discussion as sexual innuendo. Dyan casts herself in a sexpot role by displaying this willfully thick mishearing, and she laughs right afterward.

[3] Paul Rodriguez Show

Paul:  

the myth of the La:tin lover how we’re endlessly cra:ving for
love, and- and you go all night long,

uh [look,
Dyan: [Sounds good to me: huh huh huh huh huh huh huh]
Paul: [Well let me tell you Dyan, we're good now,]

Paul responds by building on Dyan's tease, repeating her term "good" with a twist into positive self-assessment of Latinos' sexual prowess: "We're good now," he brags.

Pushed by Dyan's flirting and laughter, Paul is manipulated to perform the very sex-role stereotype he had just been at pains to deny. He brags that he is capable of performing for three or four hours. Dyan responds with her loudest laughter of the segment, showing mock arousal at Paul's assessment of his Latin virility. Then Dyan acts like she is bargaining: "I bet you could go all night long." Dyan works blonde stereotypes to critique Paul's sexual performance—and to insist that he be the best that he can be at actualizing her ethnic-sexual stereotype.

Paul's last word is a complete capitulation: "Yeah I could," which literally accepts what he first denied. Paul has actualized his own stereotype. This segment shows Dyan wielding a combination of race, gender, and culture to defend her racist characterization of Hispanic men delivered to a Hispanic man on national TV. Is this a dark side of laughter? Is this kind of power-reversal judo on the laughter patterns found in courtship?

This segment should make us cautious about assuming that gender stereotypes such as "sexy blonde" inevitably work against women in discourse. In this instance Dyan's stereotypical self-casting is part of a ploy to win an argument.

**DIDJU HEAR THE ONE ABOUT GENDER?**

A humorist once remarked: It ain't what we don't know that hurts us, it's what we know that tain't so. So it may be with regard to male-female differences in communication. It may be that our stereotypes about sex differences mediate in our performances as gendered beings—creating sex/gender differences where they need not be. This is part of the arrangement between the sexes.
How different are men and women as communicators? We do not really know, but research claiming such differences remains inconclusive. Meanwhile, most of us, as members of a culture, believe that such differences exist, and we come to expect gendered misunderstandings as routine occurrences in social life. These natural differences, it is widely believed, just happen to us.

In contrast with this view, I argue that speakers create a good deal of the gendering in talk:

- by reenacting stereotypes about male-female differences;
- by engaging in dating and courtship, then forwarding these sexist relational practices into family formation;
- by talking differently about women than about men;
- by treating men and women differently as conversation partners; and
- by allowing women to enjoy only second-class power, status, and economic clout in many social and institutional settings.

All of these practices have been going on for a long time and within many cultures. This gendering has become institutionalized in languages as grammaticalized gender, as semantic asymmetries in descriptive terms applied to men and women, as default assumptions about the status of females—and more. Gender's omnirelevance is shown in the subtle ways that gendered markings creep into talk and by the ways that talk about one facet of gender may lead to talk about another facet—with no sense of transition occurring.

These issues are before us and provide a project for any imagined future. We can make some progress, but the task of readapting to gender in talk is one that will not resolve our most serious problems in one self-improvement binge. I remain optimistic that three or four generations of hard-headed negotiation and truth-telling could lead to a more fairly gendered world. This is not a taken-for-granted conclusion. We could just as easily fumble the tenuous gains of recent generations, especially if we insist on believing that men and women are socially different critters. Attaining male-female parity and finding mostly healthy ways to express sexuality—these are many-faceted tasks. We should approach these tasks with great seriousness and with our most cosmic sense of humor.