Towards understanding gender and talk-in-interaction
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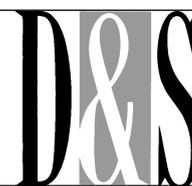
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ABSTRACT. Feminist language researchers typically assume that gender is
relevant to any interaction. Conversation analysis offers an interesting
challenge for feminists to show *how* and *that* the pervasiveness of gender is
achieved in talk-in-interaction. The aim of this article is to make a step towards
understanding the interactional mechanisms underling the omnirelevance of
gender in daily life. The present study draws upon the practices and principles
of conversation analysis, particularly the notions of repair and membership
categorization devices, to examine recordings of children's interactions.
Evidence that supports the claim that the organization of repair may be
implicated in the (re)production of gender is presented.

KEY WORDS: *conversation analysis, feminism, gender, language, masculine
generics, sexism, talk-in-interaction*

Feminists researching the relationships between gender and language have had a longstanding interest in the ways in which language reflects and helps constitute sexual inequality. Traditionally, gender and language work has been concerned with one of two issues; sexist language or gender differences in language use (see Kramer et al., 1978; Lakoff, 1973). In more recent work the distinction between language about women (and men) and the way women (and men) speak has become blurred because both aspects are now understood as part of a single process – the social construction of gender (Cameron, 1998; Weatherall, 2002).

Feminist language researchers taking a social constructionist approach have been highly critical of the notion of gender differences in speech. For example, Stokoe (1998) suggested that the focus on *difference* in gender and language, which assumes essentialism, has been ultimately counterproductive for feminism. The assumption of gender essentialism in language research, according to

Stokoe, has reinforced commonsense beliefs about binary gender categories and perpetuated sex-stereotypes about speech styles (also see Crawford, 1995). Stokoe and others (e.g. Kitzinger and Frith, 1999; Speer and Potter, 2000) have suggested that a conversation analytic approach offers a timely corrective to the tendency of gender and language work to perpetuate commonsense notions of dichotomous gendered speech styles. What a conversation analytic mentality means for gender and language research is limiting analyses to moments when gender is demonstrably relevant to the participants involved in an interaction (see Stokoe and Smithson, 2001).

Conversation analysis developed from ethnomethodology, a branch of sociology developed by Harold Garfinkel (see Heritage, 1984). From an ethnomethodological perspective gender is viewed, not as an essential feature of a person, but as a routine ongoing accomplishment of interaction (Garfinkel, 1967; West and Zimmerman, 1987). The idea that gender is a re-occurring achievement is consistent with contemporary feminist post-structuralist theories about gender. Butler (1990: 277), for example, construed gender as a performative act because it is 'a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation'.

For all feminists gender is, theoretically, relevant to any interaction. The term 'omnirelevance' was used by Garfinkel (1967: 118) to describe the ubiquitous nature of gender in members' activities during everyday life (also see West and Zimmerman, 1987). However, for conversation analysts it is not defensible to use a category, even one that is arguably omnirelevant, to describe and understand interactions (see Schegloff, 1997). Instead, analyses should be restricted to the concerns that are overtly displayed as being relevant to the participants themselves. The idea of limiting analyses of gender to when it is demonstrably oriented to as relevant has sparked a debate about whether conversation analytic concerns are compatible with feminist ones (see, for example, Kitzinger and Frith, 1999; Stokoe and Smithson, 2001; Weatherall, 2000).

Being limited, as an analyst, to the overtly displayed concerns of the participants is *not to say* that gender is not omnirelevant. What it does mean is that it is incumbent on the researcher to show *how and that* gender as omnirelevant is produced and oriented to. Some ground has been made towards demonstrating the existence of omnirelevant devices for casting people in particular ways during an interaction. For example, McHoul and Raply (2002) showed how the membership categories 'assessor' and 'client' were omnirelevant, although locally occasioned, throughout a particular interaction where the assessor was delaying initiating an assessment of the client (also see Sacks, 1992).

In a discussion of conversation analysis and post-structuralism Wetherell (1998) suggested that conversation analysis offers a useful discipline for grounding post-structuralist concepts, such as gender discourses, in the business of everyday talk-in-interaction. This article takes up that suggestion by attempting to show how the pervasiveness of gender is accomplished in talk. More specifically

the aim of this article is to examine data fragments taken from a corpus of children's talk for empirical evidence of the kinds of organizational structures of conversation that may support the (re)production of gender in talk-in-interaction. The approach I take has been influenced by general explications of conversation analytic principles and practices (Antaki and Widdicombe, 1998; Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998; Psathas, 1995). A goal of this article is to call upon some of these practices in order to make a tentative step towards understanding how the arguable omnirelevance of gender can be understood in talk-in-interaction.

Corpus

The data fragments were drawn from video and audio recordings of six, 4-year-old children attending the student crèche at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand/Aotearoa. The children were grouped into threes – an all-girl triad, an all-boy triad and two mixed-sex triads. Each group was recorded, at different times, during two different types of play activity – making party food with play-doh and playing with a train set.

The analysis of children's interaction has particular importance to the field of gender and language because it has been assumed that it is during childhood that gender-specific subcultures develop, which is used to explain (alleged) gender differences in speech (see Crawford, 1995; Weatherall, 2002). However, more relevant to this article is that children are in the process of developing the competencies necessary for becoming 'members' of their culture (also see Cahill, 1986). Thus, children's achievement of gender may be slightly clumsy and more visible than adults more seamless construction of gender (also see Walton et al., 2002).

In the first part of the following analysis I resurrect one of the traditional concerns about gender and language – masculine generics. I present evidence that true masculine generics do exist in conversation. Then I draw upon the conversation analytic notion of 'repair' to analyse an interaction where an assumption of a male referent was a source of trouble. The notion of repair is also used to examine data extracts in which gender identification was a source of trouble. In the final part of the analysis I draw upon membership categorization analysis (MCA; see Hester and Eglin, 1997) to examine two data extracts in which the (re)production of normative assumptions about gender were displayed.

Masculine generics

Gender-marked generics such as 'man' and 'he' have long been the target of feminist critiques of the English language (see Kramer et al., 1978). Recently, however, Stringer and Hopper (1998) have been critical of many studies of masculine generics because of their over-reliance on written or imagined instances of their use. Consistent with a conversation analytic approach, Stringer and Hopper conducted a study of naturally occurring spoken interaction for evidence of masculine generics and the alleged bias they promote.

Stringer and Hopper (1998) found no clear instances of the generic 'he' in the conversations they examined. The lack of genuinely neutral, masculine generics in Stringer and Hopper's data led them to suggest that such forms are very rare or perhaps non-existent. What they did identify were 'pseudo-generics'. A default assumption of pseudo-generics is that the referent is male, although the referent could be a female. Stringer and Hopper presented cases of the default assumption of 'he' being ignored. For example:

Extract 1: (Stringer and Hopper, 1998: 214)

1   Son: I saw my new doctor the other day.
2   Mom: What did HE say
3   Son: I got a prescription for my toe.

In their analysis, Stringer and Hopper (1998) noted that the son's doctor was female but the mother assumed that the doctor was male. The pseudo-generic 'he' was not oriented to as a source of trouble because there was no repair initiation in l. 3, the son simply answered the question. However, consider the following:

Extract 2: (abbreviated from Stringer and Hopper, 1998: 214)

1   AVA: Well- what'd HE say
2   BEV: He is a she- and everything's fine

In extract 2, AVA at l. 1 uses the pseudo-generic 'he' to refer to the doctor. In the following utterance BEV notices and corrects the assumption that the referent (a doctor) is he. Consistent with Stringer and Hopper's (1998) observations, the corpus of children's conversations used for the present study contained numerous examples of pseudo-generics. For example, the children used the term 'fireman' and the pronoun 'he' to refer to a(n) (imaginary) fire-fighter. There were also numerous examples where animals (e.g., a toy dog) and inanimate objects (e.g., bits of the train set track) were referred to as masculine.

In contrast to Stringer and Hopper (1998), who suggested truly neutral masculine generics may not exist in spontaneous conversation, I found a case of a genuinely neutral masculine generic being used in the children's talk. The example in extract 3 occurs when three girls are playing together:

Extract 3

1   HAL: what are you guys whispering for?
2   ROB: °nothing°
3   HAL: °what are you guys whispering for?°
4   ROB: °nuthink°
5   HAL: (1.0) no I'm talking to the grownups

HAL's question at l. 1 is the first part of a question answer adjacency pair. ROB in l. 2 orients to HAL's utterance as asking her and GEO (the other girl child present) what they are whispering about. Here 'guys' is functioning as a true generic. ROB displays her understanding that 'guys' refers to her and the other girl present by answering the question. HAL does not orient to ROB's response as relevant,

however, as she repeats the question in l. 3. ROB again demonstrates her understanding of 'guys' addressing her and GEO, as she gives the same response at l. 4 as in l. 2. The pause at l. 5 indicates the conditionally relevant answer has still not been produced. The reason why ROB's answers are not relevant to HAL's question is revealed in l. 5 in which HAL corrects ROB's mistake and explains that 'guys' was designed to address the grown-ups (both women) and not ROB and GEO. At least in this single case 'guys' functioned, unproblematically, to address females. Given 'guys' can also be used to address males and groups of both males and females, then it is a true masculine generic. However, to demonstrate the existence of a masculine generic is not in itself evidence of sexism. This issue will be returned to in the conclusion.

Gender trouble, masculine generics and repair

The term 'repair' in conversation analysis is the technical term to refer to the conversational mechanisms organizing how seeming errors or sources of trouble in talk are 'corrected' or repaired. Hutchby and Wooffitt (1998: 57) suggest that an important aspect of conversation analytic work on repair has been 'to show how repair illustrates participants' orientations to the basic turn-taking rules'. By extending Hutchby and Wooffitt's suggestion it seems reasonable to infer that repair involving gender trouble may show participants' orientations to common-sense understandings of gender.

Think back to extract 2 where BEV corrected AVA's assumption that her doctor was a man. The extract illustrates an 'other initiated other repair' (see Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998). AVA's use of 'he' is the trouble source and BEV corrects AVA's assumption that the doctor is a man before answering her. Extract 2 also illustrates a more general pattern in which repairs occur in close proximity to the turn containing the trouble source (Schegloff, 1992; Schegloff et al., 1977).

There were no cases in which the children spontaneously 'noticed' or repaired the default assumption of a male referent in relation to a pseudo-generic. However, in one case when two boys (ROS and ELF) and a girl (GEO) were playing, I (ANN) initiated and carried out the repair:

Extract 4

```
 1   ROS:   dog (.) hey dog what do you fink you're (.) doing? come here (.) here boy (2.0)
 2          there we go (.) turn it around (2.0) ugh ugh aww here's a bowl (3.0) there we go
 3   ELF:   he hasn't got any food yet (.) dog we'll make you food just making you a long
 4          worm
 5   ROS:   here's food and nat's his drink that i just put in.
 6   ELF:   oh. i'll make him some long spaghetti (.) a one long spaghetti?
 7 → ANN:   good girl
 8   ROS:   (0.6) but if:
 9   ELF:   and he's eating the spaghetti first [isn't he?]
10   ROS:                                        [that's-  ] that's a girl eh?
11   ELF:   yeah and he's eating the spaghetti (.) she is.
```

```
       [...]
41     ELF:   who has squashed up his spaghetti?
42     ROS:   me (0.6)
43     GEO:   the dog did
44  →  ROS:   he di- she did
```

In l. 1 of extract 4 ROS addresses the toy dog and calls him 'here boy' as he goes and brings the dog over to be close to the playdoh activity centre. ROS also fetches a bowl and places it in front of the dog. ELF notices the bowl is empty and informs 'dog' that 'we'll make you food'. ELF does not use a gender pronoun to refer to the dog in ll. 4–5. However, following ROS's use of the masculine possessive adjective 'his' to refer to the dog in l. 5, ELF refers to the dog as masculine in l. 6.

Stringer and Hopper (1998: 215) contended 'the use of gender-linked pronouns to refer to animals often follows gender-markings pre-embedded in talk.' The pattern illustrated in extract 4 supports Stringer and Hopper's contention. 'Here boy' in l. 1 provides the pre-text for the gender-linked pronouns used by ROS in l. 5 and ELF in l. 6.

At l. 7, indicated by the arrow, I (ANN) went over to where the children were playing and indicated, with the feminine noun 'girl' that the dog was not male, as indicated by ROS's use of the pseudo-generic, but female. In terms of sequential positioning ll. 5–6 are the trouble source and l. 7 is an example of a next-turn repair initiator (NTRI, see Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998). At l. 8, the pause, followed by the mitigated disagreement 'but if:' indicates that a self-repair may not be forthcoming.

In l. 9, ELF offers a repeated assessment of the ongoing play activity. ROS does not offer the relevant second-part to the assessment, instead orients to the relevance of the trouble initiated at l. 7. ROS's turn at l. 10, 'that's a girl, eh?' can be understood both as a self-repair following the NTRI at l. 7 and as a tentative NTRI to ELF's use of 'he' in l. 9. ELF displays the relevance of the NTRI and self-corrects in l. 11.

Previous work on the organization of repair has found that they generally occur in close proximity to the turn containing the trouble source. However, when a trouble source is only identified after a number of turns, repairs to an earlier utterance tend to be more elaborate (Schegloff, 1992; Schegloff et al., 1977). In extract 4 we see an exception to the tendency for delayed repairs to be more elaborate. Some 30 lines after the initial repair sequence, there is another repair concerning the gender of the dog. At l. 44, marked by an arrow, ROS simply self-repairs 'he di- she did' to refer to the dog. Interestingly, ELF's earlier use of 'his' at l. 41 is not demonstrably oriented to as a trouble source.

It seems possible on the basis of extract 4 that gender, as a source of trouble, may remain relevant over extended periods of an interaction. Subsequent repairs to gender as a source of trouble may require less elaboration than other kinds of delayed repairs because the nature of the trouble can be marked grammatically by the use of pronouns. Stronger evidence of extended relevance would require tracking the continued relevance from the first repair to the second one.

Nevertheless, the on-going relevance of any source of gender trouble to an interaction may be one of the organizational features of talk that contributes to gender's arguable omnirelevance. The idea that gender trouble may remain relevant over extended sequences of talk is explored further in the next section where gender identification is analysable as a source of interactional trouble.

Gender identification and repair

In half of the recorded sessions, the children were provided with a train set. The train set came with three dolls. One of the dolls, arguably a boy, wore blue clothes, had a blue cap, and was depicted on the train set box as the train driver. A second doll, in a red dress, was clearly identifiable as a girl. A third doll, arguably a boy or a girl was dressed in white and blue. Three boys are playing in extract 5, which is an example where the gender ambiguity emerged as a source of trouble:

Extract 5

```
  1      ELF:  he huh mag:ic (2.0) still one person left though
  2    → ROS:  yeah put him i- (.) her in wiv him (.)
  3      BON:  her?=
  4      ROS:  =yeah=
  5    → BON:  =its not a girl (.)
  6      ROS:  yeah (2) °yeah° (.) °lie her down like this° <> hhh right now put the lid on?
         [...]
245      ROS:  yeah (2.0) and that goes like nat Bon? [an that's]
246      BON:                                         [see he's ]dead eh? have to take him to
247            your [hospital eh?]
248      ROS:       [.hhh that's  ] a her
249      BON:  him=
250      ROS:  =it's a her (2)
251      BON:  did your cousin say?
252      ROS:  yeah (.) so it's a her
```

Gender appears as a trouble source at l. 2, indicated by the arrow, where we see a self-initiated self-repair by ROS, 'put him i- her in wiv him'. At l. 3 BON's 'her?' is ambiguous, it could be a request for clarification or a next turn repair initiator. ROS displays his understanding of 'her?' as a request for clarification by producing an appropriate clarification. BON's utterance, marked with an arrow at l. 5, 'its not a girl', demonstrates that his previous turn was not a request for clarification but was produced as a next turn repair initiator. ROS's turn at l. 6 has the shape of a dispreferred response indicating a self-repair will not be forthcoming and that ROS maintains the doll is a girl.

The first sequence of utterances in extract 5 not only illustrates the repair of gender trouble but is also an example of a 'noticing series' (Hopper and LeBaron, 1998). A noticing series is made up of three parts; it begins with a peripheral gendered activity, is followed by a gender noticing, that in turn occasions the possibility of gender's relevance being extended. In the first line of extract 5, ELF refers

to the ambiguously dressed doll as a 'person'. This utterance can be understood as the first in the noticing series, or the peripheral gendered activity. ROS's self-repair at l. 2 is a gender noticing that in turn occasions the extension of gender's relevance both at ll. 3–6 and much later around l. 250.

An ongoing lack of consensus between ROS and BON about the gender of the doll can be inferred, as it appears both at the beginning of extract 5 and then again as a trouble source some 240 lines after the initial repair sequence in the play session. BON's reference to the doll as masculine is displayed by ROS as repairable at l. 248. However, BON disagrees, and reasserts the doll as a 'him' at l. 249. The absence of a self-correction by BON occasions a repeated assessment from ROS that the doll is 'a her'. After a considerable pause, which indicates a self-repair may not be forthcoming; there is an insertion sequence in which BON requests clarification about the gender of the doll by asking 'did your cousin say?'

BON's question at l. 251 occasions a relevant response from ROS at l. 252, 'yeah', which is followed by a short pause that possibly provides a preferred self-repair space for BON (see Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998). However, a response from BON is not forthcoming and ROS's turn at l. 252 is analysable as an 'other repair' that completes the repair sequence. Seemingly, the trouble is resolved because the gender of the doll remains uncontested for the remainder of the play session.

I have suggested that gender as a trouble source may have slightly different implications for repair sequences than those dealing with other sorts of conversational trouble. One difference I proposed is that the nature of gender trouble is straightforwardly indicated by the grammatical resources, whereas other kinds of delayed repair tend, by necessity, to be more elaborate. Thus, for gender trouble the repair may not have to be done in as close proximity to the trouble source as for other kinds of repair. In extract 5 the trouble source at l. 247 'take him to your hospital' and the nature of the trouble 'that's a her' are simply marked by the use of gender pronouns. Nevertheless, they (arguably) invoke and shape the earlier repair sequence back at l. 2 as having continued relevance to the interaction.

The extended relevance of gender to the interaction in extract 5 became apparent only when a second repair sequence shaped the earlier gender trouble as having been unresolved to the satisfaction of one of the members. The extent to which any previous gender trouble may continue to be invoked as having ongoing relevance may be the degree to which gender shapes the context of the interaction. Therefore, it seems reasonable to suggest that gender trouble and the organization of repair may be implicated in the ways gender, as an omnirelevant device, is (re)produced.

Repair sequences involving gender are valuable data not only for what they may reveal about gender's relevance in interaction but also what they may tell about the kinds of gender norms that members orientate to. The repair sequences in extract 5 illustrate the children's orientation to at least one of the gender norms that were first identified by Garfinkel (1967). For example, the trouble source and ensuing disagreement in ll. 246–50, display a social norm about gender in which there are 'two sexes and only two sexes, "male" and

"female" ' (Garfinkel, 1967: 122). For BON and ROS, the doll can only be 'a him' or 'a her' but not both. Furthermore, the kind of evidence that BON and ROS display as sufficient for establishing gender is an authoritative view and consistency – if ROS's cousin says the doll is a her then it is a her, presumably because gender doesn't change over time or with the say so of different authorities. Now consider extract 6 in which two girls (HAL and ROB) and a boy (BON) are playing:

Extract 6

```
 1    HAL:  i found that bit OH THEN WE oh that's a bo bo bo bo bo bo bo oh you silly
 2          foolish girl?
 3    BON:  he huh huh
 4    HAL:  you silly foolish girl you silly foolish girl (sung) no that's supposed to start
 5          over there (.2) did you realize? supposed to start [ov:]er [there.]
 6    ROB:                                                       [do?]
 7    BON:                                                                  [ ow.] (BON turns the train
 8          on)
 9  → HAL:  oh ro ro ro ro ro ro ro foolish girl you foolish (.2) oh you foolish he huh huh huh
10          (the bridge collapses as the train drives over it)
11    BON:  he huh he huh i'm a foolish boy.
12    HAL:  [done it again we broke the whole track]
13    BON:  [he huh he huh]
```

In extract 6 HAL's turn at l. 9 is analysable as a source of trouble because in the next turn BON reformulates the ambiguous address 'foolish girl you foolish' as 'i'm a foolish boy', with some emphasis on 'i'm'. However, the repair is subtle because it barely, if at all, distinguishes between the initiation of the repair (the slight emphasis on 'i'm') and the repair 'i'm a foolish boy'. Given that ll. 9–11 are analysable as a repair sequence, then the potential seamless-ness of repairs involving gender trouble may be a further feature of repairs that support the on-going accomplishment of gender in everyday interaction.

Gender and category-bound activities

In the previous section I drew upon the notion of repair to analyse extracts where gender was a trouble source. I raised the possibility that the organization of repair for gender trouble may be one of the interactional mechanisms that contribute to the omnirelevance of gender in talk. In this, the final part of the analysis I draw upon a different conversation analytic notion, that of membership categorization, to examine how gender norms are recycled in talk. I present two examples in which we see children struggling to come to grips with gender identity categories and the category-bound activities associated with them.

Membership categorization analysis (MCA) is a form of conversation analysis that has developed for analysing when members treat categories (e.g. mothers, fathers, babies) as belonging together and as being linked to certain activities (see Hester and Eglin, 1997). Cahill (1986) employed MCA to show that the

acquisition of gender identity could be understood in terms of the development of a linguistic competence with gender categorization devices (MCDs).

So MCA provides an approach for demonstrating how particular activities or characteristics are normatively associated with certain categories. To take an example from a data extract that has already been discussed in this article, think back to extract 5. BON and ROS displayed their understanding that 'hers are girls' when at l. 5 BON reformulates his repair initiator turn 'her?' as 'its not a girl'. Thus BON is demonstrating his knowledge that 'a her' is part of the category 'girls'.

MCA has been used to examine how normative assumptions about gender are (re)produced during interaction (see Paoletti, this volume; Stokoe and Smithson, 2001, 2002). I mentioned earlier that children's interactions may be especially interesting for studying gender categories because they are striving to become identified as competent members. Thus their attempts at handling gender membership categorization devices may be particularly revealing of the conversational mechanisms producing the order of the interaction. Consider extract 7, for example, which comes from a session in which three girls are playing with the train set.

Extract 7

```
 1     HAL:  i'm a train driver alright? here's your person
 2  → GEO:  i'm this (.) the train driver i'm a train driver (0.4) the train driver's a bo::y
 3           [it's a boy.]
 4  → HAL:  [ºi knowº] <i'm a boy i'm a boy>
 5  → GEO:  argh well (.) we co::uld? (.) make it a gi:rl? [make it a   ] girl with that
 6     ROB:                                              [i got the tr-]
 7     ROB:  i got it windy windey track
 8     GEO:  hhh (0.6) we check [this is a gir-]
 9     ROB:                     [ungh        ]
10     ANN:  oh bother
11     ROB:  fell off again
```

At the beginning of the extract the girls are negotiating who is going 'to be' or have the train driver doll and who is going to be or have the other dolls. However, after the initial couple of turns the conversational business shifts to establishing alignment between members (HAL and GEO) on gender. Unfortunately, the exchange is interrupted when ROB's microphone falls off and is attended to by ANN. Nevertheless, the short interaction provides a glimpse of a joint but somewhat stumbling accomplishment of gender categories and category-bound activities.

At l. 1 HAL suggests that she will take the role of train driver and offers GEO 'her person' (the androgynous doll). GEO's turn at l. 2 begins as if it is going to be an agreement because it has the shape of a preferred turn (Pomerantz, 1984). That is, there is no pause or hesitation and the words look like they could be the start of an agreement to be 'this person'. However, the agreement becomes a trouble source and after a brief pause GEO self-corrects and declines HAL's

request to be the train driver by claiming 'I'm the train driver'. The 0.4 pause followed by the words 'the train driver's a boy', could be understood as marking a trouble source (that is, GEO's realization that she too is a girl but the train driver is a boy). However, HAL orients to 'the train driver's a boy' as an account for why she can't be the train driver. HAL displays her understanding that train driving is an activity bound to being a boy, or that the categories boys and train drivers belong together, whereas girls and train drivers don't, by loudly asserting that she is a boy.

GEO's turn at l. 5 has a dispreferred shape, which displays her disagreement with HAL's assessment of herself as a boy and her orientation to a cultural norm in which 'girls can't be boys'. In the same turn GEO suggests with some uncertainty (marked with pauses and raised intonation) that the train driver could be a girl, thus she displays, in contrast to HAL, her understanding that train driving may be an activity bound to being a girl or that girls, boys and train drivers all belong together. The lack of a response to her suggestion in ROB's following turn occasions GEO to follow-up her previous suggestion and it seems, in l. 8, as though she is going to ask for clarification (perhaps from the grown-ups present) if the train driver doll could be a girl. I suggest that the non-alignment between ROB and HAL on gender and train driving arguably gives a sense of disorder to the interaction represented by extract 7.

From a feminist perspective it is somewhat gratifying that neither HAL nor GEO have any problem with engaging in the activity of train driving. However, what is worrying is the difficulty displayed by both HAL and GEO at tying the gender category girl with the activity of train driving. Arguably the difficulty is aggravated as a consequence of the train driver doll seeming to be a boy.

The final extract is from another play session with the train set. The children are discussing where the doll dressed as the train driver should sit (in the train) and whether the girl doll could be the train driver.

Extract 8

```
1    GEO:   which one is this one go in?
2    GIS:   any one tha-? (2.0)
3    ROS:   .hhh front.
4    GEO:   i can put it in (.) in the back in the back if i want?
5  → ROS:   no it goes in the front cos he's the driver
6    ELF:   (0.4) or the red one could be the driver
7    GEO:   i can put which [ever ] one (.)
8    ROS:                   [yeah]
9    ROS:   but you have but (.) you ha- put the red one in:n cos (.) um you can put any one?
10   GEO:   it's a <u>girl</u> one the red one so ºthat doesn't go thereº (3.0)
```

At the beginning of extract 8 GEO asks where the (train driver) doll should go in the train. GIS, a research assistant, gives a non-directive reply 'any one'. After a considerable pause and an intake of breath ROS provides a contradictory answer that the train driver goes in the front. In the next turn GEO orients to the conflicting responses and requests clarification about whether she can put the

train driver in the back if she wants. ROS replies and explains why the doll must go in the front 'cos he's the driver'. ROS's turn at l. 5 links the activity of sitting in the front of the train with being a train driver. Being a boy and being a train driver are also displayed as belonging together because 'he' indexes the doll that is the driver.

At l. 6 ELF displays his understanding that girls and train drivers can also be linked together by suggesting that the 'red one', a girl doll wearing a dress, 'could be the driver'. GEO displays the continuing relevance of the adult's assessment given as l. 2 by repeating 'I can put which ever one'. At ll. 8–9 ROS begins to disagree ('yeah' 'but') with GEO, has a false start 'you have but you ha-', seems to self-repair 'put the red one in' and then displays his confusion more explicitly by requesting clarification (marked by a raised intonation) – 'you can put any one?'. GEO replies that the red doll is a girl and then she indicates what that means; that the red doll doesn't sit in the front and by implication isn't the train driver.

So, the membership categories and activities are assigned in the following way in extract 8. Train drivers go in the front of trains and train drivers and 'he's' are linked (l. 5). Then train drivers and girls can be linked together. Only one doll can fit into the front of the train. Hence GEO's final position in the interaction that the girl doll doesn't go in the front appears to have been guided by an efficiency rule. In this case it is that the doll allocated as the train driver should go in the front, and the doll not allocated as the train driver should go in the back. In extract 7 the MCD ultimately functions to link boys and train drivers. Extract 8 provides further evidence of the features of the toy that seem to limit category and activity links. In extract 7 the problem stemmed from the train driver doll being depicted as a boy, in extract 8 the additional problem was that only one doll could be placed in the front of the train where drivers go.

Concluding comments

The issue of sexist language has traditionally been an important topic in the gender and language field. The present study re-visited an issue at the heart of many debates about sexist language; the use of masculine generics (see Weatherall, 2002). In contrast to Stringer and Hopper's suggestion that truly neutral masculine generics may not exist in conversation, I found an arguable case of a true masculine generic. That case involved the term 'guys' and the analysis demonstrated members understanding that 'guys' can be used to address a group of females only. The evidence presented can be used to support the claim that true generics do occur, at least in New Zealand English. However, it cannot be used to support an argument that 'guys' is sexist. On the contrary, the analysis shows that it is truly neutral, that is, members display their understanding of 'guys' as an address form for men *and* women. The argument that 'guys' is sexist relies on a broader feminist understanding of how male dominance can be understood as being reflected and perpetuated by words that promote a sense of 'maleness' over 'femaleness' (see Weatherall, 2002).

There were no instances in the corpus I examined where the possible sexism associated with the use of 'guys' was noticed. However, I was able to present an extract where a 'pseudo-generic' term was analysable as a source of gender trouble. The conversation analytic notion of repair was central to that analysis because it allowed me to examine how participants displayed and managed the gender trouble, arising from a 'noticed' assumption of a male referent.

Conversational trouble is generally repaired in close proximity to the trouble source (Schegloff, 1992; Schegloff et al., 1977). However, my analysis of two data fragments demonstrated instances in which the repairable gender trouble seemed to remain relevant over an extended series of utterances that were quite remote from the original trouble source. From these cases it seems reasonable to suggest that gender trouble may have different implications for repair sequences than those that manage other kinds of conversational trouble. If, as I have suggested, locally occasioned gender repairables do have an extended relevance, then repair sequences may be one of the conversational devices that achieve the arguable omnirelevance of gender.

A second conversation analytic tool that I drew upon was MCA, which provides an approach for demonstrating how particular activities or characteristics are normatively associated with certain categories. The MCA presented in this article showed participants' orientations to gender norms previously documented by Garfinkel (1967). Furthermore, on the basis of the analysis I argued that at least two structural features of the train set – the train driver doll being a boy and there only being space for one doll in the front of the train – aggravated an existing tendency for a gender membership categorization to link boys with the activity of train driving.

As a feminist researcher I assume that a gender analysis is potentially relevant to any interaction because gender is a pervasive social category. A conversation analytic perspective does not necessarily deny the ubiquitousness of gender in daily life but it does offer an interesting analytic challenge to feminist language researchers – to demonstrate *how* and *that* participants display their orientation to the omnirelevance of gender. The analysis that I have presented here offers a tentative step towards meeting the challenge CA offers feminists.

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