

Language, Embodiment, and the ‘Third Sex’

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Introduction

Groups whose gender identities and enactments fall outside of sociocultural norms for women and men are often described by scholars as well as group members as constituting a “third gender” or “third sex.” This chapter discusses the utility of this categorization (hereafter abbreviated as *third sex*) for the study of language, gender, and sexuality. We begin by acknowledging the problematic nature of this terminology as established by the critiques that have been leveled against its use within the history of anthropological scholarship. However, we maintain that a careful deployment of the concept can be theoretically illuminating when providing ethnographic accounts of gender-variant communities who themselves articulate their subjectivity through the idea of thirdness. Most notably, the way this term refocuses the analytic lens on biological sex—an issue that feminist scholars have often subordinated to their interest in the social construction of gender—highlights how sexual embodiment, no less than gender, is constructed in culturally and historically specific ways. The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate the importance of the body in shaping the relationship between language and identity among gender-variant groups.

Attention to the body is crucial for understanding gender variance because it is very often the combination of apparently incongruous social and biological gender

cues—such as feminine dress on a male body—that is seen to distinguish a group from gender-normative women and men. Furthermore, many gender-variant communities engage in transformative bodily practices that mark their gender difference physically, such as the use of hormones, silicone injections, or any number of surgical procedures ranging from traditional forms of castration to modern medicine’s genital reconstruction surgery. For members of these groups, a deviant body is often simultaneously a reflection of identity and self-determination, and a source of marginalization (cf. Stryker 1994, 2006, 2008; Sullivan 2006). Yet we argue that the body serves not only as a crucial variable that often explains or correlates with sociolinguistic phenomena, as Rodrigo Borba and Ana Cristina Ostermann’s (2007) analysis of Brazilian travesti recently suggested, but is itself a *product* of linguistic practice. In other words, bodies do not derive their meanings from a pre-linguistic natural order, but are imbued with meaning through discourse.

In order to demonstrate the import of the body for language and identity research, we outline two approaches to language and embodiment that build on our own research among gender-variant communities: transsexual men in the United States and hijras in India. By bringing these two groups together in a single essay, we do not mean to suggest that they are at all similar in sociocultural terms, nor do we wish to advocate for the categorization of either of them as a third sex (whatever that would mean). Rather, we draw on their communicative practices as a means of calling attention to the way in which biological sex is as much a product of everyday interaction as is social gender. As groups whose embodiment is marked as deviant within their respective cultural contexts, transsexual men and hijras both use language to subvert dominant ideologies surrounding

their bodies and thus reclaim a certain degree of control over the meanings ascribed to them. The highly contestable nature of these individuals' identities reveals the processes through which normative and non-normative bodies alike are implicated in the construction of gender.

The first approach to language and embodiment addressed in this essay, inspired by poststructuralist feminist characterizations of sex as discursively constructed, focuses on the ways language is implicated in creating the categories of "male" and "female" bodies. We illustrate this perspective with an analysis of how transsexual men in an online community negotiate the gendered meanings ascribed to their genitals. Lal Zimman's research in this area reveals how members of this marginalized group contest and reconstruct sex through linguistic practice in order to accomplish the social needs of the community. The second approach draws on the growing body of linguistic literature that views language as inextricably bound up with gesture and other aspects of embodiment. Taking a sociocultural perspective on gesture, Kira Hall's work with the hijras of India demonstrates how group members assert their positionality as "neither man nor woman" through the use of a distinctive hand clap. Together, these examples reveal that the relationship between language and the body is a recursive one, with language shaping conceptualizations of the body, and embodied action functioning as an integral part of language.

(How) should we use the concept of a "third sex"?

The last three decades of scholarship on sexual and gender alterity has in large part focused on groups whose existence is seen as undermining fundamental assumptions

about gender long associated with Western society and scholarship. When feminist theorists in the 1970s and 1980s started to challenge the naturalization of gender by showing how masculinity and femininity are socially constructed, cultural anthropologists began to question the same dichotomy by demonstrating how gender and the related category of sexuality are often pluralistically constructed in non-Western cultures. The anthropological interest in gender and sexual alterity during this period was certainly not new, as Gayle Rubin acknowledges in a footnote when she refers to “the exotica in which anthropologists delight” (1975:165). But the research of earlier anthropologists was suddenly validated by a new feminist agenda inspired by social constructionist theory, leading to a resurfacing of anthropological studies on the cultural existence of third sex and non-heterosexual categories that were interpreted as defying European and North American organizations of gender: e.g., gender-variant groups among the Igbo of Nigeria (Amadiume 1987), the xanith in Oman (Wikan 1982), the berdache in Native America (Whitehead 1981; Williams 1986; Roscoe 1991, 1998; Lang 1998), the mahu in Tahiti (Levy 1973), and the hijra in India (Nanda 1985, 1990). The burgeoning field of gay and lesbian studies provided added impetus for such research, particularly as scholars sought to critique homophobia and heterosexism through reference to the cultural possibility of more liberating systems of gender and sexuality. The resulting body of research that employed a third sex framework thus worked not only to increase the scholarly visibility of non-binaristic gender systems, but also to feed theoretical discussions regarding the value of such systems. The essays included in Gilbert Herdt’s (1993a) edited volume *Third Sex, Third Gender*, for example, are at their

core a challenge to the assumed naturalness of binary gender systems, an approach made overtly clear in the book's subtitle *Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History*.

The concept of transsexuality entered the anthropological literature through these same discussions, but often as a means of underscoring the comparative gender fluidity associated with three-gender cultures. Serena Nanda (1990), for example, in her groundbreaking ethnography on the hijras of India, discusses the cultural position of Western transsexuals as inferior to that of hijras, asserting that the designation *trans* itself betrays that “we view an intermediate sex or gender category as nothing other than transitional; it cannot be, in our culture, a permanent possibility” (p. 123). Scholars from diverse fields have overwhelmingly focused on transsexuals as enacting normative, as opposed to subversive, femininity and masculinity, creating a theoretical role for the transsexual as the ultimate gender conformist. The literature thus produces a reductive picture of transsexuality, leading to its easy appropriation as the theoretical whipping boy for a rigidly unimaginative gender binary.

Given the widespread usage of the third sex framework during the final three decades of the 20th century to describe a range of identities across cultures, it is not surprising that a number of scholars working with gender-variant communities have since questioned the usefulness of this categorization. Most significantly, the emphasis on third sex groups whose existence is acknowledged or institutionalized to some degree by the larger society has led to the somewhat misguided assumption that these populations are less marginalized than their counterparts in Western cultures, leading to skewed representations of the cultural value placed on alternative gender identities (see Hall 1995, 1997; Herdt 1993b). Along related lines, scholarly discussions of third sex

categories may inadvertently work to reify the “normalcy” of first and second gender categories. Evan B. Towle and Lynn M. Morgan (2002) wage this critique, arguing that accounts of third sex groups “might imply—wrongly, in our view—that ‘first’ and ‘second’ [male and female] categories are inviolable and unproblematic, at least for the purposes of exploring gender variability” (p. 484-485).¹ In a three gender system, anyone whose expression of gender falls outside of normative expressions of masculinity or femininity within a given culture can be methodologically relegated to a third (or occasionally fourth) group, leaving only gender normative individuals in the male and female categories. Finally, research on third sex categories often has the effect of conflating many different forms of non-normative gender expression into a single group, while leaving other forms of gender diversity invisible. In her work on the *kotis* of India, a transgender group that sees itself as distinct from that of the more well-researched hijras, Hall (2005) argues that queer theory’s uptake of poststructuralism, spearheaded by Judith Butler’s (1990, 1993) concept of gender performativity, has led a new generation of scholars to focus on the subversive potential of third sex groups like the hijras as a theoretical trope, thereby overlooking the existence of other, less visible gender-variant groups. In short, the use of terminology like *third sex* can create the illusion of three homogenous groups—male, female, and other—rather than facilitating a subtler understanding of diversity both between and within gender groups.

Despite these problems, a third sex category can be a useful analytic tool, particularly insofar as it reflects group members’ self-understanding and/or the image of the group that is promoted by more powerful factions of society; both of these criteria

¹ Stryker (2004, 2008) makes a similar argument against the broadening of the transgender category to include all forms of “gender trouble.”

hold in the case of the hijras. Yet it is important not to lose sight of the diversity and contestable nature of ideologies about gender and sex, even among people who share a common identity. The question of whether Western transsexuals and other transgender people should be understood as a third sex illustrates the difficulty in making these determinations. In recent years, a number of sexologists with an interest in transgenderism (e.g. Bockting 1997; Diamond 2003) together with transgender authors (notably Bornstein 1994, 2006[1994]; Feinberg 2006[1992]; and Wilchins 1997) have argued that characterizing transgender identities as a kind of third sex, distinct from male and female categories, provides personal and political empowerment to transgender people. Echoing the earlier anthropologists who worked on third sex systems, these authors emphasize the oppressive nature of the gender binary and argue, as Kate Bornstein has claimed, that “[t]he correct target for any successful transsexual rebellion would be the gender system itself” (2006[1994]:242). Bornstein goes so far as to explicitly align her/himself with second-wave feminists like Janice Raymond (1979) who have argued that transsexuals are agents of the patriarchy, writing that s/he “agree[s with these scholars] that hiding and not proclaiming one’s transsexual status is an unworthy stance” (2006[1994]:239). As Towle and Morgan (2002) show, Bornstein’s stance is part of a larger trend among many transgender authors of appropriating the “transgender native in the form of [their] assumed primordial ancestors” (p. 478), or rather, of viewing indigenous gender-variant identities as the forbearers to a universal transgender experience. Yet other transgender scholars have strongly disagreed with this perspective. While recognizing that there ought to be room for people who do in fact identify outside of the male/female binary, Julia Serano (2007) argues that indiscriminately grouping all

transgender people into a third sex—even those who identify strictly as women or men—is one means by which transgender identities are cast as illegitimate and transgender people are denied the right to name themselves (see also Namaste 1996; Stryker 2008). Thus it is not entirely clear whether transgender people should be discussed as a third sex, particularly given the dissent on this issue that exists among members of this group.

A similar contestation occurs surrounding the status of hijras in urban centers like Delhi. While hijras claim a long history that dates back at least to the time of the medieval Mughal empire, many educated English-speaking Indians have now embraced gay and lesbian identities associated with the processes of globalization, rejecting traditional cross-gender practices as lower-class forms of homosexuality. The non-governmental organization (NGO) that is the focus of Hall's (2005) recent work serves as a community center for queer Indians, and while hijras have never been explicitly barred from the center, its policy against cross-dressing at the time of her field research prevented hijras from participating in the organization. The fact that hijras were required to wear men's clothing just like the gay-identified men and effeminate men known as *kotis* suggests that the administrators of this organization see hijras not as members of a third sex, but as men whose gender presentation is inappropriate in its femininity. The influence of globalization and HIV/AIDS activism in sparking this rapid and dramatic shift in queer Indian society underscores the constant flux of gender categories, including something as fundamental as whether there are three genders or two.

Sociocultural linguists who have worked with gender-variant communities have been sensitive to these problems and have maintained a critical perspective in their engagement with the third sex concept. For example, Hall (2005) describes how hijras

exploit the wide-spread ideology that they are members of a third sex, born without genitals, to create a distinction between themselves and kotis, a group that engages in similar sartorial practices, particularly when doing what they call “hijra-acting.” Because kotis generally do not engage in genital modification practices and pride themselves in being sexually licentious, an image that the already marginalized hijras do not want to be associated with (at least publicly), the embodied difference between hijras and kotis is discursively invoked as proof of their distinctiveness. While hijras characterize anatomically male cross-dressing groups like the kotis as “fake hijras,” kotis spend much of their hijra-acting performances mocking the hijras’ representation of themselves as penis-less ascetics. By describing the ideological workings behind hijras’ claim to third sex status, Hall’s analysis is able to draw attention to the body by focusing on thirdness not as a theoretical construct, but as an everyday notion that emerges as part of the ethnographic encounter.

More commonly, however, sociocultural linguists have understandably refrained from engaging with the third sex concept, given the baggage it entails (for example Barrett 1995, 1999 on African American drag queens; Besnier 2003, 2007 on Tongan fakaleiti; Gaudio 1997, 2005, 2007 on the ‘yan daudu of Hausaland; and Kulick 1997 on Brazilian travestis). Yet we propose that the concept of third sex, because of its now canonical association with biology, suggests an alternative understanding of the body that has the potential to reveal important connections between embodiment and social actors’ ongoing negotiation of gender identity. We additionally argue that incorporating embodiment into sociocultural analyses of language and gender can reveal understudied dimensions of both identity and linguistic practice. Indeed, the lack of attention to the

body in studies of language and gender variance leads Borba and Ostermann (2007) to argue that biological sex demands more sociolinguistic attention because of its crucial role in defining gender-variant groups as outside of the normative gender binary. The authors present rich ethnographic background on the somatic practices of Portuguese-speaking travestis and demonstrate how these individuals' choice of grammatical gender relates to their embodiment: for instance, travestis often use masculine grammatical forms when referring to past selves that precede the feminizing use of hormones and silicone injections. However, by taking a conventional view of gender as socially constructed and sex as biologically given, Borba and Ostermann overlook how travestis' bodies do not just influence linguistic practice, but are in fact constructed through and constituted by language. In the following section, we discuss Zimman's (2008, in preparation) research among transsexuals in an online community to demonstrate the way that gendered meanings of bodies can be rewritten in order to accomplish the needs of the community.

The discursive construction of sex

In the early 1990s, poststructuralist feminist scholars began to reject the traditional second-wave "coat rack" model that treated sex as the natural, biological antecedent to the social construction of gender (see especially Butler 1993 and Nicholson 1994; for a linguistic perspective, see McElhinny 2002 and Bing and Bergvall 1996). Instead, they argued that sex, like gender, is socially constructed within specific historical and sociocultural contexts. As an illustration, Linda Nicholson (1994) draws on Thomas Laqueur's (1990) history of the medicalization of sex, wherein Laqueur demonstrates that

the dichotomy between male and female bodies is a relatively recent development even in the West. According to Laqueur, it was not until the eighteenth century that men and women were seen as having categorically different physiologies. Before this period, women were ideologically positioned as underdeveloped men, a fact reflected linguistically by the absence of unique names for body parts now seen as “female” (such as ovaries, which were conceptualized as undescended testicles). Yet non-dualistic configurations of sex within the Western world are certainly not limited to this historical moment; we assert here that such systems also exist in the present, where they compete, albeit in marginalized capacity, with the dominant binary of male/female. In this section, we consider how sociocultural linguists can contribute to the poststructuralist argument that sex is discursively achieved. Drawing on Zimman’s (2008, in preparation) analysis of talk about the body in one community of English-speaking transsexual men, we argue that the empirical methodologies employed in sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, and socially oriented discourse analysis are highly amenable to an exploration of the ways in which linguistic practices produce both dominant and subordinate conceptualizations of sex.

Transsexual men are individuals who were assigned a female gender role at birth and raised as girls, but who in adulthood identify as men and often make use of medical technology to masculinize their bodies. The data presented in this section were collected during the fall of 2007 as part of ongoing participant observation in a popular internet community for transsexual men and others on the female-to-male transgender spectrum. Members of this community use the online forum to discuss a broad range of transgender issues, circulate information among each other, and provide support to those going

through difficult emotional times. Because of the significance of embodiment for transsexuals, the body is a recurring topic of interest for this group, and the negotiation of how transsexual men's physiologies should be talked about is commonplace. These discussions are of particular interest for sociocultural linguistic analysis because of the great importance this group places on the use of appropriate language when talking about transsexuality, and the heated nature of the disagreements that sometimes occur.

In order to understand the way transsexual men talk about their own and each others' bodies, some additional background on this group is necessary. Female-to-male transsexuals are widely understudied in comparison to their male-to-female counterparts, and as a result the practices that distinguish these groups often go without comment in the literature on transsexuality. One significant difference for the purposes of this discussion is the fact that transsexual men are considerably less likely to undergo genital surgery than transsexual women. Female-to-male genital reconstruction is perceived by many community members as producing unsatisfactory results, while costing as much as \$100,000 in U.S. currency for the most complex procedures. The use of testosterone therapy, which creates a typical male hormonal balance by replacing estrogen and progesterone with androgens, is thus the most viable medical intervention for most transsexual men. Such therapy is highly effective in producing many of the corporeal cues associated with masculinity, among them body and facial hair, a drop in vocal pitch, and an increase in muscle mass coupled with the redistribution of fat from areas like the hips and thighs to the abdomen. What this means in terms of gender semiotics is that many transsexual men are socially recognized as men, even though they have what most people would consider female genitalia. At the same time, however, many transsexual

men who make use of testosterone therapy object to the notion that their bodies are in any way female. Instead of consenting to the dominant ideology that having a vagina makes a person female-bodied, these individuals destabilize the boundaries between male and female embodiment through a subversion of the semantics of words for gendered body parts, particularly those that refer to genitals.

While one of the most salient practices transsexual men engage in when talking about their own and each others bodies involves the coining of new words, such as *bonus hole* or *front hole* to refer to the vagina, the focus of the present discussion is on their more subtle reworking of traditional genital terms. This takes place by disrupting the semantic link that ordinarily exists between genitals and biological sex. Consider the primary definitions of *vagina* and *penis* found in *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, Fourth Edition (2006):

vagina: The passage leading from the opening of the vulva to the cervix of the uterus in female mammals.

penis: The male organ of copulation in higher vertebrates, homologous with the clitoris. In mammals, it also serves as the male organ of urinary excretion.

Both of these definitions describe the body part in question in terms of physical structure (i.e. the passage that connects the vulva to the cervix) or function (i.e. the organ of copulation and urinary excretion), but also biological sex; the vagina is a female body part while the penis is a male one. Transsexual speakers contest the connection between

the physiological and gendered elements of these definitions and thus subvert the idea that having a penis necessarily makes a body male while having a vagina makes a body female. In strategically aligning themselves with either traditionally masculine or traditionally feminine genital terminology—an alignment that shifts depending on the circumstances of talk—speakers are able to accomplish different kinds of social work that fulfill the needs of this particular community.

The most common tactic employed in communities of transsexual men is to align with vernacular terminology ordinarily used for male genitals, such as *dick* or *cock*. By using these words in reference to their own bodies, speakers challenge the physiological definition of the term as an organ used for either penetration or urination. Instead, they embrace the gendered meaning of *dick* as a term that refers to men's genitals and apply it to their own physiology, eschewing dominant scientific categorizations of their genitals as biologically female. To legitimate this move, transsexual men draw on their own set of scientific discourses that emphasize similarities between the penis and the clitoris. That is, while popular opinion categorizes these two organs as separate and distinct, biologists and sexologists (as well as the lexicographers employed by *The American Heritage Dictionary*, it would seem) have long recognized that penises and clitorises are analogous in that they develop from the same embryonic tissue. Furthermore, the medical realities of intersex conditions in Europe and North America, where genitalia seen to be “ambiguous” are somewhat arbitrarily classified as either a small penis or large clitoris (Kessler 1990; Chase 1998), illustrate the continuum between “female” and “male” body parts.

Because testosterone causes clitoral enlargement, transsexual men's genitals can easily be framed as also falling somewhere on a continuum between clitoris and penis. Example (1), taken from a posting in the online community under discussion, illustrates this framing, when a member seeks feedback regarding the timeline of the changes brought about by testosterone ("T"):

- (1) Hey, so I've been on T for 6 months now. It's mostly going pretty much as expected...lotsa hair, random bursts of "must hump the furniture now", voice dropping, all that good stuff.
- But...ZERO on the dick growing!
- Everyone I've talked to says they had noticeable cock magnification very soon after starting T, so...what the hell? It's crazy...I didn't think I was going to care if it grew much or not, and I don't really...but seriously, six months and it's the same ol' teeny weenie.
- Did anyone else's take a really long time to grow, or not ever start growing at all?

Lamenting that testosterone has not yet provided the expected genital growth, this speaker uses the terms *dick* and *cock* to reference his own (purportedly female) genitalia. Through the self-referential use of phrases like "the dick growing" and "cock magnification," he reframes the primary difference between his own physiology and that of non-transsexual men as one of size, not gender. The semantic fuzziness created by this move decouples the specific corporeal characteristics of the penis from the masculinity entailed by words like *dick*. Furthermore, blurring the line between clitorises and penises functions to destabilize the boundary between male and female bodies.

The way trans men talk about their genitalia creates what Bucholtz and Hall (2004) have identified as *adequation*, or “sufficient similarity,” between transsexual men’s bodies and normatively male bodies. The tactic is thus a linguistic enactment of the more general ideology promoted by community members that there is no significant difference between transsexual men and men who were raised as boys. Although members of this community rarely, if ever, make the overt claim that sex is socially constructed (in contrast to gender, which members typically describe as a construction), the practice of using the same vocabulary to talk about both penises and clitorises breaks down the naturalization of sex in two ways: first, by suggesting that there may not be a clear line between female and male bodies, and second, by implying that it is social gender identity that in a sense determines sex, rather than vice versa. Thus, we can view this subversive reshaping of genital terms as accomplishing one of the primary projects of many transsexual communities: to place self-identification at the core of legitimate and authentic gender.

The second tactic that members of this community employ when talking about transsexual bodies is the de-feminization of terminology normatively associated with female embodiment. The use of any kind of “female” language in reference to community members is marked within this community, so much so that in certain contexts it elicits scorn or even outrage. However, transsexual men do sometimes use terminology like *vagina* and even vernacular words like *cunt* to refer to their own and each other’s bodies. One means by which speakers are able to accomplish this move without undermining community members’ identity as men is through marking these lexical items as masculine. For instance, one member of the community posted the

following question to other members, “I’m not the only one that is filled with immense hatred over his vagina, am I?” By using the third-person masculine possessive pronoun to modify *vagina* (i.e. ‘his vagina’) rather than the first person possessive pronoun (i.e. ‘my vagina’), the speaker makes it clear that he is talking about the problems faced by *men*, not women, who have “immense hatred” toward their vaginas. He thus reinforces the group’s core belief that no matter how a transsexual man feels about his body, he is still a man. A related tactic for talking about the body involves the resignification of vernacular terms like *pussy* and *cunt* as male. The use of apparently oxymoronic compounds like *boycunt*, *man-pussy*, and the self-consciously comical blend *mangina* (which sounds like *vagina*) similarly calls into question the assumed correlation between biology and gender, (see Zimman in preparation).

Transsexual men thus navigate choices between male and female genital terminology, including both vernacular and more medical options, without allowing their linguistic choices to undermine their identity as men. The lexical items used by these speakers in reference to their genitals facilitate the social work in which speakers are engaged, whether it involves requesting medical information, providing or asking for support during times of distress and sadness, or promoting transsexual men’s bodies as sites of sexual pleasure. However, the fundamental work that this community is engaged in is asserting the legitimacy of transsexual men’s self-identification as men. The tactical claiming of “male” terminology in reference to body parts viewed as female, together with the refashioning of “female” terminology as male, works to construct transsexual men as male-bodied, or at the very least, *not* female-bodied.

Gesture

The second approach to language and embodiment that could enhance the study of gender-variant communities focuses on gesture, a subject that language and gender researchers have only recently begun to incorporate into their analyses (e.g., Goodwin 2006; Mendoza-Denton 2008). Previous language-oriented work on gesture, much of it written from the standpoint of conversation analysis, addresses the role of gesture in facilitating the interactional management and organization of discourse, particularly with respect to the allocation of turns in conversation (e.g. Fox 1999; Goodwin 1986; Lerner 2003), quoted speech (Sidnell 2006), and the management of co-constructed talk (Hayashi 2003). Because these studies consider varied forms of embodiment, among them pointing (e.g. Goodwin 2003), the torque of the upper body (Schegloff 1998), and gaze (Sidnell 2006; Streeck 1993), they can potentially serve as a useful starting point for a deeper consideration not only of how gestures demonstrate socially driven variation, but also of how the body itself is a crucial site for the linguistic enactment of identity. This holds especially when those identities depend on specific forms of embodiment, as is the case for gender-variant individuals.

Other work in the area of gesture has framed it as product or reflection of a particular language or society (Kendon 1997, 2004; Haviland 2004; McNeill 1997). Adam Kendon's (1997) review of research on gesture is written in this vein: he presents a number of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural differences both in how gesture is used and in the degree to which speakers employ it. For example, he presents differences in gesticulation that mirror the structure of the languages spoken by the gesturers, such as the use of absolute versus relative coordinate systems. He also discusses the evolution of

gestural systems as a product of cultural and historical developments within a given society: “In a city such as Naples, the particular combination of climatic conditions, built environment, social structure, and economy that have come to prevail there over more than two millennia has created communication circumstances in which gesture would be particularly valuable” (p. 117). The usefulness of this type of macro-perspective for the study of language and identity is unclear, particularly since it assumes that speakers of the same language or culture will produce and interpret gesture in similar ways. Yet Kendon’s point that gesture and speech are coordinated, and “must therefore be regarded as two aspects of a single process” (p. 111) is potentially illuminating for the sociolinguistic analysis of gesture, particularly in that it challenges researchers who study the discursive production of gender to consider the contribution gesture makes to this process. Furthermore, reviews of research on the relationship between culture and gesture suggest promising directions for more particularist perspectives on gesture and identity. As Kendon (1997) and John Haviland (2004) point out, ideologies about gesture, because they vary across cultural groups, potentially shape the way that bodies are managed and deployed as communicative resources. Dominant ideologies about socially appropriate enactments of gesture in any given culture can also carry gender-specific norms, often, for instance, requiring more restraint from women with respect to physical expressiveness (see, e.g., Rossini 2004). Significantly for our purposes, these ideologies can be exploited by social actors who occupy liminal and marginalized gender positions as part of a broader semiotic toolkit (cf. Hall 2003).

Linguists interested in the fundamental inseparability of gesture and spoken language have somewhat predictably characterized gesture’s primary role as enhancing or

punctuating the semantics of an utterance; in Kendon's own words, "[s]peakers often employ gesture in such a way as to make something that is being said more precise or complete" (2000:51). Thus a speaker recounting the children's story *Little Red Riding Hood*, to borrow one of Kendon's (1997) examples, might produce an axe-swinging gesture in conjunction with the word *slice* in an utterance such as the following: "And he took his hatchet and with a mighty sweep *sliced* the wolf's stomach open." Speech and gesture are here coordinated as part of a single communicative event. In short, the swinging movement of the speaker's arm contributes visual data that enhances the semantics of the utterance by specifying the instrument used in the slicing action. Yet it is our contention that gesture contributes not only to an utterance's semantic meaning, but also to its social meaning. That is, just as the use of spoken language situates the speaker and hearer in a complex matrix of social positions—a process exemplified in the previous discussion by transsexual men's deployment of both "male" and "female" genital terms—gesture too is a crucial component of the communicative practices through which identities are constructed.

A prime example of this kind of function in gesture can be found among Hindi-speaking hijras of Varanasi, researched by Hall in the early 1990s as part of a long-term project involving language, sexuality, and globalization in northern India. Hijras in this northern city (and indeed throughout much of India) make use of a distinctive hand clap that is produced with palms flat and fingers spread wide. Widely recognized as unique to hijras, this clap serves as an important index of identity because of its function in situating its user as "neither man nor woman." That is, while hijras' aesthetic conduct is feminine (they wear clothes, jewelry, and makeup traditionally associated with Indian

women), their behavioral conduct, which includes sexually crude speech and this loud clap, calls this representation into question. Because ‘extreme’ cursing and clapping are ideologically positioned in dominant Indian discourses as unfeminine and inappropriate for women, at least in unmarked everyday middle-class contexts (cf. Raheja and Gold 1994), the hijras’ emphatic use of them in highly public domains works to establish their identity as distinct from that of both women and men.

The hijras’ use of clapping and sexual insult also somewhat ironically instantiates their ongoing construction of themselves as religious ascetics. This self-designation is contingent upon the claim that they are a people “born without genitals” and hence lack the sexual desire associated with normative men and women. Although the claim of biologically determined asexuality is undermined by the fact that many hijras undergo penectomy and castration (performed by inhouse hijra surgeons) and also engage in various kinds of sex work, it nevertheless works to authorize their societal role as performers of ritualistic fertility blessings. In short, it is because the hijras exist outside normative structures of sexual kinship that they have earned the mystique of having power over procreation. Their use of loud claps and highly sexualized insults in the context of a ritualized birth celebration thus calls attention to their embodied alterity, particularly as these behaviors appear to contradict their self-positioning as ascetics. Indeed, Indian journalists have sought to explain this apparent contradiction by appealing to popular psychology, arguing that the hijras’ penchant for clapping and sexual insult is compensatory for sexual deficiency. Yet the hijras’ employment of these claps reflects a much greater social complexity: in addition to underscoring their identity as hijras, the claps also convey complex information regarding how to manage non-hijra listeners. In

brief, the hijras' claps constitute a small-scale semiotic system that involves a number of different forms conveying specific interactional meanings, among them the *deḍh tālī* 'one-and-a-half clap' and *ādhī tālī* 'half clap' (see Hall 1997).

As one of the most salient markers of hijra identity, the hijra clap is also one of the primary indices appropriated by groups engaged in hijra parody. For instance, the Delhi kotis who are the subject of Hall's (2005) research make exaggerated use of the clap during hijra-acting as a means of mocking the hijras' portrayal of themselves as ascetics born with neither genitals nor sexual desire. Many kotis have spent significant time within hijra communities and thus use this performance genre to display insider knowledge regarding the 'truth' of the hijras' sexuality, spoofing their public claims to sexual purity. As men who forefront their attraction to other men as a key part of their identity yet remain situated in normative family structures, kotis parody hijras for their rejection of the procreative kinship system that underlies mainstream Indian society. With their wives and children, kotis remain untainted by one of the hijras' primary sources of stigma, even if they are generally assumed to be hijras when publicly engaged in this parodic practice. It is in part for this reason that kotis self-identify over and against hijras as *cauthī nasal* 'fourth breed', a term that in their view highlights the way in which they are able to move between the identities of the first three sexes: they are alternatively men (in their relationships with their wives and children), women (as the sexually passive partners of their boyfriends), and hijras (as cross-dressing hijra impersonators).

The following example from Hall (2005) illustrates how the hijra clap is incorporated into koti identity construction. After a long day of work at the NGO, the kotis gather to perform as hijras for their middle-class gay and lesbian colleagues.

Because cross-dressing is not allowed at the office, kotis have few material resources with which to construct a hijra image; on this night, a long red scarf and an illicit dash of makeup stand in metonymically for the feminine aesthetics associated with the hijra community. Yet because kotis also engage in cross-dressing practices that are distinct from what they define as “hijra-acting,” these gender props do not by themselves serve as boundary markers for the performance frame. Rather, it is a series of loud, flat-palmed claps that signal the breakthrough into hijra-acting (Hymes 1975), when Mani, taking on the role of hijra guru, calls forth her disciples (claps are indicated in the transcription by asterisks):

Roles

Mani: Hijra guru

Sanni: Great grandmother hijra of new bride

Balli: New hijra bride/daughter-in-law/disciple

- | | | | | |
|----|--------|--------------------------------------|----|---|
| 1 | Mani: | **cal merī naī navelī bahū, | M: | **Come my brand-new bride, |
| 2 | | yahā pe baiṭh beṭā, | | sit here child. |
| 3 | | rajdhānī mẽ āī hai. | | You’ve come to the capitol. |
| 4 | Sanni: | acchā celā kar use mere nām pe::: | S: | Good, make her a disciple in my name! |
| 5 | Mani: | jī::yo::: | M: | Live long! |
| 6 | Sanni: | surīle ke paṛpotī celā::: | S: | Great granddaughter disciple of the sweet-voiced one! |
| 7 | Mani: | are khān*dān bara::: | M: | Hey it’s a big *family! |
| 8 | Sanni: | are mere (gharō) kā celā::: | S: | Hey disciple of my clan! |
| 9 | Mani: | are *kis kā paṛpotī *celā re beṭā::: | M: | Hey *whose granddaughter *disciple are you, child? |
| 10 | Sanni: | *merā aur *kisī kā ((laughs)) | S: | *Mine, *who else’s? ((laughs)) |
| 11 | Mani: | *are paṛpotī terā:::* | M: | *Hey your great granddaughter*! |
| 12 | | [are *khāndān baṛā pūrā::: | | [Hey the *family is so big and full! |
| 13 | Balli: | [(xxx) | B: | [(xxx) |
| 14 | Sanni: | acchā merī pācō (ālī) aur terī to | S: | Yeah, I got everything desired but |
| 15 | | kaccī kar dī ((laughs)) | | you’ve been put to shame! ((laughs)) |
| 16 | Mani: | are gul*bār, gul*bār, gul*bār. | M: | Hey Flow*er, Flow*er, Flow*er! |

What the claps serve to accentuate in this excerpt is precisely what differentiates kotis from hijras: kinship. Whereas kotis integrate into the extended families so fundamental to

Indian society, hijras have created an alternative system of asexual kinship that parallels normative heterosexual kinship structures. In brief, the guru assumes the role of mother-in-law to her disciples, who enter the community as daughters-in-law in the symbolic form of newlywed brides. By virtue of the fact that these daughters later become gurus and have their own disciples, hijras are able to increase their family structures both vertically and horizontally. It is this scenario that is parodied by the kotis in the above example, as Mani and Sanni brag competitively about the size of their respective hijra families. The highly concentrated use of claps in this opening scene, even for the clap-happy kotis (i.e. 13 claps in 24 seconds), works to highlight this essential difference, indirectly establishing kotis, through the reflexive processes of parody, as an entirely different “breed.”

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have argued that the marginalized embodiment of gender-variant individuals compels us to consider the import of the body for the discursive construction of identity. The examples taken from our research among transsexual men and hijras suggest a discursive relationship between language and embodiment. On the one hand, language shapes our understanding of the human body and its meanings. In the transsexual men’s online community studied by Zimman, biological sex is linguistically reconstructed in order to better suit the needs of a marginalized community. On the other hand, language is also an embodied undertaking in that it works in conjunction with gesture as part of a broader communicative act. In the hijra community studied by Hall, the deployment of a flat-palmed clap marks the hijras as external to the normative gender binary. For the hijras who offer fertility blessings, as well as the kotis who engage in a

parody of those offerings, gesture helps to accomplish identity work, even distinguishing a self-identified “third sex” from their “fourth-breed” imitators.

Our goal has thus been to illustrate that the meanings ascribed to different forms of embodiment—including their interpretation as female, male, or something else entirely—are themselves the product of linguistic practice. Because gender-variant social actors experience non-normative corporeality, the status of their bodies is especially rife for contestation and thus becomes a key site for the negotiation of group members’ identities. This process is not unique to gender-variant people, as future research in this vein will undoubtedly show. Yet the embodied alterity of groups such as transsexual men and hijras creates a greater degree of transparency regarding these negotiations, thereby revealing the potential significance of the body to any social interaction.

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