patrilocal family structure when she says she will tell Mando’s father that Mando has been kosing (line 17).

The elicitation to kos thus recontextualizes the participants and highlights the ambiguity and negotiability of social roles and statuses. Baby could, on a number of grounds, claim a position of authority. She is older; she has obviously more developed interactional and verbal skills; and she is a member of the family in whose yard the interaction is taking place (cf. Goodwin 1990). At the same time the two are not so different in age (Kavita is markedly senior to both) and they routinely play together. The context is thus ambiguous with both Kavita and Baby trying to give it determinate readings in terms of the social ordering of participants. In so doing, they index, through a variety of means, the multiple ideological definitions of community which are culturally available. Even in this short exchange it is possible to see the ways in which village egalitarianism is maintained by incorporating the competing and contradictory tendencies towards personal autonomy and age-graded, gendered solidarity.

3. Conclusion

Community is a shifting and mutable notion. Children in this Indo-Guyanese village are, from an early age, socialized to understand the ways in which interactive contexts are framed by the overarching values of autonomy, age-graded solidarity, and hierarchy. I have suggested that metapragmatic descriptors play an important role in establishing indexical connections between such interactive contexts and local ideologies of community. The place of elicitation in the process of language socialization is particularly significant in this regard. However the importance of such linguistic practices can only be understood within a theory of language use which recognizes both the referential and contextualizing dimensions of the utterance.

References


“We Are Just Like Doctors, ...We Heal Sick Hair:”

Professional and Cultural Discourses of Hair & Identity in a Black Hair Care Seminar

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This paper explores how the dilemma of client expertise is intimated, both explicitly and implicitly, in the discourse and interaction among participants in a one-day educational seminar on Black hair care. Using discourse analysis, I analyze how the language use of the instructor and other participants reflects cultural and professional ideologies about language, their identities, and the nature of their work.

0. Introduction

A woman’s body, much like her voice, is often marginalized in this society and trivialized as representing a need for “beauty” or the mindless attention to remaining objects of desire to males (and often other females) (Hansen, Reed & Waters 1986). Yet beauty is a cultural concept and talk among women about their bodies is never simply about the gaze of desire. Rather, it is essentially talk about cultural constructions of women from both a male and female point of view. This is especially true for women of African descent, where the body and language signifies quite complex meanings of what it means to be a black woman, woman who is black, black, not white, etc. Hair, in particular, is an important cultural signifier for many African Diasporan women given the fact that their moderate to tightly curled hair textures and diverse hair styles have had significant impacts on their economic, social and emotional lives (e.g., Mercer 1994; Nelson 1994; Rooks 1996; Bonner 1991, 1996). It is partially in response to this cultural body politic that African American women seek professional hair care.

Significantly, though, many black women seek this attention after having already participated in hair rituals with women in their family from early childhood on. Most hair care occurs in contexts where women of all ages interact over long hours, their skilled hands weaving tight curls into braids, or unlocking them by way of hot metal combs (called straightening or presssing combs) or chemical straighteners. Often, groups of African American women, adolescents and girls gather in the kitchen to receive and provide hair care, itself a stable site for women’s interaction, narrative and cultural transmission (Jacobs-Huey 1996b; Gates 1994). Within these highly gendered spaces has evolved a complex hair lexicon, including terms like “kitchen” to describe the extremely curly hair at the nape of the neck which requires the most skill when using a straightening comb
for the upkeep of their curly hair are often absent from major products. In the analyses that follow, I chart some of the anatomic discursive elements that make up Khalif’s linguistic ideology, highlighting how his and other participants’ language use reflects an implicit ideology about language and the nature of their work.

1.1 Further Contextualizing the Dilemma of Client Expertise

I should note, however, that while client expertise does indeed raise a number of dilemmas for African American hair stylists in establishing their expertise, maintaining their clientele, etc., it does not mean that black hair stylists’ interactions with their clients are uniformly difficult. Rather, as with many interactions involving ‘lay’ persons and certified ‘experts’ (e.g., doctor/patient interactions), client-hairdresser negotiations are complex speech events in which clients and hair stylists co-construct, and at times challenge, each other’s expertise, skill, and authority. The dilemma of client expertise likewise results in hair stylists’ need to assert their expertise in creative ways.

I also do not wish to suggest that the salon is merely a conflictive space. My observations of women’s interactions during professional hair care, as well as my own socialization in beauty salons as the child of a hairdresser, reinforce the fact that the salon is highly charged cultural space for many women—particularly for African American women. As has been noted elsewhere (Gimlin 1996; Hooks 1996; McCracken 1996; Rooks 1996), the beauty salon is a site where women of all nationalities bond, network, and tell stories as they come together to receive hair care. Additionally, beauty salons specializing in black hair care constitute one of the most successful type of business that have been owned and operated almost exclusively by blacks since the early 1930s.

2. Discussion

2.1 Constructing a Professional Linguistic Ideology

In Transcript , Khalif notes that hair stylists’ use of highly specialized language can serve to restrict clients’ disruption by increasing their respect for, and hence dependence upon, professional hairdressers:

(1)     Khalif: <You ever walk around doctors and they’re standing there
         (. ) hhh and they’re talking terms
         and relative this and that and (. ) hhh you know
         operations and so forth; hhh
         and if you know you can’t relate to that vernacular
         because it’s not your field of endeavor
         (0.5)
         08 But that respect comes from that
         09 because you hear that
         10 they’re manipulating hhh things that

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* This seminar was held in Southern California last year and involved a discussion of the “Science of Black Hair,” a hair care demonstration and followed by an extensive question and answer session with the audience.
could be of great use to you (1.5)
((that))((in case)) you’re health fails or something (0.3)
You your confidence (2.0)
therefore () we must express and use our terminology (2.0)
as a skill () a verbal skill (2.0)
() that gains respect from people that’s just around us (2.0)
<They might not even hhh be considering a hair style (2.2)
<they might not () even be thinking about (2.0)
() the condition of their hair in that day (2.0)
<it might not be of paramount [sic] to them at that time ()
But just hearing the conversation going on (2.0)
() and hearing all of these relative terms hhh (1.0)
being spoken between cosmetologists (2.0)
() let () them () know () that there’s something scientific at work (2.0)
() something that they can depend on (2.0)
(hhh and that’s the foundation of science;)

The discursive work in which Khalif is here engaged is quite complex: He constructs a professional linguistic ideology that celebrates the use of medical discourse as a “vernacular” of doctors which most people are unable to understand and hence, respect. Khalif is simultaneously socializing other licensed African American cosmetologists into their expert identities as African American hair doctors (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Silverstein 1992). Interestingly, Khalif implies an important second, although absent and generically-referenced, party in lines 18-21. He notes that one of the outcomes of the use of specialized language— which is fundamental to a range of disciplines, including medicine (Boyle 1970; Kimball 1971; Rotter and Hall 1992), law (Mertz 1992), and of course, academia (Bourdieu 1971; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977)—is that hair stylists gain respect from the people that are “just around them” (line 8). Naturally, these people include clients.

Significantly, Khalif also enacts epistemic stances to construct his own expert knowledge. He does so through invoking everyday phenomena, or what Schank and Abelson (1977) have called “scripts,” of what people in this case doctors, do. This “doctor” script—initiated in line 1 with: “You ever walk around doctors and they’re standing there...”—presumes and enacts a certain degree of knowledge by re-contextualizing a situation with which everyone is familiar. Lines 18-21 serve to “unpack” this script, making explicit the analogous relation between the prestigious codes of the medical profession and the participants’ work as cosmetologists. Further, notice the pronominal shift from his abundant use of the generic “you” in lines 1-16, to the collective “we” in line 18, and his later use of the exclusivizing “they” and “them” to describe potential overhearsers, most likely clients. These pronouns display not only Khalif’s shifting positionalities in relationship to the participants and to clients, but also how participants are consigned to a collective ‘we’ and charged to adopt and practice a shared linguistic ideology. As Khalif notes in lines 29-32, this meta-discourse will ensure that something “scientific is at work,” something that people can “depend on.” As will become clear in later transcripts, however, the issue of client dependency remains a debatable issue.

As the seminar progressed, Khalif became much more comfortable and interactive with his increasingly inquisitive audience. And it is in some of his later comments that he is most explicit about the disruptive role of client expertise in hair care negotiations. The latter two transcripts reflect this and, at a larger level, also expose the delicate interaction between Khalif’s and the other participants’ professional linguistic ideologies and their “lived” ideologies (Billeg et al. 1988)—or the interaction between their everyday professional practices and their intellectual ideologies about their practice. In the first transcript, Khalif addresses the issue of terminology.

2.2 Professional Linguistic Ideology and Practice: To ‘Press’ vs. To ‘Silken’

In constructing his and other hair stylists’ professional linguistic ideologies, Khalif also reclassifies certain cultural hair care procedures. For example, he refers to the delicate hair straightening procedure, which is well-known in African American culture as “pressing hair” (Smitherman 1994), as “silkening” the hair. This procedure involves heating a metal comb, usually on the stove or in a special oven, and carefully applying it to curly hair in order to straighten it. In Transcript 2, Khalif slips and uses the term “press” and is reminded by a perceptive participant that he should have used the word “silken.”

01 Khalif: ((and))((shhhh)) I’m pressing hair line I mean haa:rr li:ne
02 (3.0)
03 Aud: “and you’re doing the silkening in the back?”
04 Khalif: ((@ voice@)) Right I’m a silkening it ()
05 (1.0)
06 I’ve just been reminded
07 (1.5)
08 that I’m silkening it
09 (2.0)
10 We all know it’s still a press but =
11 (1.0)
12 Aud: ahh hem heh
13 Khalif: = in order to get the clientele to cooperate and to
14 >feel like they don’t know what they what they talking about<
15 you be like
16 (1.0)
17 ((()“I’m bout to silk your hair”)
18 (1.0)
19 What is you?
20 (1.0)
21 Is you gone take all day?
22 Aud: heh heh heh heh
23 ha ha ha
24 Khalif: = >then you gonna talk about I’m having you in here all day
acknowledges clients as key agents within hair care negotiations, it exposes the fact that clients’ dependency upon hair stylists is always subject to contestation.

2.3 Professional Linguistic Ideology and Practice: Clients as Potential Competitors

In Transcript 3, Khalif sets up an analogous relationship between the work performed and the authority possessed by cosmetologists and medical doctors. His comments below are both confessional and especially candid about how professional registers legitimize experts’ knowledge and authority by excluding those lacking formal, often institutional, training in their subject.

(3)

01 Khalif: It’s a lot of inquisitive clients
02 (1.0)
03 and those are the dangerous ones too
04 ‘cause what you be doing
05 giving them a class:
06 (1.5)
07 Next thing you know =
08 [13.0)
09 Aud: [They gone tell somebody else
10 Aud: [They be doing their hair
11 Khalif: = they be doing they own doggone hair
12 <and she two girlfriends
13 <you done lost three clients
14 (2.0)
15 Aud: beh beh beh
16 Khalif: Like that wrap*
17 (0.5)
18 That wrap was beautiful technology =
19 (1.0)
20 Aud: Oh yeah:
21 Khalif: = Next thing you know everybody at home ((practicing))
22 (0.5)
23 Aud: beh beh beh beh
24 Khalif: I wonder why =
25 Aud: [doing they own hair
26 Khalif: = Cosy ain’t came in this week?:
27 (1.0)
28 Aud: beh beh beh
29 Khalif: = she done wrapped her hair twice since you done did it
30 Aud: mom mom mom
31 mom mom mom
32 Khalif: >you know what I’m saying?:
33 (1.5)
34 That that makes us STAR::VE
35 (1.0)
36 That’ll make us star::ve to death
37 (1.0)
38 We’ll starve to death (: hhh with people doing their hair at home =
39 Aud: yes
40 Khalif: = so we have to keep the technology at a hi::gh (: plate::me

This excerpt is a figurative response to some of the challenges facing African American hair stylists in gaining the trust and respect of their clients. Given clients’ familiarity with “pressing hair”—as suggested by Khalif in lines 15-17 and later by another participant in line 30-34—Khalif and his colleagues must work to de-familiarize women’s cultural understanding and discourses about their hair by inventing new terminology. This construction nods theoretically to the larger distinction between public and private discourse articulated in Bourdieu’s (1971) construction of language as power and Mertz’s (1992) discussion of the centrality of legal discourse to co-construct expertise and authority among law students. Also implicit in Khalif’s construction is a statement about the prestige of varieties located in a particular geographic locale. He suggests that cultural discourses of hair, located largely in the informal context of the kitchen, represent the de-professionalization of scientific discourses about hair that are or should be echoed within the institutional confines of the beauty salon.

In this sense, Khalif’s invention of a specialized term to describe a familiar procedure in a new context (i.e., after a relaxer/perm), is in conversation with Transcript 1. It keenly illustrates the tensions that are raised when Khalif’s expressed linguistic ideologies confront the contextual and interpersonal constraints of hair stylists’ everyday practices. Participants’ laughter of recognition, particularly at lines 22 and 29 co-recognize the general knowledge of clients, as well as clients’ general disdain for being kept in the salon for extended hours. Although it might be easy to mistake Khalif’s comments within the intimate context of this professional seminar for evidence of hair stylists’ role as immoral deceivers, I submit that Khalif’s re-classification of a cultural hair term both pre-supposes and pays respect to clients’ localized knowledge and agency in hair care negotiations and develops a strategy of resistance from this basis. Paralleling the linguistic strategies adopted by the law students in Mertz’s study, Khalif’s advice that hair stylists practice neologism, or invoke a power to “name” and (re)classify, illustrates his sophisticated understanding of the power of discourse in constructing expertise and authority. His ventriloquiation or animation of a fictitious client’s concern and knowledge (Bakhtin 1981) allows him to experience and embody multiple footings or positionalities within this metadiscourse (Goffman 1979). Further, since Khalif’s commentary...
41 where they know
42 they can’t deal with us:
43 (1.5)
44 Now they might be able to do a wrap²
45 and it feels like this
46 () but will it feel like that?
47 (1.0)
48 You know that silkening () (then I’ll call it that)

Here again, one of the major motivations for Khalif’s expressed linguistic ideologies is made explicit as deeply rooted in the fact that clients are not always ‘dependent’ upon hair stylists as patients are upon doctors. Khalif’s sentiments are shared by several participants, whose anticipatory completions in lines 9-10 evidence their shared local knowledge (Ochs, Schegloff and Thompson 1996). As Khalif asserts repeatedly in lines 32-36, hair stylists will “starve” with clients doing their hair at home. Thus, it is not surprising that he candidly espouses the importance of obscuring clients’ knowledge of hair procedures and terminology in lines 40-42. His use of the conditional (“might”) in line 44, “Now they might be able to do a wrap…” mitigates his representation of clients’ expertise and skill. Further, Khalif’s ensuing distinction between the skill of clients versus hair stylists in lines 45-46 situates the skill of hair stylists as the most supreme. His concluding remarks once again evidences hair stylists’ power to name or reclassify cultural hair terminology—an important strategy for hairdressers as they attempt to assert their expertise and authority in hair care settings among both “lay” clients and “expert” hair stylists.

3. Summary & Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to illustrate how Khalif attempts to resolve the dilemma of client expertise and by elevating cosmetology to its rightful place as a legitimate science-based industry on par with the medical profession. It makes a great deal of sense for Khalif to align ideologically and discursively with physicians. Like physicians, hair stylists are engaged in curing ailments associated with their clients’ hair. In some cases, serve as informal care-givers, lay psychologists, and confidants (Weisenfeld and Weis 1979; Getz and Klein 1980; Brown 1983; Eayrs 1993; Gimlin 1996). Additionally, the register of medical discourse or ‘medicalese’ is imbued with cultural capital; it is prestigious (Roter and Hall 1992). Further, medical doctors are attractive candidates for identification since, in the public and professional imagination, they are moral, prestigious and respected. People depend on them, largely because they don’t always understand what is going on with their bodies.

However, while cosmetology, like biology and physiology, is a practice rooted in science about the body, it is not afforded the same authority and respect as is medicine. While doctor’s authority is entitled, hair stylists’ authority is always constructed and contested. This contestation is particularly relevant to African American hair stylists whose client-based industry makes them especially vulnerable, particularly when their clients are especially knowledgeable. Khalif and the other participates reference this complex dilemma throughout the transcripts heretofore discussed.

It is precisely where Khalif’s linguistic ideology confronts the conflict between professional stances and practice that one can better appreciate the complexity embedded within the ideology that he is espousing (Gal 1992). Khalif’s professionalism, like that of the other seminar participants, cannot simply be constructed through skilled practice, since it can—and most likely is—shared by members of their clientele. Instead, they must rely on language and linguistic ideology to co-manage their clients’ public representations to the outside world. And they must also depend on language and linguistic ideology to instantiate the belief that stylists are indeed hair doctors who analyze, diagnose, and prescribe treatment for their clients’ “sick” and/or damaged hair.

Appendix: Transcription conventions.

[ ] a left-hand bracket indicates the onset of overlapping, simultaneous utterances.
(0.1) indicates a length of pause within and between utterances, timed in units of a second.
( . ) double parentheses enclose nonverbal and other descriptive information.
( ) single parentheses enclose words that are not clearly audible (i.e., best guesses).

_ _ _ underline indicates stress on a syllable or word(s).

italicized words or phrases indicates talk that is in some way animated or performed (i.e. sarcasm).

CAPS upper case indicates louder or shouted talk.

: a colon indicates a lengthening of a sound, the more colons, the longer the sound.
? a question mark indicates arising intonation as a syllable or word ends.

© indicates smile voice intonation; marks talk which is delivered as though speaker was smiling.

this symbol is placed before and after words or phrases that are delivered in a soft pitch.

this arrow marks words or phrases delivered with a downward intonational contour.

> < the combination of “greater than” and “less than” symbols enclose words and/or talk that is compressed or rushed.

< > the combination of “less than” and “greater than” symbols enclose words and/or talk that is markedly slowed or drawn out.

< the “less than” symbol by itself indicates that the immediately following talk is “jump-started,” i.e., sounds like starts off with a nosh.

References


² A wrap is a hairstyle made popular by the actress Halle Berry.


