

# Language, Embodiment and the 'Third Sex'

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## 1. Introduction

Groups whose gender identities and enactments fall outside of socio-cultural norms for women and men are often described by both scholars and the groups' members as constituting a 'third gender' or 'third sex'. This chapter discusses the utility of this categorisation (which we will hereafter refer to as *third sex*) for the study of language, gender and sexuality. We begin by acknowledging the problematic nature of this terminology as established by critiques levelled against its use within the history of anthropological scholarship. However, we maintain that 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 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. Our purpose here 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 marginalisation (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 Borba and 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.

To demonstrate the import of the body for language and identity research, we outline two approaches to language and embodiment that build on our research among gender-variant communities: transsexual men in the US, and *hijras* in India. This is not to suggest that the groups are at all similar in socio-cultural terms, nor do we wish to advocate the categorisation of either as a third sex (whatever that would mean). Rather, we present their communicative practices to call 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 more 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 we address, inspired by poststructuralist feminist characterisations of sex as discursively constructed, focuses on how 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. The first author's research in this area reveals how members of this marginalised group contest and reconstruct sex through linguistic practice to accomplish the social needs of the community. The second approach draws on the growing body of linguistic literature that views language as inextricably tied to gesture and other aspects of embodiment. Taking a socio-cultural perspective on gesture, 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 conceptualisations of the body, and embodied action functioning as an integral part of language.

## 2. (How) should we use the concept of a 'third sex'?

The last three decades of scholarship on sexual and gender alterity has focused principally on groups whose existence is seen to undermine fundamental assumptions about gender long associated with Western society and scholarship. When feminist theorists in the 1970s and 1980s started to challenge the naturalisation 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 during this period in gender and sexual alterity – what Rubin acknowledges as 'the exotica in which anthropologists delight' (1975: 165) – was certainly not new. 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 organisations of gender: for example, gender-variant groups among the Nigerian Igbo (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 added impetus to

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 employing a third sex framework thus served 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 Herdt's (1993a) edited volume *Third Sex, Third Gender*, for example, are essentially a challenge to the assumed naturalness of binary gender systems, an approach made 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. Nanda (1990), for example, in her groundbreaking ethnography of 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' (Nanda 1990: 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 twentieth century to describe a range of identities across cultures, it is not surprising that several scholars working with gender-variant communities have since questioned the usefulness of this categorisation. Most significantly, the emphasis on non-western third-sex groups whose existence is acknowledged or institutionalised to some degree by the larger society has led to the misguided assumption that these populations are less marginalised than their Western counterparts, leading to skewed representations of the cultural value placed on alternative gender identities (see Hall 1995, 1997; Herdt 1993b). Similarly, scholarly discussions of third sex categories may inadvertently work to reify the 'normalcy' of first and second gender categories. Towle and Morgan (2002) pursue 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' (Towle and Morgan 2002: 484–5). Stryker (2004, 2008) makes a similar argument against the broadening of the transgender category to include all forms of 'gender trouble'. 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 encourages conflation of 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 distinguishes itself from the better-researched hijras, Hall (2005) argues that queer theory's uptake of poststructuralism, spearheaded by 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 homogeneous groups – male, female and other – rather than facilitating subtler understanding of diversity both between and within groups.

Nevertheless, a third sex category can be a useful analytic tool, particularly in so far as it reflects group members' self-understanding and/or the image of the group promoted by more powerful factions of society; both criteria hold for the hijras. Yet we must not lose sight of the diversity and contestability of gender and sex ideologies, even among people sharing common identities. The question of whether Western transsexuals and other transgender people should be understood as a third sex illustrates the difficulty of making these determinations. A number of sexologists researching transgenderism (for example Bockting 1997; Diamond 2003) together with transgender authors (notably Bornstein 1994, 2006 [1994]; Wilchins 1997; Feinberg 2006 [1992]) have recently argued that characterising transgender identities as a kind of third sex distinct from male and female categories empowers transgender people personally and politically. Echoing earlier anthropologists' work on third sex systems, these authors emphasise the oppressive nature of the gender binary and argue, as 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 Raymond (1979), who 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' (Bornstein 2006 [1994]: 239). As Towle and Morgan (2002) show, Bornstein's stance exemplifies a larger trend among many transgender authors of appropriating the 'transgender native in the form of [their] assumed primordial ancestors' (Towle and Morgan 2002: 478), or rather, of viewing indigenous gender-variant identities as the forebears of a universal transgender experience. Other transgender scholars have strongly disagreed with this perspective. While recognising that there ought to be room for people who do in fact identify outside of the male/female binary, Serano (2007) argues that indiscriminately grouping all transgender people into a third sex – even those who identify strictly as women or men – casts transgender identities as illegitimate and denies transgender people the right to name themselves (see also Namaste 1996; Stryker 2008). It is thus unclear whether transgender people should be discussed as a third sex, particularly given the dissent that exists among members of this group on the issue.

Similar contestation surrounds the status of hijras in urban centres like Delhi. While hijras claim a long history dating at least from the time of the mediaeval Mughal empire, many educated English-speaking Indians have now embraced gay and lesbian identities associated with the processes of globalisation, rejecting traditional cross-gender practices as lower-class forms of homosexuality. The non-governmental organisation (NGO) that Hall's (2005) recent work focuses on serves as a community centre for queer Indians, and while hijras have never been explicitly barred, its policy against cross-dressing at the time of Hall's field research prevented hijras from participating in the organisation. Hijras were required to wear men's clothing just like the gay-identified men and effeminate men known as *kotis*, suggesting that the NGO's administrators see hijras not as members of a third sex but as men whose gender presentation is inappropriately feminine. The influence of globalisation 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.

Socio-cultural linguists who have worked with gender-variant communities have been sensitive to these problems and have maintained critical perspectives in their engagement with the third sex concept. For example, Hall (2005) describes how hijras exploit the widespread 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 marginalised 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 characterise anatomically male cross-dressing groups like the kotis as 'fake hijras', kotis spend much of their hijra-acting performances mocking the hijras' self-representation as penisless ascetics. Hall's description of the ideological workings behind hijras' claim to third sex status draws 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, socio-cultural 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, Nigeria; 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 with the potential to reveal important connections between embodiment and social actors' ongoing negotiation of gender identity. We additionally argue that incorporating embodiment into socio-cultural 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 closer sociolinguistic scrutiny 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 preceded the feminising 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 show how gendered meanings of bodies can be rewritten to accomplish the needs of the community.

### 3. The discursive construction of sex

In the early 1990s, poststructuralist feminist scholars began to reject the traditional second-wave 'coat rack' model of sex as the natural, biological antecedent to the social construction of gender (see especially Butler 1993 and Nicholson 1994; for a linguistic perspective, see Bing and Bergvall 1996 and McElhinny 2002). Instead, they argued that sex, like gender, is socially constructed within specific historical and socio-cultural

contexts. As an illustration, Nicholson (1994) draws on Laqueur's (1990) history of the medicalisation 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. Previously, 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 conceptualised as undescended testicles). Yet Western non-dualistic configurations of sex are certainly not limited to this historical moment; such systems also presently exist, where they compete, albeit in a marginalised capacity, with the dominant male/female binary. We consider here how socio-cultural 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 how linguistic practices produce both dominant and subordinate conceptualisations 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 employ medical technology to masculinise their bodies. The data presented in this section were collected in 2007 as part of ongoing participant observation in a popular internet community for transsexual men and others on the female-to-male transgender spectrum. Community members use the online forum to discuss a range of transgender issues, circulate information and provide support to those experiencing difficult emotions. Because of the significance of embodiment for transsexuals, the body is a recurring topic among this group, and negotiating how transsexual men's physiologies should be talked about is commonplace. These discussions are particularly interesting for socio-cultural linguistic analysis because of the great importance this group places on the use of appropriate language when talking about transsexuality, and the heatedness of occasional disagreements.

Understanding how transsexual men talk about their own and each others' bodies requires some additional background information. Female-to-male transsexuals are understudied relative to their male-to-female counterparts, and consequently the practices that distinguish these groups often go unremarked in the transsexuality literature. One significant difference for our purposes here 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 up to US\$100,000 for the most complex procedures. The use of testosterone therapy, which creates a typical male hormonal balance by replacing oestrogen 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. The result in terms of gender semiotics is that many transsexual men are socially recognised as men, even though they have what most people would consider female genitalia. However, many transsexual men who use 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 destabilise the boundaries between male and female embodiment through a subversion of the semantics of words for gendered body parts, particularly ones referring to genitals.

While one of the most salient practices among transsexual men talking about their own and each others' bodies involves the coining of new expressions, such as *bonus hole* or *froni hole* to refer to the vagina, our focus here 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. Conventional dictionary definitions of *vagina* and *penis* describe the body part in question in terms of physical structure ('the passage that connects the vulva to the cervix') or function ('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 can accomplish different kinds of social work fulfilling this particular community's needs.

The commonest 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 for penetration or urination. Instead, they embrace the gendered meaning of *dick* as a term referring to men's genitals and apply it to their own physiology, eschewing dominant scientific categorisations of their genitals as biologically female. To legitimate this move, transsexual men draw on their own set of scientific discourses emphasising similarities between the penis and the clitoris. That is, while popular opinion categorises them as separate and distinct organs, biologists and sexologists (as well as lexicographers) have long recognised 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 arbitrarily classified as either a small penis or a 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 falling on a clitoris/penis continuum. 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 thereby created 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 destabilise the boundary between male and female bodies.

The way transsexual men talk about their genitalia creates what Bucholtz and Hall (2004b) call *adequation*, or 'sufficient similarity', between transsexual men's bodies and normatively male bodies. The tactic thus linguistically enacts 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 penises and clitorises breaks down the naturalisation of sex in two ways: first, by suggesting that a clear line may not exist between female and male bodies, and second, by implying that social gender identity 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 community members employ when talking about transsexual bodies is the de-feminisation of terminology normatively associated with female embodiment. Use of any kind of 'female' language in reference to community members is marked within this community, such that in certain contexts it elicits scorn or even outrage. However, transsexual men do sometimes use terms like *vagina* and even vernacular words like *cunt* to refer to their own and each others' bodies. Speakers can accomplish this move without undermining community members' identity as men by marking these lexical items as masculine. For instance, one community member posted the question 'I'm not the only one that is filled with immense hatred over his vagina, am I?' By using the masculine pronoun *his* rather than *my* to modify *vagina*, the speaker makes it clear that he is talking about the problems faced by *men*, not women, who have 'immense hatred' of 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 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 *mungina* similarly questions 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 words these speakers use to refer to their genitals facilitate the social work speakers engage in, 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 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, alongside the refashioning of 'female' terminology as male, works to construct transsexual men as male-bodied, or at the very least, not female-bodied.

#### 4. Gesture

The second approach to language and embodiment that could enhance the study of gender-variant communities focuses on gesture, which language and gender researchers have only recently begun to incorporate into their analyses (for example, Goodwin 2006; Mendoza-Denton 2008). Previous language-oriented work on gesture, much of it written from a conversation analysis standpoint, addresses the role of gesture in facilitating the interactional management and organisation of discourse, particularly with respect to conversational turn-allocation (Fox 1999; Goodwin 1986; Lerner 2003), quoted speech (Sidnell 2006) and the management of co-constructed talk (Hayashi 2003). These studies consider varied forms of embodiment, among them pointing (Goodwin 2003), the torque of the upper body (Schegloff 1998) and gaze (Sidnell 2006; Streeck 1993), so potentially represent useful starting points for 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 true for gender-variant individuals.

Other work on gesture has framed it as the product or reflection of a particular language or society (Kendon 1997, 2004; McNeill 1997; Haviland 2004). Kendon's (1997) review of research on gesture is written in this vein: he presents a number of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural differences in how and to what degree speakers use gesture. For example, he presents differences in gesticulation that mirror the structure of the gesturers' native languages, 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 in 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' (Kendon 1997: 117). The usefulness of this type of macro-perspective for the study of language and identity is unclear, particularly since it assumes that people sharing a 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' (Kendon 1997: 111) is potentially illuminating for the sociolinguistic analysis of gesture, because it challenges researchers studying the discursive production of gender to consider the contribution gesture makes to the 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 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, for example, Rossini 2004). Significantly for our purposes, these ideologies can be exploited by social actors occupying liminal and marginalised gender positions as part of a broader semiotic toolkit (cf. Hall 2003a).

Linguists interested in the fundamental inseparability of gesture and spoken language have, somewhat predictably, characterised 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' (Kendon 2000: 51). Thus, a speaker recounting the children's story *Little Red Riding Hood*, to borrow Kendon's (1997) example, 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. The swinging movement of the speaker's arm contributes visual data enhancing the semantics of the utterance by specifying the instrument used for the slicing action. Yet we contend that gesture contributes not just to an utterance's semantic meaning, but also to its social meaning. That is, just as the use of spoken language situates speaker and hearer in a complex matrix of social positions – a process exemplified in earlier 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 in Varanasi, researched by Hall in the early 1990s for a long-term project investigating language, sexuality and globalisation in northern India. Hijras in this northern city (and indeed throughout much of India) use a distinctive hand clap produced with palms flat and fingers spread wide. Widely recognised as unique to hijras, this clap constitutes an important index of identity because it functions to situate users as 'neither man nor woman'. That is, while hijras' aesthetic conduct is feminine (they wear clothes, jewellery and makeup traditionally associated with Indian women), their behavioural 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 helps distinguish hijra identity from that of both women and men.

The hijras' use of clapping and sexual insult ironically also instantiates their ongoing self-construction as religious ascetics. This self-designation is contingent upon the claim that they are a people 'born without genitals' and hence lacking in 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 in-house hijra surgeons) and also engage in various kinds of sex work, it nevertheless works to authorise their societal role as performers of ritualistic fertility blessings. In short, because the hijras exist outside normative structures of sexual kinship they have earned the mystique of having power over procreation. Their use of loud claps and highly sexualised insults in the context of a ritualised birth celebration thus calls attention to their embodied alterity, particularly as these behaviours 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 much greater social complexity: in addition to underscoring their identity as hijras, the claps also convey information about how to manage non-hijra listeners. In brief, the hijras' claps constitute a small-scale semiotic system involving a number of different forms conveying specific interactional meanings, among them the *deḥ tālī* 'one-and-a-half clap' and *ādhi tālī* 'half clap' (see Hall 1997).

As one of the most salient markers of hijra identity, the hijra clap is also a primary index appropriated by groups parodying hijra behaviour. For instance, the Delhi kotis who are the subject of Hall's (2005) research make exaggerated use of the clap during hijra-acting to mock the hijras' self-portrayal 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' 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 the kotis are generally assumed to be hijras when publicly engaged in this parodic practice. Partly for this reason, kotis self-identify over and against hijras as *cauthī nasal* 'fourth breed', a term highlighting kotis' ability 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's work at the NGO, the kotis gather to perform as hijras for their middle-class gay and lesbian colleagues. Because cross-dressing is prohibited 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 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 baiḥ beṭā,                |    | sit here child.                       |
| 3 |        | rajdhānī mē 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 paṛpoṭī 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 (āī) aur terī       | S: | Yeah, I got everything desired                        |
| 15 |        | to kaccī kar dī ((laughs))          |    | but you've been put to shame! ((laughs))              |
| 16 | Mani:  | are gul*bār, gul*bār, gul*bār.      | M: | Hey Flow*er, Flow*er, Flow*er!                        |

In this excerpt the claps serve to accentuate 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 paralleling 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. Since these daughters later become gurus with their own disciples, hijras can increase their family structures both vertically and horizontally. It is this scenario the kotis are parodying in the above example, as Mani and Sanni brag competitively about the size of their respective hijra families. The concentrated use of claps in this opening scene, even for the clap-happy kotis (thirteen claps in twenty-four seconds), works to highlight this essential difference, indirectly establishing kotis, through the reflexive processes of parody, as an entirely different 'breed'.

#### 5. Conclusion

In this chapter, we have argued that the marginalised embodiment of gender-variant individuals compels consideration of 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, biological sex is linguistically reconstructed to better suit a marginalised community's needs. On the other, language is also an embodied undertaking in that it collaborates with gesture as part of a broader communicative act. In the hijra community, the deployment of flat-palmed claps marks the hijras as external to the normative gender binary. For the hijras who offer fertility blessings, and the kotis

who parody them, 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 prone to 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.

## Gendered Identities in the Professional Workplace: Negotiating the Glass Ceiling

Louise Mullany

### 1. Introduction

The sociolinguistic study of gender identities within professional workplaces has become a burgeoning area of research in recent years. Investigators in a variety of global locations have examined the complex process through which interactants in particular groups and communities negotiate their gender identities at work. Recent examples include Holmes' (2006) work in New Zealand, Schnurr (forthcoming) in Hong Kong, Martín Rojo and Gómez Esteban (2005) in Spain, Yieke (2005) in Kenya, Ostermann (2003) in Brazil, Mullany (2007) and Baxter (2008) in Britain, and Kendall (2004) in the US. This expansion of research interest is inextricably interlinked with the 'rapid increase in numbers of women in the workplace worldwide' which has taken place in the last four decades (Barrett and Davidson 2006: 1).

The growth of scholarship in gender and the professions can be witnessed across the humanities and social sciences. A key unifying factor is the aim of examining gender inequalities. One of the most significant and widespread problems is the persistence of the 'glass ceiling' (Morrison et al. 1987), the metaphorical, transparent barrier preventing women in professional occupations from reaching the higher echelons of power. The impenetrability of the 'glass' ceiling has recently led to some commentators (Johnson 2006; Wahlin 2007; *Equality and Human Rights Commission* 2008) to redefine it as a 'concrete' ceiling. The 2008 *Equality and Human Rights Commission* statistics in Britain show a marked decrease in the number of women reaching positions of power in the professions. The Commission's current projections are that it will take another seventy-three years for women to be equally represented in the boardroom in the FTSE 100 companies.<sup>1</sup> The report also highlights that women from ethnic minorities are disadvantaged the most. While only 11 per cent of directorships in FTSE 100 companies are occupied by women, less than 1 per cent (0.7 per cent) are women who belong to ethnic minorities.

Sociolinguistic investigations of gender identities in the professional workplace have set out to examine the role that language can play in maintaining and reproducing gender inequalities. The importance of an overarching political goal to conducting research on language and identities has long been an aim of sociolinguistics (see Labov 1982). Cameron