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Sexist talk: Gender categories, participants' orientations and irony[1]

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This paper uses a discursive social psychological approach to develop and extend what we know about the constitution of sexist talk. Using data from a variety of sources where the topic under discussion is gender and leisure, I examine actual instances of sexism *in action*. Specifically, I examine the ways in which participants use arguments about possible injury to justify women's *non*-participation in certain sport and leisure activities. I identify three resources that participants use to sustain sexist accounts, and bolster their arguments against attack. A fourth resource problematises just what counts as sexist talk, and provides evidence for the ways in which participants themselves can exploit sexist arguments in an ironic fashion to expose and challenge sexist assumptions. I end by considering the implications of this approach for future work on sexist talk, and discursive work on the relationship between gender and language more generally.

KEYWORDS: Discourse analysis, gender, irony, feminist linguistic reform, prejudice, sexism

INTRODUCTION: SOCIOLINGUISTIC APPROACHES TO SEXIST TALK

Sociolinguists have, for some time, been concerned with the 'gendered' or 'sexist' nature of language. Research has traditionally been divided into two strands: the study of how men and women *use* language (their language behaviour); and the study of how gender is represented *in* language (sexist language).

The study of men and women's language *use* has shown how there are quantifiable differences between the language use and speech styles of men and women. There is, for example, a large body of research which shows that men interrupt women more frequently than women interrupt men (Zimmerman and West 1975), and that women tend to have a 'cooperative' speech style while men have a more 'competitive' speech style (Coates 1993[1986]). Such findings have been interpreted in a number of ways. For example, women's speech style has tended to be theorised as either *deficient* compared to that of men (e.g. Lakoff 1973), as *dominated* by men (e.g. Spender 1980), or as simply *different* from, but of equal value to that of men (e.g. Tannen 1990). These

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differences are typically interpreted as an effect of nature or nurture: as a reflection of some inherent 'woman-ness', or as indicative of the operation of patriarchy and unequal power relations in society (see Cameron 1998a and Stokoe 2000 for summaries).

The study of how gender is represented *in* language starts from the assumption that language is an 'ideological filter on the world' (Ehrlich and King 1994: 60). Language, it is suggested, does not reflect reality but itself constitutes and naturalises a sexist and heterosexist *version* of reality. Examples of sexist language include the purportedly generic pronouns 'he' and 'man', words such as 'mankind', job titles ending in '-man', and the asymmetry of titles for men ('Mr') and women ('Mrs' / 'Miss'), where women are defined – not in their own right – but in terms of their relationship to a man. According to feminist reformers and the writers of 'non-sexist language guidelines' (Doyle 1995; Miller and Swift 1980), sexist talk can be eliminated through the development of linguistic innovations which replace sexist with non-sexist forms. Examples of such reforms include substituting the masculine 'generics', 'he' and 'man', with neutral terms such as singular 'they' and 'he/she', replacing job titles ending in '-man' with neutral titles such as 'chairperson', 'chair', or 'spokesperson', creating 'neutral' titles for women such as 'Ms', and developing new terms that can give meaning to experiences that have hitherto been ignored, such as 'sexual harassment' and 'date-rape' (Ehrlich and King 1994: 61).[2]

While research in both areas continues, each approach has been problematised – from within as well as outside linguistics. Some of the earliest 'sex differences' research, for example, has been criticised for reinforcing essentialist notions of gender dualism, and for perpetuating gender stereotypes. As Stokoe and Smithson (2001: 219) point out, much of this research reinforces 'a two genders agenda' (see Crawford 1995 for related criticisms). This research has tended to reify and homogenise gender, treating gender as an independent variable located within individuals that determines or accounts for what participants say on any given occasion. This leads to circular arguments where the researcher maps talk onto the gender identity of the speaker, measures gender differences in talk, and then uses gender as the explanatory variable to account for those differences.

While Cameron (1997: 60) accepts that there may be an 'empirically observable association' between speech style and gender, she also notes that 'it is unhelpful for linguists to continue to use models of gendered speech which imply that masculinity and femininity are monolithic constructs, automatically giving rise to predictable (and utterly different) patterns of verbal interaction' (1997: 62). Thus, all too often it is the analyst's stereotypes about men and women which are used as explanatory resources. Unfortunately, as Cameron (1998b: 947) notes, if we treat men and women as 'internally homogeneous groups' we will ignore 'specificity' (what individual women and men do in specific settings) and 'complexity' (how gender interacts with other variables such as race and class). We will also overlook the relativity and multifunctional nature of linguistic strategies (Tannen 1994). Activities such as interruption, for example, need not always constitute a 'violation' or an imposition of power. They may, for example, mark affiliation or alignment (James and Clarke 1993).

These criticisms are part of a broader movement – influenced in part by the impact of postmodern and poststructuralist ideas – away from an essentialist paradigm to a constructionist one. In line with the views of queer theorists such as Butler (1990) and ethnomethodologists such as Kessler and McKenna (1978), for example, gender is conceived as something one *does* rather than something one *has*. Gender is more a matter of performance than of essence, 'a practice rather than a category, an actively constructed performance rather than a pre-existing role' (Bucholtz 1999: 7; see also Bucholtz, Liang and Sutton 1999; Hall and Bucholtz 1995). Thus, gender is not a pre-given trait that resides in individuals and that determines the linguistic resources men and women will use to speak. Rather, it is a complex and fluid social construct located in interaction. By viewing gender in this way, the focus shifts from charting the linguistic differences between women and men, to a more detailed analysis of the ways in which people use language to produce gender difference (Cameron 1997: 49). Thus, there has been a gradual move away from studies that search for specific forms and styles of speech and which correlate linguistic variables with demographic variables, toward the type of studies that explore the functions of situated language *use*.

Research on how gender is represented *in* language has been criticised for being similarly essentialist in its orientation. For example, it implies that there are a limited number of context free, problematic or derogatory terms which are 'essentially' sexist, and that by pinpointing them and substituting them with 'non-sexist' words, one can somehow rid the language of sexism (Cameron 1992[1985], 1998d). Many institutional reform efforts and attempts at what has been termed 'verbal hygiene' (Cameron 1995), for example, treat sexist talk as a linguistic rather than a social and a contextual problem. They imply that sexist meanings reside in, or come attached to specific words, and ignore the 'context sensitivity' of actual language *use*.

In contrast, for many feminists and sociolinguists, the meaning of words is not fixed but fluid. According to Ehrlich and King (1994: 60), for example (see also McConnell-Ginet 1988, 1998[1989]), 'linguistic meanings are . . . socially constructed and constituted'. They are 'contextually variable' (Cameron 1992[1985]: 110), and 'continually negotiated and modified in everyday interaction' (Cameron 1998b: 963). Thus, specific words need not always be sexist/egalitarian in their function. If words are (at least partially) indexical, their meaning dependent on uptake and their context of use, then how can we legislate 'non-sexist' language into existence – essentially fixing the meaning of 'approved' versus 'sexist' words? As Cameron, notes, 'we cannot simply change a word's meaning for the whole community by *fiat*' (1992[1985]: 110, emphasis in original). The very possibility for the reclaiming, or 'resignification' of words such as ‘queer’ and ‘dyke’ by gay men and lesbians would seem to fly against the rationale underpinning such an approach (see Butler 1997 and Speer and Potter in press, for related criticisms).

Finally, since many researchers concern themselves with sexism at the level of single word selection and treat sexism as something that comes ‘attached’ to certain words, they ignore larger stretches of talk, and are unable to comment on the production and management of sexist descriptions, evaluative practices, justifications and accounts which do *not* index sexist words (Ochs 1992). Thus, arguments underlying linguistic reform work by stripping talk of its contextual subtleties and by caricaturing what might count as sexism to ridiculous degrees.

As a result of such criticisms, there has been a gradual shift away from analysing sexist word forms and ‘decontextualised sentences’ toward an analysis of more extended sequences of language use (Cameron 1998b: 947) and its role in naturalising specific versions of gender.

While the two strands of research outlined above continue to be pursued as somewhat separate forms of inquiry, the ‘turn to language’ has highlighted that the two concerns are not really separate issues. Rather, the study of how men and women *use* language (their language behaviour) and the study of how gender is represented *in* language (sexist language), are now thought of as part of the same process: the social construction of gender (Cameron 1998b: 962). Central to this new understanding is the view that sexism is ‘best analysed at the level of discourse’ (Cameron 1998a: 87). It is discourse rather than individual words which, it is argued, constitutes ‘the main locus’ (Cameron 1998b: 962) or ‘key site’ (1998b: 964) for the reproduction and resignification of sexist meanings (1998b: 962–963).

This ‘turn to discourse’ represents a welcome shift for researchers intent on providing an analytic exemplification of their claims. What is rather striking, however, is that despite the increasing importance feminists and sociolinguists attach to understanding the role of discourse in the reproduction of sexism, of analysing ‘everyday interaction’ (Cameron 1998b: 963), ‘daily discourse’ (McConnell-Ginet 1998[1989]: 199), and how meaning ‘is ongoingly constructed in real social contexts’ (Cameron 1998a: 87), to date, most debates about sexist talk have been conducted at the abstract, theoretical level (see, for example, Cameron 1992[1985], 1995, 1998a; Pauwels 1998), and remain isolated from an examination of actual language use.[3]

There has been comparatively little detailed empirical examination of: (a) the *interactional* resources participants use to produce and sustain sexist practices; and (b) ‘real life’ examples of sexist/non-sexist talk being ‘reclaimed’ and ‘resignified’, and used to other more egalitarian/sexist purposes. Such analyses, I suggest, would not only bring arguments about sexist talk alive, but would validate, and thus lend empirically grounded weight to what remain, at present, largely abstract and speculative debates.

This paper sets about developing and extending what we know about the constitution of sexist talk drawing on recent insights from discursive social psychology [DSP] (Edwards 1997; Edwards and Potter 1992; Potter 1996). Drawing on an eclectic data corpus where the topic under discussion is gender and leisure, I examine how members use arguments about possible *injury* to justify women's *non*-participation in leisure activities such as boxing and rugby. By identifying the resources that participants use to produce *and* challenge sexist assumptions, it is hoped that the study of gendered and sexist talk will be taken in productively new directions.

MATERIALS AND PROCEDURES

The data used here derive from a 600-page corpus of transcribed material from a variety of social science, media and 'everyday' sources (including interviews, television documentaries, newspaper articles, focus groups and mealtime discussions). These data were collected as part of an ongoing research project exploring how members justify and account for men and women's *non*-participation in certain sport and leisure activities.

The interviews, focus groups and mealtime discussions (12 in total) were conducted with a range of adults selected from amongst friends and relatives already known to me and who were between 20 and 70+ years of age. Each interview and group discussion was conducted in as informal and 'active' a manner as possible. An active interview can allow for diversity in participants' accounting practices, giving a greater scope and variety than traditional 'neutralist' social science interviews (Potter and Wetherell 1995, and see Holstein and Gubrium 1997).

On each occasion I showed participants visual prompts of men and women engaging in 'non-traditional' activities (such as men's ballet and women's rugby, for example). These pictures, then, provided an interesting, often provocative stimulus around which to generate discussion about gender issues. While all parties' contributions are relevant to, and significant for the analysis, the purpose of using such prompts was to encourage respondents to produce 'gendered' views in a spontaneous fashion, and with as little direction from the researcher as possible.[4] The remaining data were drawn from a corpus of 20 television documentaries covering a variety of topics relevant to gender and leisure, including women's rugby, wrestling, boxing, motorcycling, 'lad' culture, male ballet dancers, male strippers and the Gay Games, and finally, a selection of articles from newspapers and magazines.

The rationale for collecting data from such an eclectic range of sources is to explore the generality of certain features of interaction and sequence types across different contexts. Thus, while each setting may have its own local interactional constraints, it is likely that certain interactional considerations will 'be attended to whatever the type of discourse' (Potter 1996: 8, see also Potter and Wetherell 1987: 162). In this way, the researcher should be able to make some tentative *general* claims about the doing of sexist talk that are not 'setting sensitive' (ten Have 1999: 52).

All the data were transcribed orthographically in the first instance, and then read with a view to identifying the different conversational resources that participants use to produce and sustain inequality in their talk. One of the most frequent justifications used to account for women's non-participation in traditionally 'masculine' activities, is that they might get 'injured', and in each of the extracts used here, the injury argument is drawn on in some way. Injury arguments, as I will be demonstrating, are not 'intrinsically' sexist. 'Sexist' accounts are identified as those where members work to justify gender inequality – and specifically to justify women's *non*-participation in certain sport and leisure activities. The extracts that were chosen thus reflect the *range* of uses to which injury arguments can be put.

Extracts were transcribed in detail using the transcription symbols developed by Gail Jefferson (see ten Have 1999, and Appendix). While the process of analysis is not easily translated into a prescriptive recipe-style list of tasks against which the finished product can be assessed, the extracts themselves can be used as a resource to judge the adequacy of the claims made (see Peräkylä 1997).

My analysis shares with the existing discursive psychological studies of prejudice a focus on the variability and action orientation of talk (see Gill 1993; Gough 1998; Potter and Wetherell 1988, 1989; Wetherell and Potter 1992; Wetherell, Stiven and Potter 1987). I consider how talk is rhetorically constructed and deployed by participants in the management of certain interactional dilemmas (Billig 1996; Billig et al. 1988). In addition, and in line with some recent work in DSP (see Edwards 1997, 1998, in press; Potter 1996, 1997; Speer and Potter 2000), it is influenced by the technical and fine-grained analyses associated with conversation analysis [CA] (Hutchby and Wooffitt 1998; ten Have 1999). This is an approach which focuses on participants' own sense making strategies and which sticks closely to what can be shown to be happening within the data (see Schegloff 1997). This approach is politically and theoretically progressive because 'it allows questions to be asked that are not steeped in gender difference or underpinned by essentialism' (Stokoe 2000: 558).[5]

In the analysis that follows I identify three rhetorical resources used by speakers to manage their claims, sustain prejudiced assumptions, and bolster their arguments against attack:

1. establishing the asymmetry of injury risk and effects
2. building 'normative femininity' versus 'horrific injury' contrasts
3. constructing women's participation as illogical.

In (1) the participants argue that is it worse for women to get injured than men, in (2) that injury is unfeminine, and in (3) that given knowledge and evidence of injury risk, it is irrational for women to want to participate in the first place. I suggest that each of these resources is built using a number of rhetorically organised contrasts and 'distancing' or 'externalizing' devices which reify the factual status of descriptions (Potter 1996) and which work to pre-empt and deflect accusations of prejudice.

4. Inversions and ironic uses.
A fourth resource problematises just what counts as sexist talk, and provides evidence for the ways in which participants themselves can exploit ‘sexist’ arguments in an ironic fashion to expose and challenge sexist assumptions.

I finish by considering the implications of this approach for future work on sexist talk, and discourse analytic work on the relationship between gender and language more generally.

1. ESTABLISHING THE ASYMMETRY OF INJURY RISK AND EFFECTS

A common way in which participants justify women’s non-participation in violent sports is to establish that men and women are differentially susceptible to injury. In other words, women are *more likely* to get injured than men, and, once injured, their injuries are likely to be worse in their effects and implications than for men. Given the possibility that such arguments may be heard as sexist (or at the very least, be treated with scepticism by a young and overtly feminist researcher), what resources do respondents employ to present their claims as solid and factually true, and as independent of their own, potentially prejudiced motivations or beliefs?

Let us look at one example taken from a Boxing Day mealtime discussion between the moderator, Sue (in her mid-twenties) and a group of individuals ranging in age from 60 to over 90. We join the interaction at a point where Sue has just shown the group an image of women boxing, and asked their opinions of it:

1. Mealtime Discussion B: 28–29

1 Jan [No:] don’t like that.
2 (1.0)
3 Sue What? (.) Which one don’t you like?
4 Jan The women. (0.6) I don’t like to see that.
5 [.hhh I think that it’s]
6 Chris [(well they say they (   ) ain’t they?)]
7 → Jan (.) (it is) (.) you could get some very nasty
8 physical injuries.=
9 Alice =Mm::
10 (0.5)
11 Sue ↑WHY is it okay for men to get them and women
12 can’t?
13 Chris Well coz they say a wo- a woman’s breast
14 innit?

Jan struggles to account for why she finds the picture of a woman boxing objectionable (lines 5–7). Note that she begins, but does not go on to comment on the content of the picture, or evaluate the image in front of her. She cuts off 'it is' (which may proceed the words 'horrible', 'unladylike' and so on) in favour of a more neutral, distanced, and arguably less gendered account: 'you could get some very nasty phy̲s̲i̲cal injuries' (lines 7–8). It is interesting that Jan uses the pronoun reference 'you' to describe who might get injured, and not 'they', which would index back directly to the '*women*' she referred to in line four. As an impersonal pronoun, the word 'you' helps Jan to account for why *people* shouldn't do boxing, leaving their gender (productively) vague. Jan may be working to distance herself from potential accusations of sexism here, since *everybody* – including perhaps Jan herself – is implicated in her account (Sacks 1995[1992]).

Sue, however, picks up on and attends to Jan's inexplicitness by asking a further account-seeking question that brings gender (and Jan's possible sexism) back to relevance: '↑WHY is it okay for men to get them and women can't?' (lines 11–12). This problematises Jan's account, challenging her to explain the asymmetry of injury risk implied by her earlier reference to *women*. Although it is Chris who replies, dealing explicitly with the gender issue 'well coz they say a wo- a woman's breast innit' (lines 13–14), the 'well' and false start on 'women', indicate some difficulty with his reply, and his orientation to the utterance as perhaps interactionally dispreferred, delicate and susceptible to argumentative counters (Pomerantz 1984). His description is accomplished through some careful footing (Clayman 1992): just as Jan's use of the word 'you' allowed her to make a general, non-gendered claim about who might get injured, 'they say' defers accountability for this comment onto a similarly non-gendered and non-present third party, thus neutralising any stake Chris has in answering. It may be particularly hard to come back to Chris and say 'they don't say . . .', for example (which would require knowledge of who 'they' are).

Here, then, the internal rhetorical design of Jan's and Chris's accounts – the productive vagueness engendered by the use of impersonal pronouns, and the careful footing – all work together to bolster their descriptions against attack. The significance of such 'distancing' moves is that they enable the speakers to manage delicate moments in the interaction, present their views as factual and independent of their own personal motivations (thus inoculating themselves from accusations of prejudice), and simultaneously bring off their 'strong views' (Billig 1989).

While Sue's uptake in lines 11–12 indicates that they are not always *successful* – whatever success may mean on these occasions – the work involved in such constructions demonstrates an interactional anticipation of, and concern to deflect potentially negative uptakes. Sexism here, therefore, is not brought off unproblematically or straightforwardly, with no apparent trouble or concern (as one might expect if sexism was simply an off-loading of sexist beliefs). Rather, sexism is clearly a participants' concern and one that is attended to in more subtle and dynamic ways than a focus on individual word selection or gendered speech style would allow.

How else might participants build and sustain arguments about the asymmetry of injury risk and effects? One rhetorically robust way in which participants do this is to use a sequentially organised ‘contrast structure’. Contrast structures, ‘in which one argument or approach is contrasted with another in such a way that the speaker’s favoured position is seen to be superior’ (Hutchby and Wooffitt 1998: 233) have been identified as powerful resources used by politicians to make their speeches more effective (Atkinson 1984). Such structures can be exploited by speakers in other contexts where recipients are expected to be sceptical or unsympathetic, in order to facilitate their approval (Hutchby and Wooffitt 1998: 239). Consider the use of such contrasts in the following extracts:

2. Mealtime Discussion B: 2

1	A →	Rose	I’d be a- er- [a woman doesn’t look] =
2		Chris	[you wanna be tough] =
3		Rose	= [very pretty with a black eye] =
4		Chris	= [(you ought to see all these men] =
5	B →	Rose	= [**it’s bad enough** to see a man with ( )]
6		Chris	= [with all these) (.) [you gotta be at least] =
7		Jan	= [with half his teeth knocked out]
8		Chris	= [e- er twelve stone before you start] playing
9			rugby

3. Mealtime Discussion B: 28–29

1	A →	Rose	No but I mean if you went out with a fella er
2			and [er he- he had (.) er] =
3		Jan	[You didn’t wanna box (though Chris did you?)]
4		Rose	=anything wrong >with his face<
5	B →		it-**it wouldn’t be so much but** a fella
6			[wouldn’t speak to a girl that had a] =
7		Chris	[(No) at the clubs you see (.) er] =
8		Rose	= [black eye or a hair lip or] =
9		Chris	= [there’s boxing, I used to do] =
10		Rose	=anything

The participants in Extract 2 produce their account in response to Sue’s hypothetical question, ‘supposing I came home one day and said “ooh I want to play rugby”, what would you say to me?’ Rose and Jan (in overlap with Chris) build an argument that it is worse for women to get injured than men by producing a contrast structure that is organised around references to injuries that are ‘non-equivalent’ in their seriousness. This non-equivalence is rhetorically strong because it helps the speaker produce an argument that is interactionally difficult to counter.

In the first part of the contrast (part A), for example, Rose offers a gendered account which suggests that women don’t ‘look very pretty with a black eye’ (lines 1 and 3). She then indicates, through the use of the contrast marker ‘**it’s**

bad enough' (line 5), that what she is about to say will provide contrastive support for this claim (with the words 'it's *bad enough*' positioning what's gone before as *worse* than what will come next). Jan completes the contrast (part B): 'to see a man with with half his teeth knocked out' (lines 5 and 7). By referring to *non-equivalent* types of injury (the woman has a 'black eye', while the man has a comparatively more serious 'half his teeth knocked out'), the rhetorical force of the argument is bolstered.

We can get a much better understanding of how this non-equivalence works if we consider what the rhetorical or interactional effect of citing *equivalent* injuries might be. If, for example, Jan says 'it's bad enough to see a man *with a black eye*', the focus of contrast is the *gender* of the person with the injury, which may seem overtly prejudiced. By contrasting the 'black eye' injury with a comparatively more serious 'half his teeth knocked out', the participants make their argument that it's worse to see women with injuries more persuasive: it may be hard to disagree with the assertion that seeing a man with 'half his teeth knocked out' is indeed a problematic phenomenon that is 'bad enough'!

A similar contrast structure is evident in Extract 3. Here Rose uses a hypothetical argument to justify women's non-participation by referring to the potential 'damage' that her participation could do to her relationship with her (male) partner. Unlike references to actual events, hypotheticals have the advantage of allowing the speaker to describe situations in a way that may not reflect their occurrence in real life (Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1995: 120). They also have a defensive property (1995: 120) in that (cf. descriptions of real-life events) the speaker is protected from being asked to detail the precise particulars of those events. Like Extract 2, the contrast is built around references to injuries that are non-equivalent. This time, however, the rhetorical effect is achieved, not via comparing more and less serious types of injury. Rather, it is achieved by comparing injuries that are vaguely referenced, with those that are more detailed and specific.

Rose begins (part A) by noting that if 'you' went out with a 'fella' who had 'anything wrong >with his face< it wouldn't be so much' (lines 1–5). The description 'anything wrong with his face' does not specify the precise nature of the injury involved. Indeed, it could index an almost infinite range of things that could lead to facial disfigurement, including cuts, grazes, bruises and worse. As a description, then, it is rather vague, and perhaps productively so. Again, the contrast marker 'it wouldn't be so much but' (line 5) indicates that what is said next will be worse that what has gone before. The description in the second part of the contrast structure (part B) 'but a fella wouldn't speak to a girl that had a black eye or a hair lip or anything' (lines 5ff.) is, by comparison, much more explicit, giving detail of specific injuries. Note that the injury references are organised in the form of a three part list, which portrays them as normative, and expectable (Jefferson 1990). Again, the contrast is a rhetorically effective construction, since one may need to do quite a lot of interactional work to pick it apart and to deny that such injuries are indeed problematic. It may, for example, be rather difficult to offer an explicit, or personalized denial, such as 'actually, I'd speak to a girl with a hair lip'.

As in previous extracts, even while the respondents work to maintain binary gender logic by arguing that it is worse for women to get injured than men, the internal rhetorical construction of their asymmetrical accounts, and the very necessity for such careful construction indicates that the participants are orienting to potentially negative uptakes (and the possibility that their remarks will be interpreted as prejudiced), at the same time as warding them off. What these last two extracts show, therefore, is that it is not simply *what* is said that helps sustain sexist accounts. Rather, it is also *how* things are said – their sequential placement in identifiable contrast structures – which can help bolster the persuasiveness of prejudiced accounts. To date, little, if any research has explored the sequential organisation of (prejudiced) claims as central to the production and management of sexist talk and practices.

So far I have explored the construction of talk which asserts differential effects of injury: that it is somehow worse for a woman to get injured than a man. In the next section, I explore some of the mechanisms used to assert that injury is unfeminine.

2. BUILDING NORMATIVE FEMININITY VERSUS HORRIFIC INJURY CONTRASTS

The extracts below draw on a similar, contrastive pattern of argumentation. In this case, however, the contrasts are not used to compare different male–female injuries. Rather, they are used to contrast images of normative femininity with detailed reference to injuries. These contrasts thereby rely on and work to invoke recipients' commonsense knowledge and expectations about femininity to build a rhetorically powerful position, against which claims about the appropriateness of women's non-participation can be made. As in previous extracts, these contrasts are built using a range of 'distancing' and 'externalizing' devices, including hypothetical examples, three part lists, careful footing, and impersonal pronouns, to distance themselves from accusations of prejudice and to present their arguments as factual rather than prejudicially motivated:

4. Mealtime Discussion B: 10

1	A →	Matt	If you were interested in a girl (1.0) you
2			know and she was nice looking and everything
3	B →		you wouldn't want her to go out and get all
4			smashed up
5			(0.2)
6		Keith	Right. (1.0) There is a [propri-]
7		Matt	[with] broken
8			nose, (0.8) missing teeth, (0.6) cuts and
9			(0.4) grazes, and cauliflower ears

5. Mealtime Discussion A: 25

1		Keith	No: as we were saying, [who– >I mean<] =
2		Donald	['nd I think]
3	A →	Keith	=w- w- a young girl of (.)
4			y- your (.) fiancée,
5			she's twenty years of age,
6			she's going out playing rugby.(.)
7	B →		That night, she comes in,
8			she's got half her teeth missing.
9			.Hhh you know, wouldj-
10			[would you] like that?
11		Pamela	[(Exactly)]

These extracts are strikingly similar in terms of both their content and their structure, and Keith and Matt's choice of words and their sequential placement is important and consequential for the overall rhetorical organisation of their account. They both begin (part A) by producing a hypothetical image of normative femininity and heterosexuality and position the recipients as the partner or potential partner of a female rugby player. In Extract 4, for example, Matt describes someone who may be 'interested' in a 'nice looking' girl (lines 1–2). He uses the generalised list completer 'and everything' (Jefferson 1990) which encourages recipients to invoke images of normative (i.e.: heterosexual) femininity. Similarly, in Extract 5, Keith describes a 'young girl' of 'twenty years of age' (lines 3 and 5), who is situated in a loving relationship with 'you': she's 'your fiancée' (line 4).

These images of femininity and heterosexuality are then contrasted (part B) with images of those same women suffering horrific injuries. So, in Extract 4, Matt notes that she might 'go out and get all smashed up . . . with broken nose, (0.8) missing teeth, (0.6) cuts and (0.4) grazes, and cauliflower ears' (lines 3–9). Similarly in Extract 5, Keith notes that she might have 'half her teeth missing' (line 8). This generates an image which contrasts rather strongly with the 'nice looking' girl (Extract 4) and 'young girl' (Extract 5) that Matt and Keith's hypothetical man might be interested in. Indeed, these particular injuries do not appear to be randomly chosen. These 'girls' could equally have had broken arms, cracked ribs, or concussion. The distinctiveness of these injuries is that they affect the face in some way, and work rhetorically to make claims about the inappropriateness of women's participation more persuasive.

Note that both Keith and Matt talk about the hypothetical wants and likes of their co-participants (Extract 4, line 3; Extract 5, line 10). The discourse of likes and wants is particularly robust when deployed in this manner. For example, in Extract 4, one may need to do quite a lot of interactional work to deny that the injuries Matt describes are problematic. To undermine his claims, one would have to construct a potentially sadistic counter claim, such as 'actually you would *want* to see them all smashed up'. Similarly, it may be hard for anyone to come back to Keith (Extract 5) with the potentially dubious counter claim that they do indeed '*like* that' (line 10) or else assert that 'actually, girls without teeth are rather appealing'. By phrasing their utterances in this way, Keith and Matt orient to and neutralise any stake that would be associated with presenting their own views, thereby working to bolster their (arguably gendered) arguments against possible counters.

A slightly more complex, three-part pattern of argumentation occurs elsewhere, in a different data source. The following extract is taken from the beginning of a television documentary about women rugby players, entitled 'Women with Balls'. The speaker, Brookes, is talking in his capacity as a rugby club manager accounting for the presence of a women's team. Here the speaker exploits the normative inferences associated with specific gender category references (in this case 'ladies') to form an argument that injury is unfeminine:[6]

6. Television Documentary: *Women With Balls* (1998, June 25) Channel 4, U.K.

1 It's the first year that we've had a Harlequin
2 ladies team.
3 (.)
4 They wanted to call it Harlequin women
5 but we insisted that we are (.) gentlemen and
6 ladies so we called it Harlequin ladies.
7 ((cuts to music))
8 A → Whilst in the men's game (they) suffer a lot of
9 injuries
10 (.)
11 B → er they don't really want their ladies to turn up
12 at home with black eyes and broken ↑noses and
13 cauliflower ↑ears.
14 C → Er, they really like them to look
15 a little bit more ladylike than that.
16 ((cuts to women rugby players))

At the start of his introductory narrative, Brookes puts an enormous amount of work into displaying and topicalising his 'sensitivity to the inferential implications of category ascription' (Hutchby and Wooffitt 1998: 214), and to the interactional work that gender categories can do. In describing the process of naming the team (lines 4–6), for example, Brookes details his preference for certain gender categories (e.g. 'ladies') over others (e.g. 'women').

This does some useful interactional work for Brookes. For example, it is easier to imagine 'women' playing rugby than 'ladies', since 'ladies' are not typically associated with rugby, muddy fields and shorts, but rather with gloves, 'posh frocks' and high heels. Therefore, 'insisting' 'that we are gentlemen and ladies' (lines 5–6) helps Brookes lay the necessary rhetorical groundwork for his subsequent claim that it is inappropriate for such 'ladies' to get injured. In the second part of the extract, Brookes produces a three-parted sequence where he sets about establishing why women's injuries are problematic. Unlike the previous two extracts, here, an additional concession component is added (part A) and the order of the normative femininity versus horrific injury contrast is reversed (parts B and C). The first part of the sequence (part A), '[w]hilst in the men's game (they) suffer a lot of injuries' (lines 8–9), works as a concession (Antaki and Wetherell 1999), and as a display of the speaker's interactional 'awareness' that there are *similarities* between the effects of the game on men and on women. However, the second part (part B) details the injuries: 'they don't really want their ladies to turn up at home with black eyes and broken ↑noses and cauliflower ↑ears' (lines 11–13). The plural construction, 'ladies', implies that women might go out getting these types of injuries in droves, while the three part list, 'black eyes and broken ↑noses and cauliflower ↑ears' (lines 12–13), as in Extracts 4 and 5, constructs these types of injury as normative, and just the tip of the ice-berg of a range of related injuries (Jefferson 1990).

It is interesting that Brookes uses the categories 'men' (line 8) and 'ladies' (line 11), respectively (cf. his claim only three lines earlier, where he insists that they are '*gentlemen* and ladies' (lines 5–6, my emphasis)). 'Men' is not the logical parallel of 'ladies', and one can more easily imagine 'men' (as opposed to the top-hat-and-tails variety, 'gentlemen') getting injured. By drawing the largest possible contrast, Brookes works to make his arguments more persuasive. The work done by these gender categories, then, is achieved, not via some neutral, absolute notion of what the category means, but through its indexical usage in relation to another category that is not its logical parallel (Edwards 1998). When a speaker contrasts a category with *activities* one wouldn't normally associate with that category, they 'perform moral work on the world described' (Edwards 1991: 518; Hutchby and Wooffitt 1998: 213; Sacks 1995 [1992]). Injuries are thereby worked up as *intrinsically relevant* to definitions of appropriate femininity.

Brookes' 'they really like them to look a little bit more ladylike than that' (part C) is the perfect rhetorical contrast to the image of awful injuries worked up in the preceding lines. These men are not unreasonable in their requirements, but 'like' their women to look 'a little bit more ladylike' than they would if they had broken noses, and so on. The argument relies on the recipients' own expectations about what is 'ladylike' in order to make a case that seems such a minimal requirement it is difficult to disagree with. Brookes' repeated hesitation 'er' (lines 11 and 14), and 'they don't *really* want' and '*really* like them to look' (lines 11 and 14, my emphasis), again demonstrates an interactional 'awareness' that there may be alternative 'wants' and 'likes', leaving some space for possible counters.

In its entirety, this three-part structure may display the speaker's orientation to the delicacy of arguments about the inappropriateness of women getting injured, and his anticipation of potentially negative uptakes. This interpretation is supported if we look at the way the utterance is constructed, not as a factual statement such as ‘I don’t like women with injuries, therefore they shouldn’t play rugby’ (the kind of statement one might expect to find in attitude scales measuring sexism, for example), but as a speculative, noticing-type of statement, where the constructed views of others serve to minimize Brookes’ own accountability for any prejudice. In fact, this construction may be particularly robust because it concedes that men also get injured (part A of the sequence). It begins by giving ground to the potential opposition, as it were, and in doing so, demonstrates an explicit ‘awareness’ of the subtleties of the situation. In fact, Brookes’ assertion that there are a lot of injuries in the men’s game, is one of the only utterances that *is* stated in a distanced, factual type way. This may be because it is thought to be indisputable, and a perfectly legitimate thing *to* say. Indeed, as a concession, it is the least likely description to be unpacked (Antaki and Wetherell 1999).

In the extracts in this section, it is the male partners of women players who the respondents invested with agency, with the power to like or dislike ‘their lady’s’ or their partner’s participation. In the next section, however, this is reversed. Here it is the *female* rugby players who are invested with agency, and who choose, indeed, ‘like’ and ‘want’ to play. This time, however, the agency (and the reference to their likes and wants) is used to rather different argumentative ends. It works to construct the women as accountable or blameworthy for their rather odd or illogical desire to participate in the first place, thus further warranting the appropriateness of their non-participation.

3. CONSTRUCTING WOMEN’S PARTICIPATION AS ILLOGICAL

A third way in which injury arguments are used to undermine women’s participation in violent pursuits is to assert that, given knowledge of all the injuries associated with boxing, it is actually rather strange or irrational that women might *want* to participate in the first place. Injury arguments are particularly robust when deployed in this manner, as the speaker avoids stating his/her views in an on-the-record fashion (which may risk making him/her seem prejudiced). Instead, speakers present the ‘other’ – in this case female rugby players – as accountable for what they construct as a rather irrational desire. The attention thereby shifts from the speaker’s own views (which may always be open to accusations of prejudice), to the female rugby players’ obviously defective capacity for mental reasoning – or, more specifically – their wasteful, if not masochistic ‘spend and destroy’ philosophy. Consider the following two extracts:

7. Mealtime Discussion B: 28–29

A → Matt I’m surprised [girls] doing it really=
Chris [Yeah]
Matt =like=
Alice =Mm

5		Matt	some (.) all these other rough sports
6			coz they spend so much money on their faces
7			[don't they]
8		Alice	[THAT'S IT!] Makeup (.) Yes (.) Hair↑dos.
9	B →	Matt	**Yet they** (0.4) **do that** and smash 'emselves
10			up.

8. Mealtime Discussion B: 18

1	A →	Jan	=Quite honestly if the lady wants to go and
2			play rugby and smack her nose in=
3		( )	=((coughs))=
4		Jan	=great. Fine. Go ahead.
5		Sue	Yeah.
6			(.)
7	B →	Jan	**But it doesn't.** It's not. I wouldn't want to
8			do it.

Matt (Extract 7) begins by noting his 'surprise' that 'girls' 'like' rough sports, 'coz they spend so much money on their faces don't they' (lines 1–7, part A). Alice provides affiliation (line 4), and even before Matt has finished his turn, collaborates in the production of a three part list. These 'girls' spend money on their 'faces', 'makeup' and 'hair↑dos' (lines 6–8). This listing gives such behaviour a scripted, 'typical' nature, constructing women's investment in their appearance as a normative phenomenon (Jefferson 1990).

This works contrastively with Matt's comments in the second part of the sequence (part B): 'Yet they (0.4) do that and smash 'emselves up' (lines 9–10). '*Yet* they do that' works as a contrast marker, and positions the two activities as incongruous, each with a different logic. In this case, since women invest so much money in their appearance, and care so much about their looks, it is rather surprising that they would want to risk them.

Similarly, Jan (Extract 8) uses the discourse of 'wants' to create a distinction between the (constructed as) irrational 'wants' of female rugby players (line 1, part A), and her own, possibly more reasoned and careful 'wants' (lines 7–8, part B). Jan's comments in lines 1 to 4 work as a form of concession (Antaki and Wetherell 1999), and position her as a supporter of individual freedom, with no objections, in principal, to women's participation. However, the three-part list (Jefferson 1990) used by Jan to express her support ('great. Fine. Go ahead' (line 4)), has a forceful and almost exaggerated quality, which, at the same time, seems to ironize that support, implying that such deliberate self-harm is patently *not* 'fine'.

Jan's 'but . . . I wouldn't want to do it' – with the emphasis on 'I' (line 7–8, part B) – works contrastively with the concession to undermine the rationality of women's participation. Again, this makes the female rugby players appear irrational, and as the kind of 'unthinking' individuals that would deliberately go out and get injured. For Jan, it is not that certain *types* of people shouldn't play rugby, it is simply that 'I' – as a reasonable person, with knowledge of all the dangers – wouldn't do it. This may be rhetorically hard to undermine precisely because the speaker, and no one else, is in a position to talk about their 'likes' and 'wants'. In this way, Jan owns her views, making it difficult for somebody to counter with 'you *would* want to do it'.

The *overall* rhetorical impact of this sequence is enhanced by Jan's 'quite honestly' (line 1). This works to present her forthcoming views as a sincere expression of her feelings on this matter. It also positions what comes next as being rather delicate, and perhaps *requiring* honesty to be said. As Edwards argues, honesty contrasts with 'cognitive calculation' or 'a fake, insincere acting-out' (1999: 283). Thus, such a construction displays Jan's vulnerability to (at the same time, cleverly inoculating her from) possible counters.

A more complex, three part version of the above is evidenced in the final extract of this section. Here, the participants are working to persuade Sue that her (potential) participation in sports such as rugby is not to be advised. Unlike the previous two extracts, here Sue challenges the implied argument that such participation might be irrational or illogical on her part:

9. Mealtime Discussion B: 9

1	A →	Matt	apart from us being against it
3		Eadie	((noise of hearing aid whistling))
4			(0.8)
5		Matt	Why would you choose rugby (.) being a very
6			rough sport, (.) you're liable to get in- (.)
7			horrible injuries, (.) it's twenty-four
8			blokes this year in this country alone (.)
9			rugby players who've broken their necks
10			(0.4)
11		Keith	Yeah
12		Chris	Yeah–[well]=
13		Sue	[Really?]
14		Chris	=a girl [I know that lives underneath me she]
15	B →	Matt	[**I mean** would you (0.4) would you]
16			rather do that than per'aps play tennis or
17			something which is less likely to be?
18			(0.9)
19		Sue	But if I was– if I was male now would you be
20			saying the same things to me?
21			(0.3)
22		Matt	Well no because I think a bloke c'n: (0.8)
23			look after himself more
24			(0.4)
25		Chris	[( )]
26		Matt	[and if he] wants t'– anybody if they wanna
27	C →		(.) face dane– **I mean** I wouldn't wanna play
28			rug↑by

This extract is organised in three parts. Each successive argument – which is marked by the elaboration marker 'I mean' (lines 15 and 27) – builds incrementally on the previous one in order to persuade Sue of the problematic nature of her (potential) participation. In the first part of the extract (part A) Matt manages potential accusations of prejudice by conceding (Antaki and Wetherell 1999) that the group have prejudiced views (i.e. that they are 'against it'), but goes on to dismiss these views as irrelevant. The central issue is not about whether the participants approve or not. It is about the much more important issue of why Sue might 'choose' (line 5) to participate in such a dangerous sport in the first place.

As in the previous two extracts, the (reasonable) speaker is positioned against the unreasonable 'other' by appeals to Sue's rationality: 'Why would you choose rugby (.) being a very rough sport' (lines 5–6). This formulation positions Matt as someone who is having a particular difficulty understanding Sue's (potential) participation, rather than as someone who has a particular problem with, or prejudiced feelings towards, women's rugby. Nonetheless Matt's ownership of this 'difficulty', this lack of understanding, is used to make *Sue's* reasoning (her dangerous *choices*) appear defective. The strength of Matt's assertion, and the contrast between Matt (as reasonable) and Sue (as irrational), is enhanced by the detailed list of evidence about injuries that follows (line 7ff.). This makes it particularly hard to respond in favour of rugby playing, since Sue is being held accountable for a decision that ignores or overlooks evidence of such risks. Matt's reference to such a precise number of neck injuries gives him the status of expert, with facts and figures about the state of the game at his finger tips. It is hardly coincidental that the injuries he quotes are amongst the most extreme available, and typically associated with life-long paralysis. Matt portrays himself as an authority on the sport, and in doing so, constructs a rhetorically powerful, 'factually' informed case, that bolsters his argument against possible counters (Potter 1996).

Note too, the use of the gender category 'blokes' (line 8). Again, this works rhetorically to bolster the dangerous image of the sport. The category 'blokes' is 'inference rich' (Sacks 1995[1992]), and commonly associated with activities such as beer drinking and fighting, or with a person who can 'hold their own'. Blokes (as opposed to 'boys' or 'men') are the least likely category of person to be thought to be going out breaking their necks in such large numbers. If 'blokes' get so badly injured, then what hope is there for girls or women? Sue does not answer Matt's question, but simply notes her 'surprise' (line 13). Matt then tries a different 'tack' (part B) and works to portray himself as a caring advice giver, by framing his views in the structure 'why do X when X is bad? Why not do Y instead?' (lines 15–17). He does not simply *undermine* women's participation, but is thoughtful enough to offer (what he constructs as) a more reasonable, practical alternative. It is interesting that Matt does not finish his utterance by telling us what exactly tennis is 'less likely to be' (line 17). By leaving the completion open to interpretation, Matt avoids having to state a categorical, and possibly dubious assertion, that tennis is 'less dangerous', for example.

Indeed, rather than provide a direct response, Sue's hypothetical, 'But if I was– if I was male now would you be saying the same things to me?' (lines 19–20), draws attention to a possible source of bias in Matt's question, and holds him accountable *for* that bias. Matt's reply 'I think a bloke c'n: (0.8) look after himself more' (lines 22–23), seems to contradict his assertion only a few lines earlier that 'twenty-four blokes' had 'broken their necks' (lines 7–9). So, on the one hand, Matt emphasizes the horrific injuries in the men's game to account for why Sue – and perhaps *anybody* – shouldn't play rugby, and on the other hand, he uses 'blokes' ' ability to 'look after themselves more', to highlight why women shouldn't play rugby. Interestingly, on both occasions, he exploits the 'inference rich' nature of the category 'blokes', but for different rhetorical ends. This highlights the context-sensitive, action-oriented nature of categories and descriptions, and the variable local uses to which injury arguments can be put.

These remarks are de-gendered in the final part of the sequence, with Matt's 'if he wants t'– anybody if they wanna (.) face dane– I mean I wouldn't wanna play rug↑by' (lines 26–28, part C). In the last analysis, then, Matt's objections are not related to gender at all, but are about danger, which applies to *everybody* who plays rugby. This de-gendering is rather explicit, evidenced in the repair from 'he' to 'anybody', with the emphasis on '*any*body'. The sequence ends with Matt's emphatic 'I wouldn't wanna play rug↑ by' (lines 27–28), which closes it down. As I have already argued with reference to Jan's closing remarks in Extract 8, referring to things one would and wouldn't 'want' to do is rhetorically strong. Matt exploits this feature of talk to enhance his argument against Sue's potential rugby playing. The emphasis on 'I' bolsters the contrast between Sue's (constructed as irrational) wants, and Matt's more reasoned wants, holding Sue accountable for her alternative views. Indeed, one of the interesting things about this utterance is that it is not simply a *description* of Matt's wants, but an *account* which is meant to stand alone to justify his views.

So far I have identified three ways in which injury arguments are used to justify women's non-participation in certain activities, and a variety of interactional and rhetorical mechanisms that sustain them. In the next section, I consider three deviant cases which have features that depart from the patterns identified so far. Deviant cases are often extremely revealing, since exceptions to the rule often give a more sophisticated understanding of the workings *of* that rule. They can thus give us a much better understanding of the workings of the target phenomenon (ten Have 1999: 136).

4. INVERSIONS AND IRONIC USES

4.1 Inversions

The following excerpt is taken from a newspaper article about women bullfighters.

10. Newspaper Article: Adela Gooch, A. 'Bullfighter Gored by Male Rivals: Prejudice Forces Spain's Leading Female Matador to Give up Her Career in the Ring', *The Guardian* 1999, May 22

Gooch quotes:

1 A → No one doubts that she's shown balls
2 – or ovaries – in the ring.
3 B → **But** last year she fought more than sixty times
4 and wasn't injured once.
5 C → A bullfighter who's doing the stuff properly
6 gets gored.

In a striking inversion of the 'women *shouldn't* do violent sports because they'll get injured' type of argument, in this extract, women's non-participation in bull-fighting is justified by referring to their *lack* of injury. In the headline, for example, such references are recast as 'prejudice'.

The person quoted begins by citing positive features of the female bullfighter's participation: '[n]o one doubts that she's shown balls – or ovaries – in the ring' (lines 1–2, part A). As I noted earlier, this style of argumentation works rather like a concession (Antaki and Wetherell 1999), where the speaker works to bolster his/her claims by initially conceding positive features of women's participation. As I have already argued, the act of conceding displays the speaker's orientation to potential counters (in this case, that women are skilled and brave), at the same time, inoculating him/herself *from* such counters. This concession is followed by a 'but' marker (line 3), which signals an impending qualification: '[b]ut last year she fought more than sixty times and wasn't injured once' (lines 3–4, part B). In the final part of the sequence, he/she notes, '[*a*] *bullfighter* who's doing the stuff properly gets gored' (lines 5–6, part C, my emphasis). In the last analysis, then, this speaker constructs gender as irrelevant to a bullfighter's success. Good fighters – *whoever* they are – get injured.

This deviant case problematises the assumption that injury arguments might work in uniform ways across contexts to undermine women's participation. Some arguments justify women's non-participation by referring to their *risk* of injury, while others achieve exactly the same effect by referring to their *lack* of injury, again demonstrating the variable uses to which injury arguments can be put. This, then, helps demonstrate analytically claims about the context sensitivity of (sexist) meaning.

In the final two extracts, and in contrast to all of the extracts considered so far, the injury argument is *not* used to undermine women's participation in activities non-traditional to their sex. Instead, it is used in an exaggerated and ironic fashion to highlight the normative (and yet futile) nature of just such arguments.

4.2 Ironic Uses

Here, sexist claims are exploited to other, more egalitarian purposes. Consider the extract below. Sue has just asked the respondents – who are all in their twenties and thirties – if they would consider playing rugby:

11. Mealtime Discussion B: 39

1	Melanie	Ooh, I'd have no desire to play rugby.
2		(.)
3	Elizabeth	(°No°)
4	Sue	°Why not?°
5	Melanie	I've got too pretty fea[tures] =
6	( )	[(Sue)]
7	Angie	=it's violent.
8	Elizabeth	[Coz I'd break my nails]
9	Sue	[mhhh. Mhh hh hh]
10		(.) .hhh hh. hh. hh. hh.
11		[hh. hh. hh]
12	(Sue)	[I don't] [know the rules]
13	Linda	[I couldn't] wear my] high heels!
14	( )	[((coughs))]
15	Melanie	Do(h)n't(h) kno(h)w(h) the ru(h)le(h)s(h)!
16		hah [heh]
17	Elizabeth	[heh heh hah [hah]
18	Melanie	[I] don't know if I can
19		(move) in that gold dress
20	Elizabeth	heh [hah ( )]
21	Sue	[Huh HUH HUH] HUH HUH HUH HUH [.HHH] =
22	Melanie	[knee:s] =
23	Sue	= [hhh hhh (hhh)]
24	Melanie	= [stuck together] trying to [run down]
25	( )	[hh heh hh]
26	Melanie	the [field]
27	( )	[Mhh] huh huh huh
28	( )	[heh] heh heh heh
29	Melanie	[Um:]
30		(.) NO but I certainly [think] =
31	( )	[((coughs))]
32	Melanie	=it's leisure to watch it.
33	Angie	Mm:=
34	Sue	=Right.

Unlike previous extracts, where the participants use injury arguments to justify *others'* non-participation, here, the speakers work to justify *their own* non-participation, by providing an ironic commentary on the injury argument. Ironic commentaries work in the opposite way to fact construction. While factual claims are reified as solid, literal and independent of the speaker, ironising discourse is 'talk or writing which undermines the literal descriptiveness of versions' (Potter 1996: 107). Ironizing discourse thus turns what might be treated as factual or normative 'back into talk which is motivated, distorted or erroneous in some way' (1996: 107). Here the participants work collaboratively to resist and ironise the (masculine) interpretation that their non-participation might be due to fear of injury, by voicing, and thereby exploiting just such fears in an exaggerated and parodied manner. The device by which they construct the irony is a collaboratively produced, stereotyped version of femininity.

The participants provide various accounts for non-participation, some of which centre (if only implicitly) around the possibility of injury: (line 5) 'I've got too pretty features hhh', (line 8) '[c]oz I'd break my nails', (line 12) 'I don't know the rules', (line 13) 'I couldn't wear my high heels!', (lines 18–19) 'I don't know if I can (move) in that gold dress', and (lines 22–26) 'knee:s stuck together trying to run down the field'. Indeed, the participants work *together* to produce a ridiculous combination of accounts. This ridiculousness, and the status of this extract as ironic is itself evident in a number of ways:

First, the accounts are expressed, not as carefully articulated views, but as a collaboratively produced list. This listing gives the impression that the participants are simply off-loading, or voicing (and at the same time caricaturing and ironising), what they take to be a typical or normative (sexist) response (Jefferson 1990).

Second, there is an increasing amount of laughter which is built up sequentially throughout the extract, which displays (what the participants' take to be) the humorous, ironic nature of their accounts. For example, Melanie's '[d]o(h)n't(h) kno(h)w(h) the ru(h)le(h)s(h)!' (line 15), is not framed as a direct challenge to Sue's turn at line twelve. It does not have a questioning intonation, as one might expect if it was a 'next turn repair initiator' (Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks 1977). Instead, Melanie simply repeats the turn with interpolated laughter, thus displaying what she takes to be the 'not-to-be taken seriously' nature of it.

Third, we know that the laughter (and repetition of this turn) treats the account as *funny* (rather than peculiar or problematic for other reasons) since none of the participants attempts to repair their 'laughed at' utterances (as one might expect in more serious discourse (Mulkay 1988)). The participants simply continue laughing and collaboratively 'adding on' more laughable references. In doing so, they appear to be exaggerating and parodying (and thereby problematising) just such a (potential) response to Sue's question.

Finally, the participants themselves mark the distinction between ironic and serious discourse. The shift back to the 'serious mode' (Mulkay 1988), is evidenced in Melanie's considered 'Um:', and '*No but* I certainly think' (lines 29–30). As Mulkay (1988) has shown, this type of contrast marker indicates that what comes next is a departure from the humorous nature of what has gone before.

While not directly promoting or encouraging women's participation, the ironic commentary nonetheless undermines justifications for non-participation.

Indeed, such accounts may actually attend to, and work to destabilise precisely the type of undermining strategies found in the first nine extracts. Thus, the injury argument can be used to achieve a *range* of variable and sometimes *contradictory* actions. This assertion is not just an analyst's gloss but is something attended to, and occasionally highlighted by participants themselves. Sometimes, for example, variability and indexicality in the use of such arguments becomes a participant's *topic*, and the sexism (and hypocrisy) of the injury argument is explicitly highlighted and ridiculed.

In the following newspaper extract, Glenda Cooper responds to the British Board of Boxing Control's argument that pre-menstrual women should not be allowed to box professionally because they are more prone to injury:

12. **Newspaper Article**: Cooper, G. 'Lame Excuses of Our Time: Get Out of the Way. That Woman Boxer's Really Mad – She's Got PMT', *The Independent* 1998, February 14

1 To be honest anyone who decides to box needs
2 their head examined. But if the BBBC is going to
3 suggest that women become emotionally unstable and
4 vulnerable during periods then I'll buy it. Just
5 don't expect me to go near a cooker. I might hurt
6 myself on the nasty hot hob. Or indeed damage
7 myself with a sharp fruit knife due to my increased
8 chance of being prone to injury. Maybe I'll just
9 stay away from the weekly shop at the supermarket
10 in case I become emotionally unstable with the till
11 girl. I'll stay on the sofa, watch television and
12 let men do dangerous things like looking after
13 children. PMT? I'll have it all month thank you
14 very much.

As I demonstrated in my discussion of the previous extract, the opposite of fact construction – ironisation – occurs, when descriptions are constructed 'as partial, interested, or defective in some other way' (Potter 1996: 113). Here Cooper ironises the boxing officials' 'PMT makes you more prone to injury' argument, by illustrating the variable, and potentially contradictory uses of such arguments. In doing so, she highlights the degree of *stake* involved in their (sexist) accounting practices and exposes them as prejudicially motivated.

Cooper not only identifies, but also appropriates the rhetoric of the boxing officials to highlight the fallacy of their own argument. Thus, in a long sequence she uses (exaggerated versions of) the injury argument to undermine women's participation in (what she constructs as) normatively female activities, such as cooking, shopping and child-minding. Using injury arguments to free women from *these* activities, may actually work in their *favour*. This is made explicit in lines 11–13, where Cooper refers, contrastively, to 'sitting on the sofa' and 'watching TV', and to what she would 'let' men do. With this construction, Cooper cleverly presents the Boxing Officials' arguments as inexplicably and unjustifiably gendered.

Again, in this ironic case, injury arguments do not work uniformly to reinforce justifications for women's non-participation. Instead, they are exploited and ironised in order to undermine their factual status, at the same time demonstrating their rhetorical, constructed and constructive nature (see Potter 1996: 112–113). Cooper highlights the variable uses of injury arguments, showing how they can be used inconsistently, as resources in the boxing officials' – and 'men's' (line 12) – favour.

In both cases, the participants problematise traditional assumptions about what is normative. In doing so, they display their orientation to (the existence of) such normativity. Such cases thus give a much richer understanding of the data corpus as a whole, and point towards some productive avenues for future research.

DISCUSSION

This paper has used techniques from DSP to explore the interactional resources participants use to produce and sustain sexist practices. I identified a number of features of participants' accounts which work to reify or ironise the factual status of their descriptions. These consisted of three 'reifying resources' used by participants to present sexist claims as factual and independent of the speaker's own motivations and (prejudiced) belief systems: (1) establishing the asymmetry of injury risk and effects; (2) building 'normative femininity' versus 'horrific injury' contrasts; and (3) constructing women's participation as illogical. I suggested that each is sustained through the use of a range of 'distancing', 'degendering', or 'externalising devices' (Potter 1996), including shifts of footing, impersonal pronouns, hypotheticals, gendered membership categories, and references to likes and wants. These conversational mechanisms work together to sustain prejudiced accounts and at the same time work to pre-empt and deflect potential counters.[7]

I argued that many of these resources are used to form rhetorically potent contrasts. These contrasts work by enabling the speaker to deal with the asymmetry of his/her arguments for inequality in a way that makes them appear less asymmetrical and susceptible to possible counters. The main ways in which this is done is to compare non-equivalent injuries for men and women, contrast images of normative femininity with horrific and detailed descriptions of injury, and to compare women's irrational desire with a more rational one. Crucially, such contrasts demonstrate the value of analysing longer stretches of talk and lend empirical support to the argument that a fuller understanding of sexist talk may be just as much about the *structure* and *sequential organisation* of what is said as it is about the content of the words themselves.

When one looks in detail at the constituent organisation of sexist practices (rather than at specific words or speech styles), it becomes evident that sexism is not simply a problem for analysts. Rather, *what counts* as sexism, prejudice, or some other form of trouble in speakers' talk may be precisely what is at issue for the participants. This point is echoed in Beach's (2000) recent analysis of 'two guys' stories about a woman. Beach draws what he calls a 'critically important distinction' between 'observer-imposed and evaluated social order (e.g., "This interaction is clearly sexist") vs. the analytical demonstration that such order is demonstrably relevant (and thus procedurally consequential) for interactional participants' (2000: 401). According to Beach, it is one thing to make one's own (analytic) assessment that a respondent's account is sexist, it is quite another to say that it is recognized and treated as such by the participants. Beach is equivocal about whether his own respondents can be deemed to be doing the latter. With reference to the data discussed here, however, although it is clear that sexism is not a participants' category (e.g. none of the participants (including the moderator, Sue) says 'that was a sexist utterance'), this does not mean that sexism and its associated 'trouble' is not relevant to the participants, or oriented to in subtle, less explicit ways. Indeed, my respondents, can be shown to be attending to the possibility of their remarks being treated as problematic in some way, and tailoring their talk accordingly. In the instances discussed here, for example, participants' orientations to the potential for a negative uptake are evident in the internal rhetorical design of their accounts. It is the subtle and often delicate ways that participants organise their claims (rather than what is said *per se*) which is indicative of the 'problematic' nature of those claims in the first place. Despite this, previous research has said little (if anything) about what members themselves might *treat as* sexist in different interactional contexts, where what counts as sexism is negotiable and 'up-for-grabs'.

I also identified three deviant cases which demonstrate that injury arguments do not work uniformly to reinforce sexist assumptions, but are interactional, action oriented *resources* that are used to perform a range of actions. The extract included as an 'inversion' for example, shows how references to *lack* of injury can be used to sexist ends. The variability and indexical nature of participant evaluations is made explicit in speakers' ironic commentaries. These show most clearly how injury arguments do not intrinsically support or undermine sexist assumptions but can be used ironically to challenge those assumptions, and be exploited for their indexical usefulness. They can, in other words, be used to both sexist *and* egalitarian ends.

The analysis of irony is significant here, for at least three reasons. First, it lends empirically grounded weight to claims that, to date, have been discussed primarily only in the abstract: sexist talk is not something that comes 'written into' specific words. What counts as sexism is not pre-determined, invariable, and legislated in advance of interaction (though it *can* be for political or legal purposes (see Butler 1997)), but is something that takes on its meaning as sexist in specific contexts.

Second, it demonstrates precisely how meanings come to be 'reclaimed' and 'resignified' in real-life interactional contexts (Speer and Potter in press). By ironising their talk, the participants, like DSP, can exploit and at the same time 'de-naturalise' commonsense (Marshall and Wetherell 1989: 125). As

Extracts 11 and 12 show, dualistic gender logic can be invoked in a rhetorically gross and ironic way in order to highlight the normativity *and* the futility of just such arguments. Thus, since irony works as a *comment* on normativity, it demonstrates what members themselves *treat* as sexist in specific contexts.

Third, since irony can show how futile prejudice is, it can be exploited to produce a powerful social comment, exposing our 'masculine' reality as a social construction (Crawford 1995: 156). Indeed, irony helps speakers to make a complaint about gender inequality without actually complaining, problematising what is taken for granted and highlighting its rhetorical, constructed, and constructive nature.

A similar point is made by Giora, though, like many researchers of sexist talk, she relies primarily on hypothetical examples to support her claims. Giora (1995) notes that irony is a form of 'indirect negation' which means that speakers employ irony in order to comment negatively on some state of affairs without actually doing so in an explicit fashion. While direct negation 'may be vague, it may be face-threatening, and in certain contexts, it may be dull' (Giora 1995: 262), irony, by contrast, is 'markedly informative if not witty' (1995: 259). It is for this reason that irony facilitates the achievement of certain 'communicative goals' that would otherwise be 'unattainable by direct negation' (1995: 262). It is no surprise, then, that irony, like humour, has the potential to become a subversive feminist strategy, used to undermine the patriarchal status quo (Crawford 1995: 153). Further analysis of irony in action may prove to be a politically progressive route for future research.

In sum, the DSP approach used here provides some useful analytic tools through which to operationalise a constructionist approach to language. By drawing more eclectically and more creatively on insights from such approaches: by exploring further the detailed constitution of sexism in action and by producing analytically tractable theories of how and why sexist meanings come to be sustained and/or subverted, we may be in a better position to render the precise constitution of sexist talk explicit. Only then may we be able to develop a contextually informed framework from which to begin to undermine and disarm it.

NOTES

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2. For a comprehensive account of feminist linguistic reform see Pauwels (1998).
3. Where researchers *have* used data in the support of their claims about the variability and context sensitivity of sexist talk, they have typically done so using made-up,

'hypothetical' examples (see McConnell-Ginet 1998[1989]), or 'anecdotal vignettes' (Cameron 1998c: 447). Where 'real life' data from the print media have been used (see, for example, Clark 1998[1992] and Ehrlich and King 1994, 1998[1992]) analyses have tended to be focussed around identifying the functions of specific words and (gender) categories rather than on how such texts work as rhetorically organised, action oriented social practices.

4. It is debatable to what extent the use of prompts is itself bound up in the production of gendered views. For a discussion of the interactional 'effects' of using prompts, see Speer (in press).
5. For more on the theoretical and political utility of approaches which bracket the 'extra-discursive' see the debate between Schegloff (1997) and Wetherell (1998) and Edley (2001) and Speer (2001a, 2001b).
6. This extract is rather different from the previous ones, in that it takes the form of a monologue rather than a conversation. However, as Bakhtin (1986) has shown, since we take account of the possible 'voices' and responses of others as we speak, the speaker still works to present their talk in anticipation of a negative uptake. This work is thus analysable for its rhetorical and argumentative design (see also Hutchby and Wooffitt 1998: 185ff.).
7. It is important to note that these resources are not unique to certain 'types of accounts' or prejudiced claims, but are threaded throughout conversation. These analyses, then, will highlight features relevant to and implicated in the doing of a variety of actions (see Potter 1996).

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APPENDIX

Transcription notation

(.)	A pause that is hearable but too short to assign a time to
(2.0)	Pause length in seconds
[overlap]	Overlapping speech
°	Encloses speech that is quieter than the surrounding talk
↑	Rising intonation
↓	Lowering intonation
CAPITALS	Talk that is louder than the surrounding speech
Underline	Emphasis
>faster<	Encloses speeded up talk
(Brackets)	Enclose words the transcriber is unsure about (empty brackets enclose talk that is not hearable)
.hhh/ hhh	In-breath/Out-breath
Rea::lly	Elongation of the prior sound
.	Stopping intonation
=	Immediate latching of successive talk
((laughs))	Comments from the transcriber
Funn(h)y	Laughter within speech

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