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„Obviously I'm not a dick, right?“

Positioning masculine identities
on the mediated conversational
floor of a television game show

von Linus Westheuser

In this essay I will look at a group of four male students watching the dating and game show “Take Me Out” and in this context analyse the construction of masculinities through conversational practice. The theoretical background of this study is provided by the analysis of media consumption as interaction on a ‘mediated conversational floor’ put forward by Helen Wood, and the positioning approach to gendered identities as developed by Neill Korobov and Micheal Bamberg.

Synthesizing both perspectives I will approach the collected data to ask how the participants use the conversational frame of communal TV watching for positioning themselves; and in what way the recourse to masculinity, in relation to other features, becomes a significant object of these positionings. After starting with a further elaboration of this research question in the light of the mentioned theories, I will introduce the context and realisation of the study. I will then go on to analyse selected sequences from the obtained data. Concludingly I will summarize the results and briefly discuss their implications.

“Men talk” – but how do we know?

One of the most acclaimed contribution to the sociolinguistic study of masculinities has been Jennifer Coates “Men Talk” in which she gives a detailed account of the construction of masculinities by analysing the structure of narratives in all-male conversations and contrasting them with others recorded in all-female groups (Coates 2004). Her general findings – men tend to competitively tell stories about achievement, triumph and other men, are hardly prone to emotional self-disclosure and reinstate their sense of masculine identity by a strict observance of the taboo against homosexuality – constitute what one might call a ‘readily recognisable’ pattern. It seems justified, however, to ask with Deborah Cameron, whether that is, “because we have actually witnessed these scenarios occurring in real life, or [...] because we can so readily supply the cultural script that makes them meaningful and ‘typical’” (Cameron 2004: 270f.)?

The issue this question highlights is the fact that gender distinctions rest on a cultural logic so pervasive in Western thinking, that its effects include the very categories through which we attempt to investigate it. Amongst others, the discoveries made by a feminist critique of science suggest that through instruments like the binary oppositions of

‘male vs. female’ or ‘culture vs. nature’ gendered structures are implicated in the seemingly neutral logic of scientific enquiry (Haraway 1991). Consequently there has been a call in Gender Studies for turning its category of research into an object of research itself.

In the study of masculinity this problem was met by Raewyn Connell in her paradigmatic work “Masculinities”. She conceptualises masculinities as non-ontological ‘configurations of practice’ (Connell 1995) not only related to femininity or broader ensembles of gender, but also internally differentiated into a multiplicity of forms and positions (hence the plural). These varieties are enacted practices subtly complying to and subverting hegemonic norms. Similarly and in opposition to the quasi-ontological categorisations underlying Coates’s research, Deborah Cameron proposes to focus the study of language and gender on the performative acts by which the latter is continuously constructed in subtle, contextualised ways (Cameron 2004). The question then becomes, as Andrea Cornwall and Nancy Lindisfarne put it, “to what extent the familiar oppositions (‘male-female’, ‘men-women’ and ‘masculinity-femininity’) are everywhere belied by a much more complex social reality... [including] the enactment of hegemonic and subordinate masculinities in a single setting (Cornwall/Lindisfarne 1994: 10).

It is this need for a (sociolinguistic) study of masculinities as configurations of performative practice that makes the positioning approach developed in discursive psychology attractive for this study. As Korobov und Bamberg explain, masculinities are here seen as an “empirical phenomenon occurring in talk” constituent of an “interactional identity” (Korobov/Bamberg 2007: 3). This identity is constantly reconstructed through positionings, or the highlighting of certain features of the self that become procedurally consequential in interaction. The resulting positions are drawn up endogenically, meaning in the same conversational frame as the (actively cited) contexts that give them the force of being identity-relevant. According to Bamberg (1997) these positionings are to be found in the ordering of conversation and discourse devices, again with a view to their co-construction of the context (or ‘aboutness’) of talk and the relative location of the speaker within it.

In a study that is exemplary for the approach taken here, Bamberg and Korobov (2007) analyse the way a group of adolescent males draw up positionings in the talk about nudity in a television show. They identify a confluence of positionings along the lines of ‘masculinity’, ‘heterosexuality’, ‘childishness’ and ‘consumer criticism’. What is particularly interesting about their observations

is that all four positionings are enacted in a highly ambivalent manner, as in expressing, for example, male heterosexual desire, while also hedging against features of this position likely to be interpreted as chauvinist or shallow. The attention drawn to the contradictory, negotiating side of identities seems to be of great value for this study.

The second employed theory, Helen Wood's interactive approach to media consumption analysis, focuses on the way the specific situation of TV watching can be understood as conversational social action in a 'mediated conversational floor' (Wood 2007). Taking up the concept of media consumption as 'para-social interaction' (Horton/Wohl 1956), she argues that viewers of TV programmes are not the passive recipients or powerless 'de-coders' of mediated messages, but "respond to the conversational imperatives and sociability invited by these programmes", and "engage with the text dynamically" (Wood 2007: 80). The text thereby becomes a 'text-in-action', a dialogic event she locates, with Erving Goffman, in a 'participation framework' opened up by the utterances of the speakers (Goffman 1981). The parallels of this notion to the endogenic framework for the construction of identity-relevant positions, as outlined above, are at hand.

In the development of her theory Wood

uses data collected from women watching and 'talking with' television at their homes to distinguish three levels of engagement (primary, secondary, tertiary) in the negotiation of TV viewing (Wood 2009). Primary responses are utterances mostly using second-person pronouns directed at a participant in the show ("Oh, shut up, you-"), minimal responses, or the completion of a turn taken by a participant. Secondary responses involve (re-)formulations and interrogations of mediated statements (like "how could he afford paying her, if..."). In tertiary responses viewers take prompts from the interaction with the show to invoke their own personal experience and thereby diverge from the line of thought pursued by the programme ("That's like Richard last summer, ..."). In all three levels of engagement Wood proposes to trace the ways in which "the opening up of a mediated conversational floor allows the challenging of the wisdoms discussed in the text" (Wood 2007: 87).

I will take up the concept of the mediated conversational floor and distinguish the three levels in the following analysis, adding heuristically a fourth one (preceding them) of engaging with a TV show while not watching it. The hypotheses derived from the theories presented so far could be summarized as: The participants will engage in interactions on the mediated conversational floor of

the TV show (1), responding to its contents and cues on all the three levels (2). The negotiation of masculinity will feature prominently in these interactions (3) and will emerge in positionings also relating to other identity-relevant features (4). These positionings will emerge from the sequential ordering of conversational devices in the interaction both among the participants and with the TV show (5).

The study

The present study uses data recorded at the participants shared flat in London. All the excerpts analysed are from the second of two recordings, lasting for about 90 minutes, and document the discussion about which TV programme to watch and the conversations while watching the show “Take Me Out”. I was present during the recording without contributing much to the conversations and most likely also without having much of a distorting effect on the participants’ talk, since I was known to them before and none of the statements refer to my presence as being something unusual. The participants, Amid, Bojan and Chris (all names changed), are undergraduate students between the age of 21 and 22 of mixed ethnic descent.

The TV show “Take Me Out” is a game show produced by ITV in which a single man is presented to a round of thirty sin-

gle women and has to impress them in order to be able to go on a date with one of them. Each woman has a light which she can turn off if she is not impressed by the man’s performance in a series of rounds involving different rules. If some of the lights are still on in the last round, the man gets to choose whom to date from the remaining women. Without inferring too much it can be said, that the show is intensely charged with negotiations of gendered behaviour and presents them in a manner reflecting a diversification of available gender scripts while at the same time being stereotypically heteronormative and sanctioning against deviance.

Obviously I’m not a dick, right?

The preliminary phase identified as engaging with a TV show while not watching it figures quite prominently in the recording, as for a considerable time there is debate between the participants (especially Amid and Chris) about whether to watch “Take Me Out”. This sets the ground for the subsequent positionings of Amid, Bojan and Chris:

(Excerpt from Sec. 1, ll. 1-12; The complete transcript can be obtained from the author. The sections and line numbers in the transcript are indicated as: (Sec: Line Number))

1 Amid: [...] Take Me Out is what we

2 Bojan: = yeah, let's watch Take Me
Out
3 Chris: can we not watch a shit TV
show? Can we (.) sho- (.)
watch a good TV°- how
4 about we watch The Wire=
5 Bojan: =yeah yeah I love The Wire=
6 Amid: =no, let's not watch The
Wire
7 Chris: how about we watch:::
8 Amid: Chris you gonna love Take
Me Out I'm not lying (.) ob
9 viously I'm not a dick, right?
10 obviously I don't watch
these kinds of shows (.) *but*
(.) (inaudible) (.) there's a
11 certain::: um. ((seeing a
video on the computer))
THIS GUY WAS SO AWE
I'VE SEEN THIS ALREAD
12 MAN (1.4) >let me know if
you wanna watch Take Me
Out<

Amid advocates the show, with Chris viewing it as “shit” and proposing to watch (the more ‘socio-critical’) series “The Wire”. Amid, rejecting this proposal and interrupting Chris when he attempts to make another one, performs a positioning paradigmatic for the following sequences when stating “obviously I’m not a dick, right?”, seeking to consolidate the position of his proposal. This he does, however, at the cost of the statement becoming contradictory, as

he adds “obviously I don’t watch these kinds of shows” – while actively endorsing it in the conversation – which he solves by changing the subject to a video running on the computer.

The gender subtext of this controversy is indexed by Amid’s identification of the show with ‘being a dick’. He thereby most probably refers to the character of the show as being a quite overt display of hegemonic and heteronormative gender conceptions, where the “dick” figures as the ‘other’ of a shared identification he invokes. The debate continues and is resolved by Amid overriding Chris’s repeated vetoing and turning on the show (1: 12-32), which prompts Bojan to join the conversation:

(Excerpt from Sec. 1, ll. 32-41)

32 Amid: [...] I say you're gonna love
this Chris=
33 Chris: =NO::: I'm not gonna love
it=
34 Bojan: =it's good man
35 Amid: it's really [good
36 Chris: [(inaudible) is
good
37 Amid: you've never seen this
[don't be prejudgemental
38 Bojan: [it's really degrading to
women
39 (1.5)
40 Amid: just go with it ((starts
clapping with the show

41 audience)) clap man clap (.
you(re) obviously not
gonna enjoy (it) if you don't
take part in it

Bojan's remark again makes it clear that gender is the most salient feature of the show. Although we will see in the continuation of this sequence that he positions himself as critical of both the show and its gender implications he here (with what could be 'innocently' read as an attempt at irony) links the show's being "good" with its being "really degrading to women". This contradictory referencing to the enjoyment of something one disapproves of (as in Amid's statement above) is a recurring theme of the conversation's negotiation of hegemonic masculinity as indexed by both 'being a dick' and 'being degrading to women'.

On another part, Amid's joining the emphatic clapping that marks the beginning of the show, can be seen as the first interaction on the mediated conversational floor. Amid seems eager to build this discursive space by admonishing the reluctant Chris to "clap, man, clap", then pointing to the fact that the (enjoyable) interaction with the show needs his participation.

In the following stages the participants interact with the mediated conversational floor of the show on all three levels

enumerated above. As it is to be expected there is an abundance of primary responses in the data. Besides (near-)minimal responses like "god" (5: 9), or "oh, that's stupid" (3: 22), we find a number of incidents where one of the participants directly interacts with a speaker on the show, as in the presenter asking: "They make a lovely couple, don't they? Eh?", with Chris replying: "No" (3: 25); or a female contestant saying that in order to keep the male candidate home she would "let the candles do the talking, open a bottle of champagne [...] and see where the night goes", to which Bojan remarks: "My god, he'd get a heart attack" (5: 45).

Like in these examples, the responses are virtually all negative and work to (playfully) contradict the messages suggested by the programme. An interesting exception is the following sequence prompted by a male contestant showing his strength by pulling strings on a fitness bench:

(Excerpt from Sec. 3, ll. 10-17)

10 Amid: woo:h is that his special
trick? (.) he pulled a fucking
string for like (.) thirty
seconds

11 Chris: he's a limited man[...]

14 ((one of the women says she was im-
pressed by seeing the hair on the

chest of the contestant))

(.)fa:t-to-muscle-ratio
((others laughing quietly
for 11s))

15 Amid: you could see the hair on
the chest when he first
came in

16 ((other woman says she didn't un-
derstand what he was doing))

17 Chris: true(.) nor did I(.) I like her

It is clear that the extremely rare positive reaction to a character in the show ("I like her") is linked to expressing a rejection of the masculinity presented by the sporty man on the fitness machine, who is also referred to as "a limited man". Amid and Chris – on a very small scale of primary responses – cooperatively interact with the interviewed women in taking apart this masculinity.

Another example of a primary response, finishing the turn of a speaker in the studio, is seen in the following example:

(Excerpt from Section 6, ll. 1-4)

1 ((presenter to a male candidate, re-
ferring to one of the female contes-
tants: [...] and you went for this

2 little firecracker))

3 Bojan: yeah yea::h she's great I
slapped her arse earlier
((silent laughing from the

4 others)) (1.0) just the right

This quote is interesting in that Bojan obviously takes part in and exaggerates the sexist logic of the presenter's statement. The chauvinist connotations of the talk are mitigated as they are suggested to be performed by the presenter, in what, borrowing from J.L. Austin might be called a 'parasitic' positioning (see Austin 1976: 22). The fact that the laughing is suppressed, but continues for eleven seconds after Bojan has delivered the statement hints at the ambivalence of such an interactional move as it both stimulates the participants (maybe as a cathartic expression of the underlying discourse of the situation) while also breaching the 'progressive' consensus of the group.

These contradictory dynamics become more evident in the following sequence in which both Amid and Bojan engage in a short and indirect conversation involving secondary responses ('interrogating the text'):

(Excerpt from Sec. 2, ll. 1-4)

1 Amid: ((claps and cheers)) they're
basically just desperate
girls that keep coming back

2 Bojan: basically (.) it's probably
gonna pretend it's about

3 the women's choice (.) and
like women have the power
and then (.) it's not (.) they're
4 reduced to animals who're
chosen (.) by an idiot (.) by a
fucking idiot (.) goade-
goaded by the other idiots

In this excerpt Bojan implicitly replies to Amid's formulation of the show's content. Starting his statement, as Amid does, with the word "basically", he offers an alternative account of what the show is about and positions himself as being critical and understanding about its underlying gender ideology. This is repeated when in another sequence Amid, Bojan and Chris jointly position themselves in a similar manner by agreeing that you have to "have no respect for yourself and woman to be on this show" (5: 28-39).

Secondary responses like this one (or Amid's question "is that his special trick?" as quoted earlier), interrogating and questioning the 'text' of the show, are the dominant figures of reaction, as the participants construct their responses in opposition to the show and its candidates. However, in accordance with Wood's concept we also find responses distinct from and drawing on associations with personal experience to diverge from the show's topic altogether (tertiary responses). One example is the following sequence taking as a point of departure the already quoted statement

about 'letting the candles do the talking' and relating it to a story about the participants' flat mate Jeff:

(Excerpt from Sec. 5, ll. 46-50)

46 Amid 'let the candles do the
talking' (.) and then Jeff
went to the bank right (.)
47 and like they ((laughing
voice)) tried to persuade
him to take one of those
fifty pounds a month
48 contracts (.)um the bank
accountants were like
speaking banter like
49 ((imitates voice)) 'but don't
you want your money to
work hard for you? ((Bojan
laughs)) and Jeff was like
50 <'it's an inanimate object-
it can't work> ((the others
laugh))

This is a quite remarkable example of using the mediated conversational floor for personal narrative, as it relates the show's hollow anthropomorphism of 'letting the candles do the talking' to the similarly hollow 'letting your money work for you', although the phrases have their origin in altogether different settings. On the other hand this as well can be read as a gender-relevant positioning in that it associates the rejection of the programme's "romantic" idiom with a more general attitude of critical thin-

king.

Masculinities on the mediated conversational floor

It has become evident in the analysis that the participants extensively use the conversational cues provided by the TV show. Further, the way they do so suggests that a mediated conversational floor, in the sense of a discursive space encompassing both the television programme and its viewers, is constructed through response practices on all the three levels identified. These are presupposed in interactional performances like the 'parasitic' speaking through a mediated other, as well as (jointly) interrogating statements made in the studio. We have further seen that these performances and the specific conversational opportunities offered by a mediated floor become relevant for positionings of masculinity, somewhere on a scale between "just an idiot goaded by the other idiots" and "you won't enjoy if you don't take part".

In the light of this analysis the contradictory evaluation of the show by the participants should become more transparent: What – as one might still wonder – is the appropriate finishing part of Amid's statement, "I'm not a dick, right? I don't watch these kinds of shows, but—"?" It might be that exactly through their blatantly normalising display of gende-

red practice, 'these shows' create for the viewers a discursive space for the enactment and appraisal of their own positionings, or in other words, set the stage for a more concise (and also less dangerous) exposure to gendered 'configurations of practice', than is possible in everyday life.

This tells us something both about media consumption and the making of masculinities. As far as the former is concerned it seems clear that a critical theory of mass media cannot content itself with 'one-way' models of medialised communication, as implied in the talk of indoctrination that has become the unspoken background of so much of folk sociology. Instead what needs to be highlighted are the diverse and localised communicative practices involving mass media, as well the relational space in which mediated and unmediated negotiations of a medialised event are situated. Both can contribute to an interactional perspective which – without assuming the receiving side as the sole or primary locus of control – appreciates its continuous and constructive activity as a constituent of whatever significance the medium and its messages may hold.

In a similar sense the example given in this study illustrates the making of masculinities as cultural practice. In a positioning approach, as introduced here,

masculinities are objects of practical exchange contributing to a relational identity. Although this implies differential values of positions and strategic action for their attainment, it is neither a case of optimising behaviour, nor of adaptation to a uniform norm or role pattern, as the value and desirability of different masculinities remains uncertain to a degree and may be contested at any time. As objects of positionings they obtain their form and become socially powerful only insofar they are endowed with meaning in discursive practice. The viewing of a heavily gendered TV show, then, is an example of the relationality of this process, as the gender statements of the show are rejected personally and nonetheless joyfully received and made relevant in vicarious positionings, because they offer an intersubjectively recognisable 'participation framework' for discursive practice around gender.

However, although the data presented here gives us some insight of how gendered identification takes place in mediated conversation, the question remains open of why it is that the gendered scripts of the TV show are of such immediate relevance to a group of viewers distancing themselves from them, or in other words, how the relative uniformity of the gender scripts regulating the mediated and the immediate conversational floor comes about in the first place.

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Transcription Conventions

| | |
|--------------|---|
| (.) | Short pause of less than 1 second |
| (1.5) | Timed pause in seconds |
| [overlap] | Overlapping speech |
| °quieter° | Encloses talk that is quieter than the surrounding talk |
| LOUD | Talk that is louder than the surrounding talk |
| Bold | Words emphasized by the transcriber for analytic purposes |
| Emphasis | Emphasis |
| >faster< | Encloses talk that is faster than the surrounding talk |
| <slower> | Encloses talk that is slower than the surrounding talk |
| (brackets) | Encloses words the transcriber is unsure about |
| ((comments)) | Encloses comments from the transcriber |

| | |
|----------|--|
| Rea:::ly | Elongation of the prior sound |
| . | Stop in intonation |
| = | Immediate latching of successive talk |

Zum Autor

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