

THE EMERGENT CONSTRUCTION OF FEMINIST IDENTITY IN INTERACTION:
A SOCIOCULTURAL LINGUISTIC APPROACH

by

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The Emergent Construction of Feminist Identity in Interaction: A Sociocultural Linguistic Approach

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This paper analyzes a group of college-aged women's conversation about feminist identity. Starting from a sociocultural linguistic theoretical framework and employing insights from conversation analysis, I argue that the interlocutors' feminist identity is an interactional achievement produced through relevantly setting aside topics and displaying agreement to that action. The paper illustrates how this practice (re)problematizes feminism and maintains hegemonic standards of 'feminist' as an identity that needs to be accounted for in conversation.

Research on feminist identification in the United States shows that many young women tend to agree with feminist ideals but not with a personal feminist identity (Breen and Karpinski 2007; Jacobson and Koch 1978; Houvouras and Carter 2008; Redfren and Aune 2010; Williams and Witting 1997). Accordingly, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2013) point out that the phrase "I'm not a feminist, but" is common among college women. However, the research I conducted among women at a public university in 2016 suggests that feminist identification may be shifting, at least in terms of its enactment in discourse. The responses of women in my study fall more in line with "I *am* a feminist, but..." producing a type of identification that I call '*sort of feminist*'.

The data I present in this paper examine the "micromoments" of identity construction (Kitzinger and Mandelbaum 2013; Bucholtz and Hall 2005). In the data, we see an emergent semantics of feminism by examining what the participants feel is relevant to set aside. Yet I

argue, following other work in CA, that the practice of relevantly setting aside topics serves to (re)create normatively acceptable identities (Maynard 2016; Raymond and Stivers 2016). This process invariably produces patriarchal hegemonic identities, with interlocutors removing themselves from their assumed understanding of feminism and thereby solidifying feminists as a problem. However, if social products and actions are the basis for hegemonic social organization, then they are also agents of change (West and Zimmerman 2009:114). My data reveal that when topics are not set aside, they can be negotiated with as very real and relevant aspects of feminist identity, both in talk-in-interaction and in other conceptualizations of feminism.

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Introduction

Language is the foundation of social organization and social action. Action is a discursive achievement, whether physical, as in a reaction to a request like “close the window,” or social, as in the production and performance of identity. Feminist identity, the focus of this thesis, is both a production and a performance of particular worldviews and beliefs. People create, understand, and conceptualize feminism through language, particularly through conversation and talk-in-interaction. This thesis explores how feminist identity is produced in conversation, how it is created, understood, and conceptualized, and how the discursive practices of this conceptualization not only create localized feminist identities for speakers, but also (re)create larger discourses surrounding feminism.

In patriarchal society, feminist identity is by its very nature problematic, since feminism as a movement, in its most basic definition, seeks to create equity and equality for women by uprooting systematic oppression. However, the movement has undergone many changes and iterations since its expansion in the second wave feminism of the 1970s, and there are many varying definitions and expectations of what it means to be a feminist. In her review of feminist perspectives that have been influential in language and gender research, Mary Bucholtz (2014) defines feminism as “a diverse and sometimes conflicting set of theoretical, methodological, and political perspectives that have in common a commitment to understanding and challenging social inequalities related to gender and sexuality” (p. 23). The view of feminism as “challenging social inequalities” is particularly important to historical definitions of feminism, and this view is shared by many feminist researchers in sociocultural linguistics as well, as both a direction and a purpose for sociolinguistic scholarship. For instance, Mary Talbot (2010), who researches language and gender and the construction of gender in teenage magazines, defines feminism as

“a form of politics dedicated to bringing about social changes, and ultimately to arresting the reproduction of systematic inequalities between men and women” (p. 17).

Previous research on feminist identity often focuses on young women, particularly college aged women, and it often investigates why more young women do not self-identify as feminists (Breen and Karpinski 2007; Jacobson and Koch 1978; Houvouras and Carter 2008; Redfren and Aune 2010; Williams and Witting 1997; Rudman and Fairchild 2007). Research on feminist identification in linguistics has explored the ways that discourse categorizes feminists and defines people’s attitudes towards feminism. Such research shows that many young women tend to agree with feminist ideals but not with an overt feminist identity. Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet (2013) observe that the phrase “I’m not a feminist, but” is common among college women, and they argue that resistance to the term feminism is twofold. First, feminism is associated with “organized political action” (2013:193-194), which is echoed in other work (Houvouras and Carter 2008; Zucker 2004). Second, feminism often evokes negative stereotypes ranging from ‘feminazis’ to ‘whining victims’ (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2013:995; see also Breen and Karpinski 2007; Jacobson and Koch 1978; Houvouras and Carter 2008; Redfren and Aune 2010; Williams and Witting 1997). However, there are a variety of other reasons why someone might not identify as a feminist. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2013) remind us that some women of color do not identify as feminists because feminism as a movement has not always been viewed as appropriately intersectional (195; see also Crenshaw 1991 and Collins 1990 on this aspect of early second wave feminism). Indeed, there is an extended critique regarding feminism’s neglect of voices and perspectives that are not upper-middle class, white, cisgender women (see also McCall 2005; Choo and Marx Ferree 2010; Collins and Bilge 2016).

Much of the research on feminist identification has been conducted through surveys, where participants, mostly college aged women, are asked if they are or are not feminists, and if they do or do not associate certain stereotypes with feminism. For such a complex, multifaceted identity and political movement, it seems difficult if not impossible to discover meaning behind the term through selective sampling of opinion. Rather than assume people can easily check a box if they are or are not a feminist, this thesis analyzes college-aged women's conversations on feminism and feminist identity. Conversation is the locus of social order (Ford, Fox, and Thompson 2002:4), as well as social organization, action, and understanding. Therefore, in this thesis, I suggest that it is more productive to understand feminist identity by working from the bottom up, analyzing conversation as it relates to feminism when feminism is made relevant (Gordon 2011).

The broader university-approved study on which this thesis is based involved 26 semi-open sociolinguistic interviews and 3 video-recorded group discussions with undergraduate students, graduate students, and staff at a large public university in the western United States. Students across undergraduate linguistic classes were offered extra credit for participating in either one-to-one interviews or a video-recorded group discussion on the topic of feminism. The excerpts analyzed for this thesis are taken from a group discussion involving five undergraduate women previously unknown to each other before consenting to having their conversation video-recorded: Claire, Liz, Nadia, Grace, and Aly (all pseudonyms). All the participants self-identified as female, were between their second and fourth years of university, and were between nineteen and twenty-two years old. Aly was an international student who self-identified as Chinese, Claire was from the United States and self-identified as Japanese American and German, and Grace, Liz, and Nadia, all from the United States, self-identified as white. At the

start of the session, I asked the women to introduce themselves to each other, including their names, year in school, and major. I then requested that the group talk about feminism; specifically, I asked the group to talk about anything they felt was relevant to feminism, whether in their lives, with their friends, in their communities, or in the media. I also explained that I was purposely leaving the subject open, and that they could talk about anything they felt was relevant to a conversation on feminism. I then turned on the video recorder and left for 45 minutes.

What followed was a rich conversation on feminist identity, rape culture, sexism and misogyny, career hopes and struggles, family expectations and relations, patriarchal standards for femininity, and more topics, but this thesis will focus on the first two minutes of conversation in which group members discussed whether or not they identify as feminists. Starting from a sociocultural linguistic theoretical framework and employing insights from conversation analysis, I argue that the interlocutors' feminist identity is an interactional achievement produced through the ways they collaborate on bringing up and then dismissing topics associated with feminist identification. The thesis illustrates how this discursive practice—i.e., relevantly setting aside topics and displaying agreement to that action—(re)problematizes feminism and maintains hegemonic standards of 'feminist' as an identity that needs to be accounted for in conversation.

Identity as Emergent in Discourse

This thesis builds on a rich history of scholarship on language, gender, and identity. Robin Lakoff's (1972) foundational monograph, *Language and Woman's Place*, is often cited as launching this area of research. Lakoff argued that there are differences in women's and men's language, and these differences are attributable to male social dominance. But as with feminism in the applied world, ideas have shifted in academia regarding how best to understand gender as

a social construct. After Judith Butler's (1990) poststructuralist theory of gender introduced the idea that sex as well as gender is performative—that is, produced through its reiteration in discourse—scholars like Deborah Cameron (1995) built on this perspective from the mid-1990s forward by researching the ways that gender is produced in discourse (for early compilations, see Hall and Bucholtz 1995; Bucholtz, Liang, and Sutton 1999). Eckert and McConnell-Ginet's (1992) approach, building on ethnographic methods, focuses on gender within communities of practice, localizing identity work to interlocutors in a particular community. From conversation analysis, researchers such as Don Zimmerman and Candace West (1987) show how people accomplish gender in everyday interactions. Overall, these and many other scholars research the performance and production of gender, sexuality, and identity in and through everyday language use (for an extended review of this literature, see Zimman and Hall 2016)

In addition to identity performance, social categories and categorization have also been a central area of concern in language, gender, and sexuality. According to Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2013), normative social categories are not constructed abstractly but rather in “concrete action,” and it is through this construction that “categorizing oneself and others can be an important part of affirming social affiliations, of developing and cultivating a social identity” (241). Recent discussions view the categorization of identity as emergent in interaction. For instance, Mary Bucholtz's and Kira Hall's (2005) sociocultural linguistic approach to identity in interaction shows how identity is the product of linguistic practice. Identities are intersubjectively constructed in conversation, and they are also indexical of larger ideologies as well as encompassed by macro demographic categories (585). Celia Kitzinger and Jenny Mandelbaum, working from the perspective of conversation analysis, argue that identities are “collaboratively constructed, moment by moment, by social actors in interaction” (177). Macro-

identities like ‘feminist’ often additionally have qualities and practices associated with them, constituting what Asif Agha (2005) calls “figures of personhood.” Speakers incorporate these larger ideological discourses on identity into their conversations as they produce themselves as particular kinds of people, or in this case, particular kinds of feminists. In conversation, identity work is scaffolded at multiple levels. Speakers make individual performative choices in the conversation, but those choices are then intersubjectively negotiated and assessed by the interlocutors. Conversations as a whole are indexical of larger ideological understandings of identity, but they are also constitutive of that understanding. As such, they are an important site for the (re)creation of normatively acceptable social identities. Analysis is necessary at all levels to see how identity work functions across speakers and domains.

The Other F Word

The analytic method I adopt in this thesis focuses on the ways that interlocutors themselves decide what is relevant for feminist identification in their conversation. In order to arrive at a unified understanding of feminism, the group negotiates the problematic nature of feminism in multiple “micromoments” of identity construction (Kitzinger and Mandelbaum 2013:192). In the conversation analyzed here, the identity of ‘feminist’ is presented to the group as something to take a stance towards. Nadia invites this stance-taking in her opening question: “Well, do you guys all identify as a fem, feminis, as like a feminists::S?” (see Appendix for transcript conventions). This question is then negotiated by conversational participants. In their negotiations, participants talk about qualities and practices associated with feminism, and they make those qualities and practices either relevant or irrelevant to their individual identities. In this way, a particular kind of feminist identity emerges, as participants restate stereotypical

aspects of being a feminist, recast these stereotypes as positive aspects of their own feminist identity, and by so doing reify issues surrounding feminism. Participants “do agreement” with each other in order to arrive at a unified understanding (Pomerantz 1984a), and in this conversation they jointly construct a macro-identity category of ‘feminist’ by making qualities and actions relevant (or not) to both the conversation and their understandings of self.

Throughout the conversation, the participating women establish a normative expectation for feminism through processes of relevantly setting aside the qualities and actions they believe are associated with feminism but not with their own feminist identity. Additionally, even when qualities and practices are claimed by the interlocutors as part of their identities, there is still an aversion to identifying outright as a feminist. Practice is foundational to identity work, and yet practices associated with feminist identity are continually cast and (re)cast as negative things to be avoided. In the conversation, participants deal with this paradox as they negotiate the qualities and practices of feminist identity and reorganize those qualities and actions into what I am calling a *‘sort of’ feminist identity*.

In order to start the conversation, Nadia introduces a question, as shown in excerpt 1.

- (1) [Feminis::S]
1 Nadia: Okay sssss hhhhh
2 (1.2)
3 Claire: hh umm: what do you want to start with
4 (0.4)
5 Nadia: well, do you guys all identify as a fem, feminis, as like a
6 feminists::S? Maybe that could=
7 Claire: =umm=
8 Nadia: =be a good jumping off
9 Claire: [not necess:a:rily, I guess,
10 Nadia: [point

From the start, the term “feminists” is treated as problematic. Kitzinger and Mandelbaum (2013: 188) find that speakers often claim a particular identity through the competent use of a specialized vocabulary term. Yet in this example, we see a refusal of competence. Nadia’s question in lines 5-6 is characterized by a lack of commitment to any kind of specialized vocabulary. After two false starts, Nadia begins her pronunciation of the word ‘feminist’ with falling intonation, then draws out the final /s/ through the use of heightened intensity and high rising intonation. By not fully producing the term, Nadia performs a dis-identification with the identity of feminist from the outset of the conversation.

Anita Pomerantz (1984b:155) has found that “delicate” topics are often spoken about in glosses or euphemisms, and although “feminists::S” is not a euphemism, it is spoken in such a way that avoids directly and succinctly saying what scholars have sometimes dubbed “the other word” (Pritchard 2005; Hernandez-Truyol 2011; North 2009; Jaworska and Krishnamurthy 2012; Houvras and Carter 2008). Nadia’s hesitation to state the entire word perhaps reflects a general trend in popular discourse to avoid saying this word at all. Researchers from a variety of fields have found an aversion to the term “feminist” in classrooms of college students (Houvouras and Carter 2008), journalism (North 2009), large media corpuses (Jaworska and Krishnamurthy 2012), legal studies (Hernandez-Truyol 2011), religious studies (Pritchard 2005), and interviews (Anastosopoulos and Desmarais 2014). Indeed, college-women appear to associate feminist identification as incompatible with attractiveness. A survey done by Laurie Rudman and Kimberly Fairchild (2007), for instance, found that college women who ranked themselves highly on an attractiveness score were less likely to identify as feminist. Teun A. Van Dijk (1995) argues from a critical discourse analysis perspective that lexical choices reflect speaker’s ideologies and thereby contribute to a word’s meaning. As with taboo more generally,

the “other f word” is invested with ideologies that makes its use in everyday conversation “matter out of place” (Douglas 1966: 34) and leads to its avoidance. In this sense, Nadia’s verbal hesitation regarding the word “feminism” serves as a containment strategy (Fleming and Lempert 2011; Irvine 2011), diminishing her responsibility for bringing the taboo term into conversation.

A second form of evidence for the group’s discomfort with the term comes from the way they respond to Nadia’s opening question. After Nadia poses the question, no other speakers immediately respond, so she continues talking to mitigate the lack of a response with “Maybe that could” (line 6), to which Claire responds with “umm” in line 7. The first opportunity for response would have been after the initial question “Do you guys identify as feminists::S?” (lines 5-6). Nadia’s drawn out [s] and rising intonation calls for a response, but group members remain silent. Claire’s minimal response in line 7, produced only after Nadia begins a second question, is thus delayed for the original question. Delayed responses are dispreferred in conversation (Sacks 1987), so Claire’s delayed response further solidifies the problematic nature of the term ‘feminist.’

In the responses that follow from other participants, we see how the group constructs an understanding of the term as it relates to their identities. Rather than discuss what it means to be a feminist abstractly, the interlocutors discuss what qualities and practices they believe are a part of being a feminist, and it is in this process that the group’s understanding of feminist identity emerges. One of the primary tasks of the interlocutors is dealing with the concept of “feminists::S,” as brought up by Nadia. Since everything must be done for “another first time” (Garfinkel 1967) in every conversation, in this conversation the participants must construct a collaborative understanding of feminism online, and they must orient themselves to that

emergent understanding in the conversation. Additionally, in order to demonstrate comprehension of the understanding of feminism that is emerging, the speakers must also demonstrate agreement with each other in their collaborative construction. Nadia's question motivates the group to intersubjectively (re)define feminism and to display understanding and agreement to that definition. The stances taken by the participants in this conversation are not in reference to a fixed, stable concept, but rather to an identity that must be continually (re)negotiated through its problematic perception in the world.

A Sort of Feminist Identity

Throughout the conversation, the interlocutors negotiate the relevance of a variety of qualities and practices surrounding feminism, and it is through this negotiation that the group's emergent 'sort of' feminist identity arises. The qualities that are negotiated around the concept of feminist identification include being "active" (Excerpt 2) and having a "personal" feminism (Excerpt 3), as well as being "aggressive" (Excerpt 4), "radical" (Excerpt 5), and "obnoxious" (Excerpt 4). Participants also negotiate practices surrounding feminism, like "protesting" (Excerpt 5) and "voting as feminists" (Excerpts 4 and 7). In their discussion, the interlocutors make all of these qualities and practices relevant to the conversation about feminist identification. At the same time, they also single out some of these qualities and practices as irrelevant to their own personal identity and use of the term. I suggest that it is through this discursive practice of making a topic relevant to the conversation but irrelevant to one's personal identity that feminism becomes reified as a problematic identity and maintains hegemonic social organization.

A Sort of Feminist: Relevant Qualities

Beginning with the qualities associated with feminism that arise in the conversation, Excerpt 2 shows Grace saying that she's not a very "active" feminist, with emphasis on the word active.

(2) [Active feminist]

25 Grace: yeah like I'm not, if someone said, I'm not going to say I'm not
26 a feminist, [because

27 Claire: [mhmm

28 Grace: I'm definitely like- I guess technically would be I am a feminist
29 but like I'm not very active feminist I guess=

30 Claire: =yeah=

31 Grace: =*if that's [a good way of explai-*

32 Claire: [like a like=

33 Grace: =*explaining it*=

In line 25, Grace says "I'm not going to say I'm not a feminist," emphasizing the word "not."

From the start, this overwrought syntax shows that Grace does not completely disavow a feminist identity, but she also does not fully embrace the term, since in line 28 she says she "technically would be" a feminist, which Claire agrees with in line 30. The use of "technically" indicates that there is some sort of category of feminist that Grace understands, and she must now explain how she fits into that category. In order to do so, she states that she is "not [a] very active feminist I guess" (line 29). Claire also agrees that she too is not a very active feminist. Both women agree that they fit some sort of technical definition of feminist, even though they are not "active." This presupposes that the quality 'active' is part of being a feminist, just not a part that Grace and Claire identify with.

However, Claire of course has no knowledge of what the other women believe is true or not true about feminists, and she has no way of knowing if their understanding of feminism includes activism. In stating that she is not active, she makes relevant the idea of ‘activism’ to feminism, and then sets it aside as irrelevant to her identity. Through this process, we can see parts of the social semantics of feminism in what the participants feel is relevant to set aside. The things that the group members make relevant presuppose that they are relevant to their understanding of feminism, and in the process of selecting irrelevant qualities of their feminist identity, like being active, the group arrives at a version of feminism unique to the interactional moment that they constructed in conversation.

Claire continues to struggle with the term feminist as she tries to describe her definition of the term in excerpt 3.

(3) [Personal]

34 Claire: =pers- like a personal femin?- like I don't know howda-

35 like there's no word to like

```
36 Liz: [like *describe*=
```

37 Grace: =I share all the *views*.

This excerpt shows the problems participants have in identifying with the word ‘feminist.’

Although in line 37 Grace says that she shares “all the views” of feminism, no one has outwardly stated that they are feminists, and in fact in line 34 Claire attempts to coin a new term for a ‘personal feminist,’ because apparently there is no word for someone who shares the views of feminism and yet does not fully identify as a feminist. Arnulf Depperman’s (2005) “pragmatic opposition” shows how in categorization, “the first item contextualizes a frame of associated expectations which are violated by the contrasted second item” (309). If the original frame is Nadia’s “feminists::S,” then items need to be brought up to contrast with the assumed meaning

of the word, as a way for participants to construct their own relevant meanings and identities. So far, the group has contrasted “active” with “feminist,” thereby creating the need for a new term for women who are feminists, yet not active feminists, which according to Claire is better termed a ‘personal’ feminist.

Along with being ‘active,’ Nadia brings up being ‘aggressive’ as a quality of feminism that she does not agree with, shown in excerpt 4.

(4) [Aggressive and obnoxious]

54 Nadia: yeah, I agree. same kinda thing, like.

55 (0.6)

56 I’m like really

57 (.3)

58 >k(h)inda ob<noxious around my friends, £ about it £ ? and like

59 definitely like vote n stuff like

60 (0.7)

61 with *that in mind but not as like*

62 (1.3)

63 aggressive=

64 Liz: =yeah=

65 Nadia: as like other (.) feministS are:

66 (.)

67 Liz: as like media *makes feminists out to be*

68 Nadia: [yeah

69 Claire: [yeah

70 Grace: [yeah

In line 61, Nadia says she is “not as like aggressive as like other feminists are,” with emphasis on aggressive as well as, again, the final /s/ in feminists. Although Liz agrees with Nadia in the

middle of the turn, Liz then follows with “as like media makes feminists out to be,” and she disagrees with Nadia’s assumption that “other” feminists are aggressive. In this excerpt, we see that the quality of ‘aggressive’ is made relevant to the conversation because Nadia brought it up, but it is made irrelevant to her identity because she is “not as like aggressive as like other feminists are” (lines 61-65). This shows that Nadia has an understanding that feminists are aggressive, so when discussing feminism, she needs to bring the quality of aggression up only to set it aside as irrelevant to her personal version of feminism. However, rather than agree that all feminists are aggressive, Liz responds in line 67 with an other-initiated other-repair (Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks 1977:377) that it is the “media” that makes feminists out to be aggressive, with the line “as like media *makes feminists out to be*,” which the other speakers all agree with. Other-initiated other-repair is the most dispreferred of any repair options, but in this case Liz does mitigate her statement by framing it in similar terms to Nadia’s original statement “as like aggressive as like other feminists are” (lines 61-65). Regardless of whether or not an omnipotent media says that feminists are aggressive, the very fact of bringing up the quality and then setting it aside not only shows the speaker’s association of the quality ‘aggressive’ to the identity ‘feminist,’ it reifies that association in the conversation.

“Radical” is another quality brought up and then set aside in the conversation, shown in excerpt 5.

(5) [Radical]

72 Nadia: yeah, exactly. like like a rad[ical kind of

73 Liz: [.hhh yeah which is definitely just

74 like a depiction I don’t think it’s very *true about everyone*=

75 Claire: =not fair=

76 Liz: =yeah

In this case, Nadia brings up radical as a quality associated with feminists, which Liz says is “just like a depiction” and is not “true about everyone,” a statement that Claire supports with the assessment “not fair” (lines 74-75). In this case, Nadia has not stated that she is not radical, as was done with the qualities ‘active’ and ‘aggressive.’ Nevertheless, the group has reified the quality’s connection with feminism by saying that the depiction is not true about everyone. If being radical is not true about everyone, then it presupposes that it is true about someone, just not one of them. Additionally, although Claire adds that the depiction is not fair, it is still a depiction that must be dealt with in a conversation about feminism.

Radical and aggressive are both pervasive and stereotypical traits of feminists. One of the arguments in scholarship as to why more young women do not identify as feminists is that they supposedly do not want to be associated with negative stereotypes that often surround feminists, such as being obnoxious, radical, or aggressive. Rachel Williams and Michele Andrisin Witting (1997) have argued that stereotypes hinder self-labeling and make women resistant to self-identifying as feminists (890). Yet the following example shows that it is not the mere existence of a stereotype that might hinder self-identifying as a feminist, but rather how that idea is taken up in conversation. In excerpt 4, the quality of ‘obnoxious’ is recast as a positive quality of being a feminist.

(4) [Aggressive and obnoxious]

54 Nadia: yeah, I agree. same kinda thing, like.

55 (0.6)

56 I'm like really

57 (.3)

58 >k(h)inda ob<noxious around my friends, £ about it £ ? and like

59 definitely like vote n stuff like

60 (0.7)

61 with *that in mind but not as like*

62 (1.3)

63 aggressive=

64 Liz: =yeah=

65 Nadia: as like other (.) feministS are:

66 (.)

67 Liz: as like media *makes feminists out to be*

68 Nadia: [yeah

69 Claire: [yeah

70 Grace: [yeah

Here, a negative stereotype about feminists is actually resignified as positive. In line 58, Nadia says that she is “kinda obnoxious around my friends about it [feminism].” Nadia says this with a laughing outbreath and with what conversation analysts often characterize as a ‘smiley voice’—a voice that sounds as if it has been delivered through a mouth forming a smile. Both laughing outbreath and smiley voice can be used to mitigate problematic terms (Jefferson 1984), demonstrating Nadia’s orientation to ‘obnoxious’ as a potential problem. However, she still brings obnoxious up as a quality that is relevant to her feminist identity, and she reframes it as a positive quality by claiming it as something she herself does with her friends. Furthermore, no other participants disagree with Nadia and say that being obnoxious about feminism with friends is a bad thing. In this example, not only has Nadia made being obnoxious relevant to being a

‘sort of’ feminist, but she has also recast it into a positive association. In conversation, understanding emerges “in the course of interaction” (Sidnell 2010), so it is only through this process of interaction that “obnoxious” is unproblematic for the group and is recast as a positive part of being a feminist.

Overall, the qualities of ‘active,’ ‘personal,’ ‘aggressive,’ ‘radical,’ and ‘obnoxious’ are all brought up as relevant qualities surrounding feminism, but some, like being active, aggressive, and radical, are set aside as irrelevant to the interlocutor’s identity. Additionally, although some of these qualities are often stereotyped as negative qualities of feminists, these data show that these associations can be recast in conversation. In her discussion of the semiotic projection of sensuous qualities to speech practices, Susan Gal (2013) argues that “qualities of speech, projected onto social categories, emerge from and are harnessed to political projects” (33). In Peirce’s (1998[1903]) semiotics, which is the basis of Gal’s discussion, qualities are regarded as “abstract potentialities,” qualia are embodied entities and events, and finally qualisigns are the link between an object and an interpretation. For Gal (2013), qualia are deployed by speakers “in real time interactions or writings – for use in frankly political, time-sensitive and often adversarial projects” (Gal 2013: 45). Lily Hope Chumley and Nicholas Harkness (2013), linguistic anthropologists who have written extensively about this concept, understand qualia as social practice, rather than subjective experience. In the data analyzed in this thesis, qualities like ‘active’ are deployed in conversation as a way to create an intersubjective understanding of feminist identity and as a cultural frame for understanding practices associated with feminism. Specifically, ‘active’ is framed as something negative and problematic, as are the qualities ‘aggressive’ and ‘radical.’ These three qualities are also often associated with practice, so it is to practice that we now turn. In addition to dealing with all the

qualities of feminism, the interlocutors also negotiate practices of feminists, and like with the qualities, some of the practices are set aside as irrelevant to the group's understanding of feminism.

A Sort of Feminist: Relevant Actions

Practice has long been situated in language and gender research as foundational to identity (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992). Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) introduced the concept of “communities of practice” into the field of language and gender (borrowing from Lave and Wenger 1991) to reposition gender as a local semiotic production. For these authors, gender is constituted through day-to-day practice at the local level. Yet the authors simultaneously maintain that the local level is structured by “larger social constructs and discourses” (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2007: 28). Furthermore, a focus on local practices, argue Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2007), is “theoretically interesting to the extent that it offers insight into how the practices articulate with the wider world, and with wider discourses of gender and sexuality” (28). The conversation analyzed in this thesis is completely localized, and yet the women's discussion also reflects and (re)creates larger discourses of feminism. At the local level, language is, according to Bourdieu (1991), a mundane, practical activity, but it also a social-historical phenomenon that (re)produces history. A historical (re)production of feminist identity is shown through the following examples of “mundane” conversation, where the women discuss the practices they make relevant to their feminist identity.

In addition to discussing practices relevant to their feminist identity, the women also pass judgement on the other's portrayal of their practices. Elinor Ochs and Carolyn Taylor (1992), for instance, discussed practice early on as a form of “action” that is subject to evaluation in

reporting and storytelling. In their view, reporting and storytelling are not ‘benign’ verbal activities, but rather provide interlocutors with “the opportunity to expose, pass judgment on, and where problematic, sanction some particular family member’s actions, thoughts, and feelings” (302). Similarly, the verbal activities in the conversation analyzed in this thesis are also not ‘benign’; rather, they provide the interlocutors with opportunities to expose practices, pass judgment on these practices, and where problematic, sanction them. Furthermore, Ochs and Taylor (1995) state that “all social identities, including gender identities, are constituted through actions and demeanors” (436). Feminist identities are also constituted through actions and demeanors, as are the metapragmatic discussion of those actions. In the following excerpts, the women talk about the practices they specifically do or do not participate in as ‘sort of’ feminists, providing insight into the group’s emergent understanding of feminist identity.

To begin with an analysis of the practices the women discuss as relevant or irrelevant to their feminist identity, in excerpt 6, line 19, Claire says that although she leans towards feminist sides on issues, she does not “protest.”

(6) [Protest]

8 Nadia: =be a good jumping off
 9 Claire: [not necess:a:rily, I guess,
 10 Nadia: [point
 11 Claire: but like
 12 (0.4)
 13 I definitely like lean towards
 14 (1.2)
 15 that side on like #issues# I guess.
 16 (0.5)
 17 >But I don’t like<
 18 (0.9)

19 protest.
20 (0.3)
21 I don't kno(h)w hh
22 Nadia: [hh ye(h)ah
23 Grace: [yeah

After Nadia asks the group if they all identify as feminists, and wonders if that is a good “jumping off point” for their conversation, Claire says that she does “not necessarily” identify as a feminist, and yet, as she expresses in lines 13-15, she “definitely like lean[s] towards that side on like issues.” However, she quickly amends that statement in lines 17-19 by saying “But I don’t like protest.” In this case, Claire has made the action of “protest” relevant to the conversation, but irrelevant to her identity, which establishes protesting as something negative and problematic. In lines 22-23, Nadia and Grace agree with Claire’s statements, demonstrating agreement that ‘protest’ is relevant to a conversation about feminism yet irrelevant to their sort-of feminist identity.

Another action that arises in the conversation is the activity of voting, which the group agrees they do participate in as feminists.

(7) [Definition]

40 Liz: I mean, by definition I'm a feminist just because of the
41 definition [of feminism
42 Grace: [yeah=
43 Liz: =is like what I stand for but I mean haven't ever- I mean I've
44 protested something once but like that was-
45 (0.4)
46 *that was about abortion rights in Texas so*- hh *but like that
47 was with my mom. but I haven't ever like done like marches [or
48 Grace: [yeah=
49 Liz: =like I'm not like part of any like groups but like, like when I
vote and that stuff like I look at like the political's like side
on feminism view that like really dictates who I vote for. so in
that sense yeah I'm a femin^oiss^o

In lines 59-61 of excerpt 4, Nadia says she “like definitely like vote[s] n stuff like with that [feminism] in mind.” Additionally, in excerpt 7 Liz also agrees with the action of voting as a feminist, shown in lines 49-51, with the statement “like when I vote and that stuff like I look at like the political's like side on feminism view that like really dictates who I vote for.” In addition to the action of voting, Excerpt 7 shows three additionally important things: first, the orientation to a fixed definition of feminism, (lines 40-43); second, the negotiation of the action of protesting (43-48); and third, the lack of strong agreement with a feminist identity (lines 40-43 and 51-52).

First, Liz starts her turn with “I mean, by definition I'm a feminist just because of the definition is like what I stand for” (lines 40-43). None of the participants necessarily know Liz's definition of feminism, because it is continually being constructed in the conversation.

Nevertheless, Grace then follows with a quick “yeah” (line 42), demonstrating her agreement

with this assumed definition of feminism. Additionally, Liz does not say “I am a feminist;” rather, her turn echoes Grace’s statement that Grace “technically” would be a feminist (excerpt 2, lines 28-29), since it is only by “definition” that Liz is a feminist. In the conversation, there is a pervasive orientation to a concrete definition of feminism, one that the women either do or do not fit. This essentializes the category ‘feminist’ by assuming that there is one fixed definition of feminism, and if people do not fit the definition, they self-select themselves out of the entire category.

Second, this excerpt also shows “protesting” as another action that must be negotiated as relevant or irrelevant to the group’s identity. At this point in the conversation, the group has agreed that they do not protest, and Liz now needs to remedy her past actions (when she protested about portion rights in Texas with her mother) with the group’s current understanding of feminism. At the start of the turn, Liz starts to say “I haven’t ever protested”— an extreme case formulation—but immediately repairs herself to say “I mean I’ve protested something once” (lines 43-44). According to Pomerantz (1986), speakers can use extreme case formulations to defend themselves in conversation, and in this example Liz has started to defend herself by trying to say that she has not ever protested something. After Liz’s near use of an extreme case formulation, however, she concedes that she has “protested something once” (line 44), and then continues to a revised description of the events: she says that the protest was only “once,” that it was only “with her mom,” and that she also has not done marches and is not part of any groups. This formulation of an overstatement, a concession, and a revised description follows Elizabeth Couper-Kuhlen and Sandra Thompson’s analysis of concessive repair (2005). Here, Liz uses “I mean” twice, which Douglas Maynard (2016) argues can be used in combination with “socially supportive social actions” (76). Liz is making multiple attempts to fit in with the group’s

emergent understanding of feminism—that is, to be socially supportive—but she also must contend with her past actions that would categorize her as a “protesting” type of feminist. Within the group, protesting has already been established as something they do not do, so Liz must now contend with the fact that she has, indeed, protested something, and she must now save face (Brown and Levinson 1987), as “protest” has been cast as a negative action. It is notable that in many circumstances, abortion rights would certainly fall under feminist topics, but Liz presents it as something that exempts her from the agreed-upon non-protesting nature of their feminist identity. Speakers regulate the experiences they are entitled to have (Sacks 1970:428), and Liz has regulated her protesting experience so as to fit with the “non-protesting feminist” identity the group has constructed. Liz’s banal, inconsequential presentation of the action works to achieve an ordinariness: Liz has lived her life as a usual, ‘sort of’ feminist who fits in with the group.

Third and finally, the lack of a strong feminist identity is brought up again when Liz says that feminist views “like really dictates who I vote for,” and so “in that sense” (but therefore not in other senses) “yeah I’m a femin^oiss^o” (lines 51-52). Here, “voting” is established as an acceptable practice of being a feminist, because no one disagrees that they do not let feminism “dictate who they vote for.” However, voting is established as a relatively passive practice, as something that dictates an activity, as compared to a statement like “I vote for feminists,” which puts practice at the forefront of identity. Most of the practices in this conversation are cast as negative practices, and even when a practice cast as a positive, like voting, is done so in a passive way. In Liz’s last line, the drawn out /s/ in her statement “yeah I’m a femin^oiss^o” (line 52) echoes Nadia’s original long /s/, and the extra quiet tone iconically vocalizes the lack of any strong statements present in the conversation. No one in the group says “no, I’m not a feminist,” but also no one says “Yes, I am a feminist, period.”

In these micromoments of identity construction, interlocutors negotiate a variety of qualities and practices they deem relevant to a discussion on feminism, and they negotiate the qualities and practices' relevance to their own identities. In this negotiation, the group arises to an emergent, intersubjective, collaboratively constructed 'sort of' feminist identity localized to the specific time, place, and location of their conversation. However, just because this is one conversation does not mean there are not demonstrable effects to larger social understandings of identity and identification processes. Conversations, although localizable to particular microinteractional moments, are never fully separable from macro conceptualizations identities, and indeed they also constitute these macro conceptualizations through their moment-by-moment (re)creation of socially acceptable identities.

(Re)creating normative identity: practices and conceptualizations

The (re)creation of normatively acceptable identities is made possible by the process of making a topic relevant to the conversation but irrelevant to a person's identity. The question then becomes, what is made irrelevant in conversations on feminist identity, and why, and what effect does that have on larger social organization and understanding? Throughout the conversation, we see the interlocutors working to agree with each other, both overtly through responses like "yeah" and "same," and less-overtly through their construction of a shared conceptualization of feminism. Chase Raymond and Tanya Stivers (2016) have found that in conversation, the "collaborative establishment and maintenance of intersubjectivity" is ideally established as effortlessly as possible (349), and in this conversation, intersubjectivity is established quickly among the interlocutors, within the first minute of conversation. Throughout this establishment, we see the interlocutors make relevant a variety of things, all of which show us what belongs to

their conceptualization of feminism. The group's list of topics is by no means exhaustive, but it shows what is relevant for the women to bring up in their conversation on feminism, as well as what is relevant to set aside as irrelevant to their identity. This speaks to the situated temporality of the identity: it is unique to the interactional moment and made possible only through interaction.

In Raymond's work on the grammar of intersubjectivity (in preparation), he shows how social actors use language to create a shared reality. Raymond shows how interlocutors create a "set of common inferences" in conversation by actively updating in-the-moment understanding. Similarly, the women in this conversation create a group of common topics by actively selecting qualities and practices that they decide are relevant to a conversation on feminism. In this sense, I follow Raymond in conceptualizing 'feminism' as a "cloud," with permeable boundaries, in which certain topics are shown to be relevant to the group's emergent construction of the concept, while at the same time certain topics are made irrelevant to the interlocutors own identity (Figure 1).

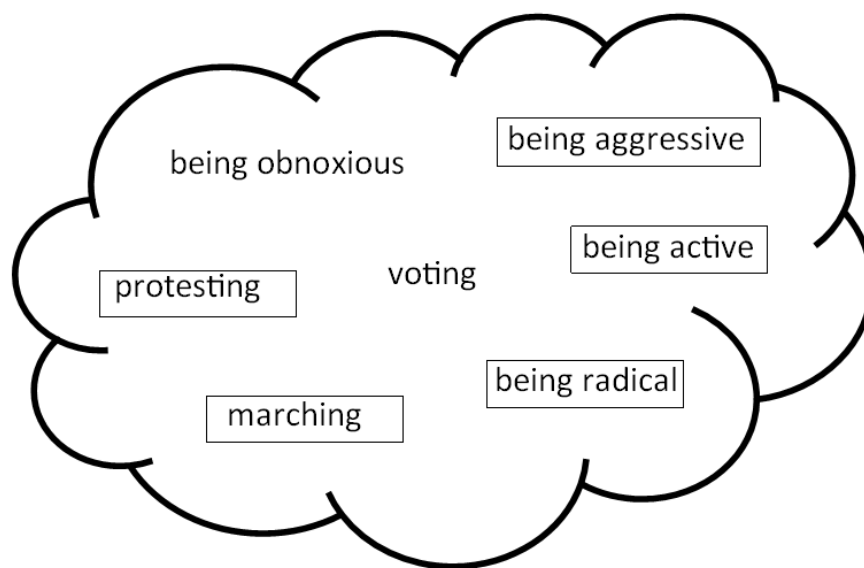


Figure 1: Cloud of inferences.

Figure 1 represents what the women in the conversation have emergently constructed as their understanding and categorization of feminism. The cloud contains the qualities and practices brought up by the women as relevant to discussion points in the conversation. However, as previously demonstrated, some of the qualities and practices are made irrelevant to group member's identities, represented in the figure with boxes. Even though these qualities and practices are ultimately discarded as irrelevant to the women's identities, their very selection reifies them as part of the group's broader understanding of feminism. Out of all the possible things to talk about, the women have chosen the qualities and practices within the cloud boundary as relevant to their understanding of feminism. In order to construct this understanding and interact with each other, the women must agree on what is relevant to being a feminist, such as voting with feminism in mind. However, because feminism is such a problematic identity, the women must also be clear that they do not ascribe to many of the stereotypes associated with feminism, like marching or protesting.

Additionally, although each individual person in conversation might have their own definition or understanding of feminism, and might have come up with different definitions if they were asked to state their definition on their own, whatever else they might consider relevant to their feminist identity is largely irrelevant if not brought up in conversation, as it is the interactional process that makes relevant those aspects of their identity. Although in principle there are individual identities and notions of feminism, and although each woman might have their own definition of what it means to be a feminist, what becomes central to the group's understanding of feminism is what is brought up as relevant in that interactional moment. Then, those aspects are intersubjectively negotiated among the group, and more importantly, they become the things that are established as members of the category "feminist." We can view these

relevant qualities and actions as variables negotiated by the interlocutors in the conversation. The variables that participants draw on that they *do* do, like vote with feminism in mind, construct the group identity of what doing ‘being a feminist’ means to them, but the deliberate setting aside of the variables they *don’t* do, like protest, constructs the view of feminism as problematic and something that needs to be negotiated.

The variables within the cloud are also indexical of larger ideologies and worldviews. As linguistic anthropologists and sociolinguists have convincingly argued, ideology is fundamental to all discourse practices (Irvine and Gal 2000; Gal 2005). In her work on stylistic variation, Eckert (2008) conceptualizes the link between ideology and the situated use of a given variable through the idea of an *indexical field*. In her view, speakers engage a “constellation of ideologically related meanings, any one of which can be activated in the situated use of the variable” (454). In this thesis, I am suggesting that a similar constellation lies behind the women’s ‘activation’ of topics relevant to feminism. Eckert argues that linkages between macrosociological categories and individual stylistic choices “produce and reproduce” social meaning (465). In the data I have examined, we see these linkages in the way group members invoke macro- qualities and practices ideologically associated with feminism and then collaboratively set some of those qualities and practices aside to construct a “personal” feminist identity. The variables in Eckert’s indexical field involve sociophonetic choices instead of topicalization choices, but as Eckert herself states, “it is not just the meaning of phonological variants that change in discourse— lexical change does as well. A word’s denotation can absorb connotations through association with aspects of the context in which it is used and most certainly, stances” (464). Qualities and practices, as components of social identity, also form an indexical field; the situated use of these components in conversation are linked to larger

macrosociological categories of identity. If the indexical field is the ideological work that happens on-the-ground, so to speak, then the speakers in this study metadiscursively construct a feminist identity through the topicalization of qualities and practices. They collaborate on the indexing of a sort of person, or in this case, a “sort of feminist.”

It is notable that many of the variables the group relevantly sets aside have to do with taking action as a feminist, whether by marching, protesting, or joining groups. This is paralleled in other linguistic research on identity, particularly in research on the performance of gay identity in coming out narratives. Scholars such as Celia Kitzinger (2000) have shown how speakers work to present themselves in a way that disallows activist interpretations. This concern with ‘activism’ also seems to be embedded in presuppositional understanding of feminism, since the interlocutors frequently clarified that although they in some ways identify as feminists, they do not participate in practices normatively associated with feminism. In this process of bringing certain practices up and then setting them aside, of making topics relevant and then making them irrelevant, we can begin to see how normativity arises surrounding feminism.

Feminist Identity Construction: Impacts, Influences, and Future Work

In his article on explanations as accounts of behavior, John Heritage (1988) writes the following: “[T]he exceptions with their explanations thus become ‘the exceptions that prove the rule’ because the provision of such explanations maintains the rule’s presuppositional status both as a rule of conduct and as a rule of interpretations” (140). Essentially, for Heritage, it is the exception that proves the rule. For instance, when participants explain that they are not “aggressive” feminists, they inadvertently (re)establish that feminists are aggressive. This organization of accounts creates a “self-motivating, self-sustaining and self-reproducing

normative organization of action” (Heritage 1988:140). Relevantly setting aside topics (re)creates normativity and normatively acceptable identities, of which ‘feminist’ is still not fully socially acceptable, as this conversation shows. This process invariably produces patriarchal hegemonic identities where the interlocutors remove themselves from their assumed understanding of feminism, and in doing so continue to solidify feminist identity as a problem.

The interactional strategy of highlighting what participants *do* do, versus what they *don’t* do, normalizes certain qualities and practices as belonging to a feminist identity. Relevantly setting aside variables reproduces feminism as a problematic and contested identity. Previous scholarship and the data discussed throughout this thesis show the problematic nature of the concept. However, much previous scholarship posits this problematic nature to stereotypes or the negative valence of the term itself. I argue that it is not the absolute existence of stereotypes or negative connotations, but rather what speakers *do* with the stereotypes and negative connotations and how they position themselves through them that solidifies the problem. We can return to Nadia’s “obnoxious” demeanor around her friends. Although this may be viewed as a negative label about feminists, it is not a problem for Nadia and the group. Although there is some level of pre-existing negativity surrounding the quality ‘obnoxious,’ what is more important is how the group negotiates this negativity in conversation, and in that negotiation, make it not a problem for their identity. However, that pre-existing negativity is also what creates a problem: no matter how much speakers can do things with negative associations, the conversational practice of setting them aside, or re-framing them, reifies the commonsense association between feminism and the qualities and practices discussed in this thesis. The fact that stereotypes exist does not make them a problem; what makes them a problem is that

speakers are required to do things with these stereotypes in order to negotiate their identity. It is in this negotiation that the problems are reified as definitional components of identity.

This gets at the very nature of hegemony. Talbot (2003) writes that “the representational practice of stereotyping plays a central role in [hegemony], by endlessly reiterating what amount to caricatures of subordinate groups” (p. 471). We might hope that conversations about feminism would dismantle issues, but in many cases, such conversations end up (re)creating social norms by relevantly setting aside deviations. These normative assumptions of identity and behavior are made possible by “explaining away” anything non-normative. However, if social products and actions are the basis for hegemonic social organization, then they are also agents of change (West and Zimmerman 2009:114 for this process in gender attributes). What was once a taboo subject, like birth control, may later be dealt with by the group as standard, normal, and expected. When topics are not set aside, they can be negotiated and acknowledged as relevant aspects of feminism, both feminism as a micro category and something to identify with, as well as feminism as a macrosociological category and movement.

It is also important to remember that this conversation took place in early fall of 2016, well into the political climate of a contentious election year, but before Donald Trump was elected president. When conducting an email follow up in late winter of 2017, I asked participants if they had noticed any changes in feminism since their discussion. Grace responded in an email with “Yes, I have most definitely noticed a difference. My identity as a feminist, liberal, and social justice advocate has grown stronger since last October for sure!!” One of the conclusions of the conversation, as argued in this thesis, is that none of the women outright said “I am a feminist.” However, just four months later, Grace is saying exactly this. Not only has Grace now claimed a feminist identity, she even self-identifies as a social justice advocate, which

is a strong claim to make and would seem to oppose her previous statement, analyzed earlier in excerpt 2, of “I’m definitely like- I guess technically would be I am a feminist but like I’m not very active feminist I guess” (excerpt 2, lines 28-29).

There are two possible explanations for this seeming contradiction. First, Grace might have all along strongly identified as a feminist and an advocate, but in the conversation with the other women decided to downplay that identity so as to fit in with the group’s emergent ‘sort of’ feminist identity. Second, Grace might not have had as strong an identification with feminism and advocacy four months prior, but since much of the United States’ political climate changed in that time period, her identification may have changed due to the things said by Donald Trump and his advisors or the laws proposed by Congress and the executive orders written.

Additionally, in that same time period, the world witnessed the Women’s March on D.C. and sister marches across the country as constituting the largest protest in United States history, a development that certainly brought the role of protesting to a new level and purpose. The popularity of the Women’s March may very well have impacted people’s views of protesting and their associations with this practice, and it is likely to continue to have an impact. Further research is needed to continue to explore and analyze the role of conversation in shaping, understanding, and (re)creating feminist identity in situations of talk-in-interaction.

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Transcript of Data

1 Nadia: Okay sssss hhhhh
2 (1.2)
3 Claire: hh umm: what do you want to start with
4 (0.4)
5 Nadia: well, do you guys all identify as a fem, feminis, as like a
6 feminists::S? Maybe that could=
7 Claire: =umm=
8 Nadia: =be a good jumping off
9 Claire: [not necess:a:rily, I guess,
10 Nadia: [point
11 Claire: but like
12 (0.4)
13 I definitely like lean towards
14 (1.2)
15 that side on like *issues* I guess.
16 (0.5)
17 >But I don't like<
18 (0.9)
19 protest.
20 (0.3)
21 I don't kno(h)w hh
22 Nadia: [hh ye(h)ah
23 Grace: [yeah
24 (0.4)
25 Grace: yeah like I'm not, if someone said, I'm not going to say I'm not
26 a feminist, [because
27 Claire: [mhmm
28 Grace: I'm definitely like- I guess technically would be I am a feminist
29 but like I'm not very active feminist I guess=
30 Claire: =yeah=

31 Grace: =*if that's [a good way of explai-*

32 Claire: [like a like=

33 Grace: =*explaining it*=

34 Claire: =pers- like a personal femin?- like I don't know howda-

35 like there's no word to [like

36 Liz: [like *describe*=

37 Grace: =I share all the *views*.

38 Claire: yeah. same.

39 (2.3)

40 Liz: I mean, by definition I'm a feminist just because of the

41 definition [of feminism

42 Grace: [yeah=

43 Liz: =is like what I stand for but I mean haven't ever- I mean I've

44 protested something once but like that was-

45 (0.4)

46 *that was about abortion rights in Texas so*- hh *but like that

47 was with my mom. but I haven't ever like done like marches [or

48 Grace: [yeah=

49 Liz: =like I'm not like part of any like groups but like, like when I

50 vote and that stuff like I look at like the political's like side

51 on feminism view that like really dictates who I vote for. so in

52 that sense yeah I'm a femin^oiss^o

53 (1.4)

54 Nadia: yeah, I agree. same kinda thing, like.

55 (0.6)

56 I'm like really

57 (.3)

58 >k(h)inda ob<noxious around my friends, £ about it £ ? and like

59 definitely like vote n stuff like

60 (0.7)

61 with *that in mind but not as like*

62 (1.3)

63 aggressive=
64 Liz: =yeah=
65 Nadia: as like other (.) feministS are:
66 (.)
67 Liz: as like media *makes feminists out to be*
68 Nadia: [yeah
69 Claire: [yeah
70 Grace: [yeah
71 Aly: [yeah
72 Nadia: yeah, exactly. like like a rad[ical kind of
73 Liz: [.hhh yeah which is definitely just
74 like a depiction I don't think it's very *true about everyone*=
75 Claire: =not fair=
76 Liz: =yeah

Appendix: Transcription Symbols (Jefferson 2004).

?	Rising intonation
,	Slight rising intonation
.	Falling intonation
[Where overlapping talk begins
]	Where overlapping talk ends
(.)	Pause of two-tenths of a second or less
(0.5)	Length of pause in tenths of a second
=	No silence between speech
:	Lengthened sound
yea-	Abrupt cut off of sound
ye <u>s</u>	Emphasized word or sound
£yeah£	Smiling voice
yes	Creaky voice
<yes>	Faster speed compared to surrounding speech
>yes<	Slower speed compared to surrounding speech
°yes°	Lower volume compared to surrounding speech
YES	Higher volume compared to surrounding speech
hh	Outbreath; more 'h' reflects longer outbreath