

"Girls," "Dancers" and "Ladies": Language, Gender and Power in a Gentlemen's Club

Overview

- Presentation is part of an IRB approved ethnographic, participant observation and interview-based research project set in an Alaskan "Gentlemen's club" (aka "The Club")
- This presentation explores **lexis**, or contextualized word choice referring to dancers in spontaneous conversational narrative
- I examine how lexical choice or lexis reflects and reproduces power relations among erotic dancers, staff and customers in my field-site.
- Analysis of a spontaneous first-person narrative illustrates that the same referent (dancers) are referred to using multiple different lexical items.
- Examination of discursive context reveals different stances toward the agency and vulnerability of dancers.

Literature Review

- To my knowledge this project is the only linguistic anthropological study that addresses sex work from an insiders' perspective
- Participant observation based ethnographic research on sex work in the US is still extremely limited, though more common than linguistic anthropological work
- Builds upon Kira Hall's (1992) linguistic anthropological study of US phone sex operators by adding an ethnographic perspective.
- Woods (2007), for example, in a much-needed study of rural "strip clubs" describes attending a strip club for 1-3 nights and interviewed management at each of the clubs she visited.
- Pilcher (2009), bases her analysis of gendered power relations in strip clubs on published studies, not firsthand research.
- Kathleen Weinkauff (2010) addresses lexis in writing about kinterm usage among full-service sex workers, but her purely interview based study does not examine the use of lexical items in their discursive context.

Working at the Club: Economic, Physical and Sexual Vulnerability

- Dancers may face theft from managers and staff (security guards and bartenders) or from outside the club
- Dancers are the most vulnerable class of employees at the Club
- Dancers are not paid hourly, they are paid based on the type and number of dances they sell, tips, and are pressured to make drink sales (see below).
- Dancers pay rent, percentage, and "tip out" at the end of the night. This may result in paying about half of their earnings in a night to the Club.
- Sexual assault, unwanted touching from customers.
- Lack of workers comp, other benefits given to regular employees
- The Club claims to have strict rules about touching, but in practice customers are given "three strikes" before being thrown out.
- Non-alcoholic (the Club does not have a liquor license) "Ladies Drinks" are sold as "promotional items" to offset the cost of rent and percentage at the end of the night.
- Drink prices range from \$10 to \$200. The dancer does not keep any of the proceeds from drink sales, and only half of the price of a drink contributes to fees after the first \$50 sold.



"Ladies Drinks": Drinks range in price and size from \$10 on the left to "The Bucket" for \$200 on the right. Photo courtesy of the author.

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Lexical labels and roles at the Club

- Performers at the Club refer to themselves and each other as *dancers* and *girls*. Staff also use these terms when speaking to other employees
- Customers are told, by security, not to touch "the Ladies"
- Drink menus contain the term "*Ladies*" drinks
- Legal contracts that dancers sign refer to them as "*entertainers*"

Lexis in the "Ponytail Guy" Narrative

- Narrative from an interview with a "security staff" member at the Club, recorded in October 2022.
- Before the story about "Ponytail Guy," he described what he does when customers break the rules.
- In the interest of space, I present only portions of a transcript of the entire narrative.
- In this narrative the speaker uses four different terms to refer to dancers.

7 This guy comes in
8 I remember him he was some
9 old timer biker
10 and uh (coughs)
11 with a long ponytail
12 that's how I remember him.
13 I told him at the door
14 you can't touch- touch ladies
15 uh, you know I told him in the
16 the discussion

- In line 14 *ladies*, along with the directive "you can't touch," establishes this as reported speech and situates him as occupying his institutional "front of house" role.
- In line 16, 'the discussion' at the door is the set of rules spoken to customers entering the club.

(several utterances omitted)

48 within a few moments I see him put a
49 hand on a girl's back
50 and
51 you know
52 she tells him
53 she removes it
54 I walk up
55 I tell him

- In the segment above, Rob describes a situation in which he went to intervene after seeing a dancer remove the ponytail guy's hand from her back.
- In line 49 he refers to her as a *girl* in line 49 when describing her as the object of unwanted touch.
- However, some dancers point out that this term is infantilizing. This is the term dancers use to refer to one another.

(several utterances omitted)

66 eventually
67 it- the guy
68 Same transgression, put his hand on
69 a dancer
70 um
71 uhm
72 the other security guard
73 said something to him
74 but apparently this guy also behind
75 one of the:
76 in one of the privacy rooms
75 uh put his hands on a dancer
76 and the dancer didn't let us know

- He switches to the term "*dancer*" in line 69 to refer to a situation in which he was not directly involved.
- He uses the term two more times in lines 75 and 76, stating that the "*dancer*" did not advise security and, it is implied, handled the customer's rule breaking herself.
- The "privacy rooms" the interviewee refers to are more often called "private rooms" or "the vault room". These are areas where private dances are performed.

(several utterances omitted)

84 and so he got away with it
85 I don't know how many times
86 before finally he got tired of women,
87 telling him
87 you can't touch me
89 and he left

- The term "women" is not used among dancers or staff when talking about employees at the club.
- "*Women*" can be seen as indexing a perspective that is outside the club. It contrasts semantically and indexically with "*girl*" and "*lady*".
- This indirectly shifts the narrative to the imagined perspective of the Ponytail guy, who has just been rejected by women all night. This experience could be generalizable outside the club.

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Sign addressed to dancers at the Club. It is in a public space, visible to customers. Photo courtesy of the author.

Findings

- Discourse analysis of narratives in open-ended interviews reveals the linguistic encoding and mediation of power dynamics in the club in a way that solely referential content does not
- At a referential level, the narrative is about the club's failure to protect the "*girls*" or "*ladies*" from harassment.
- When asserting boundaries, "*dancers*" act in their role as employees for whom performing on a razor's edge between protecting themselves and encouraging sales is the entirety of the job.
- When they reject and drive away a customer they are "*women*" and no longer fit into expectations for them as entertainers.
- Lexical items referring to dancers are dependent on implicit assumptions about their agency and vulnerability.

Direction for Future Research

- This research is ongoing, and I am still conducting interviews and collecting participant observation ethnographic data
- This paper draws from just one narrative from a 45-minute interview. I am identifying other narratives from this interview and others.
- So far, I have six interviews with dancers, staff, and former dancers from my field site along with recordings of conversation between dancers. In addition, I have been taking notes each night.
- I still have many questions I want to ask about this data. How do dancers talk about customers? How is masculinity expressed by customers and male employees? How do dancers create personae in this environment?

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