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# 1 An introduction to conversation and gender

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*Susan A. Speer and Elizabeth Stokoe*

This book showcases cutting-edge research and current thinking by researchers writing on topics at the intersection of conversation analysis and gender. Work in this area has advanced rapidly over the past decade, and this edited collection provides the first comprehensive, book-length treatment of the field. Bringing together an international group of scholars, the chapters illustrate authors' perspectives on the operation of gender in interaction. Each chapter examines real-life audio or video interactions recorded across a range of ordinary and institutional settings, including face-to-face conversation, domestic telephone calls, children's play, mediation sessions, police–suspect interviews, psychiatric assessment and calls to telephone helplines.

The aims of this collection are both theoretical and methodological. At a theoretical level, we push forward the boundaries of our understanding of the relationship between conversation and gender, charting new territory as we present the most incisive and sophisticated thinking in the field. At a methodological level, the book offers readers a clear and practical understanding of precisely how gender is analysed using conversation analysis and related methodologies, by presenting detailed demonstrations of these methods in use. Although conversation is typically understood as referring to 'talk-in-interaction', several contributors analyse and reflect on the inextricable relationship between talk, gender and embodied conduct. This introductory chapter is divided into four sections. First, to contextualize the book's chapters and convey their distinctive analytic position, we provide a critical overview of *conversation and gender research* grounded in studies of either sex/gender 'difference' or gender identity 'construction'. We explain the background, key questions for and criticisms of both traditional studies of linguistic features and interactional styles, and contemporary studies of the construction, enactment or performance of gender identities. Second, we contrast studies of difference and construction with *conversation analytic research on gender* and other categorial topics. We provide a brief introduction to conversation analysis itself, before discussing how researchers with an interest in gender have used its techniques. Third, we provide a concise *overview of the chapters*, which have been grouped into sections according to the key analytic questions they address. Finally, we discuss some of the *implications and issues*

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that emerge from the reported findings and set out some possible trajectories for the field as it moves forward over the next decade.

### **Conversation and gender research: From difference to construction**

We start our introduction by considering two broad strands of gender and language research that have, since their inception in the 1970s and 1980s, theorized and demonstrated, with particular empirical flavours, the links between gender and language (for overviews see Speer, 2005a; Weatherall, 2002a). Methodologically diverse and interdisciplinary in orientation, research spans not just linguistics, but also sociology, psychology, anthropology and communication studies. Any attempt to categorize this large body of work inevitably disguises areas of cross-over and overlap. However, we will discuss the two types of work that represent often competing theoretical and methodological assumptions about the nature of gender and how it might best be grasped analytically: *sex differences in language* and *the construction of gender and gender identities*.

#### *Sex differences in language*

The first body of research we examine focuses on sex differences in language, in terms of both the way men and women are represented *in* language, with a focus on the encoding of sexism, and the way men and women *use* language, with a focus on the features and function of speech styles (note that the terms ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ are often used interchangeably despite their differing etymologies and theoretical baggage). Sex/gender difference research has had a significant impact on the larger trajectory of gender and language studies, not least because it took seriously the role of language in the instantiation and maintenance of sex/gender inequality. Researchers working within this tradition have addressed several key questions.

- Do women and men talk and interact differently? If women and men talk differently, what features characterize men’s talk and women’s talk? Since Lakoff (1973; 1975) wrote her pioneering account of difference, hundreds of studies have identified and tested a cluster of linguistic variables (e.g., tag questions, hedges, vocabulary) and interactional patterns (e.g., interruptions, topic control, verbosity, politeness) and correlated their use with the sex/gender of speaker (for overviews see Aries, 1996; Bucholtz, 2004; Cameron, 1998a; 2007; Cheshire & Trudgill, 1998; Christie, 2000; Coates, 1998a; 2004; Coates & Cameron, 1988; Conrick, 1999; Freed & Greenwood, 1996; Graddol & Swann, 1989; Litosseliti, 2006; Mills, 2003; Swann, 1992; Talbot, 1998).

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- If women and men talk differently, how do we best account for such differences? Do linguistic disparities reflect women's deficiency as speakers and their subordinate status in society (the 'deficit' model, cf. Lakoff, 1975), a patriarchal reality (the 'dominance' model, e.g., Fishman, 1978; Spender, 1980; Thorne & Henley, 1975; Thorne *et al.*, 1983; Zimmerman & West, 1975), subcultural, socialized differences between men and women (the 'difference' model, e.g., Holmes, 1995; Maltz & Borker, 1982; Tannen, 1990; 1994), or different interactional goals such as competition, conflict or affiliation (e.g., Coates, 1996; 2003; M. H. Goodwin, 1990; 2006)?
- How do other cultural categories, such as age, class, religion, ethnicity or sexuality, mediate sex/gender as a key variable in speech styles? For example, in the field of queer linguistics, what are the features of 'gay men's English' (e.g., Leap, 1996) or lesbian women's speech (e.g., Moonwomon-Baird, 1997; see Koch, 2008)?
- Does language encode and perpetuate a patriarchal, sexist reality? If language is sexist, how is sexism realized directly and indirectly (e.g., Spender, 1980; Mills, 2008)? How is sexist language used 'ironically' to subvert prejudice (e.g., Benwell, 2004; Christie, 2000) and how may it be challenged through policy and the practice of language reform (see Litosseliti, 2006; see also Cameron, 1992; Gibbon, 1999; Goddard & Patterson, 2000; Henley & Kramarae, 1991; Pauwels, 1998)? What are people's attitudes to sexist language (e.g., Parks & Robertson, 2008)?

When taking the development of sex/gender difference literature as a whole, consistent claims about difference have proved elusive. Despite this, and despite its often being presented as an outmoded line of investigation, many researchers still ask questions about sex/gender difference in language (e.g., Drescher, 2006; Menz & Al-Roubaie, 2008; Precht, 2008; Schleef, 2008). This is unsurprising when one considers the sheer unquestioned dominance of sex/gender difference research throughout both academia and popular culture, including hundreds of studies examining the neurological basis of sex/gender differences in language (e.g., Burman *et al.*, 2008; G. S. Harrington & Farias, 2008). Sex/gender difference studies – of language and all other aspects of human biology, action, cognition and emotion – continue relentlessly despite sustained criticism about methodological flaws, the reification of binaries, essentialism and so on (e.g., Bohan, 1993; Lorber, 1994; 2000). In research about difference, researchers treat sex/gender, usually implicitly, as pre-discursive, pre-theorized, natural categories which are biologically determined or socialized from birth and trait-like. This essentialist notion means that human action varies according to the independent variable of sex/gender (e.g., Uchida, 1992).

Difference studies were therefore criticized for committing what Cameron (1997a) calls the *correlational fallacy*, whereby particular linguistic features

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are attributed unproblematically to one sex/gender or the other. The temptation to ‘see’ gender where it might not be relevant is discussed by Jefferson (2004b: 117):

Working with interactional data, one sometimes observes that a type of behavior seems to be produced a great deal by one category of persons and not all that much by another category. But when put to the test of a straightforward count, the observation does not hold up: Category X does not after all do this thing significantly more often than Category Y does. It may then be that the apparent skewing of the behavior’s distribution across categories is the result of selective observation; noticing with greater frequency those cases which conformed to some biased notion held by the observer of how these categories behave.

For many feminists and other critically oriented researchers, ‘difference’ studies are both theoretically and methodologically circular, and politically unproductive. It is perhaps inevitable that such studies, which prioritize the analyst’s taken-for-granted assumptions about sex/gender difference, will prevent them from seeing sex/gender as anything other than a reified, dualistic category. Indeed, they start out “‘knowing” the identities whose very constitution ought to be precisely the issue under investigation’ (Kulick, 1999). This means that analysts are in the business of *reproducing* rather than *studying* gendered ‘facts’ (see Hammersley, 2001; Jefferson, 2004b). As Lorber (2000: 79) points out, ‘it is the ubiquitous division of people into two unequally valued categories that undergirds the continually reappearing instances of gender inequality’. Järviluoma *et al.* (2003: 2) similarly conclude that ‘gender should be understood as a concept requiring analysis, rather than as something that is *already* known about’ (emphasis in original).

Throughout the 1990s, researchers began to challenge the focus on difference in the language and gender literature (e.g., Bergvall *et al.*, 1996; Cameron, 1996; Crawford, 1995; Hall & Bucholtz, 1995; Mills, 1996). Freed (1996: 69) reflected that ‘as researchers, we now realize, perhaps with some reluctance, that we need to abandon a number of our early and fairly simplistic feminist ruminations about the role of gender in language’. These sorts of criticisms appeared hand in hand with a new breed of studies that followed the ‘performative’ or ‘constructionist’ turn or the ‘turn to discourse’ that was pervading academia and paving the way for new methodologies and research questions (see Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). Within language and gender research, Crawford (1995: 18) proposed that adopting a constructionist framework would prompt analysts to ask different questions about the links between language and gender, such as ‘how people come to have beliefs about sex differences in speech style’ and ‘how those beliefs are encoded and enacted in one’s self-presentation’. In stark contrast to ‘difference’ studies, then, researchers began to ask questions about how sex/gender and sex/gender identities are ‘constructed’ in language, and how ‘gender is an effect of language use, rather than a determinant of different uses of language’ (Litosseliti, 2006: 44).

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*Constructing gender*

During the 1990s, the language of ‘difference’ began to be replaced with the language of ‘construction’ and ‘performance’; indeed, as Holmes (2007: 52) puts it, ‘the field of language and gender was engulfed in a wave of social constructionism’ (see also Cameron, 2009). This second strand entailed a radical paradigmatic shift in thinking about the ontological status of sex/gender (and sex/gender difference). Like other identity categories, sex/gender was understood as ‘the emergent product rather than the pre-existing source of linguistic and other semiotic practices’ (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005: 588).

Much of this second strand of work has its ‘social constructionist’ roots in postmodernism, poststructuralism and literary theory, drawing heavily on the language of discourse and performativity in, for example, Foucault (1972), J. Butler (1990a) and Bauman (2004). It is also somewhat rooted in ethnomethodology, in Garfinkel’s (1967) groundbreaking work on the social production of gender. Through a case study of Agnes, a 19-year-old male-to-female transsexual, Garfinkel analysed the practices involved in ‘passing’ and the ‘managed achievement of sex status’ (1967: 116). Thus Garfinkel’s task was to ‘understand how membership in a sex category is sustained across a variety of practical circumstances and contingencies, at the same time preserving the sense that such membership is a natural, normal moral fact of life’ (Zimmerman, 1992a: 195). These ideas were developed by Kessler and McKenna (1978) and West and Zimmerman (1987), who coined the phrase ‘doing gender’ to refer to the idea that gender is a social accomplishment (see Jurik & Siemsen, 2009; West & Zimmerman, 2009). From this perspective, sex, like gender, is not a biological or socialized essence or trait that exists prior to and outside of discourse. The male–female dualism is not ‘natural’. Instead, both sex and gender are things that one *does* rather than things that one *has*; they are activities rather than attributes, socially constructed belief systems rather than natural, inevitable and timeless facts.

There are now numerous studies that examine the ‘multiple’, ‘contradictory’, ‘fluid’, ‘fragmentary’ and ‘dynamic’ ‘construction’, ‘performance’, ‘production’ or ‘enactment’ of gender ‘identities’ or ‘subject positions’; femininities and masculinities; or the ‘doing’ of gender (for an overview, see Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). In constructionist-informed analyses, the focus of inquiry shifts away from correlating linguistic variables with demographic variables, and away from claims that ‘men talk like this’ and ‘women talk like that’, towards a ‘focus on the process of gendering, the on-going accomplishment of gender, as well as the dynamism and fluidity of the process’ (Holmes, 2007: 55). Thus, instead of concentrating ‘on the results of seeing someone as female or male’ (Kessler & McKenna, 1978: 163), analyses progress by treating the ‘natural’ coherence of gender as a performance, or an accomplishment which is locally

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produced and ‘shaped moment by moment through the details of discourse’ (Bucholtz, 1999: viii). Central to constructionist work is the view that gender and sexism are ‘best analysed at the level of discourse’ (Cameron, 1998a: 87). This focus on discourse and the discursive has, in turn, led to a gradual shift away from research which analyses sexist word forms and decontextualized sentences, or which searches for the linguistic or cultural correlates of gender difference, towards a more detailed qualitative analysis of extended sequences of language use, and its role in producing and naturalizing specific understandings of gender and gender difference (see K. Harrington *et al.*, 2008; Pichler & Eppler, 2009; Sunderland, 2006; Weatherall, 2002a). Key questions asked by researchers in this tradition include:

- How do people construct and use gender identities in talk? How do men perform masculinity and how do women perform femininity? How are multiple and contradictory gender identities taken up across stretches of talk (e.g., Benor *et al.*, 2002; Bucholtz *et al.*, 1999; Buzzanell *et al.*, 2004; Coates, 1997; 1999; Johnson & Meinhof, 1997; Kendall, 2008; Korobov & Bamberg, 2004; Pichler, 2009; Wetherell & Edley, 1999)?
- What is the relationship between gender, discourse and sexuality? How do people construct their own and others’ gendered or sexual identities? How is desire produced and regulated as a discursive, social accomplishment (e.g., P. Baker, 2008; Bucholtz & Hall, 2004; Cameron, 2005a; Cameron & Kulick, 2003a; 2003b; Livia & Hall, 1997)?
- How do people position themselves and each other as male and female at the ‘micro’ level within dominant gendered macro-level ‘discourses’? How do discourse and ideology make available and limit the subject positions that may be occupied by men and women, and how are such positions challenged, resisted or subverted (e.g., Baxter, 2003; Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Koller, 2004; Lazar, 2005; 2007; Mullany, 2007; Remlinger, 1999; Sunderland, 2004; Walsh, 2001; Wodak, 1997)?
- How are gendered ‘communities of practice’, or speech communities, constructed within the contexts of their social engagement? How do people participate in multiple communities of practice and how are gendered institutional contexts shaped and negotiated (e.g., Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1998; 2003; Holmes & Meyerhoff, 1999; Tannen, 1993; Walsh, 2001)?

On the surface, at least, the theoretical and methodological assumptions that underpin this list of questions overcame problems associated with the essentialist, sex-difference research outlined earlier, by emphasizing the ongoing and often contradictory production of the meaning of gender. Within this framework people can intervene in and subvert solidified gender discourses, creating new configurations and meanings, and, in so doing, generate ideological shift.

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Despite the radical potential of constructionist approaches, however, they suffer a number of problems in their empirical translation. The first problem is for work particularly influenced by poststructuralist and Foucauldian models of discourse. From this perspective, speakers and their talk are conceived as shaped, constrained, 'positioned' or otherwise determined by abstract discourses, ideologies or forces of power 'from above' or 'beyond' the talk (e.g., Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Sclater, 2003; Wetherell, 1998). This 'top-down', 'macro'-level understanding of discourse has a tendency to reify abstract societal discourses, ideologies and norms concerning appropriate masculine and feminine behaviour, investing them with agency to shape and constrain what (gendered) speakers say at the discursive, micro level of 'local' interactions (e.g., Sunderland, 2004; Wetherell, 2007; Wodak, 2001). The problem of reification is also relevant to the practical analytic moves made by the very process of ascribing discourse labels to stretches of text or interaction. For Wooffitt (2005), talk and texts are too complex to reduce to discourses. This kind of analysis, therefore, offers 'an impoverished view of human conduct' (p. 179). Attributing gross discourse labels to chunks of talk is problematic because there is rarely an evidential basis for that attribution.

A second problem for constructionist approaches focuses on another type of empirical translation. Despite the fact that the *theory* of gender is different, studies about the 'construction of gender identity' often end up making essentialist-sounding claims, particularly those that collect the talk of women or men, in interviews or natural settings, and then look at how *women* perform *femininities* and *men* perform *masculinities*. There is rarely a notion in such work of people *not* performing gender. If the data do not 'look like' recognizable femininity or masculinity, the 'finding' is that gender identity is not what we thought it was, or that it is variable, inconsistent, multiple or fragmentary (Edwards & Stokoe, 2004: 4; see also Cameron, 2009; Lorber, 2000; Swann, 2009). Thus the performance of gender is explained or accounted for in a somewhat circular fashion, leaving what Velody and Williams (1998) call a 'realist residue'. This type of 'constructionist' research, therefore, buys back into the sex-difference framework that it was originally designed to replace, and inadvertently reintroduces essentialism and determinist understandings of gender identity construction 'by the back door' (see Stokoe, 2005; 2008a). As Sidnell (2003: 347) notes:

There is an underlying tension here in so far as many researchers advance anti-essentialist, theoretical conceptions of gender (suggesting that gender emerges through the practices of talk) but at the same time employ the very same categories in their analysis. The theoretical notion of 'performativity' offered as an anti-essentialist antidote, is problematic in so far as it presupposes some 'real' set of actors who inhabit the roles of the *dramatis personae*.

Finally, there are problems with the way 'social constructionism' is (mis)understood in some language and gender research. Such misunderstandings are revealed



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in criticisms that, while constructionism is generally regarded as a ‘good thing’, it is also regarded as ‘dangerous’ for ignoring ‘facts [*sic*] about gender and language which have been repeatedly pointed out in the language and gender literature over the decades, and which, as socially responsible academics, we cannot and do not want to ignore’ (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 2003: 9). In everyday life, Holmes and Meyerhoff (2003) argue, people treat gender as ‘real’, as a social category that matters, as a distinction that is ‘crucial’ and ‘vital’, and as a stable, essential distinction to which any threat is extremely disturbing (pp. 9–10). However, such appeals to the ‘actual’ world of facts and reality contradict basic constructionist premises. Here, social constructionism (vs. essentialism) is conflated with social/cultural (vs. biological) understandings of gender: it is treated as a construction *rather than* as biological, or as *only* a construction rather than real. The idea that ‘construction’ means that gender identities are ‘only’ constructions rather than real is itself a reiteration of essentialism (Edwards, 1997).

The issue for many constructionists is not whether gender is actually ‘real’ or ‘true’; rather, it is the business of analysis to ‘analyze the workings of those categories, not to merely use them as they are used in the world’ (Jefferson, 2004b: 118). Social constructionist analysis is about the investigation of knowledge production: how people maintain a sense of a commonly shared, objectively existing world (see Lynch, 1993; Potter, 1996). In everyday life, people generally treat ‘gender’ as a real thing that they can know about themselves and other people, and are not generally sent into a ‘metaphysical spin’ about ‘real’ or ‘constructed’ statuses (Francis, 1994). And if people do question their or someone else’s membership of a gender category – that is, make it accountable – then this is something we can study (see Speer, 2005b; this volume). This version of constructionism is also consonant with the ethnomethodological perspective that underpins the concept of ‘doing gender’, which explores the way people constitute themselves as recognizably, taken-for-grantedly gendered, or hold each other accountable for membership in a category (e.g., West & Zimmerman, 1987).

Having set out the two main traditions in gender and language research, we now move on to the substantive background for the current edited collection. Our brief discussion of ethnomethodology in the previous paragraph partly sets up the ‘theoretical’ basis of conversation analysis, and its relevance for understanding gender. In the next section, we start by explaining the discipline of conversation analysis, before moving on to describe the way it has enriched gender and language research by opening new doors for the field.

### Conversation analytic research on gender

We start with a brief explanation of conversation analysis before outlining its procedures for studying ‘gender’ as an analytic topic. We will then examine



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the bodies of work that have used conversation analysis to make claims about gender, and reflect critically on some of the key questions each strand of work has addressed.

*What is conversation analysis?*

Conversation analysis (CA) emerged in the 1960s and 1970s in the work of the American sociologist Sacks and his colleagues Schegloff and Jefferson. Sacks's aim was to develop an alternative to mainstream sociology: an observational science of society and social action that could be grounded in the 'details of actual events' (Sacks, 1984a: 26). It has developed into an influential programme of work with many findings about how conversation works. CA's roots are in ethnomethodology (EM), a programme developed by another sociologist, Garfinkel (1967), which was, in turn influenced by the phenomenological philosophy of Schütz (e.g., 1962) and Goffman's (e.g., 1959) work on the interaction order. Garfinkel's basic idea was that people in society, or *members*, continuously engage in making sense of the world and, in so doing, methodically display their understandings of it: making their activities 'visibly-rational-and-reportable-for-all-practical-purposes' (Garfinkel, 1967: vii). Language was central to the EM project of explicating members' methods for producing orderly and accountable social activities. For Schegloff (1996a: 4), talk is 'the primordial scene of social life ... through which the work of the constitutive institutions of societies gets done'. It is through talking that we live our lives, build and maintain relationships, and establish '*who we are to one another*' (Drew, 2005: 74; emphasis added).

CA involves the study of transcripts of recordings of ordinary and institutional talk of various kinds, focusing on the turn-by-turn organization of talk and embodied conduct in interaction. CA is primarily concerned to describe the methods and procedures speakers use to coordinate their talk to produce orderly and meaningful conversational actions. These procedures are not idiosyncratic, but display relatively stable patterns and organized regularities that are oriented to by participants. Examples of patterns and topics studied include how people take turns in conversation, what it means to overlap with another speaker or produce a delayed response, how conversations are opened and closed, how people make reference to themselves and each other, how actions (e.g., complaining, questioning, assessing, inviting, etc.) are accomplished, how turns at talk are designed and formulated, how people solve problems in hearing, speaking and understanding, and a range of other conversational phenomena (Sacks, 1992; Schegloff, 2007a; for introductions see Ten Have, 2007; Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008). The goal of CA is to establish the structural frameworks that underpin and organize such regularities in interaction: 'the structures of social action' (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984).

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*Conversation analysis and the relevance of gender*

With regard to gender (or any categorical or identity topic) conversation analysts invert what previous language and gender researchers have done when they either rush to explain differences in language use, or examine, in a circular way, the construction of gender identities, in some stretch of data. LeBaron (1998; quoted in Tracy, 1998: 15) summarizes the basic CA position:

we should not ... say 'oh, look, here's a man and a woman talking; ... oh, we can make these conclusions about gendered communication'. But rather we should say, 'gender only becomes an issue when the participants themselves make it one and we can point to different things about that'.

For CA, any analysis of social categories is based on what participants do and say, rather than on what analysts take to be relevant as a function of their hypotheses, research questions, politics or theory. From this perspective, then, in order to warrant an analytic claim that a particular category is relevant to any stretch of interaction, the analyst must be able to demonstrate that such identities are linked to specific actions. There are two key issues here for conversation analysts:

- 1 *The problem of relevance*: Given the indefinitely extendable number of ways any person may be categorized, how should we decide which from a range of potential identities is relevant? The answer is to go by what is demonstrably relevant to participants 'at the moment that whatever we are trying to produce an account for occurs' (Schegloff, 1991: 50).
- 2 *The issue of procedural consequentiality*: If we can establish that a particular identity category is relevant, can we see that it is consequential for participants, in terms of its trajectory, content, character or organizational procedures? Does it have 'determinate consequences for the talk' (Heritage, 2005: 111)?

In his classic paper, Schegloff (1997) provides an empirical demonstration of these two issues, challenging what he sees as the classic mistake often made by discourse analysts: using gender as an *a priori* lens through which to analyse data. The materials that Schegloff bases his arguments on include a conversation in which one male speaker appears to interrupt a female speaker on several occasions. Studies of interruption have a long history within language and gender studies. In fact, the 'dominance' studies of sex difference mentioned earlier used a broadly CA approach to identify the micro-interactional techniques by which men dominate and control talk (e.g., Ainsworth-Vaughn, 1992; Conefrey, 1997; Davis, 1986; 1988; DeFrancisco, 1991; Edelsky, 1981; Fishman, 1978; 1983; S. Shaw, 2000; West, 1984; 1995; West & Garcia, 1988; Zimmerman & West, 1975; for criticisms see D. James & Clarke, 1993; D. James & Drakich,