Constructing flight attendant identity in safety reports to a government agency

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1. Abstract

This paper investigates the emergence of occupational identity from voluntarily-submitted safety reports written by flight attendants to a US government aviation safety regulatory agency. Using an analytic framework informed by ethnography of communication and interactional sociolinguistics paradigms (e.g., Gumperz 1982; Hymes 1986; Schiffrin 1994), I argue that the report discourse reflects aviation institutional, hierarchical, and occupational communicative and structural norms. The linguistic practices, indexical stances, and ideologies created and oriented to in the report discourse contribute to a contextually-relevant identity (cf. Bucholtz and Hall 2004; Kiesling 2004). The construction of this identity is informed by alignment to the ratified audience for which the reports are written, namely actors higher in aviation institutional authority than the flight attendant authors (Goffman 1981).

Moreover, in voluntarily submitting reports, I argue that flight attendants are actively asserting and reinforcing their role as cabin safety experts, which challenges historical constructions of the flight attendant as passive and having little safety knowledge or authority (Baker et al. 2003 [1967]; Barry 2007; Moles and Friedman 1973; Santino 1978). The submission of the reports can therefore be viewed as linguistic performances which heighten aviation institutional ideologies of safety whilst foregrounding safety-related practices. The analysis in this paper is part of a larger research project investigating flight attendant discourse and identity construction, a topic which has previously received little linguistic or academic attention.

2. Introduction

In this paper, I look at a little-examined speech situation salient to the aviation community: safety reports written by flight attendants to a US government agency. I first set out the background of the research, contextualising the speech situation and participants in the speech events. Next I introduce the theoretical and analytical frameworks in which I am situating the analysis of identity construction. I introduce the data and methodology for inclusion in the corpus. I analyse the data, applying the

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1 I gratefully acknowledge the comments and feedback from Colleen Cotter, Susan Ehrlich, and Miriam Meyerhoff. All errors are my own.
theoretical framework of linguistic identity construction set out by Bucholtz and Hall (2004). The paper ends with a brief conclusion.

3. Background of research

Flight attendants in the US have in the past received little academic scrutiny in the discipline of linguistics. Yet linguistic and discursive communication is one of the key elements of their job, one key strand of which is the communication of important safety information to passengers, pilots, and other flight attendants. It is especially crucial for flight attendants to be able to communicate in a manner which is easily and clearly understood by colleagues in times of emergency. To this end, flight attendants (and pilots) are trained to communicate in an aviation institution-sanctioned manner, using a strategy called Crew Resource Management (CRM), which was developed and implemented by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). Among other tenets, CRM emphasises clear, concise communicative norms, such as speaking a command or opinion without hesitation or mitigation. Another CRM communicative strategy emphasises the use by flight attendants of recognised aviation-specific terminology, such as referring to the leading edge of a wing and aircraft left (instead of ‘the front part of the wing’ and ‘the left side of the plane’, both of which are less precise in the crew discourse context than the preferred aviation terms).

Parallel to the concept of CRM is the hierarchical structure of the Chain of Command. This aviation institution-sanctioned concept stratifies the inflight crew of pilots and flight attendants into a recognised hierarchy, placing the captain at the top, as the absolute authority on the aircraft. Other pilots in the crew are placed below the captain in the Chain of Command in terms of onboard authority. Flight attendants’ place in the Chain of Command is at the bottom, under all pilots in the crew. This implicitly constructs flight attendants as less powerful and authoritative than pilots in the context of the aircraft.

The dual concepts of CRM and the Chain of Command are pervasive contextualizing concepts throughout the aviation industry. Thus one hypothesis I address is that discourse written by flight attendants (in this paper also referred to as flight attendant discourse) will display orientation to the Chain of Command hierarchy and to CRM communication strategies.

4. Theory

Following Bucholtz and Hall (2004), I approach the construction of identity as a product of the social and cultural semiotics of practice, indexicality, ideology, and performance. Practice refers to linguistic and social practices, the repeated actions we do in our daily lives. These daily practices create indexical stances, which are orientations to the ongoing interaction. For example, Kiesling (2004) argues that use of the term dude by young heterosexual male adults in a fraternity indexes a stance of ‘cool solidarity’, which mediates masculine solidarity and heteronormativity. Indexical stances produce ideologies, which organize and enable ‘all cultural beliefs and practices as well as the
power relations that result from these’ (Bucholtz and Hall 2004: 379). Finally, performances can be marked speech events, available for public evaluation. These social and cultural semiotics are interrelated: performances heighten ideology by foregrounding practice; indexicality mediates between practice and ideology by producing ideology through practices (Bucholtz and Hall 2004: 381). Out of these social and cultural semiotics emerges a situationally constructed and relevant identity.

5. Analytic frameworks

I situate my analysis in the complementary frameworks of interactional sociolinguistics and ethnography of communication (e.g., Cotter 2010; Gumperz 1982; Hymes 1986; Tannen 1993). I use the concept of footing (cf. Goffman 1981) to understand the alignment a speaker assumes in the participation frameworks of the safety reports. I hypothesise that flight attendants assume footings relevant to their hierarchical positions in the Chain of Command. I draw on the method of analysing individual components of discourse put forth by Hymes (1986) foregrounding the salience of context to discourse. While it is true that speakers may approach a speech situation with a priori knowledge and individual personalities, analysts must give primacy to contextualising influences and information in order to gain a deeper understanding of what the discourse is doing in the speech situation under investigation.

6. Data

Data comes from three pre-compiled sets of 50 reports each, for a total of 150 reports, completed by flight attendants and submitted to the Aviation Safety and Reporting System (ASRS), part of the National Aeronautical and Space Administration (NASA), a US government body involved in the research and oversight of aviation safety and space travel. The reports document ‘inflight incidents’, which is an aviation industry-specific term meaning non-routine events which did not result in damage to human life or aircraft. Reported incidents range from onboard fires to passenger medical emergencies to severe turbulence.

The report comes in two parts: factual documentation about the incident and a narrative account of the incident written by the flight attendant involved in the incident. The narrative does not have to adhere to a strict format, thus flight attendants are unconstrained in how they construe the tone (or key, cf. Hymes 1986) and presentation order of the narrative.

Submitting the reports is voluntary, thus a second hypothesis is that the reports themselves can be considered discursive performances which heighten safety-related ideologies through foregrounding safety-related practices. The safety-related ideologies being heighten are, I argue, rooted in the Chain of Command hierarchy; safety-related linguistic practices are rooted in CRM communication strategies.

Flight attendants are the authors of the narratives. The ratified audience and addressees of the narratives are ASRS analysts comprised of retired pilots and mechanics. Note that there are no flight attendant analysts for whom the reports are written. Thus flight attendants are composing the narratives for an audience comprised of actors who
have greater institutionally granted authority over them, and actors who do not have a rich understanding of the tasks and roles of the flight attendants. There is an unratified audience for the narratives, comprised of persons who access the reports from the ASRS website (http://asrs.arc.nasa.gov).

The narratives provide an opportunity to analyze discourse written by flight attendants concerning non-routine, safety-related events. Given the purpose of the report, we would expect an identity to emerge from the narratives which orients to safety-related practices and indexical stances. Moreover, because flight attendants compose the narratives for a ratified audience with greater institutional authority than themselves, we would expect flight attendant authors to accommodate to this institutional authority in their discourse.

6. Analysis

To address the hypotheses set out, I present two report narratives, which are keyed differently. The first narrative reports a cabin depressurization:

Example 1:
605990 (2003-12)

1. BEGINNING OR NEAR BEGINNING OF [DESCENT], THE [CAPTAIN] CAME ON PA AND SAID '[FLIGHT] ATTENDANTS IMMEDIATELY TAKE YOUR SEATS.'
2. WE DID.
3. HE LATER CALLED TO SEE IF THE MASKS HAD DROPPED IN THE CABIN.
4. THEY HAD NOT.
5. HE ASKED IF WE HEARD ANY BANGS, LOUD NOISES OR HISSING.
6. WE HAD NOT.
7. APPARENTLY EXPERIENCING PRESSURE PROB INDICATIONS IN THE COCKPIT.
8. ABOUT 3 MINS LATER, I PICKED UP THE INTERPHONE (#4) AND CALLED THE [CAPTAIN] TO TELL HIM MY DOOR WAS DEPRESSURIZING
9. AS WE SPOKE YOU COULD HEAR THE LOUD RUSHING OF AIR.
10. IT GOT EXTREMELY NOISY AND VERY, VERY COLD.
11. I BEGGED A BLANKET BACK FROM A NEARBY [PASSENGER].
12. THE [CAPTAIN] TOLD ME TO NOT LEAVE MY JUMPSEAT FOR ANY REASON -- TO REMAIN STRAPPED IN, NOT TO DO ANY CABIN CHKS EITHER WHEN THE TIME CAME -- 'SIT TIGHT.'
13. I HAD TO PUT MY FINGERS N MY EARS IT WAS SO LOUD.
14. I WAS REALLY, REALLY COLD.
15. I COULD FEEL WITH MY [RIGHT] HAND NEAR THE DOOR EDGES, EXACTLY WHERE THE AIR WAS RUSHING IN.
16. WEIRD.
17. WAS I SCARED? YES. COLD? YES. ABSOLUTELY THRILLED? YES.
19. I HAD MY FAITH IN THE [CAPTAIN].
20. I WAS #4.
21. IT WAS MY GALLEY DOOR WHICH I SAT 2 FT AWAY FACING THE REAR OF THE [AIRCRAFT]
The narrative begins with orientation to the authority of the captain, in lines 1 and 2. The captain is constructed as issuing a command; flight attendants obey without question. In lines 3-7 the captain calls the flight attendants asking for flight attendants’ opinions about the condition of the cabin, which is a tenet of CRM: keeping crewmembers informed. Orientation to CRM continues in line 8, reporting the depressurizing to the captain.

Lines 9-11 marks a frame shift, from a footing focusing on the safety of passengers and the cabin to a footing concerned with her own well-being. The phrase *I begged a blanket* directly indexes a helpless stance, the token *begged* invoking images of someone helpless. In line 12 the captain is once again constructed as authoritative and giving the flight attendant a direct order, this time exclusively for her own safety (compare with line 1, when the captain’s order was for the safety of all flight attendants). Line 12 is a temporary frame shift, whereby other actors in the incident are alluded to, albeit implicitly. For example *not to do any cabin [checks]* explicitly orients to the other-focused safety tasks and passenger care duties for which the flight attendant is responsible.

Line 13 shifts the perspective back to a self-focus. Lines 13-17 contain evaluative markers such as the repetition of *really* in line 14 and the colloquial evaluative word *weird* in line 16, which work to convey the emotional experience of the flight attendant. Compare these lines with lines 7-8, which contain no orientation to the flight attendant’s personal experience or emotions, but only report the factual events of the incident as experienced by the flight attendant.

Lines 18-19 shift the frame from focusing on the experiences of the flight attendant to discursively creating a power dyad of the flight attendant who is placing her faith (and presumably life) into the hands of the authoritative, wise, and experienced captain in command of the aircraft. The flight attendant is concerned with her own safety, and relies on the captain to keep her safe. Lines 18-19 directly index a stance of helplessness (for the flight attendant) and power (for the captain): the captain is constructed as having the power to save the life of the flight attendant.

The next narrative (Example 2) is a report about flight attendant ‘duty day limitations’. The FAA mandates that flight attendants can work up to 16 hours per duty day; if the duty period is projected to go beyond 16 hours, a flight attendant has the right to leave the aircraft, to in effect stop working, because she will ‘go illegal’. Leaving the aircraft brings with it concomitant effects which can cause major disruption to flight schedules. The FAA mandates that flight attendants must be onboard an aircraft if there are passengers; additionally there is a minimum amount of flight attendants which must be onboard for a flight to legally have passengers. Thus if a flight attendant is projected to go beyond FAA-mandated duty limits, and she does leave the aircraft, then unless there is a replacement flight attendant waiting or the aircraft was already staffed above the FAA minimum requirement, then passengers must leave the aircraft. Failure to comply with FAA regulations can result in severe fines for the airline, therefore it is in an airline’s financial interest to comply with these FAA regulations.
In Example 2, the flight has diverted due to weather. If the flight attendant leaves the aircraft, then the flight will be delayed or cancel, causing inconvenience to passengers, crew, and the airline:

**Example 2:**
796991 (2008-04)

1. THIS [FLIGHT] WAS DIVERTED DUE TO [WEATHER] IN [CHICAGO].
4. HE AS MUCH AS TOLD THE PURSER HE WOULD NOT COMPLY WITH THE [FEDERAL AVIATION REGULATION] AS HE WAS AFRAID THAT I WOULD GET OFF.
5. I CAN ONLY ASSUME THE [FEDERAL AVIATION REGULATION] IS IN PLACE TO ENSURE THE SAFETY OF CREW AND THE CUSTOMERS.
6. IT WAS INTENTIONALLY VIOLATED.

Line 2 explicitly orients to the Chain of Command hierarchy, by referring to the pilot in command, which is another term for the captain. The captain is constructed as being proactive about the duty legalities of the flight attendant crew, which is a tenet of CRM: keeping crewmembers informed of the situation, as we saw in Example 1. Line 3 refers to the purser, who is a member of the flight attendant crew but one who has an elevated status above other flight attendants in the Chain of Command hierarchy.

In lines 3, 4, and 5, the flight attendant invokes an aviation institutional authority higher than the captain, namely the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), the government agency responsible for regulating commercial aviation in the US. In the interest of maintaining and promoting safety, the FAA has implemented certain regulations such duty day limitations for flight attendants (and pilots). Another FAA regulation cited in Example 2 is that jetways must be attached to aircraft if they are parked at a gate with an open door. However, the narrative implies that the captain purposely violated this regulation, due to his fear that the flight attendant would leave the plane because her duty day was nearing its legal limit.

The flight attendant uses the institutionally sanctioned space of the safety report to commit a face-threatening act against the captain, who is higher in institutional authority than the flight attendant. However, she evokes a higher aviation institutional power, the FAA, to support her contention that the captain was violating a federal regulation. Thus the flight attendant makes strategic use of the aviation institutional hierarchy in order to commit a face-threatening act against the head of the Chain of Command, e.g., the captain of her crew.

7. Discussion

Both examples demonstrate orientation to the Chain of Command hierarchy for different reasons. In Example 1, the flight attendant author cites the authority and experience of the
captain in a manner akin to an omnipotent father figure, similar to historic constructions of pilots (cf. Ashcraft 2007). The flight attendant is constructed as helpless, almost as a child, needing the father figure of the captain to keep her safe from harm.

Example 2 orients to the Chain of Command hierarchy and the authority of the captain but draws on the highest aviation institutional authority in the US, the FAA, to support her claim that the jetway should be attached to the aircraft (and so she can presumably leave the aircraft because she will exceed her duty day limitations). Thus aviation institutional authority is invoked in both examples, and both for the benefit of the flight attendant in different ways.

Both narratives demonstrate orientation to CRM communication strategies. In Example 1, both the flight attendants and the captain are constructed as keeping each other informed of the situation in their respective work spaces (aircraft cabin and flight deck). Moreover, the captain is constructed as clearly giving a command to the flight attendants who obey the command without question. Example 2 constructs the captain as asking for, and receiving, information about the flight attendant’s duty day. Thus the data support the first hypothesis, that the reports display orientation to both the Chain of Command hierarchy and CRM communication strategies.

Let us address the second hypothesis, that the reports themselves are linguistic performances which heighten safety-related ideologies through foregrounding safety-related practices.

Example 1 contains phrases which serve to heighten the power structure of the Chain of Command in lines 1-6. The captain is constructed as issuing commands or asking questions, to which the flight attendants respond. The lines are structured as a call and response or similar rhetorical device. The effect is the tacit reinforcement of the authority of the captain: he commands or asks; the flight attendant obeys or responds (cf. Santino 1978). Additionally, line 12 constructs the captain as ordering the flight attendant to remain seated, and to not carry out her safety-related duties in the interest of her own physical safety (and the safety of cabin occupants, should she become airborne). The flight attendant obeys the order of the captain, ostensibly in the interest of safety.

Example 2 makes use of repetition of the phrase inquired of in lines 2 and 3, which implicitly orients to the CRM tenet of seeking information from the entire crew in order to make an informed decision. The word inquire directly indexes a stance of knowledge-seeking; however, owing to associations with institutional authority, it can indirectly index stances of power. This indirect indexical stance is supported in line 4, when the captain is constructed using his power to disregard the federal regulation limiting the flight attendant’s duty day. The captain ignores the federal regulations put in place to protect flight attendants from fatigue and to protect passengers from incidents or accidents due to flight attendant (or pilot) fatigue.

The reports are written for an audience, who must evaluate the claims of the flight attendants. The reports are voluntarily written and submitted and thus they are marked speech events. Therefore the data support the second hypothesis, that the reports themselves can be thought of as linguistic performances which heighten safety-related ideologies whilst foregrounding safety-related practices.
8. Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to address the influence of aviation institutional hierarchy, safety practices, and communication strategies on the discourse of flight attendants in safety reports to a government agency. Additionally I have discussed how the social semiotics of practice, indexical stances, ideologies and performances work to contribute to a contextually relevant identity. In the case of the report narratives, the identity which emerges is one which orients to the hierarchical structure of the Chain of Command, but also one which is assertive enough to bypass the authority of the captain when necessary.

This paper is an attempt to apply Bucholtz and Hall’s (2004) framework of identity construction to an understudied area (discourse of flight attendants). People are not born into the role of flight attendant; they do not come to the job with an innate sense of occupational hierarchy and understanding of aviation institutional power. These things are learned. In studying the discourse of flight attendants in various speech situations, we can gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which institutional forces influence the discourse, and situated constructed identity, of flight attendants.
References


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