

A discourse study of gender and leadership in *The Apprentice*

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Introduction

As Holmes (2006) points out, ways of speaking are ‘gendered’.¹ As suggested in a great deal of language and gender research, masculine styles of interaction are characterized by competitive, contestive, and challenging ways of speaking, while feminine speech styles are characteristic of co-operative, facilitative and smooth interaction (see, for example, Holmes, 2006; Schnurr, 2005). A masculine style of discourse is discursively realized in the production of extended speaking turns, the dominance of the speaking floor, the one-at-a-time construction of the floor, and the frequent use of interruptions (Coates, 1997, 2004; Zimmerman and West, 1975; see also Talbot 1998; Schnurr 2005). On the other hand, a feminine discourse style, which pays more attention to the relational aspects of interactions, is linguistically expressed in the collaborative construction of the floor in conversation, the use of politeness strategies and hedging devices, the avoidance of confrontations, and the use of minimal responses and supportive feedback (Tannen, 1990; Holmes, 1995; Coates, 1996, 1998, 2004; Talbot 1998). However, it must be noted that conversation usually contains both cooperative and competitive elements, and must by definition involve a certain minimum of cooperation and some degree of competition among speakers (Cameron, 1998). By explaining the linguistic realizations of such masculine and feminine discourse styles, this paper examines the differently gendered leadership styles in the popular US reality television show *The Apprentice*. Drawing on the methods of discourse analysis, this paper analyzes the leadership styles that a male and a female contestant employ in ‘doing leadership’. In particular, in the detailed micro-analyses of

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the interactions, this investigation pays attention to the linguistic devices and discursive strategies that make up their leadership styles.

Leadership, in the area of organizational studies, is generally defined as ‘the ability to influence others with the aim of achieving a commonly agreed goal which benefits the organization and its members’ (Dwyer, 1993, p.552). However, in sociolinguistics, particularly in research which takes a social constructionist perspective, what is of interest is the ways people use language to construct and perform certain social identities, including identity as a leader or manager. Thus, it is useful to see leadership as a process, a performance, or an activity, rather than as the achievements or outcomes of a leader. By emphasizing the dynamic, situated, and interactional aspects of leadership, it is possible to identify the discursive strategies and linguistic devices employed to ‘do’ or ‘perform’ leadership. According to Holmes et al. (2003, p.32), “‘doing leadership’ entails competent communicative performance which, by influencing others, results in acceptable outcomes for the organization (transactional/task-oriented goal), and which maintains harmony within the team or community of practice (relational/people-oriented goal)’. Indeed, leadership has only recently received some attention in sociolinguistics (see Holmes et al., 2003; Holmes, 2006; Schnurr, 2005). Thus far, there has been no research that investigates gender and leadership in the popular media from a discourse analytical perspective. Therefore, this paper aims to address this gap in the literature by conducting a discourse study of the representations of gender and leadership in the debut season of *The Apprentice*, which aired on NBC in the winter and spring of 2004.

An important reason accounting for the rise of *The Apprentice* as a cultural phenomenon is that the show ‘stands alone as the first television show to use business savvy and business scenarios as the basis of competition, to pit businesspeople against each other, and to purport to be able to identify the next highly successful executive’ (Kinnick & Parton, 2005, p.430). In light of its huge popularity not only in the United States, but

also in many other countries around the world, this analysis considers *The Apprentice* an important and invaluable site worthy of investigation, especially with regard to the notion of leadership. In particular, the division of the contestants into two teams based on gender in the debut season of *The Apprentice* permits an examination of gender constructions in same-sex interactions.

In *The Apprentice*, sixteen contestants vie for the top position at one of Donald Trump's companies, and embark upon a televised, extended job interview in order to become his apprentice. The contestants consisting of eight men and eight women are divided into two teams called corporations. The division, as mentioned above, is based upon gender. Each week, each team is required to select a project manager to lead them in the assigned task of the week. The two teams compete against each other every week in a business-oriented task which is intended to test their business skills and expertise. Every week, the team which wins the weekly competition wins a spectacular reward, while the losing team faces Donald Trump (DT henceforth) and his two assistants George and Carolyn in the boardroom, where DT meets up with the members of the losing team to discuss the reasons for the failure in the task. At the end of each episode, DT makes the decision as to who did the worst job in the losing team and, consequently, should be fired with immediate effect.

Data Analysis

In analyzing the data taken from *The Apprentice*, this paper examines in particular the discourse style of a male project manager (Jason) and that of a female project manager (Katrina) in 'doing leadership' by conducting a detailed discourse analysis of the interactions in which they are involved. It should be noted that the interactions examined are same-sex interactions taken from Episodes 1 to 4, where the contestants are divided into two teams based on their gender. It is argued that gender differences in the performance

of leadership exhibited by the project managers are clearly evident, and the differences are exemplified by comparison. The gender differences are made even more pronounced and extreme in such same-sex contexts, where the prominence of the gender norms is overtly visible. This is highly relevant to the gendered performance of leadership. As Excerpt 1 displays, the gendering of the team is made explicit by the comment made by DT at the very beginning of Episode 1. It could be argued that the explicitly gendered contexts may impose even more constraints on the range of possible ways which are deemed appropriate in 'doing gender' and 'doing leadership' simultaneously.

Excerpt 1 (see the Appendix for transcription conventions)
(Episode 1)

1 DT: additionally + women have a tougher time in the workplace
2 or so they say
3 let's find out
4 we're gonna be setting up two teams of eight each
5 and I've decided it's going to be men against women

Jason's Leadership Styles

In Excerpt 2, the men's team is meeting to discuss the plan to design an advertising campaign to promote jet service in Episode 2.

Excerpt 2
(Episode 2)

1 Jason: so you know what?
2 what we should do is this
3 I'll have to be the floater
4 I'll go from back and forth, okay
5 I think Nick +
6 I think Bill need to do creative, okay
7 I think you guys should come up with, okay
8 here's how we're gonna do it
9 that's it
10 come up with your print ads
11 talk to who you need to talk to
12 you're thinking corporate

13 you're thinking young and sleek
 14 come in the middle
 15 Troy: can I just interject real quick?
 16 these two gentlemen are our clients
 17 we should really find out what they want to have accomplished
 18 Kwa: who are our clients?
 19 Troy: William J. Allard and Ken Austin
 20 they are the one that have employed us + to do their marketing
 campaign
 21 we should find out what they want to have done
 22 Jason: honestly, do I think we need to meet them?
 23 I don't think we need to meet with 'em
 24 what are we seeing /'em for?
 25 Kwa: /I disagree\with that
 26 Nick: What's the /objection ()?\
 27 Kwa: /I think\ you should know what your customer wants=
 28 Nick: =I'm so sure
 29 what do you hope to gain from the meeting?
 30 what questions would you ask them?
 31 Jason: here's what we need to do
 32 we're doing it right now
 33 okay, we don't have time to go and meet with them
 34 it's gonna take an hour
 35 I think it's a waste of time

In the excerpt, Jason demonstrates a number of strategies indicative of a typically masculine discursive style, such as direct directives and challenging questions. In line 2, the statement (*what we should do is this*) clearly signals that Jason is set to announce the strategy of the advertising campaign. In lines 3-10, he proposes the division of labour in the form of statements rather suggestions. For instance, he uses a '*need* statement' to get Nick and Bill to do the creative aspects of the campaign, *I think Nick, I think Bill need to do creative* (lines 6-7), which displays a masculine discourse style. Note that from line 1 to line 14, Jason establishes his position as project manager in the team by dominating the floor in the meeting. In particular, by specifying his own role explicitly as *the floater* (line 3), he spells out his responsibility to oversee and supervise the whole project. In doing so, he, again, establishes his leadership position within the team by

evoking his role in the team.

Jason's uses of *okay* (lines 4, 6 and 7) do not mean to seek agreement from the members of the team, or solicit comments from the members. Rather, *okay* is used to check the understanding of the members, ensuring every member of the team fully understands what he has said so far. This interpretation is supported by the absence of pausing after the utterance of *okay* to invite possible comments. Also, he does not use a rising intonation to possibly signal its function as a question. It is evident that the team members share such an interpretation, and they have not given any responses after his use of *okay*, nor any minimal responses such as *mm*. Moreover, rather than using the inclusive pronoun *we* consistently which emphasizes collective responsibility and expresses solidarity, Jason uses the pronouns *you* (lines 11, 12, 13) and *you guys* (line 7) to establish the status differential between him and the other members. Note that he only uses the inclusive pronoun *we* twice (in lines 2 and 8) in situations where his involvement is clearly evident.

It is also noteworthy that despite the fact that statements such as *you're thinking corporate* (line 12) and *you're thinking young and sleek* (line 13) do not appear in the form of imperatives, they take on directive force, and are by no means less powerful than the imperatives within this context. In particular, the use of the mental process verb *think* makes the directive force even stronger, since getting others to *think* in a particular way represents a much deeper level of exerting influence and exercising control. By using the verb *think*, Jason not only imposes the conceptual direction of the advertising campaign on the team members, but also directs the members' ways of thinking.

In response to Troy's mitigated rejection to his proposal in lines 15-17, Jason produces a challenging question, *what are we seeing 'em for* (line 24), suggesting that he sees no point in meeting the clients, even though Troy provides an explanation in lines 16-17. Soon after, by saying *here's*

what we need to do (line 31), Jason not only signals his intention to return to the agenda, but also implies that his decision is final, and any more discussion is not necessary. He then orders the team to do what he proposes *right now* (line 32), which makes his directive all the more imposing. And in line 35, his account of rejecting Troy's suggestion is merely an obvious one (*it's a waste of time*). This shows that he does not think it is necessary to justify his rejection, thereby implying that he possesses ultimate jurisdiction regarding the entire plan of the campaign.

In light of the analysis above, it is clear that Jason exhibits a conventionally masculine style in 'doing leadership', characterized by its transactional and task-oriented nature. His way of delegating specific tasks to the members clearly exhibits his firm, authoritative, and decisive style of leadership. As seen in Excerpt 2, Jason issues the imperatives without mitigation or modification. He even signals that his words are final by saying *that's it* (line 9). And when he rejects suggestions from his team members, he does not provide any justifications. His direct and unmitigated interactive style indexes masculinity, discursively displaying overt power and reaffirming his superior position in the team as project manager. Note that Jason does not use any softening devices, which might otherwise be deemed feminine, to attenuate the face-threatening force (Brown and Levinson, 1987) of the directives, such as modal particles (e.g. *perhaps, probably, just*), pragmatic particles (e.g. *sort of, kind of*), modal verbs (e.g. *might, may*), or tag questions (e.g. *isn't it*). In fact, Jason's characteristically masculine leadership style is not only ratified in the team, but also highly commended by his team members. This could be reflected in the comments made by Nick, one of his team members, in the boardroom with DT, as shown in Excerpt 3.

Excerpt 3
(Episode 2)

1 DT: go ahead Nick.

- 2 Nick: I think Jason performed well,
 3 especially the way we started off
 4 midway through
 5 he took the reins, he took charge, made quick decisions
 6 cause we had to get things in under certain timelines +
 7 and I thought he performed well
 8 his choices were well thought out=
 9 DT: =are you saying that
 10 because you don't want Jason to pick you as one of the /two?
 11 Nick: /not one bit\ not one bit
 12 I thought his decisions were real sharp and well thought out

In Excerpt 3, Nick considers that Jason *performed well* (lines 2 and 7), describing Jason's decisions as *real sharp* (line 12) and *well thought out* (line 12). Given that Jason's leadership style is at the very masculine end in the gendered continuum of discourse styles, it would be useful to find out the reasons why Jason chooses to employ such an extremely masculine style of leadership. A possible explanation is that directives from superiors to subordinates are most often direct and unmitigated due to the overt difference in the status of the participants (Holmes et al., 1999). However, it is suggested that a more convincing explanation is that in a community of practice (see Eckert and McConnell, 1992) composed of men only, such a masculine style can be considered normal or 'unmarked'. This is not to say that any other gendered interactive styles are not possible. Rather, a prototypically masculine way of interaction could be regarded as the most appropriate way of 'doing leadership' in an all-male context, where displays of masculinity, which typically include emphasizing status differentials and exhibiting absolute authority, are an important means of establishing common ground and expressing shared understandings among the members in the all-male team. Thus, by adhering strictly to the stereotypically 'male' norms of interaction, it could be regarded as an 'unmarked' way to earn the recognition as a respectable leader among the male members.

Katrina's Leadership Styles

This paper now turns to examine the leadership styles of a female project manager, Katrina, in the all-female team. Unlike Jason, Katrina draws upon a range of discursive strategies typically associated with the feminine register in 'doing leadership'. Excerpt 3 shows a conversation between Katrina and Jessie, in which they have a disagreement over how decision making should be done in the team.

Excerpt 4

(Episode 4)

- 1 Jes (I): but I could tell Katrina was irritated that
 2 maybe I went ahead and did something
 3 and didn't consult the group
 4 Kat (I): the tables downstairs weren't being effective +
 5 I approached Jessie and said +
 6 shut it down
 7 she took great offence to that
 8 Jes: well, if you wanna change it, you're the leader
 9 so you tell me
 10 you're obviously getting mad that I'm thinking on my own
 11 Kat: no, I'm not getting mad at you for thinking on your own
 12 all I'm saying is that
 13 I've been told four times that this is a bad idea
 14 Jes: why are you spazzing out?
 15 are you upset because +
 16 Kat: I'm upset because you're upset=
 17 Jes: =I'm not upset at anything
 18 I think you're getting frustrated
 19 because + because something isn't working right,
 20 and then you're just trying to find fault
 21 so you have somebody to blame it on
 22 Kat (I): I think Jessie's upset because she wasn't leading +
 23 and + that saddens me
 24 because I was more supportive when she was the leader
 25 Kat: when all of us are trying to work as a team
 26 and I feel like one person doesn't agree with what we're doing
 27 that's what frustrated me from the beginning
 28 Jes: but I think all the ideas (we came up with) were all the same

In line 8, by saying *if you wanna change it, you're the leader*, Jessie implicitly signals that even though she may not necessarily agree with

Katrina's decision, she will not object to her decision, given Katrina's role as project manager of the team. In line 9, she then issues a declarative (*so you tell me*) telling Katrina to give clear instructions to her. Jessie goes on to speculate that Katrina has got angry with her since she made decisions by herself without consulting Katrina (*you're obviously getting mad that I'm thinking on my own* in line 10). In response to Jessie's speculation, Katrina explicitly denies Jessie's claim in line 11 (*no, I'm not getting mad at you for thinking on your own*). She explains that *I've been told four times that this is a bad idea* (line 13). It is noteworthy that Katrina does not criticize Jessie directly; rather she shifts the target of the criticism to the decision itself (*this is a bad idea*). Moreover, instead of stating that it is she who thinks that Jessie's idea is bad, she says *I've been told* (line 13). By using the passive voice where the agent of the criticism may be omitted, she impersonalizes the criticism, thus distancing herself from the negatively affective speech act (Holmes, 2006). This is a prime example of 'doing leadership' in a conventionally feminine way.

In line 14, Jessie asks Katrina why she is getting mad. Note that Jessie's use of the colloquial expression *spazzing out*, originating from the word *spastic*, in describing Katrina's emotional states, clearly carries offensive connotations. In this way, Jessie displays a confrontational stance. Jessie goes on to ask Katrina *are you upset because*. In line 16, Katrina replies that she is upset because Jessie is upset (*I'm upset because you're upset*). By recycling the same syntactic construction (*I'm upset because*) as Jessie's previous question (*are you upset because*), Katrina could be said to display a certain degree of a cooperative discourse style. In response, Jessie denies the fact that she is upset, and speculates that Katrina is frustrated because something is working well and she is trying to put the blame on somebody else. In saying so, Jessie accuses Katrina of putting the blame on her. In lines 25-27, Katrina disagrees with Jessie, and answers that she is frustrated because Jessie does not agree with what the team is doing. By

emphasizing the concept of *a team* (line 25) and by using the pronoun *we* (line 26), she lays emphasis on the importance of teamwork and plays down her own authority, thereby promoting an egalitarian and consensual style of interaction, which is characteristic of a feminine leadership style.

In sum, Excerpt 4 clearly demonstrates that Katrina, as project manager, pays attention to the face needs of the team members. It is clear that she does not pursue an authoritative leadership style, but prefers to lead using a stereotypically feminine, collaborative style. In fact, there is little evidence that she is intent upon evoking her power or status explicitly at any point in the interaction. In fact, in lines 22-24, she states explicitly that when Jessie was the leader in the previous week, she was more supportive of her decisions. Again, this shows that Katrina embraces a stereotypically feminine and collaborative style in 'doing leadership'.

Discussion

In examining the interactive styles of two project managers in 'doing leadership', this paper suggests that they display different styles of leadership in *The Apprentice* which are in accordance with the traditionally dichotomous gendered expectations. The interactional strategies employed by the two project managers are to a large extent consistent with the prevailing gender norms. As shown in the analysis, while Jason's leadership style is stereotypically masculine, characterized by directness and authoritativeness, Katrina's leadership style is normatively feminine, emphasizing group consensus and relational goals. It may be postulated that the gender-stereotypic representations in *The Apprentice* not only reinforce and reproduce the traditional gender stereotypes, but also confirm the existence of the differences between men and women. This echoes what Cameron (2003) calls the 'ideological work' done by the representations of language and gender, that is, the affirmation of the existence of fundamental differences between men and women. As such, such gender representations

in *The Apprentice* are likely to 'reproduce the proposition that gender difference or complementarity is part of the normal order of things' (Cameron, 2003, p.461).

However, gender differences do not carry the connotations of 'different, but equal' (Case, 1994, p.161; see also Cameron, 1995). As Hearn and Parkin (1989) suggest, given that leadership has been traditionally performed by men, notions of leadership have been assumed to imply maleness, and the necessary and desirable qualities of 'doing leadership' are assumed to be masculine. As such, this assumption 'is deeply entrenched in thinking and language, so that the language of leadership often equates with the language of masculinity to include qualities such as aggression, assertiveness, abrasiveness, and competitiveness' (Hearn and Parkin, 1989, p.21). This is reflected in the fact that the criteria used to measure competence in leadership continue to be associated with the male stereotypes (Martin Rojo and Gomez Esteban, 2005). It is therefore not surprising that defining men and masculine patterns as normative inevitably leads to perceptions that women and feminine styles are not just different, but inferior (Case, 1993, 1994). As Peck (2000a) points out, while displays of masculinity in the workplace are likely to result in success, displays of femininity lead to derision and marginalization. One could therefore assume that the way men and women are represented with regard to their leadership styles and leadership abilities in *The Apprentice* contributes to naturalizing women as unsuitable and incompetent in 'doing leadership', as a result of the gender differences exemplified by the differential leadership styles. Following on from this assumption, this paper argues that the ways in which gender differences in 'doing leadership' are represented in *The Apprentice* serve to maintain, reproduce, and reinforce the status quo in the workplace (see Sung 2007). In other words, the show not only perpetuates the masculine style as the norm of 'doing leadership', but also reinforces men as the 'unmarked' prototype of a competent and effective leader.

In assessing the possible influence of *The Apprentice* in reproducing gender stereotypes, one must take into account its specific genre. *The Apprentice* as a reality television show seems to present to the audience the ‘reality’ of the existence of discretely different gendered leadership styles that are displayed by the male and female project managers. By claiming to reveal the ‘reality’ in the commercial world, the show may intend to disguise the highly artificial and constructed nature of the show. As Matheson points out, the media ‘present us not with reality but with a selected, edited, polished version of the real’ (2004, p.103). Even reality TV shows which purport to reflect the reality ‘always and necessarily reflect portions’ (Matheson, 2004, p.103). As such, the show may be produced in such a way that appeals to the general audience by presenting familiar and easily recognizable gendered images in an explicit manner. Thus, such gendered representations not only reproduce and reinforce the gender stereotypes, but also confirm the validity of the gender stereotypes in the so-called ‘authentic’ workplace interactions shown in *The Apprentice*.

This paper suggests that the gendered composition of the group has a particularly important impact upon the project manager’s choice of the communicative style in ‘doing leadership’. It is argued that such gendered composition serves as an important cue that signals particular gendered expectations, which, in turn, constitute to a large extent the gendered norms against which the performance of leadership is evaluated. As Carli (2006) suggests, both men and women are likely to adjust and modify their communication style depending on the gender of the people with whom they are interacting, based on the assessment of how the other people are likely to behave, and how they themselves are expected to behave. An explanation is that different social norms may be operating in interactions with men and interactions with women (Carli 2006). It seems clear that what is of paramount importance to the project managers is to conform to the gendered expectations in order to be considered a member of the in-group in the

same-sex contexts. It is therefore not surprising to note that Jason's leadership style is reminiscent of that of the male leaders among the boys' group in Goodwin's (1998) study. It may be argued that the communicative styles exhibited by the male leaders among the boys' group, as described by Goodwin (1998), could serve as a 'cultural model' in 'doing leadership' and 'doing gender' simultaneously in a stereotypically masculine way.

In a study that explores the relationship between language and gender in departmental meetings in a New Zealand secondary school, Sollitt-Morris (1996) argues that the heads of department's linguistic styles are influenced by the sex-preferred linguistic features typical of their respective genders, and by the ration of genders within the department. Sollitt-Morris (1996) suggests that the more participants there are with the same gender as the head of department, the stronger is the display of typical sex-preferred linguistic features. Thus, her study adds weight to the argument that the gendered composition has an important influence on the choice of leadership styles displayed by the project managers in the same-sex teams in *The Apprentice*.

Despite the fact that the choice of any gendered discourse style very much depends on a range of contextual factors, such as who is speaking to whom, and in what kind of setting and social context, it seems clear that the gendered composition of the group contributes to the discernible patterns of the interactional styles used predominately in all-male and all-female interactions. Given that it is rare to find workplaces with men- or women-only in the real world, it could be argued that the artificial settings of the all-male and all-female teams in *The Apprentice* may be used to demonstrate and typify stereotypically gendered ways of interaction.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that the ways in which the male and female contestants in *The Apprentice* are portrayed and represented are to a great

extent in accordance with widely held gender stereotypes. In particular, the ways in which they 'do leadership' are clearly gendered in such a way that conforms to the traditional gendered expectations. This can be explained by the current conceptualization of gender as 'performative acts' (Butler, 1990). That is to say, the male and female contestants employ gendered discourse strategies in enacting their gender identities which are congruent with the prevailing codes of gender, while simultaneously 'doing leadership' as project managers. This is not to deny the fact that it is impossible for men and women to defy, transgress, or subvert the gender norms which are deeply rooted in society. However, acting in ways that explicitly challenge the gender norms may put oneself at the risk of social disapproval, which is likely to lead to serious consequences, especially when it comes to the evaluation of one's leadership competence in the workplace. As Peck (2000b) puts it, discursive performance that is conceived as appropriate may be rewarded, while inappropriate discourse style is negatively sanctioned. Thus, it can be argued that constant enactments of reward and negative sanction serve to ensure the gender-appropriate performance of leadership, which explains the gender differences found in the same-sex contexts.

The data analysis has illustrated that gender bias is at work in the representations of the leaders in *The Apprentice*. When compared to the male project manager, the female manager is portrayed in a rather negative light. That is to say, she is depicted displaying stereotypically feminine qualities (such as emotionality) which are clearly incompatible with the commonly conceived notion of leadership. Thus, this not only denigrates the linguistic features typical of the feminine style of leadership, but also perpetuates the cultural belief that women are unable to perform leadership roles well, and devalues the suitability of women in 'doing leadership' at work. Not surprisingly, such kinds of negative depictions on television may have important implications for the reinforcement of the gender bias already present in many organizations (see Heilman, 2001).

It remains to be seen whether such gender stereotypical representations in the popular media are likely to undergo any changes towards more gender-neutral, or at least less gender-stereotypic, representations in the mass media, given the increased awareness of gender-related issues among the general public in recent years. At any rate, in light of the paucity of research on the representations of leadership and gender in the media discourse, a promising research direction would be to pursue further analysis by adopting a multi-disciplinary perspective, as in this paper, through drawing on various methodologies from various disciplines such as discourse analysis, organizational studies, psychology, and sociology, in order to reflect the complexity of the issues involved.

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Appendix: Transcription Conventions (based on Holmes, 2006)

<u>yes</u>	underscore indicates emphatic stress
[laughs]	paralinguistic features in square brackets
+	pause of up to one second
xx / xxxxx \ xx	simultaneous speech
=	latching between the end of one turn to the start of the next
(3)	pause of specified number of seconds
()	unintelligible word or phrase
(hello)	transcriber's best guess at an unclear utterance
?	raising or question intonation
-	incomplete or cut-off utterance
(I)	scene taken from the individual behind-the-scene interview