How do ladyboys talk?: The use of prosody among Thai male-to-female transgenders

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The study investigates the construction and performance of gender identity among kathoey, male-to-female transgenders in Thailand. Kathoey occupy a liminal space in Thai society; while they are recognised as a historical "third sex/gender", they are nevertheless marginalised from normative conceptualisations of gender and sexuality in Thailand. The goal of the current study is to identify how kathoey use language to position themselves within the Thai sex/gender inventory and to describe how language participates in the indexation of gender identity more broadly.

Data are drawn from the eight months of ethnographic fieldwork in Bangkok. During this time, 23 kathoey participants were observed and recorded in a variety of interactional contexts, including individual sociolinguistic interviews and unstructured casual encounters with friends and work colleagues. Analyses focus on various prosodic features of kathoey speech, including both rhythm and intonation. Analyses reveal that kathoey markedly and selectively lengthen the final syllables of information units. They combine this rhythmic pattern with a specific phrase-final intonational contour, a feature claimed by Luksaneeyanawin (1998) to signify particular grammatical and attitudinal meanings, including emphasis. Among kathoey, the contour is also used as a means to adopt stances (Jaffe 2009, Kiesling 2009) of expressiveness and humour. These stances contribute to the construction of kathoey gender identity, which in many ways accords with stereotypical expectations.

The findings are significant as they show how kathoey draw upon the linguistic resources available to all Thai speakers and employ their meanings particularly in the construction and performance of identity.

Keywords: transgender, identity, prosody.