

“My bad. That’s a transwoman, and I’m going to end my life”: Repair in crowd work on TikTok

Katie Slemp, kslemp@yorku.ca

Comedians on TikTok frequently show videos of their crowd work, where they ask questions to the attendees of their shows. While this is not part of their structured stand-up routine, it provides a time for interaction. As it is spontaneous interaction, (although the videos might be edited, censored, and/or captioned when posted on TikTok), this crowd work may contain ‘trouble sources’ and opportunities for linguistic repair (e.g., Kitzinger, 2012). For example, Ashley Gavin, a self-identified lesbian comedian, almost exclusively posts content of crowd work videos on TikTok. In the video from Gavin (2024), there is an indirect apology (“my bad”) and then the correct category is supplied in the phrase “that’s a transwoman,” which is addressed to the audience more than to the interlocutor (as indicated by the use of “that’s” instead of “you’re”), followed by a comedic attempt at self-degradation to atone for the mistake (line 3).

- 1 Ashley: Do you consider yourself more masculine?
2 Trans woman: Well, I’m trying to get past it.
3 Ashley: (.) >My bad.< (.) That’s a transwoman, and I’m going to end my life.
4 (.) Trans lives matter. Mine does not. And I’m just gonna- (.)
5 If it makes you feel better, I just thought you were a cis (dyke)
6 Like, I just thought you were (.) I just thought you were- were a vagina
7 owner (.) and a Harley owner. That’s what I thought.

Other comedians on TikTok have experienced similar trouble sources when doing crowd work, such as Lucas Zelnick. In this case, there is seemingly a ‘subject-side’ (e.g., Stokoe, 2011) concern of being gender-aware, or to use Zelnick’s own word, an “ally,” seen in the text over the video, such as “throwing my water bottle out of poor allyship” (Zelnick, 2023, 1:27).

- 10 Raven: She, (uh) isn’t accepting of me being trans.
11 Lucas: You know what is annoying about your mom? = If she doesn’t want you
12 to be trans why the fuck did she give you a sick trans name? hhh
13 (.) My apologies madame
14 Raven: It’s the other way.
15 Lucas: (.) Wait? What are your pronouns, sorry?
16 Raven: He/him.
17 Lucas: He/him. FU::CK! NO::::::!
18 ((throws water bottle and hits another attendee))
19 I’m sorry (.) I just was trying to show how liberal I am!

Both present examples are of other-initiated repair, which is less preferable than self-initiated as it is very face-threatening (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Zelnick responds with a “sorry” in the request for pronouns (line 15) and then with the correct category and shouted profanity (line 17), upset that his “allyship” (positive face) has been challenged, while Gavin responds with an indirect apology and correct category identification of “trans woman” (line 3). Gavin continues the repair by indicating that the trans woman was so ‘passing’ that she was assumed to be a “cis dyke” (line 5). These marked repairs, where the speakers include a repair solution and an apology, provide overt clarity by establishing the correct category in the repair. Examining how comedians repair when encountering gendered trouble sources provides a valuable insight into conversation analysis involving humor, and furthermore, in the context of other-initiated repair following a misgendering trouble source in popular videos on TikTok, seen by thousands.

References

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