Men's and Women's Language

PAUL HANLY FURFEY

In a recent article in the REVIEW the present writer called attention to the sociological implications involved in the use of Standard English and Sub-standard English respectively by different social classes.[1] As it was there pointed out, linguistic differences are a sensitive index of social differentiation and their presence sharpens group differences. The present paper will discuss divergencies in the language usages of men and women, a phenomenon which is barely discernible in the familiar languages of Europe, but which is not at all uncommon among primitive peoples.

The terms, "men's language" and "women's language," though they have become conventional, possibly imply something more than the facts warrant. There is no instance known to the writer in which the men and women of the same tribe speak entirely distinct tongues. The sex distinctions which have been discovered involve, not the language as a whole, but certain specific features of the languages, as phonetics, grammar, or vocabulary. Examples of differences in these three areas will now be given after which their social implications will be discussed.

Phonetics. Waldemar Bogoras reports interesting phonetic differences between men and women among the Chukchi (Chukchee), a Mongoloid tribe who inhabit the extreme northeast corner of Siberia.[2] Here women tend to substitute *ts* for *ch* and *r;* and *tsts* for *rk* and *chh*.[3] Thus where men say *ramkichhin,* "people," women say *tsamkitstsin.* In addition, the men "particularly in the Kolyma

[1] P. H. Furfey, "The Sociological Implications of Substandard English," *Am. Cath. Soc. Rev.,* March 1944, 5:3–9.

[2] Waldemar Bogoras, "Chukchee," in Franz Boas, *Handbook of American Indian Languages* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1911–), 2:631–903. See pages 665–66. The above handbook is hereafter cited as *HAIL.*

[3] In the interests of intelligibility and typographical simplicity I have here and elsewhere used ordinary English letters instead of the various systems of phonetic writing which occur in the original references. The latter, while scientifically preferable, might cause difficulty to the reader without special training in phonetics.

district, drop intervocalic consonants, principally *n* and *t*." In the Bengali language (Bengal, eastern India), women, children, and the uneducated classes often pronounce *n* for *l* in initial positions.[4] Bunzel reports that among the Zuni (New Mexico) "there is considerable variation in the speech of different groups, *e.g.*, men and women and old and young," but she does not specify the nature of these differences.[5] Among the Eskimo of Baffin Land men formerly pronounced a *t* in certain situations where women pronounced an *n*.[6]

Grammar. One of the most interesting instances of grammatical differences between men's and women's languages occurs in the speech of the Chiquito of Bolivia.[7] The situation may be briefly summarized as follows: In the men's language two genders are distinguished. Nouns designating gods, daemons, and men are masculine, while those designating women, the lower animals regardless of sex, and all other concepts are feminine. There is an elaborate system of gender inflections involving, not only nouns, but all the words of the language except a few invariable particles. This results in a sharp distinction between constructions containing masculine nouns and those containing feminine nouns. So much for the men's language. In the women's language these gender distinctions do not exist. Men, therefore, use masculine constructions when speaking of masculine nouns and feminine constructions when speaking of feminine nouns, while women use the feminine constructions in all cases regardless of gender. Thus men say, *n-ipoostii naqui Tupas,* "the house of God," while women say, *n-ipoos n-Tupas* with the same meaning.

The language of the Chiquito probably represents the most radical distinction between men's and women's speech which is known to exist anywhere; but there are a number of languages in which there are differences in some of the paradigms depending on the sex of the speaker. Thus in Thai, a language spoken in Thailand (Siam) and related to Tibetan and Chinese, there are differences

[4] Suniti Kumar Chatterji, *A Brief Sketch of Bengali Phonetics* (Reprint from the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies*, London, vol. II, part I), page 6.

[5] Ruth L. Bunzel, "Zuni," *HAIL*, 3:385–515, page 430.

[6] Boas' notes to William Thalbitzer, "Eskimo," *HAIL*, 1:967–1069, page 987.

[7] L. Adam and V. Henry, *Arte y vocabulario de la lengua chiquita* (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1880), pages vi–vii and 4–8.

in the first person personal pronoun and in certain polite particles. The Yuchi, an Indian tribe who were living in Georgia in the region of the Savannah River when first discovered by De Soto, have a complicated system of personal pronouns whose correct use depends on the sex of the speaker, the sex of the person spoken of, and the relationship between them.[9] The speech of men and women show differences in certain indicative and imperative verbal forms among the Koasati, Indians now living in Louisiana, but formerly in Alabama.[10] It is interesting to note that minor sex differences in speech have been traced in Creek and Hitchiti, languages which, like Koasati, belong to the western division of the Muskogean family.[11] In Biloxi, an extinct Siouan language of southern Mississippi, there was an elaborate system of sex distinctions. Thus the command, "Carry it," would be *ki-kangko* if a man were speaking to a man; *ki-tki*, if a man or woman were speaking to a woman; and *ki-tate*, if a woman were speaking to a man.[12]

Vocabulary. The language of the Carib in the Lesser Antilles is often quoted as an example of striking differences in men's and women's vocabulary. This phenomenon, which seems to have been once more extensive, is said to persist today in Dominica.[13] It has been stated that when the Carib invaded the region and conquered the Arawak, they exterminated the Arawak men but intermarried with the women. Afterwards men continued to speak their native Carib; and the women, to speak their native Arawak. As successive generations were born it remained traditional for the women to speak a language considerably different from the pure Carib of the men. This account, however, has been questioned. Jespersen, analyzing Rochefort's seventeenth-century Carib vocabulary, finds sex differences in only about one-tenth of the words and feels that the phenomenon may be otherwise explained.[14]

[8] Mary R. Haas, *Beginning Thai* (Washington: American Council of Learned Societies, 1942), page 59.

[9] Günter Wagner, "Yuchi," *HAIL*, 3:293–384, pages 326–27. For the location of the various Indian languages of North America in early days see maps in, C. O. Paullin and J. K. Wright, *Atlas of the Historical Geography of the United States* (Washington: Carnegie Institution, 1932), A. Meillet and M. Cohen (eds.), *Les langues du monde* (Paris: Champion, 1924), and Diamond Jenness, *The Indians of Canada* (Ottawa, National Museum of Canada, n. d.)

[10] Mary R. Haas, "Men's and Women's Speech in Koasati," *Language*, July–Sept. 1944, 20:142–49.

[11] Haas, *Ibid.*

[12] Dorsey and Swanton, quoted by Haas, *Ibid.*

[13] Meillet and Cohen, *Op. cit.*, page 642.

[14] Otto Jespersen, *Language; its Nature, Development, and Origin* (New York: Holt, 1923), pages 237–38.

Dixon and Kroeber report sex difference among the Yana, an Indian tribe of northern California.[15] Thus men say, *auna,* "fire," while women say *au.* In male speech *yana,* "Indian," *marimi,* "woman," and *ina,* "stick" correspond respectively to *ya, marim,* and *i* in female speech. These investigators found such differences in no other California tribe. It was indeed true that in other tribes men and women used different terms to describe relationships, but "this distinction is evidently made so frequently by primitive peoples because the relationship itself is to them different as the sex is different; whereas the distinction in Yana is a linguistic one." [16]

The foregoing examples are sufficient to show that sex differences in phonetics, grammar, and vocabulary are not uncommon in the less familiar languages; probably a thorough analysis would show that they exist, though in less striking form, in the better known languages of Europe. Jespersen has collected scattered observations to prove this. For example, he quotes testimony that women said *Bernabé* and men, *Barnabé* in late seventeenth-century France and that the word *soft* is pronounced with a longer vowel by men than by women in modern England. The same author accuses women of a freer use of aposiopesis and parataxis.[17] However this may be, it is probably at least true that there are certain expressions, such as "Oh, dear!" and "How perfectly sweet!" which sound distinctly feminine to our ears, and others, including a number of salty and unprintable phrases, which sound equally masculine.

In order to appreciate the true significance of men's and women's languages, it is helpful to place the phenomenon in its proper linguistic context. To do so, it is useful to recall that sex may affect linguistic forms in three ways; for such forms may be modified by (1) the sex of the speaker, (2) the sex of the person spoken to, and (3) the sex, real or conventional, of the person or thing spoken of. The first of these three types of sex influence is the phenomenon which has been discussed in this paper. The second occurs in those languages which have separate gender-forms in the second persons of pronouns and verbs. An illustration would be Hebrew *qatalta,* "thou (m.) killed," *qatalt,* "thou (f.) *killed.*" [18] The third type is the familiar

[15] R. B. Dixon and A. L. Kroeber, *The Native Languages of California* (Reprint from the *American Anthropologist,* vol. V, Jan.–March 1903), page 15. [16] *Ibid.*

[17] See Jespersen's chapter, "The Woman," *Op. cit.,* pages 237–54.

[18] This is common in the Semitic pronoun and verb. Another instance is furnished by Tunica. See Mary R. Haas, "Tunica," *HAIL,* 4:1–143, page 36. A Biloxi example has already been given.

case of grammatical gender which is rather general in the Indo-European, Semitic, and Hamitic language families, in the languages of the Pacific Northwest and the lower Mississippi in North America, and, more sporadically in South America and elsewhere.[19] Note that these three types of sex influence might be defined as influence in the sphere of the grammatical first person, second person, and third person respectively.

What is the significance of these linguistic differences based on sex and what do they imply? The very fact of their use implies, of course, some consciousness of men and women as different categories of human beings. Furthermore, at least at some period in the history of the language, this distinction must have been regarded as being of a certain consequence; for it would seem to be a general truth that the great categories of grammar are not based on distinctions regarded by the speakers as trivial.

To the sociologist the point of cardinal importance is the social significance of linguistic sex distinctions. There is a certain amount of evidence from linguistics which indicates that, in some cases at least, the distinctions in question are bound up with a masculine assertion of superiority. The case of the Chiquito has already been instanced. Here, the reader will remember, men and supernatural beings were classed in one category; women, the lower animals, and inanimate objects, in another. It seems not unreasonable to suggest that a feeling of masculine dominance underlay the development of the peculiar Chiquito dual-language system.

A system of noun-classification in the Dravidian languages of southern India is suggestive in this connection. Here the primary division is between a superior class which includes gods, daemons, and men, and an inferior class of animals and inanimate things. The position of women in this classification varies. For example, in Gondi and Kui women, along with goddesses, are uniformly assigned to the inferior class. In Kurukh, Malto, Kolami, and Telegu, these beings belong to the inferior class in the singular and to the superior class in the plural. In Tamil, Kanarese, and Malayalam they have a third class of their own in the singular, while in the plural they go into the superior class.

In the Semitic languages the primary noun-classification distinguishes masculine and feminine, but this classification overlaps with

[19] For further discussion of gender and noun-classes in general see, P. H. Furfey, "The Semantic and Grammatical Principles in Linguistic Analysis," *Studies in Linguistics*, Summer, 1944, 2:56–66.

several others of minor importance and the feminine ending is taken, not only by nouns biologically or conventionally female, but also by abstracts, collectives, diminutives, and deteriorates. The use of the same ending for feminines and deteriorates may be significant. It may be significant also that in the Iroquoian languages of North America nouns designating men are distinguished quite sharply from all other nouns.

The evidence reviewed in this article would seem to show that the following is true: A distinction in the speech of men and women, sometimes quite extensive and sometimes confined to only a few expressions, is a not uncommon linguistic phenomenon. This distinction which depends on the sex of the speaker, seems to be a particular instance of a tendency to make linguistic distinctions on the basis of sex; other instances are the use of different forms according to the sex of the person addressed and the classification, in several languages and language families, of persons or things spoken of by means of grammatical gender. Furthermore, there is linguistic evidence that, at least in some scattered instances, the existence of these distinctions is associated with an assertion of masculine superiority.

On the basis of this evidence it may be tentatively suggested that language sometimes serves as a tool of sex dominance. In a previous paper referred to at the beginning of this article the writer showed how the contrast between Standard English and Substandard English could serve as an aid to upper-class control. It is interesting to note that men's and women's languages, in a parallel fashion, may also be made to serve the purposes of a dominant social group.

Catholic University of America, Washington 17, D. C.

Note. After the above article was in the hands of the editor my colleague, Dr. Regina Flannery Herzfeld of the Department of Anthropology at the Catholic University, kindly made available to me certain linguistic data which she had collected among the Gros Ventre of Montana in 1940. These data show that the Gros Ventre make a very clear distinction between men's and women's speech, at least in certain exclamations and certain terms of tribal significance. Thus when someone enters the lodge, men say, *wahe* (*a* as in *arm*, *e* as *ei* in *eight*), while women say *naha* (*a* and in *man*). Particularly interesting was Dr. Herzfeld's observation that a man using a woman's expression would be considered effeminate. These distinctions between men's and women's languages seem to be dying out among the youngest generation.