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Otto Jespersen and “The Woman”, then and now*

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1. *Introduction*

The Danish linguist Otto Jespersen (1860–1943) published *Language, its Nature, Development and Origin* in 1922, more than 90 years ago. Written in English, it was apparently addressed to a readership of students of language (Jespersen 1995 [1938]: 208-210). Jespersen was by then deep into his career as a celebrated scholar of Germanic, historical, and descriptive linguistics. About midway through his book, an 18-page Chapter 13 appears, entitled “The Woman”. This article focuses on “The Woman”, a text that has served since the 1970s as a touchstone for feminist narratives of the history of the discussion of language and gender.¹ Modern treatment of Jespersen’s Chapter 13 typically casts Jespersen into the role of mouthpiece for ideas about women and language that contemporary scholars have discredited. In what follows I’d like to suggest that “The Woman” deserves a new reading, which neither apologizes for Jespersen’s views, nor diminishes his importance to the history of feminist linguistics. Rather, we need to

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¹ All citations of Jespersen’s 1922 text refer to the 1964 reprint.

acknowledge the complexities of this text and seek to better understand both what it meant in the culture and time that produced it, and its position in present-day reflection on language and gender.

Although not many early 21st century students of language are familiar in depth with Jespersen's work, most readers of feminist linguistics are acquainted with "The Woman" because it is almost inevitably cited on the topic of the history of Western scholarship on language and gender. Jespersen's Chapter 13 is now read as the prime early example of conventional stereotypes and preconceptions about women's language that consider it inherently defective relative to men's language. As such, Jespersen's text is introduced into accounts of the history of language and gender studies in tones that range from detached amusement to derision. Cameron reprints it in her classic reader that anthologizes key sources in the field, labeling it as "Jespersen's notorious chapter" (1990: 22). Of 18 selections in the reader, only one other approaches the length of "The Woman"; that Cameron reprints it in full signals her investment in its importance. Hall (2003: 358) depicts the chapter as "infamous in language and gender studies". Directly under a subheading "The Deficit Position", Johnson (1983: 134) writes, "Anyone familiar with the literature on language and sex frequently encounters references to Otto Jespersen's (1922) pronouncements on women's language". In *Women, Men and Language*, Coates anchors a chapter entitled "The historical background (I)" with more than 30 references to Jespersen (1922), citing the work on almost every page. This exposition is carried forward essentially untouched from the first edition of Coates' book (1986: 15-34), to the second (1993: 16-37), and the third edition (2004: 9-27), indicating how foundational it is to her view of the subject. However, the extent of Coates' treatment of Jespersen's chapter is unusual. Mahony (1983: 446) gives what is probably the most common representation to what he calls "Jespersen's pioneer essay". He introduces it as a display of "androcentric ideology" and "chauvinism", then quotes several discontinuous passages in the text (without inquiring into their contexts or that of the chapter as a whole), as a means of characterizing what inquiry into women's language looked like before the dawn of modern analysis of the markers of inequality between the sexes.

This article returns to Jespersen's Chapter 13 as an attempt to try to understand how it was read in Jespersen's day, how it is now read as part of the historical backdrop to the study of language and gender — and what prospects it may have among readers in the future. I first analyze what Jespersen wrote, and the place of Chapter 13 within *Language, its Nature, Development and Origin*. Second, I examine the intellectual context of the book, and more specifically, of the chapter "The Woman", and how they were received in the early 1920s. Third, I shall look closely at how Jespersen's words and ideas have been incorporated into the historical self-consciousness of present-day feminist linguistics, and suggest more historiographically satisfying alternatives. Finally, I inspect how an oncoming generation of students now construes this 90-year old text, and speculate about what its influence on research into language and gender might be if it were to be given a fresh reading.

2. *What Jespersen wrote*

Jespersen's autobiography (1995 [1938]: 209) depicts *Language, its Nature, Development and Origin* as an analysis of how languages evolve over time. The topic was of great interest in early 20th-century language scholarship following late 19th-century development of techniques for comparing languages and the resultant breakthrough insights into language change. However, granted that Jespersen wrote on a popular topic, he worked outside the various schools that dominated language study in his day. This is displayed in many facets of his research. He was a critic of both prevailing ideas about the direction of language change (Nielsen 1989) and of Saussurean structuralism (Jespersen 1917). He also kept his distance from the emerging Copenhagen School (Rischel 1989). Over many years, he followed efforts to create an international lingua franca; eventually, dissatisfied with the existing candidate languages, he stepped forward to invent his own (Jespersen 1929). Although Jespersen's work on phonetics and pedagogy made him part of the "Reform Movement" in language teaching (Howatt 1984), that subfield amounts to only a single limb of the large and heterogeneous body of his research. Therefore, even as Jespersen achieved an international profile as a grammarian, historical linguist, phonetician, and language theorist, he tended to work independently, capitalizing on his own broad curiosity and powers of observation and

analysis to challenge some of the conventional views of his time. At the summit of his career in the 1920s, Jespersen writes with full self-possession, giving free rein to his idiosyncratic interests.

Language, its Nature, Development and Origin comprises 21 chapters grouped into 4 books. Book I recounts a "History of linguistic science", focusing on the 19th century. Jespersen summarizes and critiques the achievements of the scholars who reconstructed the Indo-European language family. He ends by noting approvingly that, in his view, linguistics was then embarking on a healthy re-investment in living languages in place of its absorption with the past (p. 97).

Book II, entitled "The Child" was a departure from convention in early 20th century scholarship on language change. It exhibits Jespersen's originality and his capacity to discover and articulate what is extraordinary in, at face value, ordinary language facts. He analyzes many examples of child speech — sounds, words, syntax, conversational routines, language play, invented languages — noticing, for instance, the incongruity of an English-speaking child's repetition of the sentence "You mustn't eat that" as "Not eat that", and commenting on the gap between the adult form of a question like "Why do you smoke, Father?" and the child's version "Why you smoke, Father?" (p. 136). Jespersen's data (from learners of English, Danish, French, German, Russian, and other Indo-European and non-Indo-European languages) derives from his own observations of children, from published work in linguistics, and from examples of child language given in literary works. In the style of the day, he offers little by way of generalizable empirical data, but nevertheless brings his observations to bear on questions of language change, asserting that some kinds of phonetic substitutions, clippings, semantic splits, and word-boundary re-analyses are likely to have originated in the spontaneous creations of child learners. For example, Jespersen asserts on the basis of an investigation of twins' private languages that one source of cross-linguistic variation may be the survival of children's invented words and grammatical features (182-188).

Book III, "The Individual and the World" comprises 5 chapters, including the famous Chapter 13. In this section Jespersen describes and speculates about the influence of what he considers three other major factors in language change: "The Foreigner" (effects of multilingualism and language contact on how languages change); "Pidgins and

Congeners" (contributions to the conceptualization of language change from study of pidgin languages, including Beach-la-mar [now "Bislama"], Mauritius Creole, and Chinook Jargon); and "The Woman" (about which see below). Book III concludes with two chapters weighing the causes and mechanisms of language change, in which Jespersen evaluates proposals about assimilation, dissimilation, economy, analogy, iconicity, attitudes towards correctness, the role of slang and of language play, etc. He rejects the view that language change is exhaustively ruled by strict phonetic laws in favor of a view that allows for a complex interplay of diverse factors.

In Book IV, "Development of language", Jespersen offers his own perspective on several of the great language controversies of his day. He argues that language change over time is not a process of decay, but rather of simplification and regularization in a direction that enhances communicative efficiency; he attributes a role to sound symbolism in the relationships between the shapes of words and their meanings; and he proposes his own solution to the long-debated but seemingly insoluble question of the origin of human language.

This, then, is the context of the "notorious" chapter on "The Woman", namely, Jespersen's exposition of the sources, processes, and outcomes of the phenomenon of language change and diversification. In his Preface, Jespersen depicts Book III as covering "the changes which the individual is apt independently to introduce into his speech" (p. 8). Differences between the speech of women versus men comprise, in his view, one facet of those changes. Jespersen begins Chapter 13 by cataloging differences reported in language use and language form between women and men, citing examples from Carib, Bantu, Yana, Basque, Sanskrit, Japanese, and French, among other languages. He then undercuts ethnographic and anthropological claims that women and men in some cultures speak entirely distinct languages. Jespersen concedes that specific lexical items may vary by gender in some languages, but argues that the actual scope of variation has been overstated, and in any case that women and men employ the same grammatical patterns. He demonstrates morphological differences with examples (from Chiquito and Yana; p. 240) in which women's language lacks affixes or inflections present in men's language, but remarks that for the most part both share the same stock of

words.² In this initial portion of Chapter 13, Jespersen's objective seems to be to downplay anthropologists' claims that there exist speech communities with starkly contrasting women's versus men's languages. He goes on to argue that many such contrasts are actually reflexes of more general practices of language taboo (289-290) — although he does not address why taboo might constrain the speech of women more than that of men. Moreover, he argues that forms ascribed to women are those generally associated with less powerful social groups, and therefore do not necessarily mark gender *per se* (241-242).

From this point Jespersen moves forward to approach from several directions the question of whether women or men lead linguistic innovation, citing mixed evidence without coming to a conclusion on either side. He reports that women's pronunciation is sometimes analyzed as "more advanced" than that of men (p. 243), and he cites several examples of innovations in sound structure attributed to women (243-245). Jespersen then discusses examples of the coinage of new words both by women and by men (245-248), although he generalizes that men are "the chief renovators of language" (p. 247), in a passage to which we will return below.

From here, Jespersen's discussion of gender and language change shades into a loosely organized catalog of what he sees as the outstanding properties of women's speech as opposed to that of men. He asserts that, relative to men, women in all cultures avoid vulgarity and swearing (p. 246); speak more (p. 253), more hyperbolically (p. 250), with more facility (p. 253), and leave more sentences unfinished (p. 251); that they have smaller vocabularies more reliant on the central lexical resources of a language (p. 248); and that they favor contrastive intonation and parataxis over hypotaxis (p. 251). In this discussion, Jespersen continues a theme established in the first part of the chapter, in which he downplays anthropologists' and ethnographers' data that contrasts female versus male languages. Often after he concedes a specific gender-based difference in language, he steps backward to impose limits on its application. For example, Jespersen

² Note that insofar as these examples show that women's language lacks inflections that appear in men's language, women's language would (under some definitions) count as the unmarked case relative to men's language, not vice versa.

cites a paragraph of purported distinctions in pronunciation between female and male speakers of English, but finishes by denying that there are major differences between women's and men's speech in this domain: "... we must say that from a phonetic point of view...the two sexes speak for all intents and purposes the same language" (p. 245). Likewise, he passes on to the reader claims that women use the English words *common* in place of *vulgar*; *nice* in the place of *fine*; *kind* in the place of *good*, then he dismisses the distribution of these adjectives as "small details [that] can hardly be said to be really characteristic of the two sexes" (p. 245). Later, Jespersen attributes the invention of slang more to men than women, but adds that "with the rise of the feminist movement, many young ladies have begun to imitate their brothers in that as well as other respects" (p. 248).

Where Jespersen does admit a contrast between the sexes in language use, he routinely privileges men's usage over that of women, while at the same time reserving a certain respect for women's usage. For example, he writes that:

the highest linguistic genius and the lowest degree of linguistic imbecility are very rarely found among women. The greatest orators, the most famous literary artists, have been men; but it may serve as a sort of consolation to the other sex that there are a much greater number of men than women who cannot put two words together intelligibly, who stutter and stammer and hesitate, and are unable to find suitable expressions for the simplest thought. Between these two extremes the woman moves with a sure and supple tongue which is ever ready to find words and to pronounce them in a clear and intelligible manner. (Jespersen 1922: 253)

A common rhetorical move for Jespersen is to frame his depiction of women's abilities positively, even admiringly, and in the next sentence to undercut them. In the following passage, he starts by acknowledging an apparent point of superiority in women's linguistic abilities, then twists the screw so as to assign greater value to men's complementary abilities:

Woman is linguistically quicker than man: quicker to learn, quicker to hear, and quicker to answer. A man is slower: he hesitates, he chews his cud to make sure of the taste of words, and thereby comes to discover similarities with and differences from other words, both in sound and in sense, thus preparing himself for the appropriate use of the fittest noun or adjective. (Jespersen 1922: 249)

However, throughout his exposition Jespersen communicates his judgments in a tone that is not so much distasteful, much less scornful, toward women and women's language as it is indulgent and condescending. In Cameron's opinion, "Although Jespersen is sometimes accused of misogyny, his chapter reveals him as a gallant rather than a male chauvinist" (1985: 33).

It is important to notice that in all this Jespersen does not generally present women's language as a disordered or restricted version of men's language. He does advert several times to a feature of women's cognition that he views pejoratively, namely that (as he claims) women "start talking without having thought out what they are going to say" (p. 250; also see p. 251). However, Jespersen's assessment of women's language overall cannot be represented as disparaging. Granted that he views gender-based differences as fairly constrained, within the domain in which he accepts that differences exist, he assigns to women their own characteristic position in linguistic space. Jespersen seems not so much to disdain, as to marvel at, what he depicts as the distinctive attributes of women's language. For instance, in a passage to which we will return below, he enthusiastically catalogs examples from five languages of intensifying adverbs in women's speech, citing almost thirty illustrative sentences without raising any objection to their use (249-251). Later, in discussing "the frequency with which women leave their exclamatory sentences half-finished", Jespersen writes:

These quotations illustrate types of sentences which are becoming so frequent that they would seem soon to deserve a separate chapter in modern grammars, "Did you ever?" "Well I never!" being perhaps the most important of these "stop-short" or "pull-up" sentences, as I think they might be termed. (Jespersen 1922: 251)

Jespersen proceeds in the next paragraph to imply that such constructions follow from what he considers a "peculiarity of feminine psychology", namely, that women speak before they think. But note that he does not try to contain or efface these expressions. Rather, Jespersen proposes to label them, and makes room for their inclusion in English grammar.

As another example of Jespersen's orientation toward women's language, it is worth looking closely at his assertion about gender-based differences in vocabulary. He writes that "the vocabulary of a woman as a rule is much less extensive than that of a man"

because women "move preferably in the central field of the language, avoiding everything that is out of the way or bizarre" while men freely adopt or coin novel and technical terms (p. 248). However Jespersen goes on to cite a study that, while acknowledging a difference in size, emphasizes gender-based specialization of vocabulary: in a timed free word-listing task, women's lists are found to be rich in words for clothing, men's for animals; women cited 179 words related to food, men 53; and overall women's vocabularies attended "to the immediate surroundings, to the ornamental, the individual, and the concrete", while men's vocabularies prioritized "the remote, the constructive, the useful, the general, and the abstract" (248-249). Therefore even as Jespersen starts out this subsection, "Vocabulary", by alleging a simple gender-based difference of size, as he elaborates on the topic his attention shifts to qualitative differences, in which women's and men's lexicons seem positioned in a complementary relationship, rather than as a subset and superset. The nature of the complementarity implicitly disadvantages women relative to men, since the alleged female propensity for "the ornamental" hardly competes in value with a male tendency toward "the constructive" or "the useful": here, as elsewhere, Jespersen takes for granted the priority of men's language. But men's language does not subsume women's language, nor does women's language lack independent merit.

Thus although Jespersen advantages men's over women's language, he downplays differences between the two and treats each as having its own intrinsic character. Jespersen does not seem to present women's language as a deformed version of men's language.

3. *How Jespersen wrote: Support for his claims*

Because modern discussion of "The Woman" often calls attention to the basis on which Jespersen builds his claims about women's language, it is important to examine the origins of the data he brings forward, the warrants he presents for his proposals, the structure of his arguments, and the explanations he provides. Throughout Chapter 13, Jespersen relies on multiple sources for both data and claims. Among more than 50 authors he cites by name, most with publication dates ranging from the 1500s to his own era, some wrote in fields that would now be subsumed under anthropology, sociology, or

psychology. Jespersen also refers in passing to two late 19th century studies that anticipate modern empirical psycholinguistics: one study that compared female versus male college students' speed of word recall (248-249), and another that tested adult females' versus males' comprehension and speed of recall in a reading task (p. 252). Still, the bulk of his illustrations derive from works of literature, including texts by Cicero, Shakespeare, Molière, Jonathan Swift, William Makepeace Thackeray, Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy. He substantiates his claims about the properties of women's language by quoting from these works. Jespersen also cites proverbs and freely provides examples of both women's and men's language from his own observations, or perhaps of his own invention, leaving the generality of those data unexplored. When Jespersen interprets or builds a conclusion out of his data (and sometimes in the absence of any data at all), he relies not on the authority of empirical evidence, but on appeals to what counted as common sense within the shared culture of the author and his readership. Thus, for instance, he states point blank and without substantiation that "some men are confirmed punsters, while women are generally slow to see any point in a pun and scarcely ever perpetrate one themselves" (p. 249), and he treats as an established fact the assertion that novels written by women are predictably more accessible to foreign language learners because they have a narrower lexical range (p. 248).

Subsection 9 of Chapter 13 (249-251), Jespersen's treatment of adverbs in women's language, serves as a typical example of the structure of his arguments. Jespersen begins by asserting that, more than adjectives, women's use of adverbs differs from that of men. He moves on to a long quotation from a 1754 essay by Lord Chesterfield (British politician and would-be literary scholar Philip Dormer Stanhope [1694–1773]) that quotes an unidentified woman's prolific use of the adverb *vastly* as an intensifier, or in Jespersen's terminology, an 'intensive'. Similar examples follow from what is purported to be women's speech in German (with the intensive *riesig* "huge, vast"), French (*affreusement* "frightfully"), Danish (*rædsom* "frightfully"), Russian (*strast'* "passionately"), and English (*awfully, quite, so*). Some of these examples are presented without attribution, while others are quoted from late 19th to early 20th century sources, both fiction and non-fiction. Jespersen singles out for commentary the English adverb *so* as characteristic of women's speech. He interprets an utterance like "I'm *so* glad you've

come" as constituting a truncated version of something like "I'm *so* glad you've come that I must treat you to something extra".³ Jespersen then declares (without providing any supporting evidence) that women use *so* not by deliberate ellipsis but due to a characteristic feature of their cognition:

The explanation of this characteristic feminine usage is, I think, that women much more often than men break off without finishing their sentences, because they start talking without having thought out what they are going to say (Jespersen 1922: 250)⁴

Subsection 9 ends with a few more examples, some from an unspecified "modern novel" (*ibid.*), and some presented without identifying their provenance. In this way, Jespersen adds to his own observations material culled from a range of published and folkloristic sources to illustrate his assertions about women's versus men's language. At points in his exposition where he moves from illustration to generalization, and further from generalization to explanation, Jespersen relies on bare assertion, presented with breezy self-confidence. As another example, at the very end of Chapter 13 he amasses quotations (from Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Oscar Wilde, Shakespeare, and a popular 1912 novel) that depict women as irrepressibly talkative. He moves first from these literary citations to the generalization, otherwise unsupported, that women exhibit greater ease of speech and volubility compared to men. Next Jespersen blithely asserts that what he treats as a characteristic contrast between women's and men's language derives from the division of labor in "primitive tribes" (p. 254): women's collaborative domestic labor exercised communication through speech, whereas the work of hunting and warfare that occupied men downplayed it. Jespersen presents his explanation about "primitive tribes" as if its truth were unassailable and its relevance obvious.

³ In making this claim, Jespersen conflates what modern descriptive grammarians consider two separate constructions in which *so* participates: the comparative correlative where *so* serves as a degree modifier (e.g. "*so* [adjective] *that* [clause]"; Quirk *et al.* 1985: 1000) and *so* as a non-correlative intensifier or "booster" (*ibid.*: 834, 1416).

⁴ On p. 252 Jespersen cites a line from an unidentified Danish comedy in which a man introduces a comment with the expression "I declare!". Jespersen does not seem to notice that this utterance exhibits precisely the kind "break[ing] off" that he describes on page 250 as characteristic of women's speech.

Note that in this instance Jespersen's explanation for women's purported greater fluency and volubility invokes social-historical factors. Similarly, he attributes women's purportedly smaller vocabularies to their generally less extensive education (p. 248); and he even attributes the decay of trilled /r/ among female speakers of French to the fact that, relative to men, women spend more time indoors where (he claims) "less noisy speech habits" (p. 244) prevail. In all these cases, Jespersen explains the characteristics of women's language with reference to women's environmental and cultural experiences. On the other hand, in asserting that women speak before they think, Jespersen offers a cognitively-based explanation for "the frequency with which [women] leave their exclamatory sentences unfinished" (p. 251), and he invokes an innate quickness of thought to explain women's more dynamic use of pronouns (p. 252). Thus Jespersen moves without comment across these two accounts of gender-based differences, the social-historical and the cognitive. In his reliance on literary and folkloristic examples and on his own experience, in his sparse use of empirical data, and his appeals to readers' common sense, Jespersen's evidence and argumentation stand out as belonging to an earlier era. However, when it comes to explaining the source of gender-based differences in language, Jespersen deals in the same two competing factors that modern feminist linguistics still debates.

4. *The context in which Jespersen wrote*

Language, its Nature, Development, and Origin was reviewed positively by Jespersen's peers, all of whom seemed aware of its author's prominence. Of ten reviews, four were written by major scholars who were founders or early presidents of the Linguistic Society of America: Leonard Bloomfield (1887–1949), Roland G. Kent (1877–1952), Eduard Prokosch (1876–1938), and Edgar H. Sturtevant (1875–1952). A fifth was written by the prominent Norwegian linguist, Alf Sommerfelt (1892–1965), who co-founded the Norwegian Association for Linguistics. Reviewers praised the book's "breadth of research and depth of thought" and "splendid workmanship" (Kennedy 1924: 328), its originality and liveliness (De Reul 1922: 731), and appreciated it as a "very readable survey" (McKenzie 1923: 90). Only Leonard Bloomfield (1922) published a review that is mostly taken up by criticism of what he considered Jespersen's

retreat into unscientific explanations for linguistic change, such as sound symbolism (Falk 1992: 468-480). Aside from this complaint, however, Bloomfield praised the book as "valuable", "charming", and "original" (1922: 372-373).

Granted this overall assessment of Jespersen's text, it is worthwhile examining the specific reception that Chapter 13, "The Woman", met with. What stands out immediately is that this section of the book received scant attention from contemporary readers. In an eight-page review, De Reul (1922: 734) dismisses Chapter 13 in one sentence, commenting that Jespersen dedicates a chapter to women's language, but that it deals mostly with the psychology of women. McKenzie (1923) lumps all of Book II ("The Child") and Chapter 13 together with the chapters on multilingualism and creole languages. He then characterizes what amounts to about half of the entire book as "interesting and often amusing illustrative material" while objecting that "it is not very clearly shown whether anything of fundamental importance can be learned in this way" (1923: 90). Kennedy (1922: 330) passes over Chapter 13 with the remark that "the influence of the woman, linguistically considered, is also discussed and appraised"; likewise, Kent (1923: 315) and Prokosch (1923: 298) merely register without comment that Jespersen includes material about women's language. Reviews by Bloomfield (1922), Pendleton (1923), and Sturtevant (1923) make no reference at all to "The Woman".

Only two reviewers, Sommerfelt (1924) and Collinson (1923), directly address Jespersen's treatment of language and gender.⁵ In a five-page review written in Danish, Sommerfelt devotes three sentences to Chapter 13 (1924:155). In one he expresses the opinion that the chapter is original and will be read with interest. In the remaining two sentences, Sommerfelt bypasses anything controversial by citing the context of Ireland to support Jespersen's claim that bilingualism is more common among men than women because of men's greater mobility across national borders. Collinson, on the other hand,

⁵ Of these ten reviewers of Jespersen's book, only Sommerfelt (1892–1965) and William Edward Collinson (1889–1969), Liverpool Professor of German, appear in Jespersen's autobiography. Collinson appears several times (Jespersen 1995 [1938]: 88, 221, 225, 228), and is identified as "my friend" on p. 221.

comes out to characterize as Chapter 13 "rather old-fashioned", "thin", and "rather unconvincingly" presented (p. 93). He rejects some of the specific differences Jespersen points out between women's and men's speech as "preposterous" and in any case "quite irrespective of sex". He asserts that the only genuine differences are in women's use of intensifiers; their technical vocabularies of clothing and color; their reticence to use vulgarity; and "the intrusion of child-like diminutives ... [among] those who have much to do with children" (ibid.).

Note that Collinson's critique of Chapter 13 does not extend to Jespersen's use of literary illustrations or unsupported generalizations. Nor does Collinson (or any other reviewer) find fault in Jespersen's habit of capitalizing on his own experiences, or object to the absence of empirical support for the explanations Jespersen provides. In fact, no early 20th-century reviewer of *Language, its Nature, Development, and Origin* criticized Jespersen's sources or methods, in Chapter 13 or in any other part of the book. This is not surprising, since the social-scientific model for argumentation about language did not prevail in Jespersen's day.⁶

We see, then, that most reviewers ignored Jespersen's treatment of "The Woman". A few questioned its value. Collinson alone took Jespersen's claims seriously, but downplayed them as inaccurate and overblown. These readers' neglect of Chapter 13 is, however, unlikely to have derived from overfamiliarity with the topic. In fact, a search of Jespersen's bibliography for authors whom he treats as his peers or predecessors, and who wrote about language change for similar readerships, turns up little discussion at all of gender and language. For example, Jespersen cites English phonetician and historical linguist Henry Sweet's (1845–1912) *The History of Language* (1900). In discussing sound change Sweet attributes a role to child language learners and "foreigners" (pp. 20–24), but makes no mention of differences between women's and men's language. Jespersen also cites the seminal American linguist William Dwight Whitney's (1827–

⁶ When Bloomfield (1922: 371–372) criticized Jespersen as retreating into prescientific language analysis, his objection was that Jespersen relied on sound symbolism to explain the creation and relationships of words, rather than working out how words are formed and related through the application of consistent sound laws and analogic changes.

1994) *Language and the Study of Language* (1867). Although Whitney wrote fifty years before Jespersen, and from a different perspective, like Sweet, Whitney covered much of the same territory as Jespersen, including child language and the origin of language. Whitney discussed the role of dialectal variation in language change (155-162), but again there is no reference to gender. Similarly for Whitney's *Life and Growth of Language* (1898 [1875]); Paul's *Principles of the History of Language* (1889 [1886]); Oertel's *Lectures on the Study of Language* (1902); Müller's *Chips from a German Workshop* (vol. IV, 1876); Bally's *Le langage et la vie* (1913); Bloomfield's *Introduction to the Study of Language* (1983 [1914]); Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916); and Sturtevant's *Linguistic Change* (1917).⁷ These works represent a diverse array of late 19th and early 20th century scholarship on language structure and language change. What they have in common is that Jespersen cited them in his 1922 book — and that none of them discusses gender and language. Nor do any of them explicitly discount the salience of gender. They simply do not advert to gender as a meaningful major category in analyzing the structure or development of language.

There are, however, a few sources that Jespersen cites in the 1922 book that do mention in passing language differences by gender, without dwelling on them in any detail. Sayce (1875 [1874]: 83; 1880: 205) cites a claim that Jespersen rebuts, that among the Carib people of the Antilles Islands women speak an entirely different language than men. Dauzat (1910: 20) writes that mothers have a greater influence on their children's pronunciation relative to fathers. One can also find occasional relevant passages from texts of the same generation as Jespersen's sources, but which Jespersen happens not to cite: in a single paragraph aside, Wyld (1907: 68) mentions lexical differences between English-speaking women and men; Müller (1875 [1863]: 45-48) reviews some of the same anthropological sources that Jespersen seems to have read, including claims about the Carib people and about speakers of Sanskrit. However, the general intellectual

⁷ Sturtevant comes closest, however, with a single unelaborated remark that in some "savage tribes there are considerable differences between the speech of women and of man" (1917: 148). Fögen (2004) cites a passage from Paul (1889: 183) in which Paul depicts "nursery language" (e.g. *bow-wow*, *mama*) as rich in reduplication and onomatopoeia, but a connection to women's language is undeveloped.

environment into which Jespersen's Chapter 13 appeared was one that paid little regard to language differences by gender.

In this way, re-reading Jespersen's chapter "The Woman" from inside the context within which it was written shifts one's perception of its contents. What stands out are the facts that Jespersen observed that, within limits, language use sometimes varied between women and men; that he invested significance in that variation, even as he expressed reservations about its actual scope; and that he speculated about the role of gender-based variation with respect to his main topic, language change. For illustrations and discussion of his topic Jespersen looked to literature and to fields other than linguistics or philology. This was an accepted rhetorical style in his day, and moreover, because his disciplinary peers seemed for the most part oblivious to gender as a factor bearing on language use or language change, he had little previous work to draw on. In treating gender as having a role in language change, Jespersen exhibited his general intellectual independence from early 20th-century language scholarship. In his style of argumentation, however, Jespersen wrote within the then-existing tradition of scholarship on language, which relied heavily on anecdotal evidence, the authority of literary monuments, appeals to readers' experiences and expectations, and on a discourse shaped by folklore and common sense. The social-scientific model for constructing and testing arguments through deductive reasoning and the marshaling of empirical data had at that time not thoroughly penetrated study of language.

Another dimension of the context of Chapter 13 is the corpus of Jespersen's own work. Although his peers seemed indifferent to the topic of women's language, Jespersen published versions of the text contained in "The Woman" three times, spanning 35 years: first, in Danish, in a Danish-language magazine (Jespersen 1907); second, in English, in his 1922 book; and third, again in Danish, as an independent chapter in a book (Jespersen 1941: 161-174) that covers some of the same ground as *Language, its Nature, Development and Origin*. The three versions contain largely the same content, cite the same sources, and rely on the same style of support, with the two Danish texts sharing long stretches of identical text. However, the Danish versions contain a few touches omitted from the 1922 English version, which together seem to represent a greater investment in the biological basis of gender-based differences in language. For example,

in both Danish and in the English texts, Jespersen illustrates differences between the distribution and choice of adjectives in women's versus men's speech. But only in the Danish texts does he add the unelaborated comment that this difference reveals "the colder and sober character of the man and the more impulsive and emotional character of the woman" (Jespersen 1907: 585; 1941: 166 [translation mine: MT]). Jespersen opens the 1907 text with a catalog of secondary sexual characteristics (e.g., differences in blood chemistry and the incidence of color blindness; p. 581) that seems to set the stage for viewing differences in language as dictated by biology. However, he goes on to cite social-environmental as well as biological explanations for women's versus men's language, in the Danish as in the English versions.

Jespersen's interest in women's language surfaces in a few other publications. *Growth and Structure of the English Language* (1905), which he identified as his most successful book (Jespersen 1995 [1938]: 137), refers to gender-based differences in language in several places in the context of an extended argument that English has an essentially 'masculine' character. He declared that the shallowness of modern English inflection lends the language a "briefness, conciseness and terseness [...] characteristic of the style of men" (p. 5); that native speakers typically shun hyperbole or exaggeration, in contrast to the traits of women's language (8-9); and likewise, that English speakers — even females — avoid the abrupt or extreme changes in pitch that Jespersen attributed in general to women's language (p. 9). Jespersen later elaborated in "The Woman" on all three of these characterizations of women's versus men's language, which appear in *Growth and Structure* as offhand evidence for the masculine tenor of English. In the seven volumes of Jespersen's *A Modern English Grammar on Historical Principles* (1909–1949) there are only a few casual remarks that refer to gender-based language differences, such as "A male, but hardly a female, can use [the expression] *a man* in the sense of 'one'" (Vol. VII, Section 5.22). In *Mankind, Nation, and the Individual* (1946), published posthumously in English, Jespersen makes several comments (pp. 25, 29) that ascribe greater responsibility for linguistic innovation to women over men, and specifically identifies his most extended example of slang as the creation of a woman (p. 138). However, the book otherwise addresses dialectal variation, taboo, linguistic

correctness, and language and social class without reference to differences between females and males.

Surveying Jespersen's work overall gives a sense that his interest in women's versus men's language surfaced early and persisted throughout his career, but that it evolved little over time, remaining essentially intact without profiting from give-and-take with like-minded scholars. In any case, there is no evidence that Jespersen's modern reputation within feminist linguistics rests on any text other than the 1922 version of "The Woman" as published in *Language, Its Nature, Development and Origin*.

5. *How we now read what Jespersen wrote*

An Internet search to retrieve all citations of the terms 'Otto Jespersen' together with 'The Woman' and '1922', decade by decade since 1922, shows that (after removal of irrelevant items) for the first 50 years after publication Chapter 13 was rarely cited. But since the early 1970s Jespersen's Chapter 13 has been referred to in literature accessible online at a rate that roughly doubles every ten years, from 10 citations between 1972 and 1981 to 89 between 2002 to 2011. Of course, the overall rate of publication on the topic of language and gender has increased over that interval at a steep rate as well. But it is significant that the pace of citations of Jespersen (1922) has kept up, apparently without saturating the readership for texts on language and gender.

From the point of view of the historiography of linguistics, one can only applaud research that values and persistently calls attention to texts produced by previous generations. However, there are at least three facets of how Jespersen's chapter is incorporated into present-day writings on language and gender that might be questioned.

First, there is the general historical position assigned to "The Woman". It is conventional to introduce Jespersen (1922) as "one of the earliest sources" (Cameron 2007: 27), "early writing on the subject" (Talbot 1998: 36), "early work on gender" (Romaine 1999: 14), or among the "earlier examples" (Mills & Mullany 2011: 1) of the treatment of language and gender within "traditional books on language" (Thorne & Henley 1975: 209). It is noteworthy that references to Jespersen (1922) frequently appear in the first few pages of an article or chapter, in the first chapter of a book, or in the first paragraphs of a section that addresses the history of the study of language and gender,

wherever that section is located within the superordinate text. This fact materializes how Jespersen's chapter has been recruited to represent the starting point away from which modern analysis of language and gender has moved.

An implication that underlies this way of framing the text is that Jespersen spearheaded a stream of research on language and gender, within which "The Woman" is a "good illustration" (Romaine 1999: 14), or even "the paradigm example" (Cameron 1985: 33). We have seen, however, that Jespersen was not a typical early 20th century linguist, either in general, or with respect to his interest in language and gender. The attention he invested in language and "The Woman" was not common coin among his peers, taken as the generation of scholars who preceded and followed him and who wrote about language change. For the most part, Jespersen's colleagues (including those who reviewed his book) either ignored or discounted the topic of language and gender. Some modern citations of Jespersen (1922) take care to emphasize its novelty in his own day. Hill (1986: 146), for example, calls it "virtually the first that discussed women's language at all". But Hill's description still places Jespersen's "The Woman" in the vanguard of a tradition of scholarship that followed him, rather than (as I see it) as an essentially singular, isolated, text that had little precedent *or* following for another fifty years.⁸

This is not to say that before Jespersen no one noticed women's versus men's language or speculated about it: Jespersen's many examples and illustrations from literary, anthropological, and sociological texts make that clear. A recent review by Fögen (2004: 199) of reflection on "gender-specific communication in Graeco-Roman antiquity" looks much farther back to collect a rich resource of commentary about women's versus men's language. But Fögen's as well as Jespersen's examples derive from a wide range of writings composed for diverse purposes, out of which both authors distilled isolated asides or comments made in passing that are pertinent to women's

⁸ A journal article by the American sociologist and radical priest Paul Hanly Furfey (1896–1992) is an intriguing exception. Entitled "Men's and women's language" and published in *The American Catholic Sociological Review*, Furfey (1944) mentions Jespersen in passing but concentrates on "primitive people", on the grounds that "divergencies in the language usages of men and women...[are] barely discernable in the familiar languages of Europe" (p. 218). See Joseph (1992) for more on Furfey, whose work has had little impact on present-day feminist discussion of language and gender.

language. Their sources do not form a corpus of 'early work' that self-consciously analyzes language and gender. Only one text that Jespersen cites treats gender in a direct and sustained manner, namely maverick British sexologist Havelock Ellis's (1859–1939) *Man and Woman* (1894). But Ellis's focus is on anatomical and psychological comparison of the sexes, with only peripheral attention to language.

As is evident from the reviews of *Language, its Nature, Development and Origin*, Jespersen's "The Woman" did not lead other scholars to recognize gender as an important factor in language change. Sixty years later, in writing a book the goal of which was "to place in historical perspective the current debate over sex and language", Baron (1986: 10) faced the same challenge that faced Jespersen in having to piece together his data from miscellaneous sources. Baron surveyed a large range of texts (mostly in, and about, English) for their treatment of language and gender, looking both before and after Jespersen's day. Like Jespersen (and like Fögen), he culls examples from literary and academic sources of various kinds, patiently mining texts about language for their relevance to gender, and texts about gender for their relevance to language. Little of the data Baron unearths comprises analysis of or reflection on how women versus men actually speak; rather, most of it consists of recommendations for how women ought to speak, or attempts to explain the distribution of linguistic features that are inherently marked for gender (e.g., pronouns) with reference to purported differences between women and men. Baron cites "The Woman" abundantly and returns to many of Jespersen's sources. Then to cover the interval between Jespersen's day and the 1970s, Baron reverts to the same piecemeal basis for his data, citing usage manuals, handbooks for writers that prescribe language standards, and introductory textbooks in linguistics (and also an intriguing but limited trickle of descriptive papers on pronouns and gender-marked nouns). There is no evidence in Baron's survey that, following the publication of Jespersen (1922), attempts to observe and generalize about the features of women's language flourished. It is only from the 1970s onwards that Baron can work with self-conscious, sustained, expositions and argumentation about women's versus men's language.

Coates's (1986: 15-34) summary of the historical background to study of gender-based language differences has a similar complexion to that of Baron (1986). Coates knits

together examples and comments from 16th- through 19th-century texts that address gender in passing, quoting profusely from Jespersen and his sources. But from 1922, Coates jumps directly to the 1970s.⁹ This makes Jespersen's chapter resemble less an example of 'early work' than a sudden outcropping of attention directed at an unconventional topic by an unconventional scholar. Jespersen wrote using the standard scholarly practices of his time (i.e. reliance on anecdote over empirical evidence), but he pursued a topic little recognized by his peers. In "The Woman", interest in analyzing gender as a factor in language flashed into view, then disappeared, only to re-emerge in very different guise after fifty years of apparent extinction.

For these reasons, I believe it would be desirable to reconsider the role which modern feminist linguistics assigns to Jespersen's text as a typical representative of early work on language and gender. Jespersen's "The Woman" is essentially in a class of its own, with little precedent or follow-up until the topic burst into public attention in the 1970s. This is one facet of how the text is now read that I believe deserves reconsideration.

A second facet that is worth revisiting is the content of certain modern exegeses. Many of the claims that Jespersen makes, and the positions he espouses, are accurately represented in present-day readings of "The Woman". For example, Jespersen *does* assert that women as a rule shun coarse language (as noted in commentary on "The Woman" by Kramer 1974: 84; Bradley 1981: 74; Spender 1985: 10; Cameron 2007: 32; Pan 2011: 1016); that women have smaller vocabularies than men (Kramarae 1981: 95; Smith 1985: 13; Key 1996: 4); and that women are more voluble (Coates 1986: 32; Talbot 1998: 38; Cameron 2003a: 469). Modern feminist linguists' painstaking social-scientific research has disputed, and rejected, these exact claims. However, some other claims now attributed to Jespersen seem to misrepresent or simplify what amount to more complex or dynamic positions that he takes. A case in point is the attribution to Jespersen of the claim that men, not women, drive linguistic innovation. For example, Spender (1985: 11)

⁹ In the following chapter, "The Historical Background (II)" Coates does fill in some of the interval between Jespersen and Lakoff (2004 [1975]). But her topic shifts from a chronicle of discussion about language and gender (the business of the preceding chapter) to a chronicle of discussion about *linguistics* and gender, in particular, the specific evidence that dialectologists from the 1900s to the 1960s prioritized males over females as both fieldworkers and informants.

wrote that "According to Jespersen, women had a debilitating effect upon the language" and believed that because women lacked "vigor and vividness" of expression, they could not contribute those qualities to language. Coates (1986: 16) quotes Jespersen: "it is men rather than women who introduce "new and fresh expressions" and thus men who are "the chief renovators of language" (Jespersen 1922: 247)". Goddard & Meân Patterson (2000: 94) sum the point up: "Jespersen claims that men [...] invent new terms, while women are merely conservative".

However, despite his modern reputation as dismissive of women as linguistic innovators, Jespersen's discussion of the point is quite equivocal. He first poses the question of whether one or the other of the sexes is responsible for language change, responding that "An answer that is very often given is that as a rule women are more conservative than men [...] while innovations are due to the initiative of men" (p. 242). Jespersen supports this initial claim with a short example from Cicero, but then continues: "This, however, does not hold good in every respect and in every people". Jespersen undercuts the role of men as the sole source of innovation with an elaborate 19th-century example from the language practices of the indigenous "Botocudo" (Krenak) people of what is now Brazil, among whom women, not men, invent new words. He balances these data with another scholar's claim that French and English speaking women avoid neologisms; but then continues, "In Japan, on the contrary, women are less conservative than men" (p. 243), citing phonetic, lexical, morphological, and supra-segmental evidence. The topic continues into the next subsection ("Phonetics and grammar", 243-245), where Jespersen notes the summary judgment of grammarians that in the history of English, "women had a more advanced pronunciation than men". Among innovations he attributes to women (or mostly to women) in other languages are the raising of French *a* to *e* around 1700; loss of French trilled *r*; and lenition of *r* in both Danish and Chuckchi (now 'Chukchi', spoken in far eastern Siberia). Jespersen then drifts from the topic of leadership in linguistic innovation to the more general topic of gender differences in language to discuss some purported contrasts in modern English pronunciation between women and men. He concludes:

But even if such observations were multiplied [...] they would be only more or less isolated instances, without any deeper significance, and on the whole we must say that

from the phonetic point of view there is scarcely any difference between the speech of men and that of women: the two sexes speak for all intents and purposes the same language. (Jespersen 1922: 245)

With this, Jespersen implies that neither sex is characteristically responsible for driving forward sound changes in language.

In the following subsection ("Choice of words", 245-248), Jespersen turns to the question of gender and lexical innovation. He gives examples from English in which each of the sexes coins and replaces lexical items: "Women will therefore invent innocent and euphemistic words and paraphrases ... [which] in their turn have to be avoided and replaced" (p. 245); "Men thus become the chief renovators of language, and to them are due those changes by which we sometimes see one term replace an older one, to give way in turn to a still newer one" (p. 247). Curiously, Jespersen offers no motivation for his use of the adjective 'chief' in the phrase 'chief renovators', which appears in a paragraph balancing evidence for women versus men as innovators. Regardless, it is this last statement ("Men thus become the chief renovators of language") that has been passed from hand to hand as encapsulating Jespersen's stance on linguistic innovation by modern writers are such as Mahony (1983: 46), Smith (1985: 14), Coates (1986: 16), Goddard & Meân Patterson (2000: 94), Santaemilia (2002: 98), and Awan & Sheeraz (2011: 410); Cameron (2003b: 187) remarks that Jespersen adds some (unspecified) caveats. This leads to a lopsided interpretation of "The Woman" as wholly discounting the contributions of women to linguistic change — a reading that is at odds with the hedged conclusion that Jespersen reaches.¹⁰

Similarly, the following passage has been read in such a way as to simplify, and to distort, Jespersen's actual stance:

Men will certainly with great justice object that there is a danger of the language becoming languid and if we are always to content ourselves with women's expressions, and that vigour and vividness count for something. (Jespersen 1922: 247)

¹⁰ As an exception, Lakoff (2004: 80) remarks in a footnote on what she perceives as Jespersen's ambivalence about women's versus men's role in linguistic innovation. Key (1996: 131-132), also an exception, reads "The Woman" as representing women as linguistic innovators.

It is conventional to interpret this text as Jespersen's claim that women's language harms English (e.g., by Spender 1980: 11; Romaine 1999: 180; Goddard & Meân Patterson 2000: 95; Talbot 2000: 37; Santaemilia 2002: 98). However, the actual words tell a somewhat different story: note that Jespersen's syntax specifically contains the scope of any threat from women's language as something that would arise if the unspecified 'we' were 'always' to adopt it. Moreover, 'vigor and vividness' — presumably predicated of men's language, but Jespersen does not spell out that attribution outright — is asserted only to 'count for *something*' (emphasis added: MT), rather than as an across-the-board antidote to the compromising effect of women's language. These features of the passage are downplayed in many quotations of it. For example, Spender baldly omits Jespersen's strategic adverb 'always'; obscures the effect of the concessive 'for something' by following it with claims she presents as Jespersen's opinions; and in other ways flattens the passage into a stark denunciation of women's language:

According to Jespersen, women had a debilitating effect upon the language (p. 246) and it was reasonable for men, 'certainly with great justice [to] object that there is a danger of the language becoming languid and insipid if we are to content ourselves with women's expressions'. Jespersen maintained that 'vigour and vividness count for something' and because, in his opinion, women lacked such qualities and could make no such contribution, their language was perceived as a threat. (Spender 1980: 11)

There are also other points on which Jespersen's modern reputation seems to have drifted away from the actual contents of "The Woman". One concerns the chapter's presupposition that men's language is a default against which women's language can be contrasted as a marked variety. As Cameron (1985: 31) has written, this "norm-and-deviation framework" is pervasive in analysis of women's language against that of men. Jespersen is no exception. The point is especially well developed by Hall (2003: 359-361), who accurately points out features of Jespersen's exposition that, sometimes subtly, sometimes forthrightly, position women's language in silhouette against men's language, taking men's language as a default version of human language in general. Hall's close examination of "The Woman" models how to give an older text a fresh and attentive reading. In particular, Hall avoids the pitfall of resting the case for Jespersen's norm-and-deviation framework on a facile observation that "The Woman" is not counterbalanced

by a separate chapter entitled "The Man". Among scholars who capitalize on the absence of a hypothetical chapter "The Man" are Kramer (1974: 82); Graddol & Swann (1989: 53); Talbot (1998: 37); Romaine (1999: 14-15); Goddard & Meân Patterson (2000: 94); Sunderland (2006: 5).

Although factually correct, this common complaint obscures the extent to which Jespersen's Chapter 13, despite its assumptions about normativity, does try to characterize men's language, and to characterize what is shared across the language of both sexes. To quantify the matter in crude syntactic terms, I counted how many times in Chapter 13 Jespersen assigns the syntactic role of subject, or the role of a constituent in construction with a subject, to nouns referring to females or female language (e.g. "*women* have played an important part in..."; "*a young girl* is relating..."; "*A woman's thought* is no sooner formed...") versus males or male language (e.g., "*men* will generally say..."; "*a male period* [i.e., sentence (MT)] is often like ..."). The relevance of this analysis is that it may reduce to something roughly quantifiable how often Jespersen's sentences depict females versus males as agents or experiencers. References to females or female language appear in subject position 109 times. The corresponding figure for males is 60. There are 10 instances of subjects that conjoin references to females and males (e.g., "*Carib men and women on the continent* speak ..."; "all that *he or she* could remember ..."). Comparing the numbers of references to females versus males that Jespersen's syntax assigns to non-subject position (accusative, dative, oblique), the two sexes are closer: females, 75; males, 58; the two sexes conjoined, 17. These data suggest that — even granted Jespersen's participation in the norm-and-deviation framework, and even in the absence of a counterbalancing chapter on "The Man" — Jespersen cannot be characterized as a exhaustively concentrating on the linguistic deviance of women relative to men while treating men's language as so transparent as to require no comment. He does, in fact, make some remarks about men's language, even if his focus is on the language of women.¹¹

¹¹ It is worth noting that both versions of "The Woman" that appeared in Danish, (Jespersen 1907: 587-588, 1941: 168-169) include an identical long passage in which Jespersen illustrates what he identifies as men's language, including an example that extends for almost 250 words.

A third facet of how I believe Jespersen's modern reputation might be revisited brings together the two previous facets, historiographical position and questions of exegesis. Freed (2003: 701), among others, has pointed out the near-monopoly that the "three major themes" of "deficit", "dominance", and "difference" has held until recently in accounts of the history of research on language and gender.¹² Scholars such as Henley & Kramarae (1991) and Freed (1995) have challenged the value of this neatly alliterating, metrically symmetrical, conceptual triad, so that its zenith as a theoretical tool may have passed. However, it persists in accounts of how language and gender was conceptualized in the 1970s through the 1990s. In the classic narrative, the deficit theme comes first chronologically, and is almost always associated with Robin Tolmach Lakoff's (b.1942) pioneering work in feminist linguistics, *Language and Women's Place* (1973, 2004 [1975]). What is most pertinent here is that the deficit stance is routinely extended backward in time to characterize Jespersen's Chapter 13 (e.g., by Johnson 1983: 134; Spender 1985: 10; Henley & Kramarae 1991: 20; West 1995: 108; Bergvall 1999: 277; Romaine 1999: 14; Weatherall 2002: 56; Nordenstam 2008: 15; Valentine 2008: 434; Mills & Mullany 2011: 1; Pan 2011: 1017).

Without doubt, Jespersen views certain features of women's language as disadvantageous relative to features he attributes to men's language. He also adopts a tone that is sometimes patronizing, and he exoticizes women's language in contrast to the implied norm of men's language. But to represent Jespersen's Chapter 13 as a "disparaging dismissal of women's language as inferior" (Awan & Sheeraz 2011: 410) or

¹² Briefly, the "deficit" model construes women's language as deficient relative to male norms: "Women were seen as powerless ...[and] compelled through the pressures of patriarchal culture to speak an ineffectual and insecure form of the language" (Freed 1995: 4). The "dominance" model argues that institutionalized male social power underlies and shapes differences in language between women and men, such that men "crowded women into a smaller and less significant space on the linguistic floor" (Bergvall 1999: 277). As a result, "language variation need[s] to be understood in a larger sociopolitical context" (Freed 1995: 5). The "difference" framework emphasizes that women and men are socialized to value different communicative goals — for women, the enhancement of solidarity; for men, the acquisition and maintenance of social power — and that differences of language and communicative style follow from the pursuit of these contrasting goals (see Henley & Kramarae 1991 for discussion).

to identify it flatly as an early deficit theory (Johnson 1983: 134; Henley & Kramarae 1991: 20) is to obscure many of the complexities of his views. We have seen that Jespersen is ambivalent about the differential roles of the sexes in linguistic innovation; that he downplays other scholars' claims which, in his view, exaggerate differences between women's and men's language; and that he incorporates features of women's language into his conception of the English language, rather than rejecting them out of hand. We have also seen that Jespersen acknowledges what he perceives as virtues inherent to women's language use: their quickness relative to men in learning, hearing, answering (p. 249), and their capacity to "[move] with a sure and supple tongue which is ever ready to find words and to pronounce them in a clear and intelligible manner" (p. 253). Jespersen offers what from his perspective counts as a salute to women in writing that

there is reason to congratulate those nations, the English among them, in which the social position of women has been high enough to secure greater purity and freedom from coarseness in language than would be the case if men had been the sole arbiters of speech. (Jespersen 1922: 246)

In short, Jespersen's "The Woman" cannot readily be subsumed under a 'deficit' framework. His orientation toward women's language is too complex, too ambivalent, and most importantly, not focused on identifying faults. The categories used to analyze scholarship on language and gender starting in the 1970s cannot be meaningfully extended backward to 1922. Deborah Cameron, who, like Kira Hall, is an unusually close reader of Jespersen, wrote that "If you read the whole chapter in which Jespersen expounds on the subject of 'The Woman', it becomes clear that he is adopting a view of languages as ideally balanced between 'masculine' and 'feminine' elements" (2003a: 449). This view is, of course, susceptible to modern critique — as is the association of women's language with 'purity and freedom from coarseness'. But "The Woman" is incongruent with the prevailing representation of Jespersen as simply an early "deficit theor[ist]" (Henley & Kramarae 1991: 20).

6. *What role Jespersen might have in the future of feminist linguistics*

We have reviewed the content of Jespersen's chapter "The Woman", and something of the context in which it was originally written and received. I have also analyzed the role now assigned to this text in contemporary feminist linguistics. What might its future trajectory be? Since the late 1990s, it has become commonplace in some educational settings for students in the language sciences, including those writing about feminist linguistics, to post their unpublished work online. In this way, the Internet makes accessible to a public readership texts written by the oncoming cohort of language scholars, in the form of not only doctoral dissertations, but also Masters degree theses, examination papers, and even undergraduate students' essays produced as class assignments. These texts represent the work of novices, so that they deserve a more indulgent reading than is appropriate for the output of professional scholars, whose work has presumably undergone peer review. But a special virtue of student writing is that it opens access into what the field looks like to a new generation, at least among that subset of the generation that posts original academic writings online.

Because feminist linguistics is a popular topic among students of linguistics, an Internet search for citations conflating the terms 'Otto Jespersen', 'The Woman', and '1922' retrieves not only published texts produced by established researchers, but also the unpublished work of students.¹³ Among these materials, I located texts which meet all four of the following criteria: they cited Jespersen's Chapter 13, "The Woman"; they could be positively identified as produced by undergraduate or graduate students; they were originally composed on or after the year 2000; and they were posted either in entirely unpublished form, or (rarely) under the aegis of informal, local, online serials such as "Working Papers of the (university name) Department of Linguistics" or "The (university name) Journal of Undergraduate Research". I examined 17 texts that met these criteria. They comprised 3 doctoral dissertations, 5 papers by students in Masters degree programs, and 9 papers produced by undergraduate students (Bachelors theses,

¹³ The same search terms also retrieve lecture notes, course syllabi, classroom slides, handouts from oral presentations, and various informal (and sometimes anonymous) texts. Although these are a rich source of citations of "The Woman", I excluded them from consideration on the grounds that they may have been produced in too unstudied a manner to bear the weight of analysis.

term papers, examinations) composed in English, Spanish, German, and Swedish. Their authors were affiliated with 16 different institutions of higher education in Australia, Canada, Germany, Romania, Serbia, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States.¹⁴ Student readers of Jespersen's "The Woman" offered a range of comments about it, all of which have been adverted to above. However, two points stand out as particularly likely to be raised by undergraduates and graduate students in their discussion of Jespersen's Chapter 13, each appearing in more than half of the 17 student papers.

First, student work strongly identifies Jespersen with deficit theory, which views women's language as inherently deficient relative to that of men. I have argued against this reading, on the grounds that Jespersen's text has an ambivalent, uneven, profile, which does not fall wholly within any of our modern categories for conceptualizing discourse about language and gender. Just as it cannot be comfortably identified as an example of pre-feminist sexist discourse, or as the fountainhead of an early tradition of writing on language and gender, it cannot be domesticated into modern deficit theory. Still, references to Jespersen's Chapter 13 in student writing routinely associate it with a deficit theory of women's language.

Second, student work almost inevitably passes directly from Jespersen's "The Woman" to Robin Lakoff's *Language and Woman's Place* (1973, 2004 [1975]), emphasizing common ground between the two texts. The pairing of Jespersen and Lakoff also appears in professional literature on language and gender. For example, McConnell-Ginet (1975: 46) remarks that Lakoff "comes astonishingly close" to expressing some of the Jespersen's perceptions; Spender (1980: 36) characterizes Lakoff as, at least in some respects, "following in [Jespersen's] footsteps"; for Talbot, "[Lakoff] sometimes seems to

¹⁴ I do not provide further information about the authorship or identity of these 17 texts, on the understanding that they represent the work of beginners, not professional scholars, and therefore their authors deserve a measure of protection from public scrutiny. Moreover, the accessibility on the Internet of unpublished material is unstable, so that it cannot be predicted whether materials that were readily available online in May 2013 will remain available for first-hand study by readers of this article at a later date.

echo" what she calls "Jespersen's complaints" (1998: 36); Coates (1986: 19) declares outright that "there are many parallels between Lakoff's and Jespersen's work".

The association of Jespersen with Lakoff is strong in published literature on language and gender. It is even more pronounced in student writing, where common ground across the two scholars' work is presented as an established matter of fact. Since many student texts cite Coates or Spender on the connection between Jespersen and Lakoff, students' perception of the relationship between the two likely comes to them second hand, rather than from their own first hand readings of "The Woman" against *Language and Woman's Place*. Nevertheless, it is significant that among the various comments about Jespersen that appear in published literature, it is this specific association that stands out to student readers, as if they consider it particularly salient in the history of feminist linguistics.

Among similarities that student writers highlight between Jespersen and Lakoff is the claim that both fail to provide empirical support for their characterizations of women's language. This claim appears widely in published literature, and has been carried over uncritically into student work.¹⁵ However, the prevailing standards for what counted as support for a claim about language use in the 1970s were very different from those in the 1920s. Lakoff, writing in 1975 and trained in the early days of generative grammar, depicted women's language on the basis of her own experience and intuitions. She could have — but chose not to — employ data derived from corpora, from elicitation, or from systematic collection of spontaneous speech. None of those resources was available to Jespersen in 1922. Therefore, the significance of Jespersen's reliance on literary sources, proverbs, and what he treated as common sense, is incommensurable with Lakoff's decision to build a model of women's language on the basis of her intuitions and personal experience.

¹⁵ For examples of how that objection is articulated with respect to Jespersen see Kramer (1974: 21), Spender (1980: 11), Talbot (2003: 38); with respect to Lakoff, see Smith (1985: 149), Freed (1995: 4), Romaine (1999: 156). Frank (1978: 48) and Sunderland (2006: 5) raise the point with respect to both Jespersen and Lakoff together; Cameron (1985) with respect to Jespersen on p. 33, and with respect to Lakoff on p. 34. For discussion and defense of Lakoff's choice to base her claims on intuition and personal experience rather than empirical evidence, see Bucholtz & Hall (1995: 3), Bucholtz (2004: 2-13); Leap (2004: 278-279); Queen (2004: 291-292).

I believe that a closer look at Chapter 13 disrupts the grounds for comparison of Jespersen, an early 20th-century grammarian for whom women's language provided insight into the phenomenon of language change, to Lakoff, a late 20th-century feminist linguist whose goal was to explicate the double bind that gendered language imposes on modern English-speaking women. I have argued that deficit theory, a label that arose to name Lakoff's work in contrast to what followed it, is not a useful construct in characterizing Jespersen's "The Woman". Identifying Lakoff and Jespersen as sharing a similar deficit model of women's language, and moreover a similar failure to provide empirical support for their claims, glosses over very great differences of orientation and approach, and distorts our perception of both scholars.

In sum, student work that cites Jespersen's "The Woman" predictably repeats two contestable claims, namely the identification of Jespersen with deficit theory, and the association of Jespersen with Lakoff. These interpretations of "The Woman" are deeply etched into modern discussion about Jespersen's contributions to the study of language and gender. Regrettably, students now presuppose them as part of the received historical lore of the field.

7. *Conclusion*

Looking back on the publication of Lakoff (1973, 2004 [1975]) after a twenty-year interval, Bucholtz & Hall (1995: 1) declare that their goal is to "rescue [*Language and Women's Place*] for contemporary use". Decoupling Lakoff's work from Jespersen's "The Woman" might be one useful move in that direction. For example, the deficit theoretic stance of Lakoff (and others) might be construed more accurately if it were dissociated from Jespersen, so as not to stretch the concept unreasonably. Likewise, dissociating Lakoff's use of anecdotal evidence from Jespersen's literary examples and his arguments based on common sense may help us better assess the significance of how both scholars treat their sources. In this sense, revising how Jespersen is read may, as a by-product, clarify our understanding of Lakoff's contributions.

One might also extend Bucholtz & Hall's initiative to try, after a ninety-year interval, to "rescue [...] for contemporary use" Jespersen's Chapter 13. This is a challenging task, because insofar as "The Woman" doesn't fit neatly into modern categories for analyzing

language and gender, taking a fresh look at it is disruptive and requires greater conceptual resources. A close reading of "The Woman" brings to light complexities in Jespersen's position that are buried in the conventional interpretation of Chapter 13 as wholly androcentric. That same close reading holds a mirror up to a 21st-century reader's own complexities in assessing this unusual, rough-edged, gem of a text from 1922. However, examining those complexities, and the rough edges of the text itself, provides a reader with rich opportunities to develop insight, imagination, and tolerance for perspectives that do not conform to modern treatments of language and gender.

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SUMMARY

Danish linguist Otto Jespersen's (1860–1943) *Language, its Nature, Development, and Origin* was published more than 90 years ago, in 1922. This article focuses on Jespersen's often-cited Chapter 13, entitled "The Woman", a text that has served since the 1970s as a touchstone for feminist narratives of the history of discussion of language and gender. The author of the present article shows that modern treatment of the chapter sometimes misconstrues Jespersen in casting him into the role of mouthpiece for ideas about women and language that contemporary scholars have discredited. She suggests instead that "The Woman" deserves a new reading, which neither apologizes for Jespersen's views, nor diminishes his importance to the history of feminist linguistics, but rather recognizes the intricacies of this text and seeks to better understand its position in relation to present-day scholarship on language and gender.

RÉSUMÉ

Language, its Nature, Development, and Origin du linguiste danois Otto Jespersen (1860–1943) a été publié il y a plus de 90 ans, en 1922. Cet article porte sur le chapitre 13 souvent cité de Jespersen, intitulé "The Woman" ("La femme"), un texte qui sert depuis les années 1970 de pierre de touche pour les récits féministes de l'histoire de la discussion de la langue et du genre. L'auteur du présent article démontre que le traitement moderne de ce chapitre interprète parfois Jespersen de façon incorrecte, en lui assignant le rôle de porte-parole pour des idées concernant la femme et la langue qui ont été discréditées par les linguistes contemporains. Par contre, l'auteur suggère que "La femme" mérite une nouvelle lecture qui n'excuse ni les opinions de Jespersen, ni ne diminue son importance dans l'histoire de la linguistique féministe, mais plutôt reconnaît la complexité de ce texte et cherche à mieux comprendre sa position par rapport avec l'érudition actuelle sur la langue et le genre.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

1922, also vor mehr als 90 Jahren, erschien *Language, its Nature, Development, and Origin* des dänischen Sprachwissenschaftlers Otto Jespersen (1860–1943). Im vorliegenden Aufsatz handelt es sich um das oft zitierte Kapitel 13 des Buches, das den Titel "The Woman" ("Die Frau") trägt und das seit den 70er Jahren als Bezugspunkt der Kritik in der feministischen Diskussion über Sprache und Geschlecht gilt. Dabei geht es der Autorin darum zu zeigen, dass in der neueren Auseinandersetzung mit diesem Kapitel Jespersen bisweilen deswegen missverstanden wird, weil man Jespersen in die Rolle eines Sprachrohrs für gewisse von den zeitgenössischen Wissenschaftlern bereits diskreditierte Vorstellungen über Frauen und Sprache versetzt hat. Demgegenüber wird hier der Versuch unternommen, eine neue Auslegung des Kapitels "Die Frau" zu liefern, und zwar eine, die weder eine Apologie für Jespersens Ansichten bietet noch dessen

Bedeutung für die Geschichte der feministischen Linguistik schmälert. Vielmehr wird eine Interpretation angestrebt, die die Vielschichtigkeit des Textes anerkennt und die ein genaueres Verständnis des Platzes dieses Texts in Bezug auf die heutige Forschung über Sprache und Geschlechterrollen ermöglicht.

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