Language and Gender

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MARY M. TALBOT

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This opening chapter establishes the agenda by considering such key questions as: why do we need to distinguish between sex and gender, and why is language study important for feminists?

Gender is an important division in all societies. It is of enormous significance to human beings. Being born male or female has far-reaching consequences for an individual. It affects how we act in the world, how the world treats us. This includes the language we use, and the language used about us. I want this book to make you more conscious of the social category of gender, of the divisions made on the basis of it and, not least, of the part language plays in establishing and sustaining these divisions.

About this book

This first part, 'Preliminaries: Airing Stereotypes and Early Models', is looking at some early work on sex differences in language use and at stereotypes about women. Its three chapters provide a grounding in early work in the field and its central, but problematic, distinction between sex and gender.

Part II, 'Interaction among Women and Men', introduces a range of studies in the Anglo-American empirical tradition working within what is often called the 'difference-and-dominance' framework. This second part covers research into specific aspects of spoken interaction, including claims that have been made about large-scale gender differences. Two of the chapters present research into men and women's language grouped under a variety of speech situations and genres. These chapters take up some of the more minor issues and problems arising from the various studies presented, such as the difficulties arising from accounting for gender differences in terms of dichotomies like public versus private and informational versus affective. Part II finishes by considering more major problems, its concluding chapter examining some of the theoretical underpinnings underlying research presented so far and the problems they pose for

researchers in language and gender. It focuses chiefly on the preoccupation with 'difference' and includes discussion of the reception among feminist linguists of Deborah Tannen's popularizing work on male and female 'interactional styles' (1986, 1991, 1995).

Part III, 'Discourse and Gender: Construction and Performance', turns to critical perspectives on gender and language. This last part introduces a contrasting approach to the study of language and gender, one that is grounded in a different theoretical background and asks different kinds of questions. It begins to try to explain how languages, individuals and social contexts 'interact', and how this interaction sustains unequal gender relations. In particular, it presents work in critical discourse analysis, an approach to the study of language in social context which is grounded in European theories of discourse and subjectivity. Looking at studies of the construction of a variety of feminine and masculine identities, the chapters in this final part of the book reflect both the high degree of interest in mass media and popular culture found in language and gender research within critical discourse analysis and the preoccupation with discourse and social change which is central to critical discourse analysis more generally.

Linguistic sex differentiation

The earliest work on men, women and language attended to 'sex differentiation'. Studies of such differences were carried out by Europeans (and other 'Westerners') with an interest in anthropology. They have tended to concentrate on phonological and lexicogrammatical 'exotica' (sound patterns, words and structures). A great deal of this kind of study has focused on the existence of different pronouns or affixes specific to men and women, whether as speakers, spoken to or spoken about. Sex differentiation of this kind is uncommon in languages of European origin. The pronoun systems of Germanic languages – such as English and Danish – only distinguish sex in third person singular reference (he/him, she/her or it). That is, when one individual is speaking to a second one about a third, the sex of the third person is specified. The pronoun systems of Romance languages – such as French, Italian and Spanish – are similar, except that they mark sex in the third person *plural* (**ils/elles**, etc.) as well. Colloquial Arabic also has sex-marking in the second person singular (**you**) so that, in addressing a person as **you**, the pronoun you use will depend on whether that person is male (**ʔinta**) or female (**ʔinti**). (The symbol ʔ represents a glottal stop.)

Other languages have very different pronoun systems. The Japanese

one is complicated by the existence of distinct levels of formality and the need to take into account the status of the person you are talking to in deciding which level to use. There is a range of different words for the first person pronoun, **I**, for instance. There are formal pronouns which can be used by both women and men: **watashi** and the highly formal **watakushi**. Less formally, **atashi** is used only by women, **boku** traditionally only by men (there is also another form, **ore**, available to men if they want to play up their masculinity). Choice of pronoun depends here on the sex of the speaker, not the addressee. That is, if you are a woman you must use the 'female' pronoun form and if you are a man you must choose from the 'male' forms. Japan does appear to be undergoing change. Girls in Japanese high schools say that they use the first-person pronoun **boku**, because if they use **atashi** they cannot compete with the boys (Jugaku 1979, cited in Okamoto 1995: 314). Feminists have been reported using another form, **boke**, to refer to themselves (Romaine 1994: 111).

In some traditional, tribal societies, men and women have a whole range of different vocabularies that they use (while presumably understanding 'male' and 'female' forms but not using both). An extreme example of this phenomenon was in the language used by the Carib Indians (who inhabited what is now Dominica, in the Lesser Antilles). When explorers from Europe first encountered these people, they thought the women and the men were speaking distinct languages. A European writer–traveller in the seventeenth century had this to say about them:

> the men have a great many expressions peculiar to them, which the women understand but never pronounce themselves. On the other hand, the women have words and phrases which the men never use, or they would be laughed to scorn. Thus it happens that in their conversations it often seems as if the women had another language than the men. (Rochefort, cited in Jespersen 1922: 237)

This linguistic situation is more likely in stable, conservative cultures, where male and female social roles are not flexible. However, a contemporary tribal people in Brazil, the Karajá – whose language has more differences between male and female speech than any other language – are currently coping with rapid and profound cultural changes affecting every aspect of their society. In Karajá speech, sex of speaker is marked phonologically. There are systematic sound differences between male and female forms of words, even occurring in loan words from Portuguese. There are some examples in table 1.1. Notice the absence of /k/ and /ku/ in male speech.

Table 1.1 Differences in male and female speech in Karajá

Male speech	Female speech	Portuguese	English
heto	hetoku		house
out	kotu		turtle
bisileta	bisikreta	bicicleta	bicycle
nobiotxu	nobikutxu	domingo	Sunday

Source: Fortune and Fortune 1987: 476

Traditionally, the Karajá speakers have very clearly defined social roles for women and men. The distinct male and female forms contribute to marking these two domains, a central aspect of Karajá tribal identity. Since young people are now learning to read and write in their mother-tongue of Karajá, these distinct forms will be retained. As a consequence, they will be less likely to lose their sense of cultural identity in the process of assimilation into the larger, Portuguese-speaking Brazilian society than if they had to acquire literacy through Portuguese.

Sex differences in language of the kind we have been considering were grouped together as *sex-exclusive* differentiation in the 1970s. A distinction between sex-exclusive and *sex-preferential* differentiation – first suggested by an American linguist, Ann Bodine – became popular for labelling two different kinds of feature under investigation. Unlike sex-exclusive differences, sex-preferential differences are not absolute; they are matters of degree. While sex-exclusive differentiation is fairly uncommon in languages of European origin, the same cannot be said of sex-preferential differentiation. In later chapters of this book, I will be concentrating on sex-preferential patterns of language use, rather than sex-exclusive ones of the kind I have been talking about so far. This will involve, among other things, examining claims that women use forms of language that are closer to the prestige 'Standard' than men do (that is, speak more 'correctly'), and claims that women use a cooperative style in conversation while men use a style based on competitiveness.

Both sex-exclusive and sex-preferential differences are highly culture-specific. Acquiring them is an important part of learning how to behave as 'proper' men and women in a particular culture. Failure to acquire appropriate forms and their usage can have serious, even devastating, consequences for the individuals concerned. Gretchen Fortune, an American linguist in Brazil who co-produced the original writing system which is still used by the Karajá, has told of one young Karajá speaker whose use of women's forms was not corrected by his parents (Fortune 1995). This

individual's collision with the linguistic norms of his community meant that he became a type of 'misfit' and source of ridicule within the community. For him, as a 'misfit', Portuguese provided a new identity and a kind of liberation.

Linguistic sex differentiation can become a location of social struggle within a society, not just the struggle of one individual. Japanese men's and women's forms are ceasing to be sex-exclusive, that is, forms used exclusively by one sex.

Sex versus gender

This brings me to the distinction between sex and gender. It was a conceptual breakthrough for second-wave feminism that was first articulated in detail by a British feminist in the early seventies (Oakley 1972). It does not exist in all languages – it's absent from French, Norwegian and Danish, for example – but for us, as language scholars, it is an important distinction.

According to the sex/gender distinction, sex is biologically founded, whereas gender is learned behaviour. Basically, sex is a matter of genes and the secretion of hormones and the physical developments that result from them. In this account, whether you have ended up male or female is all down to whether your father gave you an X or a Y. It is these chromosomes which determine the development of the gonads (embryonic sex glands) into either ovaries or testes. At around eight weeks old, the gonads of a foetus with one X and one Y chromosome start to produce the 'male' hormone testosterone, after which the foetus begins to develop male genitalia. Without the production of this hormone, the foetus continues as normal; that is, it carries on developing as a female. This assumption of a biological female-as-norm was an appealing idea for many feminists in the seventies and eighties, since it was a refreshing contrast to androcentric assumptions about the male-as-norm that permeated much scholarship (there are various examples of this assumption in operation in chapters 2 and 3). It has since been contested (Fausto-Sterling 2000: 204) and the account I give here is necessarily simplistic. The basic point, however, is that sex is a matter of bodily attributes and essentially dimorphic (that is, it has two forms). One is either male or female (intersexuals confuse the picture and I'll come to that issue in the next section).

Gender, by contrast, is socially constructed; it is learned. People acquire characteristics which are perceived as masculine and feminine. In everyday language, it makes sense to talk of a 'masculine' woman or a 'feminine' man. Unlike sex, gender is not binary; we can talk about one man being

more masculine (or feminine) than another. This contrast is reflected in the grammar of English. Grammatically we can have **masculine, more masculine, most masculine** but not **male, *maler, *malest** (the asterisk is marking the ungrammatical forms, a convention in linguistics). People are 'gendered' and actively involved in the process of their own gendering, as I will argue in part III, where I will also consider some of the many possible kinds of masculinity and femininity.

From the above it is clear that what have been called sex-exclusive and sex-preferential differentiations are in fact ways of *doing gender*. They are part of behaving as 'proper' men and women in particular cultures. If they were genuinely matters of biological sex, they would not display the extraordinary diversity that they do. They would be the same everywhere.

So it would be misleading, and not at all helpful, to conflate sex and gender. Accounts differ, however, over the extent to which differences between the sexes are biologically determined or learned. For instance, there is a good deal of evidence indicating that men tend to be more aggressive than women. There are many more men than women convicted of violent crime. The presence of higher levels of testosterone in men than in women is often used to account for this difference (testosterone is known as the male hormone and is crucial in the development of the male foetus, but it is found in women as well).

The research evidence is far from being conclusive, however. There seems to be a connection between high testosterone levels and aggression, but it certainly is not possible to claim a definite *causal* link between them. That is, we cannot say for sure that testosterone makes people aggressive. After all, there is a lot of research evidence documenting boys' tendency to be more aggressive than girls, even at pre-school age; different levels of aggression between boys and girls cannot be put down to hormone differences, since children's hormone levels are negligible. In fact, there is some research to suggest that it might be the other way around: a person's aggressiveness might cause an increase in their testosterone level. We have a chicken-and-egg situation, in fact. And the problem doesn't end there. What do we mean by aggression anyway? The term is notoriously imprecise (see, for example, the Australian feminist Lynne Segal's account of it being used synonymously with 'dominance' (1994: 182)). It can be used to refer to very different phenomena, from assertiveness in seminars to serial killing.

So, is men's tendency for greater aggression a biological (that is, sexual) characteristic, or is it an aspect of masculine gender and therefore socially constructed? Or is it perhaps both? Well, it is probably best to concede that

people's behaviour patterns come about in an interplay of biology and social practices, so that ultimately it is not really possible to separate the biological from the social. For the record, a causal link between testosterone and aggression has been established in rats and mice, not in humans or other primates. In some primate species, but not all, greater levels of aggression have been found among males than among females. Even where this is the case, there is no need for a biological explanation (Bem 1993: 34–5). As Segal observes:

> The biological alone is . . . never wholly determining of experience and behaviour. For example, all people must eat, but what we eat, how, when and where we eat, the phenomena of vegetarianism, dieting, dietary rules, obesity, anorexia, indeed any human practice or problem surrounding eating cannot even be adequately conceived of, let alone understood, only by talk of biological propensities. (1994: 186)

In making claims about the relation between sex and gender, then, we need to be careful. When gender is mapped onto sex, as it frequently is, there is an implicit assumption that socially determined differences between women and men are natural and inevitable. The confusion of sex and gender has political underpinnings: it often accompanies a reassertion of traditional family roles, or justifications for male privileges. Consider a few examples. Here are some comments I have heard fairly recently. They probably sound all too familiar:

> Women aren't allowed to do what's natural these days. Normal women want to have babies, they want to stay at home, but they can't.
>
> Well, I suppose the boys do dominate in class. Oh, they hog the computers, naturally. No, the girls just aren't interested.
>
> You women always complain. So now it's 'competitive work environments', is it? You get what you want and you're never bloody satisfied. Always whingeing about something. 'Competitive work environments', 'harassment in the workplace' – what a load of crap! Not up to the job, more like.
>
> If you can't take the heat, sweetheart, go back to the kitchen.

And so on. The last one was intended as a witty put-down, of course. (See Spender (1995) for Australian equivalents of the remark about boys in classrooms.) When the distinction between sex and gender is erased, restricted possibilities open to women and girls may be excused as biologically necessary, and received ideas about differences in male and female capacities, needs and desires left unchallenged.

So claiming that sex and gender are essentially the same is a conservative argument. As Ann Oakley has observed, 'in situations of social change, biological explanations may assume the role of an ethical code akin in moral persuasiveness to religion' (1982: 93). An extreme, and hence comical, expression of this in operation was in a magazine article in the late seventies dealing with a perceived threat to humanity in enormous numbers of women choosing the independence of a working wage over domesticity and dependency. The article was headed 'Ambition, stress, power, work – IS IT ALL TURNING WOMEN INTO MEN?' In it a 'top endocrinologist and Professor of Medicine' appealed to women to 'recognize their limits before it's too late' (cited in Kramarae 1981: v–vi). Too late for what, I wonder?

I wish it was always so easy to laugh at, though. There is a popular and influential field of research devoted to reducing human behaviour to biology. Sociobiology and evolutionary psychology try to establish a genetic basis for behaviour. A contribution to this field in the nineties claims to provide evidence that black Americans' relatively poor educational achievement is genetically based (Murray and Herrnstein 1994) – in other words, that black people are genetically inferior. A recent development is a genre of popular science books on 'brain sex' that places 'an extraordinary insistence on locating social pressures in the brain' (Fine 2008: 69). Critics of the genre have called it 'neurosexism'.

Claims about direct biological influences on language are just as contentious. There has been a huge amount of research attempting to establish sex-related differences in brain capacity. It is politically highly sensitive. Disputed claims about cognitive differences are that women are born to be better with language than men, and men are innately better than women with visual and spatial things. There are indeed some slight but fairly well-documented differences (Philips, Steele and Tanz 1987; Halpern 1992):

1 It has been claimed that girls statistically go through the stages of language development a little earlier than boys.
2 Girls have been said to be less likely to have language-related disturbances, such as stuttering and reading difficulties.
3 It has been claimed that the right and left hemispheres of the brains of girls and women tend to be less specialized in function than in boys and men (less lateralized). This means that the speech centres are not so exclusively established in the left hemisphere; women process speech on the right side more than men do. The upshot of this is that if a woman's left hemisphere is injured (through a stroke, for example), she will probably show less impairment of speech than a man would.

Difference 3 is often used to account for 1 and 2. There is a major problem with this, however. We have a chicken-and-egg situation again. How can we assume that the difference in lateralization is innate? Newborn babies don't fit the pattern at all. In fact, some researchers have discovered that *boys'* brains tend to be less lateralized. Environmental influence seems a far more plausible way of accounting for the differences. There is plenty of evidence indicating that boys and girls are spoken to differently. Apparently we talk to baby girls more, for instance. Might this not stimulate greater facility with language? It seems highly likely. To cut a long story short, after vast amounts of research trying to prove fundamental biological differences in the mental capacities of women and men, results have been inconclusive (see Hyde and McKinley 1997). Claims about lateralization, for example, have not been upheld in recent research using modern, non-intrusive methods that have made it possible to examine healthy subjects rather than relying on observation of people who've suffered brain damage (Frost et al. 1999; Knecht et al. 2000).

What intrigues me is that people want to find such differences at all. As British linguist Deborah Cameron has observed, 'studies of "difference" are not just disinterested quests for the truth, but in an unequal society inevitably have a political dimension' (Coates and Cameron 1988: 5–6). More recently, a feminist biologist, Anne Fausto-Sterling, has argued that 'biology is politics by other means' and stresses the need to continue to 'fight our politics through arguments about biology'. In this process, she urges us to never 'lose sight of the fact that our debates about the body's biology are always simultaneously moral, ethical, and political debates about social and political equality and the possibilities for change. Nothing less is at stake' (Fausto-Sterling 2000: 255).

In dealing with learned kinds of activity, such as linguistic interaction, we can only speak with any certainty about gendered behaviour. Linguistic interaction is obviously behaviour which has been learned, and there is little point in trying to account for it by talking about innate qualities. In societies with sex-exclusive differences in language use, choice from among a range of lexicogrammatical options is part of gender performance. The word 'choice' is perhaps not the right one, since the forms for use by women and men are enforced by prescriptive rule. They can be compared with prescriptive rules in English such as 'two negatives make a positive', 'never end a sentence with a preposition' or 'don't say "him and me", say "he and I"'. Speakers are corrected, one way or another, if they produce inappropriate forms. The consequences of transgressing the rules are probably more dire than they would be for an English speaker

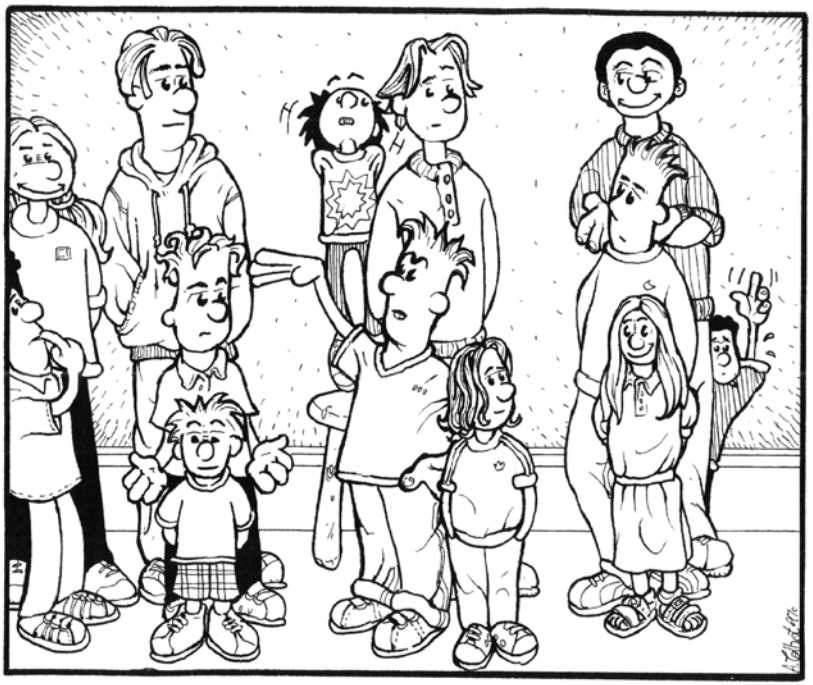
these days, however. Occasionally there are exceptions when speakers are not corrected and suffer as a result, as we know from Fortune's research among the Karajá in Brazil.

Gender, then, is not biological but psycho-social; it should always be considered in the context of social relations between people. The sex/gender distinction has been contested, however, as have other nature/nurture arguments. The next section considers why.

Sex and gender as troublesome dichotomies

A collection on language and gender research opens with the observation that 'Just as we rarely question our ability to breathe, so we rarely question the habit of dividing human beings into two categories: females and males' (Bergvall, Bing and Freed 1996: 1). The authors of this first chapter, American linguists Janet Bing and Victoria Bergvall, go on to consider how human beings need to impose categories and boundaries on experience in order to understand it. This is something very familiar to linguists. Boundaries in our experiences can be quite fuzzy and vague; language puts things into clear-cut categories, imposing boundaries, limits and divisions on reality. Bing and Bergvall observe, for example, that we have the distinct categories of 'day' and 'night', but the actual boundaries between them are indistinct. We cannot identify precisely when it stops being daytime and becomes night. Day and night are bipolar categories that language imposes; the reality is a continuum. Similarly, sociolinguists interested in dialect continua are used to dealing with indistinct boundaries. It can be very difficult to determine where one variety of a dialect or language ends and another begins. The point Bing and Bergvall are making is that a lot of experience is best described as a continuum and bipolar categories are not always accurate.

I have already observed that gender is a continuum. It makes sense to talk about degrees of masculinity and femininity. We can say that one person is more feminine than another. But surely male and female are clear-cut categories, aren't they? Well, usually yes, but not always. It turns out that sex is also a continuum. In the last section I presented the basic determinants of foetal sexual development. Sometimes things happen differently, however. For instance, a foetus with X and Y chromosomes may not receive its crucial dose of the 'male' hormone testosterone at eight weeks. It may not be enough. Or, if enough, it may be at the wrong time. 'Mistakes' like these mean intersexed development of the foetus. Not all individuals are born male or female. Some are born as both, some as



'Right. Tall ones at the back, short ones at the front!'
A drawback of bipolar categories

neither, and some are indeterminate. According to figures cited by Bing and Bergvall, for every 30,000 births there is 1 intersexed infant. Other accounts put the figure very much higher. 'Although the birth of intersexed individuals is not rare', as they observe, 'it *is* unmentionable, even in tabloids that regularly report such outrageous topics as copulation with extraterrestrials and the reappearance of Elvis'. In industrialized societies, the binary distinction between male and female is medically enforced. Exceptions are 'corrected', surgically and with hormone treatment. Since this is the case, it should be no surprise that physicians acknowledge that sex as well as gender is socially constructed (Bing and Bergvall 1996: 8–9).

In some writing on language and gender there is a tendency to treat the social categories of masculine and feminine as bipolar. This is particularly true of work on distinct interactional styles of men and women, especially the popularizing versions (see chapter 5). Such studies put essentialism out through the front door, only to let it in again at the back. That is to say, they do away with biological essentialism, just to replace it with a

kind of social essentialism, which is just as bad. This problem of an obsession with bipolar difference is a theoretical concern that I return to in chapter 6, at the end of part II. Some of the studies presented in parts I and II treat sex/gender as unproblematic, establishing their research objective as identifying differences in linguistic behaviour between members of each bipolar category: men speak like this, women like that. Other studies avoid this, setting out to investigate not so much correlations of language and gender per se as of language and gendered social roles (such as position in a family group). Bing and Bergvall pessimistically predict that, despite our increasing awareness of the problems of gender polarization and stereotyping, 'there will probably be no decline in the number of students who begin their term-paper research with the question, "How is the language of men and women different?" Such questions strengthen deeply held certainties that mere facts cannot dislodge' (1996: 6). I sincerely hope they are mistaken. Refreshingly, a recent textbook includes a section headed 'It's Not about Sex Difference' in each of its chapters dealing with family, education, work, religion and media (DeFrancisco and Palczewski 2007).

But it is not just that sex and gender both need to be seen as continua. Ultimately the distinction between them simply doesn't hold up. The dualism that the sex/gender distinction implies breaks down, when you consider that cultural and environmental factors crucially influence the potential for foetal development even before the moment of conception (in fact, long before, if advisory texts for would-be parents are to be believed). In an article on the formative influence of culture on the development of the human skeleton, Fausto-Sterling convincingly argues that 'our bodies physically imbibe culture' (2005: 1495). 'The sex–gender or nature–nurture accounts of difference', she goes on to say, 'fail to appreciate the degree to which culture is a partner in producing body systems commonly referred to as biology' (2005: 1516). So which comes first: sex or gender? Neither.

There is also another kind of problem with assumed correspondences between sex and gender. In *Female Masculinity*, Judith Halberstam (1998) undermines the assumption that there are inevitable links between maleness and masculinity, or between femaleness and femininity. Her book-length study of 'masculinity without men' has one overarching objective: to render visible the widespread but studiously ignored phenomenon of female masculinity. In doing so, she uncouples masculinity from maleness altogether, challenging the powerful gender ideology that weds 'masculinity to maleness and to power and domination' (1998: 2).