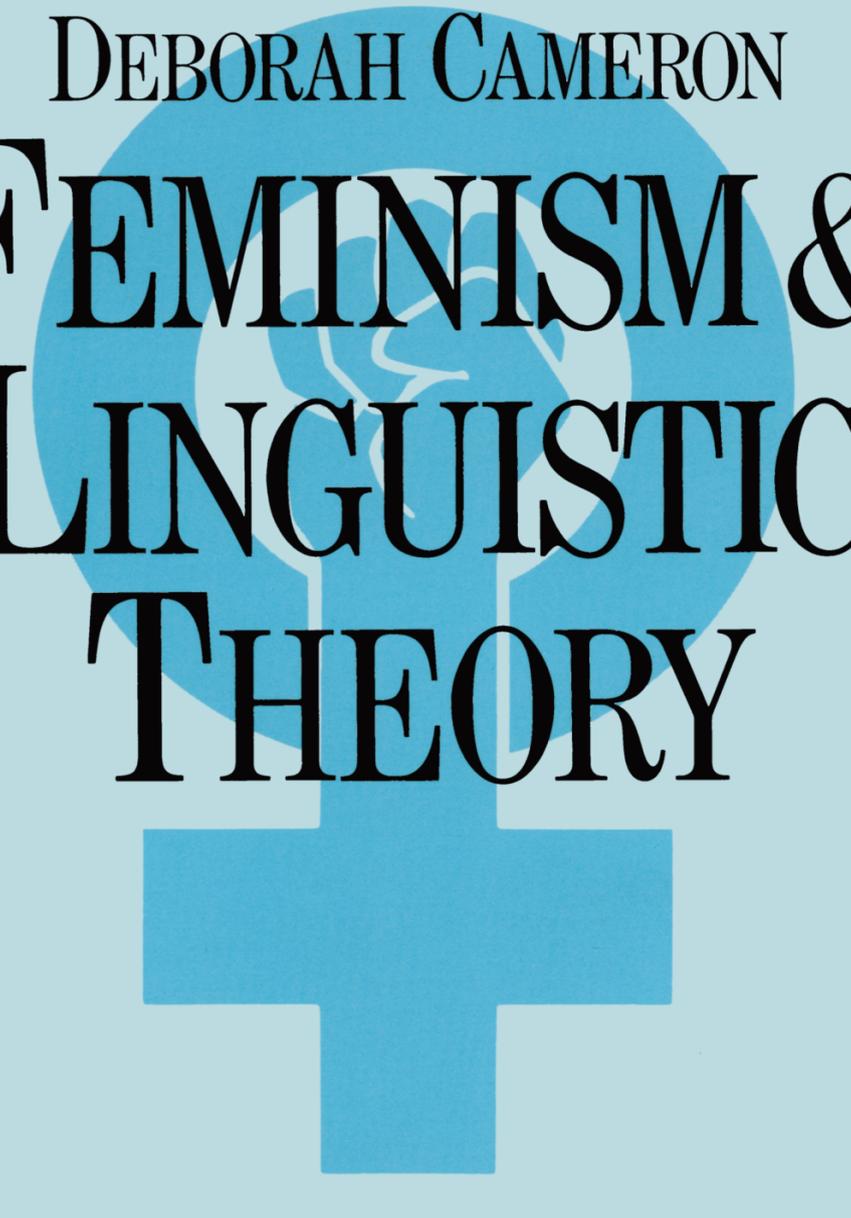


DEBORAH CAMERON

FEMINISM &  
LINGUISTIC  
THEORY



SECOND EDITION

# FEMINISM AND LINGUISTIC THEORY

*Also by Deborah Cameron*

THE FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF LANGUAGE: A Reader  
WOMEN IN THEIR SPEECH COMMUNITIES (*editor with Jennifer Coates*)

# Feminism and Linguistic Theory

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**Second Edition**

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MACMILLAN

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# Preface to the First Edition

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As a feminist academic, I am aware of certain obligations and responsibilities. I am conscious, for instance, that many women have been denied the privilege of higher education. By this I certainly don't mean the chance to imbibe 'wisdom' from 'great minds', nor even the opportunity to develop and discuss ideas, which feminists do anyway. I mean the right to financial support, the right to organise your own time, and the right to use the informational, technical, social and recreational facilities of a college or university. In our society these are privileges indeed, and women get less of a share in them than men.

I also realise that many women consider higher education the very reverse of a privilege. They are only too delighted never to have sold their souls and brains to the repressive patriarchal values of academic institutions.

So my responsibilities are these. First, I must be responsive to the needs and concerns of women outside academic life; and secondly I must challenge the practices and values that keep women outside.

Because of these obligations, I have tried to write this book in a particular way, one that I feel embodies feminist principles. That in itself is a challenge to the status quo; and the essence of the challenge lies in my concern to demystify language and linguistics.

Intellectual mystification occurs when a writer, to put herself in a position of authority, denies the reader sufficient resources to understand and dispute what she says. It can be done in a number of ways.

For example, the writer may leave unexplained and taken for granted the conceptual framework she is working in, or may present it as a given rather than something open to question. Or she may depersonalise herself, hiding behind the spurious authority of an 'objective commentator' by not making it clear where she stands, politically and intellectually, in relation to the ideas she discusses.

In this book, therefore, I have tried to spell out even the most basic assumptions behind the theories I deal with, and to provide

enough background to suggest how they may be called into question themselves. I have been at pains to make clear what my own opinions are, and to present the opinions of others scrupulously. To do this I have used a lot of quotation – which allows my subjects to some extent to speak for themselves – and it is important that the reader scrutinise that quotation carefully.

Another important source of mystification in academic writings is the language used: indeed, it could be said that mystification BY language and mystification OF language are the joint subjects of this book. Writers may prevent readers from dealing with their ideas as anything more than gibberish, or as anything less than received truth, by writing in a way that is incomprehensible. Alternatively, they may be so vague that no clear line of thought emerges. Then, if they are criticised, it is easy for them to claim they have been misinterpreted.

In this book I have attempted a relatively simple style. An important addition to the text is the glossary of linguistic and other technical terms, which the reader should refer to whenever necessary for a concise account of what I mean by using various unfamiliar words.

I have avoided language that conceals the presence of the writer and the process of writing. The word I appears frequently, and at many points I indicate exactly what argument I am trying to put forward. The aim here is to give the reader every opportunity of saying to herself 'hold on a minute, that doesn't follow', or 'but what about x?' or 'I can't accept that'. In other words, the reader is encouraged to be an active maker of her own ideas in relation to this book, and not simply a passive consumer of other people's.

I have also avoided offensive and sexist language, replacing it either with 'neutral' terminology or, more often, with terms that draw attention to the existence of women. Most sex-indefinite and generic referents in this book will be *she* and *her*. If there are any men reading who feel uneasy about being excluded, or not addressed, they may care to consider that women get this feeling within minutes of opening the vast majority of books, and to reflect on the effect it has.

Finally, I acknowledge that I did write this book unaided: many groups and individuals contributed to it in different ways. Some of them participated in discussions of language and sex; some showed me their work, or shared information and experiences they thought might be useful; some read and commented on the typescript; some

gave me encouragement and support while I was writing it. One particular group, my students, helped me by obliging me to concentrate on the basics of linguistic theory and to work out the best ways of explaining them.

I would like to thank the following in particular: participants in the first WAVAW conference workshop on language and violence; members of Balliol College Women's Group, Pembroke College Women's Group, Oxford University Women in Politics seminar and Oxford Rape Crisis Group; Kate Cameron, Tony Crowley, Liz Frazer, Ian Griffiths, Roy Harris, Caroline Henton, Rebecca Hiscock, Radhika Holmström, Bob Hoyle, Helen Lawrence, Toril Moi, Peter Mühlhäusler, M. Nawaz, Elizabeth Powell-Jones and Marni Stanley.

DEBORAH CAMERON

# Preface to the Second Edition

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Is it too soon for a revised edition of a book that first appeared as recently as 1985? How quickly a book dates depends on developments in its field; the state of the art in language and gender studies has grown and changed so much over the last few years, if there is still a place for a critical survey, that survey must stand in need of fairly substantial revision.

Readers familiar with the original *Feminism and Linguistic Theory* will find the revised edition both similar and different. The overall structure and argument is virtually unchanged, and I have tried to keep the relatively accessible style of the original. There are, however, a number of additions, reflecting the greater diversity and scope of feminist language studies today. The most notable of these are an extra chapter on male/female differences in linguistic behaviour, an updated and extended discussion of sexist language and linguistic reform and a new section on postmodernism. Some material from the original has been expanded or reorganised to make it clearer (hindsight being a major aid to clarity), and I have also taken the opportunity of correcting errors and clarifying obscurities.

In making these revisions I have tried to respond to the concerns and interests expressed by readers. I am extremely grateful to all those who have written to me; some of their comments (and the comments of reviewers) have been incorporated in the revised text. This is one of the bonuses of revising a book, as opposed to writing it the first time: instead of constructing an imaginary audience, you can engage in dialogue with a real one.

Of course, you also find that you are in dialogue with your (former) self, and this presents an interesting problem. If I disagree with the earlier Deborah Cameron, should I preserve coherence by pretending I don't, disown her views completely or argue with her in the text? I have chosen after considerable thought to make occasional use of the last strategy, and I hope new readers will not find it merely tedious and self-regarding. To deny that I have changed is a mystification: I would rather make clear how and why I have changed.

Finally, the writer of an avowedly feminist book is always in dialogue with the political movement that sustains her. Feminism has moved on since I first wrote this book, and in particular it has moved toward greater awareness of diversity and difference among women. The implications of this are profound. Whatever topic they are addressing, feminists today have a responsibility to acknowledge diversity in the way they write (for example, the pronoun 'we' can no longer be used unproblematically. Who are 'we'?) I have tried to move in this direction throughout the revised text.

I will end this preface as I ended the original, by thanking the many people who have contributed to my work in various ways. For helpful reviews or extended comment in print and correspondence, I thank Margaret Deuchar, Tony Holiday, Jennifer Hornsby, Cheri Kramarae, Sara Mills and Trevor Pateman. For sharing their work and making space for discussions of mine I am indebted to Meryl Altman, Mira Ariel, Isobel Armstrong, Tove Bull and Toril Swan, Jennifer Coates, Bronwyn Davies, Liz Frazer, Anjuli Gupta, Penelope Harvey, Caroline Henton, Colleen Kennedy, London Linguistics and Politics group and Momoko Nakamura.

Much of the work for this edition was undertaken while I was visiting the College of William and Mary in Virginia from 1988 to 1990. I am grateful to Roehampton Institute for allowing me to go, and in particular to Karen Atkinson and Linda Thomas for making my absence a practical proposition. Students in my language and gender seminars at William and Mary provided a stimulating environment for revising the book, while the friendship and support of my US colleagues Ann Reed, Janine Scancarelli and Talbot Taylor were crucial in making my visit a happy and productive one.

DEBORAH CAMERON

# 1

## Introduction: Language and Feminism

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### INTRODUCTION

The question of language and its political implications has exercised writers, philosophers and social theorists throughout the intellectual history of western civilisation. It is noticeable, too, that the subject has inspired extreme pessimism: from ancient Greece to Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, speech and writing have been credited with a malign power to regulate human social relations in ways we are not aware of and to disguise important truths in a cloud of misleading rhetoric. Today's speakers inherit the idea that language is a weapon, used by the powerful to oppress and silence their subordinates; nor is this belief unjustified. But why should language, and knowledge about language, be a resource for the powerful alone? Why shouldn't this 'weapon' be appropriated by the other side?

Feminists have constantly asked this question, addressing it in various ways. For instance, at the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, a landmark event in American feminism, delegates adopted a resolution protesting the contemporary restrictions on women's public speech. John Stuart Mill, a British supporter of women's rights, raised the question of generic masculine pronouns more than a hundred years ago. In the early part of this century, modernist women writers like Virginia Woolf and Dorothy Richardson debated the question of the 'woman's sentence', searching for a literary language that would fit the female experience they sought to express. In the present wave of feminist activity, now more than twenty years old, women have returned to these same questions even more insistently, as we shall see. Clearly feminists do not consider language a side-issue or a luxury, but an essential part of the struggle for liberation.

The attitude of the outside world is rather different however. Just after I had written the original version of this book, I was asked at a job interview about its title, *Feminism and Linguistic Theory*: 'But surely', said the puzzled (male) professor, 'that's like writing a book about linguistics and organic gardening?'. I didn't get the job.

I mention this because it illustrates two attitudes common in Britain, and perhaps elsewhere. One is the equation of feminism itself with personal eccentricity and crankishness rather than politics. I suspect that a book called *Marxism and Linguistic Theory*, say, would not have seemed so puzzling, even to a non-Marxist. Like George Orwell, my questioner placed feminism in the same category as free love, vegetarianism and sandal-wearing. The other reaction, more relevant perhaps, certainly less confined to the outer fringes of anti-feminism, is an inability to see how feminism and linguistic theory could be interconnected. My connecting them was taken as paradoxical, like the old joke about the phrase 'military intelligence'.

I imagine that readers of this book will not perceive feminism in itself as eccentric. But they may with good reason be puzzled as to the precise connection between it and linguistic theory; they may also be sceptical about the significance of any such connection.

In the ten years since I first began work in this field, I have noticed again and again that feminist concerns with language at the level of practice – for instance, demands that titles like *chairman* and so on be avoided – are specifically targeted by anti-feminists as the ultimate example of feminists wasting time on things that aren't important. We are urged to get on and fight the 'real' injustices, instead of worrying about mere trivial words. One answer to this is to point out that it's not a choice: we can demand equal pay and nonsexist language too. Another is to explain why language is important in its own right. The more we hear anti-feminists bleating that language is 'trivial' or a diversion from 'the real issues', the more we may suspect they are protesting too much: perhaps the issue of language has an extraordinary subterranean importance for those critics who deride feminist concern with it.

As a matter of fact, it was just this suspicion that impelled me to start taking an interest in feminist linguistics. Trained as a linguist, active in feminist politics, for several years I resisted making any connection. I didn't work on language and gender, and this was a conscious decision, reflecting the fact that the field had little prestige. But when public argument broke out between linguists and feminists

in the wake of Dale Spender's book *Man Made Language*, the patent anxiety and hostility of the 'experts' made me think again. The result was *Feminism and Linguistic Theory*. In researching it I came to appreciate why feminism and theories of language do indeed go together.

The nature of any connection that is made between them can easily be misunderstood, and there is one common misunderstanding in particular that needs briefly to be addressed. The questioner who found my work so puzzling was groping, however ineptly, toward a question of some importance. Can any and every discipline support a distinctive feminist approach? Is there no limit to the kinds of phenomena feminists can theorise about?

If my interviewer had been thinking more clearly, he might have raised not the spectre of organic gardening but the issue of the natural sciences. Arguably there is no such thing as a 'feminist physics' or a 'women's chemistry', because the phenomena those sciences theorise have nothing to do with gender. Feminist literary critics might propose an alternative canon, but feminist scientists do not waste their time constructing alternative theories of relativity or a new periodic table of the elements. If linguistics is a science, does the same consideration not apply to 'feminist linguistic theory'?

The answer depends on how you define 'linguistics' and 'science' – both matters of some debate as we shall see in Chapter 2. Certainly there are areas in the study of language where feminism is unlikely to make much difference: it's hard to imagine a feminist account of Gaelic vowel mutation or a women's phonetic alphabet, for instance. But many aspects of linguistics are concerned with meaning and social action; they are as amenable to a feminist approach as literary criticism, sociology and history.

But in any case, there is more to an academic discipline than its subject matter. There may not be a feminist science, but there is a feminist critique of science. Even if the object of scientific study is ungendered, science itself is a human activity, a discourse: the assumptions and procedures that organise it are human constructions, and feminists would claim that they are gendered through and through.

Having clarified this important point about what it means to call an area of study 'feminist', we may now go on to examine some more specific concerns to do with feminism and linguistic theory.

## FEMINISM

First, it is necessary to say something about feminism. As I shall argue later, this term does not have any one agreed meaning that could be formulated as a set of beliefs, and it probably never did have, despite all protestations to the contrary. There are many feminisms: but all are informed by certain shared concerns.

At a political level, feminism is a movement for the full humanity of women. Notice I do not say 'women's rights', or even 'equality' (cf the writing on the lavatory wall: 'women who want to be equal lack ambition'). Equality presupposes a standard to which one is equal: in this case, the implied standard is men. Feminists are ultimately in pursuit of a more radical change, the creation of a world in which one gender does not set the standard of human value. Even the most moderate 'liberal' feminist, who has as her main goal the free entry of women to traditionally male domains, will sometimes express doubt as to whether our current values and yardsticks of success are really ideal for anyone, male or female.

Of course women must as a precondition to any wholesale change in values be liberated from their present subordinate position with its multiple restrictions, exclusions and oppressions (such as relative poverty, economic dependence, sexual exploitation and vulnerability to violence, poorer health, overwork, lack of civil and legal rights – the list goes on and on). But the transformation that will result from this liberation is envisaged as a profound one, affecting the whole of humanity.

As an intellectual approach, feminism seeks to understand how current relations between women and men are constructed – and we take it they *are* constructed, rather than natural – and in the light of this understanding, how they can be changed. This project involves several interrelated activities.

One is to try to *describe* the conditions of women's lives, now and in the past – a topic conspicuously not addressed, or else poorly addressed, in traditional scholarship. Women's lives and achievements need to be put (back) in the picture. Another is to *theorise* – give an explanation of – those conditions. Here feminists have inevitably paid attention to the differences between women and men. If they are not natural but constructed, how are they constructed? If they tend to subordinate women to men, how and why does that happen?

Feminist theory has advanced various accounts and examined the influence of a number of factors. An example is the sexual division of labour, present to some degree in all known societies, in which some tasks are women's and others are men's. Men's work is economically and socially valued; women's usually is not. (The societies which most closely approach sexual equality seem to be those in which women control their own production, and men need the things they produce.) Some feminists have looked particularly at women's obligation to do domestic work and childcare, suggesting that mothering, apart from its role in restricting women economically, may have consequences for the psychology of women and their children, reproducing the cycle whereby women mother and men do not.

Other feminists have considered the role of sexuality – that is, socially mediated sexual practice – in restricting and oppressing women. Sexual violence against women is widely practised and frequently condoned; at the same time a double standard denies women full expression as active sexual beings themselves. And there is also a good deal of feminist work emphasising the importance of cultural representations of gender – men and women as they appear (or in the case of women, don't appear) in stories, pictures, textbooks, scholarly articles, and so on – in forming the identities of real women and men, their notions of masculinity and femininity, their expectations of what is possible and their ideas of what is normal.

The question of language and its workings can enter into this feminist project of description and explanation in a number of ways. I want now to point out several reasons for feminists concerning themselves with language, exemplified by the recent history of feminism (especially in contemporary Britain and north America).

## FEMINISM, LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTIC THEORY

### **Images of women: the critique of representation**

One of the ways a concern with language entered contemporary feminism was through the preoccupation of the early second wave (in the late 1960s and early 1970s) with 'images of women', that is, representations. Some of the most striking feminist actions and texts

of the period – actions like the famous protests against beauty contests, and texts like Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*<sup>1</sup> – took as their point of departure a strong objection to the ways in which women were portrayed in cultural products. Right up to the present, this strain in feminism has remained strong. Literature, children's reading books, advertising and the media generally receive critical attention from feminists.

Language too is a medium of representation, and not surprisingly the sexism of many conventional usages was challenged by feminists early on. (Though I shall stick to talking about the English language here, the challenge to sexist language could and still can be found among speakers of many languages, including French, German, Dutch, Italian and Japanese.) Usages were thought to be in need of reform if they were blatantly offensive ('Blonde in fatal car crash'; 'bitches wear furs') or else androcentric, implying that the norm of humanity is male ('Man', 'mankind', 'man in the street', and so on). Reform usually meant avoiding offensive expressions and recasting androcentric ones so they became neutral (thus 'mankind' becomes 'humanity' and so on). This 'nonsexist language' was endorsed by a major publisher, McGraw Hill, as early as 1973, and has continued to make inroads into many people's speech and writing.

This was a concern about *language*, but it implicitly depended on a theory of how language works, a linguistic theory. Early feminist analyses of language generally rested (to some extent they still do) on the notion of 'conditioning': if you are exposed repeatedly to stereotypes and distortions, you will come to believe them and take them for granted. In the case of language, it seems important in retrospect that feminists were able to draw on a strong tradition of thought making similar arguments, though for different purposes. The idea that language is abused by the powerful to conceal or distort the truth appears throughout the Western intellectual tradition. As we shall see in Chapter 6, both feminist and anti-feminist thinkers have made use of this tradition.

Feminists also became interested in reviving theories from pre-war anthropology: theories which suggest that language strongly affects and maybe even determines one's view of the world. This claim of 'linguistic determinism', which I examine in Chapter 7, led feminist writers such as Dale Spender by the end of the 1970s to extend the analysis of sexist language from a few problematic or offensive expressions to the entire apparatus of language in general.

## The personal is political: language in feminist practice

Although it is slightly artificial to separate things out as I am doing here, since feminist concerns were always overlapping parts of a varied whole, it can be argued that feminists of the 1960s and 1970s had other reasons to be concerned with the workings of language apart from the sexist representations that surrounded them. Language was central to feminist practice, and the problems this raised led many feminists to look for some kind of linguistic theory.

One of the most fundamental and most innovative feminist political activities of the time, consciousness raising (CR), was essentially a linguistic practice in which women talked to one another about their experiences. The idea behind CR is that when women come together to articulate personal experience they will discover common threads and come to perceive what they had thought of as personal problems and inadequacies to be shared conditions determined by social structures. This is the meaning of the famous feminist slogan 'the personal is political'.

Women who have spent time in CR groups often emphasise that the process requires them to pay close attention to language and to find new ways of talking about things. It is liberating to be able to put into words experiences which had previously seemed nebulous and vague, or else shameful and unmentionable; it is empowering to find other women sharing, understanding and collectively reinterpreting such experiences.

Many feminist writers have referred to this communication of experience as *naming*, but in fact a name, a linguistic label, is not always necessary. Sometimes one is coined – *sexism* for example – but at other times it is enough to define an experience by describing it and getting others to acknowledge it. There is still no one word for Betty Friedan's 'problem without a name' (the malaise of middle-class suburban housewives with no role outside the domestic sphere), but we now know what it is.<sup>2</sup> Language has dispelled its apparent nonexistence not by naming it but by communicating it.

The need to communicate, to bridge the gap between women, is a constant theme of feminist writing, reflected very often in the titles of books or poems: *Silences, Lies, Secrets and Silence, Finding a Voice, Unlearning to not Speak*.<sup>3</sup> Silence is a symbol of oppression, while liberation is speaking out, making contact. The contact is what matters: a woman who lies or who is silent may not lack a language, but she does not communicate.

In 1990, when at least some element of feminist discourse is part of most people's repertoire (regardless of their politics: recently I heard a religious conservative speaking against the lambda craze use the argument that the dance 'objectified women'), it is easy to forget – but necessary to bear in mind – that twenty years ago feminism had to create this whole new way of communicating, since the appropriate language did not then exist. Yet the creation of a new language engendered its own dissatisfactions.

Women struggling to reinterpret the world have noted that language does not in itself guarantee communication, and that words are often inadequate. As one woman, hailing the publication of Dale Spender's *Man Made Language* wrote:

Sometimes when I am talking to people I really feel at a loss for words. I have this idea in my head and a feeling I want to express and I just can't get it out. I have felt like this for years and I have never been able to understand why.... A vast number of the words I use all the time to describe my experience are not really describing it at all.<sup>4</sup>

What this woman is describing has been called women's *alienation* from language. It is an uneasy feeling that your words are not yours at all – they have been somehow co-opted or taken away and turned against you. The feminist view of language has something in common with the feminist view of sexuality: it is a powerful resource that the oppressor has appropriated, giving back only the shadow which women need to function in a patriarchal society. From this point of view it is crucial to reclaim language for women.

Again, this kind of practical concern with language – how can women say what they really mean? – has an implicit theory behind it. The writings of Dale Spender, and other women (notably Mary Daly and Adrienne Rich) put that theory explicitly on the agenda for discussion by grassroots' activists.

CR and other feminist activities had the additional effect of pointing up certain differences between talk in the 'safe space' women were creating for themselves and talk in the wider world dominated by men. US feminists like Robin Morgan and Marge Piercy have written for example of their dissatisfaction with the aggressive and jargon-heavy style used on the New Left. When I was a graduate student I remember feeling a gap, a dissonance between the way conversation was conducted in women's groups

and the way I was expected to talk in the academic seminars where I spent my working time. The seminars started to seem like intellectual duels in which the best 'man' won – and I was training myself explicitly to compete on those terms. I noticed too that some women were either unable or unwilling to compete: often they were silenced.

I wouldn't claim, of course, that this experience was universal or even widely shared. But for me at least, and I think for others too, it fed a developing interest in the notion that men and women might have different ways of talking, and that women might be disadvantaged or alienated by the routine imposition of male norms. Again, it seemed that a problem of practice – how do we avoid being silenced? Adopt 'their' tactics or try to change the rules? – led to an interest in linguistic theory: were there really differences, and if so, how did they arise and what did they mean?

### **Feminism(s)/postmodernism: signs of things to come**

So far, I have been talking about pressures to look at language which arose, roughly, during the late 1960s and 1970s. And although once again I must stress that divisions are artificial, that they tidy up what was/is really an untidy picture of an unfolding political and intellectual movement, I want now to say something about the developments of the 1980s, that is, since I wrote the first version of *Feminism and Linguistic Theory*.

Many of these 'developments' were in fact present in some feminist thinking much earlier than 1980. (Nor have they simply replaced what preceded them – everything said so far remains relevant to feminist theorising about language.) But in the 1970s, the new currents were most strongly felt within academic circles, whereas in the 1980s I think it is fair to say that these currents have exerted a pull on feminism more generally. They have led to a different way of thinking about gender and to a further emphasis on the importance of language and linguistic theory.

I am referring here to the intersection between feminism and a current of thought we can loosely call 'postmodernist'. The term *postmodernism* is used to refer to many things: a stage of history or capitalism (allegedly beginning some time in the 1970s), but also the ways of thinking and the forms of art or culture that reflect this new stage. Theorists who use the term (and it is disputed) suggest that we are now living in a world radically different from anything

known before. Although I do not want to embark on a listing of all the things that have been claimed to characterise postmodernity as a historical phenomenon, I will pick out some of those that are mentioned very frequently.

One is a telescoping or compression of time and space. Communications technology has made the world much smaller and the places in it much more alike. (Think for example of the global proliferation of McDonald's hamburger restaurants.) At the same time, new styles, fashions, ideas and so forth are being produced at a furious rate, and also endlessly recycled: styles from different periods and places are often mixed together in a kind of collage, and this characteristic of mass-produced popular culture has deeply influenced 'serious' art, blurring cultural boundaries.

The speed up is made possible by technology, but the underlying reason for it is the capitalist drive for profit. Styles, images and ideas are the new commodities of the postmodern world – we are now producing and consuming items like computer games and music videos rather than, say, steel girders. Even basic commodities like food and clothing (think of cereal, or jeans) are sold, nowadays, in terms of the lifestyle they connote rather than their mere functional utility. And the ideas of theory and politics have also become commodified, to be advertised and sold in the market like cereal and jeans. Ronald Reagan and the environment (to name two recent examples) are also images; ultimately they are products.

If it is true that we are living in a postmodern world characterised by a speed-up in time, a compression of space and a proliferation of messages and images constantly bombarding us, we might expect this to have effects on the kind of people we are and the kinds of thinking we find relevant to our condition. Philosophers of postmodernism argue that we need new theories for new times; the old theories (for example Western humanism or classical Marxism) no longer speak to our complex, fragmented reality.

A postmodernist worldview distinguishes itself from traditional philosophical assumptions with their roots in the Western 'enlightenment' of the eighteenth century. The most important of those traditional assumptions is that by using our innate faculties of reason, human beings can come to know the truth about the world and themselves. If you want to persuade someone that some claim you make is true, you appeal to their reason with the associated standards of logic, evidence and proof.

Postmodernism questions this familiar and comforting idea that there is some truth which we can 'know'. Postmodernist philosophers point out, for example, that claims to truth, however rationally argued, rarely rest on pure rationality but depend crucially on the authority of those who make the claim. The enlightenment world has believed many claims later rejected as biased or ludicrous – that Africans are less evolved than Europeans, for instance – because they were backed by the authority of science. But claims like this always arise within a belief-system whose validity is accepted beforehand. In relation to the system they seem obvious and unchallengeable. Take away or modify this invisible support system and it becomes impossible to see them as justified. Postmodernist treatments of science, which is the enlightenment's most privileged way of knowing, suggest that no phenomenon can be observed objectively, the description uninfluenced by the standpoint of the observer.

Another thing postmodernism questions is the status of the person or 'subject' who 'has' knowledge and reason. We tend to think of ourselves as stable entities with relatively fixed personalities and consistent opinions, arrived at by rational means. Postmodernist thinking doubts this, denying that the self is either stable or coherent.

Psychoanalysis is an important reference point for this sort of doubt, which becomes all the more intense under contemporary conditions of extreme fragmentation. Freud theorised that all human subjects are motivated by unconscious desires which are not rational, not consistent and not accessible to the conscious and reasonable processes of self-reflection. Sometimes this becomes manifest in a problem: for instance, when someone develops an irresistible compulsion to do something repeatedly, like wash her hands or eat everything in the house, and is unable to understand why she behaves in this bizarre way. Most of us, unplagued by this sort of problem, can more easily ignore the unconscious, irrational components of our selves: but they are there nevertheless.

Why should this way of thinking have proved attractive to some feminists? There are in fact many reasons for feminists to deplore the new developments: the postmodern form of capitalism intensifies the exploitation of women workers, and the commodification of political ideas trivialises feminism itself ('You've come a long way, baby', as the cigarette ad proclaims). Jane Flax points out that even postmodernist philosophy – as opposed to the phenomena it theorises about – isn't entirely attractive and some

feminists find it threatening.<sup>5</sup> Women (and other oppressed groups) want to experience themselves as rational and coherent subjects. They want to be able to present feminist ideas as reasonable, objective and true. But the strength of postmodernism is that it offers an explanation for why this has been so difficult and beyond a certain point, ineffective.

Feminists criticise Great (white male) Thinkers for giving us accounts of 'human experience' (presented as rational, objective and true) which 'make sense' only in so far as they actually exclude the experience of women and other oppressed groups. If women, accepting this criticism of existing accounts, now try to provide a competing account from the standpoint of their own experience, they are going to be caught up in a number of problems and paradoxes.

First of all, since women lack the power and authority of men, their competing claim to truth will lose. This we know from experience as well as theory; feminism *isn't* seen as objective and true, whereas the equally (but covertly) gender-specific masculinist account *is*. This supports the postmodernist claim that truth is relative to power.

Secondly, it is problematic for feminists to present their competing account as universal, like its rival, an account of human experience, only this time without the male bias. For how can it be universal? If the male theory's claim to universality is vitiated by the gender standpoint of the theorists, men, the same must be true of any female counterpart. That is why some feminists embrace postmodernism, acknowledging their gendered standpoint and criticising all assertions of neutrality as illusory, wherever they come from.

Thirdly – and this has been crucial for recent feminist politics – there is a danger that in constructing the competing account, women will replicate men's exclusion of women in a different form: some women – the most privileged – will universalise their own experience as 'women's experience', and this will be false for other groups of women. During the 1980s such excluded groups of women – Black and other minority ethnic women in the West, Third World and non-Western women, working class women, older women, lesbians, women with disabilities – drew increasing attention to the dangers of generalising about women, and to the reality of diversity, difference and conflict within the category 'women'.

This point has been well taken in politics and theory: it is common, now, for us to talk of 'feminisms' rather than feminism, of many standpoints and experiences rather than one. Though feminists continue, of course, to be interested in the construction of gender, the nature of gender relations, the reasons for women's oppression and the best strategies for ending it, many have stopped looking for any single, overall cause, like the division of labour, patterns of childrearing, practices of sexuality or cultural representations. All these things are relevant and many more as well, since gender interacts with other social divisions such as those of race, ethnicity, class, age and so on. In this refusal to construct universalised accounts, feminism as a political movement seems to be drawing closer to postmodernism as an intellectual current.

What has any of this to do with language and linguistic theory? One connection lies in the idea that postmodern societies are characterised by the incessant production of messages, images and signs. To understand society therefore entails learning how to 'read' its cultural codes, its languages. A feminist critic might want to examine how the meaning of gender is constructed and reconstructed in the codes of, say, fashion, or advertisements or popular music. This is rather like a continuation of the feminist concern with images of women: but it occurs within a different theoretical framework. For as Jane Flax points out, postmodern philosophy questions not only the status of truth, reason and identity but also the status of language. According to enlightenment thinking, language is a transparent medium which simply names (or for early feminist critics, reflects) a world existing outside of language. It is a way to bring a prior reality into consciousness. Postmodernism takes a very different view.

As I have already observed, some feminists of the early second wave made the radical move of asking from whose point of view and according to whose reality this naming of the world had been done: the answer was, from men's. More radically still, feminists like Dale Spender proposed that there is no reality outside its linguistic representation. The language you use affects what you perceive as real.

Though it comes by way of a different theoretical route, postmodernism would endorse this general approach to language. Indeed it would go further: prompted once again by the insights of psychoanalysis, it suggests that language is not only not neutral, it is also not totally in our conscious control. We ourselves are created

and structured as social beings by learning a language. As some theorists have put this, language 'speaks us'.

For feminists, the interesting implication of this idea is that language may 'speak' men and women (more technically, masculine and feminine subjects) differently. One crucial aspect of a person's gender might be their relation to language. Some feminist theorists have suggested that 'femininity' means in a sense being outside language or marginal to it. This might explain the alienation of many women from prevailing forms of (rational, unified) discourse. It might suggest, too, the necessity for women to create new ways of using language. Others argue that our language, like everything else, has become so fragmented that we cannot talk in these abstract terms ('language', 'women', 'femininity'); we need a less global, less Utopian feminist account of language.

These feminist/postmodernist ideas will be discussed in Chapter 8. They are, of course, complex and often difficult to understand. One particular difficulty is the large number of intimidating labels associated with them and with their history: not only postmodernism itself, but also 'structuralism' and 'post-structuralism', 'semiotics', or even just 'theory', as if there were no other kind.

When I first wrote this book, I chose to put this current of thought under yet another heading, 'semiology', and I have sometimes been asked why. As some readers have pointed out, this term is not normally used by the writers I discuss. For me that is part of the point, however, because what I want to talk about is not the theories of some well-defined school but a set of ideas connected by their common dependence – from a linguistic point of view – on concepts introduced in the early 1900s by the linguistic theorist Ferdinand de Saussure.

Saussure used the term *semiology* to mean 'the study of sign-systems'. Language is a prime example of a sign system, but semiology has also been used to analyse other human representational practices like myths and folktales, films and fashion, literary texts, and so on. Contemporary psychoanalysis studies the unconscious as a system of signs – metaphorically, as a language. All these enterprises could be bracketed under Saussure's term, semiology. That term is useful because it is much more general than structuralism or post-structuralism. I will examine it more closely in Chapter 2.

Although semiology seemed to me a reasonable umbrella term for the psychoanalytically-oriented feminist approaches I examined in

the original version of this book, and will be used for these approaches in this revised version too, it is not so reasonable to apply the term semiology to the new forms of feminist postmodernism. The two perspectives share certain assumptions, overlap in certain ways, but postmodernism is a great deal more than a development of Saussure. Sign systems are only a part, not the whole, of what interests postmodernists. I will try to make clear both the similarities and the differences between a postmodernist perspective and what I am calling semiology when I discuss feminist versions of each in Chapter 8.

#### FEMINISM/LINGUISTICS: DIALOGUE AND DEBATE

Having surveyed these various angles from which feminists come at the question of language, I should now try to clarify my own aims in writing a book about feminism and linguistic theory. In the original version of the book, I began this part of the introduction by remarking on the diversity of feminist approaches and saying,

Yet in this accumulating literature there is a diversity of approach and viewpoint which I find something of a problem. What common ground is there between, say, the sociolinguist's statistical analysis of sex differences, the reformists' prescriptions for eliminating sexism in everyday usage and the radical call for a revolution in language which will liberate us all? Are they addressing the same question? What questions should they be addressing? If their conclusions differ, are they all equally valid? What, in short, is the state of the art?

In a review, the feminist linguist and speech communication scholar Cheri Kramarae confessed she could not understand why diversity caused me this anxiety.<sup>6</sup> Why did I want feminists to agree on a linguistic theory, or even on the terms in which we might formulate a range of theories?

I acknowledge now that Cheri Kramarae had a point. Today I am less insistent that we all should 'come to terms'. But I still think it is useful to clarify the differences between approaches, and indeed to write a book in which a range of approaches are examined. It continues to worry me that most students of language and feminism encounter only one approach, the one that is the paradigm for their

particular academic discipline. Literature students read what I'm calling semiology, but not sociolinguistics (which they are encouraged to deride as unsophisticated empiricism); for linguistics students matters are exactly the other way around, and they read sociolinguistics but not semiology (which they in their turn deride as unscientific).

This is a recipe for ignorance and narrow-mindedness, and to my mind it does neither camp any good. By accepting one frame of reference in isolation from any others, you effectively render yourself unable to perceive its problems, and consequently powerless to address them in novel and interesting ways. So the primary aim of this book is still to make possible dialogue and debate – not in order to impose theoretical uniformity but explicitly as a challenge to it.

The second aim I put forward originally was to challenge what I saw as an emerging feminist orthodoxy about language – one I did not agree with. Now, I would have to say orthodoxies, plural: the consensus has become less consensual. It remains true, though, that I do not entirely agree with any of the approaches I discuss, and that I have an agenda of my own. The examination of feminist linguistic theories in this book is intentionally a critical one (in the non-pejorative sense of 'critical' – I want to raise certain problems without denying that the work has value or that I owe a good deal to it). This critical perspective makes space for my own views, which I also aim to make clear.

My third stated aim was to attempt a critique of academic linguistics. I have felt no obligation to modify this in the light of more recent developments. Apart from the appearance of a few studies which treat sex differences in speech more fully and less stereotypically than usual, there is little to report in the way of a linguistics informed by feminist concerns. I therefore repeat what I said before: that my aim is not only to point out sexist assumptions and practices, important as that is, but to question the whole scholarly/objective basis of linguistics and to show how the assumptions and practices of linguists are implicated in patriarchal ideology and oppression.

This book, then, is addressed to women who seek a broader background of information and analysis on the nature of language and its relation to women's lives. In it they will find an introduction to linguistic theory itself (Chapter 2), a critical account of studies dealing with male/female linguistic differences (Chapters 3 and 4), a

consideration of the 'sexist language' issue (Chapters 5 and 6) which develops into a more abstract discussion of the relation between language and reality, with an account of some feminist theories (Chapters 7 and 8), an attempt at an alternative theory (mine, Chapter 9) and a conclusion assessing the prospects for feminist linguistic theory and practice (Chapter 10).

It is inevitable that the feminist debate about language should become ever more complex and difficult for non-specialists to evaluate. The challenge is to keep the discussion accessible without glossing over the theoretical problems involved. In this revised edition of *Feminism and Linguistic Theory* I have once again attempted to meet that challenge.

# 2

## Linguistic Theory: Frameworks and Approaches

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### INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1 introduced a number of ideas about feminism and linguistic theory, and traced various angles of approach to the questions those ideas raise. Though I talked about the need for a linguistic theory, I did not define what a linguistic theory was nor give any details of particular linguistic theories. That will be the project of this chapter.

Most work dealing with language and gender assumes *one* theory of language. Scholarly work on sex differences, for example, usually draws on mainstream linguistics and the subsidiary theory of variation in language that goes by the name of sociolinguistics. By contrast, much recent work on women's writing – that is, literary scholarship – assumes a different model of language, essentially a semiological one. Writers choose their perspective and stick to it, without in most cases paying much attention to the alternatives.

This book does not assume or imply that there is only one model of language. On the contrary, one of its aims is to survey the whole range of theorising that informs current feminist work. I will therefore define linguistic theory very broadly, and certainly much more broadly than most of my colleagues trained as linguists would want to do: in my view, any systematic approach to the nature and workings of language qualifies as a linguistic theory, whatever discipline it comes from. Moreover it is not my opinion that any one theory is necessarily right while all the others are wrong. A theory's success is always relative to its aims, and different theories may prove fruitful in different ways. All of them, of course, may also be criticised, most notably for falling short of the objectives they set themselves.

In this chapter I will try to explain some of the basic tenets of certain influential theories. Without this kind of background, the

reader unfamiliar with linguistics and semiology will find it difficult to follow the more critical discussion of feminist linguistic theories later on. But it is very important that the reader keep in mind we are dealing with contested terms. Even within a single discipline – linguistics, say – there is lively debate on what the aims of a theory should be and how it should seek to fulfill them. Even the term ‘language’ – the phenomenon being theorised in a linguistic theory – does not have one straightforward, agreed-on definition.

### LINGUISTICS: BASIC PRINCIPLES

At this point in history, linguistics (usually defined as ‘the scientific study of language’) claims a privileged place among the disciplines which study language. It is the term ‘scientific’ that distinguishes linguistics from other ways of studying language. Although language has been studied for around 2500 years in the guise of grammar (how to use it correctly), rhetoric (how to use it persuasively), poetics (how it is used in literature), and for more than 100 years by philologists who compare languages and reconstruct language history, the scientific study of language is a recent development.

Introductory textbooks very often date it to 1916, when the substance of lectures by ‘the father of linguistics’, a Swiss scholar named Ferdinand de Saussure, was reconstructed by his students and posthumously published under the modest yet groundbreaking title, *Cours de linguistique générale* (course in general linguistics).

Before we turn to Saussure and the scientific linguistics he is often said to have founded, it is worth taking a moment to consider what is meant by calling an enquiry ‘scientific’.

*Science* is defined in the dictionary as ‘a branch of knowledge dealing with objects, forces and phenomena of the natural universe, based on systematic observation of facts and seeking to formulate general explanatory laws’. Clearly the model science this definition conjures up is something like chemistry or biology. Linguistics is among the so-called ‘human sciences’, like psychology: it deals not with the natural universe but with a form of human behaviour. What makes it scientific is its adherence to the other principles mentioned in the definition: systematic observation and the formulation of ‘general explanatory laws’.

Science differs from other kinds of enquiry by being *factual* – rather than dealing in opinions and value-judgements or textual exegesis. A scientist is supposed to be objective and methodical (not casual or haphazard or partisan). As well as providing facts, scientists are obliged to look for principles that underlie, explain or cause those facts.

It is also significant that modern societies accord science very high prestige. We are impressed by its mythology of dispassionate objectivity and logical deduction (and this is a mythology, for as many philosophers of science have pointed out, science often depends on intuition, guesswork and bias even – by some accounts, particularly – in its most original investigations). We tend to believe that science is the key to truth.

This being so, we should not forget that linguistics has a great deal to gain by labelling itself ‘scientific’ and adopting the appropriate principles – placing emphasis on rigour, objectivity, formalisation and so forth. Feminists have often been suspicious of this and some have chosen deliberately to flout scientific norms; but it would be rash to condemn this choice from the outset, for that means accepting the mythology of science, about which there is reason to be sceptical.

The scientific nature of linguistics is expressed in three cardinal principles, which we must now examine.

### **Descriptive v. prescriptive: eliminating subjectivity**

Linguistics today is sometimes described as a ‘theory of grammar’, but this is not the ordinary, ancient sense of grammar (that is, rules for correct usage). Most of us probably recall learning grammatical rules like ‘never split an infinitive’ or ‘don’t end a sentence with a preposition’. But these are exactly the sort of rules that scientific linguists are not interested in, and do not include in their grammars. They are *prescriptive* rules: they prescribe form X rather than form Y, telling speakers they should say one thing when they would more naturally say another.

The rules linguists are interested in are *descriptive* formulae capturing the regularities of what people naturally say, or more accurately, what they know it is possible to say. If English-speakers know that ‘it’s me’ is a grammatical sentence in their language, the linguist must provide a rule accounting for that sentence in her grammar. The fact that prescriptive grammars tell you to say ‘it is I’

is beside the point. The only sentence excluded from the grammar is the impossible one ‘\*it I is’ (the asterisk is a convention denoting the fact that English-speakers would never come out with such a sequence). This is a form of objectivity and avoidance of value judgements: the prescriptive grammarian who labels ‘it’s me’ a solecism is dealing with subjective matters of taste or social prestige, but the linguist is describing the facts of the language.

Traditional mainstream linguists and feminist ones have sometimes been at loggerheads about this principle of non-prescription, because – as the mainstreamers correctly observe – feminist demands for nonsexist language are prescriptive. On the other hand, sexist conventions like the generic masculine are prescriptive in origin too. It is not always easy to make a clear distinction between ‘the facts of the language’ and matters of authority or taste. The point of doing so in practice is to preserve the scientific status of linguistics.

### **Synchronic v. diachronic: eliminating history**

Before Saussure, the predominant method for studying language was historical: scholars asked how language X had got from stage A to B (Anglo-Saxon to modern English, for instance, or Latin to Portuguese). Saussure thought this rather unsystematic, though he himself was trained in the method. To use a natural history/biology analogy, rather than watching the organism’s development Saussure wanted to cut through it at a particular moment and study its internal structure under a microscope. This he called ‘synchronic’ linguistics as opposed to ‘diachronic’ (‘through time’, that is, historical) linguistics.

It is obvious that synchronic linguistics involves what scientists call an ‘idealisation’ of the facts. There is never a frozen moment where everything is homogeneous and change can be excluded. But something well-defined, even if it is artificial, can be studied more effectively than something more realistically chaotic. Linguistics is based on a number of such idealisations, and they have enabled a good deal of progress in ‘formulating general explanatory laws’.

### **Knowledge v. usage: tidying up chaos**

A further example of idealisation is the decision Saussure made to study the abstract linguistic system rather than the use people make

of it – which is affected by all kinds of extraneous variables, like people having a stammer, or losing their train of thought or making errors in their choice of words. You cannot observe the system directly, of course, only people's concrete usage: but you can infer it, and formulate it as a set of rules.

Saussure made a distinction between *langue* (language, the abstract system) and *parole* (speech, actual and concrete). He explained the difference here with a little parable about a train, which I will adapt.

Suppose that one Saturday I take the 9.45 from Victoria to visit my sister in Brighton. Then, the next Saturday, I do the same thing. Is it the same train and the same journey I take each time? In one sense, probably not: the rolling stock is probably different, and the engine might be a different engine. Perhaps the train is held up at Three Bridges on the first occasion, but not on the second. Yet on another level, these differences are pretty much irrelevant. In each case I take the 9.45 from Victoria. In terms of the system – the timetable of British Rail's Network South – it is the same train each week.

The difference between *langue* and *parole* is like the difference between 'the 9.45 from Victoria' and the particular physical pieces of the train. Every time I utter a word, *hello*, say, it is slightly different in phonetic detail: that is a question of *parole*. In *langue* however it is always the same word, *hello* rather than *goodbye* or *hi* or whatever.

In contemporary linguistic theory, this distinction is more usually made in the terms used by Noam Chomsky, *competence* and *performance*. Competence is what you know, abstractly; performance is what you do (and sometimes of course you get it wrong). The underlying idea is that language can be described as an abstract system of rules which speakers use more or less imperfectly, hampered by their memories, their emotions, their state of health, and so on. The linguist's primary goal is not to describe in minute detail the 'impure' behaviour of speakers, but to construct the 'pure' system which that behaviour is based on.

## DIFFERING APPROACHES

There are many schools of post-Saussurean linguistic theory. Here I want to note three main traditions, differentiated primarily by their emphasis. First, there is the 'structuralist' tradition, in many ways

faithful to Saussure, but now often outside mainstream linguistics, concerned with other cultural systems as much as with language. Second, there is a 'cognitivist' tradition, in which language is approached as a property of the human mind. And third, there is a 'sociocultural' tradition which chooses to emphasise that language shapes and is shaped by human culture.

## The structuralist tradition

### *Saussure*

Today, Saussure is claimed by many scholars outside linguistics: he has attained the status of a thinker, rather than being remembered simply as a scholar of language. He is the founder of a broad current which I call *semiology*, and he laid down the principles of what was fashionable in the 1970s as *structuralism*. These isms and ologies are not always applied to strictly linguistic phenomena. In Saussure's own work, though, they were developed as approaches to the study of language, more precisely of *langue*.

What defines a structuralist approach is its insistence that language should be studied as a self-contained system defined by the internal relations of its parts – not as a historical, social, philosophical or pedagogical matter. Saussure remarked that 'heretofore language has almost always been studied in connection with something else, from other viewpoints'<sup>1</sup>. But if language is not just a reflection or expression of something nonlinguistic, what is it? Saussure's solution was to approach it as a sign-system. He placed linguistic study at the centre of a new science:

A science that studied the life of signs within society is conceivable; it would be part of social psychology... I shall call it semiology. Semiology would show what constitutes signs, what laws govern them.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, Saussure did believe language was connected to social and psychological questions, but he felt it was part of a social-psychological phenomenon deserving its own branch of study – the tendency of human cultures to construct symbolic systems such as spoken and written language, sign languages, codes and so on. The task he set himself and commended to semiology, the science of signs, was to analyse the workings of sign systems.

### Signs

It is obviously necessary to define a sign, which is to semiology what elements are to chemistry or cells to biology. For Saussure, though, signs are complex because they are produced by fusing two things, the *signifier* and the *signified*. In Saussure's *Cours*, the examples tend to be words: the word *cat* for instance consists of a signifier, the sequence of sounds /kat/, and a signified, the concept CAT, a four-legged feline animal.

It is important to notice here that this is not a theory of names and things: the sounds /kat/ signify a concept, they do not label an object. Signs separate reality from its representation. Both elements of the sign are *arbitrary*.

This is easy to grasp in the case of the signifier. There is nothing in nature which obliges a cat to be called a cat and not, say, a *blerg*. Indeed, it is only in English that a cat *is* called a cat, which is to say a particular signifier is combined with a particular signified. But it is equally true, Saussure implies, that the signified itself is arbitrary. It would be possible to order the world in a different way, so that it did not contain a class of four-legged feline animals at all. It is by learning our culture's sign systems that we learn its concepts and principles of classification.

If signs are arbitrary, their precise substance – for instance, the exact physical characteristics of the /k/ in cat – is not what gives them their meaning, just as it is not the composition of the rolling stock that enables me to recognise the 9.45 from Victoria. (Nor, as any regular user of this service can tell you, do I necessarily recognise the 9.45 by the fact that it leaves at 9.45!) What makes signs meaningful is the contrast with other signs. The 9.45 is not the 10.15. A cat is not a bat or a dog.

This point may be grasped by thinking of, say, military ranks (for example, private, corporal, sergeant, sergeant-major). If someone asked me to define the term *corporal* I would probably explain that it was the rank above private and below sergeant, that is, I would contrast it with the other terms in the system. I might point out the signifiers of rank, such as the stripes on a uniform sleeve. These are also meaningless except by comparison with one another.

Saussure identifies two sorts of relation signs have with one another. One is a combination relation: /k/ in cat combines with the other sounds, /a/ and /t/. The relation between /k/ and /a/ is *syntagmatic*. The other is a substitution relation: /b/ or /p/ or /r/ could replace the /k/ of cat to yield a new sign. The relation between /p/ and /b/ in this context is called *paradigmatic*.

These ideas proved immensely fruitful in analysing the structure of languages. In America from the beginning of the century to the 1960s, structuralist linguistics flourished. The American structuralists, as they are known, were concerned to describe languages that had not been studied intensively before, such as American Indian languages, many of them threatened with extinction. In the field they collected a corpus of data and produced a grammar which was essentially an inventory of the elements in a language (its sounds, its words, its grammatical forms) and rules for the distribution of those elements (that is, their syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations). Though in recent years 'structuralism' has become a trendy term which is commonly thought to denote something amazingly abstruse, all it really means is that you break something down into its component parts and study the relationships of those parts to one another.

### *Semiology*

Semiology does not mean the same as structuralism. Semiology is a discipline – Saussure's 'science of signs' – while structuralism is a method you can use to do semiology. Neither semiology nor structuralism is equivalent to the study of language. Semiology studies any and all sign-systems, and the structuralist method can be applied to other things besides language.

Since Saussure wrote, an extraordinary array of phenomena have been studied as sign systems, by scholars taking Saussure's observations about language and applying them elsewhere. The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, for example, studied systems of kinship as if they were languages. Obviously the principle of relation and contrast applies well to kinship terms: like the military ranks discussed earlier, they form a closed system of meaningful distinctions. But not all applications of semiology are so immediately obvious. The literary and cultural critic Roland Barthes studied the 'language' of fashion. The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan maintained that the unconscious mind was organised like a language, as a system of signs. These men were not linguists, but they were semiologists. And though they were not feminists either, their work – particularly Lacan's – has influenced an important current of thought within feminism.

Let us briefly examine an illustration of semiological analysis applied to something symbolic but not linguistic. In his book *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes analysed a magazine cover as a sign.<sup>3</sup>

The magazine cover showed a Black soldier saluting the French flag, and this, Barthes points out, was its immediate signified: 'here is a Black soldier saluting the French flag'. But Barthes argued that this signified itself became the signifier of a further, more abstract signified. At a higher level, the signified was an ideological proposition: that since here we have a loyal and patriotic soldier who is also Black, French imperialism is not the nasty oppressive thing some (disloyal) people make out.

Barthes suggested in this two-level analysis that there is a nonliteral language of ideological propositions or 'mythology'. Signifiers that might in principle mean various things are conventionally hooked up to particular signifieds, so they are interpreted in a particular way. In this case, for instance, the Black soldier is interpreted as loyal: not coerced, or deluded. Once something becomes a sign in the culture, with its place in a whole network of signs, the union of signifier and signified which it embodies (out of all the other possibilities) comes to be seen as natural and indissoluble. (Saussure observed that the two elements of the sign cannot be prised apart: they are like two sides of the same sheet of paper, so that cutting one from the other is impossible.)

This way of talking about cultural images is potentially interesting to feminists. It might explain, for instance, why the image of a naked woman normally invokes the ideas of availability and degradation. There is nothing inherent in female nakedness that makes it mean these things: but it has become a sign, and its misogynistic connotations are therefore difficult to shake off.

Of course, this example suggests that the language of cultural myths is not so arbitrary as the sounds /kat/. The convention that women's nakedness connotes availability or degradation arises, not coincidentally, in a society where women are sexual subordinates (and, one might add, where clothes are usually worn in public). In Barthes's example too, we can only mythologise the sign if we pay attention to a particular part of it, the soldier's race: and it is no accident we do this, but a reflection of our culture's racism.

Perhaps, then, when we move away from simple examples like *cat* and from the innocence of sounds to the complexities of meaning, it is unwise to discard extra-linguistic questions of history and power completely. Structuralism on its own cannot tell us how or why some signs (words, images) acquire the significance they do.

On the other hand, some of those theorists who have applied the ideas of Saussure in other domains take seriously the idea suggested

in Saussure's concept of the sign, that learning language is the child's entrée into culture, and that a theory of signs might therefore contribute to a theory of how humans develop into social beings. This is a particular concern of Lacan's psychoanalytic appropriation of Saussure.

### *Lacan*

Lacan notes that Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, placed enormous stress on language and on its unconscious components (like slips of the tongue or word associations). He points out that language is of the first importance in any actual analysis, since the analyst has no other way of getting to the unconscious – it is always mediated by language. Furthermore Lacan observes that the unconscious, according to Freud, is highly structured – just like language itself.

From these observations Lacan, using Saussurean insights, draws certain conclusions. The unconscious is itself composed of signs (which the analyst and analysand must interpret). And since on a structuralist view there is no differentiation or signification outside language, Lacan reasons that the unconscious is actually formed as language develops in the child. It is language that turns an infant from an *hommelette* (little man [sic]/omelette), a mass of instinctual drives spreading out in all directions, into a member of the culture. If we wish, as psychoanalysts do, to understand this process of acculturation, a theory of linguistic signs is a necessary tool of analysis.

Feminists are, of course, interested in acculturation, since gender identity and sexuality are taken within feminist theory as cultural constructions. It is therefore not surprising that some feminists have turned to Lacan, with his synthesis of Freud and Saussure, for insight into the nature and acquisition of femininity. Though this may sound like a far cry from the structural analysis of a word like *cat*, we shall see that the resulting feminist approaches are centrally concerned with the relation of women to the sign-systems of patriarchal culture, not excluding its forms of language.

### **The cognitivist tradition**

Saussure believed that semiology belonged within social psychology, and indeed no linguist denies that language is in some sense a mental and cognitive phenomenon. But by the middle of this century

the American structuralists had tended to adopt a behaviouristic model of psychology in which there was little attempt to study internal cognitive processes. Linguistic behaviour, like other kinds, was treated as a matter of conditioning, stimulus and response. And it must be said that the pure structural analysis of languages as self-contained systems could and did proceed without benefit of a cognitive theory.

This position was attacked, however, by the linguist Noam Chomsky in the late 1950s, in a move which was to alter the aims and methods of linguistic science in radical ways. Chomsky was interested particularly in syntax (sentence structure) rather than the small units of language (sounds, words, and so on) most successfully studied by the structuralists, and he pointed out that syntactic rules were too complex to be learned in the way behaviourists claimed. He also suggested that linguistics should be a theory of the complex properties he found in language structure, properties which in his opinion must reflect the structures of human cognition, and not just a set of procedures for analysing languages.

Chomsky has made various strong claims about language. First, he claims that what children have to learn (and linguists ought to look for) are not words and sentences but the rules for producing these. Evidence for this notion comes from the fact that the sentences of any language are in principle infinite. No-one could learn them all, since most of them have never (yet) been produced. If children simply imitated the language they were exposed to, they would not be able to produce new sentences, nor would they make the sorts of creative, rule-governed errors that they do (saying *swimmed* and *goed* for instance, which they do not hear from adults). Chomsky also claims that children are innately predisposed to learn language – they ‘know’ what kinds of structures they will find. Otherwise, he says it is impossible to imagine them hypothesising at random the very complex and specific principles on which languages appear to be organised.

Another claim that follows from this is that human languages, despite their superficial variation, are cut to a single pattern. Presumably children in China and Italy have the same innate language predisposition; but the Chinese child learns, say, Cantonese, the language she is exposed to, whereas the Italian child learns a dialect of Italian. Cantonese and Italian must be similar enough that each is the sort of thing the child is predisposed to learn. It is therefore important, Chomsky argues, for linguists to

theorise beyond single languages and look for universal properties defining language in general.

This cognitivist perspective, of which Chomsky is the best-known representative, currently dominates the field of linguistics. For feminists, its main importance is that in emphasising nature over nurture and system over usage, it denies the importance of social influences on language – or at least on those aspects of language that are held to be theoretically interesting. Even grammatical patterns that appear to be social and political in their motivation – like pronoun usage in English – have been explained by mainstream linguists in completely nonsocial terms, and this kind of explanation is felt to be superior in principle. One effect of this tradition's dominance, therefore, has been to trivialise the efforts of feminists outside it.

Meanwhile, inside it, feminists struggle to find a place for questions of gender. In her review of the field of language and gender studies for the prestigious *Cambridge Survey of Linguistics*, Sally McConnell-Ginet notes how little impact feminism has had on mainstream linguistics, explaining that interest in language and gender tends to be motivated by a desire to understand gender, 'not from interest in language as such'.<sup>4</sup> Though McConnell-Ginet does go on to qualify this, she clearly sees herself as addressing an audience which takes the essential irrelevance of gender issues to language 'as such' for granted.

### **The sociocultural tradition**

There is, however, another tradition, in which language is treated primarily as a mediator of social relations, an expression of social identity, a repository of cultural values and a medium of art and ritual. This tradition is to be found within linguistics (in the subdiscipline of sociolinguistics) and also in anthropology, with which linguistics has always had close connections, especially in North America.

#### *Anthropology*

Anthropologists have traditionally regarded language as a key to understanding some aspects of culture. For instance, it has been standard practice to collect kinship terms and record the names of plants, animals, deities and so forth. The vocabulary of a people can be seen as a summary of their concerns and beliefs about the world.

Before the Second World War, some American anthropologists with a special interest in Indian languages were contemplating the strikingly different beliefs with which their informants operated, and raising the theoretical issue of exactly how language relates to worldview – is it simply a reflection, or do the structures of a particular language itself in some sense determine speakers' classification of their reality?

This latter possibility could be seen as one logical extension of the Saussurean structuralist model: it is usually known as the 'Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity' after the two theorists most associated with it. 'Linguistic relativity' implies that languages may vary dramatically in their ways of segmenting the world – there is no absolute and fixed standard laying down what conceptual distinctions a language must make. Since the theory also posits that language affects perception, 'reality' may differ considerably according to whether you speak, say, a European or a Uto-Aztecan language. A strong version of this argument might merit the label 'linguistic determinism', that is, language actually *determines* your reality. Though its popularity waned with the rise of cognitivist and universalist linguistics, the notion of relativity/determinism has intrigued a number of contemporary feminist researchers, who suggest that perhaps our worldview is 'androcentric' (male-centred) because the conventions of language have been developed in a patriarchal context.

More recently anthropologists have turned to the study of linguistic behaviour in its own right, rather than simply as a means to elucidate belief-systems. For example, they have described the verbal rituals found in particular cultures, examining the rules that govern speech events like storytelling, healing, religious ceremonies, and so on. This concern with speech events is called 'the ethnography of speaking'. And once again it is of interest to feminists, since gender is one of the social phenomena that enter into rules about who may speak to whom, in what kind of language and on what occasions.

### *Sociolinguistics*

Sociolinguistics emerged as a subdiscipline of linguistics (and occasionally of sociology) during the 1960s. It is most succinctly defined as the study of linguistic variation in space (both social and geographical) and time. Several factors were at work in its genesis.

Since the nineteenth century, students of language had undertaken to describe regional varieties of languages, an enterprise usually called *dialectology*. But dialectology dealt with traditional, rural speech, compiling maps of linguistic features; it did not (and could not) deal with the speech of urban areas, where divisions of class and race, social and geographical mobility, were producing new linguistic configurations. Sociolinguistics addressed this gap in our knowledge of variation. It is sometimes referred to, indeed, as 'urban dialectology', though in fact its methods can be applied in non-urban communities too.

At the same time, many sociolinguists were motivated by social and political concerns. They felt the impulse toward a socially relevant linguistics that would address the social and educational problems suffered by subordinated groups of working class and minority speakers whose speech was stigmatised (not, however, the linguistic problems confronting women. The nonstandard speaker of most early studies is typically, explicitly male). The explanation and defence of nonstandard speech is a common motif in sociolinguistics to the present day.

Finally, sociolinguistics had a theoretical agenda which was critical of Chomskyan linguistics. Some sociolinguists expressed concern at the idealisation and abstraction of the orthodox model, suggesting that the older method of collecting a corpus of data for detailed analysis was the only safe basis for generalisation.

The technique of sociolinguistics is to quantify selected features in people's recorded speech and correlate them with the social characteristics of the speaker (class, race, gender, age, and so on) and/or the situation. In this, sociolinguistics might appear to be the study of *parole* or performance rather than *langue* or competence; but in fact its effect is to question or reformulate that distinction. It shows that variation in so-called performance is not random or unsystematic. It is statistically highly patterned and predictable from social and linguistic information. Thus, it is argued, the socially-conditioned aspects of language use are as much a part of our competence as the ability to construct grammatical sentences. Someone who doesn't vary her language according to the situation, or who cannot tell a young from an old speaker and use the language appropriate to her own age and status is not a competent language user. This kind of sociolinguistic knowledge is often called 'communicative competence'.

Sociolinguists also dispute the Saussurean notion that language *change* is unsystematic, arguing instead that it arises from socially meaningful variations in the present. The synchronic and the diachronic are thus interconnected.

### **Summary**

The three approaches just discussed are not incompatible in the sense that, for instance, structuralists do not think language is a social phenomenon and sociolinguists see no cognitive element in language use. Most linguists are prepared to acknowledge the validity of other perspectives, even if they think their own is more significant than the others. It is more a difference of emphasis in what one chooses to study and how one approaches it.

Nevertheless there are some obvious inconsistencies in the different ways of looking at language. For example, someone committed to the innateness hypothesis proposed by Chomsky is not likely to be sympathetic to the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis. A sociolinguist considers variation more important than homogeneity, whereas for the Chomskyan matters are the other way about.

There are also tensions between structuralists and sociolinguists. Sociolinguists feel that classical structuralism demands too much idealisation, the assumption of a state which does not exist in the real world of differences (and one might add, inequalities). Lacan would be happy neither with Chomsky nor with Whorf (in fact Lacan and Chomsky once met; it seems that neither understood the other's obsessions). Though Lacan shares the cognitivist belief in universal properties of mind, he does not believe in innate ideas; although he is deterministic in his view of language he seems not to be a relativist (which begs the question of how the European and the Amerindian language could generate identical unconscious structures in their respective speakers).

This leads me to mention another, very significant difference between semiology as it is currently practised and the other traditions we have considered. In some ways it is simply pointless to compare them and impossible to reconcile them, because where both mainstream linguistics and sociocultural approaches to language accept a traditional, positivistic view of the scientific project, semiology does not. As a theory it has turned away from the norms of empiricism and positivism (formulating hypotheses, collecting evidence to test them, making deductions) and from the

pursuit of a single, unquestionable 'truth' to a more 'hermeneutic' standpoint in which there are only interpretations rather than hypotheses and facts-in-evidence. In short, semiology today leans toward what was described in chapter one as a postmodernist epistemology. It is heavily critical of the alternatives as practised by mainstream linguistics.

A similar division can be observed in feminist theory. Some feminists continue to believe in the potential of science for revealing important truths about gender, and request only that science should clean up its act, discarding the sexist prejudices which in any case obscure the truth. The feminist philosopher of science Sandra Harding has called this attitude 'feminist empiricism'<sup>5</sup>, and it is still the prevailing mood among most feminist linguists, probably because of the standard scientific training all linguists receive.

Among those who approach language from the perspective of other disciplines, most notably from a literary perspective, science has to some extent fallen off its pedestal; its notions of objectivity and truth are regarded as mystificatory. It is a difference of view that we will need to return to, and the reader should keep it constantly in mind as she compares the divergent positions to which those who disagree about the status of empirical science are led.

But this is not to say that semiology has nothing in common with other approaches. In their feminist versions, as we shall see, they have a surprising amount in common.

## CONCLUSION: FEMINISM AND LINGUISTIC TRADITIONS

I want to conclude by pointing out what feminist work on language over the last fifteen or twenty years has drawn from the various traditions described above. This will serve as a rough-and-ready map for much of the rest of this book.

### **Feminism and semiology**

Feminists in the tradition of Saussure have given us a body of work dealing with two main topics. The first of these is the question of 'gendered subjectivity': that is, how we become masculine or feminine cultural beings. This question is discussed within the framework of Lacanian psychoanalysis which, as I observed above, places emphasis on the crucial significance of language and the

relation of women to it. It is claimed that women and men relate differently to language: that femininity places a subject in a position marginal to it.

At this point it becomes possible to address a second, related topic, that of women's writing. What are the implications of women's linguistically marginal position for their literary creativity? It has been argued that the implications are positive rather than negative: women are in a position to create new and different forms of linguistic expression. By making alternative discourses available in the culture, they may even change the culture itself.

Both these topics will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 8.

### **Feminism and the sociocultural tradition**

#### *Anthropology*

Anthropological linguists have made a significant theoretical contribution to feminist thinking about language. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis has been developed by Dale Spender and Suzette Haden Elgin from a feminist perspective; and the social anthropologists Edwin and Shirley Ardener have produced a theory (with certain Whorfian echoes) of women's 'muting' in male-dominated cultures. These theoretical debates are reviewed in Chapter 7.

Anthropological studies, particularly those that fall under the heading of ethnography of speaking, also provide a great deal of valuable information on women's linguistic situation cross-culturally. I will be drawing frequently on ethnographic sources, especially in Chapters 4 and 9.

#### *Sociolinguistics*

Because it deals with language in its social context, and pays attention to social differentiation, sociolinguistics is a good source of data on sex differences. Whatever the shortcomings of pre- and nonfeminist studies in this area (and there are many), they did sample women's speech as well as men's and they attempted to theorise the differences they found. Happily, too, a good deal of recent research on gender-linked variation has been done by researchers with an understanding of feminism: the field is attractive to feminists because language and gender is a respectable concern within it.

Sociolinguistics has also produced insights into the relation between language and power, linguistic variation and social disadvantage. While little of this work concerns itself with gender

specifically, it can be applied, at least to some extent, to the question of women's oppression.

I will consider sociolinguistic research in depth in Chapters 3 and 4.

### **Feminist linguistics?**

As a final observation, let me point out that feminists have not just been passive recipients of wisdom from these traditions of linguistic study, but in recent years have actively intervened to shape their development. That is as it should be, of course: feminism has as much to give linguistics as linguistics has to give feminism. In semiology, anthropology and sociolinguistics it has already had some impact. The nature of that impact will be documented for anthropology and semiology in due course; meanwhile I will begin by documenting it in the case of sociolinguistics.

The sociolinguistic study of variation, specifically of sex differences in linguistic behaviour, is a particularly suitable case for feminist treatment. At the very least feminists can hope to correct the gross errors of methodology and interpretation which have led to much lame and inadequate theorising; and more ambitiously, they may set out to create a framework for the study of gender that will have influence in other areas of study, changing them – and thus sociolinguistics – for the better.

Not only is the study of sex difference an obvious concern for feminist linguists, it is a crucial one politically: for assertions of women's difference from men are the implicit and often the explicit foundation on which sexism and inequality rest. It is therefore important for those assertions to be scrutinised, interrogated, challenged, reinterpreted and re-evaluated, above all revealed as the political statements they are. The next two chapters are about this 'politics of variation'.

# 3

## The Politics of Variation: Sex Differences in Language (I)

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### INTRODUCTION

Although this chapter and the next are about sex differences in the use of language, they should not be treated as an exhaustive catalogue of research findings on that subject. Rather, they have two concerns: the first, which they share with Chapter 5, is with the sexism of linguistic science, as expressed in various assumptions and practices; while the second is with the political significance of sex difference itself.

Throughout this discussion I will be emphasising the idea that the study of sex differences cannot help having a political dimension, because the male/female difference is so important for the organisation of the societies in which studies of difference are done. This was true even before the current wave of feminism (Virginia Woolf in 1929 and Simone de Beauvoir in 1949 both marvelled at the huge volume of material on the subject); contemporary feminism has just made the political implications easier to see.

Historically, a lot of sex difference research was done specifically in order to provide a scientific account of an already-assumed female inferiority – taking comparative measurements of male and female brains, for instance, as a way of explaining why women were weaker intellectually than men. Even when this was not the overt purpose, research results have been used to justify particular aspects of women's subordination: thus even today it is sometimes said that girls don't become engineers because they lack spatial ability, or that their relative lack of aggression makes them less effective leaders.

Of course we can contest this kind of sexism by arguing about the accuracy of particular scientific findings. If a finding is incorrect, then the conclusions drawn from it are discredited at once. For instance,

the generalisation that women are physically weaker than men has been qualified; in some areas, like endurance, they may be much stronger than was thought and capable of outperforming men in certain tasks.

But this is to allow the opponent to set the terms for debate, accepting assumptions that feminists ought perhaps to question (for example, that women should be treated equally only to the extent that they resemble men) and thus conceding a vital part of the argument. Inaccurate or biased research deserves our criticism, but it is just as important to ask the prior questions of why researchers have chosen to study sex differences so intensively in the first place (why does no-one study 'sex similarity'? There is plenty of it, after all) and why they have interpreted their findings in particular (and sexist) ways.

It is because of these broader questions that an honourable feminist tradition has arisen, especially in the social sciences, of directing attention to the way sex difference has been described and explained, rather than to the content of difference itself. This feminist critique is aimed at exposing the hidden political agenda of social science, its underlying motivation for the endless ferreting out of differences.

Curiously enough, though, this has not been the major concern of feminist work in the social science disciplines of linguistics and speech communication. Feminists studying language have in general been more interested in furthering the study of sex difference than in criticising it, and though it is acceptable to sneer at long-dead commentators like Jespersen, whose work we will shortly come to, a thorough critique of modern sociolinguistics has been very slow to emerge.

Why should this be so? I would suggest that feminist linguists have two main motives for studying sex differences. One is *positive*: the quest for an authentic female language, whether this is taken to reflect some deep-seated cognitive difference, or the existence in many societies of a distinctive female subculture. The other is more *negative*: to identify the sexual power dynamic in language use, the conventions and behaviours through which speech reflects and perpetuates gender inequality. Both motives can be discerned in today's feminist linguistics; they are not necessarily totally opposed, though it must be said, at times their coexistence is rather uneasy.

Whichever motive is uppermost for them, feminist linguists engaged in sex difference research do not seem to find the idea of

studying difference problematic in itself. They agree, too, that the differences they study are social rather than innate. They are products of, on one hand, women's own activities and values, or on the other, their oppression by men. By studying the differences and the ways in which they arise we can arrive at an understanding of how language relates to gender.

This is all very well. But it needs to be acknowledged here that the feminist concerns just mentioned have something in common with nonfeminist and even anti-feminist concerns in studying sex difference. Although they favour differing explanations, the feminist and the sexist share a belief that linguistic behaviour is one of the keys to understanding the nature and status of women. While this agreement is not altogether surprising – feminists cannot entirely avoid fighting on already established ground, and the cultural importance of sex difference is deeply entrenched – its consequences have sometimes been regrettable.

I propose, then, to look at how sex differences in language reflect, or are said to reflect, the natures or roles or statuses of women and men. As well as pointing out biases and gaps in the way these ideas have been applied, I will be trying to demonstrate the more general point that it is always problematic to treat language use as a direct reflection of social identity. In different ways, both pre- or nonfeminist linguists and feminists themselves have very often done just this. I want to suggest that it is ultimately unsatisfactory, both on intellectual and political grounds.

My discussion will be divided between this chapter and Chapter 4. In this chapter, I focus on cultural beliefs about the language of women and men: that is, what linguists call 'folklinguistics'. I will examine both the lengthy tradition of comment on sex differences that existed prior to this wave of feminism, and the newer tradition of feminist folklinguistics exemplified both by some linguists and by some 'feminists in the street'. Oddly enough, these two traditions are not antithetical. They are, in some ways, similar. It is obviously of interest to ask why this should be, and in the light of the resemblance whether feminist versions of folklinguistics serve any useful political purpose.

In Chapter 4, I will deal with the 'scientific' alternative to folklinguistics: sociolinguistics. This progression from one to the other will not be presented as a journey from darkness into light. On the contrary, it will become clear that scientific investigations are thoroughly imbued with the very same assumptions we find in

folklinguistic speculation. In many cases, the conventions of academic discourse force researchers to make these assumptions even more explicit and specific.

Together, these two chapters constitute an attempt to address the question I consider to be of overriding importance, which is not whether male/female differences exist (they do), what they are or what causes them, but *what they mean*: what significant social uses are made of them, or more accurately of discourse about them. This is an important and also a difficult point, so let me try to make it clearer. It goes back to the question I posed above: what motivates people to study sex differences and to place such emphasis upon them?

In an article called 'Woman's Time', the philosopher and critic Julia Kristeva once put forward a three-stage model of feminism.<sup>1</sup> The first stage was for women to demand equality with men ('liberal' feminism). The second stage was to reinterpret difference so that women's own activities would gain social value even though they were different from men's ('radical' feminism). The third stage – Utopian at this point – was to transcend gender divisions altogether. The male/female difference would not necessarily disappear, but it would become socially insignificant, as many human variations (height, blood group) are now.

Kristeva's model is not intended either as a concise account of feminism's recent history nor as an orderly, linear chronology for feminists to follow (though she does seem to think that each of her stages represents an improvement over the one before). The best way to understand it, in my view, is as a way of separating out the different impulses represented in today's highly varied feminist thinking. This is not to say that all the stages are equally well-represented and well-understood. Most contemporary feminist politics is somewhere between the first and second stages, that is, it oscillates between deploring and celebrating difference, between the negative and positive motivations I outlined above, without realistically expecting – yet – to transcend current gender divisions.

At this stage, as Kristeva implies, an interest in, even a fascination with sex difference is very much a fact of our lives; and it is certainly not a neutral fact. One way a visiting alien would be able to tell that the male/female difference is not just an insignificant human variation is by observing how obsessively, how incessantly we talk about it. As long as Kristeva's third stage is present in our thinking only as a Utopian dream, feminists cannot simply refuse to

get involved in this endless discourse of difference; people who claim that this is a postfeminist era are living in a dream world. But we do have to face the paradox implicit in our contributing to the discourse, which is that every word we say on the subject of difference just underlines the salience and the importance of a division we are ultimately striving to end.

If we want studies of sex difference to work towards our liberation rather than perpetuating our subordination, we have to take this problem very seriously. What that means, among other things, is that feminists who engage in this kind of research must refuse easy answers, answers that can easily be accommodated within the system as it is now.

We must criticise explanations of difference that treat gender as something obvious, static and monolithic, ignoring the forces that shape it and the varied forms they take in different times and places. Such explanations are simplistic and pernicious, because whatever their intentions, they tend to end up just like non-feminist research, by giving an academic gloss to commonplace stereotypes and so reinforcing the *status quo*.

What I am trying to say is that merely paying attention to sex difference – affirming that women exist and are different from men – is not in and of itself a feminist gesture. It can just as easily fall back into anti-feminism. Even to celebrate what is distinctive about women does not, in my opinion, automatically qualify as feminist. Feminism begins when we approach sex differences as constructs, show how they are constructed and in whose interests. We underestimate at our peril the difficulty and danger with which the ‘politics of variation’ are fraught.

#### DELIMITING THE FIELD: WHAT IS SEX DIFFERENCE?

So far, I have been using the term ‘sex difference’ without explanation. It may seem a strange usage, too, because feminists usually make a distinction between sex (anatomical, biological) and gender (social, cultural). The differences we are concerned with here are clearly of the social type. Let me clarify, then, that sex difference in these two chapters is intended to mean (social) difference between the sexes; because *gender* is also a technical term in grammar, linguists have tended to signal an interest in women rather than word-endings by speaking of ‘language and sex’ where feminists in

other fields would prefer 'language and gender'. (I have used 'gender' myself in contexts where there is no risk of ambiguity.)

It might seem that every question about language and sex is a question of sex difference, but for linguists the concept is more limited. It goes back to the distinction between *langue* and *parole*, the system itself and the use of the system in actual social contexts. Sociolinguistics, the study of language variation, does not concern itself with what is *in* the language: how many and what sort of pronouns or terms referring to women, for instance. Rather it studies the choices speakers make from the options available to them. If a linguistic feature (like rising intonation or the word *darling*) is used more by one sex than the other, or if norms and standards differ from one group to the next (for instance, it is less acceptable for women to swear) then we are dealing with a sociolinguistic sex difference.

Sally McConnell-Ginet has pointed out, in my view quite correctly, that this is a somewhat partial and simplistic approach to the interaction of gender with language use.<sup>2</sup> She observes, for example, that gender may affect language use in a given situation not just as a property of the speaker but also as a characteristic of the addressee; the determining factor might be who is being spoken to rather than who is speaking. This (and other similar oversimplifications) need to be borne in mind. Nevertheless I will follow common practice in using 'sex/gender difference' as shorthand for difference that correlates with the sex of the speaker.

It can be seen from this explanation that sociolinguistics is basically *comparative*, comparing the usage of one group (for example women) with another (for example men). One problem with this is that comparisons have a tendency to set up one group covertly as the norm; in the case of sex, it is men who are the norm. This immediately makes it more likely that women's 'deviant' linguistic behaviour will be explained in stereotypical and sexist terms.

But it is not entirely fair to blame this tendency on sociolinguistic methods alone, since sociolinguists dealing with gender-related variation are only the heirs of a lengthy sexist tradition in the study and lay discussion of male and female speech. This tradition, usually called 'folklinguistic' or 'anecdotal', represents the speech of subordinate groups first as different, then as deviant. In the case of women's speech it goes back to antiquity, and its legacy has proved hard to get rid of.

THE ANECDOTAL TRADITION: WOMEN AND  
FOLKLINGUISTICS

In any society, we find beliefs about language that are simply accepted as common sense. These beliefs not only explain to the ordinary language-user things she might have observed for herself, they also regulate linguistic behaviour. For example, it is widely believed in English-speaking cultures that women are good listeners. But 'are' also has a certain flavour of 'ought to be': a lot of oral and written advice to women (for example, in the problem pages of women's magazines) urges us to make use of this supposed talent. In this way, a tendency which is real but slight may become exaggerated; or one which is not real may come into being. It is therefore difficult to make a clear separation between folklinguistics and linguistics proper (in this chapter and the next, I will give several examples of the interaction between them).

Even so, one could argue that it is necessary for sociolinguists at least to attempt such a distinction between folklinguistic stereotype and linguistic fact: particularly when the stereotypes in question are both ludicrous and contemptuous of women speakers. All too often, linguists – not excluding feminist ones – seem to overlook the folklinguistic roots of their supposedly 'value-free' observations.

It would be an exaggeration to claim that all anecdotal observations about sex differences in language are sexist in the sense of insulting women. Sometimes they are sexist only in the subtler sense that they reinforce the idea of an absolute, all-pervading sex difference. Everything is given a metaphorical sex, and never shall the two sexes overlap.

In 1712, for example, Jonathan Swift claimed in his 'Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue', that some sounds ('hard' consonants) were typical of male speech, others (vowels and liquids) of female speech.<sup>3</sup> Since vowels are not better nor worse than consonants – indeed Swift explicitly says that language needs both masculine and feminine tendencies – this is a relatively non-misogynist stereotype. Nevertheless it is pernicious because it trades on the pernicious habit of labelling things or qualities (hard/soft, consonant/vowel) masculine or feminine (a habit we must return to in Chapter 5).

It is also, of course, rubbish. Contemporary readers are apt to be startled that Swift, an intelligent man, should have said, still less actually believed, anything so silly. It bears pointing out, therefore,

that silliness on this whole subject was not put to rout by the coming of a more formal and scholarly type of linguistic study.

Feminists have rediscovered with astonishment, for example, the work of the Danish grammarian Otto Jespersen, who published in 1922, more than two centuries after Swift, a book grandly entitled *Language: its nature, development and origin*, and containing a chapter called 'The Woman'.<sup>4</sup> (This, by the way, is a good example of setting one group up as the norm and treating others as deviant. As many commentators have noted, there is no chapter in Jespersen's book called 'The Man'.) Without adducing any real evidence (he refers sometimes to the dialogue given to women characters in novels or plays by men), Jespersen tells us women speak more softly and politely than men, have smaller and less varied vocabularies, use diminutives like *teeny weeny*, construct their sentences 'loosely' and leave them unfinished, all the while jumping from topic to topic.

These characteristics of women's speech were evidently not chosen at random and are not value-free. Jespersen is caught between his fantasies (soft-spoken, retiring child-women) and his prejudices (loquacious yet bird-brained women) to produce a stereotype that is both old (think of Shakespeare's comment that a low voice is an excellent thing in woman) and yet contemporary. Popular culture gives us plenty of female verbal incontinence (cf the Andy Capp joke: 'when two wives get together, who has the last word?') and illogical women who can't keep to the point (as a character in the soap opera *Coronation Street* comments, 'you might as well try to knit fog as follow what's in a woman's mind').

Stereotypes, however false, tend to persist for as long as the social differences and inequalities they reinforce. So long as women are subordinate to men, their language will continue to be stereotyped as indicating natural subservience, unintelligence and immaturity. So long as men dominate women in conversation by restricting their talk, our folklinguistic beliefs will include the idea that women talk incessantly. Nor does it matter that the stereotypes are internally contradictory. As a male student once pointed out to me in a moment of inspiration, it doesn't make sense to say both that women's talk is trivial and that it is 'deep' compared to men's. Yet both these things do continue to be said. Linguistically this might not make sense. Politically however it does.

Even feminists have not always subjected linguistic stereotypes to the scrutiny they require. The first book to alert linguists to the political implications of sex differences, Robin Lakoff's 1975 work

*Language and Woman's Place*, is remarkable for creating a stereotype of its own – and one not so very different from its overtly chauvinistic precursors.<sup>5</sup>

According to Lakoff, there are two styles of speech: 'neutral language' and 'women's language' (another example of norm-and-deviation thinking, though Lakoff is more self-conscious about it). The latter is characterised by a lack of forcefulness. Women use more tag questions ('approval-seeking' constructions like 'that'll be all right, won't it?'), more 'uncertain' rising intonations, more intensifiers (*so, really, very*) and more qualifiers (*not exactly, a bit*), more exaggerated politeness and less offensive expletives than men. This is a subservient way of talking in which everything is hedged about and nothing asserted outright.

Lakoff is a feminist, and her explanation of women's language is not like Jespersen's, however much the language itself may seem to be. She explains that women are socialised to hedge their meaning in language for fear of giving offence to men. But her account is still an anecdotal one, and has not always been borne out by empirical research.

Dubois and Crouch, for instance, tested the hypothesis that women use more tag questions than men. In their sample, on the contrary, it was men who used more. Other recent researchers, like Janet Holmes and Cameron, McAlinden and O'Leary have found women and men using roughly equal numbers of tags.<sup>6</sup> Yet the idea that this is a 'women's form' persists: it is as though people want to believe Lakoff because her account fits so well with prevailing ideas.

Why do stereotypes like this persist not just in folklinguistics but also in modern scientific linguistics? In Lakoff's case, it might be a reflection of her training in the Chomskyan tradition, which urges the analyst to examine her own intuitions rather than collecting a corpus of data. This method is not very satisfactory when the point is precisely to make generalisations about group behaviour, as in the case of language and sex research. That is one reason why most feminists in this field work within the paradigm of sociolinguistics, which we will look at more closely in Chapter 4.

But Lakoff's particular academic training cannot be the whole story. Feminists who are not linguists also have strong folklinguistic beliefs about women's speech, and they are – once again – reminiscent of the beliefs of anti-feminists, though of course the feminists interpret them differently.

## INVESTIGATING FEMINIST FOLKLINGUISTICS

I have attended many feminist seminars, workshops and group discussions about language, and there are certain folklinguistic assertions that I have heard over and over again from the (nonlinguist) women present. From those assertions I have put together a feminist folklinguistic profile of women's speech with the following features.

1. Disfluency. Women have trouble communicating in a 'male' language and the result is hesitations, false starts, and so on.
2. Unfinished sentences.
3. Speech not ordered according to the norms of logic (or to put this another way, ordered according to women's differing notion of logic).
4. Use of questions, including statements couched as questions.
5. Speaking less than men in mixed groups.
6. Using co-operative and supportive strategies in conversation, whereas men are more competitive.

This is how many feminists believe women speak, and there is a tendency to make these attributes the basis of an authentic 'women's speech style' which should be positively valued. Feminists claim the right, in language as in other spheres, to do things differently from men without this being seen as indicative of inferiority. They propose to 'revalue' women's distinctive way of talking.

As a general political strategy, there is nothing wrong with revaluing women's traditions. Indeed there is every reason to believe that society in general would benefit from it. But on this particular question of language, I think we should proceed with caution, because the feminist folklinguistic profile raises a number of problems.

The most obvious problem is, do women really talk this way? For it seems pointless to revalue a tradition that exists only in the feminist folklinguistic imagination. And a second problem is, supposing women do use the features listed above, what does this actually mean? Does it mean what feminists think it means? Is it a straightforwardly positive thing or is it – as Lakoff might suggest – a disadvantage in many situations?

To put matters in more concrete terms, what exactly is the linguistic evidence for such impressionistic labels as 'logic' and

'cooperativeness'? And supposing we identify particular features we judge as exemplifying these things, what is the evidence that those features don't mean something else entirely?

For instance, it is not difficult to think of linguistic features that could be defined as disfluencies. We could take a piece of data and quantify the hesitations, false starts, repetitions, pauses and so on. But linguists have long debated the issue of what disfluency means. Some believe pausing is the hallmark of a careful or thoughtful speaker, planning her next utterance. Those who pause rarely are thoughtless and unintelligent. For this reason, ironically, Jespersen claimed that men pause more than women. Others believe hesitancy indicates errors in language processing, while yet others claim it is a stylistic device that conveys a message to the hearer that the speaker is uncertain, or perhaps reluctant to offend. So if we find a sex difference in disfluency, we are still left with a problem of interpretation.

The question of unfinished sentences is problematic in a different way. It would not surprise most linguists to find them in women's speech, because they are absolutely normal in all speech. The 'finished' sentences with which they are implicitly contrasted are an artefact of *writing*. Literate societies have a strong tendency to take writing as the norm of language. But a moment's thought will show that this is somewhat perverse. Speech, especially face to face conversation, uses resources (intonation, pausing, gesture, gaze) that writing does not permit. It is therefore much less important to use 'perfect' sentential syntax. Unfinished sentences in speech are not an indication that the speaker is uncertain, incompetent or alienated.

Logic in language is a particularly broad and difficult notion. One question that immediately arises is whether it refers to the content of speech or to the form – the sequencing of utterances, for instance. Another is, in either case, what exactly would constitute greater or lesser logic (since I take it no-one is claiming that any speaker communicates in propositional calculus).

In relation to the 'content versus form' issue, it is perhaps worth mentioning a possible link with the more general debate about what is called 'moral reasoning'. In one of the most influential pieces of feminist research on sex differences ever produced, the psychologist Carol Gilligan argued that women and men tend to use different criteria and reasoning procedures in coming to moral decisions.<sup>7</sup> To

put her claim in drastically simplified terms, men base decisions on a form of blind justice: abstract, depersonalised reasoning procedures which apply the same rules in the same way to every case. Women's moral reasoning is more 'relational': they tend to think about how a decision would affect particular persons in a concrete situation, and make their choices accordingly. Gilligan relates this difference to the differing social roles and relationships of men and women.

Though some feminists have criticised Gilligan's work on both theoretical and methodological grounds, and its point should therefore not be taken as unquestionably proven, it is worth discussing because it has had enormous influence. Like Lakoff's book about women and language, it captured the imagination of feminists both inside and outside the academy. As we shall see in Chapter 4, its ideas are echoed in many studies of women's preferred conversational style.

For the moment, however, it suffices to point out that our usual conception of logic – reasoning things out from abstract first principles – resembles the behaviour of the men in Gilligan's study rather than that of the women. (Which is not to say that women are illogical, rather that our notions of logic may be androcentric. Carol Gilligan's book is nonjudgementally titled *In A Different Voice*.) If the feminist folklinguistic belief that women are less or differently logical than men is a matter of *content*, it could be that this is the sort of thing feminists have in mind.

It is difficult to say, however, what formal linguistic correlates (if any) the difference Gilligan proposes might have. In spite of her title, she does not pursue in detail questions about the language in which men and women reason. And the feminist folklinguistic discussion of logic does seem to imply that difference lies not only in what women say, but in the way they say it.

It is helpful at this point to introduce some examples of real speech. My data here come from two conversations: one between two men, recorded for the Survey of English Usage, a large corpus-based project on the structure of educated British English<sup>8</sup>, and one between two women – feminists – which I recorded for purposes of comparison.

- (1) B: I must say I tend to be . . . I mean I . . . you know I do talk quite openly to my pupils which is a little daring of me because the situation in Cyprus is a little different from here . . . I mean

people are a bit narrow in this respect you know they don't like people to talk about it too openly – but I do because I think it's important but the trouble is that – erm – that's not really systematic in the sense that I do it but how many other people do it you see.

A: Yes it's – er – it's an enormous problem actually because as soon as you start to make a special thing about it then immediately I think you're creating the wrong atmosphere, especially for sex.

(2) C: I'd sell my soul to get nuclear weapons out of Britain

D: Well I don't think you're ever going to get it except by civil disobedience because it's part of what a government's all about, they have to defend the country. I don't think getting the Labour Party to resolve for unilateral disarmament changes anything . . . they just won't put it into practice they can't . . . you look at the record of governments there's no way they can stop defending us

C: I think that there's some hope now with the Labour Party because they've – um – compromised themselves politically so far that they wouldn't . . .

These extracts, I hope, show just how common disfluency and unfinished sentences are in the speech of both sexes. What, though, do they show about logic?

One could make a case that the women's conversation is more logical than the men's. The structure of extract (2) could be shown like this:

- C asserts that nuclear weapons should go (opinion);
- D says the only way to do it is civil disobedience (counter-opinion);
- because governments have to defend the country, so you can't believe promises parties out of power make to disarm (justification of stated opinion);
- look at the record of governments (evidence for justification);
- C disagrees: there is hope in getting the Labour Party to commit itself (opinion);
- because it would be politically counterproductive to break promises made to their constituency (justification).

This argument has many features of logical debate. The women justify their points carefully and bring in evidence to support them. They state their opinions and express disagreement explicitly. The sequence of remarks is an unbroken chain of assertion and counter-assertion.

Extract (1), in which two men discuss sex education, is much less simple. Let us try to reduce it to a set of propositions as we did with extract (2).

- B asserts: I talk to my pupils about sex (statement);
- this is daring (evaluation);
- because in Cyprus they frown on openness (justification of evaluation);
- but I think it's important (justification of first statement);
- the trouble is I don't do it systematically (evaluation of first statement);
- but then no-one else does it at all (re-evaluation);
- A agrees: sex education is a problem (opinion);
- because making a thing of it creates the wrong atmosphere for talking about sex (justification of opinion).

Although this conversation too has sequences of opinion and justification, it does not proceed in a linear fashion. Speaker B keeps returning to the same point, his first statement, dealing with it in a variety of ways, and we get three different and slightly conflicting evaluations of his action in discussing sex openly with his pupils (it's daring, it's unsystematic, it's something anyway). To make matters more confusing, although A starts by saying *yes*, indicating he agrees, it becomes clear that he doesn't entirely agree and is off on another tack. His contribution asserts not that sex education is important or daring, but that it is problematic, because education is a poor context for open discussion of sex.

It would, however, be rather contentious to describe the men's conversation as illogical, since it makes perfectly good sense. It would also be contentious to claim, on the basis of these two extracts, that men in general are less logical than women in general. What I would prefer to say, and what I think these extracts illustrate, is that there are different kinds of logic in conversation. They have less to do with gender *per se* than with context, formality, subject matter, the relationship between the participants and their shared background assumptions.

In a famous paper on logic and conversation, the philosopher H. P. Grice proposed that conversationalists acknowledge the existence of a 'cooperative principle' which requires them to give as much information as is needed, to be truthful, relevant and not vague or ambiguous.<sup>9</sup> People do not always observe the principle, of course, but where a speaker flouts it, the hearer will suspect she has a reason. For instance, someone who expresses her opinion of a friend's appearance very vaguely may be suspected of doing so in order to be polite (saving others' face is a common motive for vagueness, untruthfulness and withholding information). Someone who tells me an apparently irrelevant fact may well want me to deduce a hidden inference in it, a proposition they prefer not to make explicit.

In Grice's theory, logic in conversation is not just a matter of explicit surface connections between utterances. We are all reasoning out unstated propositions and analysing the probable intentions of our interlocutors every time we engage in talk – but various social and contextual factors influence the amount and the kind of reasoning required.

It's also important to note how important the affective, as opposed to merely informational or propositional component of conversation is. An enormous amount of meaning would disappear if speakers and hearers did not make heavy use of affective cues – like tone of voice, hesitating and hedging. When speaker A in extract (1) says 'Yes, it's an enormous problem', speaker B does not have trouble understanding the reference of *it* even though this is not spelt out; nor is he perplexed by the use of *yes* followed by a totally different point. He realises that A is expressing general solidarity, acknowledging his contribution.

To sum this up, the 'rules' of talk are not like the rules for solving equations or constructing syllogisms. People talking do not only exchange information, and sometimes they exchange no real information at all ('nice day, isn't it?'). They also use talk to construct social relationships. Any discussion of 'logic' must bear this point in mind.

So, what is the source of the persistent folklinguistic belief that women are less logical or use a different kind of logic than men? There are several possibilities we might consider.

One possibility is that women tend to be less involved than men in formal and public speech events where the appropriate or customary style is especially explicit, where logical connections

are made on the surface and where information and argument are more important than interpersonal solidarity. As extract (2) suggests, women engaging in abstract political arguments are perfectly capable of marshalling this kind of logic. But a number of feminists have suggested that women in many cultures and many situations are partly or even totally excluded from this kind of formal discourse.

A second possibility is that women talking to other women can leave many things more implicit because they assume a great deal of shared knowledge and cooperation. This arguably reflects women's socialisation to be attentive to and concerned about what others think and feel. (We must return in due course to this argument that women are cooperative conversationalists, which has been quite influential in feminist linguistics.) It might be observed, too, that men and women do not have the same degree of knowledge about one another. Perhaps, then, men find women's conversation difficult to follow, and since they are the powerful group, they can deal with their incomprehension by defining women's behaviour as deviant and wrong – 'illogical' is just their word for that. Cheri Kramarae suggests that women are more attuned to the dynamics of male conversation than vice versa, since subordinates are dependent for survival on a good grasp of their superordinates' behaviour.<sup>10</sup>

A third possibility that should not be overlooked is that the stereotype is just a stereotype and has no real correlate in women's behaviour. It is rather suspicious that the label 'illogical' has been used to disparage other subordinate groups' language as well as women's. Educational psychologists of the 1960s and 1970s pursued with great vigour the idea that working class and Black children used an illogical language that caused them to lag behind in school. In particular, American Vernacular Black English was labelled 'a basically nonlogical form of expressive behaviour'.<sup>11</sup> But it seemed the educators in question had simply failed to understand the structural rules of nonstandard grammars, and as linguists successfully argued, their claims were meaningless. They were rather like saying that French was less logical than Russian. The illogicality of Black and working-class speech is a myth that has now been exploded: perhaps the illogicality of women's speech is also mythical and should be allowed to go the same way.

Let us return to our feminist folklinguistic profile. For the moment I will leave on one side the question of women's use of questions and their tendency to speak less in mixed conversation. These claims are

less vague than the logic claim, because a question or a speaking turn is easy enough to identify with precision. Furthermore these are claims that have actually been supported by empirical sociolinguistic research. As we shall see, however, when we review that research in the next chapter, there remains a problem of interpretation and evaluation.

Finally, then, let us consider the stereotype of women as cooperative and men as competitive. This is so ingrained and so influential, I shall have occasion to come back to it many times. Here I want to point out – as I have done with other features in the feminist profile – how difficult it is to identify the linguistic correlates of competition and cooperation. Suppose for instance we hypothesise that cooperative conversationalists would ask others for their opinion very frequently and regularly express agreement. How can we allow for the possibility that someone might request an opinion antagonistically, by picking on someone who does not want to speak? Or that people often express agreement (as speaker A in extract (1) does when he says ‘Yes, it’s an enormous problem’) as part of a more general *disagreeing* strategy?

What I am arguing here is that the meaning of a linguistic feature cannot be determined outside its context. From Jespersen to Lakoff to the feminist in the discussion group, people who talk about women’s language have a regrettable propensity to overlook this problem. Reams of paper have been used to debate what tag-questions, for instance, mean. Are they approval seeking, supportive or a put down (as in ‘you’re not really going to wear that, are you?’) My answer would be, it is impossible to say in advance. Tags have all these functions and more, and only the context can narrow the field in any specific case.

It is possible and indeed likely that context is more important than gender in determining how cooperative or competitive speakers are. For instance, the women speakers in extract (2) are less cooperative than the men on a number of quite plausible measures. They interrupt more, disagree more and give less hearer support (*yes, mm*). This is because they are having an argument about the politics of disarmament, whereas the men are discussing sex education in a much less polarised way.

Once again, we must ask where the stereotype of competitive men and cooperative women comes from. Certainly it is reinforced in expert linguistic studies, both feminist and nonfeminist. Classic ethnographic studies of all-male interaction have tended to focus on

street gangs and ritual verbal performances, whereas studies of all-female interaction are more likely to focus on small, intimate groups. As well as producing data on the two sexes that is not directly comparable, this is surely simplistic, suggesting as it does that men don't have intimate conversations (and women don't have large scale confrontations). Indeed, it leads me to suspect that subconscious folklinguistic beliefs have influenced sociolinguists' choice of settings for data collection.

What of the specifically feminist folklinguistic belief in women's cooperative speech? Are feminists just repeating old stereotypes? Are they romanticising women's fabled lack of aggression and equally fabled listening skills?

Perhaps so. But I think there is one other factor that should be taken into account. Contemporary feminism has deliberately institutionalised a very cooperative speech style. When you attend a feminist group or meeting, you soon learn that interruption, talking too much, raising your voice, vehemently disagreeing with others, expressing hostility and so forth are not acceptable behaviour. On the other hand, it is desirable that you express solidarity, give way to other speakers and tolerate long silences if they occur.

There are good political reasons behind this style. It was painstakingly worked out as a way of preventing some women – usually those whose privileged access to higher education had given them confidence and articulacy in public speaking – from dominating and silencing others. Many women in early second-wave feminist groups had belonged previously to leftist organisations where the prevailing style of discussion was hierarchical, forceful and oratorical; they had found this offputting and were determined not to repeat it. That the style they replaced it with is specifically a feminist style is suggested by the comments made to me when I interviewed feminist women about how they thought feminists talked. Women recalled their early experiences in feminist groups:

I had a lot of trouble not interrupting. I felt like everyone was thinking I couldn't keep my mouth shut.

It struck me the minute we started, all the silence and letting people finish.

On the other hand, I found some feminists justified this style as something that 'suits women better' or 'gets away from male ways

of speaking'. The often painful political processes by which feminists arrived at their anti-elitist linguistic norms has already been erased, and the norms themselves have been naturalised. This is an example of folklinguistics regulating real linguistic behaviour. In my opinion, too, it is rather depressing if feminists are starting to forget the reasons for speaking in one way and not another. Surely we should not cease to remind ourselves and the world in general that the use of language is deeply political. To insist that on the contrary it is a fact of nature is to fall straight into the classic folklinguistic trap.

### CONCLUSION

Although folklinguistics is often dismissed by linguists as unscientific and inaccurate (both of which it usually is), it is certainly not without interest for a feminist linguistic theory. Feminists must pay attention to beliefs about male and female speech, because prejudice is often more powerful than fact.

But the feminist study of sex differences in language must also, of course, pay attention to the empirical facts, whatever they may turn out to be. How do men and women (of different ages, classes, races, cultures) use language (in different contexts and situations)? Can any generalisations be made about this? And what are the implications?

When we ask these questions, we enter the domain of sociolinguistics. In Chapter 4, I will attempt a critical survey of sociolinguistic findings about gender-linked variation.

# 4

## Sex Differences in Language (II): Empirical Sociolinguistics

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### INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 3 we looked at the ‘politics of variation’ in a general sense: we asked why feminists would want to study male/female differences in language, and we also looked at the anecdotal tradition of (often sexist) comment feminists in the field have inherited – in some cases rather uncritically. The question which hung over this whole discussion, though, was how beliefs about linguistic behaviour relate to the observable facts.

In this chapter, therefore, I want to look, still critically, at the actual research findings of feminist and non-feminist sociolinguists. For convenience I will split the sociolinguistic field into two, examining first the ‘quantitative paradigm’ in which variations of pronunciation and grammar are studied using statistical analysis, and then the more ‘holistic’ study of communicative strategies which usually goes under the general name of ‘discourse analysis’.

Both these enterprises are open to criticism on three fronts. Firstly, we may be critical of the way the field is set up, so that men and their behaviour are implicitly the norm and women’s behaviour becomes a deviation needing explanation. Secondly, we may be suspicious of many actual findings, asking how far they are distorted by theoretical or methodological bias. Thirdly, and this is the most important thing, we must take up in some detail the matter of interpretation – what observed differences mean. For as I observed in Chapter 3, the underlying meaning of both folk and expert discourse about sex difference is a political one. It underlines male/female as a significant social division. In many cases, as I shall try to show, it also rationalises and perpetuates sexual inequality.

## SEX DIFFERENCE RESEARCH

**The quantitative paradigm***Sociolinguistic surveys*

The best established approach to social differences in pronunciation and grammar is the quantitative sociolinguistic survey. Either a representative sample of the population being studied or a judgement sample (that is, chosen for a particular purpose rather than at random: often it is an already-existing peer group or network of people who know each other) is interviewed, and recordings of speech are analysed. Linguistic features (for instance, how often speakers drop their g's in words like *playing*) are correlated with social characteristics like age, ethnicity, gender and class.

This sort of survey has been done in many communities since the 1960s when it first became popular. In Britain for example there are detailed studies available of sociolinguistic variation in Norwich, Tyneside, Reading, Dudley and Belfast. By replicating the sociolinguistic survey in various different places, sociolinguists have been able to identify a number of patterns that recur very frequently.

One of these is a *social stratification* pattern. Typically, in any variety of a language there are items that can be expressed more than one way. Many New York speakers alternate, for instance, between two pronunciations of words like *that*: 'that' and 'dat'. Many speakers of English on both sides of the Atlantic have two ways to construct negatives – for instance, 'I haven't got any bananas' and 'I aint got no bananas'. In each case one variant is standard and the other nonstandard. The social stratification pattern illustrates the fact that the proportions of each variant in a person's speech relate very clearly to the person's social class. The higher the class, the more standard the speech. It is also true that speakers in all classes use more standard variants in formal than in casual speech (this is known to sociolinguists as *styleshift*).

There is also a recurrent pattern related to gender. Women use more of the standard variants than men of the same social class. While this is not universally true – there are exceptions on record – it is true often enough that sociolinguists expect to find it in each new situation they study.

The feminist linguists Jenkins and Kramarae have criticised the sociolinguistic approach, arguing that

Both the theory and the methodology are based on the implicit assumption that the communicative experience of white middle class males is prototypical...the experience of women, other ethnic groups and classes are treated as deviations...Gender, ethnicity and class are seen as 'demographic variables' which can be controlled and accounted for, often by using *ad hoc* explanations based on cultural stereotypes.<sup>1</sup>

This comment was made in the early 1980s, around the time when sociolinguistic methods were undergoing some changes. Because of those changes, I do not in fact any longer agree with Jenkins and Kramarae that white middle-class speakers are taken as the norm in sociolinguistics. Recently such speakers have tended more and more to disappear from sociolinguistic studies for a variety of reasons.

One of these reasons is the growing popularity of a type of survey that does not attempt to study representative populations, preferring to focus on the more 'natural' peer groups or social networks which speakers establish. Such 'network' surveys are less vulnerable to 'norm and deviation' criticism, since they usually eliminate major social variables like class and ethnicity (that is, group members studied are all one class and race), so that the group itself *becomes* the norm. Network theorists are interested in questions like which individuals conform most closely to group norms, who innovates and who resists innovation, and how changing social conditions at the local level – rehousing or factory closures for example – affect the group's linguistic habits. This focus on the micro level of social or community structure discourages stereotypical generalisations.

I do think, however, that Jenkins and Kramarae are still right about the treatment of women. There is in sociolinguistics an implicit assumption that where women's speech differs from men's, it is the behaviour of the women rather than the men that requires explanation; men are the norm from which women deviate. Furthermore the phrase '*ad hoc* explanations based on cultural stereotypes' is still excruciatingly applicable to many sociolinguistic discussions of women's speech. It is at the level of explanation that the sexism of sociolinguistics is most blatantly on display, and I want to concentrate on it in the remainder of this section. Let me begin, then, by identifying some general tendencies that are seen within anthropology, ethnography and sociology as well as in the specific case of sociolinguistics.

*The explanation of sex differences: women's roles*

Sex differences in linguistic behaviour are, I would argue, more vulnerable than other differences to 'norm and deviation' approaches. There are several possible reasons for this. One is that sex differences are taken for granted, naturalised. We are programmed to look for them, and also, when we find them, to treat women as 'the sex', the ones who are different.

Conversely we are not sensitised to the possibility of sociocultural differences between the sexes, because they seem to share a culture and a history in common, living as they do in close proximity. Unlike workers or minority ethnic groups, women in most cultures do not form a separate community (particularly not a publicly visible one). So the culture and history of any community is likely to be conflated with the culture and history of men.

These two tendencies – looking for natural difference and failing to see cultural difference – reinforce one another, causing men to be studied and women to be stereotyped. In terms of language, this makes women a very different case from, say, Afro-Caribbeans or Lancashire mine workers. These groups have an acknowledged and often flourishing traditional linguistic culture, which is easily understood as arising from their particular history as geographically and socially segregated communities, and not from 'natural', ahistorical difference.

To put what I am saying in more concrete terms: the dialect poetry of the Lancashire miner, say, is taken as a product of his particular cultural experience, which is different from the experience of public schoolboys or Rastafarians. The domestically-oriented, nurturing talk of the miner's wife, by contrast, is more likely to be taken as a product of her *nature* or her *role* than as a culturally-determined genre, and it is seen as something she shares with all other women. If it turns out that she is not like her husband linguistically, the difference is not treated like the difference between miners and public schoolboys. It is usually addressed in terms of overall, general differences between all women and all men.

That said, there is a serious question about how far we can speak of 'women's languages' or 'genderlects' in the same way we talk of 'Lancashire dialect' or 'Jamaican creole'. It is reasonable to acknowledge that women and men within one community do share a historical and cultural experience to a much greater extent than the miner and the public schoolboy. What I question is whether sex differences are different in kind from other differences, and

should be treated in such general and stereotypical terms as they often are.

Linguists agree that sex differences are pervasive. And in some cases they take a form sufficiently extreme that investigators have been led to speak of separate languages or varieties for the two sexes. Whereas most differences are of a sex preferential kind – that is, certain forms are used significantly more by one sex than the other – a number of languages have what are called ‘sex-exclusive markers’: forms that are used only by women, or only by men. It is interesting to look at how the more extreme case is explained.

Seventeenth-century travellers reported, for example, the case of the Carib Indians of the lesser Antilles, claiming that the sexes in this community spoke different languages. The explanation that they gave was that the Caribs had been conquered by the neighbouring Arawak; Carib men were exterminated but the conquerors took the women in marriage. Each sex continued to use its original language and to pass it on to their same-sex offspring.

This account is no longer accepted by linguists and anthropologists. The sex exclusive markers which do indeed occur in some languages are superficially striking, but on closer inspection they can be seen to result from a few regular and predictable rules acting on the same basic structures.<sup>2</sup> So a dramatic story like the one told about the Carib is clearly not adequate: it over explains what is really a rather small difference. Nevertheless the problem remains of explaining why sex differential rules arise and are followed in a language at all.

One explanation invokes the notion of sex or gender *role*. Jespersen discussed the Carib case in these terms, illustrating his point with a description of ‘primitive society’ in which men, out hunting, develop a language of sparse, economical remarks designed to coordinate activity while women indulge in idle chatter by the village fire. It is scarcely necessary to point out the inadequacy and sexism of this picture – in which women’s own collective labour as gatherers or tenders of gardens is entirely overlooked – and its inapplicability to many of the cultures in which sex-exclusive linguistic markers are found. But many less naive commentators would agree with Jespersen’s focus on the sexual division of labour, which produces a high degree of sex segregation and a considerable difference in the day to day activities of women and men.

The anthropologist Susan Harding has an account of why women and men in a Spanish village use different styles of discourse which

depends on the idea that the sexes have differing roles.<sup>3</sup> Among her informants, Harding says that speech styles are learned and practised by the two sexes in distinct contexts: for men, in political meetings and other decision-making situations, for women in negotiating interpersonal relations. (This has a certain similarity to Carol Gilligan's argument about moral reasoning, which I mentioned in Chapter 3.) Each sex is virtually excluded from the domain of the other, and each learns a mode of speech appropriate to its own domain.

This finding – that men dominate the public domains of speech – is echoed by many other ethnographic studies in a wide range of cultures, though it is not absolutely without exception.<sup>4</sup> Even in less overtly sex-segregated cultures, as researchers like Marjorie Goodwin have argued, it is still usual for children to develop their communicational skills within single sex peer groups, and if these are organised differently to do different things, the speech norms girls and boys acquire may well be different too.<sup>5</sup>

There seem to me to be two problems with this line of argument (which is essentially that speech is 'role-appropriate' and that gender is a major determinant of role). First of all, it is not obvious to me that the speech strategies needed for typically male and female roles are so totally different and non-overlapping as is often implied. For instance, men are said (by both Harding and Goodwin) to be more skilled in confrontation and argument, while women are better conciliators. This supposedly reflects the different contexts in which they learn the linguistic skills – public debates versus private relationships. Yet surely conciliation is a skill politicians have to learn, and equally there is confrontation within personal relationships. I do not deny the findings of researchers like Harding, but their explanations seem inadequate: I question whether such discrete speech styles flow seamlessly from particular social roles. It seems to me that their gender appropriateness must be reinforced in other ways.

Secondly, it is important not to conflate 'role' and 'gender' automatically when linguistic features are correlated with the social characteristics of speakers. Consider for example the distinctive variety that used to be known as 'motherese' (now usually called 'caretaker register' or 'child-directed speech'). Used to young children, this variety is formally distinctive, with a special vocabulary, high pitch, loudness, slowness and exaggerated intonation contours. It is also sex preferential, used much more by

women than men. But what it correlates with is not a gender role but more specifically a child-rearing role. Men who do childcare may use it; women inexperienced with children may not. It is true, of course, that women do more childcare than men. But feminists should beware of naturalising that fact or implying that childcare and its specialised language are somehow essentially feminine, part of a female gender role.

The point of this example can be put in more theoretical terms. It is easy to assume that any significant, gender-linked difference should be attributed to the general operation of gender roles. But gender roles are not a thing; gender itself is not a characteristic women and men just 'have'. Rather, what we call gender and gender roles are the observable effects created by a complex system involving, for example, sexual divisions of labour, the exclusion of women from public domains, and so on. *Gender should never be used as a bottom line explanation because it is a social construction needing explanation itself.* We need to look, then, for the specific practices that produce gender roles rather than stopping at the roles themselves. Restrictions on and beliefs about language may be part of the construction of gender rather than a simple reflection of it.

Another reason to be wary of explaining linguistic differences as products of gender roles, and leaving it at that, is that such a proceeding just encourages stereotyping. For instance, the finding that women are 'cooperative' or 'conciliatory' speakers may be explained, as we have seen, in terms of women's activities and peer-group norms. When applied to women universally this becomes a stereotype, overgeneralised and just a step away from the sexist argument that women are 'naturally' caring. Instead of looking carefully at the specific conditions in which particular women live, we are frequently tempted to appeal to some common denominator of female experience (domesticity and motherhood are the commonest choices) that is false to the facts of many women's experience and – to the degree that we wish to eliminate such common denominators – politically counterproductive as well.

#### *Explanation in the quantitative paradigm*

In quantitative sociolinguistic studies, we find an emphasis on using general (and stereotypical) notions of 'women's role' to explain the common finding that women use more standard variants than men of a similar social status. During the 1960s and 1970s, three explanations in particular gained credence: conservatism (men

innovate, women stick more closely to traditional forms); status consciousness (women are more sensitive than men to the social meaning of speech and more concerned with elevating their own status through speaking 'properly'); and feminine identity (women are expected to talk like 'ladies', that is, like middle-class speakers. Conversely, men associate working-class speech with masculinity). More recently a fourth explanation has been put forward: that men have stronger community ties than women and this favours men's more nonstandard speech. In at least three of the four cases it is the notion of 'gender role' that ultimately underpins the explanation.

Taking each of these explanations in turn, I want to ask whether they are adequate accounts of the observed facts; whether they embody covert value judgements downgrading women relative to men; and whether alternative explanations are possible.

#### *Conservatism*

The idea that women are more conservative than men is manifestly inadequate to account for all the observed facts, at least in the cultures sociolinguists have studied most intensively, and it is rarely advanced nowadays as an explanation of sex differences. One fact that contradicts it immediately is that women are often in the vanguard of linguistic change towards the standard variety. Clearly, using standard forms is conservative only for the high-status women who traditionally use them. For women in low-status social groups, speaking the standard is innovative behaviour.

It is interesting that women are said to be conservative only at times and in places where this trait is not valued. For example, in the eighteenth century (which did value it) women were often accused of wanton innovation in vocabulary.<sup>6</sup> By Jespersen's time, the 1920s, innovation was considered good: Jespersen claims that where vocabulary is concerned, 'men are the chief renovators of language'. Among the Malagasy, by contrast with Western European cultures, conservatism continues to be valued highly. According to Elinor Keenan, women are not considered competent public speakers on the grounds that they do not maintain traditional forms of speech.<sup>7</sup> All in all, then, claims about women's conservatism are stereotypical, sexist and in many cases just plain wrong.

#### *Status consciousness*

The idea that women are more status conscious than men is supported by some very influential sociolinguists, including the

US researcher William Labov and the British researcher Peter Trudgill. Taking their work together, two main reasons for women's status consciousness emerge, each one related to the supposed gender-role of women. First, women do not derive their identity and self-esteem from paid work in the same way men do (either because they do not have paid jobs or because they regard these as less important than their role in the family). They therefore invest more in other symbols: possessions, appearance, speech. Second, women are primary child-rearers and are concerned to provide their children with models of 'correct' speech.

Trudgill and Labov obviously make certain assumptions here that feminists would criticise – for example that the category 'women' is coextensive with the category of housewives and mothers. Even in the 1960s this was not self-evidently true. But the main problem with the claim that women are status conscious is the lack of real supporting evidence for it.

In 1972 Trudgill published a paper about sex differences in Norwich English.<sup>8</sup> He reported that women, when asked by the researcher to assess the standardness of their own speech, tended to overestimate their use of prestige forms (he checked their assessments against taped samples of their actual talk). Since people's self-assessments tend to reflect the way they wish they spoke, Trudgill took it that women wished to identify themselves with a higher social class, and thus that their status aspirations were higher than men's (with male informants he found the opposite tendency, which will be discussed later on). But surely it is possible that the women's assessments might just as well have reflected their awareness of sex stereotypes and their consequent desire to fulfil 'normal' expectations that women talk 'better'. The status consciousness argument really needs more convincing evidence than this experiment before we can take it as proven.

Furthermore the finding itself – that women in each class use more standard forms than men – is not without problems. It may be at least partly an artefact of the methodology used to assign speakers to social classes. Women, particularly married women, are often categorised with men (fathers or husbands). Certainly this was Trudgill's procedure where married women were concerned: the husband's occupation defined the class of the wife (along with other criteria such as what kind of housing they lived in). The theoretical assumption here is that the family is the unit of social stratification, and the crucial factor is the occupation of its 'Head'.

The sociologist Christine Delphy has argued that this assumption is not simply a mistake or a reasonable rule of thumb that has now become outmoded, but an ideological manoeuvre which obscures the real workings of patriarchal societies.<sup>9</sup> The point of it is to place men and women in the same class so that partners in marriage will appear to be equal. If you look at things from a feminist perspective they are, in fact, not equal. Economically the wife is typically dependent (or at least, could not sustain her lifestyle or support her children on her own earnings) and her household labour is exploited.

Delphy points out that if one jettisoned the idea of the family as unit of stratification, using economic criteria to classify individuals instead, most wives would come out below their husbands. If, conversely, one used educational and type-of-occupation criteria to classify individuals (and these are highly relevant to the question of how standard a speaker's language is), it is probable that many wives, especially those of working-class men, would come out *above* their husbands. Data from the US census of 1970 showed that a significant proportion of younger working-class women had more education than their husbands.<sup>10</sup> Sociolinguists should therefore keep in mind the possibility that some women's more standard speech could reflect the fact that class categorisation assumes parity between married couples, whereas in certain relevant ways they do not have parity.

Of course one might argue that working-class women's tendency to stay in education longer is itself a sign of their status consciousness. But there is a more convincing case to be made that what it really relates to is the differing opportunities for men and women in the labour market. To put this briefly, women who are not part of the tiny professional elite (doctors, lawyers, executives), which is to say, all working-class and most middle-class women, need more education than men in the same position. Unless they can enter traditionally male 'craft' jobs, which is still extremely difficult, these women will find their opportunities are best in the so-called 'pink-collar ghetto' (clerical and secretarial work, service industries, nursing and school teaching). The important thing about pink-collar jobs is that they pay less than 'male' jobs yet require skills and qualifications, often including some degree of 'well-spokenness'.

This is the argument put forward by Patricia Nichols in an excellent sociolinguistic study of Black women and men in South Carolina, USA.<sup>11</sup> The island community Nichols studied traditionally spoke Gullah, a creole variety developed from the African/English

pidgin of early slave plantations. Gullah survives only in the small area of the American South where Nichols worked. And in fact certain parts of the community are even now shifting toward a more standard American English. Most noticeably, young women are making this shift.

This is not because young women are status conscious. It is because young people of both sexes are increasingly seeking work on the mainland, instead of participating in the precarious agricultural island economy as their elders continue to do. The mainland economy has only recently opened up with the growth of tourism: nor has it opened up to women and men (or indeed Black and white workers) in an exactly similar way. Black men get jobs in the construction industry, whereas Black women get jobs in the service sector.

This places different pressures on women and men's language. No-one cares how a construction worker talks or whether he has much education. But a service worker or secretary is in contact with a wider public; she is obliged to modify her speech (and also has opportunities to hear more standard speech from others). The upshot of all this is that families encourage young women to get as much education as possible – men can make a reasonable living without it, but women cannot – and women are more advanced in the shift away from Gullah. In the older generation, incidentally, it is women whose Gullah is more pronounced, probably because women were less likely than men to leave the island in order to trade their produce.

This study shows up a lot of the over-simplifications in the 'status consciousness' argument. On a basic level, it shows that all women are not the same. The shift toward standard English is associated with young Black women – not older Black women or white women (who do not, of course, speak Gullah, but do speak a strongly nonstandard variety). Clearly, any explanation based on the idea of women's domestic role giving them certain personality traits, like status consciousness, is unable to deal with the fact that different women behave differently. Women and men respond to material pressures on their speech, and these pressures are different because – outside a tiny elite anyhow – women and men participate in different status hierarchies which are not readily comparable.

For example, a secretary may seem to be of higher occupational status than a builder's labourer (the blue collar/white collar distinction). Her job is less dirty and requires more qualifications.

But the labourer earns more, because construction is a male job and typing a female one. How then do we decide which class to assign a couple to where he is a builder and she is a secretary (not that uncommon a scenario)? Are they both unskilled workers or is she in a higher class than her husband? In terms of the lifestyle her wage will support, the secretary is not really middle-class; yet in other important ways she does differ from the builder. Neither solution seems entirely satisfactory.

It would surely be better to recognise that class stratification is cross-cut by other social divisions, such as gender and race. Status consciousness, as applied to male/female speech differences, is a construct that tries to squash everything into the one-dimensional framework of class; to the extent that other things are relevant it therefore fails.

I have spent so much time on the status consciousness explanation because it has been very influential, and because Nichols shows how it can be reinterpreted with more satisfactory results. But no one explanation will suffice for all women in all communities, and we must therefore proceed to the other suggestions that have been made.

#### *Femininity, masculinity and covert prestige*

The 'talking like a lady' explanation is a mirror-image of Peter Trudgill's suggestion – which is based once again on his Norwich informants' responses to self-evaluation questions – that men give 'covert prestige' to working-class nonstandard speech, associating its roughness with masculinity. Men in Trudgill's study under-reported their use of the standard whereas women over-reported the same thing (see the discussion of status above). And this might lead us to suspect that there is a cultural association, certainly for British English speakers, between femininity and middle-class language on one hand and masculinity and working-class speech on the other.

Associations of this kind do seem to be made folklinguistically. Swearing and taboo language, for instance, are strongly linked to both class and gender in exactly the way you would predict. Robin Lakoff suggests that the prohibition on women using language forcefully extends to nonstandard pronunciation as well.

For feminists, one interesting implication of the idea that Trudgill puts forward, and of his findings, is that gender allegiance seems to be at least as powerful for men (in the attitudes they express, if not in their behaviour) as class allegiance. Nonstandard speech is

appropriated to signify masculinity by even middle-class men. It is also interesting, though, that this tends to place working-class women in a contradictory position: their working classness disappears or is represented in a negative way as a threat to their femininity. Language does play a certain part in rendering comic or grotesque the stereotypical working-class woman of media representations. This woman is loud and foulmouthed (like Roseanne Barr) and has difficulty using words correctly (like Ethel on *East Enders*). Her working-class male counterpart is not usually ridiculed or disapproved of in this way, as someone whose language is inappropriate.

In considering how far this might constitute an explanation of the observed facts, though, the obvious question is whether folklinguistic beliefs relate directly to behaviour. Unlike a lot of linguists, I would not dismiss the possibility. Especially in the area of gender, wishful thinking about how women ought to look and act can easily acquire prescriptive force, with the consequence that real women try to live up to the ideal. Many feminist linguists have unearthed for our edification great piles of conduct and etiquette books telling women what they should talk about, when, how and to whom. Nor does women's pronunciation and vocabulary escape this sort of scrutiny. But to investigate the connection between folklinguistics and behaviour remains difficult; it is an area where caution must be recommended.

### *Community ties*

The most recently popular explanation for women's tendency to use more standard forms comes from the social network approach within sociolinguistics. This approach has found that in close-knit, working-class urban and rural peasant communities (the types it has usually studied to date), an individual's use of nonstandard forms correlates well with their degree of integration into the community or 'network strength'.

This finding reflects the commonsense idea that people are influenced in their speech by the speakers around them. Thus when I went to Oxford University, my (markedly northern) speech soon became noticeably more standard, as a result of contact with so many standard speakers. For people from less mobile social groups, the question is more one of continuity than change, however. The more a person is integrated into a close-knit social network, the more time they spend speaking to the same group of people and the less

they spend in contact with others who might change their speech. Thus in a working-class network, well-integrated speakers have high nonstandard scores. Someone who is poorly integrated – say because she is living and working away from friends and kin – will have lower scores, because her ‘vernacular’ is not being reinforced.

There are differences, then, between individuals within one community in terms of the strength of their ties to that community. There are also group differences. For example, most middle-class people do not belong to close-knit networks at all. Typically they are geographically mobile, living relatively far away from kin, work and friends; they separate work from leisure and do not always socialise with the same group of people who all know each other. (Members of the British aristocracy, on the other hand, may well belong to very tight-knit, though geographically dispersed, networks.)

The other most obvious example of group difference concerns differences between men and women in the same community. From the point of view of social network studies, sex differences in language use are likely to arise from two sources. One of these is the pervasive sex-segregation of traditional working-class culture and of most workplaces. Men mostly interact with men and women with women. By the time they marry and live together, they each have well-established networks that are sex-specific.

The second source of difference is that in many network studies (not all) men have been found to have stronger community ties than women. If, as linguists argue, the strength of these ties correlates with the degree to which speech reflects nonstandard (vernacular) norms, the finding that men are more nonstandard than women makes perfect sense.

The positive thing about this approach is that it can deal with exceptions to the overall pattern. For example, the sociolinguist Lesley Milroy did research in three closeknit Belfast communities.<sup>12</sup> In one of these, the Clonard, she found that younger women used more nonstandard forms on certain variables than did young men. She explains this by pointing out that young Clonard men have been hard hit by unemployment, and this has weakened their networks. Young Clonard women are working, so theirs are stronger by comparison.

Network studies have given us various instances of groups of women who are less standard speakers than comparable groups

of men. (Though if one simply considers 'all women' as against 'all men', such a finding invariably fails to emerge; which only goes to show that lumping all women together masks important and interesting facts.) This reversal of the usual pattern always coincides, however, with a situation in which women have the strongest community ties. We might go on to ask, then, why such a situation is, or is considered, exceptional.

The most obvious conclusion to draw here once again goes back to women's domestic role, and in particular their tendency not to work outside the home, or to work part time, or to work in isolation (home working, cleaning and so on). Arguably this cuts down on women's contact with other people. Certainly, measures of 'network strength' like the one Milroy uses put a lot of emphasis on paid work alongside other community members.

But it is important not to assume this connection *a priori*. For example, Karen Bennett studied a community in Granada, Spain, where women had traditional roles.<sup>13</sup> Using a Milroy-type measure she found their network ties rather weak. But this, she felt, was a distortion and would fit badly with her linguistic findings. The women actually had rather strong ties, since they spent much of their time doing household tasks communally outside. Bennett solved the problem in a way feminists would approve: by counting housework as work.

Somewhat similarly, Beth Thomas noted that older, non-working women in the Welsh-speaking community of Pont-rhyd-y-fen preserved a vernacular Welsh feature that men had lost.<sup>14</sup> Since these women too had traditional gender roles, how was their greater use of this vernacular feature to be explained? On inspection it turned out that the women had strong community ties through their membership of the local chapels. Thomas made participation in chapel activities an important criterion for network strength.

The moral common to these stories is one I have been emphasising throughout this discussion. It is misleading and inaccurate to generalise about women and men and the linguistic correlates of their roles. Sociolinguistics is most successful in explaining sex differences when it looks very carefully at the conditions of particular communities' lives and at what the people themselves consider the most important influences on their behaviour. It is least successful when it makes stereotypical assumptions about women: that they behave in certain ways because they are mothers, or because they don't work outside the

home, for example. Stereotypes like this flatten out important details: they disguise the exceptions to the 'women speak more standard' rule, or else are unable to account for them. Whereas by looking at these exceptions we are able to perceive that the pattern itself is complex and produced by multiple factors. It is not just an automatic reflection of gender.

### **Discourse analysis**

The differences studied in the quantitative paradigm are of a particular and limited kind: they are socially, but not linguistically, meaningful. (To pronounce 'that' as 'dat' or substitute 'aint' for 'isn't' does not change the meaning of your utterance.) Discourse analysis deals with a more general speech style in which the different choices speakers make can be described in functional as well as formal terms.

Interest in sex differences at this level of language was stimulated by Lakoff's *Language and Woman's Place*. We may recall that this was not a work of empirical investigation but an example of feminist folklinguistics, though informed by the author's linguistic training. The studies which followed it were more scientific: but unlike most of the quantitative studies discussed above, they were also explicitly feminist.

With hindsight it is possible to generalise about the two main directions in which this kind of sex difference research has developed since Lakoff. Although it was not a linear, chronological development and neat labels as always 'tidy up' a complex phenomenon, I find it helpful to distinguish two currents: a 'dominance' current and a 'difference' current.

Lakoff had described 'women's language' (its main characteristics are reviewed in Chapter 3) as a variety girls learn in the course of early childhood socialisation. They are encouraged to use it, rewarded for using it and disapproved of as 'unfeminine' if they fail to use it. This speech style urged on little girls is, however, a way of preparing them for their subordinate place in adult society. Talk couched in women's language lacks authority, thus unfitting those who use the language for any position in which they might exercise authority. Adult women will have the unappealing choice between rejecting women's language and so becoming 'less than a woman', or embracing it and thus acquiescing in their inferiority – becoming 'less than a person'.<sup>15</sup>

Lakoff's claim is that women are denied access to 'powerful' styles of speech, those that confer authority and credibility on a speaker. This is one version of the dominance current. Another version puts things differently, arguing that men's way of speaking is *not* intrinsically more credible/authoritative, what happens is simply that men can use their *socially* dominant position to claim *linguistic* privileges. The two versions need to be distinguished because their practical implications are different. The first version suggests that women can gain authority by using men's linguistic strategies, while the second is more sceptical about this; linguistic strategies are after all chosen within particular social contexts and relations. Either way, however, it remains the case that – in the trenchant phrase of Sally McConnell-Ginet – 'conversation is not an equal opportunity activity'.<sup>16</sup>

Inequality of conversational opportunity has been uncovered in a number of areas. For instance, researchers have documented sex differences in floor apportionment, that is, how speaking turns are allotted and to whom. In a famous study, Zimmerman and West found that whereas same sex dyads (pairs) share the floor equally and interrupt each other rarely, in mixed sex pairs there is a marked asymmetry. Men interrupt women.<sup>17</sup> West has gone on to show that this pattern applies even to dyads where the woman has more status – her example is talk between women doctors and male patients.<sup>18</sup> Nicola Woods found that in a business setting, gender was a better predictor than status of who would interrupt whom.<sup>19</sup> Women were interrupted less as bosses than as subordinates, but overall they were still interrupted more than men.

Men are also able to gain the lion's share of the floor in cross-sex talk because women provide them with 'hearer support' in the form of minimal responses (like *mhm*, *yes*) and questions – when you ask someone a question you cede the floor to them. Men do not reciprocate this support.

The matter of women's support strategies is taken up in a number of papers by Pamela Fishman.<sup>20</sup> Whereas some researchers had treated women's supportiveness as a straightforward sign of their socialisation into powerlessness and deference, or as signs of what Lakoff would term 'insecurity' or 'approval seeking', Fishman considers supportiveness a creative and skilful strategy women use in order to have some kind of control in conversation with men. If women ask questions and give cues like 'd'you know what?', men are obliged to engage in talk.

As Fishman notes, though, such strategies are only necessary because men in fact have the upper hand. Their often recalcitrant behaviour forces women to do the 'interactional shitwork' if they wish to interact at all. The obvious comparison is with housework: if women want to eat and live in pleasant surroundings they have to cook and clean. The smooth conduct of interpersonal relationships is one more chore for which women are responsible, not because they are powerful but because men are unwilling and refuse to do their share.

The 'difference' current accepts these findings, but reinterprets them. Researchers in this current are interested in Lakoff's suggestion that there is a women's language, but they criticise her negative evaluation of it. They propose that it is not, in fact, inherently dysfunctional and should be valued as something positive and authentic: different, not inferior.

A good example of how this perspective works takes us back to Pamela Fishman's studies of 'interactional shitwork'. Fishman acknowledges the skill involved in this and indeed the necessity for someone to do it; but she sees it as something women are coerced into. 'Difference' researchers by contrast see it as evidence of women's more cooperative, more person-oriented style. Perhaps women choose this style because it fits with their own, perfectly valid interactional or social goals.

In support of this notion, researchers like Elizabeth Aries and Jennifer Coates point out that women use support features like minimal responses not only with men but among themselves, in all-women conversation where gender hierarchy is not a factor.<sup>21</sup> Here it is hardly 'shitwork' since it is shared: its purpose is to promote the kind of intimacy women enjoy and men often lack.

Some of the features Lakoff discusses as markers of powerlessness or insecurity are reinterpreted in the 'difference' current as variants of the support structure. Janet Holmes for instance argues that some tag-questions are really support structures.<sup>22</sup> Lakoff had labelled as 'illegitimate' those tags – allegedly very common in women's speech – that call for confirmation of facts or opinions for which the speaker is the only real authority. Why for instance say 'that's a good book, isn't it?' rather than just 'that's a good book', if you have any confidence in your own judgement? Holmes replies that such a tag functions not to undermine the speaker but to engage the hearer, reassuring her that the speaker cares about her opinions too.

Like certain other 'women's language features', such as qualifiers, intensifiers, hesitations and so on, tags are hedging structures which qualify the force of an assertion so as not to intimidate, offend or exclude other points of view. This could be interpreted as weak and lacking authority; it could equally be interpreted as polite and considerate.

Holmes is equivocal on the question of whether women are coerced by social expectations and the behaviour of men into using support structures, or whether these represent positive choices. Other researchers, like Deborah Jones and Jennifer Coates, are less equivocal, viewing women's cooperative speech as arising from distinctive and valuable female subcultures.<sup>23</sup>

For someone of this persuasion, who does not want to attribute everything to the workings of power, the problem obviously arises of why the sexes should have distinctive linguistic subcultures at all. Here we are back to the ideas about roles and spheres which I discussed earlier in this chapter (the work of Harding, Goodwin and so on).

In a very influential paper, Daniel Maltz and Ruth Borker have placed particular emphasis on the fact that girls and boys play in single sex peer groups where they learn different styles of speech.<sup>24</sup> Boys tend to play in large groups organised hierarchically; thus they learn direct, confrontational speech. Girls play in small groups of 'best friends', where they learn to maximise intimacy and minimise conflict. According to Goodwin, whose work I have referred to already, this difference has linguistic correlates. She studied the use of directives – speech that gets someone to do something – among working-class Afro-American children in Philadelphia. She found that in the boys' peer group, powerful members used direct imperatives like 'gimme' and 'get off'. In the girls' peer group there was more use of consensual suggesting forms like 'lets'.

From this kind of data Maltz and Borker conclude that the sexes come to have very different ideas of what constitutes ordinary friendly conversation. This can cause misunderstanding and conflict when in later life they talk to one another. Men may feel women don't make their intentions clear, while women may feel men are too direct and not sympathetic enough. But in fact each sex is acting in good faith, unaware – as one might be with a foreign speaker of one's own language – that the other is following different rules and acting on different assumptions.

In Chapter 3 I observed that most feminists have been more interested in studying linguistic sex differences than in critiquing or questioning this activity. I explained this as a consequence of two main motives: on one hand, the desire to show how gender inequality enters into everyday talk, and on the other hand, a desire to uncover an authentic women's speech that can be positively valued. These motives are obviously relevant to the discourse analysis I have been describing here; indeed it will be clear by now that the two motives correspond, respectively, to the 'dominance' and 'difference' currents. I want to discuss each of these currents now in a more critical way. While I do see value in each of them, from the point of view of the politics of variation I also see certain problems in both.

*Dominance and difference: a critical comparison*

The 'difference' current has some cogent criticisms of the 'dominance' approach. For instance, difference theorists dislike the implication that everything about women's behaviour can be traced simply to their subordination, and this resistance has a lot to recommend it. Even more laudable is the awareness of many difference researchers that the problem of women's speech is not so much how it *is* as how it is *valued*. Here we need make no distinction between 'real' differences and folklinguistic stereotypes: we can bring the two together to produce an integrated account of what linguistic sex differences mean in our society.

We may consider, for instance, the fact that women are discriminated against in certain areas of life ostensibly because of the way they speak. Women who want to work in broadcasting, or who are required by their jobs to speak frequently in public, encounter strong prejudice against their 'shrill' or 'tinny' voices. Assertiveness training courses and the pop versions that appear in magazines routinely recommend that women consciously attempt to lower their pitch and moderate their 'swoopy' intonational range. In Mrs Margaret Thatcher British women have a real-life example of someone who took this advice.

Phoneticians like Caroline Henton have shown in painstaking detail that the stereotype of women as 'shrill' and 'swoopy' is actually – on average – false.<sup>25</sup> That is useful information for a feminist to have. But the real political question is what this stereotype means. Does the association of low pitch with authority and high pitch with lack of it have any reasonable basis, or is it

simply a sexist prejudice through which everything that marks a speaker out as female becomes a cause for complaint and a proof of inferiority? To put it another way, is it a case of high pitch giving rise to sexist prejudice, or does the prejudice cause the reaction to the pitch?

I have been criticised for coming down on the side of the second alternative. David Graddol and Joan Swann for instance suggest that high pitched voices will lack authority as long as there are squealing children and low, growly dogs.<sup>26</sup> In other words they believe that sexism in this instance is built on some 'natural' foundation. I still do not believe it. Women do not actually sound like children, and men sound even less like Great Danes – except in the light of a culturally-mediated analogy that already trades on sexism. It is not a natural similarity but rather sex stereotyping that prompts the comparison between men and fierce animals or women and helpless children. And it is hardly a coincidence that women here are on the negative side of the comparison. As the saying goes, 'a woman's place is in the wrong'; and this is as true of language as it is of anything else.

The difference theorists are more suspicious than their colleagues in the dominance current of traditional value-judgements about the way women talk. They insist over and over again that women's supportiveness, for example, is a positive rather than a negative attribute. This might seem to show a strong awareness on their part of the workings of power: it is relative power that determines what is or is not socially valued. But paradoxically, in many versions of the difference approach power unaccountably disappears from the conception of gender and of difference itself. Gender becomes an innocent cultural distinction, a matter of differing (but equally valid) customs and values. It does not seem any longer to be a system of dominance and subordination.

Apart from the general doubts and suspicions this shift away from power may raise in feminist minds, it also raises internal questions for the difference theorists themselves. Consider for instance Maltz and Borker's thesis that the problems of mixed sex talk arise out of cultural mismatch rather than power imbalance; childhood experience has made men and women diverge in their expectations. Even the Zimmerman and West finding that men interrupt women can be re-read in these terms. Men's more direct conversational style comes into conflict with women's expectations of support, and each sex misunderstands the other's intentions (this might explain why the pattern is much more marked in mixed sex than in all-male talk).

But this whole account depends on the argument about children's single-sex peer groups, an argument which just pushes the problem back a stage. *Why* are girls' and boys' peer groups so different, and why in these particular ways? Does the difference really have nothing to do with the construction of a dominant identity for males and a subordinate one for females? Can we imagine a culture in which the peer group characteristics of boys and girls are reversed, boys being cooperative and other-oriented, girls being direct and confrontational? If not, why not?

Furthermore it is legitimate to ask how far adult behaviour patterns are built on a childhood foundation – is the child father to the man, or mother to the woman, in the absolute and simple sense Maltz and Borker appear to believe? For after all children and adults do not participate in exactly the same social relations. The tendency to see childhood socialisation as the most important gender-constructing process has always been strong in the social sciences, but it has also been criticised on theoretical and political grounds. Theoretically it is static, ignoring the way any one person is constantly positioned and repositioned through social interaction. Politically it leads to inertia, since it suggests that our childhood experiences have made us what we are: there is no urgent need for us to examine (and change) our own behaviours and relationships. The best we can do is raise our own children differently (a project that will fail, ironically, to the extent that children model themselves on the unreconstructed adults they encounter!)

If we believe, as many difference theorists seem to, that the best way of understanding gender relations is to study children, this saves us from having to address some very difficult practical issues which affect us in the here-and-now. We can conveniently neglect the question of what happens to all the assertive little boys and cooperative little girls when they leave the arena of childhood play and enter the adult world.

Yet this, surely, is a crucial question. However we evaluate the two styles morally – and we may certainly want to agree that supportiveness is a positive good – it is evident that instrumentally they have political consequences. They reproduce what we might call Harding's 'Spanish village syndrome' or Carol Gilligan's 'different voice', constructing women to function best in the private domain and men in the public one. Without undervaluing the private sphere itself, we can still say that this arrangement works to the advantage of men. As Fishman has argued, using

empirical evidence Maltz and Borker do not match, men are able to use a particular conversational role to underwrite their dominant position in heterosexual relations. Where they are disadvantaged, women make up the difference. This does not happen the other way about.

There is an irritating theme in some difference work of stressing the damage gender roles do to men, as if we are all similarly oppressed, our sufferings opposite but equal. (I think of this as the 'Women can't vote/Men can't cry' argument; needless to say I find it trivial and banal.) Feminists should be extremely wary of this well-intentioned but politically counterproductive move. As Jack Sattel has observed, the fabled 'inexpressiveness' of men cannot usefully be described as simply a correlate of their masculine gender role.<sup>27</sup> Once again, if we look more closely we will see that this particular role, whatever its disadvantages, has considerable utility in maintaining men's power. If one wants to be powerful, it is useful to appear invulnerable; such things as crying, showing emotion and expressing intimacy connote weakness. That, Sattel claims, is the deeper reason why they are forbidden to men.

What about the argument that male and female speech styles should be conceptualised separately from the workings of power because these styles appear most clearly in single-sex interaction? Jennifer Coates suggests it is a mistake to treat single-sex and mixed-sex interaction in the same terms.<sup>28</sup> The implication is – again drawing on the 'children's single-sex peer groups' argument – that all-women talk might be a kind of bottom line for descriptions of women's speech styles; this is the 'natural' case, existing prior to and outside the power effects observable when women talk to men.

Again, I feel that this argument has not been properly thought through. For women there is no paradise into which the serpent of sexism does not intrude. The context in which we develop our speech styles and identities is one of omnipresent patriarchal relations. For members of socially subordinate groups, subordination remains salient even though superordinates are not immediately present.

This leads me to be critical of the entire project of finding and celebrating an authentic 'female verbal culture'. This project is exemplified by Deborah Jones's article 'Gossip'.<sup>29</sup> Jones sets out to document and to praise the distinctive historical and contemporary modes of women's speech, ignored by linguists and trivialised culturally by terms like *gossip* (which Jones proposes to reclaim). But

if there is a distinctive female verbal culture – and here we need to bear in mind that women themselves are not a homogeneous group – I would argue that it has been shaped by patriarchal conditions, including the restrictions placed on women's lives and words. If so, it makes little sense to speak of 'authenticity', though feminists might wish to celebrate women's talk as an aspect of their resistance to oppression, a demonstration of skill and creativity with the limited materials at hand.

In a similar way, the writer Alice Walker celebrates the quilts and the gardens made by Afro-American women under conditions of extreme racist oppression.<sup>30</sup> But Walker's mother's garden is not more authentically female or Black than Walker's own essay about it. It would not be right to celebrate a society in which Afro-American women could make quilts and gardens but not write essays, and indeed Walker condemns that society even as she evokes the value of the gardens and the quilts. Feminist linguistic researchers must observe the same caveat.

#### THE POLITICS OF VARIATION: A REPRISÉ

The title of Chapter 3, 'The politics of variation', was intended to underscore the central point about sex difference research: that it is always undertaken for political reasons, and has traditionally been used to justify sex discrimination and exclusionary practices, making them seem natural and inevitable. Thus it would be perfectly possible for a sexist to argue from the very findings reported in this chapter that women make poor leaders and high-pressure salespersons because of their lack of assertiveness, whereas they make good carers (nurses, home helps and so on) because of their sensitivity to the needs of other people in conversation.

The use of feminist linguistic research for such overtly sexist purposes may seem unlikely; but even now there are indications that something more subtly worrying is happening. The May 1990 issue of *Glamour*, a widely-read US women's magazine, has an article called 'Girl talk, boy talk' about a book on male/female communication by the linguist Deborah Tannen.<sup>31</sup> In the article, Tannen's findings are presented as advice to women on how best to communicate with men: for example, 'Speak in a straightforward way to male subordinates. Women shy away from blatant orders but men find the indirect approach manipulative and confusing'.

This is a fairly obvious gloss of Maltz and Borker's discussion of Goodwin's findings on directives, but the *Glamour* presentation of it does two things the linguists do not do, or at least not to anything like the same extent. First, it makes the differences seem natural and inevitable – rather than questioning where they come from and what social functions they serve, readers are urged to accept and adjust to them. Secondly, it treats male/female differences as a problem *for women*. Women become responsible, as usual, for the 'interactional shitwork' of facilitating effective communication. (I doubt that men are reading magazines which counsel them to modify their style in order 'to communicate better with all the women in your life'!)

A recent issue of American *Cosmopolitan* had an even more blatant example: an article (patronisingly titled 'Why not speak like a grown-up?') listed various things for women to avoid when speaking in work settings, including tag questions, rising intonation and high pitch, because these things undermine a speaker's perceived authority. Readers will doubtless be able to identify the source of this advice as the work of Robin Lakoff: work which is highly contentious because of its speculativeness, lack of supporting evidence and hostility to nonaggressive speech styles. The effect of repeating Lakoff's observations as *prescriptions* is to endorse them as true (which they may not be) and to reinforce the value Lakoff places on particular features (which is disputed, and arguably sexist). Linguistic research which was meant to help women understand and change their reality is being used here to hurt them, if only by creating in the mind of the female reader one more problem, a linguistic inadequacy for which she must blame herself.

It is perhaps even more worrying that this kind of advice also turns up in assertiveness training texts and manuals used to train women in business. A typical American text called *Leadership Skills for Women* counsels: 'Use strong, direct language and stand firm when you are interrupted. Statistics show that women allow themselves to be interrupted 50 per cent more often than men. Don't contribute to those statistics'.<sup>31</sup> Apparently, the authors have concluded from published research that women get interrupted because they 'allow themselves' to be (does this 'contributory negligence' argument remind us of anything?) and if they want to succeed they must emulate male speech. This is the dominance approach carried to an extreme even Lakoff might shy away from.

And though this manual, *Glamour* and *Cosmopolitan* are moderately 'feminist' publications and clearly mean well, in the end I see little difference between the kind of advice they peddle and the more obviously sexist 1950s books of advice to brides or wives on how to talk to their husbands.

It is surely nothing to celebrate when sociolinguistic descriptions of behaviour are turned into folklinguistic prescriptions about (women's) behaviour; but given the realities of history and power it is also nothing to be surprised about. Unfortunately all studies of sex difference in every field whatsoever carry this kind of danger. And I want to conclude by examining various ways for feminists to respond to it, apart from simply recommending that women eliminate difference by learning to behave more like men.

One possible response is to deny that the purported differences apply to all women, or to all situations. Just because Ms Average is a cooperative rather than competitive speaker, we cannot assume that Jane Smith who is sitting in front of you will not deliver the goods. In any case, Ms Average is a product of her sexist society. Since sexism is unjust you should make it a point to put women in positions where they have a chance to overcome their historic powerlessness. In terms of Julia Kristeva's model, which I introduced in the last chapter, this would be a first stage, liberal equal-rights-and-opportunities response.

Or alternatively we can accept the differences and reject the conclusions drawn from them, stressing instead the value of women's ways of doing things. Someone sensitive and caring might make a better leader or salesperson than someone more competitive. This would be a second stage response.

Finally, we can reverse the terms of the argument, insisting that women's difference from men is not the *cause* of sexism but an effect of sexism; social practices like not hiring women in certain positions or allowing them to become leaders have the effect, over time, of producing the very differences which are then used to justify the original discrimination.

While a feminist linguistics will probably want to make strategic use of all these responses, it is this last one, in my opinion, that is most radical theoretically, and most resistant to the danger that research into male/female differences will be co-opted to serve the existing sexist system.

## SUMMARY

These two chapters about sex differences in language use have examined not only the linguistic (how women and men talk) but also the metalinguistic (that is, how they analyse and talk about talk, either in folk or in expert terminology). I have suggested that there is an important connection between the linguistic and the metalinguistic, since the important thing about sex difference is not what it *is* so much as what it is made to mean. In Chapter 5 I propose to look at a different aspect of metalinguistic politics: the way in which grammarians and linguists have projected a male/female dichotomy on to the languages of the world, and their attempts to use grammar as a tactical weapon in the battle of the

SEXES

# 5

## False Dichotomies: Grammar and Sexual Polarity

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### INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 4, we examined the meaning of sex differences in linguistic behaviour. But the stereotypical interpretation of those behavioural differences is only one example of a much more pervasive cultural phenomenon: the tendency to classify anything and everything in terms of the opposition masculine versus feminine. Yin and yang; animus and anima; the pairing turns up so often, not surprisingly it is sometimes taken for a universal principle of human thought and categorisation.

Jack Rosenthal reports a 'thought experiment' in which people were presented with the following pairs of words:

Knife/fork  
Ford/Chevrolet  
Salt/pepper  
Vanilla/chocolate

and were asked to say which word of each pair was masculine and which was feminine.<sup>1</sup> Strangely enough, people were able to perform this bizarre task without difficulty. Even more strangely, there was near total agreement on the 'right' classification. *Knife*, *Ford*, *pepper* and *chocolate* were masculine, while *fork*, *Chevrolet*, *salt* and *vanilla* were feminine.

This phenomenon is called 'metaphorical gender', and there are three interesting things to note about it. First, it obviously has nothing to do with the actual gender of the words, since all of them refer to ungendered objects or substances. This seems to indicate that the concepts 'masculine' and 'feminine' are infinitely detachable from anything having to do with 'real' sexual difference.

Second, the classification does not seem to obey any single, logical principle. Rosenthal speculates that *pepper* and *chocolate* are classed as masculine because they are stronger flavours than *salt* and *vanilla*, while *Chevrolet* is feminine because of its sound (it's a longer word than *Ford*, has an open vowel at the end, connotes 'Frenchness') and *knife* is masculine because of the association with aggression. But the more pairs one adds, the more different dimensions one has to invoke to explain their classification. This suggests that the concepts 'masculine' and 'feminine' operate conceptually at a highly abstract level, subsuming a number of lower-level contrasts such as 'strong/weak' and 'active/passive'. In other words, we are dealing here with a tightly-woven mesh of metaphorical oppositions.

Third, and perhaps most important of all, the attribution of gender is *relational*: it depends on the contrast between two terms. If someone were asked, 'is salt masculine or feminine', they would be at a loss; the question only makes sense if they are asked to compare salt with pepper. And if the comparison is changed, the gender may change as well. For example, if people are given the pair spoon/fork instead of knife/fork, they will say that *fork* is masculine. If *fork* is feminine in relation to *knife* and masculine in relation to *spoon*, clearly there is nothing inherently masculine or feminine, even at an abstract and nonliteral level, in the work *fork* itself.

This 'relational' aspect of metaphorical gender suggests something very interesting which feminists of the twentieth century have placed great emphasis upon. The terms *masculine* and *feminine* do not refer to 'essences', definite, unchanging qualities which exist independently. If there were no concept of femininity, there could be no concept of masculinity either. In fact, as the reader may have noticed already, the two terms behave exactly like the classical Saussurean sign discussed in Chapter 2, defined not by their essence but by their *difference*.

In societies organised around sexual differentiation (which means all known societies) we are led to believe that masculine and feminine are simple categories of the natural world, like plants and animals or lions and tigers: the two classes exist and can be defined. Feminist theorists have argued that this is a mistake; or less politely, a con. The only thing that is constant is the assertion of difference.

One of the earliest and most famous discussions of this was the anthropologist Margaret Mead's study *Sex and Temperament*.<sup>2</sup> In it Mead pointed out that every society designates some qualities

and activities 'masculine' and others 'feminine'; but the qualities and activities themselves may be different, and even opposite, from one culture to the next. One group of people consider fishing men's work and weaving women's, while two hundred miles away it is women who fish and men who weave. Or, it might be added if we wish to consider history rather than geography, medieval Europeans represented women as sexually insatiable, while the Victorians represented them as naturally frigid, engaging in sex only as a marital duty.

Mead makes another important point. Whatever is thought masculine is also valued more highly than whatever is considered feminine. In other words, and this again has been emphasised in more recent feminist theory, we are dealing not just with a (constructed) *difference*, but with a *hierarchy*.

Another way to put this is that men, the more powerful gender group, impose their own definition on the masculine/feminine opposition. As Simone de Beauvoir argued in her book *The Second Sex*, man has constructed woman as 'the Other', as the one who is not oneself.<sup>3</sup> Whatever characterises men, in their own view, women are defined as the opposite. If men are active, women must be passive; if men are rational, women are emotional; if men represent good, then women must represent evil. In other words, all the negative characteristics of humanity as men perceive them are projected onto women.

The feminist thinker Hélène Cixous has pointed out that this is a longstanding tradition of Western thought. The Greeks – who are usually taken as founders of the Western philosophical tradition – conceptualised the universe in terms of various 'binary oppositions', that is, either/or dichotomies.<sup>4</sup> These included limit/infinity, light/darkness, reason/unreason, mind/body, good/evil, and masculine/feminine. The terms on the left of the opposition are identified with one another and are 'positive' for Greek thinkers. The terms on the right are also grouped together, and represent the dangerous 'negative'. Once again the oppositions are really hierarchies. And once again their metaphorical structure places women in the realm of all that is negative, evil and dangerous, in need of control.

This brings us to an approach recently fashionable in critical theory and denoted by the term *deconstruction*. Deconstruction is an approach, most closely associated with the philosopher Jacques Derrida, in which the critic exposes the hidden workings of a binary opposition. The opposition is normally used to make distinctions,

to argue that X and Y are polar opposites, X one thing and Y another. The deconstructive critic points out, however, that the logic of the argument is faulty, since actually one cannot define X without invoking Y and *vice versa*. It is impossible to define things in absolute terms and pin down their meaning, because all meaning is relational and therefore shifting (like the metaphorical gender of fork). Furthermore there is a covert hierarchy between X and Y, which the distinction depends on though it does not explicitly say so.

In the hands of feminists like Cixous or Luce Irigaray, deconstruction poses two questions about the masculine/feminine dichotomy and the associated oppositions (such as good/evil or reason/emotion). First of all, is it sensible to think of masculine/feminine as polar opposites? Luce Irigaray, for instance, has argued that it is totally reductive to define the feminine as the not-masculine in relation, say, to sexuality.<sup>5</sup> Freud was guilty of this reductionism. In his system, men have a penis and women have no penis. Irigaray points out that whatever Freud may say, women in fact possess sex organs of their own – they are different, but not opposite, to men's. A binary opposition, penis versus no penis, rather obviously fails to capture the reality of sexual difference.

The second question concerns the value placed on feminine as opposed to masculine terms in an opposition. As we have seen, femininity is associated with darkness, infinity, the body, emotion or unreason and so on. All these things become negative. But perhaps they are devalued precisely because of their association with femininity; and perhaps it is therefore one important task of feminism to *revalue* them, even to celebrate them. Feminists should question, for instance, the way Western thought has downgraded the body relative to the mind, the emotions relative to reason. (We will look at this point again in Chapter 8.)

What has any of this to do with language, more precisely with the 'grammar' of this chapter's title? On a fairly simple level, it is obvious that the masculine/feminine opposition pervades the English language and its conceptual metaphorical structure. The experiment with word pairs demonstrates that clearly enough. But on a more elevated theoretical level, it is also true that the masculine/feminine dichotomy has entered very deeply into the system of linguistic analysis we call grammar. Gender is a basic grammatical category in the languages of the world. As we shall see, this fact has consequences for the discussion of gender more generally. In

addition – and I will begin with this point – linguistics has given a special status to the kind of binary opposition masculine/feminine exemplifies, and of which deconstructionists, including feminists, have been critical.

## LINGUISTICS AND THE BINARY OPPOSITION

The reader will recall that Saussure placed special emphasis on the principle of contrast in language structure. For example, the sound /p/ differs in one salient particular from the sound /b/. That particular is what phoneticians call 'voicing', the vibration which is present in /b/ but not in /p/. We can contrast the two sounds (and indeed, many other pairs of sounds) in terms of a binary opposition, [+ voice] or [-voice].

Students of linguistics are taught early on about the importance of binary oppositions like this one, and are encouraged to look for two-term contrasts, x and not-x, in the linguistic data they analyse. They may even be taught that the mind is organised around this kind of contrast, which is 'natural' in language and thought.

Two questions arise here. One is whether binary oppositions exist in language to be discovered, or whether they are constructed as a convenient method of analysing language. Are they natural to language structure, or natural in the sense of coming easily to the analyst? The other question is: if we do tend to think in oppositions, is this an innate tendency or a learned one?

There is also a third question. Whatever the answers to the previous questions, are they equally applicable to every level of linguistic analysis? Let us suppose that binary oppositions are natural in the sound system of a language, that because of the physical properties of our auditory apparatus it is easier for us to distinguish x/not-x-type contrasts. (There is some plausibility in this suggestion, because infants and certain animals appear able to perceive things like the presence or absence of voicing.) Does this mean the oppositions are also natural in the grammatical and semantic (meaning-related) components of a language?

There is a model of word-meaning (called componential analysis) which depends on binary oppositions. The aim of this approach is to reduce the meaning of a word to a series of so-called 'primitive features' which are expressed as [+x] or [-x]. For instance, the word *animal* has the features [+animate] and [-human]. It has been argued

that the primitive features are innate, and the tendency to make binary oppositions is natural to human cognition.<sup>6</sup>

The trouble is, very few differences of meaning are genuinely of the [+ / - x] kind. Animateness and humanness are arguably 'real' either/ors, but what about a pair like old/young? Componential analysis would handle these as a single feature, say [+ old] or [-old], but this would be somewhat unsatisfactory because although *old* and *young* are dictionary antonyms, age is a continuum rather than an opposition.

And what of the masculine/feminine dichotomy? Anatomically speaking, it is an either/or. In componential analysis it is usually taken as an obvious primitive feature, so that a word like *wife* would have the feature [-male]. The idea that femaleness is part of the definition of the word *wife* seems relatively reasonable; but questions arise when one considers that – as we noted above – gender seems to be a conceptual component in many unrelated lexical items; and that oppositions often function covertly as hierarchies, which means it may not be a neutral fact that this system represents women as the negative of men.

### **Plus and minus male: negative semantic space?**

In her book *Man Made Language*, Dale Spender takes aim at the componential analysts.<sup>7</sup> She takes their practice of representing a feminine gendered component of meaning as [-male] as a sign of the fact that women in language are relegated to 'negative semantic space'.

In my opinion, Dale Spender here has made an error: the error of failing to distinguish between a bias in the language and a bias in the analytic system used by linguists. Certainly, the [-male] convention is sexist. The only rule in componential analysis is that every opposition must be classified by plus or minus values on a single dimension; [+ / - female] would be equally valid, and the fact that the analysts chose the other alternative doubtless reflects their (predictable) perception that men are the norm of humanity.

But Spender makes a leap in the argument, saying: 'One of our fundamental rules for making sense of the...world is...that the male represents the positive while the female, necessarily then, represents the negative'.<sup>8</sup> One of *whose* fundamental rules for making sense of the world is this? From the evidence of componential analysis, it is one of certain linguists' fundamental rules; and

extrapolating a little with the observations of Mead, de Beauvoir and Cixous in mind, it is a fundamental rule among sexist Western thinkers down the ages. *But that does not mean that the rule is built into our language itself and as such must eternally be every speaker's rule.*

In suggesting the rule is an inalienable part of the language, Dale Spender ironically assists those she criticises in making their sexism look natural, when she ought to be exposing it as a cultural construct. Spender implies that linguists are passively following a sexist rule of English grammar; I suggest they are actively creating one. This is all part of the same project described by Simone de Beauvoir and H el ene Cixous, a project of defining gender in a particular way and trying to make it look like an essence, something real and unchanging and natural and necessary.

Let us go back to the claim that the binary oppositions of componential semantics are natural and innate. I would want to counter this by arguing that on the contrary, few things are more obviously cultural and learned than lexical opposites. They are like the metaphorical gender attributions we examined at the beginning of this chapter, in that they follow no single principle, they do not remain constant from one context to another and they vary from culture to culture.

Most readers will probably recall being explicitly taught the concept of the antonym at school (I seem to recall that antonyms figured in the late, unlamented 11+ exam). Among the pairs children learned, at least in my day, were items like black/white (which only make sense as antonyms if you have studied physics), north/south (ditto), day/night (though in the context of fashion, the appropriate opposition is day/evening) and long/short (like old/young, a continuum or pseudo-opposite). The fact that these pairs were so assiduously taught seems to suggest that they are not innate. And indeed the logic of their oppositeness is so variable and opaque, it would surely be amazing if these particular pairs were inborn. Arguably the urge to dichotomise is a product of indoctrination and not a native habit. It is prized in cultures which use second-order systems of logic and dialectic to reason about the world.

We can sum up the thread of the argument here by saying that binary oppositions, such as masculine/feminine, are not themselves the first principles of semantics and human cognition, they are a system grafted on in the attempt to analyse those things. Their content is determined by cultural considerations, rather than natural

facts. Furthermore they are not very successful in capturing the complexity of language.

None of this means, however, that their existence can simply be disregarded. Feminists resist the idea that the masculine/feminine opposition is natural, because only if it is cultural can it be criticised and changed; but in the meantime it would be foolish to underestimate the real effects of pervasive cultural beliefs. In the case of language, there is obviously an interaction between the first order system – the language itself – and the second order system of grammar, in which language is represented to its users. We can see this very clearly if we consider the grammatical category of gender.

#### THE CASE OF GENDER: GRAMMAR AND IDEOLOGY

Gender in language is probably the most obvious and familiar example of a masculine/feminine linguistic dichotomy. It has inspired centuries-worth of discussion and analysis. And oddly enough, that discussion and analysis has always been coloured by the extra-linguistic ideology of sexual difference and male superiority.

#### **Defining gender**

The term 'gender' as applied to grammar originated, as did many other grammatical terms, in the linguistic scholarship of ancient Greece – it is usually credited to Protagoras. The word is derived from a word meaning 'class' or 'kind', and it referred to the division of Greek nouns into three different classes, traditionally labelled 'masculine', 'feminine' and 'neuter'.

Greek, like many other Indo-European languages, has what is known as 'grammatical gender'. In a grammatical gender language, nouns are placed in classes not according to their meaning but according to their form – for example, the patterning of their inflectional endings – and the way they behave when it comes to the agreement of adjectives, articles and pronouns (the technical term for this is 'concord'). Masculine, feminine and neuter are labels for formal properties and have nothing to do with what a word actually means. For example, the Latin word for a table is *mensa*. The ending, -a, signals that this word is feminine; it will take feminine forms of the adjective, for instance. But the meaning of the item *mensa* (table)

clearly includes, in the terms of componential analysis, a [-animate] feature, ruling out any semantic feminine element.

Latin and Greek had three genders (as does modern German); there are also languages with two (such as French) and languages which have a much larger set (African Bantu languages, for example). All these possibilities exemplify the phenomenon of grammatical gender because items are classified according to their form.

English, by contrast, has developed a different kind of gender (I say 'has developed' because in its earliest form it had the Germanic three-way grammatical classification). In English, gender is determined not by form but by meaning: the word *table*, unlike *mensa*, would always be neuter in this system (the correct pronoun would be 'it') because it refers to an inanimate object. Whereas any word referring to an entity with a biological sex would be either masculine or feminine. There is also a large group of words which can refer to either sex – words like *driver* and *friend*; they are said to have 'common gender', and the question of concord is decided in each specific instance (that is, *driver* will sometimes be *she*, other times *he*; there is also the problem of the unspecified, generic driver, the appropriate pronoun for whom is a major linguistic headache for today's speakers).

The name for this meaning-oriented classification is 'natural gender'. English speakers do indeed find it natural, and complain mightily about the bizarre foreign habit of assigning gender to anything from a turnip to a sideboard. (In the light of Rosenthal's experiment, perhaps these chauvinists would be wise not to push the point too far!)

What I have just summarised is the 'standard account' of gender to be found in grammatical textbooks. In practice, though, the system does not work quite this way. Feminists in particular have had reason to express their puzzlement.

For instance, someone contemplating a sentence like the following (from an issue of *Women's Journal*) might be excused for suspecting that so-called 'natural gender' is natural only if one happens to be male:

Man is unique among the apes in that he grows a long beard, and it is to this that he owes his superior intelligence

By contrast, Germanic philologists of the nineteenth century laboured long and hard to prove that grammatically masculine and

feminine words have semantically as well as formally gendered qualities. All of which might prompt us to ask the question, what is the real connection between gender and sex?

*Investigating grammatical gender*

Grammatical gender is supposed to have nothing at all to do with sex. You might think, therefore, that feminists could dismiss it with relief as a non-issue. English-speaking feminists have indeed paid little attention to it; but European scholars have felt obliged to take it up. This is because, in the words of the German feminist Marielouise Janssen-Jurreit,

For two thousand years there has been an unresolved question: whether word endings of nouns and pronouns, as well as articles, are an extension of the qualities regarded as male or female.<sup>9</sup>

Linguists today would consider this question a silly and misguided one; while according to John Lyons, author of a wide-ranging introductory reference text, gender often reflects some kind of semantic criterion, he insists that the crucial factor is 'not necessarily sex'.<sup>10</sup> It is clear, though, that scholars from Protagoras to the nineteenth century would not have agreed with this. For them it was important that gender should reflect sex, even if on a highly metaphorical level. Doubtless this wish was at bottom an ideological one, inspired by the same mania for dividing the world into masculine and feminine that is still at work today.

Protagoras found gender assignation in Greek inconsistent and illogical – for example, there were cases when two words referring to the same thing had different genders – and he went so far as to advocate reform (he was ridiculed for this by Aristophanes, and the attempt was unsuccessful). Later scholars contented themselves with trying to find an abstract basis on which gender might turn out to be logical after all. And the logic they sought was the logic of sexual difference and male superiority.

The nineteenth century Germanic philologist Jakob Grimm believed that grammatical gender was in some sense a more advanced form of natural gender. Whereas natural gender was based on the brute fact of biological sex-reference, grammatical gender was based on the more abstract divination of masculine and feminine qualities in the meanings of words. Grammatical gender developed, therefore, when speakers passed to a higher level of reasoning in terms of general principles.

Grimm spelled out these principles as they applied to gender. 'The masculine', he explained, 'means the earlier, larger, firmer, more inflexible, swift, active, mobile, productive; the feminine the later, smaller, smoother, the more still, suffering, receptive'.<sup>11</sup>

Some writers, according to Janssen-Jurreit, turned Grimm's thesis around and took the grammatical gender of a word as evidence of whether what it denoted was masculine or feminine. Theodor Hippel wrote that women were not rational on the grounds that the German word for reason was grammatically masculine. (Presumably this means that in France, where *raison* is feminine, matters were precisely the other way about!) We may generously assume that Hippel did not really believe what he said, but was merely putting a rhetorical flourish on a widely-accepted piece of wisdom. Yet there are always some rhetorical flourishes too imbecilic even to be considered; it tells us something that this, apparently, was not one of them.

In these analyses linking grammatical gender with sex, it was taken for granted that the three genders – masculine, feminine and neuter – embodied a hierarchy of value. Some languages quite openly exploit this belief: Janssen-Jurreit notes that in Konkani, a language of south India, there is a distinction between married women (who are referred to by the feminine form) and young or widowed women (who get the neuter to mark their lesser status).<sup>12</sup>

Bernard Comrie also points out that where languages mark degrees of *animacy* by means of case inflections, as is done in Slavonic languages, gender is sometimes a relevant factor distinguishing high from lower degrees of animacy – that is, women may be designated as of 'lower animacy' than men. Comrie observes of a Slavonic form marking high animacy that historically it 'was used only for male, adult, freeborn, healthy humans, i.e. not for women, children, slaves and cripples'.<sup>13</sup> While Comrie goes on to add that this particular phenomenon is relatively rare, it is nevertheless suggestive, fitting a broader pattern in which grammatical distinctions map on to and express social ones.

In case anyone thinks this sort of thing is confined to earlier times and feudal societies, it is well to consider some more recent debates in European societies like France, Germany and Italy where grammatical gender languages are spoken. In such languages, titles for women often bear a feminine ending such as the German *-in* or Italian *-essa*. As women enter traditionally male positions of power, this has led to new coinings like *Stadtsekretärin* and *dottoressa*.

However, many women in this position do not like having a feminine title. In some cases, there might be reasonable grounds for the objection; for instance, German *-in* has traditionally been used to denote the wife of the man with the title, and it is not surprising that women who hold positions in their own right prefer to make that clear. Grappling with this problem, feminists who want to draw attention to women's presence rather than simply adopting male titles have sometimes proposed completely novel words (for instance Italian *dottora*, a feminine coining for 'doctor' that flouts the rules of Italian word-formation).<sup>14</sup>

But in many cases women object to any feminine title whatsoever, on the grounds that the feminine gender inherently downgrades any office to which it refers. As Anne Corbett has observed of Frenchwomen, 'the successful Madame prefers to be le Docteur, le Professeur, l'Ambassadeur and le Philosophe, even with the succeeding *il* which is required in formal texts'.<sup>15</sup>

Observations like these suggest that there is, in fact, a felt connection between grammatical gender and sex, and that speakers perceive a covert hierarchy between masculine and feminine, mirroring (also, of course, reproducing) the social hierarchy between them. Whatever the true origins of grammatical gender, it cannot be true that it has nothing to do with sex. A long tradition, expert and lay, which linked the two together, is still affecting attitudes and behaviour today so that the formal distinctions of grammatical gender systems can be used to mark social distinctions as well.

### *Natural gender*

For centuries, as we have just seen, commentators argued that grammatical gender really did relate to the immutable realities of sex difference. Today this notion is largely discredited among linguists and students of the European languages. On the other hand, commentators on English have recently come up with a startling reversal: they have begun to argue that natural gender, traditionally defined as a classification based on sex reference, is really a *grammatical* phenomenon.

This is not a coincidental development. It goes with a new eagerness to protect the English language from the criticisms of feminists. At Harvard University in the 1970s, women protested against the use of the generic masculine – that is, the pronoun *he* and its variants used to refer to sex-indefinite or sex-inclusive referents – in the context of theological discussion. Seventeen members of the

linguistics faculty wrote to the college newspaper, the *Harvard Crimson*, to put the women straight about what they wittily dubbed 'pronoun envy'.

Many of the grammatical and lexical oppositions in a language are not between equal members of a pair, but between two entities one of which is more marked than the other . . . . For people and pronouns in English the masculine is unmarked and hence is used as a neutral or unspecified term . . . . The fact that the masculine is unmarked in English (or that the feminine is unmarked in the language of the Tunica Indians) is simply a feature of grammar.<sup>16</sup>

In a language where classificatory distinctions are formal rather than semantic, the unmarkedness of the masculine gender might well fail to excite attention. But in a language like English, where gender distinctions are meant to be semantically-based, the Harvard faculty's claim is startling enough to deserve further scrutiny. We may begin by looking at what the two terms 'marked' and 'unmarked' mean.

Markedness theory is related to the Chomskyan search for linguistic universals (see Chapter 2). Most claims about markedness involve comparisons across languages; for example, a particular word order might turn out to be much commoner, less unexpected than the alternatives in the languages of the world or of a certain language family. Or there might be a recurring relationship between two vowels, say /u/ (as in *boot*) and /y/ (as in the French *lune*). It is generally true that /u/ may occur in languages that do not have /y/, but if a language has /y/ it normally has /u/ as well. /y/ is therefore 'more marked' than /u/. The unmarked form of something is the form you expect to find.

The Harvard linguists seem not to be making this kind of claim, however. They state that while masculine is the unmarked gender in English, feminine occupies the same place in Tunica. So this is a statement not about language universals, but about the structure of single languages. In that case, what determines that a form is unmarked?

Linguists commonly make use of several criteria. One is whether a form is morphologically basic, or whether it needs extra material added by way of an additional rule. If that sounds confusing, it can be illustrated simply; the singular number of the English noun is unmarked with respect to the plural, since the singular form is basic

and to make the plural you have to add a suffix. This criterion does not apply to the pronouns *he* and *she* (don't be fooled by the fact that *she* has more letters; it still has only two sounds). They are separate forms, neither one made out of the other.

A second criterion is precisely a form's ability to be used generically; the unmarked form subsumes the marked one. In the case we are concerned with, though, this does not help us because it is circular. *He* is generic because it is unmarked, but if we ask why it is unmarked we are told, because it is generic.

A third criterion for labelling something unmarked is relative neutrality of meaning. But in the case of gender, what can that be except a social value judgement? To whom does *he* seem more neutral, and why?

Finally, there is the criterion of frequency. If one form occurs more than its alternants, that is a reason to suspect it is unmarked with respect to them. In the case of English gender, this is not very useful, because gender is supposedly fixed by sex reference. *He* occurs whenever there is a male or indefinite referent; *she* when the referent is female. The relative frequency of these instances is an extralinguistic question rather than a linguistic one. It depends what speakers happen to be talking about.

I do not know which of these criteria, if any, the Harvard linguists would use to justify their comments. But none of them is very compelling. Furthermore there is independent evidence that the Harvard faculty was wrong in stating that the English generic masculine is simply a feature of grammar. That evidence is historical.

Scholars of the development of the English language know that generic *he* has been the undisputed standard usage for less than two centuries. Earlier texts – including texts by canonical writers like Jane Austen – suggest that so-called 'singular *they*', as in 'if someone's stolen my pen will they please return it' was also used as a generic, perhaps even more than *he*. But grammarians intent on prescribing rules of correct usage preferred *he* over *they* and stigmatised the latter as incorrect. Of course many speakers have continued to use it casually, and in some spoken contexts almost invariably, but they tend to prefer *he* in writing. This change has been brought about by the activities of prescriptive grammarians and educators, not – as the Harvard account implies – by some mysterious property of the language itself.

Our friends from Harvard might reply that there is still nothing sexist about the convention, and the triumph of *he* might even reflect

its 'naturalness' for the function the prescriptivists laid down for it. In that case, we would have to refer them to Ann Bodine's excellent essay 'Androcentrism in prescriptive grammar'.<sup>17</sup>

Bodine not only documents the prescriptivist promotion of *he* over *they*, she also quotes extensively from the passages in which grammarians give reasons for their choice. It is evident from this quotation that the grammarians were mainly motivated not by considerations of linguistic naturalness or logic (for example, the clash of singular and plural implicit in the use of *they*; and as Bodine points out, why in any case is number concord more important than gender concord?) but quite explicitly by sexism. They referred to the masculine as 'the worthier gender', asserting that as the male is superior in nature, so this should be mirrored in grammar.

In the same passages that enjoined readers to use *he*, grammarians called for other changes, changes which were related ideologically, but not linguistically, to the pronoun question. For example, one sage quoted by Bodine railed against the custom of saying that X and Y were married, or worse, that Mr X was married to Miss Y. Propriety would be better served, he pointed out, if this fact were always expressed in terms of the woman being married to the man, since it is the woman who is passed from father to husband and loses her identity. Another writer objected to phrases like 'Mrs X and her husband are not at home'. He argued that reference to a male should precede any reference to a woman, again reflecting the order of nature.

In the face of this kind of thing, it surely becomes impossible to maintain that the workings of gender in English are untouched by sexism. It is true that today's speakers, not knowing the origins of generic *he*, may regard it as just a feature of grammar. But historical scholarship gives this notion the lie: since the form was originally prescribed for sexist reasons, feminists who find it sexist are hardly projecting some novel and bizarre interpretation onto an innocent and neutral rule.

The affair of the Harvard linguists illustrates not only their own sexist prejudice but also their faithful adherence to the more questionable tenets of linguistic science. They built a vast edifice of mystifying theoretical explanation on the assumption grammar is a 'natural', autonomous system that cultural practices play no part in shaping. Unfortunately for them, the assumption in this case was false.

## CONCLUSION

One cultural tendency feminists must be critical of, and ultimately indeed try to eliminate, is the tendency to impose the categories 'masculine' and 'feminine' on every aspect of life, so we see them as natural categories instead of what they are, restrictive and unequal constructs. It is obvious that the gender-dichotomising tendency goes deep, and that our languages are implicated in it (males and females have different given names, different address titles, different pronouns...) but it is perhaps less obvious that our *metalanguages* – the systems we use for talking about language, including grammatical categories – are implicated too.

One reason why the ideological premises of grammar so often remain hidden is that linguists deny their existence. Partly this is a matter of protecting their expertise: any fool can claim generic *he* is sexist, but only the linguist can explain it is really 'unmarked'. Partly, too, it reflects the investment linguists have in scientific objectivity. To admit that even some aspects of linguistic analysis have political implications is, in the eyes of many professionals, to undermine the status of linguistics as a science.

Linguists therefore choose to distance themselves from questions of politics and ideology. Theoretical concepts like Saussure's *langue* help to reassure linguists that they are not dealing directly with speakers who inhabit the real world of social and power relations, but only with a pure, decontextualised system. Hence we get what would otherwise be an absurdity: the spectacle of linguists telling speakers off for wanting to make 'unnecessary' changes in their language, which is seen, oddly, as something that exists independently of the speakers who use it.

Another distancing strategy linguists use is the technique of forgetting or ignoring history. For the history of linguistic analysis in the West is overwhelmingly a prescriptive and overtly a political one.<sup>18</sup> Any thoughtful linguist must wonder from time to time if such a legacy can have been shaken off completely in the relatively short time during which scientific linguistics has existed. It needs to be admitted that linguistic science does not begin on a *tabula rasa*. Just as linguists today use traditional categories like 'gender' or 'case', so they also inherit traditional value judgements and myths. Even when it eschews prescriptivism and presents itself as science, grammar/linguistics remains a branch of patriarchal scholarship which is guilty of perpetuating sexism.

Though earlier I criticised Dale Spender for confusing two different things, in fact it is not always easy to make a clear-cut distinction between sexism in language and sexism projected on to language by systems of linguistic analysis. The two are always interacting. There is consequently some overlap between this chapter and the next one, which deals with the broader 'sexist language' debate and discusses some feminist proposals for reform.

# 6

## Making Changes: The Debate on Sexist Language

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### INTRODUCTION

The sexism we looked at in Chapter 5 was expressed in both lay and expert systems for analysing language. It is one of the arguments of this book that the metalinguistic practice of talking *about* language is as susceptible to feminist theoretical discussion as any other kind of linguistic practice, and just as important. I have also argued that feminists should be careful not to confuse the linguistic and the metalinguistic, even if the boundary between them is often fuzzy. In making this point, though, I did not intend to suggest that metalinguistic discourse is the only legitimate target for feminists. What, then, of the sexism that seems to be built into language itself?

The topic of sexism in language is probably the best known of all feminist linguistic concerns. Since I assume that readers will be familiar with the problem, this chapter will not be a straightforward restatement of it or a listing of offensive usages. Instead it will deal with two more theoretical questions. What makes sexist language problematic? And what can be done about it?

### DEFINING SEXIST LANGUAGE

The term 'sexist language' immediately raises a problem of definition. The word *sexism* originally was coined to refer to ideas and practices that downgrade women relative to men. Nowadays, though, it is often used to refer to ideas and practices that treat either sex 'unfairly', or even just differently. On this definition, sexist language might not mean only expressions that exclude, insult or trivialise women, but also those that do the same thing to men.

Indeed this 'gender neutral' definition of sexism has become so prevalent even since the first edition of this book was written, it is necessary in this revised edition to be much more explicit about my use of the term.

One recent writer has pointed, for instance, to the 'sexism' of expressions like 'innocent women and children' in reports of war or terrorist actions.<sup>1</sup> He notes that male civilians may also be injured and killed in combat. He also objects to the now-common term 'mothering'. Why assume, he asks, that men are not interested in caring for their children? Why not use a neutral term like 'parenting'?

Why indeed? The answer is not that feminism, or society in general, has set out to discriminate – linguistically or otherwise – against men. The usages objected to as 'anti-male' are certainly sexist, but not for the reasons some men seem to think. In fact they follow the logic feminists identify as sexist because it assumes *women's* subordinate position.

The phrase 'innocent women and children' is not so much a slur on men as a way of infantilising women – classing them, with children, as helpless and passive victims incapable of political agency or moral judgement. The word 'mothering' is sexist in many contexts because it reinforces the 'natural' connection of women with children and childcare – a connection that feminists have criticised, since under our present social arrangements it has the entirely sexist consequences of defining non-mothers as non-women, restricting women's opportunities to do other things if they wish, exploiting their unpaid labour and in some cases causing them to be seen as less important than the children they give birth to.

The idea that sexism, in language as well as other spheres, can 'cut both ways' is attractive to many men and indeed to many women. Since most Western societies are liberal in outlook, cherishing the proposition that 'we're all individuals', it is not surprising that the early, uncompromising identification of sexism with women's oppression was quickly challenged and replaced with the notion of individuals being oppressed by their restrictive sex roles. In my opinion however this is a red herring. Sexism is a system in which women and men are not simply different, but unequal; as I noted in Chapter 4, this is the origin and the function of 'sex roles'. Sexism in language is one manifestation of the system, and it works to the disadvantage of women, not men.

APPROACHING SEXIST LANGUAGE

In this discussion, I will confine myself to discussing examples of sexism from the English language, though of course it exists and has been analysed in other languages too. Feminists have noted that the lexicon and grammatical system of English contains features that exclude, insult and trivialise women. Some of them have posited underlying mechanisms of language change to account for this; some have been more interested in relating it to social realities, treating language as a sort of cultural key rather than as a self-contained system with its own particular dynamic; others have seen it as their main task to suggest linguistic reforms that will modify or eliminate offensive usages.

It is really this last concern that has given feminist objections to sexist language their public visibility, since feminists have demanded concrete changes in speech and writing. Under this pressure, conventions have indeed changed. Newspapers feel obliged to permit expressions like *angry young men and women* where twenty years ago *angry young men* would have sufficed. References to *chairpersons* and *spokeswomen* no longer excite much comment. Even pronouns are on the move.

But this is not to say that sexist language is not alive and well in English-speaking communities. There is always room in the newspaper for an amusing (and sometimes invented) item about earnest left-wing council proposals to rename manholes 'access chambers' or – even more hilarious – 'personholes'. But what is interesting is that even die-hard sexists have had to change their argument in defence of traditional usage. They do not on the whole deny a male bias in conventional English, but they pretend to object to change on purely linguistic grounds – for instance that one should not tamper with grammar, that nonsexist forms are unaesthetic or even, as a last resort, that willed changes in language destroy freedom of thought and usher in totalitarianism. As Stephen Kanfer trumpeted in 1972 in *Time* magazine,

The feminist attack on social crimes may be as legitimate as it was inevitable. But the attack on words is only another social crime – one against the means and the hope of communication.<sup>2</sup>

Poor, poor language, attacked in its innocence by feminists intent on destroying its virtue. Lucky for language that so many men are eager

to protect it. Is this veiled rape imagery coincidental, I wonder? Men have often personified language as a woman. Tillie Olsen quotes W.H. Auden describing the poet as a father, 'begetting' poems on language.<sup>3</sup> He is, of course, to be master over her. Olsen points out that this sort of imagery is alienating for poets who happen to be women; I would point out in addition the rather sinister implication that men are somehow masters of language, so that they and not we are entitled to decide her fate.

In any case there is something absurd about the notion that language or words can be attacked independently of their users. There is also something disingenuous about it, since by setting language up as a thing, a monolith, it stops us asking *whose* words, images and traditions will be under attack if the conventions are changed. Kanfer's assertion that words are, in the end, worth more than the 'legitimate' social grievances of feminists is, to say the least, a weak and unconvincing argument.

The fact that so many people object so strenuously to the feminist 'attack on words' suggests, to me at least, that this issue of sexism in language is not the trivial diversion it is often made out to be. But the question remains: why is it important? Is sexist language just an offensive reminder of the way the culture sees women, as nonentities and scapegoats? Or is it positively harmful in and of itself? Can it be reformed, and if so, should it be?

These are questions of theoretical importance, and feminists themselves do not agree on the answers. Most feminists agree, of course, that sexist language exists and is a bad thing; but on the question of why, they are divided. A particularly important division is between those who regard sexist language as a *symptom* and those who regard it as a *cause*.

### **Sexism in language: symptom or cause?**

The 'symptomatic' camp considers most instances of sexist language – things like generic masculine pronouns, the word 'man', special titles for women and so on – unintentional rudeness stemming from people's ignorance and carelessness. These faults can be cured by a determined reformer who (a) draws people's attention to the offending forms, explaining why they offend, and then (b) suggests an alternative form that people can use instead.

Casey Miller and Kate Swift, the authors of a useful *Handbook of Nonsexist Writing*, are typical representatives of the symptomatic

tendency.<sup>4</sup> For them, the major problem with sexist language is that it is outdated. It persists only as a matter of ingrained habit, not ideology. Most people are accustomed to follow linguistic rules more or less slavishly, but in this case they would be glad to change if only someone gave them a new set of clear rules to follow (an earlier work by Miller and Swift was subtitled 'New Language in New Times': it seems they take the optimistic view that we are living in a postfeminist world).<sup>5</sup>

The reason why changes ought to be made in language is to bring it into line with the way things really are. It is the business of language to represent reality, so to the extent that it is stuck in a vanished world where woman's place was in the home, and so on, language is misleading us and failing to do its job. In the words of Miller and Swift:

The public counts on those who disseminate factual information...to be certain that what they tell us is as accurate as research and the conscientious use of language can make it. Only recently have we become aware that conventional English usage...obscures the actions, the contributions and sometimes even the very presence of women. Turning our backs on that insight is an option, of course, but it is an option like teaching children the world is flat.<sup>6</sup>

Sexist language distorts the truth: realising this, right-thinking people will proceed to self-criticism and reform. Purged of prejudice, our language can be used 'conscientiously' to disseminate 'accurate' information.

The work of Miller and Swift has been enormously useful to feminists working for practical reform. It is detailed, concrete and enables even the most unimaginative writer to eliminate gross bias without gross inelegance. I do not therefore wish to belittle or dismiss it. On theoretical grounds, however, it leaves much to be desired. In this chapter, I want to be very critical of the 'theoretical reformism' this kind of work represents, and the assumptions about language that underlie it.

'Theoretical reformism' can be defined as the belief that fairly minor changes in the surface forms of words are sufficient to solve the problem of sexism in language. It is words rather than meanings that are problematic; in fact, the point of reform is to ensure that words express what speakers 'really mean' rather than unfortunately

conveying something speakers do not intend. For example, when a speaker discusses a 'manpower problem', she probably does not intend to convey that all her employees are male. By choosing a different word – 'staffing' or 'personnel', say – she could avoid this implication. This assumes that words have clear, fixed meanings and that the purpose of language is to represent states of affairs accurately. I will argue later, though, that such assumptions are simplistic.

In fact the reformism of the symptomatic tendency has been criticised by other feminists almost from the outset. Dale Spender, for example, is a well-known representative of the alternative idea that language is a cause of oppression, and not just a symptom of it.<sup>7</sup> For Spender, it makes no sense for reformists to restrict themselves to a small set of targets like generic pronouns and *man*. All words embody sexism because their meaning and usage is fixed by men from an antifeminist perspective.

This whole question of symptom versus cause is linked, of course, with the question of linguistic determinism, language and reality. I want to examine the debate on that issue in Chapter 7, and therefore I will not enter into it fully here. Rather I will draw out my criticisms of what I am calling 'theoretical reformism' to the point where the need for more radical approaches like Spender's can be appreciated more clearly. I will also focus on the strategies feminists have used to resist sexism in language over the last two decades, which are more varied in their aims and effects than the discussion so far might suggest. This is both an interesting topic in itself and a theoretically important one; for one of the questions I will ask about linguistic reform is what constraints and limitations there might be on its effectiveness.

## ANALYSIS AND RESISTANCE: FEMINISTS FIGHT BACK AGAINST SEXIST LANGUAGE

As I have already observed, feminists are concerned both to draw out the implications of sexist language and to consider changes in linguistic practice that might mitigate the effects of this particular form of sexism. Analysis is always a necessary prelude to resistance, and in the following discussion I will not attempt to separate them.

In the interests of clarity, however, I will look at sexism in linguistic practice from two slightly different angles. Some of the sexism feminists have identified in (English) usage is of an 'everyday' type – for example, conventions for addressing women and vocabulary available to insult them. This kind of sexism can be (and has been) noted, but it is hard to get rid of because it occurs in 'unregulated' contexts: nobody has made or written down a rule saying that women can be addressed as 'dearie' or referred to as 'bitches'. In these cases, analysis may have to suffice, or feminists may have to be content with informal, guerilla-style resistance.

There are other sexist conventions of usage, however, which – although they are reproduced in everyday speech and writing – are ultimately sanctified by the authority of grammar books and dictionaries. (The infamous generic masculine pronoun is an example.) Here it is much more feasible for feminists to try and intervene more formally by criticizing existing sources, and by creating their own alternatives.

### **Sexism in everyday encounters**

#### *Small insults: terms of endearment*

Languages generally have developed systems of address – what you call a person when you talk to them face to face – which reflect the salient social distinctions of the culture (kin versus nonkin, intimate versus nonintimate, higher/lower status, to mention some very common ones). For example, as a teacher I assume the right to call my students by their first names; they have to ask me if it's permissible to use mine. If my sister called me 'Ms Cameron', though, I would be surprised and perhaps upset. The norms concerning this are complicated and sometimes hard to work out. For instance, if I have a student in my class old enough to be my mother, is it appropriate to call her by her first name?

Feminists have noted that it always seems to be appropriate for men to treat women as if they were intimates or subordinates. Women – like children – tend to be called by their first names where men would not be; and they are also recipients of endearment terms like *love*, *dear*, *honey*, *pet*, *hen* and so on.

Of course women use these terms too – with each other and with men. But if a woman calls a man *dear* she is normally either older than him or intimate with him. A man can choose to call any woman *dear* unless she is directly in authority over him (thus my male

students do not call me *dear*, though every other male on the planet may do so). It doesn't matter if the woman is older, of higher status or a total stranger. Men may still presume familiarity and superiority in their choice of address forms.<sup>8</sup>

When women complain about men calling them by endearment terms, it is often thought rather silly – the men are just trying to be friendly, after all, they do not intend any sexist slur. But there are two reasons to suspect this argument of being less than compelling. The first is the lack of parallel between the treatment of women and that of men. If a male customer my age is addressed as *sir* while I am *love*, that surely says something about the relative respect in which we are held.

But secondly, what do endearment terms mean? As I have suggested already, they connote intimacy. When used by strangers, therefore, they are inherently disrespectful. They are a unilateral declaration by the man that he need not trouble about the formalities expected between non-intimates. This is all of a piece with the way some men assume they may stare at women, stand close to them and invade their physical space by touching. The other group of people whose space and autonomy we routinely violate in this way are children. (Nor should we forget the widespread convention in racist societies that Black people are addressed by whites as *boy* and *girl*. Is this just a way of expressing friendliness? Hardly: it is a way of denying the adulthood and the dignity of a subordinated group.)

What can feminists do about this? In the case of titles, of course (that is, markers like *Miss* and *Mrs*) there have been attempts at reform, and in some countries – though not in Britain – they have been very successful. In the United States, *Ms* is now the unmarked choice of address form for women in professional contexts, and dental receptionists do not ask that irritating question, 'Is that Miss or Mrs?'

But whereas institutions can be forced to change their behaviour – I can, for example, request that my bank address me routinely as *Ms* rather than *Miss*, in everyday encounters unregulated by institutions, matters are less clear-cut. Feminists can only challenge individual men on a case-by-case basis, and go on trying to make clear why particular usages are insulting. In Berlin, for example, I heard of a woman addressed as *Fräulein* ('Miss', literally 'little woman' and widely regarded as a put-down, so that many German women have abandoned it in favour of *Frau*) by a male bus driver,

who said 'Danke, Fräulein' when she tendered her fare. The woman replied, 'Bitte, Herrlein' (you're welcome, little man). The man was obviously angry. He did not find the woman's endearment term endearing.

*Not-so small insults: 'street remarks' and verbal violence against women*  
It has been noted by sociologists that in urban settings there is a 'norm of civil inattention' whereby unacquainted people typically refrain from approaching and addressing one another in public. There are of course exceptions to the rule: you can ask someone the time, or for directions; you can expect to attract comment if your behaviour is somehow deviant, for example you are hopping down the street dressed in a clown suit. In addition, however, whole classes of people are what the sociologist Carol Brooks Gardner calls 'open persons', fair game for comments from anyone, anytime. Obvious cases include children and people with certain disabilities: but women too are 'open persons', open to casual comments on their appearance and behaviour.<sup>9</sup>

Gardner points out that some street remarks, like endearment terms, are ambiguous: in some circumstances it is acceptable and even kind to greet or compliment another. Thus women are caught in a double bind: if they take a 'compliment' at face value they confirm men's right to treat them as 'open persons', while if they ignore the remark or reply negatively they may be accused of rudeness and/or showered with abuse. Once again, it is important to note that women do *not* have reciprocal rights to treat men in a similar way.

The most important effect of street remarks, though, is that they are a way of controlling public space and defining women as intruders within it. All women, including those who find street remarks 'flattering', are aware of being watched and assessed in a way men are not, and it makes women self-conscious in a way men do not need to be. At times, self-consciousness can shade into actual fear; for many street remarks are not ambiguous but clearly hostile.

Many commentators have noted that more words are available to insult women than men, especially in sexual terms, and that words for women's bodies are more taboo than those for men's (compare *prick* and *cunt*). Whole classes of words – for instance those denoting women as sexual prey, like *ass*, *tail* and *crumpet* – have no male analogues. Nor do words like *slag*, *nympho*, *ballbreaker* and *prickease*.

Many insults applied to men are insulting because they connote homosexuality (*arsehole, bugger*). This reflects not only homophobia but also sexism, since gay men are stereotyped as effeminate, too much like women.

Obviously this linguistic phenomenon is connected with more general matters, most noticeably the sexual double standard. Women should have no sexual desires whereas men should be insatiable; if women get out of line by expressing autonomous desire or refusing to cater to men's, they will be censured. On the other hand, no group of women is more vilified than prostitutes, whose job exists precisely to cater to men's desires. Julia Stanley observes, after scouring the Oxford English Dictionary and finding 220 terms for women as prostitutes, that the prostitute for English speakers is the 'paradigmatic woman'.<sup>10</sup> Male prostitutes have no such richness of terminology associated with them, nor is that terminology extended to men in general. Prostitutes, it seems, are not paradigmatic men.

Once again we see here that contradictoriness is no barrier to the maintenance of sexist stereotypes. There are insult-words for women who have too much sex (*slag*) and women who have too little (*pricktease*); women can be *tasty* and at the same time *cunts*. The same behaviours engaged in by men are described admiringly (a male 'slag' is a *stud*).

Muriel Schulz suggests that a systematic process is at work in the history of English, which she calls 'the semantic derogation of women'.<sup>11</sup> She points out that many insult terms for women have developed from originally unisex words (thus *harlot* once meant 'a young person') or endearments (*tart* was once as 'innocent' as *honey* or *sweetie*). But when words become associated with women, they take on negative and often sexual connotations. This kind of asymmetry can even be seen in pairs of originally parallel male and female terms, like *bachelor* and *spinster* or *courtier* and *courtesan*. In each case (others would include *governor/governess*, *master/mistress*, even *tramp* (homeless man/loose woman)) the masculine term remains neutral while the feminine form undergoes derogation.

Schulz considers a number of explanations for the phenomenon she describes, and concludes that it arises from men's prejudice against women and their fear of women's 'natural' power or biological superiority. Other feminists, myself included, find the idea that men consider women biologically superior bizarre (though all powerful people to some extent fear their subordinates; this is a

fear of the unleashed anger of those who have reason to bear you a grudge). A more prosaic explanation would be that the derogation of women reflects a reality in which men regard us as inferior and define us above all in terms of our sexual attributes.

Yet the feminist analysis of insults, from the small to the truly gross, would miss something if it stopped there. The linguistic practices we have been considering have a function over and above simply 'reflecting cultural beliefs' about the inferiority and sexual nature of women. Nor are they amenable to the analysis put forward by Miller and Swift, that they somehow 'distort reality'. For women, these practices *create* a certain reality in and of themselves: they are, in fact, a form of social control and definition. Let me explain and illustrate this point.

*Insults as a form of social control*

The sociologist Sue Lees has investigated the culture of young women, paying attention to the role of words like *slag*, *slut*, and so on in their lives.<sup>12</sup> It seems that young women fear having the terms applied to them (by men and also by one another), and they police their self-presentation and sexual behaviour to avoid being labelled slags. In other words, the proliferation of terms that function as sexual slurs on women's reputation is used as a weapon to keep women in line. And – crucially – women have no such linguistic weapon to turn against men. Suppose a young woman wants to criticise a man for allegedly 'sleeping around', and suppose the man cares: what can she call him?

It is seldom pointed out that the use of verbal insults is almost always an integral part of incidents in which women are physically and sexually assaulted. Not only the acts of a rapist or batterer but his words too are experienced as terrifying and humiliating. And violent men use the resources of language to define situations in particular ways. They may use gross insults to intimidate, and endearments to redefine what they have done as consensual sex or love instead of rape, assault and battery.<sup>13</sup>

While the availability of suitable terms presumably does reflect prevailing myths about sexuality and rape, there is nothing abstract about it: the language itself constitutes an act of violence and actively recreates the same cultural beliefs. In many cases, verbal violence is the 'main event'. Terms like *cunt* and *slag* are bandied about even more often than the cock and the fist, and once again, women do not have a parallel powerful language with which to hit

back. In practice, this matters. The popular notion that words do not hurt you is by no means endorsed among women survivors of male violence.

In discussions of this problem, feminists have asked how to cope with verbal violence. One solution that has been proposed for some words is 'reclaiming' – investing a negative word with a more positive meaning. This has happened to some extent with *dyke*, a disparaging word for lesbians, and with *spinster*, less disparaging but still pretty negative, which is Mary Daly's term of choice for women who refuse to accept patriarchal society, preferring to 'spin' their own reality. Recently a volume of stories about sex was published under the title *Macho Sluts*, clearly intended among other things as a reclamation of the word *slut* (and of the promiscuous sexuality it denotes). Some women have suggested reclaiming *cunt*, pointing out that the word has connections with *cunning* (knowledge, magical power), or simply that it denotes a powerful and female area of the body.

Two problems arise here, though. One is a problem of content: it is appropriate for feminists to celebrate their diverse sexual choices (lesbianism or spinsterhood, for instance) but not, perhaps, to reduce ourselves to body parts (I would have problems referring to myself approvingly as a *cunt*, or even as a *slut*, since I would rather challenge the necessity for a linguistic category of 'unchaste' women than embrace it with joy).

The second problem concerns intent. The meaning of words is contextually variable, and depends partly on what the hearer takes the speaker to have intended in using it. A man who calls me *dyke* intends contempt rather than solidarity. (In the same way, the rappers NWA – Niggas With Attitude – are entitled to protest at the racism of other uses of *nigger* by white people. Whether to reclaim or reject this term has been a matter of some debate in Black communities.) The point is, we cannot simply change a word's meaning for the whole community by *fiat*. 'Reclaiming' can make meanings (and thus cultural beliefs) less monolithic, but it is a continuing struggle.

Recognising this, some feminists have used the alternative strategy of deliberately playing with words rather than attempting straightforwardly to redefine them. This might be called a 'metalinguistic' strategy since it involves self-conscious reflection on words – their history, their etymology, even sometimes their spelling.

*Metalinguistic strategies: reclaiming herstory*

A number of feminists – Mary Daly is a good example – find it useful to subject words to a kind of archaeological excavation, turning to the etymological dictionaries to find out where a particular word came from, what it meant and how it has changed. For instance, returning to that problematic word *cunt*, I once took part in a discussion in which a woman explained that she did not use that word because for her, its connotations were unrelievedly pornographic. She preferred to use *vagina* – until she looked it up in the dictionary, which gave its etymology (*vagina* is Latin for ‘sheath’, as in where you keep your sword). This seemed so offensive, she had abandoned *vagina* as well. She felt she had learned something new about sexism from the history of the word.

At other times it is more effective to ignore history and etymology in order to make a feminist point. The word *history* is a good example: feminists often respeak or write it as *herstory*. This reflects the notion that history means ‘his story’, so that ‘her story’ would be the female equivalent. As various pedants have pointed out, the word *history* actually derives from Latin *historia*, story, and has no connection with the English pronoun *his*. Similarly, some feminists spell *women* as *wimmin* or *womyn* to avoid including the element *men* – even though that is not the true etymology and indeed, the element is not even pronounced.

Linguists and prescriptivists find this kind of thing irritating (Goddess help anyone who tries to start a herstory course at Harvard!). But why shouldn’t feminists play with language for political ends? *Herstory* is an excellent word, pointing out with wit and elegance that history has too often been the story of men’s lives; *wimmin* might be applauded as a useful piece of spelling reform if someone other than feminists had invented it. (Incidentally, in this case men have not been above etymologising the word to suit them: Dennis Baron documents the very prevalent early etymology of *woman* as meaning either ‘womb-man’ or ‘woe-to-man’<sup>14</sup>)

Creative use of word structure, word spelling and word history is a feature of feminist writing both in the radical tradition and in the more postmodern, semiological tradition. Mary Daly’s classic work *Gyn/Ecology* is a good example of radical feminist wordplay.<sup>15</sup> Daly invents new words, breaks them up in provocative, punning ways (as with the title; and *therapist* becomes *the-rapist*) and plays on obsolete meanings, as with *glamour* (originally ‘possessed of magical powers’), *haggard* (connected with witchcraft) and *spinster* (one who

spins a new thread). Daly points out that the development of these words has tended to erase the female power once latent in their meanings. She asks why women cannot by the same token 'wrench back some wordpower'. It is a good question, and I will come back to it, as well as considering Daly's own more recent attempts at word empowerment.

The work of writers like Daly, and still more of the 'semiologist' writers like H  l  ne Cixous, raises a problem for some feminists, that of elitism. Punning, coining and wordplay are not immediately accessible to many readers; and as sustained devices, they can only be used in written texts, not in everyday speech. For all that these strategies can cause irritation, though, their value lies in the implication – a world away from the commonsense views of Miller and Swift – that the surface meanings of words are only the tip of a massive iceberg. The alternative meanings and the linguistic creativity our culture represses cannot be suppressed altogether; and if feminists choose to uncover these submerged elements of language, that is a form of resistance to the status quo. It shows that people who insist 'that's not what it means' or 'you can't say that' rest their case not on the facts of language, but on the arrogance of power.

### **Institutionalised sexism in language: dictionaries and grammars**

Earlier I drew a distinction between sexism that occurs in 'unregulated' contexts (like the use of endearment terms to women) and that which has acquired the force of a rule by being written on the linguistic equivalent of tablets of stone, the dictionary and the grammar book or usage guide. (The technical term for this engraving of linguistic norms is 'codification'. Insult terms are mostly uncoded, pronoun usage and word-spellings are examples of codified usage.) It is in the case of this institutionalised or codified sexism that feminists might seem to have most chance of changing the rules. I want now to turn to the reforming efforts made by feminists, first in the domain of the lexicon (and the dictionary, which is the 'official record' of the lexicon) and then in the domain of grammar.

#### *Spreading the word: the gatekeepers*

Feminists have often reminded those critics who complain about women changing the language that the language changes by itself,

and this process cannot be halted. Of course this is not quite accurate – language does not exist independently of speakers, and it is they who introduce innovations – but the point is well taken. Our vocabulary and semantics cannot remain fixed for all time, as some commentators, even today, might prefer. New words are coined or borrowed or made out of combined parts from existing words; the meanings of old words gradually shift.

Word meanings are especially liable to change because people learn them by hearing them in context rather than by looking up the ‘standard’ definition, and the inferences they draw can vary. For example, in the Falklands War, Mrs Thatcher accused the Argentinians of ‘prevarication’. Some people recoiled in horror from this strong language, since *prevaricate* is defined in dictionaries as meaning ‘to lie’. But Mrs Thatcher could equally have meant (and probably did mean) ‘to stall for time’. A lot of speakers think this is what *prevaricate* means; it is rather like *procrastinate* (put off until tomorrow) and the ‘stall’ meaning makes sense in most contexts where the word is actually used. If enough speakers draw the conclusion that *prevaricate* means ‘stall’, and use it accordingly, the meaning ‘lie’ will become obsolete. There will be no point telling speakers they are using *prevaricate* wrongly, because usage is the main criterion for meaning.

On the other hand it is unwise to be too democratic about this. Some people’s usage is more powerful than others’. Whether new words and new meanings are accepted can depend to some extent on what means exist to disseminate them. Educational practices can retard changes, or stigmatise them (this is relevant to the question of generic *he*, which is often still insisted on by teachers); publishing and the mass media can popularise a word, or conversely, fail to legitimate it (quality newspapers, most famously the *New York Times*, for years refused to print the word *Ms*, even if the woman being written about preferred it). The dictionary, too, has a role to play in making some meanings and words more acceptable than others.

So whether changes in sexist language are a ‘natural’ outcome of women’s changing experience, or whether they are deliberate, conscious reforms, they are not just left to take their chance in a linguistic free market. This particular market is regulated by ‘gatekeeping’ institutions: education, publishing, media, lexicography, grammar. To be acceptable in the public domain of language use (official documents, the TV News) feminist innovations have to

pass the gatekeepers. And the gatekeepers are, of course, far from neutral; they too are political institutions.

One way of intervening here is to question or subvert the authority of those institutions themselves; and the most obvious target is the dictionary. Over the last decade or so, feminists have moved progressively from attempts at nonsexist dictionary-making to attempts at feminist lexicography which radically question the nature of the whole enterprise.

*Feminists and lexicography: 'we need a dictionary, not a dick-tionary'*

Lexicography, like linguistics, claims to be descriptive rather than prescriptive, recording people's use of words without fear or favour. This is a blatantly implausible claim, of course: why would I look a word up in the dictionary to see how I use it? I reach for the dictionary when I want to know how I *should* use it. And this is fortunate, because like most speakers, I find some dictionary definitions remote from my own usage. For whom, for instance, does *woman* mean 'weak and lacking in vigour'? Who defines the *clitoris* as 'a rudimentary sexual organ in females, analogous to the penis'? If *unfeminine* means 'not characteristic of women', then why is the body hair almost every woman has called 'unfeminine hair'?

I took these definitions from the dictionaries I happened to have in my house when I was writing this. And my point is, they betray a certain bias. Nor is this entirely avoidable. Since it is impossible to sample the usage of every English speaker, English dictionaries are necessarily selective. The problem is, they will not own up to their selectivity (perhaps because in most cases, it is so biased as to be indefensible). Instead they expect us to believe that they are describing some consensual, authoritative standard of use. Authoritarian might be a better word.

The most important bias of dictionaries is to the written rather than the spoken word. The quest for usage does not begin in the pub or on the bus, but in libraries. Even then it tends to be restricted to middlebrow fiction and nonfiction (nowadays, especially in North America, periodicals have replaced literature as the most favoured source, but even these tend to be rather upmarket 'general interest' magazines – not comic books, or photoromances, or political pamphlets, or the scripts of TV soap operas). You will not find words like *skive* and *naff* in most dictionaries (or if you do they will be marked 'dialectal' or 'colloquial'), though you will find words like *scrolloping*, which a famous writer used once. And apart from certain

specialised domains (the lexicon of skateboarding or knitting for example) you will also find few words whose source is a text written by somebody working class, or black, or for that matter female.

In one sense this is not surprising. Since dictionaries are in fact prescriptive, whatever they may claim, there is no point in their including non-prestige usages and words like *fuck* which everyone knows the meaning of (though the Oxford English Dictionary did finally capitulate and put *fuck* in, as a gesture toward inclusive scholarship). But it is a problem for feminists if dictionaries include sexist definitions and examples, if they refuse to include feminist terms or define them in contentious ways. Dictionaries have authority for most speakers, however little they may deserve it.

In an article called 'The making of a nonsexist dictionary', Alma Graham describes her feelings on discovering how sexist were the standard dictionaries used in schools.<sup>16</sup> The definitions and examples were sexist, and the sources were overwhelmingly male. Graham felt that this sent a powerful if implicit message to school students that men were more important than women, and she embarked on a project to make a less biased, more representative dictionary. This involved looking for female as well as male sources, and avoiding sexist definitions. (A few years later, a similar clean-up was performed for *Roget's Thesaurus* by a female editor.)

Other feminists have gone further, however. *A Feminist Dictionary*, compiled by Cheris Kramarae and Paula Treichler, is not just a nonsexist version of the standard dictionary, but an attempt to break down the monolithic authority of dictionaries in general.<sup>17</sup> There is no attempt here to tell us how we should use words; instead we get quotations from the work of various women which show how varied and creative definition has been, and how differently certain words appear from a feminist perspective. (The playful heading, 'we need a dictionary not a dick-tionary' is taken from *A Feminist Dictionary*.)

The entry for 'home', for example, defines it in several ways, including a sense few male lexicographers would ever consider: most women's place of work. The entry also quotes Betty Friedan's definition: 'a comfortable concentration camp'. One might say, of course, that this is not what a dictionary should do. Would anyone be able to figure out the 'real' or 'basic' meaning of *home* from such bizarre references? To this it might be retorted that no-one linguistically advanced enough to look up a word in a dictionary could possibly require a definition of the word *home*. But in any case,

what – other than the dictionary itself – makes us so sure that words ‘have’ basic meanings that apply in every context? What makes one meaning more ‘real’, or less biased than another?

The best thing about *A Feminist Dictionary*, I think, is its overt acknowledgement that speakers do not agree on what words mean, and that sometimes this is an important matter of political debate. The word ‘feminist’, for instance, is a disputed term even within the group of people that claim it for themselves. Kramarae and Treichler quote Rebecca West’s witty remark, that she isn’t sure what a feminist is, she only knows men call her that whenever she does or says anything that differentiates her from a doormat. Again and again these feminist lexicographers refuse and indeed poke fun at the authoritative pronouncements of mainstream lexicography. One suspects that in the end, they see no real use in either ‘dictionaries’ or dictionaries: a feminist orthodoxy is not much better than a sexist one.

Another recent foray into feminist lexicography is Mary Daly and Jane Caputi’s *Webster’s First Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language*.<sup>18</sup> To appreciate this fine title, it is useful to know that Webster’s is the authoritative dictionary in the US, and is called after the patriotic scholar Noah Webster; but that the name *Webster* itself means ‘woman weaver’ (-ster being a feminine suffix in English, as in *spinster*). Daly and Caputi take us on a mystical journey through a web of words and meanings, skilfully woven by and for women. Again, the point of this is to suggest that words have possibilities beyond what their ‘standard’ definitions and common uses suggest. Daly and Caputi are especially preoccupied with reclaiming the spiritual powers women were once invested with – powers hinted at in the etymology of words like *glamour*, as noted above.

Even more recently a book has been published under the title *Womanwords* which acknowledges the Marxist critic Raymond Williams’s *Keywords*.<sup>19</sup> Williams put forward what is still an admirable rationale for politicised lexicography, and it is worth quoting him:

This is not a neutral review of meanings. It is an exploration of [a] vocabulary . . . which has been inherited within precise social and historical conditions and which has to be made at once conscious and critical – subject to change as well as continuity – if the millions of people in whom it is active are to see it as active: not as a *tradition* to be learned, nor a *consensus* to be accepted; . . . but as

a vocabulary to use, to find our ways in, to change as we find it necessary to change it, as we go on making our own language and history.<sup>20</sup>

Feminist lexicography at its best makes meanings 'conscious and critical' for women while also suggesting the possibility of change.

*Feminists and grammar: the myth of neutral language*

The best known aspect of sexism in English is what some feminists have called 'he/man' language, that is, the generic use of masculine pronouns and the term *man(kind)*. A great deal of effort has gone into making changes in this area, since many feminists consider pronouns an important subliminal influence on perception.

Miller and Swift, for example, say that 'what standard English usage says about males is that they are the species. What it says about females is that they are a subspecies'.<sup>21</sup> This is not a trivial thing for standard English to convey, and reformists like Miller and Swift believe it should be corrected by the use of nonsexist language.

What they mean by nonsexist here is neutral or gender inclusive language. It involves recasting sentences so that they clearly do not exclude either women or men. For instance, *mankind* could be replaced by *humanity*, *craftsman* by *artisan*, *forefathers* by *ancestors*, *spaceman* by *astronaut* and so on. Pronouns can either become disjuncts (*he or she*, *her or his*) or the singular *they* may be used (no one would use sexist language if they could help it). Alternatively, the pronoun problem may be avoided by recasting a sentence (for example, 'pick up baby when he cries' might become 'always pick up a crying baby') or by pluralising ('pick up babies when they cry').

In the years since this book was first written, there has been considerable movement toward recommending, if not requiring, this kind of nonsexist language in business, education and publishing (especially academic publishing). When Ann Bodine in 1975 surveyed the grammar and usage texts used in US schools, she found the generic masculine advocated unproblematically as an arbitrary rule of the English language.<sup>22</sup> (Two hundred years earlier, as she demonstrates in her article, it was not seen as arbitrary, but prescribed quite explicitly on the grounds that the masculine was the 'worthier gender' and must take precedence in grammar as it did in nature.) Nowadays things are less unproblematic.

Fifteen years on from Bodine's survey, the books are much more likely to advocate nonsexist strategies, especially pluralisation. In an

interesting study of recent US college writing handbooks (which are especially good indicators of changing standards since they are revised extremely frequently) Sharon Zuber demonstrates that the authors of these influential texts have moved from noting feminist objections to generic *he*, to suggesting nonsexist language as an option writers might consider, to recommending it – or at least some forms of it – as a norm.<sup>23</sup>

It is notable, however, that many of those who form the audience for these books have continued to regard generic *he* as ‘just a rule of grammar’ which should not be altered to suit the transient whims of feminists, though they may feel under some pressure from certain quarters to use nonsexist forms in their writing. What is interesting about this is that they clearly do not know the history of the form; they are unaware that the rule was made so rigidly in the first place to suit the whims of anti-feminists.

Although Bodine observes, accurately in my opinion, that Americans are more pedantic about these matters than the British, it does seem that below the institutional level (handbooks, grammar texts, publishers’ guidelines) there may be a fair amount of resistance among English speakers to feminist reforms.

One reason for this resistance might be the common idea that language is ‘trivial’, so linguistic reforms are not worth the trouble they cause. Arguments addressing this objection may be pitched at two levels, stressing either the symbolic value of linguistic choices (sexist language is insulting to women) or – more controversially – their cognitive implications (sexist language is inaccurate and misleading). Most feminists would probably want to argue both ways, and would see the two as connected.

The idea that sexist language is inaccurate and misleading is emphasised by reformists like Miller and Swift, as we have noted already. There has also been a certain amount of experimental work by linguists and psychologists which supports the hypothesis that for current speakers of English, generic masculines are interpreted as masculine rather than generic – though it has to be said the results of this work are not entirely clear-cut, except perhaps in the case of generic *man*.<sup>24</sup>

Since my own view of language is one in which meaning is fluid and context-dependent, I attach less importance than some feminists might to such attempts at pinning down what *he* or *man* really mean. I am more interested in the varying symbolic functions they fulfil. And indeed I will argue shortly that ‘accuracy’ in language is beside

the point; feminist reformers who make it central to their analyses have inadvertently made clear its very serious shortcomings.

What, then, of the 'symbolic value' approach to grammar? In a witty 'Person Paper on Purity in Language', Douglas Hofstadter illustrates by analogy the idea of sexist language as symbolically insulting to women.<sup>25</sup> He does this by systematically replacing the terms *man* and *woman* with *white* and *black*. Suppose, he says, that Neil Armstrong's famous words when he stepped on the surface of the moon had been 'one small step for a white; one giant leap for whitekind'. Would we not have perceived this as blatant, shocking racism? Why does the same not apply to the exclusion of women in generic masculine language?

It is not, of course, invariably helpful to make analogies between sexism and racism. But in this instance a reasonable point is being made: that however an individual actually interprets it, generic *man* is symbolically an affirmation of male supremacy. By using nonsexist language we can at least avoid the overt implication that males are the standard and norm of all humanity.

Whether we can at the same time make people think explicitly about women is a more difficult question. A striking illustration of the difficulty here appeared in July 1989 when the US Supreme Court upheld a Missouri state law restricting women's abortion rights. The pro-choice organisation NARAL took a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times*. It read:

ON JULY 3, AMERICANS LOST A FUNDAMENTAL LIBERTY.  
Now it's up to you to win back your right to choose.

The text continued:

The Supreme Court's ruling... has given politicians the power to intrude on the most personal decision an American can make – whether or not to have an abortion.<sup>26</sup>

Clearly NARAL made a deliberate choice to avoid the word *woman* and prefer, throughout the advertisement, the sex-neutral term *American*. The context makes clear, though, that *American* refers exclusively to American women, since it is only women and not men for whom this is 'the most personal decision an American can make'. And my point is, this rhetorical strategy is effective because of its shock value. One aim of it is to make opponents of abortion appear

unpatriotic and out of tune with American values; but the main message being conveyed implicitly here is that women are Americans too: they should not be deprived of the rights and liberties guaranteed to all American citizens by the US Constitution.

This linguistic strategy would not work if the term *Americans* automatically conjured up a picture of women. NARAL is asking readers of the *New York Times* to see a loss of women's rights as a loss of Americans' rights, thus implying that this is a novel way to look at the matter. It implicitly suggests that the Supreme Court ruling itself rests on a failure to identify women as members of the class 'Americans'. If *American* and *American woman* were fully and automatically equivalent, the message of this advertisement would be superfluous. (A few months later, President George Bush underlined the non-equivalence of 'women' and 'American citizens': explaining why the US saw fit to invade Panama, he said he could not tolerate assaults on 'the wife of an American citizen'. I have looked in vain for any evidence that the woman concerned was not herself American.)

The NARAL advertisement is an example of nonsexist language being used apparently as the norm, but in reality to make a point, to make people think of women in a context where ordinarily they might not (as the inheritors of constitutional rights). Had the topic not been abortion, unambiguously a women's issue, the correct inference might not have been drawn. For as the George Bush example shows, by contrast, neutral terms (for example, *citizen*) need not always be nonsexist. While neutral language may be less overtly offensive than the kind it replaces, there is reason to suppose that it is often ineffective, in the sense that it does not really bring women into people's mental landscape at all.

The reformists feel that words like *spaceman* have a special place in the lexicon of prejudice, because it incorporates the element *man*. Whatever that element may once have meant, in contemporary English it suggests a male referent. If you got rid of it – for example, by using the word *astronaut* instead – it would be easier to conceptualise a woman in space.

But what would happen to the reformist's theory if *astronaut* too were used by English speakers as if it were masculine, in spite of the fact it has no surface gender marking? Because, as George Bush's remark so neatly illustrates, this is in fact what tends to happen. And I want to stress that this is not to do with facts about 'reality', for example that most astronauts are men and it's a macho kind of

occupation. Many non-neutral uses of gender-neutral words (like *citizen*) cannot be explained in terms of speakers' commonsense assumptions that men do certain things and women other things. The only assumption that explains them is the same assumption that leads Miller and Swift to criticise the generic masculine: that the norm of humanity in just about every sphere is a man.

If the oratory of George Bush does not convince on its own, consider an extract from the *Sunday Times* magazine: it is about conditions in a refugee camp.

The lack of vitality is aggravated by the fact that there are so few young adults about. They have all gone off to work or to look for work, leaving behind the old, the disabled, the women and the children.

Or this one, from a court report in the *Guardian*:

A coloured South African who was subjected to racial abuse by his neighbours went berserk with a machete and killed his next-door neighbour's wife, Birmingham Crown Court heard yesterday.

Examples like this could be multiplied indefinitely, and they are not just reflections of a sexist reality. For example, nobody could possibly observe as a matter of fact that most 'able bodied young adults' are male, because half of them are female. It makes perfect sense that old, disabled and non-adult persons should be excluded from the reference of this phrase, but no sense that women should be excluded – unless the word *adult* really means *adult male*. And in the second case, presumably the murdered woman lived next door to her attacker. Why then is she not referred to as 'his next door neighbour', instead of 'his next door neighbour's wife'?

It is all very well to say that terms like *astronaut* and *artisan* conjure up, for understandable reasons, male rather than female associations. But what are we to make of it when the same is true of words like *adult*, *neighbour* and *citizen*? Evidently, cosmetic changes like getting rid of *man* do not entirely work. There are no guarantees when it comes to linguistic 'neutrality'.

In this connection, we might also consider the short, sad career of the sex-neutral suffix 'person', as in *chairperson*, *spokesperson*. This item was expressly designed to replace generic *man*. Instead of being recuperated to the masculine gender, though, as has happened to

words like *astronaut*, *person* has become a kind of euphemism for *woman*. It is hard to recall any instance – in speech, anyway – of its applying to a man. On this point, the *Sunday Times* is once again instructive: it tells us that

Of course, full justice to a steamed pudding can only be done by a true trencherman. The term is used advisedly, for I have never encountered a feminine trencherperson whose curves could easily expand to accommodate a second helping.

Here we have speakers using the letter of a feminist reform against the spirit. ('So the girls don't want to be called men. OK, let's call them persons if that's what they insist on'). And this just reinforces the ancient sexist perception that the word *woman* is somehow embarrassing and offensive (as it was to the Victorians, who associated it with sex and low class status). Instead of being men and women, we are now men and persons. If we believe that words can be 'reclaimed', then *woman* ought to be at the top of the list.

A similar thing has happened to *Ms*, especially in Britain and Australia: instead of replacing *Miss* and *Mrs* it has been added to the system to make a further distinction, referring in many people's usage to older unmarried women, divorcees and 'strident feminists' – in other words, to 'abnormal' and 'unfeminine' women who have not been able to get – or keep – a man.

What cases like these show is not just that reform measures are often ineffectual, it is that – as with word meanings – their reception and transmission cannot be controlled by the people, in this case the feminists, who proposed them in the first place. Struggles about language are long drawn-out: speakers cannot always be brought to see the point of innovations, still less the virtue in them. As feminists resist sexist language, so many speakers have resisted the alternative.

But to a theoretical reformist, this must surely seem very puzzling. As we have seen, reformists like Miller and Swift regard neutral, nonsexist language as a necessary corrective which will make our speech and writing *more accurate*. 'The point' they say, 'is not that we *should* recognise semantic change, but that in order to be precise, in order to be understood, we must'.<sup>27</sup> Surely, then, it is perverse and inexplicable behaviour on the part of so many English speakers to take words (like *adult* or *person*) that are not inherently misleading, or are meant to improve linguistic precision, and deliberately make them misleading and imprecise. Don't these speakers want to be understood?

The mistake the reformists make is a common and fundamental one: they assume that language is – or should be – a faithful representation of reality, a ‘mirror of nature’. But as Saussure warned, this is not the case. Sign systems do not name the world so much as order it. And they do this in accordance with cultural belief systems which are not always themselves orderly, or even rational. One such belief system is, of course, sexism.

If people were unable to tolerate massive contradictions between what they observe and what they believe, sexism would collapse tomorrow. For instance, how many people have watched a woman carrying a load of shopping and a three year old child, or cleaning up after an incontinent elderly relation, and still been able to maintain that some jobs are too heavy and dirty for women? How many times have we heard women who themselves are single parents saying that equal pay is wrong because men have families to support?

Talking as though *adult* and *neighbour* were exclusively masculine terms is no less conventional (and no more senseless) than this kind of thing. To criticise language for being ‘misleading’ as to the state of affairs in the real world is to tilt at windmills, because language is not so much a limpid pool through which we are to glimpse the truth as a muddy pond full of the debris of history and ideology.

Miller and Swift believe that language change is threatening because it ‘signals widespread changes in social mores’.<sup>28</sup> This seems to me to be only half the story. What institutional language reform really signals is an agreement on the part of the powerful to recognise a new way of ordering the world (the question of how closely this conforms to reality is at best secondary). This is disturbing because it challenges the appearance of immutable truth previously enjoyed by the old order.

The cause of many people’s conservatism is only partly antifeminism. Miller and Swift do not point out the important fact that conservatives care for language in itself, and not just as an indicator of social mores. Resistance to linguistic change is related to the way people think of language as a fixed point in the flux of experience, and cling to the certainties they feel are embodied in language. The word itself is sacred, and to suggest otherwise is blasphemy.

It might surprise us to find such superstitious attitudes in modern society (though of course, conservatives set their face to the past). But historically speaking, this reverence for language is deeply ingrained and persistent. The Chinese sage Confucius had a doctrine

of 'the rectification of names' which held that the thing should conform to the word. For many cultures, the 'right' linguistic formulae have a sort of supernatural power: thus Sapir once spoke of 'that virtual identity of word and thing which leads to the magic of spells'.<sup>29</sup>

Maybe this attitude lingers on in advanced Western societies, explaining why some people still wax so lyrical about arcane grammatical rules, the Oxford English Dictionary and all the other magical authorities, and why they are so indignant about feminists 'tampering with language'. They are afraid that in tampering with language, feminists may be able to tamper with reality. And as we shall see in the next chapter, a number of feminists would agree with them about that.

As the British conservative Roger Scruton rather inelegantly expresses his own indignation about feminist linguistic reform, 'Each of us inherits in language the wisdom of many generations. To mutilate this repository of human experience is to mutilate our most fundamental perceptions'.<sup>30</sup> Feminists have dared to suggest that the wisdom of many generations may not have been disinterested, or even very wise; that human experience is not identical with male experience; and that our (whose?) 'fundamental perceptions' keep women in servitude. But above all, some feminists have dared to question the monolithic status of language itself, its claims to neutrality and to absolute truth. We should never underestimate the enormity of this challenge.

In the remainder of this book, I shall be addressing myself far more intensively to questions of the nature of language itself. I shall argue that the conservative and the reformist are both misguided: their views are comforting to many people, but in the end they are untenable as a theory of language. For feminists, therefore, the comfort they give is illusory.

#### CONCLUSION: CAN THERE BE A NONSEXIST LANGUAGE?

Languages and their histories are invaluable resources for feminists analysing the workings of patriarchal societies, and in the last twenty years feminists have drawn our attention to the sexist implications of usage in many languages. Wholesale reform of language to eliminate sexism has proved more difficult, however; particularly when it has been based on simplistic accounts of what language is and how it

works. We cannot simply appeal to 'reality' and 'truth, as Miller and Swift do; we cannot root out prejudice by *fiat* nor make sexism disappear just by exposing it; we have even less power to control what people say or mean than the prescriptivist defenders of sexist convention. In the mouths of sexists, language can still be sexist.

Does this mean we should sit back and do nothing? In a review of the first edition of this book, Sara Mills took issue with me for pessimistically implying that linguistic reform is impossible; she pointed out, and I think with some justice, that my analysis risks leaving women with no way to hit back when they are confronted with sexist language, at least until after the revolution.<sup>31</sup> Since women's day-to-day experience of irritating and offensive usage is unrelenting, this is obviously problematic.

And in fact, I would *not* want to suggest that feminist resistance – from guerilla raids on men who call us *darling* to all-out war waged on institutional bastions like the dictionary – is valueless. It would be ridiculous to claim that the resistance of the last two decades has achieved nothing, for on the contrary it has brought about significant, noticeable change. Miller and Swift's *Handbook* is an extremely influential text; it and similar books are on all the best shelves nowadays.

I do think, however, that it would be better if feminists operated with a more hard-headed, political notion of what we are trying to do. In my opinion we should be tampering with language not to tell the truth, but quite openly to shame the devil. It is disingenuous to claim that the conventions we propose are simply 'better' than the traditional ones (more accurate, more precise), because really it is a question of political and ideological preferences – the traditional usage embodies one view of the world, the feminist alternative a different one, and we need to make clear that *both* these views are politically non-neutral. We should therefore be honest enough to defend our tampering not in terms of its purported linguistic merits, but in terms of its political utility for raising consciousness, denouncing sexism and empowering women.

Let me give a concrete example of what I mean. In both editions of this book, I made a decision to use what some linguists have called 'the visibility strategy', or 'positive language', in which all generics are feminine: *she*, *her*. Some readers objected to my choice, and from a reformist perspective stressing accuracy, neutrality, truth and fairness, it might well seem misguided and distasteful. After all, the reformist might say, some of my readers will be men. Certainly

some of the groups to which my feminine generics refer consist mainly of men (linguists, lexicographers, scientists and so on). Referring to them as *she* detracts from the clarity of my work, since the reader is brought up short by the unfamiliar, inappropriate form. And anyway, I wouldn't like it if a male author did it with *he*.

All I can say in my defence is that at this point in history, I find it useful to do two things with my own writing and speech. One is to emphasise women's presence in the world. As I have tried to show, 'neutral' language does not do this routinely; however 'fair' or 'accurate' it may be, it therefore fails in what I consider a crucial political task. The other is to raise people's consciousness by confronting them with their prejudices, which are often unconscious. I do not want my use of pronouns to slip by unnoticed: I want readers to think about it, and to act on their conclusions.

The prejudice against saying or writing *she* generically is extremely strong, and the habit of saying *he* deeply ingrained. I remember, for instance, a conversation about whether to use *she* in academic writing. One student said it was not appropriate for her, since her field of study was theology. On being asked by someone else whether she saw God as male or female, she replied 'Neither: I see him as an absolute supreme Being!'. We all laughed, but it was a perfect illustration of the need for consciousness-raising on this point.

One day, perhaps, consciousness will have shifted and generic *she* will lose its shock value. At that point my invariant use of it will have served its purpose, and I will reconsider my position. Meanwhile I regard positive language as akin to positive discrimination: it is a stopgap measure, a necessary stage on the long historic journey toward liberation and justice.

Other writers will make different choices, and that in itself does not particularly worry me. Since none of the available usages are politically neutral, I see no value in prescribing one over the others. Rather, what I hope for is a linguistic universe in which people will accept that they must consider the alternatives and then make their own choices, instead of relying so heavily on authority – even some hypothetical feminist authority – to tell them what is acceptable or 'correct' linguistic usage. That highly educated people who question every other kind of authority are often obsessed with it in matters of language is a constant source of wonder to me, and also of concern.

So, what is to be done about sexism in language? I would say, whatever is most effective in making people think about the

implications of the expressions they use. (Many of the resistance strategies discussed in this chapter are extremely effective in that respect.) Finally, I believe that it is less important for feminists to establish a particular set of nonsexist conventions as 'standard' than to make people aware of the non-neutrality of language.

In the next chapter, I turn to the work of radical feminists for whom the neutrality of language is indeed an illusion, and who suggest that, far from embodying an accurate or inaccurate picture of the world, language is the means whereby our world is created.

# 7

## Silence, Alienation and Oppression: Feminist Models of Language (I)

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### INTRODUCTION

During the past two decades, as we have just noted, there has been widespread protest against what is seen as a constant and damaging misrepresentation of the world by sexist language. In that language women are portrayed as second class citizens, neither seen nor heard, eternal sex objects and personifications of evil. Within the perspective I have labelled 'theoretical reformism', our response as feminists is clear. We must expose the 'falseness' of this language and refuse to tolerate its continued use, providing where necessary a set of neutral and thus inoffensive alternatives.

But in Chapter 6 we also began to see how this uncomplicated viewpoint fails as a theory of language – an account of what language does and how it does it. Many feminists, including some whose work we touched on in the last chapter, have felt a need to go beyond theoretical reformism, developing a more radical analysis of the place of language in culture and thus in the oppression of women.

It is time, then, to embark on a fuller and more theoretical account of the alternatives to reformism. If we reject the idea of language as a simple representation of reality, a form of expression which rational and well-meaning users may adjust, if they so choose, to fit new conditions, what are we to put in its place?

In this chapter and the next I will explore two rather different forms of feminist linguistic theory which nevertheless share certain concerns, not least the need to go beyond simple reformism in both theory and practice, putting something in place of the traditional 'mirror of nature' view. In this chapter I will consider a number of 'radical feminist' theorists, while the theories of feminists influenced

by semiology and postmodernist ideas will be considered in Chapter 8. There are, however, some theoretical issues that are common to both chapters; these will be introduced almost immediately.

### THE RADICAL FEMINIST THEORISTS

By the term 'radical feminism' I intend to refer to a tradition of thought and activism that has flourished particularly in English-speaking cultures (most notably in the USA where it originated during the social upheavals of the late 1960s, but also in Britain and Australia). This tradition is itself diverse, and as it has spread it has become even more so. I am considering its strands as one tradition on the basis of a certain amount of shared history. More subjectively, it could be characterised by its militancy, its autonomous small-group organisation (normally excluding men and often using the technique of CR) and its primary focus on gender (which distinguishes it from socialist feminism and – as we shall see – some forms of postmodernism).

For the women I am calling 'radical' theorists, we cannot just substitute nonsexist expressions for sexist ones, because there is no neutral language currently in existence. The entire system, since it belongs to men and is controlled by them, is permeated by sexism through and through. Moreover, male language is a species of Orwellian thought-control, for these theorists believe it is through language that we construct our reality. Those who define the limits of language can make us see things their way.

It is evident that this view has been, and remains, influential in the feminist movement. There is a rhetoric of 'silencing', 'alienation', 'appropriation', that pervades the writing of radical feminists. And they warn that the inauthenticity of our language may undermine our capacity to transform ourselves and the world we live in. As Mary Daly puts it:

The fact is that the female saying 'I' is alien at every moment to her own speaking and writing. She is broken by the fact that she must enter this language in order to speak or write. As the 'I' is broken, so also is the Inner Eye, the capacity for integrity of knowing/sensing. In this way the Inner Voice of the Self's integrity is silenced: the external voice babbles in alien and alienating tongues.<sup>1</sup>

Or in the words of Adrienne Rich:

When we become acutely, disturbingly aware of the language we are using and that us using us, we begin to grasp a material resource which women have never before collectively attempted to repossess . . . as long as our language is inadequate, our vision remains formless, our thinking and feeling are still running in the old cycles, our process may be 'revolutionary' but not transformative.<sup>2</sup>

In these passages, Mary Daly and Adrienne Rich emphasise the inauthenticity and alienation of women's experience in patriarchy, implying however that we can find some whole, authentic female self (the Inner Eye/'I') through a process of personal and political transformation. Language is, for both Daly and Rich, among the most important sources of our current alienation, and if we do not pay attention to it our efforts at transformation will fail. Yet if we do pay attention, it is also potentially a resource for our transformation. Language 'breaks' us; repossessed, it can also remake us.

What theory of language underlies this kind of rhetoric? In this chapter I will examine in particular two relevant feminist linguistic theories. These are the 'muted group' theory of Shirley and Edwin Ardener and the 'man made language' theory of Dale Spender. I will also explore a work of fantasy based on radical feminist linguistics, Suzette Haden Elgin's *Native Tongue*. These writings go together because they share a set of themes and assumptions.

One of these is some form of linguistic determinism. Radical feminist linguistic theories hold that language determines (or in a weaker formulation, places significant constraints on) our thought and perception, and thus our reality. A second theme is that men control language as they control other resources within a patriarchal society. Men determine how language is used and what it means; and consequently language enshrines a male and misogynist view of the world. Thirdly, radical theorists assume that women are placed at a disadvantage as language-users. They may use the 'male' language, thus falsifying their experience and perceptions. This is 'alienation'. Or they may try to express themselves more authentically, in which case they will soon encounter a lack of suitable linguistic resources, and fall silent.

This is a view of women who live and speak, write or sign within a man-made symbolic universe. They must cope with a massive

disjunction between the linguistically-validated male world view and their own, which cannot so easily find expression. Indeed, in some versions of the theory it cannot find expression at all; women may be alienated not only from language but from the female experience it fails to encode.

This chapter will set out the background to these axioms and the way they are worked out by different feminist theorists. It will also be critical of the radical viewpoint, posing questions about its possible limitations. Let us begin, then, by looking at the crucial axioms of determinism and male control.

## DETERMINISM

The idea that language determines our perceptions of the world, and thus what counts as 'reality', is important in current radical feminist linguistic theory. But from the linguist's point of view it raises difficult questions; it cannot simply be assumed as an axiom. We should therefore go back a step and consider the theoretical background to feminist ideas about linguistic determinism.

### **Language and reality**

All debate on linguistic determinism takes place in the context of a particular view of reality. For unless we accept that what we call reality is mediated by human perceptual processes (rather than simply existing 'out there' to be passively registered as a series of images with names attached) the question of the effect of language on perception would not be very important. And indeed some theorists would maintain that the real world exists independently of our conceptualising it. Language may distort reality, or we may fail to grasp it properly, but it is there nevertheless.

Other theorists, however, argue that we ourselves play a part in creating reality – especially, perhaps, social reality (as opposed to the world of physical forces like gravity). Millions of stimuli impinge on our consciousness at every moment; if we were like blank screens, passively registering every one of them, our minds would contain an undifferentiated, meaningless chaos. In order to make sense of the world, therefore, we must be selective, paying attention to some things and not to others. We must actively classify and interpret incoming stimuli.

If this is so, it becomes feasible to ask whether the language a person learns plays a part in the classification and interpretation process. Given that there is considerable cross-cultural variation in people's interpretations of the world, it is a tempting hypothesis. Languages might be ready-made classification systems directing speakers' attention to some phenomena rather than others. Perhaps a language-using being engages not with brute 'reality' but with a version already filtered through the mesh of conceptual categories – and in every case these will be only a small subset of all possible categories – provided by her particular language.

Obviously, though, this is not the only possible account. Language could be seen – as indeed theoretical reformists see it – simply as a tool of thought, encoding perceptions which are influenced by people's differing environments and experiences. In this case, though reality is still socially constructed and culturally variable, language is merely an expressive medium giving form to ideas that are arrived at independently. It reflects perceptions rather than determining them.

Many feminists in recent years have tended towards the first view rather than the second. And radical feminists in particular have viewed language not as a convenient classification system helping us to make sense of the world, but as a straitjacket, something that forces women's experience into categories that do not fit, like the Ugly Sister's foot into the patriarchal glass slipper. Language for these feminists is androcentric: thus it does not merely filter our reality, it distorts it.

Feminist theorising on this point tends to invoke the linguistic theories of Saussure, Sapir and Whorf. It is therefore useful to turn to those sources, asking what they say, what arguments exist for and against them, and how far feminist versions have remained true to their original spirit.

## **The theoretical roots of determinism**

### *Saussure*

It is not so much radical feminists as the Lacanians, whom we will consider in Chapter 8, who acknowledge a debt to Saussure. My purpose here, however, is to explore linguistic determinism as a theoretical idea, and Saussure – the founding 'father of linguistics' – is often claimed as its ultimate source, which makes it necessary to consider his work here.

In the *Cours*, Saussure certainly did reject the notion that language simply gives form to pre-existing ideas. The text asserts:

Psychologically, our thought – apart from its expression in words – is only a shapeless and indistinct mass. Philosophers and linguists have always agreed in recognising that without the help of signs, we would be unable to make a consistent distinction between two ideas. Without language, thought is a vague, uncharted nebula. There are no pre-existing ideas, and nothing is distinct before the appearance of language.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, it is problematic to interpret this passage as outright linguistic determinism. The *Cours* argues against simple-minded theories of words as names, but it does not argue for the extreme opposite position. Denying there are pre-existing (innate) ideas, for instance, is not at all the same as saying that signs actually constrain our ideas. For Saussure, thought and language are inseparable, neither one taking precedence.

Lacan, a 'neo-Saussurean' thinker, argues that determinism is entailed by the doctrine that the sign is arbitrary, acquiring meaning only from its relations with other signs in a system. But Lacan adds something to Saussure: the claim that we become acculturated as persons by entering the system of signs which he calls the Symbolic Order. If this is accepted, then the arbitrary segmentation of the world by signs takes on considerably more importance, since on this view there is no reality but the one language imposes on the child establishing her identity. As Marks and de Courtivron explain, for Lacanians 'meaning is located not in the thoughts of the enunciator but in the system of signs itself'.<sup>4</sup>

The idea that language (*langue*) is collective – 'the social side of speech, outside the individual who can never create nor modify it by himself' – is indeed Saussure's.<sup>5</sup> But the conclusions Lacan draws from this push the point to an extreme; and it is, in fact, a problematic point within the *Cours*. We will return later to the Saussurean/Lacanian separation of language and meaning from the individual and the context of speech.

Consideration of Lacanian feminism must be deferred until the next chapter; this one is primarily concerned with radical feminist theorists whose determinism comes from a different source: the work of Sapir and Whorf, to which I will now turn.

*Sapir and Whorf*

Within linguistic science, as opposed to semiology, the theorists most associated with determinist ideas are the pre-war American anthropological linguists Sapir and Whorf. Indeed, the idea that language determines worldview is usually referred to in linguistics as the 'Sapir-Whorf hypothesis'.

Sapir-Whorfian determinism has a different starting point from Saussure's theories, as might be expected given the more anthropologically-oriented preoccupations of Sapir and Whorf themselves. Both men studied American Indian cultures extensively, and both found themselves interested in why they as Western Europeans and the peoples they observed seemed to have such different perceptions of the 'same' phenomena. For example, one might ask why such apparent fundamentals as the nature of time and space, the colour spectrum, the division between animate and inanimate objects or between things and events or processes, are subject to cultural variations in perception.

Sapir and Whorf argued that linguistic differences are the ultimate cause of these radical differences in perception. In the words of Sapir:

Human beings are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. . . . The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are different worlds, not the same world with different labels attached.<sup>6</sup>

Whorf also emphasised the unconscious 'background' assumptions built into every language, and asserted that 'no individual is free to describe nature with absolute impartiality but is constrained to certain modes of interpretation even when he thinks himself most free'.<sup>7</sup>

It may be helpful to give an example or two of the sort of thing Sapir and Whorf had in mind when they made these claims since, as I shall argue shortly, their views have sometimes been oversimplified by feminists. The most important point to make here is that Whorfian determinism focuses much more on grammatical features (particles, patterns of sentence structure) than on the meanings of words. The implications of grammar are more serious, since they are

apt to remain, as Whorf put it, 'background': we rarely reflect on them consciously. Thus assumptions embedded in grammar escape the language user much more easily than those of lexical meaning.

By way of illustration, Whorf pointed out that speakers are subtly influenced in their perception of the world by the grammatical category particular words are assigned to – whether, for instance, something is a noun or a verb.<sup>8</sup> Most English-speakers think of 'fire' as a thing, not because of what it means, but just because it is a noun. Fire is, scientifically speaking, a process rather than an object, but its grammatical classification as a noun – which is by no means universal in the languages of the world – to some extent blocks this 'mode of interpretation'. The same is true of 'fist': if *kick* is a verb, why isn't 'fist', since it too denotes a temporary alignment of body parts?

The Whorfian claim here is that we have a tendency to perceive noun referents as objects and verb referents as processes. This tendency arises from arbitrary and variable features of particular grammars, and we are not consciously aware of it though it affects the way we see our world.

What throws such 'background' assumptions into relief, however, is contact with other languages in which things are done differently. Whorf felt that speakers of what he called 'Standard Average European' languages – all of one linguistic family, with a shared history and a lengthy period of intercultural contact – had taken their own assumptions as the human norm, but that the study of Amerindian and other non-European languages would dispel Eurocentric illusions.

Another example: it is natural for European speakers in reporting an event to encode time reference – in other words, indicate when something happened relative to the time of speaking. Indeed it is grammatically impossible in a language like English to construct a sentence reporting an event without tense marking. Yet among the Hopi, an American Indian people Whorf studied, it is equally natural and indeed obligatory to use grammatical particles marking the status of the information reported – whether the speaker directly observed the event or was told of it, for instance. In English such information is optional, and would have to be expressed through a cumbersome preface like 'I heard that...' rather than through a grammatical particle added to the verb. Time reference seems to the English-speaker like a natural and inevitable part of all meaningful discourse; but that is just because tense is so basic to the grammar of

English. The Hopi, to whose grammar tense is not basic, can dispense with it quite easily.

To sum up the point of these examples, then, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis states that grammatical structures and rules function in any language as an unnoticed 'background' to speakers' thinking about the world and may create unconscious biases in perception. Highly divergent grammars (like those of English and Hopi) will produce equally divergent 'realities' for their speakers.

It should be noted, though, that Sapir at least did not believe that linguistic biases were insurmountable. 'As our scientific experience grows', he remarked, 'we must learn to fight the implications of language'.<sup>9</sup>

I say this because I think many more recent criticisms of Sapir and Whorf (whose work predates the second world war and has since fallen into disfavour among linguists) have rather unfairly exaggerated the absolutism of their claims. For example, it has been argued that if language really determined thought, such things as translation and language learning would be difficult verging on impossible. Nor would it be possible to explain certain kinds of innovative or creative thinking. Experimental work in psychology and linguistics has suggested that human beings *are* able to 'see around' grammatical classification schemas, suggesting that cultural relativism is not primarily linguistic.

But this is to iron out all the subtlety of the original arguments, which were about tendencies rather than cognitive absolutes, and which need to be understood in the context of the debates of their time. One of those debates concerned the nature and significance of cultural difference. Sapir and Whorf were followers of Franz Boas and defenders of so-called 'primitive' cultures, whose language and thought they presented as different rather than inferior. By espousing a relativist perspective they were consciously attacking the racist evolutionary theories of the anthropologists who came before them. One reason why Whorfian ideas are out of favour today is that this debate – in anthropology and linguistics anyway – has lost its topicality. Accepting the point that there are no 'primitive' languages, linguists have become more interested in language universals than in differences between languages; before the war, matters were the other way around.

Another Sapir-Whorfian concern was with the question of how 'objective' scientific description could hope to be. Today it is fairly commonplace to note that observers are influenced by cultural

preconceptions. Sapir and Whorf made an important contribution to an earlier stage of that still-ongoing debate.

As far as I can tell, Sapir and Whorf did not deny that people may entertain conceptualisations of the world at odds with the background assumptions of their language. They claimed only that this requires more effort. Indeed the remark I quoted above suggests Sapir thought linguistic study would help speakers to transcend their unconscious biases. Absolute determinism is easily refuted, but the weaker claim that we are *influenced* by language structures remains, to my mind anyway, of interest.

There is, however, one question about Whorfian determinism that does seem fair and reasonable. Are the 'background assumptions' of particular languages arbitrary linguistic features, or do they reflect extralinguistic cultural conditions? In other words, do Whorfians put the linguistic cart before the conceptual horse? While some of their examples – the one about nouns and verbs for example – seem persuasive, others that are frequently cited (like the fact that Arctic-dwelling people have a lot of terms for snow) offer no real evidence that language determines rather than just reflecting what is culturally salient.

Feminists who have seized on Whorfian ideas argue that sexism is a 'background feature' of many languages, and affects cultural perceptions of gender. Their discussions, like those of the critics of determinism, have sometimes lacked subtlety; and they have not always engaged fully with the problems such arguments raise. The issue of whether background features are purely linguistic is clearly relevant to the feminist debate on whether language reflects sexism or causes it; for it could be argued that if, say, the grammar of English segments the conceptual universe in accordance with nonlinguistic cultural norms (sexual differentiation, devaluation of women and so on) it is not so much inculcating a worldview as obeying the dictates of one.

Once again, though, it is unhelpful to think in absolute, everything or nothing terms about this. Even if (as the historical evidence suggests) a grammatical element like the generic masculine pronoun had its origins outside language in pre-existing cultural prejudice, one could argue it has since become a 'background assumption' of English grammar (look, for example, at Whorf's own usage as quoted above – the 'individual' is naturally *he*, it seems), influencing our perceptions and recirculating the sexist prejudice in a subtle and perhaps even unconscious form.

In summary, then, there is certainly something to interest feminists in the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, but feminist Whorfians should proceed with caution. Determinist ideas are a legitimate and important area of debate, but they do not have to be pushed to their ultimate extreme in order to have some force. Language could still be significant as one sexist influence among others: it does not have to be the sole determinant of perception.

Before looking more closely at the use feminists like Dale Spender have made of Sapir-Whorfian determinism, I want to consider in general terms the other radical feminist axiom: that men control language. What are the sources of this idea?

### CONTROL

The radical feminist notion that men control language does not derive from the work of linguists, though it is in one sense a further application of Whorfian ideas, but has its roots rather in a more general discourse of twentieth century Western culture about the abuse of language as a coercive political instrument. Before feminism, and outside it, the idea of control over language for political ends has been mainly conceived as a form of state control.

This discourse has antecedents scattered throughout the Western intellectual tradition, but its present forms come out of a modern historical context: the debate on democracy and totalitarianism prompted by the rise of fascism in Europe, and later the revelation of atrocities like the Nazi death camps and Stalin's purges. How were whole populations made complicit or complacent in the face of such horrors? What was the role of propaganda and language in producing totalitarianism? Writers like George Orwell and George Steiner in the aftermath of the Second World War dwelt on questions like these. As is well known, Orwell popularised this kind of concern about the state of language when he created a fictional, corrupted and impoverished language – Newspeak – which was crucial to the functioning of the totalitarian society he depicted in *Nineteen Eighty-four*.

The idea that language can be controlled or corrupted in the interests of illegitimate power depends on our accepting not only that language is a resource that some powerful group can appropriate (like money or goods) but also some form of determinism; because the point of controlling language is ultimately

to control what it is possible or legitimate for people to think. Each of these assumptions can be challenged, and I shall be critical of both, but to begin with let me try to clarify the importance of determinism to Orwellian notions of control.

Although one might suppose that merely controlling what can be (publicly) said or written confers a significant degree of power (as in states that practise rigorous censorship for example, or repress minority languages like Welsh and Catalan), the Orwellian goes much further, arguing that a totalitarian state is not just one in which you may not say what you like (because you will be killed, imprisoned, forced to recant and so on) but one in which you literally cannot say what you like, because the state or other repressive agency has corrupted the words you would say it in. In *Nineteen Eighty-four*, dissent is not merely punished, it is stopped at source: it cannot be expressed because there is no way even to think subversive thoughts.

Though *Nineteen Eighty-four* is a work of fiction, the view of language it puts forward has passed into accepted wisdom about reality. Both conservatives and radicals draw on it. Roger Scruton, a British conservative philosopher whom I have already quoted, accuses Soviet communists of corrupting the Russian language and feminists of corrupting English (by removing gender distinctions and so making them impossible to perceive).<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, peace movement activists analysing what they call 'Nukespeak' have accused the Pentagon of attempting 'thought control' by, for example, naming a missile 'peacekeeper' and using the jargon form 'render inoperative' when what they really mean is 'kill'. Feminists arguing for nonsexist language have suggested that men practise a similar thought control.

These accusations and counter-accusations from right to left, feminist to anti-feminist, might lead us to wonder whether thought-control through language is even remotely effective, since its critics are so numerous and vocal on every side. For example, Roger Scruton, reviewing a Soviet dictionary of political terms, finds the communist state brainwashing its unfortunate citizens with blatantly biased definitions of terms like *democracy* or *liberalism*.<sup>11</sup> Even leaving aside the question of how one defines a political term without any bias, the question surely arises whether readers of the dictionary placed any faith in these definitions. Recent events strongly suggest that nobody was fooled. If Soviet citizens raised no public objection to state linguistic orthodoxy, was this brainwashing – an absence of

dissent – or was it simple prudence in concealing one’s true opinions? Thought-control rhetoric seems to me another instance of linguistic absolutism undermining the legitimate debate about how linguistic choices may unconsciously affect us.

It also overlooks the other problem, which is how a minority – a state department, say – can get control over language, which inevitably continues to be used by the whole society. Language is not a zero-sum game (if I have more of it, you have less); words and meanings are not wholly analogous to economic commodities. Once again, this way of talking about language makes it into a monolithic thing existing apart from its speakers – as if a committee of lexicographers defining words thereby controlled their use by everyone else in every context. While I have argued already that lexicographers do have some influence, and that the politics of lexicography are a suitable case for analysis and intervention, it bears repeating that this influence could never amount to total control. (And it is even more difficult to see how men as a group might exert an iron grip on meaning.)

Radical feminist theories of language have determinism and (male) control as their twin foundation stones. In what follows, I will pay close attention to the ways in which they address the general problems raised here: how far language determines thought and perception, how male control over language is effected and maintained, and to what extent it succeeds in its coercive and sexist aims.

## MUTED WOMEN AND MAN MADE LANGUAGE: SOME RADICAL FEMINIST LINGUISTIC THEORIES

### **The dominant and the muted: women’s reality, men’s representation**

One influential model of how language works in a culture and how gender affects its workings is the ‘dominant and muted’ theory of Edwin and Shirley Ardener, two British social anthropologists. Though the Ardeners themselves are not part of the radical feminist current, their ideas have been taken up by a number of women who are, like Dale Spender and Cheris Kramarae.

The premise of the Ardeners’ model is that while every group in a society will generate its own ideas about reality, not every group

has equal access to the 'mode of specification' – crudely, the linguistic system through which realities are publicly articulated. This is controlled by the dominant group. Relatively less powerful groups are 'muted': their reality does not get represented. As Shirley Ardener explains:

[T]here are dominant modes of expression in any society which have been generated by the dominant structures within it. In any situation, only the dominant mode of the relevant group will be 'heard' or 'listened to'. The 'muted groups' in any context, if they wish to communicate, must express themselves in terms of this mode, rather than in ones which they might otherwise have generated independently.<sup>12</sup>

What Shirley Ardener is saying is that muted groups have to perform a kind of translation: their reality differs from the dominant one, but cannot be expressed in its own terms. And as a result, she claims,

This dominant model may impede the free expression of alternative models of the world which subdominant groups may possess, and perhaps may inhibit the very generation of such models. Groups dominated in this sense find it necessary to structure the world through the model (or models) of the dominant group, transforming their own models as best they can in terms of the received ones.<sup>13</sup>

The particular 'muted group' to which the theory is applied in the Ardeners' work is women. Women have a different reality, but they are forced to encode it in terms of men's reality.

Muting is not to be confused with actual *silence*. As Shirley Ardener comments, 'They [the muted group] may speak a great deal. The important issue is whether they are able to say all they would wish to say, where and when they wish to say it'.<sup>14</sup> Nor is muting a condition in which a group has no distinctive view of reality to communicate. Edwin Ardener insists: 'the muted structures are "there", but cannot be "realised" in the language of the dominant structure'.<sup>15</sup> According to the Ardeners, then, women have their own model of the world, and they have the capacity to use language. The problem is that the two things do not fit together, whereas for men, the dominant group, language and reality map on to one another unproblematically.

Cheris Kramarae takes the dominant and muted model as one of her 'frameworks for analysis' in the study of language and gender.<sup>16</sup> She uses it to formulate several hypotheses which can then be investigated empirically. Among the hypotheses that follow in her opinion from the idea that women are a muted group are the notion that women find it easier to understand men than vice versa (since a muted group needs to understand the dominant model in order to 'translate' its own into acceptable terms, whereas the reverse is not true) and the notion that women will express more dissatisfaction than men with dominant modes of expression, and will search for alternatives (because dominant modes fit poorly with women's reality). She also suggests that women will have difficulty with public speaking and that their sense of humour will be different from men's.

Kramarae finds evidence to support many of her hypotheses. For example, on the question of whether women understand men better than men understand women, she points out that in anecdote, sociological survey data analysis and clinical practice, men constantly express bewilderment about what women think and what they want. Women seem to find men's views less of an enigma. And on the question of women's dissatisfaction with dominant modes, including those of public speaking, she draws attention to the practices of present-day feminists, which are consciously informal and supportive by comparison with traditional rhetoric.

It is open to question whether these observations provide compelling evidence for the notion of women as a muted group in the sense the Ardeners define the term. If women understand men better than the reverse, for instance, it could be for the entirely nonlinguistic reason that women are so often emotionally and economically dependent on men: thus it pays them to be observant about men's behaviour and considerate of their wishes. And as I have already pointed out in Chapter 3, the style of speech feminists favour has a political rationale: it implies that traditional modes are considered undesirable, but not necessarily that they are intrinsically alien to women.

I do not think the Ardeners model is best thought of as empirical, something evidence will confirm or refute; rather it is interpretive. For me, the problems it raises are problems of internal inconsistency. On crucial points, I find the theory equivocal or contradictory, and I want to raise those points now.

*The problem of determinism*

It is striking that on the question of whether language determines perception, the Ardeners are equivocal. In one sense, they reject determinism: after all, in Edwin Ardener's phrase, 'the muted structures are "there"'. They simply cannot be encoded in the only language available. But then again, Shirley Ardener speaks of the dominant model impeding not just the expression of muted models but 'perhaps the very generation of such models'. And she also asserts, 'Words which continually fall on deaf ears may, of course, in the end become unspoken, or even *unthought*' (my emphasis).<sup>17</sup> And a page later: 'Are [women] able to think in ways which they would have thought had they been responsible for generating the linguistic tools with which to shape their thoughts?'<sup>18</sup>

These are interesting questions, but they embody a contradiction in the context of the model. If we are to think of language as shaping people's thoughts, and we are also to accept that women as a muted group do not have 'the linguistic tools' to do this, how can we also accept that 'the muted structures are "there"'? Why should they be? Surely the dominant (male) language would determine everyone's reality. Yet if we reject determinism, thus allowing for women to generate their own model of reality, we are left with another problem: what prevents the muted group from generating a mode of specification in which that reality may be expressed?

The answer seems to be, because dominant groups control meaning. But how do they do this, and why are muted groups unable to do the same? In a wholly deterministic theory, women are unable even to grasp a reality outside the man made language: it is unspeakable and unthinkable. But if the Ardeners' is not a wholly deterministic theory, how do they account for the dominant group's control?

*The problem of control*

It is not clear to me what the linguistic reason might be for women's inability to generate independent 'modes of specification'. Indeed it is not even clear that in certain contexts they do not in fact do so. Edwin Ardener's paper on 'Belief and the problem of women' actually deals with a women's secret language, the Liengu (mermaid) language of Bakweri women. Perhaps this could be seen as an example of women opening up a channel of communication for their own reality.

But in any case the Ardeners themselves hint at a different way of looking at the problem of control. Rather than interpreting the

muting phenomenon as a case of men suppressing women's ability to express themselves, we might focus on what the Ardeners refer to as 'transformation', that is, translating experience into male terms, as a strategy consciously used by the women so that men will listen to them. As Shirley Ardener herself says, 'only the dominant mode of the relevant group will be "heard" or "listened to"'. That is not quite the same as saying that the dominant mode is the only possible mode, or the only one in existence. It suggests a social rather than a purely linguistic restriction.

There are many analogies for the hypothetical situation I am describing here, in which women elect to translate in order to communicate effectively. For example, in a formal meeting someone who wishes to make a suggestion must phrase it in parliamentary language, as a motion. If she simply says what she thinks, she may be ruled out of order. This has nothing to do with whether others present understand what she says, and arguably it is absurd, but it is a social norm in that situation. To flout it would not be impossible, but it might well be inexpedient.

In the case we are concerned with here, it is expedient for women (and other muted groups) to respect the preferences of the dominant group. To quote Shirley Ardener again, 'unless [women's] views are presented in a form acceptable to men, they will not be given a proper hearing'<sup>19</sup> – just as unparliamentary language will be ruled out of order. It is the prerogative of the powerful to set norms for everyone. In situations where they are absent, though – when women talk to other women, or delegates exchange gossip in the bar – the powerless may express themselves in terms of their own choosing.

What difference does it make if we interpret muting in this way? Certainly the alternative interpretation I have put forward does not make the problem of muting disappear. Having to translate into a language you are not 'at home' with is no small handicap; and there are plenty of reasons to believe that women are indeed less at home than men in some forms of language. But there is an important difference between saying on one hand that women lack the means to encode their reality linguistically, and on the other hand that they possess the means, but are denied the opportunity because men find their code less acceptable. To make the first assertion is to claim women have a linguistic problem, while to make the second is to say that the problem is one of power and social inequality. These concepts seem to cause the Ardeners some difficulty, however.

*The problem of power*

The dominant/muted model is strangely coy about power. Shirley Ardener observes that 'the present way of distinguishing a dominant from a muted... model does not impose upon us an obligation to talk in terms of "domination by men" or "the oppression of women", where this is taken to be a purposeful male activity'.<sup>20</sup> If she is trying to ward off implausible conspiracy theories about male control over language – always a pitfall for feminists – this is reasonable enough. Doubtless, men do not meet to make elaborate plans for suppressing women's reality. They inherit a culture and a tradition structured on certain principles, and their behaviour reproduces it – as, indeed, does women's in most cases.

Nevertheless it is hard to see that this behaviour does not in the end add up to male dominance and oppression of women. Furthermore, linguistic suppression is often 'a purposeful male activity', as Ardener herself documents. Explicit restrictions are imposed on women's speech, especially their public speech, in many cultures. Even where these are upheld by women (mothers, mothers-in-law) as well as men, it is clear that their function is to maintain the dominance of men. The Ardeners' preference for abstract technicalities – 'structures of dominance' rather than 'domination by men' – begs the question: in what cultural contexts and for what social purposes does the asymmetry between dominant and muted groups exist, and why are women rather than men the muted group?

*Summary*

The dominant/muted model of Shirley and Edwin Ardener raises important questions about what it calls 'differing orders of perception' between groups within a society, and it offers feminists plenty of food for thought. There are, however, some problems. What all this really fails to explain is why muted groups can generate an underlying reality but not a surface 'mode of specification' to express it. How do dominant groups manage to control the channels of communication so completely as to exclude any alternatives? Is the claim that they do this consistent with the evidence on the linguistic behaviour of muted groups (for example, the existence of subcultural varieties and styles, including the ritual languages and the conversational styles of all-women peer groups)? Is muting a *lack* of linguistic resources, or a lack of acceptance for women's language use in the wider, male-dominated culture?

These questions have political as well as theoretical implications. Although the Ardeners are not totally consistent, overall they seem not to regard women as active social and linguistic agents. (To be fair, they downplay the agency of men as well.) This puts them at odds with the feminist researchers who have emphasised the creativity and vitality of women's verbal culture; more importantly though, it leaves us wondering, if anything can be done to release muted groups from their subordinate linguistic position.

### ***Man Made Language: patriarchy and the power of definition***

Dale Spender's book *Man Made Language* was first published in 1980. Accessibly written for a broad feminist audience, it did as much as any text has ever done to raise feminist consciousness about language. For this reason – and despite the criticisms linguists in particular have made of its scholarship – it merits serious attention.

*Man Made Language* is a forthright radical feminist work. It is less wary than the Ardeners' articles of straightforward generalisations. Thus Dale Spender paints a picture with sweeping strokes, in which men control meaning and thus impose their worldview on everyone. Women, without the ability to symbolise their experience in the male language, either internalise male reality (alienation) or find themselves unable to say anything (silence). This account, though less equivocal, raises much the same questions as the dominant/muted model.

#### *Determinism*

Dale Spender assumes that an absolutist version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is correct:

Language is our means of classifying and ordering the world: our means of manipulating reality . . . . Yet the rules for meaning, which are part of language, are not natural; they were not present in the world and merely awaiting discovery by human beings. On the contrary, they had to be invented before anything could be discovered, for without them there is no frame of reference, no order, no possibility for systematic interpretation and understanding.<sup>21</sup>

On the one hand there is the evidence that not all human beings are led to the same view of the world by the same evidence and on the other hand is the explanation – namely the Sapir-Whorf

hypothesis – that this is because of language. It is language which determines the limits of our world, which constructs our reality.... Human beings cannot impartially describe the universe because in order to describe it they must first have a classification system. But paradoxically, once they have that classification system, once they have a language, *they can see only certain arbitrary things.*<sup>22</sup>

One reason for quoting at length here is to show that – in the light of our earlier discussion of Sapir and Whorf – Dale Spender's is a particularly extreme formulation of linguistic determinism. The constraints of language apparently cannot be overcome or even mitigated ('they [humans with a language] can see only certain arbitrary things').

Spender is also different from Sapir and Whorf in seeming to separate the processes of language and culture so that the former precede the latter ('they had to be invented before anything could be discovered'). Sapir tended to stress their 'interpenetration', the evolution of language alongside culture, but Spender gives us a sort of 'Big Bang' scenario in which a set of rules for interpretation are initially formulated and every subsequent 'discovery' is placed within their rigid framework. The rule that concerns Spender is, of course, the rule that interprets the world in male terms, definitively relegating women to the category of Other, not-men.

With the crucial underlying rule that the world can be divided into plus male and minus male categories we have seen the construction of patriarchal order. It is a symbolic order into which we are born, and as we become members of society and begin to enter the meanings which the symbols represent, we also begin to structure the world so that those symbols are seen to be applicable; we enter into the meaning of patriarchal order and we help to give it substance, we help it to come true.<sup>23</sup>

The only kind of agency Dale Spender admits is active perpetuation of the pre-existing patriarchal order; and as always with such absolute determinism, one wonders what permits the writer herself to avoid and draw critical attention to the very rules which allegedly hold all speakers captive.

I am certainly not disputing here that many or most people do lack awareness about the assumptions embedded in their language;

nor is it unreasonable to argue that we try actively to make sense of the world, very often interpreting it along traditional lines etched on our culture through history. (Dale Spender gives some good examples: for example, the naming of a scientific finding that women tend to relate figures in space to their context 'field dependence', as opposed to men's 'field independence': this implies a deficiency in women's performance, whereas an alternative name like 'context awareness' would be a positive evaluation of the female tendency. Predictably the alternative naming did not occur to the scientist). What is disconcerting is to argue this point in terms that make any kind of nontraditional behaviour a theoretical impossibility.

But the most intractable problem raised by Spender's account is not so much its determinism – problematic though that is – as its dependence on a kind of origin myth, the genesis of patriarchy, the postulated semantic 'Big Bang'. In the beginning, there was a 'crucial underlying rule that the world can be divided into plus male and minus male categories'. Who made that rule, and why? With this question we come to the problem of male control over language.

### *Control*

Dale Spender's title – *Man Made Language* – is on one level a metaphor, but it also seems to be intended as a descriptive statement. Men control language because men created language. So it is as well to enquire into what Dale Spender means by asserting language is man-made. She means not so much that men have coined all the words, invented the grammar and so on as that they have *defined* linguistic terms from their viewpoint, excluding women's. Most importantly they created the basic classification schema – plus male and minus male, good and bad – in terms of which all novel expressions or concepts would then be interpreted.

Take for example a term like *motherhood*. Spender claims that men have defined this word positively (not to say sentimentally). It thus becomes impossible for women to use the word in relation to the complex, positive *and* negative experience they may have of mothering. This clash between experience and language forces women into silence; for if 'unhappy motherhood' is an oxymoron, might not the experience the woman is trying to express with it be equally bizarre? If she uses deviant language, will she herself be labelled unnatural and deviant, not fit to be a mother as men define the term?

Spender argues that the entire lexicon can be analysed in this way: all words encode a male point of view (and indeed, a conviction of male superiority: hence the semantic rule that female terms become negatively marked or pejorative). Where this point of view may be at odds with women's experience, women can either take it on anyway (alienation) or reject it (silence).

Leaving aside the rather obvious objection that the 'unhappy motherhood' example is ill-chosen – for that phrase surely does not strike any odd or paradoxical note – the reader may notice a hint of a contradiction here. In the extremely deterministic universe Dale Spender seems to endorse (see above) one wonders about the status of women's alternative (authentic) experience of the world. If language is the measure of reality, what are women alienated from, or silenced about?

Let us return to Spender's claim that men define reality in their image, fixing the rules from the outset. Again, it is with some justification that we might wonder how men managed to do this. The origins of language and the advisability of supposing that it was 'created' by anyone in particular are matters little discussed in contemporary linguistics, since it is hard to know in any 'scientific' way what might have occurred. Spender however makes the move of applying to language an account by Dorothy Smith of the construction of *knowledge*.

This is how a tradition is formed. A way of thinking develops in the discourse through the medium of the printed word as well as in speech. It has questions, solutions, themes, styles, ways of looking at the world. These are formed as the circle of those present builds on the work of the past. From these circles women have been excluded...deprived of the means to participate in creating forms of thought relevant or adequate to express their own experience or to define...their situation and concerns. They have never controlled the material or social means to the making of a tradition among themselves or to acting as equals in the ongoing discourse of intellectuals.<sup>24</sup>

Men, Smith argues, have built up a tradition of received wisdom – facts, theories, ways of seeing and interpreting the world – by checking their contributions with other men, past and present. No-one in the charmed circle is likely to wonder if women consider the tradition fair to them, or whether they interpret matters differently.

Now, it seems to me there are plenty of discourses for which the general outlines of this account would be difficult to contradict. Philosophical and scientific speculations about the minds, bodies and sexualities of women from Aristotle to Freud were indeed pursued within a charmed circle of males. Women's traditions of knowledge had low prestige and in some cases – women healers' knowledge of their reproductive systems for instance – they were more or less deliberately suppressed. Nor does the circle contain very many women even now. The material means (money, education) and the social means (freedom from male persecution or ridicule) have never existed for women to participate in intellectual life on an equal footing with men, and they still do not exist. To say that the traditions of philosophy or science are historically male and have excluded women is reasonable enough.

But how reasonable is it to suppose that the exclusions and regulations of institutionalised knowledge – science, philosophy – apply equally and in the same way to everyday language? It is obvious how women were excluded from the academy, and the result was that women were not our culture's respected philosophers and scientists. No-one claims, however, that women historically did not use ordinary language to the same extent as men. In which case, how did language become male, man-made? How could women have been prevented from using language in accord with their own perceptions? (They could, of course, have been prevented from codifying their usage in, for example, the dictionary. But once again it must be recalled that the dictionary is not the language.)

Spender carefully uses the (Lacanian) idea of speakers 'entering' meanings already ordered and passed down through generations (just as one might learn the traditional folktales of one's culture). But since she also speaks of men *creating* the patriarchal order of meaning, this just pushes the problem back in time.

Where the Ardeners give us a scenario in which no speaker seems to have agency, Spender gives us one in which men have it and women lack it. This is explained, presumably, by the historical dominance of men over women. But it has the unfortunate effect of suggesting a kind of male conspiracy, a bit like the fictional state language bureaucracy in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four*. It evades the hard questions feminists have been raising recently about some women's own role in perpetuating sexist practices. Is it plausible to say that only men have shaped the meanings feminists would want

to change? What is the relation of language to power? These are questions it is fair to pose in relation to Spender's work.

### *Power*

The mystery of why women have not encoded their own meanings deepens when we consider Spender's argument that they can and should start doing so as a form of political resistance. The blurb of *Man Made Language* does not misrepresent the content when it enthuses, 'once women expose the falseness of male meanings and encode their own, language and society can assume new forms and women can move towards autonomy and self-determination'.

What is highlighted here is a familiar 'chicken and egg' question raised by any theory based on the propositions of determinism and control. Are women unable to affect language because they lack power – in which case they cannot hope to encode their own meanings without first changing their status – or is it the lack of linguistic resources that renders them powerless? On this point I find that Spender oscillates between the two alternatives. Though she emphasises her dependence on the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, she also says at one point:

Any exposure of the false nature of male superiority, while not a direct attack on male power, is an indirect attack which undermines it. If and when sufficient members of society no longer act in a manner which acquiesces in that superiority and permits it to go unchallenged...that power will need to be defended or transformed.<sup>25</sup>

Here Spender asserts that male power has some other basis than the assertion of male superiority which justifies power (and which one finds in language and other cultural forms). If you undermine the 'naturalness' and 'truth' of the justification – for example, by challenging the definitions of certain terms – you force men into a defensive position and incite women to attack them, since their power is now seen for the non-natural, unfair thing that it is.

This alternative formulation is more classically Marxist than Whorfian. Whorfianism, in its feminist versions, conflates the power with the myth that justifies the power, whereas the (traditional) Marxist view sees language as part of what disguises the true condition of the oppressed, even or especially from themselves. From this point of view, it is important to dismantle ideological

systems like language so that oppressed people, no longer misled, can organise to bring about revolution. From an extreme Whorfian perspective, by contrast, the dismantling and reconstruction of meaning would itself *constitute* the revolution.

This is an important difference in perspective, since feminist linguistic theory has implications for feminist political practice. Both the 'muted group' theory and the 'man made language' theory pose questions about feminist *resistance* to male control over language. How is it possible, and how crucial is it to the overall project of securing women's liberation? As I have pointed out, neither of the models discussed here seems clear or consistent in its answers to these questions. Let me end the discussion by considering them in more detail.

#### RESISTANCE: THE 'DREAM OF A COMMON LANGUAGE'

Both muted group theory and Dale Spender's *Man Made Language* seem to be caught up in a contradiction on the question of feminist resistance to oppression. Spender in particular is advocating that women seize the language and start to encode their own meanings: but in a totally Whorfian universe of linguistic determinism where male control is, in addition, total, this appears to be an impossibility. How could women alienated in such a universe even begin to see it through different eyes?

Doubtless this problem can be resolved to some extent by accepting a less strong version of the determinism and control theses. As Sapir suggested, and as George Orwell argued in 'Politics and the English Language', the corrupting effects of words can be resisted if we are prepared to think more carefully about what we are saying or writing.<sup>26</sup> This is not unlike the position of the reformists, though it does differ in fully recognising the political nature of the problems involved.

For radical feminist theorists, though, the solution more usually canvassed involves creating novel forms of expression, like Mary Daly's startling wordplay and extensive coining of new terms; or even whole new woman-made languages. (We will see in Chapter 8, too, how this idea that women need 'a language of our own' has for some time carried a powerful appeal, recurring not only in radical feminist writings but in other very different kinds of feminist linguistic theory.)

In the mid-1980s, the linguist and science fiction writer Suzette Haden Elgin worked out this theme with great thoroughness in a novel called *Native Tongue* which is worth considering here.<sup>27</sup> *Native Tongue* assumes a Whorfian universe in which language determines reality. It portrays a bloodless feminist revolution in which women change reality by secretly constructing a 'women's language', Láadan.

*Native Tongue* is set in the future, in North America. Women have no civil rights and are under the total control of men. The exploration and colonisation of space has proceeded apace and Earth governments are involved in endless trade negotiations with aliens. As a result of this contact with aliens, linguists have taken on a vital social role interpreting alien languages. The linguists are hated and periodically persecuted, but they are also very powerful. Even linguist women, though under the same legal and social disabilities as all women, have a certain amount of autonomy because of the need for their services. And when their childbearing years are over, linguist women (unlike others) live in communal, women-only houses.

It is within these 'barren houses' that subversive feminist activities go on. The women conceal relics of a past in which women had rights. They conceal instruments for performing abortions, and contraceptive drugs. But their greatest secret is the language they are busy creating: Láadan, a woman's language.

The creation of Láadan proceeds on different levels. It is not difficult for the women, all highly skilled linguists, to create a pleasing phonological shape for the language or a set of elegant morphological rules. What is difficult is the process of 'encoding' meanings. For this language must express lexically the perceptions of women, which no known 'man made language' expresses except by endless, inexact and timewasting circumlocution.

Encoding is defined as 'the making of a name for a chunk of the world that so far as we know has never been chosen for naming before in any human language... [Encodings] come to you out of nowhere and you realize that you have always needed them; but you can't go looking for them, and they don't turn up as concrete entities neatly marked off for you and flashing NAME ME.'<sup>28</sup> The reason these entities have not been named is because women consider them important and men do not, or they refer to a female rather than a male reality.

For example, women might wish to 'encode' the concept of childlessness as a positive state; the term 'barren', chosen by the men to denote the postmenopausal or infertile women who live

outside the main household is a negative word for which no neutral or positive alternative exists; therefore it does not capture the reality of the women concerned. (I choose this example because English-speaking women in the real world have grappled with it too, coining the term 'childfree'. I find this word unsatisfactory in another way: it implies that children are a terrible burden. There is apparently no way in English to name the two states of having children and not having them *positively* without in each case somehow putting down the opposite choice. This kind of rather subtle problem is what the idea of Encodings in a women's language addresses.)

By the end of the book, the women have begun to teach Láadan to little girls, and they are looking forward to a time (perhaps several generations on) when instead of being an artificial creation it will be a natural language, a women's 'native tongue'. But this raises a political problem for them: when women are empowered by their language and it is no longer possible or desirable to keep it totally secret, what action should women take to protect and ultimately liberate themselves?

I do not want to reveal the ending of the book. But it turns out the answer is a Whorfian paradox. As the heroine Nazareth points out, the entire 'what shall we do' problem is based on the women's assessment of what would be likely to happen within the old, pre-Láadan reality; but Láadan has created a new reality in which all previous calculations become null and void.

Whether intentionally or not, this ending seems to me to pinpoint more clearly than most nonfictional feminist works have managed to do, a political shortcoming of Whorfian ideas carried to their logical conclusion. What and whose reality does Láadan change? Women's – not men's, since men do not speak Láadan, and not the overall culture's, since the culture is so male dominated. Women end up with an 'authentic' language that brings them integrity and solidarity, but they do not end up with power.

Of course it might be argued – at least within the universe of the novel, and perhaps also by a radical feminist like Dale Spender or Mary Daly – that women do not want to have power in the sense men have defined it – domination, violence, bloody revolution. It is ironic, however, that when Láadan is endangered, at least one woman acts violently to protect it. Without this commonplace act of power as we know it the women's bloodless revolution would be put down in its infancy.

Let me put this argument in slightly more theoretical terms. Whorfian theory is intended to be culturally relativistic. It addresses differences without implying any evaluation of one worldview as superior to another. Those feminists who make use of it must therefore work with a model of 'separate realities' for women and men in a single culture – a theme which is in fact strongly evident both in muted group theory and in Dale Spender's work. The model is static: 'you have your reality, we'll have ours'. But as Anne Beezer observes, criticising Dale Spender, this is politically too simple (in the sense of 'too easy' as well as 'too simplistic'). In relation to gender, reality is not multiple but *contested*. Men and women are not merely different, they are *unequal*.<sup>29</sup>

Beezer makes use of the ideas of V.L. Vološinov, a Marxist linguist and philosopher, to argue that power in language and discourse is the ability to make your version of reality look natural and consensual, though in fact there are always many competing versions of the same 'facts' (the meaning of 'a fair wage' is not the same for the capitalist and the worker, for example).<sup>30</sup> But just pointing this out, while it may be necessary, is not sufficient to change anything. Powerful people cannot be allowed to simply shrug their shoulders and go on exactly as before, and powerless people cannot just take refuge in the fact that they think differently. They have to persuade others that their interpretation has validity and should be acted on: that is, they have to redefine social meanings rather than merely relativising them.

To put this in concrete terms, let us consider what the proper feminist response might be to a chauvinist statement like, say, 'women are ruled by their hormones'. Is it 'well, that may be true in your reality, but it certainly isn't true in ours?' (To which the chauvinist will doubtless reply, 'fine, now go and find a responsible job in your own reality, because I think you're ruled by your hormones and I don't care to hire you'.) Or is it to create a language in which it will be possible and meaningful to say 'men are ruled by their hormones'? It is surely needless to labour the point here. The only effective answer to a chauvinist statement like this is some version of 'nonsense'. Feminists want propositions such as 'women are ruled by their hormones' to become nonsensical. But we cannot simply bypass the (extremely powerful) forms of discourse in which these sexist propositions are embedded; we are obliged to challenge them.

From this point of view, the quest for a woman's language seems like a partial solution at best. A further problem with it is that it is

Utopian because it is ahistorical. The idea of creating a new language is attractive because it proposes that we can start again from scratch and attach our own connotations to the words we create, ignoring history. But for exactly the same reason, the idea is unworkable. You cannot simply step outside history, sealing language or reality in an imaginary plastic bubble forever. You can only start where you are, and try to change it.

I am not of course suggesting that feminists shouldn't coin new words or try to encode new ideas linguistically. On the contrary, this is vital. But it is no good imagining we can keep our perceptions and our words from being contaminated by the outside world and still have them make any impact. Everything we create has to take its chances with history. (Think about the recent history of the word *feminism* itself; women who named their movement for it have not been able to keep it pure and positive.)

From a perspective that acknowledges the force of history and the persistence of inequality, as any realistic politics must, Láadan is not a language but an 'anti-language', like Pig Latin or the argot of street gangs. As a source of group solidarity it succeeds, but as a form of real resistance it fails. This is the major political shortcoming of any linguistic strategy based on the notion of 'separate realities': even if the strategy is less extreme than inventing a women's language (and it must be remembered, of course, that *Native Tongue* is a work of fiction, not a political programme) it will either be unworkable or else it will make no difference.

The other problem raised by the 'separate realities' idea is somewhat different, and as we shall see in Chapter 8 it comes in for a lot of critical discussion in semiological and postmodern theorising about language. Is it really the case that all women share perceptions and experiences to the degree that one language would capture 'women's reality'? Or is this a false universalising of the varied experience of women? Does the 'dream of a common language' depend on our accepting a lie the powerful have always told about their powerless Others: 'they're all the same'? And does it depend also on our 'essentialising' certain so-called 'female qualities' (nurturance, nonviolence, love of nature and so on) when we ought to be challenging these restrictive definitions of femininity?

This is left vague in *Native Tongue*. But as I have observed several times already, in the last few years feminists have been much less willing to sink all differences between women in the idea of shared experience or global sisterhood, and more suspicious of general-

isations about women's nature. *Native Tongue* is, of course, a fantasy, the 'dream of a common language' taken to its extreme. But whereas in an earlier phase of feminism the fantasy was appealing (albeit Utopian) now many women would regard it as a totalitarian nightmare.

## CONCLUSION

Radical feminist theories of language can be characterised linguistically as an amalgam of Whorf and Orwell. Language constructs a certain reality: since it is men if anyone who did the constructing, excluding women from their charmed circle, the reality constructed turns out to be androcentric and indeed misogynistic. And since language constrains what we make of the world, its androcentrism and misogyny are culturally reproduced as each new generation learns the language. Realising this, women undertake the quest for a language in which *their* reality can take shape.

Theories like the ones we have been examining here beg certain questions and raise certain problems, even contradictions. If language constructs reality, where are we to locate the alternative reality women seek to express? If male control of language has been so total, how can women wrest it away? Will 'a language of our own' resolve women's problems, and will the diversity of women's experience fit a single order of meaning?

These might seem like all-or-nothing formulations, but I pose the questions in such absolute terms because the theories themselves seem to offer us total scenarios and stark choices. In the end, though, I think this absolutism is an error: that the notions of determinism and control, while they are naively glossed over by liberal-minded reformists, are pushed too far in radical feminism. What in radical feminist linguistic theory can be salvaged and put to use will be a question taken up again in Chapter 9 – for it is clear to me that the Ardeners and Dale Spender are addressing a genuine problem about language and the interpretation of reality, they are not just theorising about nothing at all.

In the next chapter however I want to turn to theories of language and gender that arise within a quite different intellectual tradition, one that explicitly takes issue with the linguistic and political assumptions of radical feminism.

# 8

## Feminist Models of Language (II): Semiology, Postmodernism and the Debate on the 'Gendered Subject'

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### INTRODUCTION

For more than a decade now there has been a sustained and serious challenge to the kind of feminism and the kind of linguistic theory that Dale Spender and the Ardeners represent. The challenge comes from the intellectual movements I have referred to as 'semiology' and 'postmodernism'. While these two movements are not the same, and there are important internal differences within each as well as between the two, they overlap historically, thematically and politically in significant ways. That is why I will treat them together here, opposing them (as indeed they self-consciously oppose themselves) to the models we considered in the last chapter.

I am well aware that to someone who is 'inside' either semiology or postmodernism, my yoking them together must seem ignorant or bizarre. Later in this chapter I will try to be more attentive to and respectful of their differences. From the point of view of feminist linguistic theory as a whole, though, the best way to introduce them is by putting them together and pointing out what they share – basically, a set of criticisms of all the other feminist perspectives we have looked at.

Both are products of the same, twenty-odd year period. During the 1970s a feminism influenced strongly by structuralist and post-structuralist 'continental' (that is, European) thinkers like Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida and especially the psychoanalytic theorist Jacques Lacan aroused interest and gained influence in certain

academic disciplines (particularly those concerned with textual interpretation, like literary and film theory). This is the movement to which I give the umbrella term 'semiology', because of its debt to the linguistic model associated with Saussure. The 1980s brought a newer wave of 'postmodernist' theorising, again influenced by the continental tradition of philosophy and again with implications for feminism.

Like the Ardeners and Dale Spender, feminist semiologists and postmodernists place emphasis on language and linguistic theory. But their conception of language, of gender and of feminism is radically different; indeed it is specifically critical of the assumptions made in other feminist approaches. Those approaches are 'humanist', whereas both semiology and postmodernism are 'anti-humanist'.

What do those terms mean? A convenient way to begin addressing that question is to consider a review of Dale Spender's *Man Made Language* written by two feminists who criticise it from an anti-humanist perspective, Maria Black and Rosalind Coward.<sup>1</sup> Although the review contains many interesting and perceptive remarks, it is most helpful to focus on just two lines of argument Black and Coward develop: one about *power* and one about *meaning*. After that, we must also focus on their (implicit) use of insights from psychoanalysis about the nature of human beings, since a concern with the nature of the human 'subject' is one of the hallmarks of this whole current within contemporary feminism.

## A CRITICAL VIEW OF DALE SPENDER

### **Power**

Dale Spender's view of power is rather simple: all men have power over all women. Men have set up social arrangements to privilege themselves; everything works in their interest, including, of course, language.

Black and Coward have two objections to this. First, they want to stress that there are many dimensions of power in a society: not just gender but also class and race, to name some obvious instances. This complicates the picture of 'one group literally [having] power over the other'.<sup>2</sup> A white middle-class woman, for example, may enjoy power over male subordinates who are Black or working-class,

though she herself is subordinate to her white middle-class husband. As we will see, this emphasis on power as a multidimensional relation comes to the fore in postmodernist feminism too.

Second, Black and Coward do not like the picture implied in Dale Spender's account of men actively creating social arrangements that serve their interests, and then using coercive pressures to force women to stay in their assigned place. Influenced by continental thinkers like Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault, Black and Coward see power as a much more complex and subtle matter, exercised through 'ideology' or 'discourse', and not usually by outright coercion. (For instance, no-one has to threaten little girls with violence to get them to desire 'feminine' things like dolls and pretty dresses. The problem for antisexist parents and educators is rather to get them not to!)

Furthermore it is arguably misleading to suggest that there is a group of people consciously 'exercising' power at all. Men, even white middle-class ones, are not like an industrial cartel, meeting (when? at the dawn of history, or once a week? Black and Coward point out that the scenario is absurd) to plan how they can subordinate women most effectively. They inherit social structures and constructed ways of life just as women do. The exercise of power is thus diffuse, ungraspable (Foucault for instance compares it to a net), and not the kind of conscious activity Dale Spender seems to imply.

What follows from this line of argument in terms of linguistic theory is that man did not, in fact, make language in his own image and exclude women from it. From Black and Coward's perspective, it is unhelpful to hold men in general directly responsible for the way language is or the way women are in relation to it; and it is naive to suppose that women can simply turn things around by a sheer act of will.

## **Meaning**

The argument about power dovetails with another argument, about meaning. Dale Spender (and the Ardeners) contend that women and men have different realities because their experiences are different. The problem for women is that men control the processes by which the meaning of experience is expressed in linguistic form. Language therefore encodes only 'male' meanings.

Black and Coward point out the implication of this: Spender assumes that language is a direct reflection of experience. If people have similar experiences they will share meanings, if not (as in the case of men and women), not. But Black and Coward feel this is theoretically naive: for them, 'experience and identity cannot be seen as the origin of meaning, but as its outcome'.<sup>3</sup>

This is perhaps the most important point on which humanist/empirical and anti-humanist/anti-empirical feminist theories of language come into conflict, and it will bear further comment. The traditional, enlightenment view commonsensically sees language emanating from a speaker. If I say 'I am the author of this book' the word *I* refers to a prior reality, a particular individual whose words these are and whose book this allegedly is. This is sometimes called 'humanism' because the origin of meaning here and the criterion for interpreting or evaluating the truth of what is said is clearly the person who speaks, the one to whom – in this case – *I* refers.

What Black and Coward are suggesting, though, is that commonsense understandings of this are simplistic: they get it the wrong way round. There is no reality of a particular individual before the word 'I'. The linguistic entity '*I*' *calls the identity of the speaker into existence*. '*I*' constitutes what theorists within this paradigm call a 'subject position': a culturally recognisable place, given by the language, for a subject to put themself in.

Althusser called this positioning 'interpellation' or 'hailing': if someone in the street calls out, 'Hey, you!' and you turn around, you have recognised yourself as the one being hailed. He argues that social institutions hail or interpellate us as the subjects they need us to be: subjects of a particular class, for example. This is what (relatively speaking) fixes our social identities. An infant before language acquisition, or an autistic child, or an adult who is severely psychotic, is not a full social being since they have not achieved the identification with a subject position necessary to experience the self as unified from moment to moment, and to recognise it when others 'hail' it.

A small illustration might suggest something of the difference cultures make between masculine and feminine subject positions. Recently a woman who had just had a baby told me that in the hospital nursery, each newborn's crib bore a label announcing its sex. The labels said either 'I'm a boy' or 'It's a girl'. Obviously none of these infants was yet capable of speech. But on the day they were born, the culture hailed them differently: boys were hailed as active

'speaking subjects', unproblematically 'I'; girls were not. This is the order which, as they grow older, these children will be forced to enter.

The process of becoming a (proper) social subject is the process of learning language and positioning oneself within it. That is what Black and Coward mean when they describe identity and experience as the outcome of meaning rather than the origin of meaning; and when they say that language 'defines our possibilities and limitations, it constitutes our subjectivities'.<sup>4</sup>

### **Psychoanalysis**

Although they do not talk about it in detail, Black and Coward are implicitly making use here of psychoanalytic theory, and more specifically of the Lacanian variant which explains how subjectivities are constituted through language. This too requires comment, for it is an important theme of semiological and postmodern feminist theory.

It could well be asked why so many contemporary feminists draw so heavily on the theories of Freud and his successors. There can be little doubt that the practice of psychoanalysis has often been very oppressive to women, requiring them to 'adjust' to the passivity and masochism of a culturally prescribed feminine role. But the theory of psychoanalysis, especially as rearticulated by Lacan, is currently popular with feminists because it seems to offer an understanding of how subordination can be internalised deep in our personalities, and reproduced even after external conditions – for example, women's dependent economic and legal status – have changed. It says that our identities, including gender identities, and our sexual desires (which animate us even though we are not conscious of it) are forged in the family relations of our childhoods. If it is in this process that the norms of masculinity and femininity are reproduced socially from generation to generation, then psychoanalytic theory is crucial for feminists.

It is also, as I pointed out in the Introduction, crucial for the postmodernist perspective. In postmodernist thought, and semiology is in this respect thoroughly postmodernist, the subject is 'decentred', displaced from its central position in the Enlightenment universe (just as the Enlightenment itself displaced God from that position, replacing him with 'Man': hence, once again, the term 'humanism'). Postmodern anti-humanism depends on a radically different

conception of what human beings are; and much of that comes from Freud. We may think of ourselves as stable, unified entities who 'have' personalities and experiences, but this is superficial. Since for the Freudian most of the forces shaping our behaviour are unconscious and conscious thought itself is produced by a multiplicity of forces we cannot fully know, the much vaunted rationality and stability of enlightenment Man is ultimately an illusion.

But what has any of this to do with language? The connection lies in the notion (Lacan's rather than Freud's) of a *symbolic order*, a set of meanings that define culture and make available the subject-positions I mentioned above. In current subject-theory this symbolic order is often equated with language (the Saussurean system of differences, *langue*). As Coward and Ellis explain: 'Because all the practices that make up a social totality take place in language, it becomes possible to consider language as the place in which the social individual is constructed'.<sup>5</sup>

The term 'subject', which designates that 'social individual', turns out to be a pun. As well as being the 'subject' of her own perceptions, the social individual is a 'subject' in the other sense, subject to the authority of someone or something. That something is the symbolic order, or language. We are all subject to the laws of language, which exist before we are born and which are, in Saussure's words, 'outside the individual who can never create or modify it by himself'.<sup>6</sup> As children, one of our tasks is to enter the symbolic order, to acknowledge it and position ourselves in it so we can speak as members of the culture – if we fail, the result is psychosis.

The relevance of this to feminist linguistics is as follows. First – as I noted earlier – it is important for feminists to understand how subjectivity, identity and sexuality are constructed. Lacanian theory suggests they are constructed by language – girls and boys enter the symbolic order differently – and this means language and linguistic theory become important to feminists too. (We will look in more detail at what Lacan says about language and gender shortly.)

But beyond this understanding of our present arrangements lies the possibility of actual feminist intervention. Presumably the kinds of gendered subjectivities described by Lacan's account – and the relative value placed upon them, for as we shall see it is masculine subjectivity that turns out to be the norm while feminine subjects are marginal – are unsatisfactory from a feminist viewpoint. Presumably, too, if they are social they are not immutable.

One way to intervene in the process of subject formation might be to alter the family relationships in which it takes place. Many non-Lacanian psychoanalysts, 'object relations' theorists like Nancy Chodorow for instance, recommend just this: fathers as well as mothers should form primary nurturing bonds with young children. That would alter the psychoanalytic story in which mothers are everyone's first love-object while fathers stand for authority.<sup>7</sup>

Lacanian, however, focus their attention on the linguistic side of the equation. Perhaps we can change the structures of subjectivity by changing the language through which subjectivity is constructed. Or, failing wholesale linguistic revolution, we can at least subvert the structures from within by placing more value on the 'marginal' in language. Thus a number of feminists who develop their theories from Lacanian ideas have called for women to speak and write in a way that emphasises and celebrates their difference from men – a call which is sometimes expressed metaphorically in the idea of 'writing the body'. Implicit in this is the notion that marginality gives women who embrace their non-mainstream position a privileged access to novel and creative forms of expression.

During the last decade or so, the ideas of Lacan and those feminists who have made (critical) use of his work have inspired an enormous amount of discussion and debate. I want to try and outline those parts of Lacan's model that are relevant to feminism and feminist linguistic theory, and then to look at what two rather different feminist theorists – Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva – have made of Lacan.

## LACAN

Lacan, using a Saussurean model of language, addresses himself to the question of how children take their places in the symbolic order, that is, become human subjects and members of their society. He views this as a several-stage process of 'splitting': the child must learn it is separate from its mother's body, recognise itself as a unity (Lacan speaks of a 'mirror stage' when the child understands that what it sees is its own reflection) and comprehend the difference between itself as speaker (I), addressee (you) and person mentioned in others' speech (s/he). This last 'splitting', most obviously, depends on acquiring the relevant norms of language. Language-learning is both a socialising and an individuating process.

Lacan's most important claim from a feminist perspective is that male and female children (or masculine and feminine subjects, though Lacan does not maintain the distinction rigorously) enter the symbolic order differently. The reason for the difference is the crucial position of the phallus: this is the symbol that 'rules' the whole order, and it is also the mark of sexual differentiation.

To understand why the symbolic order should be ruled by the phallus, we have to go back to Freud's account of children's psychosexual development. Freud believed that sexuality was plastic in both object (who/which gender we desire) and aim (how erotic satisfaction is achieved). But since reproductive sexuality is required to continue human life, there must be some process whereby the child narrows down the possibilities, defining itself as male or female and desiring those who are defined as the opposite.

Freud located this process in the stormy relations of the child to its parents, the so-called 'family romance'. Building on clinical observations, he was led to posit an Oedipus complex, in which the child desires its mother and feels rage and jealousy toward its father as a rival for the mother's affections. This state of affairs is resolved by the castration complex, in which sexual differentiation is accomplished. Boys overcome their forbidden desire for the mother through their fear that the father will castrate them if they persist. They identify with the father, who has a penis, as they do, and understand that one day they will inherit his power (and his exclusive relation to a woman). Girls, on the other hand, must recognise that they are already castrated, and will later regain the lost penis by having children. For both sexes, though, the crucial fact of which they must become aware in order to pass through the castration complex is the fact of sexual difference: whether they, and their parents, possess a penis or not.

Lacan interprets this story symbolically rather than literally: he talks not of the penis, a piece of male flesh, but of the phallus, the cultural sign of masculinity. For him, the law of culture forces every subject to take up a position on one side or the other – having or not having the phallus. This need not be a matter of biology – on the contrary, one may identify with the phallus whether or not one has a penis, and take up a gendered subject-position in defiance of anatomical sex – but the castration complex always results in the acquisition of one gender or the other.

Before this, Lacan argues, the child has not entered the symbolic order but remains in the order of the imaginary. Here, at one with

the body of its mother, it perceives no lack, no incompleteness, no absence, difference or unsatisfied desire. Awareness of these things comes only when the mother/child dyad is broken up by the threat of castration, symbolised by the phallus.

This circumstance results in the phallus itself having two powerful meanings for the child. Firstly, it is associated with *lack*, the loss of the mother's body. After the prohibition on incest and the threat of castration are appreciated, there can never be the same close relationship between mother and child. Secondly, the phallus is associated with the prohibition and threat that made the child aware of it – it stands for the authority of the Law, the patriarchal social order.

Lacan contends that language is closely associated with both these concepts, lack or desire on one hand and law or power on the other. The idea that words can stand for things can be grasped by a child only when it has some notion of things being missing or absent. In the symbiotic imaginary stage there is no pressure towards symbolic language, since no absence is perceived. This is why Lacan theorises the symbolic order as dominated by the phallus: language develops when the authority of the father brings about the loss of the mother's body.

Let us consider this scenario critically from a feminist perspective. All Freudian theory regarding sexual differentiation is open to the criticism of sexism and phallocentrism, but Lacanians argue that Lacan avoids the worst excesses by distinguishing the penis from its symbolic, fantasised equivalent, the phallus. How convincing is this argument?

It needs to be acknowledged that male fear of castration and female 'penis envy' are conceived, in psychoanalytic theory, as unconscious fantasies, not conscious and rational beliefs. These fantasies play with the possibilities of gender as if they were not fixed by anatomy – one reason why some Freudians insist that the two things are indeed separate. They also mirror one another: those who have the phallus (boys) see that others do not, and fear they might lose it; those who do not have it (girls) see that others possess it and imagine they might acquire it too.

But it must also be admitted that the phallus is, in an important sense, the penis. Unconscious fantasies of losing/gaining a phallus are triggered by the real-life perception of a visible difference between the sexes: some people have penises and others have something else.

This in itself is not problematic. No feminist denies that men have penises, nor indeed that penises make a difference. But what is problematic is the idea that when a child notices the difference between men and women, she will instantly interpret it in a particular way – specifically, the female genitals will be seen to 'lack' what the male genitals have. Why should the child – at this stage, the prelinguistic child – already have the 'binary opposition' mentality that constructs the world into sets of 'x' and 'not-x'? Lacan's own account, resting feebly on the argument that the penis is particularly salient and visible, seems to underline both the implicit conflation of fantasy-phallus with real penis and the assumption that the penis is superior to female genitals, thus inviting feminist objections to the idea that anatomy is destiny.

The Lacanian feminist Jacqueline Rose argues that the phallus is interpreted this way not for any inherent reason but because it is a signifier, its meaning arbitrary but fixed by the symbolic order. As she puts it, '[S]omething can only be seen to be missing according to a pre-existing hierarchy of values.... What counts is not the perception but its already assigned meaning'.<sup>8</sup> I find myself in total agreement with this remark, but I will admit to some perplexity on the question of how children on the brink of symbolic language can have internalised this 'already assigned meaning' of the crucial signifier. We seem to be in something of an explanatory regress here: children cannot enter the symbolic until they introject the phallus, which they cannot properly do until they know its symbolic value, which cannot happen until they introject the phallus...

It is interesting, though, that Rose returns the locus of explanation to *language*, the system which alone invests difference with significance. Lacan's is fundamentally a linguistic reading of Freud, and his view of language merits more detailed consideration.

We may note first that the term 'symbolic order' is not totally clear. In some Lacanian writing it refers to the totality of social and cultural practices, while elsewhere it seems to refer only to language, which is the foundation of other practices. While I will leave the matter open for the present, the ambiguity should be borne in mind.

Whatever its scope, the symbolic order is conceived in Lacanian theory as a sign-system, a Saussurean *langue* of differences and relationships. But for Lacan, the signifier takes precedence over the signified. Rather than representing a signified in a one-to-one correspondence, the signifier refers to a whole inventory of other signifiers in a chain of association (it is not, perhaps, difficult to see

why a psychoanalyst might tend to view matters in this way). Coward and Ellis explain:

Language is seen to have the dizzying effects of a dictionary: each word, definition by definition, refers to all the others by a series of equivalents; every synonymous substitution is authorised. Language results in tautology, without at any moment having been able to hook onto any signified at all.<sup>9</sup>

The obvious question here is why in this case speakers imagine they are making intelligible remarks rather than free associating or playing Chinese Whispers. Lacan meets this objection by speaking of *points de capiton*, points at which the hypothetically open-ended chain actually becomes closed. These points are contextual, artefacts of the moment, the situation of speech. They are the limit imposed on *langue* by *parole*.

At this point, once again we seem to have encountered a puzzle. Lacan seems to want to have things both ways: meaning is both contextual – that is, a function of social structures and interactions – and at the same time it is itself *constitutive* of social structures and interactions. Meaning is created on an individual basis in a particular situation; yet it pre-exists the individual whose identity and experience arise from language itself.

This also raises a problem about the phallic domination of the symbolic order. If the authority of the phallus is guaranteed neither by anatomy nor in the last instance by language, where does it come from? Perhaps we can acknowledge the argument that the phallus is a ‘third term’ breaking up the mother/child dyad, and as such the spur to language acquisition: but why should its meaning be so monolithic?

Despite all disclaimers about the contextual nature of meaning, it seems to me that Lacanians are covert determinists, dependent on a somewhat questionable reading of Saussure (see Chapter 7). Though liable to ‘slippage’, the values of signifiers are fixed by the system. For Lacanians emphasise that subjects must insert themselves in a pre-existing order; and that suggests a stability of meaning outside the individual speaker or situation.

It is odd, then, that Lacanians claim to have refined Saussure’s account of language by rejecting the idea of a disembodied system inhering in society (Saussure, following the sociological thought of Emile Durkheim, described *langue* as a ‘social fact’) and placing the

speaking subject at the centre of the theory. For it turns out that this speaking subject is constituted, precisely, by locating herself in relation to a disembodied system inhering in society (hence Black and Coward's point, that meaning is the origin of the individual and her experience rather than vice versa). This may be the polar opposite of a radical feminist account like Dale Spender's, but it raises curiously similar problems about how meanings can be fixed and by what or whom they have been fixed.

It also raises the problem of power. The reason why feminists have taken up Lacanian ideas should be evident by now: women (or feminine subjects), since they lack the phallus, are positioned differently in relation to the symbolic order the phallus dominates, an order we cannot escape since it circumscribes what it means to be a human subject. In fact, women are marginal to it, in Lacan's famous formulation 'excluded from the nature of things, which is the nature of words'. Like the notions of 'muting' and 'man made language', this is an account of women's status as Other, cultural outsider, linguistic alien.

In one sense, Lacan here tells us what we already know. The symbolic order is patriarchal; inserting oneself into culture means submitting to patriarchy. But finally, the reason for this remains mysterious. The theory deals with sexual differentiation, but not satisfactorily with power and inequality, with the superimposition of dominance on difference. This might lead us to wonder how useful it is as a feminist linguistic theory.

It must be said at once that Lacan has been criticised by feminists, for all that he has influenced so many of them. Few women are slavish followers of the master, and I want to look now at some of their reworkings of his ideas. Perhaps the most important characteristic of these feminist reworkings is their concern – again, reminiscent of radical feminist theory – that women should not simply accept Lacan's dictum, but should try to find a 'feminine' language in which to encode and validate what symbolic language excludes or marginalises.

It seems to me that the most interesting and at the same time most characteristic moves are made by two women in particular, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva. Both these women write in French; both are trained analysts (Kristeva is also a trained linguist); both take Lacan's work seriously, though their feminism leads them to modify it significantly. In other ways, however, they are interestingly different from each other.

## FEMINIST REWORKINGS OF LACAN: IRIGARAY AND KRISTEVA

**Luce Irigaray**

Luce Irigaray is clearly identified as a powerful critic of Lacan; she was actually expelled from Lacan's school after the publication in 1974 of her book *Speculum de l'autre femme*. This book, like the rest of her work, is critical of Lacan's theories particularly as they relate to language and femininity.

Irigaray's most significant objection to Lacan is that his system cannot admit plurality, either in sexuality or in language (and for Lacanians there is, of course, a link between these two things). Hers is a feminist position because it refuses to conceptualise women and femininity as merely opposite to men and masculinity – the binary and androcentric 'he has it, she lacks it' model inherited from Freud. Irigaray asserts the difference and otherness of women; Lacan, in her opinion, denies it and so neutralises its power.

To Lacan's famous pronouncement 'the unconscious is structured like a language', Irigaray asks, 'which language?' For Lacan there is only one, and since it is dominated by the sign of the phallus, women are in a negative relation to it. Irigaray insists that women have a (different) language of their own; or more exactly, that they would have, were this language not suppressed and denied existence within the patriarchal system. In an interview with Couze Venn published in 1977 under the title 'Women's Exile', she offered a particularly clear statement of this position:

The question of language is closely allied to that of feminine sexuality. For I do not believe that language is universal, or neutral with regard to the difference of the sexes. In the face of language, constructed and maintained by men only, I raise the question of the specificity of a feminine language; of a language that would be adequate for the body, sex and the imagination... of the woman. A language which presents itself as universal and which is in fact produced by men only, is this not what maintains the alienation and exploitation of women in and by society?<sup>10</sup>

What Lacan conceptualises as a lack, Irigaray, rejecting the binary opposition, conceptualises as a difference. The difference, as it turns out, is quasi-anatomical: the male genitals stand for unity, the

oneness of the penis, while women's sexuality is plural, symbolised by the labia, their 'two lips'. If it were not suppressed, women's language would differ from men's in analogous ways to their genitals, both in form –

It has nothing to do with the syntax we have used for centuries, namely... subject, predicate or subject, verb object. The female sexuality is not unifiable.<sup>11</sup>

– and in meaning:

There will always be a plurality in feminine language. And it will not even be the Freudian 'pun', i.e. a superimposed hierarchy of meaning, but the fact that at each moment there are always for women 'at least two' meanings, without one being able to decide which meaning prevails, which is 'on top' or 'underneath', which 'conscious' or 'repressed'. (...) For a feminine discourse would undo the unique meaning, the proper meaning of words, of nouns, which still regulates discourse.<sup>12</sup>

It is, perhaps, difficult to imagine a concrete instance of such a language. But theoretically this is an interesting instance of a feminist apparently rejecting determinism as a masculine phallic ploy.

It follows that for Irigaray, the silencing of women by men is not achieved by any mysterious semantic means, but by the naked exercise of power: 'Women', she says, perhaps thinking of her own experience, 'are not allowed to speak, otherwise they challenge the monopoly of discourse and of theory exerted by men'.<sup>13</sup> This is all too obvious, she claims, in the differing behaviour of the male and female schizophrenics whose language she has studied. Men typically produce linguistic symptoms, but women find it more difficult to articulate their illness, suffering more from psychosomatic pain.

Recently Irigaray has published the results of some empirical work analysing the actual language produced by men and women in different contexts, including tape recorded psychoanalytic sessions and formal experiments where subjects were required to compose written sentences including specific keywords.<sup>14</sup> This excursion into conventional social scientific methodology may seem surprising, given that Irigaray is strongly identified with a current of thought that opposes empiricism. (For me it is also ironic that Irigaray's

methodology is so much less sophisticated than that used by many social scientists with none of her philosophical sophistication.) It is however worth discussing, because – as I will argue later in this chapter – unless the abstractions of Lacanian theory can be related in some way to the observable actions of people in the world, they are little more than dogma.

What Irigaray finds in her experimental work is that women are less likely than men to make themselves the subject of discourse, either spoken or written. The clearest example of this is that men, asked to write a sentence, much more often begin it with the pronoun *je* (I). Also, both men and women frequently address their discourse to a hypothetical or generic male interlocutor (something Irigaray links with the fact that in French generics are masculine, and – even more restrictively than in English – third person plural pronouns as well as singular must be gendered).

Overall Irigaray concludes that it is difficult to speak ‘as a woman’. Women efface themselves in discourse by representing themselves obliquely, not as ‘I’ or even ‘she’, but in generic terms which conflate ‘human’ and ‘masculine’.

Irigaray enquires, ‘Are the differences between men’s utterances and women’s effects of language or society?’, and immediately answers, ‘I think we should reject this separation’. She points out that language itself is an effect of generations of social interactions, rather than being a ‘pure’ system in the mind, outside history.<sup>15</sup>

Irigaray does not however believe that the solution to women’s problems is to *neutralise* sexual difference in language. Sex, she says, is important in human culture; our aim should be for a better balance between the two sexes in language, culture and society. However,

Without giving up putting sexual difference into words, it is desirable that women should be more able to situate themselves as *I, I-she-they* [that is, *elles*], to represent themselves as linguistic subjects and to speak with other women.<sup>16</sup>

It is difficult to give a neat summing up of Irigaray’s work on language and gender. But it is clear that her metaphor of ‘women’s exile’ can be read in more than one way. Perhaps women are exiled, cast out from language and culture in the same way Irigaray herself was cast out from Lacan’s school. Perhaps it is women’s destiny to return one day to their rightful home, their own language and culture. Perhaps, alternatively, women within a patriarchal society

choose the status of the exile, the foreigner, the outsider, refusing to be wholly co-opted, assimilated to an alien male dominated culture. This is a useful image with which to approach the work of another feminist theorist, Julia Kristeva.

### Julia Kristeva

Kristeva is herself an exile, a Bulgarian living in France and working in the French language. She has called herself *l'étrangère* ('the strange/foreign woman'). And she theorises femininity as a condition of otherness, of non-assimilation or incomplete assimilation to the phallic symbolic order, though not in quite the same way as Luce Irigaray.<sup>17</sup>

Kristeva is less critical than Irigaray of Lacan's entire framework, but she insists much more pointedly than either Lacan or Irigaray on the difference between 'women' and 'feminine subjects'. Lacan is open to criticism for being at least equivocal on this question. His famous dictum that 'women are excluded by the nature of things, which is the nature of words' suggests he really is talking about biological women, and not about gendered subjects. Luce Irigaray is open to the same criticism; since her notion of feminine sexuality and language is so firmly grounded in the anatomy of the female body (notably its possession of 'two lips') it seems that when she says 'women' that is exactly what she means.

For Kristeva, however, the subject position one takes up in entering the symbolic order is not determined by one's anatomy, but by one's identification (or not) with the mother. Men can take up a feminine subject position and women a masculine one. To be a feminine subject is to enter the symbolic order in a particular way. Feminine subjects are not totally outside the symbolic, but they retain stronger links than do masculine subjects to the pre-symbolic (Imaginary) stage and the pre-Oedipal mother figure.

Kristeva discusses the Imaginary stage in an interesting way. She suggests that before the symbolic order there exists a *semiotic order* linked to oral and anal drives. The 'pulsions' of these drives are gathered in what Kristeva calls 'the *chora*' (a word that means, approximately, receptacle). Once the child enters the symbolic order as a result of its castration complex, the contents of the *chora* will be repressed. Like all repressed elements, though, this *chora* will return, manifesting itself even in symbolic language through rhythm, intonation, gaps, meaninglessness and general disruption of the

rational, symbolic flow. Feminine subjects will show this semiotic influence to a particularly marked degree, since for them the repression of pre-Oedipal elements is less complete.

It can be argued that some kinds of discourse – madness, poetry, art in general – are primarily semiotic rather than symbolic; that is, they foreground the nonrational elements of language. Kristeva sees the heightened ability of feminine subjects to break through the conventions of rational discourse as enabling in two ways. First, it enables novel forms of creative art, such as the modernist poetry she discusses in her book *Revolution in Poetic Language* (she asserts, of course, that male modernist poets could nevertheless be feminine subjects).<sup>18</sup>

Second, and more important, it is potentially subversive of the entire social order. For a Lacanian, it is the symbolic order which sustains all our social and cultural institutions. For a feminist Lacanian like Kristeva, therefore, whose interest is in changing things, it is the feminine disruption of symbolic language that has the potential to bring about a social revolution.

The revolution Kristeva envisages is profound. In an influential article, 'Woman's Time', which I referred to in Chapters 3 and 4, she discusses different kinds of feminism and links them to different attitudes toward the symbolic.<sup>19</sup> Liberal, equal-rights feminism is, she suggests, a demand for women to be integrated into the symbolic order rather than being marginal to it. Radical feminism is a celebration of women's marginal position: it rejects the culture's excessive valuing of rational symbolic discourse (Luce Irigaray might exemplify it). But Kristeva speaks of a 'third generation', in which feminists unmask the entire male/female opposition as 'metaphysical', as a construction, rejecting the notion of individuals having a gender identity (or indeed, an identity) altogether.

The idea of this third generation is connected in fairly obvious ways with Kristeva's refusal to use biological categories in deciding who is what kind of gendered subject. Identifying womanhood with femininity is an oppressive patriarchal trick, and the kind of feminism Kristeva calls 'radical', which exhorts women to embrace and revalue femininity, while it may have some usefulness at a particular point in history, must in the end be criticised for colluding with the system. Unless we make it our goal to transcend the male/female dichotomy, we will not be able to get beyond the inverted sexism that keeps the same old categories and just swaps the positions of those who occupy them.

This 'beyond gender' scenario is apocalyptic: it marks the disappearance of men and women as we know them (and perhaps as a corollary, the disappearance of human subjects as we know them). The question Kristeva poses here is not, however, new: on the very first page of her introduction to *The Second Sex*, first published in 1949, Simone de Beauvoir dared to ask: 'Are there women, really?'<sup>20</sup> Feminism to date has tended to answer in the affirmative. Even Julia Kristeva herself has been fairly conservative on this point: she sees a necessity, at this point in history, to go on talking about women, even though she warns against taking the term 'women' to refer to anything 'ontological', that is, which actually and necessarily exists. (And in her most recent work, Kristeva appears to be rather firmly stuck in what she would once have termed the 'radical' stage.)

But as we move into the 1990s, Kristeva increasingly appears as a transitional figure. There are feminists now who have raised Simone de Beauvoir's question more insistently, and who prefer to answer it in the negative – or at least, to explore the implications of doing so. Are there 'women'? Should there be 'women'? Can we define a category of 'women' or make any coherent statements about it? These are issues that engage the attention of feminists who locate themselves within postmodernist theory.

## FEMINISM AND POSTMODERNISM

I said at the beginning of this chapter that semiology and postmodernism are not the same thing, and I justified putting them together on the grounds that they overlapped to a certain extent 'historically, thematically and politically'. This argument requires some elaboration, and also, conversely, some qualification.

By saying that postmodernist thought overlaps with the thought of semiologists, I mean to imply that there are certain fairly obvious continuities. For instance, postmodernism takes up and extends the critique of 'humanism' already apparent in semiology. Elements that are foregrounded in semiology (for example, the linguistic theory of Saussure and the psychoanalytic theories of Freud and Lacan) are less explicitly present in postmodernist writing, but they are implicitly assumed as background. Postmodernism also builds on the semiological conception of language. Indeed, from the point of view of linguistic theory I see no radical break between the two

currents, except that in postmodernism, language is given less determining force (this follows, of course, from the postmodern abandonment of monocausal theories about anything).

In terms of feminism, there are continuities too. The theme of marginality, addressed by semiologists like Irigaray and Kristeva, remains important for feminist postmodernists; Irigaray's emphasis on plurality also has postmodernist overtones, though Irigaray does not treat it in the way postmodernists do. And as we have noted already, Julia Kristeva's work prefigures the most important questions for a postmodernist feminism.

There are, however, important discontinuities. In the introduction I characterised postmodernism as a movement suspicious of and resistant to universalising theories. This resistance appeals to many feminists, because it is precisely through the endless writing of the universal story of 'Man' that women have been so consistently excluded and misrepresented. Women do not want to repeat this oppressive error by writing our own universal story, since whoever wrote it, that story would inevitably have the effect of turning innumerable different women into 'Others' and marginalising them as men have marginalised all women.

Postmodernists call stories that function in this way – by ironing out differences in pursuit of some purported universal – 'totalising fictions'. They claim that these are myths that achieve their coherence and elegance only through exclusion, which is a form of illegitimate power. And during the 1980s, as more and more women protested their exclusion or marginalisation by a feminism that claimed to be speaking for all women, it seemed that this abstract theoretical opposition to the universalising impulse was being vindicated, painfully, in political practice.

The various enterprises I have gathered together under the heading 'semiology' depend quite heavily on totalising fictions. Psychoanalytic theory is the most glaring example. Some feminist Freudians have gone so far as to claim it as a trans-historical and cross-cultural theory of gender construction, though the family relationships and childrearing practices of the turn of the century European bourgeoisie, Freud's models, are very far from universal. Feminist postmodernists are therefore less committed to psychoanalysis.

From the point of view of feminist linguistic theory, however, the most interesting break postmodernism makes with other feminist approaches is to abandon the quest for an authentic women's

language as utterly misguided and fruitless. In the forthright words of the North American scientist and philosopher Donna Haraway, 'The feminist dream of a common language, like all dreams for a perfectly true language, of a perfectly faithful naming of experience, is a totalising and imperialist one'.

This sentence is taken from a very influential piece first published in 1985 and titled 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs'<sup>21</sup>. I propose to examine it rather closely, not because it is somehow a distillation of postmodernist feminist theorising – no single statement, however influential, can claim to be that – but because it develops the theme of language in a particularly explicit and provocative way.

The phrase 'dream of a common language' is most famously that of the poet Adrienne Rich. But Donna Haraway is justified in applying it to many or even most recent variants of feminist linguistic theory. For example, a great deal of feminist discussion about sex differences in language tries to unify women around a particular style, whether folklinguistic or 'real'. Dale Spender too is clearly in search of a common language for women, one that can express the experience they allegedly share. In Suzette Haden Elgin's fantasy *Native Tongue*, the women linguists who create the language Láadan assume throughout that what they are doing is encoding the perceptions of women in general. Even the Lacanians, by associating 'feminine' language so closely with the female body, are appealing to a shared reality as the basis for women's speech and writing.

It is this recurring desire among feminists for a common language in which to express our shared experience which Haraway attacks as 'totalising and imperialist'. What she means, I think, is that the assumption of shared experience overlooks both the instability of gender divisions and the many differences between women. In Julia Kristeva's terms, it concedes too much to the 'metaphysical' category 'women', and so falls into the patriarchal trap of failing to question the male/female dichotomy. Also, it permits some women – as a matter of fact, they tend to be white, Western intellectuals – to speak for women in general, as if all women were just like them. Feminists who make this move either ignore other women's realities or assimilate them to some version of their own. This is a kind of imperialism.

Haraway feels that the 'dream of a common language' is a dream of wholeness and harmony, a kind of return to Eden. Such nostalgic yearnings are suspect for her; not only are they totalising and imperialist, they derive from a way of thinking about people and

social relations whose historical moment, whether we like it or not, has passed away in almost every part of the world.

Unlike the feminists she is implicitly criticising, Donna Haraway is a trained scientist. She argues that recent developments in biotechnology and information technology are 'enforc[ing] new social relations for women worldwide'.<sup>22</sup> Biotechnology changes women's relation to reproduction and their bodies. Information technology makes possible a global economy of ultra-technologised production in which a (primarily female) workforce becomes dispersed, isolated, deskilled, moved in and out of the labour market at will, and treated in many ways as though workers were machine components and not people. (Of course, Marx himself, in the nineteenth century, said this reduction of people to machines was intrinsic to industrial capitalism. But postmodernists feel it has become much more pronounced and even literal in the last two decades.)

These developments mean that persons are now being conceived of as parts that can be slotted in or taken out in the service of a larger system. Old dichotomies between nature and culture, organism and machine, public and private, are being broken down not only in avant-garde theory but in the realities of women's lives. The 'Cyborg' of Haraway's title is a science-fiction term for an amalgam of human and machine: 'a kind of disassembled and reassembled postmodern collective and personal self'.<sup>23</sup> Haraway adds: 'This is the self that feminists must code'.

It is not easy, and not meant to be easy, to extract a linear argument from Haraway's essay, which appropriately resists 'totalisation'. But this particular remark – that the Cyborg is 'the self that feminists must code' – seems to me to suggest that Haraway thinks it pointless to resist new developments with old strategies. For example, it will be useless to protest that we are persons and not machines, and we wish to return to a more 'whole' way of life. Even supposing such a way of life once existed, it cannot exist any more; you cannot turn back the clock on subjectivity. (It would be like rejecting the Western individualism which has made us what we are now, and proposing to return to a pre-Enlightenment universe.) Rather, we must seize the potential that is offered by a Cyborg 'personal and collective self'.

When Haraway says the problem is to 'code' that self she suggests that the definition of a Cyborg is still up for grabs. This underlines once again the importance of language and meaning in creating our

ways of being in the world. The obvious question to ask, then, is how feminists should code the new self.

In line with her desire not to 'totalise', however, Haraway does not give an answer to that question. Instead she closes her essay by saying, 'this is a dream not of a common language but of a powerful, infidel heteroglossia'. The word *heteroglossia* means 'diverse/different tongues', while *infidel* (traditionally applied by Christians to Jews and Muslims) means 'without faith'. So Donna Haraway's dream is of a diversity of voices, but all of them heretical, refusing allegiance to the traditional beliefs of their culture. Once again, then, women are placed as outsiders, speakers from the margins.

It is not the emphasis on marginality that divides Donna Haraway's postmodernism from Luce Irigaray or Julia Kristeva's Lacanian theories, but her emphasis on diversity, plurality. (Though Irigaray says feminine language always has a plurality of meaning, she does not suggest there will be a plurality of feminine languages.) The postmodernist ideal is 'polyvocality', a play of different voices in which no one will silence or drown out any other.

To summarise (totalise?) then, feminist postmodernism both continues and takes issue with the project of feminist semiology. Lacanians trace the intricate constructions of masculine and feminine subjectivities in language, and in some cases (notably Julia Kristeva's) look forward to a world in which those illusory constructs will be broken down. Postmodernists assert that we are living in such a world already, and we had better claim its potential before someone else defines it for us. The Lacanians hope that the 'repressed' or 'suppressed' feminine language can break through, restoring to women what has been alienated from them. Postmodernists believe that 'the feminine' itself is a myth. As Donna Haraway comments, 'Gender might not be global identity after all, even if it has profound historical breadth and depth'.<sup>24</sup>

What is the language of a Cyborg like? Donna Haraway says, 'Cyborg writing is about the power to survive not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other'.<sup>25</sup> In other words, don't look for a new language or an old one that was stolen from you, take what is to hand and use it for your own purpose. Her example is the writing of the Chicana feminist Cherríe Moraga, who forges an oppositional identity using a mixture of two existing (and historically colonial) languages, English and Spanish. This doesn't mean passive assimilation to the language of the oppressor –

Haraway recommends biting the hand that feeds us – but it cannot mean searching for a language outside history, for a mythic unity contained in a shared, pristine Word.

## PROBLEMS

The theoretical developments I have been presenting here are influential, especially among academics, but hardly uncontested. Let us examine some of the problems these new approaches have raised.

### **Language, bodies, history**

Lacanian make a persistent connection between language and the body, especially the female body, and in many cases they suggest that this is (or could be) a positive relation. Other feminists beg to differ. The dissident French feminist journal *Questions Féministes* puts this critical argument in these terms:

It is at times said that women's language is closer to the body, to sexual pleasure, to direct sensations and so on, which means that the body could express itself directly without special mediation and that, moreover, this closeness to the body and to nature would be subversive. In our opinion, there is no such thing as a direct relation to the body. To advocate a direct relation to the body is therefore not subversive because it is equivalent to denying the reality and the strength of social mediations, the very same ones that oppress us in our bodies. At most, one would advocate a different socialisation of the body, but without searching for a true and eternal nature, for this search takes us away from the most effective struggle against the socio-historical contexts in which human beings are and will always be trapped.<sup>26</sup>

This critique concentrates on the fundamentally social nature of the body itself; perhaps the authors think it needless to point out that language too is irrevocably part of the cultural rather than the natural sphere. Or as Mary Jacobus, a literary critic, pithily expresses the same thought: 'if anatomy is not destiny, still less can it be language'.<sup>27</sup>

The problem pinpointed here can be described as 'biologism' (anatomy is destiny) or 'essentialism' (women and men are eternally

different, but each forms a homogeneous group in itself) or 'ahistoricism' (a refusal to pay attention to the historical forces bearing on women's position at a particular time and in a particular place). Even the least biologicistic Lacanians may be vulnerable to the criticism that their approach is ahistorical, because it is fair to say that they treat psychoanalysis itself as a universal theory not tied to any one culture or period. Given the dependence of the theory on a model of child development explicitly based on the nuclear family, this is rather puzzling. Not surprisingly, many feminists (including postmodernists) have expressed serious reservations about it.

Even if we grant the relevance of Freudian categories to some cultures (for example, present day Western cultures, where the nuclear family is normative even if it accounts for only a minority of actual families) certain problems remain. How does Lacanian theory fit with other accounts of gender formation and language acquisition?

Like any theory, psychoanalysis excludes some things, the better to concentrate on others. But if it gives the impression that children acquire language and gendered subjectivity in a totally private, psychosexual family drama, that impression is surely misleading. Children are treated differently according to sex both inside and outside the family from the moment they are born. Gendered behaviours are modelled for them, and explicitly taught to them. Peer groups and social institutions (like schooling and mass media) reinforce norms of masculinity and femininity all the time. All these social processes are embedded in language, and all of them contribute to a child's linguistic development. So it could be argued that feminist linguistic theory, if it privileges psychoanalysis over every other kind of model, is excluding a great deal of equally relevant material.

There is a considerable body of research on language acquisition, which tends not to support the claims of Lacanians about language and gender, since it suggests that there are few significant sex differences in language acquisition. (Of course, Lacanians assume that children's gender identification need not accord with their biological sex. But it is surely reasonable to suppose that in most cases, it does; or why call the subjectivities masculine and feminine, and assert that they are helpful in understanding the subordination of women?)

As for the claim that feminine subjects are marginal to symbolic language, research suggests that if anything, girls are more quickly and completely integrated than boys. Girls are (slightly) more

advanced in linguistic development, and less vulnerable to every kind of linguistic disorder.

A Lacanian might respond to this by saying that what linguists mean by 'language' is not the same as what they mean by 'the symbolic order', and therefore the empirical findings are irrelevant. If so, I would want to pose the question of what the symbolic order is, and why it is so frequently identified with language. In refusing all observable facts about linguistic behaviour as merely 'empirical', our hypothetical Lacanian makes her theory irrefutable, because it is completely circular. If femininity is *by definition* marginality to the symbolic order, and anyone, male or female, who writes a certain way is therefore a feminine subject, there is no way to evaluate the statement that feminine subjects are marginal to the symbolic order. It becomes an axiom or a dogma, and for feminist purposes vacuous. So although Lacanian theory opens up interesting questions about subjectivity, sexuality and the role of language in both, it immediately closes them down again with its dogmatic, authoritarian answers.

### **Language, gender, fragmentation**

The authoritarianism and ahistoricism of Lacanian theory is questioned and finally found wanting by feminist postmodernists. They, however, raise some equally problematic issues on their own account. The most obvious and pressing of these goes back to Simone de Beauvoir's question: 'Are there women, really?'

Most feminists today are happy to acknowledge that there is no such thing as 'Woman', a universal, transhistorical, cross-cultural fiction created by some women in their own image and almost immediately destroyed again when other women objected that she didn't – and shouldn't – speak for them. But women, plural: if we dispense with them, if we deny that the category of gender has any general content or meaning – if there are no women, really, can there really be any feminism?

The exuberant postmodernist rhetoric of diversity and polyvocality sets itself in opposition to the Utopian (yet oppressive) concept of the universal 'Woman'. But it has itself been criticised as Utopian in a different way: Utopian in being utterly removed from the real world.

As Donna Haraway acknowledges, gender divisions have 'profound historical depth'. Of all the 'totalising fictions' produced

by theorists in pursuit of cultural universals, the most plausible by far are the ones that concern gender. Every known society differentiates women from men, and most of them exemplify some degree of male dominance. Though many anthropologists argue that there are (and have been) gender-egalitarian societies, there is no recorded example of women as a group dominating men. For me at least, knowing these facts makes a difference. Something that goes this deep is not to be dismissed lightly.

Of course, the content of gender divisions and the degree of gender inequality is extremely variable over time and space. Doubtless, a woman in a hunter-gatherer society, a Victorian bourgeoisie wife and an assembly worker in a Silicon Valley electronics plant would find few points of similarity in their experiences of life. The relationship between a slave woman and the plantation owner's wife in pre-Civil War America – to take a different example that feminists have discussed extensively – was hardly one of sisterhood and gender solidarity.

But does this really license us to do away with gender as a basis for feminist analysis? I think that would be equivalent to doing away with theory altogether. For theory does require a measure of abstraction. The similarities here are abstract rather than emerging concretely and immediately from the recounting of each woman's life. Ultimately they lie in the fact that each of the very different women mentioned above had an identity formed and a life circumscribed to a significant degree by the circumstance of being born a woman and not a man. If making that observation is totalising and imperialist, then so is all theoretical discourse; any attempt to reach beyond the simple bearing of witness to our own lives is rendered null and void.

The 'gender-scepticism' of some postmodernists is regarded by other feminists with dismay. Men, they point out, have had centuries to consolidate their position before beginning to question it; women are cutting the ground from under ourselves after only twenty years. The problem these critics see is that feminists – without having achieved equality, let alone wholesale social transformation – are beginning to deny themselves the power to make any generalisations about women and gender at all, and thus to undermine the collective identity on which effective politics depends.

Let me return here to the more specifically linguistic postmodernist injunction to stop universalising, the rejection of an earlier feminist 'dream of a common language'. On one level it is easy to

sympathise with this, since – all questions of ‘imperialism’ aside – ‘a perfectly true language, a perfectly faithful naming of experience’ is simply an ‘impossibility (I will argue this point more fully in Chapter 9). And a linguist is likely to keep in mind, too, the fact that no actual person speaks ‘language’. Language is an abstraction; in reality there are only languages, plural, and it is hard to imagine women overcoming this rather fundamental division.

But that is to take the idea of a common language very literally, whereas I think it should be taken as a metaphor. The impulse behind this metaphor is, I would argue, not so much total unity as contact or communication – the desire of women to speak, to listen, to move as far as possible toward understanding. The context in which Adrienne Rich uses the phrase ‘dream of a common language’ is too often forgotten when the phrase itself is quoted:

No one lives in this room  
 without confronting the whiteness of the wall  
 behind the poems, planks of books,  
 photographs of dead heroines.  
 Without contemplating last and late  
 The true nature of poetry. The drive  
 to connect. The dream of a common language.<sup>28</sup>

The impulse is not to eradicate difference, deny history, but ‘to connect’.

Granted, this is rather a modest impulse. It inevitably falls far short of the mystical, quasi-telepathic unity conjured up in, for instance, Suzette Haden Elgin’s fantasy of Láadan, literally a ‘perfectly faithful naming of [women’s] experience’. It is, however, an impulse that I am unwilling to dismiss as totalising and imperialist.

Donna Haraway and others are right to emphasise the diversity of women and the value of their many voices. But communication does not necessarily require all parties to speak with only one voice. To achieve its aims (which it can never, of course, do perfectly) it requires an awareness of and attentiveness to difference; it requires a constant imaginative effort to grasp what another speaker means. The common language feminists have dreamt of may be nothing more totalising than a way of speaking and writing that makes space for differing voices to speak, engage with one another and be respectfully acknowledged.

This is quite close to the polyvocality postmodernists want. But I find it interesting that their emphasis is on writing, not speaking, not listening. In Donna Haraway's 'powerful infidel heteroglossia', is anyone listening? The word *communication* appears in her manifesto in negative contexts only; 'communications engineering', for instance, is a strategy for putting women in the 'integrated circuit' of patriarchal capitalism. And arguably women (especially less privileged women) have been listening for far too long. Yet there is nothing 'powerful' about talking to yourself.

I see much to applaud in postmodernist suspicion of 'totalising fictions'; I also see much to fear if feminism abandons all claim to go beyond the particularity of a single moment, a single experience (or more likely a fragmented collection of such moments and experiences). Feminism must exist in the space between these extremes, between a falsely universalised 'Woman' and an ungraspable diversity of women. If anything lies between the two poles it is language and its communicative potential. I want to conclude this discussion by focusing on what that might mean.

#### CONCLUSION: ON COMMUNICATION

Language-using is the social practice through which humans make public sense of private experience. What cannot be put into a linguistic form remains irreducibly private (and frequently inchoate, even for the individual concerned). That is not to say language is or could be a 'perfect . . . naming of experience'. On the contrary, *because* language is social and public it is shaped by history and power; what can be meaningfully communicated in it is therefore not an individual decision, and some individuals find it more congenial than others. Despite its manifold inadequacies, however, if we wish to create an intelligible reality (again, this is not the same as a *shared* reality), language is all we have to work with.

It is not clear to me how a postmodernist feminist like Donna Haraway regards the project of creating an intelligible (not necessarily consensual) reality. Is such a reality 'totalising and imperialist'? Or is it, in fact, what Haraway herself is trying to create in writing her 'Manifesto for Cyborgs?' There is something paradoxical and lacking in self-reflexivity about the postmodern position taken to its logical extreme (just as there is with the spectacle of a Lacanian fluently explaining how women 'lack access

to language', or a radical feminist declaring that man-made language makes it impossible to see that language is man made). To repeat, *all* theory (perhaps, indeed, every act of speaking or writing) rests to some extent on a desire to make intelligible what is superficially chaotic. Language too must be theorised since it is the medium for, and sets some of the limits on, that intelligibility.

This is why theories of language that exclude or gloss over questions of communication seem to me to miss a central point. The social practice of language-using is not defined simply by the act of speaking (or writing or signing). Nor is it completely defined by the structures of the language itself, though these do bear on it. What most crucially defines this social practice, I would argue, is the act of addressing someone, in some context, for some purpose.

It is this aspect of language that tends to escape the attention of semiologists, postmodernists and indeed many linguistic theorists. It should not, however, be overlooked by feminists. For me this is the bottom line: women are not addressed in the same way as men. Women do not address others on the same terms as men. Patriarchal relations are part of the context for every act of (attempted) communication. If we want to understand what part language plays in women's subordination, and indeed what it can do in our liberation, we need to pay attention to questions of communication and address.

These are the questions I plan to pursue in the next chapter. I will continue with the argument I have already begun to develop: that the approaches we have been examining in this chapter and Chapter 7, models which emphasise women's linguistic exclusion, alienation and marginality, are inadequate and pessimistic.

The feminists whose work we have considered in these two chapters have dreamt of a common language, or they have abandoned that dream and with it the search for any point of contact at all. I think this has come about partly because language, meaning and especially communication have been misrepresented (in linguistics as well as by feminists). In Chapter 9, therefore, I will try to argue this point in more detail and to offer an alternative account.

# 9

## Beyond Alienation: an Integrational Approach to Women and Language

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### INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I want to articulate a view of language in the spirit of the argument I began to develop at the end of Chapter 8. This view of language refuses any overall global theorisation (psychoanalytic or otherwise) of women's relation to language as a form of alienation, and conversely, any vision of an authentic 'women's language' in which there is no such alienation. It is more concerned with local practices of exclusion and regulation, emphasising the communicative nature of language, its quality of being addressed to someone in some specific context.

This is not to imply that the feminist approaches to language I have examined in the last two chapters should be dismissed out of hand. They have helped many women to make sense of their experiences and feelings about language: muting, misunderstanding, marginality and so on. These phenomena are real enough. But in order to explain them, I believe we do not have to resort to notions of alienation, male control, negative semantic space, negative entry into the symbolic, inauthenticity and linguistic determinism. These notions mystify the workings of language and – just as importantly – they demoralise women language users.

Let us consider an example of this demoralisation. In 1976, at a conference on patriarchy, a paper was read which gave an account of Lacanian theories about language and gender. When the papers from the conference were published, they included not only this Lacanian paper but a critique of it written by women in the Dalston Study Group, titled 'Was the patriarchy conference "patriarchal"?''. Obviously the Dalston women felt hostile towards the psychoanalytic theory presented to them. They commented:<sup>1</sup>

It felt ironical...to arrive at a women's conference and feel defined negatively in relation to it; to listen to papers being read about women's silence and women having no social language, which itself made us passive and silent.

The Dalston group objected not only to the content of the paper but to the alienating theoretical language it was written in. The authors of the paper, in an attempt to talk about women's exclusion, had replicated it:

The language used...had the effect of *making* large numbers of women feel inadequate, stupid or angry...the process we identify in education as a process of socialisation that often makes women, blacks, working class people, etc. unconfident and suspicious of intellectual work, and makes them doubt the strength and potential of their own language. It also perpetuates the split between the undervalued day-to-day language of such groups...and the impoverished depersonalised analytical language of intellectuals.<sup>2</sup>

Here the Dalston Study Group identify a rather simple mechanism of oppression and exclusion: it has nothing to do with the global nature of language, but rather it is a matter of how these particular women were addressed (by other women) in a particular context. Apart from the surface problem – that the language of the psychoanalysis paper was inaccessible to all but a privileged few – there was a deeper problem: an enormous gap between the abstract 'language' being theorised about and the concrete forms of language used in day to day life, which suggested an implicit *devaluation* of everyday speech.

Theories of language (including feminist theories) too often operate at this level of ungraspable abstraction. In linguistics the split is institutionalised in Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole*, for instance. From this shortcoming proceed many of the misconceptions on which feminist theories of alienation and so on are founded. As a preliminary to my analysis of women's oppression in various local linguistic practices, therefore, I want to examine linguistic theorists' conceptions of language, meaning and communication – and to criticise them on a number of grounds.

## LANGUAGE, MEANING AND COMMUNICATION

### **Language**

The word 'language' has at least two meanings. As a general, abstract term it can refer to a human faculty (like 'cognition' or 'perception'). This term does not have a plural. Alternatively it can refer to specific entities like 'English' and 'Swahili', and clearly in this second sense it can be pluralised. In a great deal of theorising about language, both lay and expert, the two senses are not very rigorously kept apart.

In my view it would be more helpful if they were. Linguistic scholars often look at entities like 'English' as objects, exemplars of the abstract natural category 'language'. They therefore gloss over the fact that English is a social *institution*, a cultural artefact with a history, regulated by conventions and by authority (examples of the latter include dictionaries, grammars, stylesheets, books about usage and so on).

Linguistics glosses over this because of its aspirations to be 'scientific'. Most discussion of languages as institutions tends to focus on matters of correctness, elegance and purity, which are prescriptive and unscientific in linguists' terms. To elevate itself above the morass of value-judgements, prejudices and misconceptions, linguistics practises abstraction. It abstracts languages away from their histories, the people who use them, the circumstances in which they use them and the purposes they use them for. Languages become 'language', (exemplified best, perhaps, by Saussure's *langue* in which terms enter into relations with each other – and there is absolutely nothing else). Such a language has no users and no uses. Institutions that grow up around languages are ignored (though clearly one could study them without descending to prescriptivism oneself). And as a result linguistics misses a great deal that is interesting and important. Its theory of meaning and communication is thoroughly impoverished.

### **Meaning and communication**

#### *Linguistics and communication*

Because linguistics abstracts away the users of language and the contexts of their everyday speech, it ends up with a simplistic and skewed account of how people ascribe meaning to language – in

short, how they communicate. To sum this up rather crudely, the tradition of Western linguistic thought locates communication in the linguistic code itself, because the linguistic code is all linguistics aspires to study. But the kind of communication one can theorise in this way is extraordinarily narrow and problematic in many respects.

In her autobiography, Simone de Beauvoir brings out the consequences of such narrow theories of communication particularly clearly. She describes an early childhood world of prelinguistic experience which words, when she comes to use them, can render only imperfectly: 'white was only rarely totally white, and the blackness of evil was relieved by lighter touches; I saw greys and half-tones everywhere. Only as soon as I tried to define their muted shades, I had to use words, and found myself in a world of bony-structured concepts'.<sup>3</sup>

De Beauvoir initially found language somewhat unsatisfactory; but having admitted the necessity for it, she fell into the opposite error of assuming there was no meaning outside of the rigid definitions people gave her:

As I had failed in my efforts to think without language... I assumed that this was an exact equivalent of reality; I was encouraged in this misconception by the grown-ups, whom I took to be the sole depositaries of absolute truth: when they defined a thing, they expressed its substance in the sense in which one expresses the juice from a fruit. So that I could conceive of no gap into which error might fall between the word and its object; that is why I submitted uncritically to the Word, without examining its meaning, even when circumstances inclined me to doubt its truth.<sup>4</sup>

The young Simone had two theories, presented here as equally naive: first that thought is independent of language and later that language expresses reality perfectly, leaving no room for arguments about meaning. What she had to learn was that language is both more and less flexible than these theories imply: its meaning can be guaranteed neither by reference to the speaker's private experience nor by invoking some fixed, authoritative reality. And when words fail us, as they often do, all we can do is attempt to clarify in other words. As a result, *the representation of experience by language is partial in every sense of that term.*

This truism of communication is something linguistic theorists have not always grasped. The model of communication that has

dominated Western thinking about language is, as Roy Harris points out, 'telementational'.<sup>5</sup> Language is a means for transferring a thought intact from the speaker's mind to the hearer's. This is possible because the speaker and the hearer share a linguistic code, a set of invariant correspondences between forms and meanings, signifiers and signifieds. Given a thought she wishes to convey, the speaker need only select the appropriate form; her utterance will be decoded by the hearer in the same manner, by matching its form with a concept – the same concept – in her own mind.

This model can work only if there really is a unique one-to-one correspondence between forms (words or utterances) and meanings, and if language users all have the same mental inventory of forms and meanings. Without what Harris calls the 'fixed code', we could never be sure that we had really understood what anyone said, since we could not know that their utterance encoded the same concept it evoked for us. Linguistics however assumes the existence of the fixed code without asking too many questions about what actually happens in communicative events. At best, it relegates these to the realm of *parole* (also known as performance, pragmatics and so on), leaving the idealised fixed code – the determinate pairing of form and meaning in a particular language – as the central core of linguistic investigation proper.

Given the historical and current dominance of this view, it is hardly surprising if feminist versions of linguistic theory are implicitly based on fairly similar assumptions about communication. Even the Lacanians, though admittedly they reject the idea of telementation, have a fixed code – the symbolic order – as a central element in their approach. From the perspective I am adopting here, Lacanians are not as different from traditional linguistic thinkers as they claim. Recall that for Lacanians, meaning is not in the speaker but in the system; for others, meaning is in the speaker because the system is in the speaker too.

Roy Harris is one of the few contemporary linguists who criticises the abstraction and idealisation whereby telementation by means of a shared fixed code is simply assumed: he calls it 'the language myth'. He suggests that language can only work in the ways we know it does work if meanings are *not* fixed, shared and transferred intact from mind to mind; and he proposes what he calls 'demythologised' or 'integrational linguistics', an alternative model that begins from that premise.

*Integrational linguistics*

Integrational linguistics regards language primarily as a communicative phenomenon, and therefore acknowledges two crucial points. Firstly, language is *radically* contextual. It is not just a matter of context affecting the system, the system has no existence outside a context. Thus language cannot be abstracted from time and space, or from the extralinguistic dimensions of the situation in which it is embedded. Just as modern biologists regard even simple organisms' behaviour as produced by incredibly complex interactions of genetic and environmental phenomena, so even the simplest linguistic exchange involves a constellation of factors – linguistic, contextual, social and so on – which is always more than the sum of its parts. And this also implies, of course, that meaning is radically indeterminate and variable.

Secondly, language-using is a creative process. There is virtually no limit to the novel situations humans may encounter, and therefore to the communicational demands that may be placed upon them. To meet those demands, demands which cannot even be specified in advance, a fixed code could not possibly be adequate. Instead language must be flexible and renewable; that is, it must be possible to make it mean new things, not by creating new words for each new situation, but by putting existing resources to variable use, deploying language's inherent metaphoricity and open-endedness. A moment's thought suggests this is exactly what real people in real situations really do; whereas the language myth seems to imply that the model for human conversation would be something like the 'exchange' I have with the bank machine when I want to withdraw some cash.

Interpretation, then, is creative and contextual: it is not just a matter of looking things up in some vast internal codebook. If linguistics would take full account of the human capacity for creativity as well as rule-following, intuition as well as rational deduction, chaos as well as order, then in Harris's words 'it would no longer be necessary to reduce speaker and hearer to mere automata, handling pre-packaged messages in accordance with mechanical rules'.<sup>6</sup>

This theory of language is, in many ways, an enabling one; but it does have one corollary which many people might find less appealing. If language is radically indeterminate in the way Harris suggests, it cannot be 'perfect'. In particular, we cannot rely on it to bring about absolute mutual understanding in the way a telemental transfer of thought would (hypothetically) do. Indeterminacy

makes language flexible, adaptable to novel situations; but it also causes language to fall far short of being telepathy. In the light of this argument, let us return to the feminist concept of 'alienation'.

*Meaning, understanding and alienation*

Simone de Beauvoir was frustrated by her failure to make words express the exact nuances of her perceptions. Camilla Gugenheim, whom I quoted in the Introduction, complains that 'a vast number of the words I use all the time to describe my experience are not really describing it at all'. The poet Audre Lorde notes that we speak of our experience 'only at the risk of having it bruised and misunderstood'.<sup>7</sup> And it is this kind of limitation on language that leads many feminists to posit that women are alienated from a language controlled by their oppressors, and that women must therefore find a language of their own.

But if meaning is complex, plural and ultimately open-ended, the new language solution fails. The fit between experience and language is never exact, since words themselves are not exact, and nor is the fit between speakers' and hearers' interpretations. Perhaps, then, these problems are built into all interaction, affecting all speakers; and perhaps in the end there is no escape from them. This is not to say that women's relation to language is exactly the same as men's: but I shall go on to argue that the difference cannot be located in the meanings language itself makes available. Rather, it lies in the social practices through which language use in certain contexts is regulated.

If perfect mutual understanding – telepathy – is not a normal or even a possible outcome of speaking, though, is that not the ultimate nightmare of alienation? Are we not trapped in our own private worlds with no hope of making contact? That is one way of looking at things, and no doubt it goes very deep. One of the founding myths of Judeo-Christian culture – the Tower of Babel story in the *Book of Genesis* suggests, precisely, that humans have lost some original linguistic unity:

And the Lord said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand each other's speech. So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of the earth.

On one level this myth is meant to explain the diversity of languages in the world. But it also addresses, metaphorically, the politics of communication. The perfect understanding that results from speaking the same language is an essential prerequisite for collective action and confers enormous power. Threatened, God undermines this power by replacing unity with diversity of language. Like the exile of Adam and Eve from paradise, the scattering of the tower-builders stands for a Fall, an obstacle God puts in the way of human happiness.

Feminists too have their versions of this story. Men have undermined women by 'confounding their language', the language of their bodies, of their unconscious, of their experience. In order to act together, an authentic language of women must be forged. Without this common language, women are powerless to realise their 'true' nature and the projects they have imagined.

Postmodernist feminists, of course, take a rather different position on the Babel myth. They see it not as a fall from grace but as an inevitability; or even a liberation from totality into diversity. But if other feminist theorists overestimate communication, postmodernists, with their rejection of the 'dream of a common language', seem to me to underestimate it. They take the same opposition between absolute unity and total fragmentation, and simply invert it.

I, by contrast, do not think communication or collective action is negated by the view of meaning I am putting forward here. Rather, to dismiss those things in principle altogether seems to me as fantastic as to suppose we can somehow rebuild the tower of Babel. But certainly, if we are to understand the nature of communication and collective action, we must first acknowledge its inherent limitations. Until we abandon our fantasies of what communication never was and never can be, we will not be able to say anything sensible about it.

Where does all this leave the feminist theories of language and oppression we have discussed in this book? I suggest that from the perspective outlined above, it becomes difficult to sustain feminist ideas of linguistic determinism, male control over meaning and female alienation from language.

Determinism, at least in the absolute forms put forward by radical feminists and some neo-Saussureans, is a myth; because where there is no determinacy there can be no determinism. If language and linguistic acts are integrated into social life generally, language becomes one influence among (and interacting with) others – it cannot be privileged as Whorfian and Saussurean theories privilege it.

Male control over meaning is an impossibility. No individual, no group however powerful, has the ability definitively to 'fix' the endless creative play of meaning. Meanings are not 'entered' or learned by rote: they are (inter)actively constructed in context. This does not imply however that an individual speaker can make language mean anything she likes, in the manner of Humpty Dumpty; I will shortly return to the question of social constraints on intelligibility. What it implies is that the constraints themselves are contextual artefacts, rather than being an order specified in advance for language as a whole (whether by the Lacanian Sign Of The Phallus or Dale Spender's 'Plus/Minus Male' rule, or any other, similarly monolithic construct).

Finally, the alienation of women from language is not an inevitability, nor does it follow from women's feelings of alienation that an 'authentic' feminine language needs to be invented. Given the flexibility of language and the undeniable fact that women, like men, acquire it, there is no reason in principle why language should remain forever 'man made' – though neither women nor men will ever realise the dream of a *perfect* language.

Of course, this argument begs the crucial question: if feminists have been misled in supposing that they are alienated in a male-controlled language, what does women's linguistic disadvantage consist of? It would be extraordinarily arrogant for me to dismiss out of hand the perception of so many other women that a disadvantage exists. And indeed I am very far from dismissing this: I claim only that there are more productive ways of understanding it.

It is clear to me that the 'radical indeterminacy' thesis proposed by Roy Harris becomes implausible if it is pushed to the ultimate extreme of saying that individuals are free to do whatever they like with language. Integrational linguistics is not useful to feminists unless social and political factors are permitted to enter into the picture of communication, and we must now consider this point in more detail.

## THE POLITICS OF LANGUAGE AND THE OPPRESSION OF WOMEN

As I have just observed, and as Simone de Beauvoir found out, individuals are not simply free to do exactly what they wish in creating meaning. At one end of the spectrum we have 'mere

automata handling pre-packaged messages', like bank machines: at the other end we have certain artists, aphasics and schizophrenics, whose messages are novel, and verging on unintelligibility. Between these extremes, where most instances of communication are to be found, speakers interacting with other speakers encounter the constraints imposed by the fact that communication is by definition not individual, but social. The social norms which regulate public behaviour are always and inevitably an integral part of the context for any linguistic or communicative act.

As a social, public activity, language-using itself is subject to regulation by laws, customs and institutions – what I have referred to in this book as 'metalinguistic practices'. An integrational linguistics does not simply abstract these metalinguistic practices away to leave us with some pure 'core' of linguistic practice to study. Even if we can make the relevant analytic distinction, it is important to bear in mind that real linguistic acts always involve an interaction between the two things.

It is, however, in the normative social practices regulating what will be accepted as an intelligible or reasonable or 'good' way of talking that the possibility for elite power and control over language arises. Some ways of talking or writing can acquire prestige while others are disparaged; some definitions of the world can be excluded from the public sphere, or met with blank incomprehension, or made to look ridiculous, while others can be made to look 'natural' and true.

Language, meaning and communication are in one sense the birthright of every human being, but a social hierarchy is imposed on this as on other elements of our shared human life. As Trevor Pateman puts the point,

Language, though the socially produced means of thought, is not socially controlled. Increasingly control over the development of language and its use is held by state institutions, including mass media and monopolistic private enterprise, as in journalism and advertising.... The semiologists have sometimes failed to appreciate the possibility and existence of class or other minority control over language.<sup>8</sup>

For feminists, the question is whether male control over language is like the control exerted by the state, the media and so on. In the feminist theories we have examined, it is assumed that male

control is different, special: it is all-pervasive, trans-historical and located, unreachably, at the very heart of language. But perhaps it would be more fruitful to regard the linguistic privilege men enjoy as analogous to their other privileges, and to the linguistic privileges enjoyed by other powerful groups. Men could be said to 'control language', then, to the extent that their economic, political and social dominance enables them to dominate the relevant linguistic institutions as well, defining who may speak in what context and what counts as a reasonable or intelligible thing for them to say.

I want to narrow down the matter of 'minority control over language' – in this case male control – and try to be a little more specific about it, because I do not think that extreme general statements about women's exclusion from language are either accurate or politically helpful. What does make more sense, though, is the argument that women, for historically specific reasons, have been forbidden at certain times and in certain places to use certain linguistic registers or discourses (these terms will be explained and contrasted below: roughly, they mean the kinds of language appropriate to particular domains like religion or law or scholarship).

Many of these specialised 'languages' have indeed been historically created by men, and often represent women as marginal or inferior. Indeed this sexism often continues even when women nominally gain access to the language in question. For instance, women have long been able to practise journalism and lexicography, but the conventions of these genres, at least in the mainstream, have not become noticeably less sexist. Within these domains, sexism is part of everyone's way of understanding and talking about the world – which is not to say, however, that language could not be used to challenge and to change it.

One barrier to change which does not affect all forms of language equally is the importance of tradition, 'custom and practice', in institutions. The conventions codified in grammars, style manuals, standing orders, editing and subediting rules and so on are quite literally handed down from generation to generation of professional language users. They are part of a professional mystique and their authority is seldom questioned. Nor is it usually noticed that there is an ideological side to these apparently innocuous 'customs'.

When linguists discuss matters of institutional linguistic style – say, the language of law or science or religion – the term they

employ to describe features particular to a certain domain of language is *register*. A register is conceived as a set of co-occurring formal features: in science writing for example we expect to find polysyllabic Latinate vocabulary, the passive voice and the avoidance of the pronoun 'I'. Semiologists by contrast are more likely to use the term *discourse*, which is defined as a set of statements formulated on particular institutional sites of language use.

In practice these definitions overlap, but there is an important difference of emphasis between them. Put simply, the difference is that semiologists do not confine themselves to describing formal features. They are interested in the underlying assumptions of a discourse – the sorts of things that can actually be said in it – and regard the formal conventions as reflecting this underlying structure of meaning. In the science example, for instance, the passive voice is not an arbitrary convention but reflects the ideological notion of science as objective and impersonal.

Maria Black and Rosalind Coward, in the review of Dale Spender's work I have already mentioned, say that feminists ought to concentrate on discourse rather than language (*langue*).<sup>9</sup> Language is not inherently sexist, but when it is organised by institutions into discourse it often becomes sexist: the underlying assumptions of, say, grammar books or conventions for reporting rape cases in newspapers are sexist assumptions and they are made visible through particular linguistic choices.

This might seem like academic nitpicking. In fact, though, I think it is important for feminists to make the distinction between language and discourse. Dale Spender posits an historically ubiquitous and unobservable operation whereby men regulate meaning and relegate women to 'negative semantic space'. This can be criticised as overgeneral and ahistorical, as well as pessimistic. Black and Coward (showing a postmodern suspicion of universal theory) suggest instead a multitude of different practices, each with its own history, which can be studied in detail and resisted bit by bit. For them, women's relation not to 'language' or 'meaning' but to particular discourses is a variable and piecemeal affair.

Nevertheless there are certain themes within it which seem persistent both historically and across cultures. The most important common thread is the exclusion (total or partial) of women from what are sometimes called 'languages of power'.

## WOMEN AND THE LANGUAGES OF POWER

A 'language of power' should not be confused with a status-marked linguistic variety like, say, standard English. It is defined rather by its function in a particular context: it is the variety of language that has to be used if the speaker is to function effectively in that context. Both the form and the content are important here.

For example, let us suppose that there is a particular form of language associated with traditional healing and storytelling ceremonies in an American Indian culture. Someone who occupies the powerful position of healer or storyteller has to have command of this language. The same is true, of course, of doctors and literary writers in an English-speaking culture. Anyone who does not command the appropriate medical or literary language cannot lay claim to authority in the medical or literary sphere. Other important areas of life in which particular languages of power are crucial to authority and equal participation include law, religion, scholarship and politics.

In a different context, though, working-class or minority languages can function as languages of power themselves. The American Indian case mentioned above is an example. The traditional language of the healer is not valued by the wider society, but it has high prestige within the life of the Indian community. Similarly, socialists and community activists may find it a positive advantage to use a nonstandard vernacular. In a nationalist or anticolonial struggle the historically suppressed or devalued indigenous language may take on new and powerful symbolic meaning, while an opposing language of power – say, English in Wales or Afrikaans in South Africa – is rejected.

The interactional sociolinguist John Gumperz points out the extraordinary importance of being able to deploy communicative skills particularly in a modern, bureaucratised society.

The ability to manage or adapt to diverse communicative situations has become essential and the ability to interact with people with whom one has no personal acquaintance is crucial to acquiring even a small measure of personal and social control. We have to talk in order to establish our rights and entitlements . . . . Communicational resources thus form an integral part of an individual's symbolic and social capital.<sup>10</sup>

Gumperz's work is mainly about the way speakers from different ethnic groups misunderstand one another because they do not share the same norms of communication (even where they do share the same language). His studies make clear, too, that majority members use the experience of miscommunication to stereotype minority speakers as inadequate communicators. Feminists may fruitfully consider whether the same applies to women: whether women are represented as inadequate communicators and robbed by restrictions on their speech of their precious 'social and symbolic capital', so that their ability to 'adapt to diverse communicative situations' is impaired.

Languages of power are those which in a given situation maximise the speaker's personal and social control. I want to look at a number of cases in which it is suggested that women are denied access to them, or defined negatively in relation to them.

### **Women as second language users**

In an imperial or post-imperial situation, access to economic and political power may depend on being able to speak a language other than your native language – usually the language of the former imperial power (for example Spanish or Portuguese in Central and South America; English among the Celtic peoples of Britain, among Indians in the US and in many parts of Africa and the Caribbean). A similar situation affects minority communities when they migrate to work and live in foreign countries (for example South Asians in Britain, Latinas/os in the USA, Turkish 'guest workers' in Germany).

The idea that men and women have a different relation to the 'powerful' second language has been discussed by a number of anthropologists and linguists. It is a complex matter, but the research available suggests that multilingual situations often place special burdens on minority women whichever way the chips fall.

Studies of women in multilingual situations have often focused on their comparative lack of access to the superordinate second language. For example, the anthropologist Penelope Harvey has studied a community in the Peruvian Andes where the indigenous language is Quechua and the former imperial language is Spanish.<sup>11</sup> Although Harvey emphasises that in certain domains – the community's spiritual life, for example – Quechua has value and prestige, Spanish is the language used in contexts of political

decision making. And women appear to have less access to Spanish than men. They are more likely to be monolingual in Quechua; if bilingual, their level of proficiency in Spanish is likely to be lower; and even if they are proficient in Spanish, they seem to use it less than comparably fluent men and to be less comfortable using it.

A simple explanation of this difference might focus on women's economic and social disadvantage. Spanish is learnt through schooling, and women tend to get less schooling than men. (In other societies where a similar generalisation holds, it is also relevant to note what kinds of work the sexes do. Often, men's work brings them into contact more with the second language. For instance, if an Asian man in Britain works as a bus conductor, while his wife works in an Asian-owned garment factory, it is the man rather than his wife who has the incentive and opportunity to learn English.)

But Harvey is not satisfied with this simple explanation; it is relevant up to a point, but it does not account for the reticent behaviour of women who *do* speak Spanish. Harvey points out that an additional influence on the behaviour of women is the attitudes of men. The men of the community she studied sometimes displayed very negative attitudes to women acquiring, or displaying proficiency in, Spanish. Andean women who abandoned tradition, symbolised by dress as well as the Quechua language, risked slurs on their sexual reputation, which could lead to social ostracism and violence.

Harvey emphasises that power is not associated *only* or simply with Spanish; post-colonial politics may require Spanish, but the Indian past symbolised by Quechua also has a (somewhat different) powerful symbolic meaning. What is interesting, though, according to Harvey, is that women have difficulty in appropriating the *positive* symbolic meaning of either Spanish or Quechua. Ignorance of Spanish and ability to speak Spanish can both count against them.

Although matters are very complex, it seems men may feel threatened by women's becoming bilingual. Why should that be? One suggestion is that minority men are dealing with their own ambivalence about the loss of indigenous traditions. Assimilation brings certain economic rewards, but it also undermines the continuity of one's way of life and thus one's identity. In a male-dominated society, men can resolve this problem by taking the rewards of cultural change for themselves while requiring the community's women to be living symbols of tradition. This has

the added advantage for men of limiting female mobility and – in some cultures anyway – making women more dependent on men than they were in more traditional times.

Not all colonial or ex-colonial situations work out in just this way, however. Some researchers note that minority women are required to function not as upholders of tradition but as ‘mediators’ between traditional and colonial institutions. It is the young women of a community who will learn the powerful second language, interpreting for her parents and other community members. The Sioux anthropologist Bea Medicine, for instance, notes that the Bureau of Indian Affairs in the US deliberately recruited young women for this mediating role.<sup>12</sup>

The danger implicit in this situation is that the women will lose their status as authentic and significant members of their own communities – a considerable loss if the wider culture is a racist and sexist one which is unlikely to accord minority women real status within it. Bea Medicine maintains that this has not happened to American Indian women, whom she sees as relatively ‘advantaged’ speakers, acknowledged by the community as skillful in both the languages of power that are relevant to their lives.

In her work on the Puerto Rican community in New York City, however, Ana Celia Zentella draws attention to a problem of conflicting roles and identities for women.<sup>13</sup> Puerto Rican women are caught, she says, between the expectation that they will ‘mediate’ relations with the English-speaking world and the equally pressing demand that they will act as ‘conservators’ of tradition, particularly by ensuring that the language and culture of the community are passed on to the next generation. Zentella perceives this as a special burden placed on women, one which makes it more difficult for them to negotiate cultural identities.

Research dealing with women in bilingual or multilingual settings does not support the idea of women being totally excluded from the languages of power, whether traditional or colonial. It does suggest, though, that women’s access to these languages is affected by various economic, sexual and familial pressures which do not affect men, or at least not to the same degree. The picture we get here of women facing gender-specific expectations, sometimes contradictory ones, is too complex to be discussed in terms of simple generalisations about exclusion and lack of access. We find a similar complexity in the experience of women with other kinds of powerful language.

## **Women and literacy**

There are some parallels between women's relation to second languages and their relation to reading and writing, though this latter relation has not yet been researched in very great detail. Also, theorists of literacy disagree on what it means to be illiterate – in particular, whether it is automatically a disadvantage. Some people make very strong claims about the effects of literacy not merely on a person's life chances but on their consciousness: that it increases confidence and makes people better able to think and reason for themselves. Others are more cautious, pointing out that the functions of reading and writing are culturally variable.

One fact that students of literacy agree on, however, is that the majority of illiterates in the world today are women. Indeed the higher a country's overall illiteracy rate, the wider the gap between women and men. Historically we know that literacy in the developed world has been a mostly-male phenomenon; in circumstances where to be literate also means/meant having knowledge of a super-ordinate 'learned' language (such as classical Arabic in the Islamic world, Sanskrit in India, or for Western Europeans during much of their history, Latin) it is practically a sex-exclusive marker.

Why are women so frequently illiterate? We need to remember that literacy is not a natural concomitant of all language but a technology, invented rather recently in human history (6000 years ago; human culture and speech is at least 30 000 years old). Unlike speech or signing, literacy is not acquired naturally by children. It has to be taught. So once again the fact that women in general receive less education than men is a reasonable explanation of their higher illiteracy rate. On the other hand, as with the Spanish/Quechua case discussed above, it is probably only a partial explanation. Men may resist attempts to make women literate on the grounds that this also makes women more independent and less compliant. Reactions of this kind have been reported by women's literacy projects in southern Africa, for example.

The women of Western Europe have mostly been literate in their own languages for some time. What they missed, historically speaking, was literacy in the classical languages, especially Latin which was the language of learning and culture throughout medieval Europe, persisting as a scientific language for some centuries after and as a reference point for educated people (in the public schools and universities especially) right into the present century.

It has been argued, provocatively though not uncontroversially, that this historic exclusion has had important effects on European women, denying them not just knowledge but a whole way of thinking that continues to have power and prestige. As the theorist Walter Ong puts it,

Writing ... serves to distance the knower and the known and thus to establish objectivity.... Learned Latin effects even greater objectivity by establishing knowledge in a medium insulated from the emotion charged depths of one's mother tongue, thus reducing interference from the human lifeworld and making possible the exquisitely abstract world of medieval scholasticism and the new mathematical modern science.<sup>14</sup>

Ong is arguing, in effect, that the upper-class European men who used a language not their mother-tongue for scholarly purposes were able to create a discourse of particular abstraction and objectivity, 'insulated' from emotion precisely because it was (a) learned and not acquired in early childhood and (b) written rather than spoken. This discourse has persisted, though the conditions of its creation – the convention that important or scholarly texts are written in Latin – have disappeared. And it has also retained its connotations as a 'masculine' language.

I would be wary of going so far as to say that this means science and mathematics are 'male', or that they do not suit women's ways of thinking and reasoning. Some feminists, most notably Carol Gilligan, have argued that women's reasoning is less separated than men's from the concrete particularities and emotional resonances of a situation;<sup>15</sup> Ong's remarks might give us an interesting linguistic slant on this notion, in so far as women, excluded from Latin, were not the creators of the abstract and objective discourse men seem to favour.

As I pointed out earlier, Gilligan's arguments about women's 'different voice' need to be treated with caution. I would say, however, that science and mathematics were *historically* male discourses and that history does affect our current relation to them. We may well feel uneasy or tentative using a language we or our ancestors had to fight to get into; this has nothing to do with the language itself, but everything to do with its connotations, and the way women were defined in relation to it. Once again, what something *is* and what it *means* may be two different things, and

feminists should be careful in making the distinction. We can see this even more clearly in the case of what has been called 'High Language'.

### **'High language' and women's silence**

In an influential essay, the feminist literary critic Cora Kaplan makes the point that women are denied full access to the most influential and prestigious types of language within a culture.<sup>16</sup> Everything defined as 'high language' – the language of important social, religious, legal and political rituals, for example, and oral or literary art – is also defined as 'male language'. Kaplan observes:

The prejudice seems persistent and irrational unless we acknowledge that control of high language is a crucial part of the power of dominant groups, and understand the refusal of access to public language is one of the major forms of the oppression of women within a social class as well as in trans-class situations.

#### *Literary Language*

The example Kaplan chooses to discuss in detail is that of literature, and specifically poetry, which is a particularly concentrated and prestigious form of symbolic language. She considers the tendency of early women poets like Anne Bradstreet, and nineteenth century ones like Elizabeth Barrett Browning, to manifest in their work a certain anxiety and diffidence about writing poetry, as if they perceived a barrier and were determined to break it down.

Kaplan emphasises that this barrier is not merely to do with the social expectation that women will not be poets, though obviously that existed. Nor is it entirely a matter of women's limited education, though that too is relevant (Josephine Donovan echoes Walter Ong in observing that women found difficulty writing in genres where the models came from classical literature, since they rarely learned Latin.<sup>17</sup> Both women and men of the middle class favoured genres and styles based on 'private' writing – letters and diaries – thus they tended to write what eventually became the novel). Kaplan believes, though, that the anxieties of women poets derived from a prohibition at a deeper, psychological level. Women had internalised the idea that poetry was forbidden to them.

Recent work suggests that early women writers in English faced tangible and concrete risks if they published. In a recent survey Elaine Hobby notes that women writers and male publishers consistently felt the need to apologise for a woman's going into

print.<sup>18</sup> Many seventeenth century women writers used the strategy of explaining that they would not have written at all but for absolute necessity (Hobby's book is called *Virtue of Necessity*). They say they were impelled to it by divine inspiration, or because they felt they must overcome their modesty in order to plead a political cause (this is, of course, the time of the English Revolution), or to set the record straight about the lives of male relatives, or whatever. It was certainly clear to these women that they could not simply write without excuse. Publishing was incompatible with femininity and required elaborate justification. Such considerations of modesty persisted for a long time, motivating Charlotte Bronte, for example, to take a male pen-name. When her real gender was known, she was censured just as she had foreseen, for the unmaidenly coarseness of her writing.

Women's relation to literature, including poetry, is less problematic today. Prejudice still exists, but a girl growing up now is free to imagine herself a writer without anyone questioning her femininity or her morals. In other spheres of 'high language' this may not be the case. Religion is a good example.

#### *Religious language*

There is considerable militancy on the issue of women and religion especially among Jewish and Christian feminists, and they make clear that the issue is in part a linguistic one. Women are excluded from specifically linguistic functions like preaching, teaching and saying the formulae associated with important rites. In the case of Christian women, the exclusion is often justified in terms that are also to do specifically with language: the Biblical injunction of St Paul that the woman should be silent in church. Although it is not usually put in these terms, the anxiety about women's ordination is at least partly an anxiety about women profaning a sacred language. It also overlaps with a more general anxiety about women as public speakers – a further case of 'high language' and the 'language of power'.

#### *Public and ritual speech*

Jenkins and Kramarae state that cross-culturally, 'we find that women's sphere includes the interpersonal but seldom the rhetorical'.<sup>19</sup> This is something of an overgeneralisation – many cultures do in fact reserve some rhetorical functions for women – but the underlying point is well-taken. It is perhaps especially applicable to capitalist or other stratified societies where the public/private

distinction is an important feature of social organisation. Here we find women identified with the private not just linguistically but much more generally.

An illustration of women's linguistic marginality in public and ritual speech is provided by the etiquette of the traditional Anglo-Saxon wedding reception. In terms of visibility, the roles are distributed evenly between women and men, with a woman – the bride – most visible of all. Yet the women are ritually silent. The bride's father proposes a toast to the happy couple, and the groom replies on their behalf. He toasts the bridesmaids and the best man replies for them. Men speak, women are spoken for; here we have an epitome of women being 'seen and not heard'.

That phrase, of course, is usually applied to children rather than women. Cora Kaplan in her essay on high language has drawn an explicit parallel. All children have restricted speaking rights, but whereas boys will eventually be admitted to the sphere of public speech (Kaplan fixes this at puberty), girls will never be linguistic 'adults'. Their participation in high language is not tolerated, just as children's participation is not.

Kaplan's analysis is apposite to some cases reported in the ethnographic literature. For example, Joel Sherzer describes the linguistic training of boys among the south American Araucanians. The public speaking skills of these boys are honed by older men; boys are initiated very explicitly into the genres of male Araucanian speech, and even taken to practise making speeches to an audience of animals and plants. Women in this culture are noticeably silent and deferential.<sup>20</sup>

Yet I think there are other strands to be unravelled in this question of women's silence. Kaplan quotes Sophocles's aphorism, 'silence is a woman's glory'. This suggests that silence is not entirely a negative prescription, a 'thou shalt not', an absence of the male privilege that boys will eventually inherit as their birthright. It is a positive attribute of femininity. It symbolises deference to men. The argument here is supported by the fact that injunctions of silence are frequently directed quite explicitly and particularly to *wives*. For instance, in some cultures women observe a period of silence immediately after marriage; or they may be permitted to speak only in the home and censured if they break silence outside. Books of advice to (American) brides surveyed by feminist linguists also exemplify this, albeit more moderately, urging women to listen to their husbands rather than initiating talk of their own.

There is another, more arcane and irrational thread to be unravelled. Men appear to feel that women's public utterance is dangerous and unseemly because it 'sexualises' the previously nonsexual public forums in which serious matters are seriously discussed. Sex – identified apparently with women – should be kept in its (private) place. It does not belong on the platform or in the pulpit. This is what I meant when I referred earlier to women 'profaning' a sacred language.

Many readers may recall, as I do, the momentous decision of the BBC during the 1970s to allow a woman, Angela Rippon, to read the news on television. Apart from the old saw about women's voices lacking authority, the main reservation about Ms Rippon was that her feminine presence might somehow distract viewers from the serious contemplation of current affairs.

One might ask exactly who was sexualising the news in this instance – Angela Rippon or the men who allegedly could not restrain themselves from drooling over her? (Curiously, no-one had ever raised the problem of women being distracted by the sexual presence of male newsreaders. Perhaps the news is not really addressed to women.) We should remember, though, that innumerable restrictions on women's behaviour (for example veiling and other 'modest' dress, covering the hair, looking down, walking behind men, seclusion and segregation) are predicated precisely on the need to avoid inflaming men's lust in public, where men have other things to think about and where they may be tempted by other men's wives. It is not perhaps too far-fetched to make connections with more specifically linguistic restrictions.

In the matter of high language, women suffer not only from overt restrictions on their speech but from negative value-judgements on their ability to speak effectively. Whatever style of speaking a culture judges appropriate to the public arena, women will be stereotyped as less skilled in using; whatever style is considered feminine will be stereotyped as unfit for rhetorical use. This leads to some striking cross-cultural contradictions. Thus we have Jespersen, the European, explaining that women lack directness, and that this want of 'vigour and vividness' means women are not great orators. And in contrast we have the Malagasy as described by Keenan: their favoured ritual speech style, *Kabary*, is extremely indirect and allusive, and women are not considered good at it because their speech is too direct and vigorous.

Women who do enter the public arena of high language face an obvious problem. They cannot appear 'unfeminine', for that would shock and alienate; nor can they be 'too feminine', since that would undermine their authority and leave them vulnerable to the 'sexualisation' problem. This is a hard game for women to win. If anyone doubts it, they have only to think of Mrs Margaret Thatcher, whose speaking voice and style has probably attracted more negative comment than anything else about her, and certainly more than any male politician's. Mrs Thatcher's speech is described as 'strident' (that is, unfeminine: is the word *strident* ever applied to men?), probably in part because of her deliberate lowered pitch, adopted to increase her authority, but which has as side effects slow speech-rate and monotonous intonation; but also as 'insincere' and 'phony', probably a reaction to her intermittent paralinguistic (that is, tone of voice) attempts at saccharine femininity.

Mrs Thatcher may not acknowledge it, but she is a victim of the general rule that 'if in antifeminist discourse women are often inferior to men, nothing in this same discourse is more ridiculous than a woman who imitates a male activity and is therefore no longer a woman'.<sup>21</sup> This can apply not only to language but to the way a woman looks, the job she does, the way she behaves sexually, the leisure pursuits she engages in, the intellectual activities she prefers and so on *ad infinitum*. Sex differentiation must be upheld by whatever means are available, for men can be men only if women are unambiguously women.

As Cora Kaplan argues, the matter of women's silence and their exclusion from high language must be placed very firmly in the more general context of analysing 'the power of dominant groups'. In the case of men as a dominant group, power is underwritten by creating masculinity and femininity as mutually exclusive and unequal domains. Language, not surprisingly, plays a part in this differentiation.

*Different and not equal: language and femininity*

It would still be difficult to find a more elegant summing up of the differentiation principle than Jean-Jacques Rousseau's statement in *Emile*, a text published in 1762:

In order for [women] to have what they need... we must give it to them, we must want to give it to them, we must consider them deserving of it. They are dependent on our feelings, on the price

we put on their merits, on the value we set on their attractions and their virtues.... Thus women's entire education should be planned in relation to men. To please men, to be useful to them, to win their love and respect, to raise them as children, care for them as adults, counsel and console them, make their lives sweet and pleasant: these are women's duties in all ages and these are what they should be taught from childhood on.<sup>22</sup>

In this notorious passage, Rousseau makes clear why this sort of femininity is constructed (to make men's lives 'sweet and pleasant') how it is done (by indoctrination from childhood) and why women conform (because they are dependent on men for what they need). For all that its forms may have changed since the eighteenth century, the cultural production of a narrowly-defined and rigidly-prescribed femininity grinds on even as we approach the twenty-first.

And language is part of it. For any woman who talks too much, too loudly, too frankly, too authoritatively, the epithet 'unfeminine' is waiting on someone's lips. Few words have such a chilling effect. One of the most important tasks for feminist linguistic theory and practice is to challenge the norms of linguistic 'femininity' and reject the negative value judgements our culture applies, perversely, to both 'feminine' and 'unfeminine' discourse.

Perhaps unintentionally, a lot of current feminist linguistic theory is almost as negative itself, reinforcing the impression that women are restricted and impoverished as language users. For example, Dale Spender remarks that women have been denied opportunities to talk with one another, since this is threatening to men.<sup>23</sup> Since in fact most women in most cultures interact *primarily* with other women, I think she must mean that women have been taught not to value this kind of interaction ('gossip', 'chit-chat', 'girls' talk'....) It becomes threatening only when they do begin to value it. However, by formulating the point in the way she does, Dale Spender makes women look more helpless and hopeless than they really are. I find this both inaccurate and questionable politically.

#### WOMEN'S TALK: THE MYTH OF IMPOVERISHMENT

The main point I have been trying to make in this chapter is that to say women 'have no language', are 'silenced' or 'alienated', even when this is theorised as a reflection of oppression rather than as a

sign of women's own inadequacy, is misleading and imprecise. Neither 'language' nor 'women' are undifferentiated categories; different groups of women and different kinds of language have their own differing histories. I have therefore suggested that feminists take note of specific discourses or registers where particular groups of women have faced problems of access and recognition. It is appropriate, for example, to treat early women poets as breaking through silence; it is not appropriate to extend this to the ordinary woman speaker in her female peer group.

As we saw in Chapter 4, research on women's speech does not bear out the picture of silent inarticulate women struggling to express their experience in a language not their own. It shows women as resourceful and creative, using strategies of resistance to linguistic restriction and prejudice.

This is not to say that women are fine, thank you very much, and have no linguistic problems. They have, for example, all the problems discussed above. For this reason I reject any attempt to make women's culture in the far-from-ideal present a basis for authentic womanhood in some ideal feminist future. But equally I see no virtue in accounts of women's oppression which are totalising, ahistorical or semi-mystical and which suggest therefore that change is difficult to the point of impossibility.

Many theories of women's relation to language – some that have an author, some that pass along the feminist grapevine – have exactly this flaw. In muted group theory or Dale Spender's work, in Kristeva's reworking of Lacan, the mechanisms of oppression are so general and all pervasive that they become invisible, ungraspable. We cannot fight such shadows as 'muting', 'negative semantic space', the 'symbolic order dominated by the phallus'. There are however practices we can fight (and have fought and are fighting): restricted educational and economic opportunities, illiteracy, rules and conventions forcing women to remain silent, sexist usage, insulting representations of women and their abilities, and so on.

It is significant that the linguistic oppression of other subordinated groups is rarely if ever treated in this totalising way. The Dalston Study Group rather tartly observe that 'immigrants and working class people too have a negative point of entry into our culture, something no-one has yet explained with reference to the penis/phallus'.<sup>24</sup> Where minority ethnic groups and workers are subordinated in relation to language, this is not taken as evidence of their alienation from language *per se* or as a sign that their own

language varieties cannot express their experience. It is taken as evidence of institutional prejudice and systematic restriction of some people's life chances by other people.

Where working class and Black language is concerned, linguists have long rejected 'deficit' models which theorise as inferior what is merely different, attributing failure or underachievement to linguistic rather than more broadly social causes. As I have said before, in the case of women and language I think that 'cultural difference' approaches are not enough on their own: they let men and sexism off the hook too easily. The constraints of sexism are not however inherent or immutable – in other words, we certainly do not need a 'deficit' theory of women's language either. What we need is an account of difference placed firmly in the context of power and inequality.

In the end, though, feminism cannot afford a theory that tells us only how women are oppressed; it must convince women also of 'the strength and potential of their own language'. But *potential* is a very important word here. Women's 'difference' cannot be celebrated uncritically: it needs to be redefined in the pursuit of liberation and justice. In the concluding chapter, we must take up questions of practice and strategy with this matter of using language for liberation in mind.

# 10

## Conclusion: Problems and Practices

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### INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of this book I set out, optimistically, to assess the state of the art in feminist theory about language. In this Conclusion I must try to draw together the threads of the diverse approaches we have considered here and examine their implications for both theory and practice. What should a feminist linguistic theory do? What might a feminist linguistic practice be?

In 1982 Suzette Haden Elgin – who was later to publish the novel *Native Tongue* – observed, in a review of the work of Cherris Kramarae, ‘we need a coherent theory within which work can be done on the subject of the interaction between sexual gender . . . and language’.<sup>1</sup> At the time I was in broad agreement with her. We *didn’t* (and still don’t) have one coherent framework, and the result of this seemed to me ‘not so much pluralistic as simply confused’, to quote the first edition of this book. I don’t know whether Suzette Haden Elgin still holds to what she said then; I am not so sure any more.

To call for ‘a coherent theory’ is the same as calling for feminists and linguistic scholars dealing with questions of gender to agree on what gender is and on what language is. Since both language and gender are phenomena of enormous social and political importance, it now seems very obvious to me that each will be highly contested.

Most of those who work in the field of language and gender are not able or willing to regard the issues at stake from a disinterested distance. Even if one accepts that researchers are never totally disinterested, gender is a particularly problematic case. For feminists, a great deal is at stake: our identities and our deepest beliefs about the world. Furthermore we are studying questions of gender for a political reason. We are not engaged, ultimately, only in the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake; as Marx said about his

own work, interpreting the world is one thing, but 'the point ... is to change it'.

To look for a standard theory at this stage, therefore, is both pointless and undesirable, in that it tends to close down prematurely this crucial area of debate. My aim in this book has been rather to open up the discussion by putting together a broad range of ideas on the theme of language, gender and feminism. A certain amount of overall incoherence is arguably the price one pays for trying to represent this kind of diversity.

A similar point can be made about language *per se*. In attempting to define it narrowly so that theoretical statements about it will be 'coherent', there is a danger of conceding too much to a restrictive view of what is interesting about it and what is theoretically unimportant. The main danger I see here is, of course, that we will let 'scientific' linguistics define the entire agenda, accepting the claims of privileged authority it has made for itself. Banal as this may sound, I believe that language is too complex and too deeply implicated in a wide variety of human activities and concerns for any one discipline or approach to capture it *in toto* or to address every question of interest concerning it.

At this point it may seem that I have argued myself into a corner: that I have put myself into a position from which it is impossible to write any kind of conclusion, since conclusions are conventionally all about summing up and closing down. In this conclusion, however, I will attempt a kind of summing up that pinpoints important differences and the questions raised by them. I will accept the obligation to impose a certain structure on the field of language and gender studies (how useful this structure is, readers must decide for themselves) but this will fall far short of a unified, coherent theory. It will be map-making rather than route-planning.

I asked a moment ago what a feminist linguistic theory should do. Perhaps at this point a very general answer can be given to this question: it should relate languages (their acquisition, structure and use) to the construction of gender identities on one hand, and to the workings of power on the other. All of these terms – language, gender, identity, power – are of course problematic and themselves in need of further investigation. Patently, feminist linguistic theorists define them differently, and this is an inevitable part of political as well as intellectual debate. The debate has been carried on throughout this book: nevertheless it will be helpful to return, briefly, to the terms that are in question and the unresolved problems they raise.

## FEMINIST LINGUISTIC THEORY: CONTESTED TERMS

**Language**

Reluctant though I am to impose some strict definition on the term *language*, I do feel the need to point out that it is used so variably by feminists as to require great alertness on the part of the reader. Some uses of the term are very narrow: for certain sociolinguists for example, language consists of pronunciation, lexis and syntax, excluding even some of the conversational phenomena discussed in Chapter 4. Other uses are extremely broad, extending language to cover, for instance, art and mythology.

This is one of the things that can make it difficult to assess feminist claims that language is sexist or man made. Just as the statement that dogs take up a lot of space only makes sense if the dogs are Great Danes rather than Chihuahuas, so the claim that language is man made applies to the language of art more readily than to the rules of English pronunciation.

In some cases it is hard to be sure just what is being asserted: for example, does a phrase like 'the language of theory' mean the kind of vocabulary used in theory, the syntax in which a theory is couched or the kinds of statements and propositions made in theories? Are women excluded from theoretical language (as some feminists have claimed) because the words used are defined from a male perspective (as in Dale Spender's example about 'field dependence'), because the syntactic conventions of theory are alien to women's ways of conceptualising (as Luce Irigaray might argue), because we disagree with the sexist assertions of a particular theory, or because women's participation in theoretical discourse is seen as 'unfeminine'? All of these possibilities are plausible, and all might plausibly be considered in some sense matters of language. But they are not all linguistic problems in exactly the same way, nor are they susceptible to a single solution. It is therefore important for writers to make as clear as possible just what they are talking about when they talk about language.

There is another problem in certain feminist uses of the term *language*, and in this case I think it reflects not a valid difference of perspective but an unexamined cultural prejudice: what has been called 'scriptism', the assumption that written language is the norm of all language. To the extent that feminist discussions of language unconsciously reproduce this assumption, they are open to certain criticisms.

My contention that there is a prejudice *for* writing and *against* speech might seem counter-intuitive. No-one can be unaware that speech precedes writing both for the individual and for the culture, that most linguistic events are spoken rather than written, that there are nonliterate cultures in existence, and so on. Yet in literate cultures we find many linguistic forms stigmatised for no better reason than that they would never appear on a printed page. We talk for example (and disapprovingly) of speakers 'dropping letters' like t, g, h, as though speech were 'really' reading aloud from an invisible page; we disparage elements like *um* and *er*, *y'know*, *like*, hesitations and incomplete sentences as 'inarticulate', though spontaneous speech cannot be easily be processed by the hearer unless these 'fillers' and redundancies are used (they can be edited out of writing only because the reader can always go back and read it again).

Linguists pretend to superior virtue on this score, claiming that speech is more basic, and sometimes even that writing is a mere graphic representation of speech (it isn't: try transcribing some ordinary conversation exactly as you hear it, and the massive differences will soon become apparent). But in practice they have frequently taken writing as a hidden norm, for example in supposing – as Chomsky does – that the fundamental unit of language is the sentence.

This point is relevant in feminist linguistic theory because some theorists clearly mean *writing* when they use the term *language*, and this leads to a number of very dubious claims. Take for instance Kristeva's placing of the prosodic – rhythm, stress, intonation – in the semiotic order rather than the symbolic order. It is true that prosodic patterns are learned extremely early in the process of language acquisition, but that cannot excuse Kristeva's apparent willingness to separate them from language proper. In *spoken* language prosody carries out many syntactic functions: the separation between it and grammar is totally artificial. The idea that prosody 'disrupts' the logical flow of language is applicable only to writing; the claim that women depend on intonation rather than grammatical devices (also made by Jespersen-style sexists down the ages) is devoid of content, since we all of us in speaking depend on intonation. So too – as I have observed – with Luce Irigaray's claim that feminine language has nothing to do with the complete sentence. In speech, departures from the complete sentence are hardly remarkable.

In the work of the radical and semiologically-inclined feminists particularly, resistance and subversion are often achieved in ways that would not be possible in speech (spelling puns, orthographic devices like slashes and parentheses, diacritic markings). Post-modernists continue this tradition; the word on the page (or the computer screen) is privileged for them because of its place in the technologised, global-communications world they analyse.

There is, of course, no reason for feminists to disavow certain linguistic strategies just because they are appropriate only to the written language. But there is every reason to be wary of generalising from writing to language in general, whether in theory or in practice. Though it is correct to say that writing in modern urban cultures is the more prestigious medium, it is necessary to be conscious of the potential for ethnocentrism and elitism if this insight is extended too far.

### **Language, gender and identity**

Throughout this book we have noted many differences of feminist opinion on the question of how language relates to gender identity, that is, the sense people have that they are either masculine or feminine (I use these terms in preference to 'men' and 'women' in order not to prejudge the question of whether gender is necessarily congruent with biological sex). Let us briefly pose the most fundamental questions that arise in this connection.

First, does language *constitute* identity, as the Lacanians argue, or is it used to 'mark' an identity already given, as most sociolinguists assume? Obviously, the term *language* is not being used in the same way by each camp in this debate: for Lacanians it is an abstract system making available subject positions, for sociolinguists it is a set of learned surface features whose use conveys the message that 'I am a woman' or 'I am a man'. The Lacanians would also argue that the gender identity constituted by language need not be in accordance with the subject's anatomical sex: there is an (unconscious) choice of position. Sociolinguists by contrast would emphasise cultural norms and pressures leading people to behave in certain ways. A man could use language marking him as feminine, but this would be a form of more-or-less conscious deviance.

Second, is the identity constituted or marked in language primarily a matter of difference or of dominance? Here the sociolinguists themselves are divided: some writers on the subject,

like O'Barr and Atkins, go so far as to argue that so-called 'women's language' marks status rather than gender. (From their own studies of courtroom testimony, these researchers concluded that low-status men use it, but high-status women avoid it.<sup>2</sup>) Others go to the opposite extreme, comparing differences in women's and men's styles of speech to (sub)cultural differences rather than power differentials. For Lacanians, dominance and difference are not easily separable: the phallus stands for both.

Third, what (if anything) is the relation between language and the body? There is a strand in feminism (represented for instance by Luce Irigaray) which connects gender with language via the bodily experience of sexuality. Other feminists vigorously disagree with this 'essentialising' notion.

These questions are highly relevant to feminist linguistic practice, the issue of what is to be done. For example, someone who links language with gender through power, as Robin Lakoff does, will also be likely to advocate wholesale changes in women's behaviour; whereas someone who sees the link as a matter of women's distinctive cultural history or bodily experience will urge rather that women revalue the feminine in language, holding onto what is authentic in their behaviour (or for a writer like Irigaray, who takes a more extreme view of women's current 'exile', striving towards authentic femininity) rather than simply acceding to the more valued masculine norm.

There are serious political pitfalls for feminists whichever option they choose, and the problems involved are general ones, not confined to the issue of language. If feminists take a strong 'dominance' line, they risk reducing women to passive victims whose cultural forms express nothing of value; if they take a strong 'difference' line they may gloss over questions of power. Either way, there is a danger of playing into the hands of anti-feminists.

The 'difference' position in some versions carries a further risk, that women themselves will set up oppressive norms of 'authentic' femininity. As postmodernists have been especially quick to observe, this may well end up replacing one kind of exclusion (that of women by men) with another, if one privileged group of women universalises its own behaviour as the model of femininity. But even if the 'difference' position can accommodate differences like those of race, class, generation and culture, it is still arguably oppressive – and in the end politically suspect – to go along with the notion of 'femininity' and to suggest that women should

embrace as opposed to rejecting it. There again, though, this critical postmodernist position, taken to its extreme, could be taxed with shirking the inescapable fact that for the moment we are stuck with the existence of gender divisions, and it is surely incumbent upon us to make something of them.

The problem of conceptualising gender identity is tricky in feminist linguistics as it is in every other area of feminist theory and practice. Some feminists see femininity as an undervalued blessing, others regard it as a curse, still others as a myth. Of course, it is also a *word*, and among the most loaded and contested ones we use. If only Orwell were right, and we could simply legislate words out of existence! Since we cannot, though, we will doubtless go on arguing about what 'femininity' means.

## Power

In the context of feminist linguistic theory, the question of power is a question about who controls language, in what way and to what extent. Does power in language derive from other kinds of power (physical, political, economic)? Or is linguistic power the power to define reality and thus the key to all other forms of domination?

The issue of linguistic determinism has been discussed so much in this book there is surely no need to rehearse the arguments for and against even briefly here. I will note once again, however, that the whole debate has been posed in extreme terms, so that language is either the First Cause or else it is a pale reflection of some nebulous 'society'. Either we use language – consciously, rationally, freely – or it uses us.

In this particular argument I find myself somewhere in the middle. It does not make sense to me to think of language either pre-existing and determining social arrangements or simply reflecting them: surely language is an integral part of the social.

Certainly I agree with those Whorfians and semiologists who suggest that human beings are creatures of culture, their personalities, desires, ways of behaving and understanding constructed by the societies into which they are born, the traditions they inherit. I agree also that not all the forces shaping us, perhaps not even most of them, are easily available to our conscious introspection. And our socially-constructed selves are our *real* selves: culture is not a thin veneer applied to some pre-existent consciousness and capable of being stripped away.

Yet I cannot accept a theory in which human beings are denied all agency and all capacity for self-reflection. The very construction by humans of determinist theories stands as *prima facie* evidence that the shaping of language and thought by subjects and the shaping of subjects by language and thought form a circle of mutual interaction. Nor can I accept that language should be privileged over everything else in theories about what makes us the people we are. Again, I am tempted to take refuge in a cliché: things are very complicated. No one thing – language, economics, biology – explains everything, certainly not the workings of gender and power. And apart from the intellectual problem, I think there are certain political dangers in over-emphasising the part language plays in maintaining male dominance, just as there are dangers in supposing that it is entirely trivial.

Throughout this book we have noted various instances where the subordinate position of one group or another has been blamed specifically on their language. Working-class and Black children do poorly at school because their language is inadequate or inappropriate; a corrupt political party (whether Nazi or communist) triumphs by corrupting the language and thus brainwashing the masses; women are marginal in society because they are marginal in language.

While language is certainly a political issue for the oppressed peoples of the world, I think it would be wise to think long and hard about the politics of blaming oppression solely or primarily on language. For the powerful, after all, there is much to recommend this account: it deflects attention from the fact that poor, Black and female speakers are disadvantaged just because they are poor, Black and female. Let the privileged fund compensatory education classes for underachieving children, turn the Russian dictionary over to the United Nations, say *astronaut* instead of *spaceman*. It costs virtually nothing; and on its own, in practice it changes very little.

If language is detached from the context of social relations, blown up to occupy the entire picture instead of appearing as a piece of the picture, it loses its connection to the struggle as a whole. Feminists and other progressives want linguistic change, certainly; but as an integral part of a broader social movement. And it is the goals of that broader movement which determine what kinds of change are desired – an issue we must now explore in more detail. Feminists do not necessarily agree on what our most important political goals are, and therefore we find lively debate on what linguistic changes are needed.

## FEMINIST LINGUISTIC PRACTICE: TOWARD A RADICAL DISCOURSE

Let me make clear that in this concluding discussion of practice and strategy, I will not be attempting to produce a set of recommendations for feminist speakers and writers to follow. That would be to impose one agenda (mine) on what is, as I have said, a lively debate; and in any case no one language, no single style, could possibly meet all feminist needs. (Readers who simply want concrete suggestions about avoiding overt sexism are already well served by texts such as Miller and Swift's *Handbook*.<sup>3</sup>) I will, however, raise a number of more general questions about the goals of feminist linguistic practice. These are questions that have been debated quite extensively among feminists, generating a fair amount of argument and disagreement.

**Languages of power: seizing their potential, knowing their limitations**

It might seem as if feminists would be able to find common ground on the question of what in Chapter 9 were called 'languages of power'. In my analysis I placed women's exclusion from and restriction in these languages at the centre of the account of how men's hold over language works. Making the leap from theory to practice, one might argue that it should be an important priority in feminist linguistic practice for women to 'seize' the powerful languages denied them by patriarchal arrangements.

All around the world, many feminist struggles have indeed made this a priority. For example, feminists have organised meetings to give women a voice in political decision making, or sometimes just a public voice; they have made massive efforts to combat female illiteracy and lack of educational opportunity; they have set up networks of women's presses and other cultural institutions enabling women's writing to be produced and disseminated. All these are examples of women pursuing access to languages of power.

But this is not a simple matter: even if we identify languages of power as an important site of inequality, it does not necessarily follow that matters can be resolved by securing equal access to them. In some cases, including those of political language, literacy and publication mentioned above, fighting for equal access is a good thing. In other cases, however, it might not be.

Increasingly, and in my view quite rightly, some of the languages of power have themselves come under feminist critical scrutiny. They may be prestigious, but are they intrinsically desirable forms for feminists to express themselves in? Or are they at odds with the interests and values feminism exists to promote? To put this another way, is a language of power the same thing as a language of liberation?

One example of this kind of debate concerns what the Dalston study group call the 'depersonalised' and 'impoverished' language of most academic analysis: if feminists choose to use this kind of discourse in their own political analyses, is it a form of co-optation? Is it unbearably elitist, since it excludes so many less privileged women from participation and understanding? Does it perpetuate the devaluation of emotion and personal experience relative to abstraction and generalisation – something feminism has traditionally stood against? This particular debate has been played out in the politics of, for example, feminist presses and journals, many of which consciously avoid conventionally-accepted ways of writing, or encourage alternative forms – even though in some cases this can cause them to be seen as intellectually 'lightweight'.

Another similar instance concerns the growing linguistic self-help or self-improvement industry. A number of corporations, voluntary organisations and educational institutions have for some years offered training to women – often under the general heading of 'assertiveness training' – which helps them to speak in more 'authoritative' ways. Ways of talking which confer authority (and thus enhance career success) can also be seen as languages of power, and opening them up to women – who have historically been deprived of linguistic and other authority – might appear, therefore, as a positive, feminist activity.

Some feminists have questioned this, however, suggesting that women are being taught to ape male behaviour and the 'authority' this confers is not the same thing as real empowerment. The 'subculture' or 'difference' theorists of women's talk have sometimes argued that the cooperative style observed when women talk to women has greater moral and social value than the competitive style used by men, and should be preferred by feminists. It is evident, though, that the women's style is not a 'language of power' whereas the men's is. Women in their thousands have taken courses in assertiveness training; advice on making your speech more authoritative is disseminated to millions. Meanwhile, 'cooperative-

ness training' for men does not exist. Should feminists choose the path of power if it entails placing competition above cooperation? Or should we attempt the much more difficult task of redefining what powerful speech is?

The worry feminists express is that in pressing for access to powerful language, women – or more likely, a small number of token women – will simply be co-opted to the prevailing, exclusionary norms of (rich, white) male behaviour. And there is another, more Orwellian/Whorfian worry, too: that if we use 'their' forms of language we will start to think like them as well.

In an article called 'Sex and death in the rational world of defense intellectuals', feminist Carol Cohn discusses the process of acclimatisation to a form of discourse she had initially found repulsive as well as ludicrous.<sup>4</sup> Cohn went to a defence policy think-tank in the US to find out what made defence intellectuals tick and to discuss issues of war and peace with them from an oppositional and feminist standpoint. In order to talk with the experts, however, and to have any credibility in doing so, Cohn found herself obliged to learn the language they used. In that context, it was a not just a language of power but in effect the only intelligible language.

But as a Whorfian might have predicted, it was a short step from speaking the experts' language to understanding – even sharing – their point of view. What the men said began to make sense to Cohn, and she began to feel pleasure in her own command of the (extremely sexist and sadistic) terms. In the end she found it hard to hold on to the vision that had impelled her to go to the institute in the first place.

Perhaps the most hotly debated language of power is the rather amorphous but extremely powerful category of 'rational discourse'. Rational discourse – the language of fact, evidence, logical argument, persuasion – is absolutely central to contemporary politics, including a great deal of feminist politics; but as we have seen already, it attracts a certain amount of scepticism and criticism within feminist linguistic theory. Some versions of radical feminism and some kinds of feminist semiology suggest that women should reject rationality as an illusory (and perhaps also male) construct, foregrounding instead the nonrational elements in discourse.

Theoretical support here comes from the Lacanian insistence that our discourse is 'overdetermined' by unconscious motivations and irrational fantasies; while as we have seen, the informal folklinguistics of some feminist culture has a concern with 'logic' as one of its

themes. And of course, this feminist suspicion of rationality has been reinforced by the postmodernist critique of Enlightenment thinking, in which a sceptical attitude toward 'reason' is central.

Some linguistic theorists, including feminists, remain unreconstructed by the new currents, and regard this development as disastrous: for them rational discourse is the most powerful tool any movement can bring to the task of persuading the society its arguments are valid and its demands just. To throw away this resource is not only inept strategically, it raises the spectre of a world in which all standards of justice and truth are null and void: there is nothing but the endless drive for power. Defending the Enlightenment project, Jean Bethke Elshtain for example asserts,

If one continues to believe in the project of human speech, one must move beyond a view of language as simply or inexorably 'power over', discourse as domination...and toward speech as part of an emancipatory effort, a movement toward social clarity and self-comprehension. The project of rational speech, an eyes-open, truth-telling passion against 'the powers that be' and 'the censors within' can be one emancipatory window into the future.<sup>5</sup>

For Elshtain, denying that our exchanges are governed by standards of truth and logic – or suggesting that they need not be – is equivalent to despairing of human speech altogether.

On the other hand, postmodernists in particular have raised some pertinent questions about this purported 'clarity' and 'truth-telling': such as why the allegedly neutral, consensual standards of truth and logic have so frequently legitimated the views of the powerful, no matter how self-interested, unjust and indeed absurd, while at the same time managing to dismiss the claims of competing accounts, no matter how reasonable and elegantly argued. If feminists would be ill-advised to jettison rational discourse entirely, they would surely be equally ill-advised to believe unreservedly in its capacity to save the world.

It is arguable, though, that too much has been made of the rationality issue, elevating rationality and its opposite into absolute values when in practice – as I argued in Chapter 3 – they are relative terms and acquire value only in particular contexts. Rather than thinking purely in terms of rationality versus irrationality in discourse, then, it might be more useful for feminists to consider the following question: in a given context, what kind of language will best serve our political goals?

In practice the answer to this question might involve a variety of strategies, and not necessarily an internally consistent set; it might imply adopting the weapon of rational discourse in some situations, while criticising its use in others. (Whether this kind of inconsistency is itself irrational, I leave others to decide!) Let us not forget, either, that feminists in different situations might have differing priorities in deciding on linguistic strategies. For example, where women are struggling for literacy they will probably not be impressed by Lacanian or postmodernist doubts about the virtues of conventional written language.

It is not only in the sphere of linguistic practice that feminists have had to face the problem of how to remain true to their political principles while at the same time resisting total marginalisation. That problem is ancient, pervasive and intractable – it has to be addressed as it comes up in each particular instance. Questions of how to express one's ideas in language without being marginalised but also without compromising them are particularly hard, because language is interactive: its effectiveness depends to a large extent on the attitude of the hearer. Carol Cohn, for instance, must have decided that the need to be taken seriously by the defence experts outweighed the need to use a feminist discourse they would find alien and silly. (Later, of course, Cohn wondered whether she had made the right choice.)

Some languages of power, then, are problematic for feminists, and this has led some women to ignore the conventions of certain genres (like academic writing or religious ceremony) altogether. Perhaps it is worth pointing out, though, the rather obvious fact that women without access to a particular form of language are denied the opportunity to make moral and political choices about its use. If the last decade of feminism has taught us anything, it is that one woman or group of women cannot make choices for another. We can, of course, continue to engage in discussion of our choices, and we can also endeavour to make feminist conversations (in whatever medium or genre) receptive to as many different kinds of language as possible.

### **The importance of the metalinguistic: 'idle discourse' versus radical discourse**

The debates just mentioned, covering various aspects of linguistic practice, have not produced consensus on how feminists should

speak and write, but I think they indicate agreement among feminists that however we speak and write, we need to be sensitive about our use of language – attentive to its hidden meanings, its problems, the choices that arise from it and the political alignments they symbolise. In other words, a feminist linguistic practice has a strong *metalinguistic* dimension: it involves not only talking but also talking about the language in which one is talking, using language in a way that constantly questions its meaning and status.

It has been suggested that this kind of metalinguistic self-questioning is the hallmark of any radical discourse, whereas the absence of a metalinguistic consciousness just reinforces the feeling that words 'name' an immutable order: things are the way they are and nothing can be done about them.

The philosopher Trevor Pateman, in his always-challenging book *Language, Truth and Politics*, has termed language that reinforces the *status quo* 'idle discourse'. Idle discourse, which many social institutions positively encourage us to engage in, is somewhat reminiscent of the language lambasted in George Orwell's essay 'Politics and the English language': it dodges meaning and treats definitions as closed, not possible subjects for dispute. It makes the same error Simone de Beauvoir made as a child, and later counselled against – failing to see that one can challenge the picture of reality your culture imposes on you.

This failure is not so much a product of stupidity as of desperation: it is understandable that most people feel a certain lack of control, and therefore devote their energies to grasping the world as it appears to be. Pateman observes:

Idle discourse is the language of the powerless who accept their position. To the degree that the pursuit of security dominates everyday thought and language use, I think this is because people have decided that other satisfactions are not obtainable.<sup>6</sup>

A lot of feminists will probably recognise what Pateman says as applying to them. Many women's accounts of their entry into feminist politics describe a period of often painful resistance to the feminist interpretation of reality; even if it is less than ideal, to have a taken-for-granted world turned upside down, to be told that the meanings you have structured your life around are not inevitable after all, is incredibly threatening. Pateman is not unsympathetic to the 'pursuit of security' in a hostile world, but he suggests that a

*radical* discourse will be one that calls it into question. It is politically progressive, therefore, to make changes in language which encourage people to reflect actively on the political nature of meaning itself.

Pateman argues that even rather superficial changes – the use of nonsexist language is an example – will ultimately affect attitudes at a deeper level: if not the attitudes of the cynical speaker him or herself, then those of other people who hear what s/he says. 'The change in practice', Pateman reminds us, 'constitutes a restructuring of at least one aspect of one social relationship ... every act reproduces or subverts a social institution'.<sup>7</sup>

This is a crucial point to make: that in our speech and writing, we can signal either acceptance or rejection of the existing order. 'Every act reproduces or subverts a social institution'. We do indeed have a choice. And in exercising it we are taking responsibility for our behaviour and our relationship to the world. As Pateman insists, '... in my act I have asserted that I can control language: I have stopped acting as if language necessarily controls me'.<sup>8</sup>

As we have seen, there are many feminist linguistic theorists who would say that Pateman is deluding himself with this idea that he can control language. But if we pursue their argument to its logical conclusion, it is surely futile to talk about feminist linguistic practice at all. There can be no radical discourse without an active attempt to intervene in meaning – even if the attempt is not wholly successful. Unless we believe that change is possible, and that we ourselves can bring it about, not only feminist linguistic theory but feminism in general becomes another form of 'idle discourse', a different (but equally fruitless) kind of quest for security, this time the security of knowing that we are powerless.

Finally, I believe that feminists must have faith in the capacity of language to empower as well as oppress; linguistic resources may very often have been denied us and used against us, but there is nothing immutable about this or any other form of sexism. To place women 'outside language' in our theories is to deny ourselves something of crucial importance: the power to shape new meanings for a different and better world.

# Notes

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## **1 Introduction: Language and Feminism**

1. Kate Millett (1970).
2. Betty Friedan (1963).
3. These titles belong, respectively, to works by Tillie Olsen (1980), Adrienne Rich (1980), Amrit Wilson and Marge Piercy.
4. Camilla Gugenheim (1981).
5. Jane Flax (1990).
6. Cheri Kramarae (1985).

## **2 Linguistic Theory: Frameworks and Approaches**

1. F. de Saussure (1974, p.16).
2. Ibid.
3. Roland Barthes (1973).
4. Sally McConnell-Ginet (1988, p.75).
5. Sandra Harding (1990).

## **3 The Politics of Variation: Sex Differences in Language (I)**

1. Julia Kristeva (1982).
2. Sally McConnell-Ginet, 'Language and gender' (1988).
3. Jonathan Swift, 'A Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue', in H. Davis (ed.), *Prose works of Jonathan Swift Vol.IV* (Blackwell, 1957).
4. Otto Jespersen (1922).
5. Robin Lakoff (1975).
6. Betty Lou Dubois and Isobel Crouch (1976); Janet Holmes (1984); Deborah Cameron, Fiona McAlinden and Kathy O'Leary (1989).
7. Carol Gilligan (1982).
8. The Survey of English Usage data on this occasion were taken from published transcripts to be found in David Crystal and Derek Davy (1975).
9. H.P. Grice (1975).
10. Cheri Kramarae (1981).
11. Quoted and critically discussed in William Labov (1972).

## **4 Sex Differences in Language (II): Empirical Sociolinguistics**

1. Mercilee Jenkins and Cheri Kramarae (1981, p.16).
2. This point is spelled out in Ann Bodine (1975).
3. Susan Harding (1975).

4. For a good survey of the ethnographic findings, see Joel Sherzer (1987).
5. Marjorie H. Goodwin (1980).
6. See the examples in Susie Tucker (1961).
7. Elinor O. Keenan (1974).
8. Peter Trudgill (1972) and reprinted in Barrie Thorne and Nancy Henley (1975).
9. Christine Delphy (1981).
10. Marie Haugs, 1973, cited in Delphy, *op. cit.*
11. Patricia Nichols (1983).
12. Lesley Milroy (1987).
13. Karen Bennett (1986).
14. Beth Thomas (1989).
15. Robin Lakoff (1975, p.6).
16. Sally McConnell-Ginet (1988).
17. Don Zimmerman and Candace West (1975).
18. Candace West (1984).
19. Nicola Woods (1989).
20. Pamela Fishman (1980, 1983).
21. Elizabeth Aries (1976); Jennifer Coates (1989).
22. Janet Holmes (1984).
23. Deborah Jones (1980); Jennifer Coates (1989).
24. Daniel Maltz and Ruth Borker (1982).
25. Caroline Henton (1989).
26. David Graddol and Joan Swann (1990).
27. Jack Sattel (1983).
28. Coates, *op. cit.*
29. Jones, *op. cit.*
30. Alice Walker (1984)
31. Deborah Tannen (1990).
32. Marilyn Manning with Patricia Haddock (1989, p.15).

## 5 False Dichotomies: Grammar and Sexual Polarity

1. Jack Rosenthal (1990).
2. Margaret Mead (1935).
3. Simone de Beauvoir (1974).
4. Hélène Cixous (1981).
5. Luce Irigaray (1985a).
6. M. Bierwisch (1970).
7. Dale Spender (1980).
8. *Ibid.*, p.2.
9. Marielouise Janssen-Jurreit (1982, p.280).
10. John Lyons (1968, p.284).
11. Jakob Grimm, *Deutsche Grammatik*, quoted in Janssen-Jurreit *op. cit.*, p.292.
12. Janssen-Jurreit, *op.cit.*, p.297.
13. Bernard Comrie (1989, p.196).
14. See Marlis Hellinger (1984).
15. Anne Corbett, 'Cherchez la metaphor', *Guardian*, 18 February 1983.
16. Quoted by Casey Miller and Kate Swift (1976, p.92).

17. Ann Bodine reprinted in Deborah Cameron (1990).
18. For a good brief analysis of the continuity between prescriptive and descriptive linguistic traditions, see Roy Harris (1980).

## 6 Making Changes: The Debate on Sexist Language

1. Eugene August (1990).
2. Stephen Kanfer (1972).
3. Tillie Olsen (1980).
4. Casey Miller and Kate Swift (1980).
5. Casey Miller and Kate Swift (1976).
6. *Ibid.*, p.8.
7. Dale Spender (1980).
8. This point is demonstrated empirically by Nessa Wolfson and Joan Manes (1980).
9. Carol Brooks Gardner (1980).
10. Julia Penelope Stanley (1977).
11. Muriel Schulz (1975).
12. Sue Lees (1986).
13. I owe this insight to conversations with survivors of sexual violence, and especially to Tricia Maher whom I thank for her detailed demonstration of the role of language in an actual assault.
14. Dennis Baron (1986).
15. Mary Daly (1978).
16. Alma Graham (1975).
17. Cheris Kramaræ and Paula Treichler (1985).
18. Mary Daly with Jane Caputi (1988).
19. Jane Mills (1990); Raymond Williams (1976).
20. Williams, *op. cit.* pp.21–2.
21. Miller and Swift (1980, p.4).
22. Ann Bodine, 'Androcentrism in prescriptive grammar', *Language in Society* vol.4, 1975.
23. Sharon Zuber (1990).
24. For the 'man' issue, see J. Schneider and S. Hacker (1973); Janice Moulton (1981).
25. Douglas Hofstadter (a.k.a. 'William Satire'), 'A person paper on purity in language', reprinted in Deborah Cameron (1990).
26. *New York Times*, 9 July 1989.
27. Miller and Swift (1980, p.8).
28. *Ibid.*, p.4.
29. In David Mandelbaum (ed.), *Selected Writings of Edward Sapir on language, culture and personality* (University of California Press, 1949).
30. Roger Scruton (1983).
31. Sara Mills (1986).

## 7 Silence, Alienation and Oppression: Feminist Models of Language (I)

1. Mary Daly (1978, p.1).
2. Adrienne Rich, 'Power and Danger' (1980, pp.247–8).

3. Ferdinand de Saussure (1974, p.112).
4. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (1981, p.xiii).
5. Saussure (1974, p.14).
6. David Mandelbaum (ed.) *Selected Writings of Edward Sapir*, (University of California Press, 1949), p.162.
7. Benjamin Lee Whorf (1976).
8. Ibid.
9. Sapir (1949, p.10).
10. Roger Scruton (1983).
11. Ibid.
12. Shirley Ardener (1978, p.20).
13. Shirley Ardener (1975, p.xii).
14. Ardener (1978, p.21).
15. Edwin Ardener, 'Belief and the problem of women', in S. Ardener (1975, p.22).
16. Cheris Kramarae (1981).
17. Ardener (1978, p.20).
18. Ibid., p.21.
19. Ardener (1975, p.ix).
20. Ardener (1978, pp.22–3).
21. Dale Spender (1980, pp.2–3).
22. Ibid., p.139.
23. Ibid., p.4.
24. Dorothy Smith (1978, pp.281–2).
25. Spender, op. cit., p.1.
26. George Orwell (1961).
27. Suzette Haden Elgin (1985).
28. Ibid., p.22.
29. Anne Beezer (1984).
30. Vološinov's major work holds some interest for feminists. It is published in English as *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (Seminar Press, 1973).

## **8 Feminist Models of Language (II): Semiology, Postmodernism and the Debate on the 'Gendered Subject'**

1. Maria Black and Rosalind Coward, 'Linguistic, social and sexual relations: a review of Dale Spender's *Man Made Language*', *Screen Education*, vol.39, 1981.
2. Ibid., p.70.
3. Ibid., p.72.
4. Ibid., p.81.
5. Rosalind Coward and John Ellis (1977, p.1).
6. Ferdinand de Saussure (1974, p.14).
7. See Nancy Chodorow (1978).
8. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose (1982, p.49).
9. Coward and Ellis, op. cit., p.97.
10. Luce Irigaray, 'Woman's exile: an interview with Couze Venn', *Ideology & Consciousness*, vol.1, 1977; reprinted in Deborah Cameron (ed.) (1990, p.80).
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.

14. Luce Irigaray (1985b), (1987).
15. Irigaray (1987, p.121), translation mine. (The crucial sentence of the original goes, 'La langue est un effet de sédimentations d'époques de communications sociales... Il n'y a pas de schémas linguistiques existant depuis toujours dans le cerveau de tout sujet parlant'.)
16. Irigaray (1987, p.123).
17. The most accessible single source in English for Kristeva's work is probably Toril Moi (ed.), *The Kristeva Reader* (Blackwell, 1986).
18. Julia Kristeva (1984).
19. Julia Kristeva, 'Woman's Time', *Signs*, 1981, reprinted in Nannerl Keohane, Michelle Rosaldo and Barbara Gelpi (1982).
20. Simone de Beauvoir (1974, p.1).
21. Donna Haraway (1990).
22. *Ibid.*, p.205
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*, p.222
25. *Ibid.*, p.207.
26. 'Variations on common themes', in Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (1981, p.219).
27. Mary Jacobus (1981, p.207).
28. Adrienne Rich (1978).

## 9 Beyond Alienation: An Integrational Approach to Women and Language

1. Dalston Study Group (1978, p.76). The paper being criticised by the Dalston group is also reprinted in the same volume (*Papers on Patriarchy*, 1978) as Rosalind Coward, Sue Lipshitz and Elizabeth Cowie, 'Psychoanalysis and patriarchal structures'.
2. Dalston Study group, *op. cit.*, p.77.
3. Simone de Beauvoir (1963, p.17).
4. *Ibid.*
5. Roy Harris (1981).
6. Harris, *op. cit.*, p.165.
7. Audre Lorde (1980, p.19).
8. Trevor Pateman (1980, p.129).
9. Maria Black and Rosalind Coward, 'Language, social and sexual relations', *Screen Education*, vol.39, 1981.
10. John J. Gumperz (1982, pp.4-5).
11. Penelope Harvey (1991).
12. *Bea Medicine* (1987).
13. Ana Celia Zentella (1987).
14. Walter Ong (1982, p.3).
15. Carol Gilligan (1982).
16. Cora Kaplan (1978).
17. Josephine Donovan (1990).
18. Elaine Hobby (1988).
19. Mercilee Jenkins and Cheris Kramarae (1981).
20. Joel Sherzer (1987).

21. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (1981, p.3).
22. Quoted in Julia O'Faolain and Lauro Martines (1974, p.259).
23. Dale Spender (1980, p.107).
24. Dalston Study Group, *op. cit.*, p.77.

## **10 Conclusion: Problems and Practices**

1. Suzette Haden Elgin (1982).
2. William O'Barr and Bowman Atkins (1980).
3. Casey Miller and Kate Swift (1980).
4. Carol Cohn (1989).
5. Jean Bethke Elshtain (1982, pp.128–9).
6. Trevor Pateman (1980, p.77).
7. *Ibid.*, pp.15–16.
8. *Ibid.*, p.16.

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# Glossary

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**Accent** pronunciation.

**Alienation** term used by some feminists for the inability to express your own experience or feelings because no suitable linguistic medium exists.

**Biologism** explaining things, especially social phenomena, entirely in terms of biological causation: 'anatomy is destiny' as an explanation for women's subordination, for instance.

**Code switching** changing from one language or variety to another in midstream, often to mark a change in topic or tone.

**Codification** the writing down of rules. In relation to language, the construction of standards of correctness in spelling, pronunciation, grammar, meaning and usage; done primarily through dictionaries and grammar/usage books. Not all languages are codified; English was extensively codified only in the eighteenth century.

**Competence** 'linguistic competence' is the Chomskyan term for what people know about the grammatical structure of their language. Dell Hymes used the term 'communicative competence' for speakers' knowledge about what kind of language is appropriate in a given context.

**Corpus** a sample of speech, elicited under natural or laboratory conditions, for the linguist to analyse.

**Covert prestige** the hidden value attaching to stigmatised speech forms. Thus society overtly disapproves of English speakers saying 'aint', but some of them – perhaps men especially – think it sounds tough.

**Deconstruction** a way of reading texts that exposes gaps and contradictions, and is especially suspicious about binary oppositions. Shows how terms that are supposed to be absolute and opposite actually depend on one another, and are often organised as a hierarchy, one term being privileged over the other.

**Demographic variables** those that involve group differences within a population: for example region, social class, age, race, gender.

**Determinism** in linguistics, the idea that language defines reality by constraining a speaker to conceptualise in certain ways.

**Diachronic** historical; Saussure distinguished diachronic and synchronic linguistics.

**Dialect** cluster of phonological, grammatical and lexical features associated with a particular region or social group.

**Dialectology** the study of dialect; usually, the study of traditional rural dialects.

**Discourse** in mainstream linguistics, language 'above the sentence', that is, a stretch of speech or writing more than one sentence long (a paragraph, an exchange, a conversation). Discourse analysis is the study of linguistic organisation in these larger units. For semiologists, 'discourse' refers to an

organised set of related utterances or propositions. Thus one can talk about 'the discourse of masculinity', meaning the set of statements a culture uses to organise its definition and understanding of masculinity (for example 'men don't cry', 'they're only after one thing', and so on).

**Domain** context or set of contexts in which language is used, and which influences the choice of linguistic style or variety. Home, school, religion, business are all important domains of language use.

**Empiricism** the theory that knowledge is derived from experience and observation (rather than, say, from innate ideas or from authorities); usually also includes scientific experiment. Postmodernists criticise it.

**Epistemology** theory of knowledge (how it is arrived at, what if anything makes it 'true', and so on).

**Essentialism** belief in 'essences'; an essentialist believes her object of study has essential basic qualities that can be used to explain its behaviour, and that do not require any explanation themselves. An example is 'human nature' as an explanation of how humans behave. Masculinity and femininity are often treated as essences.

**Ethnicity** a form of group identity which rests on a shared heritage and way of life, often also a shared language. **Not** the same as race or nationality. Races and nations contain many different ethnic groups.

**Ethnography of speaking** the study of speech events (for example a healing ritual, a political speech); practised by anthropologists and linguists.

**Etymology** the history and derivation of words.

**Folklinguistics** cultural beliefs about and systems for analysing language.

**Formalisation** A systematic way of expressing statements, often using a standard and precise notation. Chomskyan linguistics is very concerned with the form of statements in linguistic theory.

**Gender** in grammar, a system of concord or agreement affecting nouns, pronouns and articles. In feminist theory, the social differentiation of masculine and feminine persons, activities, behaviours and characteristics; as distinct from the biological differentiation of male/female, which is usually called **sex**.

**Grammar** the level of language between sound and meaning, that is its form – word and sentence structure, technically called morphology and syntax. Also used for the linguist's analysis of linguistic form; and (in fact the earliest of these usages) for prescriptive rules laying down correct usage.

**Heteroglossia** diversity of language(s)

**Idealisation** 'tidying up' the data or discarding certain facts for the sake of simplicity and clarity. For instance, elementary level physics students make calculations on the assumption of a 'frictionless universe': the universe isn't frictionless, but the assumption reduces the complexity of the calculations. Similarly, language isn't homogeneous but variable; in some linguistic theories, however, variation is ignored.

**Informant** term for the speaker whose speech a linguist studies.

**Intonation** use of pitch contrast to give grammatical and attitudinal information.

**Langue** Saussure's term for the 'pure' linguistic system, as opposed to **parole**.

**Lexicography** dictionary making.

**Markedness** some linguistic elements form pairs in which one element is more frequent, broader in scope and/or more neutral than the other. The less neutral element is 'marked' with respect to its counterpart.

- Metalinguistic** about or beyond language. A metalanguage is one used to talk about language (words like 'noun' and 'meaning' form part of a metalanguage). Metalinguistic practices regulate language: dictionary making is an example.
- Methodology** procedures for doing scientific investigation.
- Morphology** the internal structure of words; for example, the word *cats* has two elements, a root and a plural suffix. Part of grammar.
- Nonstandard** applied to language, a variety that is not codified and does not have (overt) social prestige.
- Pejoration** worsening; the process whereby a word acquires a more negative meaning.
- Performance** complements **competence**; refers to people's actual linguistic behaviour as opposed to their knowledge of the underlying grammatical rules.
- Philology** the historically-oriented study of linguistic texts. 'Comparative philology' was the precursor of modern linguistics; it traced language genealogies by comparing different languages and reconstructing common ancestry.
- Phonetics** the study of speech-sounds.
- Phonology** the study of sound systems, that is, how speech sounds behave in languages as opposed to their general properties (the province of phonetics).
- Postmodernism** novel philosophical perspective which rejects the epistemological tenets elaborated during the Enlightenment – that by using our reason we can know the truth about things.
- Post-structuralism** so called because it is a current of thought that follows on from structuralism, drawing on it and criticising it at the same time. The technique of deconstruction is associated with it.
- Prescriptivism** laying down rules of correctness and making value-judgements on language.
- Prosody** stress, rhythm, intonation; in poetry, metre.
- Quantitative** in sociolinguistics, statistical; the quantitative paradigm primarily uses statistical methods, and this affects the kind and amount of data collected. In other approaches – ethnography of speaking, discourse analysis – the paradigm is more likely to be 'qualitative' or 'holistic'.
- Referent** real-world element to which a linguistic expression 'refers'. Reference is distinguished from **sense**, which is the value of an expression within the linguistic system; reference relates it not just to other expressions but to the extralinguistic sphere.
- Register** variety of language appropriate or normative for a particular context or domain of use.
- Reification** treating a concept like a thing.
- Relativity** the notion that there is no absolute reality or truth; standards are historically and culturally variable. In linguistics, the notion that reality is relative to the language in which it is discussed. See also **determinism**.
- Semantics** the study of meaning.
- Semiology** the study of sign-systems.
- Sexuality** socially-mediated way of being sexual or expressing sexual desire; often refers in particular to sexual object-choice, as in the terms 'heterosexual', 'homosexual'.
- Sign** entity composed of a form (signifier) and a concept (signified) deriving its value from contrast with other signs.

- Social network** important in current sociolinguistics; denotes the set of contacts a speaker has with others.
- Sociolinguistics** the study of language in society, or more narrowly, of linguistic variation and change.
- Speech community** group of people with shared communicative and linguistic norms. Not everyone who speaks English belongs to the same speech community.
- Standard language** codified and prestigious variety of a language, usually spoken natively by an educated elite. Often becomes synonymous with the language itself.
- Stratification** in sociolinguistics, a regular statistical pattern produced by quantifying the use of some linguistic feature in the speech of different socio-economic classes. Higher status people use more standard language.
- Structuralism** a method based on breaking something down into its constituents and analysing their relationships. In linguistics, it usually refers to the work of a school of North American linguists such as Bloomfield and Hockett; elsewhere it tends to refer to the work of French theorists Barthes and Lévi-Strauss.
- Style** type of language affected by situational factors, especially (for sociolinguists) the formality of the situation. Modifying speech as the situation becomes more or less formal is known as 'styleshift'.
- Synchronic** not historical; see **diachronic**.
- Syntax** the study of sentence structure.
- Universal** in linguistics, a feature or tendency common to all languages.
- Variation** differences in linguistic behaviour, studied by sociolinguistics.
- Variety** neutral and inclusive term for some kind of language: a dialect, a style, a register. Often means 'dialect' in the technical definition (see above) but is an attempt to avoid the negative connotations of that term in ordinary usage.
- Vernacular** historically, denotes a mother-tongue as opposed to a learned 'high language' like Latin or classical Arabic; in sociolinguistics, the least formal style of speech used by an individual or the least standard variety found in a speech community.

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