



# GENDER & LANGUAGE

Theory and Practice

Lia Litosseliti





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# GENDER AND LANGUAGE: THEORY AND PRACTICE

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# Introduction

Gender and Language is a diverse and rapidly developing field, which has both academic and popular appeal. The ‘turn to language’ across the humanities and social sciences, and the impact of critical linguistics and discourse analysis, have contributed to a reframing of questions on gender and language. This book provides a broad overview of key issues and questions, and aims to do so in both theoretical and practical ways. It introduces key theoretical concepts and frameworks and illustrates and exemplifies the relationships between gender and language use, by looking at specific texts (spoken and written), situated in specific contexts. In addition, each chapter contains questions and suggestions for further reading, to allow those new to the field to locate the issues discussed in that chapter critically and in context.

In this book, the word *text* is used to refer to both spoken and written language, including dialogue. Contrary to text, which can exist physically – a transcript of a conversation or a newspaper article – *discourse* is a broader term and less easily defined. *Discourse analysis* involves analysis of the text as product, but is ultimately concerned with language in a social context, shaped by discursive and socio-cultural practices. A central theme running through the book is that language *both reflects and creates* how we see the world; and how we see the world includes assumptions about gender and gender inequalities. *Gender* is used in this book not as a grammatical, but as a social category. If *sex* relates to a biological and generally binary distinction between male and female, then gender refers to the social behaviours, expectations and attitudes associated with being male and female. Sex is binary, but ‘the traits assigned to a sex by a culture are cultural constructions’, socially determined and alterable (Wodak, 1997: 3). In this sense, gender and *gendered identities* are both social and individual, but also variable; they vary from one generation to the next, from one situation to another, and among language users who belong to different groups in terms of age, ethnicity, race, religion, class, sexuality, or education. The concepts mentioned here are initially discussed below, and elaborated and illustrated throughout the book.

First, it is necessary to provide some background on how theories of gender and language have developed. The feminist movement has undoubtedly influenced thinking in the social sciences and humanities, including linguistics, over the past 30 or 40 years. Since the 1960s, the scope of feminist thought has become wider and more diverse and its impact more profound. As a political movement, feminism has tried to render women’s experience visible and to both identify and combat the sources of

gender inequalities. The earlier wave of feminist intervention tended to see women's involvement in the domestic domain as an expression of their exclusion from the male world, while later work emphasized the special and distinct nature of women's outlook on social life.

Scholarly and popular debates on gender and feminism have centred on shifts: women entering professions such as medicine and law; girls doing better than boys at school; shifts in gender roles, where women are not only mothers and housekeepers, and men are not only workers and providers; shifts towards equal opportunities and increased gender awareness. Gender and language research during the past three decades has run parallel to such debates, and has been similarly preoccupied for a long time with gender *difference*. Gender and language research, as an umbrella term, refers to cross-disciplinary discussions of both the ways in which language is used *by* men and women, and the ways in which language is used to say things *about* men and women. In Part I of the book, we will see that past theorizations of gender and language ('deficit', 'difference', 'dominance') revolved mainly around how language has been used by women and men differently, while more recent approaches are concerned with how women and men are constructed through language.

These more recent and complex approaches, which started gathering pace in the late 1980s and 1990s as a result of the influence of post-structuralism, turn to the role of *discourse*, which is generally seen as *language as social practice*. Past approaches have been characterized by a 'static conception of distinct male and female identities, apparently fixed once and for all in childhood' (Talbot, 1998: 144). But the ways in which language, identity and social context interact have not been taken into account until recently. Johnson also points out that the view of men and women as binary opposites (and thus essentially different) 'needs to be seen within a much broader tradition in linguistic thinking generally, the roots of which are to be found in structuralist approaches to language' (Johnson and Meinhof, 1997: 14). Such approaches see language as a closed system with internal rules, and not as a dynamic entity influenced by external social factors and used variably by real speakers and writers.

As we will see in Part I, the current and new directions in the study of gender and language, in terms of theoretical and analytical frameworks, are the result of a critical rethinking of linguistic analysis, feminist theory and feminist linguistic analysis. This also involves a lack of consensus on how to evaluate the claims of the literature, and to what extent to revisit previous assumptions. Broadly speaking, current thinking is based on different research paradigms *across disciplines*, the importance of meaning which is situated within immediate and socio-cultural *contexts* and within particular *communities of practice*, the centrality of *discourses* and the *discursive construction of a range of gendered identities*. These are explored in detail throughout the book, but it is useful first to briefly introduce them in this section.

Context is important within a view of language as social practice, and it incorporates the social situation, linguistic co-text, genre, and (gender and other) relations between speakers and hearers, writers and readers. As Fairclough (1992) has argued, context includes those *discursive practices* pertaining to a given text, and the relevant

*social practices* (see Chapter 3). Generalizations outside a particular conversational context are now seen as inherently problematic, and increasingly gender and language research has focused on particular men and women in particular settings. An acknowledgement that gender is complex also involves looking at the ways in which gender interacts with other identity categories such as ethnicity, age, class, race, education, and sexual orientation. In addition, gender is produced through people's participation in *communities of practice* where groups of people engage in a mutual endeavour, such as a classroom or a workplace (see Part II). Current theories are interested in the ways in which gender identities are formed and reproduced, through participation in multiple communities of practice (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992).

In terms of analytical frameworks, current thinking has also led to an emphasis on *discourse analysis*, and *critical discourse analysis* (CDA), as valuable frameworks for exploring a range of text types for their contribution to the construction of gender. If past approaches had assumed that people use language in certain ways because of who they are, (critical) discourse analysts suggest that people are who they are (partly) because of the way they use language (Cameron, 1998). And at the same time, people activate power whenever they produce meaning. Here, CDA is particularly useful, in that it aims to understand social issues, inequalities, and ideologies, by exposing the subtle role of discourse in maintaining them (the 'hidden agenda' of discourse). Once we consider that this agenda serves particular interests and acts against others, it becomes clear that a critical (feminist) discourse analysis cannot remain descriptive and neutral (see Chapter 1).

Different definitions of *discourses* are given in Chapter 3, but for our purposes here, we can think of discourses as ways of seeing and experiencing the world (including gender) from a particular perspective. Discourses are manifested in texts and work to represent, maintain, reconstitute and contest gendered identities and social practices.

As mentioned earlier, language does not simply reflect social reality; it is also constitutive of that reality, through an ongoing process of negotiation, modification and restatement in which all speakers, writers, listeners and readers are involved. As we will see in Chapter 3, gender is socially and culturally constructed; our gender identities (our sense of who we are as gendered subjects) are largely constructed through the discourses we inhabit and negotiate. The plural form *identities* is used to emphasize the current thinking of identities as multiple, diverse, fragmented, and shifting. In addition, our gendered identities are not simply about being male or female, but about *doing or performing* one's gender at any one time. One example of this can be seen in sex workers' speech on the telephone, where they typically perform the 'powerless' femininity that clients expect (see Chapter 3, for this and other examples). In order to define ourselves as masculine or feminine, we make choices among norms of language which are seen as appropriate and intelligible for performing masculinity or femininity (Butler, 1990). In this sense, identity formation is an ongoing and dialectical process, rather than a set of attributes: who we are is being constantly shaped by the taken-for-granted concepts and assumptions embedded in discourses, and vice

versa. Further, identities (and gender identities) are not only multiple and shifting, but sometimes also contradictory.

## ABOUT THIS BOOK

The book engages with the above issues and the questions they raise, in theoretical and applied ways. The theoretical frameworks discussed and the examples of language use provided aim to demonstrate the various strands and directions of research in this area, towards a more critical re-evaluation of previous work and the theorization of gender and language in non-essentialist ways.

The book is structured chronologically in Part I. Chapter 1 summarizes early feminist and non-feminist approaches to the study of gender and language. It focuses on key elements of early study in this area, such as sexist language, and language change and intervention. It also traces the emergence of feminist linguistics. Chapter 2 concentrates on past approaches, which have been primarily concerned with the investigation of differences between male and female speech, and with the varying interpretations of such differences – the long-running debates surrounding the ‘dominance’ and ‘difference’ paradigms. Chapter 3 examines more recent theorizations of gender and language, which question any straightforward notion of gender differences, and conceptualize gender in more productive ways. Instead of a reliance on binary and generalized distinctions between male and female language use, the focus is on gendered discourses and identities (femininities and masculinities) and on gender as a contextualized and shifting practice, rather than a relatively fixed social category. The move away from seeing gender as a set of behaviours imposed upon the individual by society, and towards gender as enacted or accomplished, is discussed through examples.

Part II is based on the assumption that it is both difficult and counter-productive to make global statements about women’s and men’s language: ‘if gender identities are not fixed, then it is difficult to imagine how the linguistic resources used in their construction can be the same from one situation to the next’ (Johnson and Meinhof, 1997: 23). The chapters in this part look at how gender is discursively constructed – and to what effect – in education (Chapter 4), in the media (Chapter 5), and in the workplace (Chapter 6). The issues and theories discussed in Part I are further exemplified in Part II. For example, the theories of ‘difference’ and ‘dominance’ are demonstrated through analysis of interaction in the classroom and in the workplace. Also, sexist language and gendered discourses are identified in media texts and in workplace interaction. The discussion extends to the power relations and ideologies pertaining to these texts, for example, those contributing to gender inequalities in the workplace.

Finally, Part III provides a broad introduction to some of the principles, approaches and decisions involved in conducting research on gender and language. It can be used as a starting point for researchers in the area and a resource for those who are teaching and studying gender and language. This part introduces key principles of feminist linguistic research and provides samples of activities, study questions, and resources.

The questions and extracts used in each chapter are suitable for either self-study or

classroom use. I have used the majority of them effectively in my teaching of Gender and Language courses at universities, and in the process of supervising dissertations and research projects in this area. Their aim is not to offer clear-cut or correct answers, but rather to encourage readers to reflect on the issues raised, clarify their understanding, and engage with 'real' texts critically. The questions are guided, in the sense that the content of the chapter in which they are embedded provides the ideas, suggestions and directions necessary for addressing them. In most cases, this is done explicitly in the parts immediately following each question or extract; in some cases, it will be necessary to read the whole chapter, or other parts of the book, before going back to address some of the questions. There is sign-posting for the reader, when it is necessary to do this, and generally, for moving from one section of the book to the next. Each chapter is provided with a summary.

Further readings at the end of each chapter are selected with one criterion in mind: they consist of key sources where many of the issues discussed in that chapter are overviewed and explored comprehensively and in much more detail than is the case in this book. They include a mixture of 'classic' key texts and recently published ones. In most cases, the lists of further readings are short, because the key texts suggested are more than adequate in initiating those new to the subject, and in providing access to a whole range of other discussions and sources. Where specific chapters in suggested readings are particularly relevant, and where readings relate to a specific area covered in the book, this has been indicated.

This book is the product of fascination and engagement with what is a constantly developing field. As with any project, there are necessarily omissions in it. Some of these are the result of spatial constraints and the scope of the book (for example, discussions on gender, language and sexuality); others are the result of an 'Anglo-centric' bias in the research we are conducting, reporting and disseminating, for which we are all responsible (hence the relatively fewer examples from different languages and cultures). However, I hope that the book will be useful in offering the new reader an informed account of past, current, diverse, and controversial voices in the field; an understanding of the complexity of this area of study; and a thought-provoking examination of some of the ways in which theory permeates practice.

It is an exciting time for gender and language work. Collaborative research is being produced across several academic disciplines. The literature in the field is expanding (at the time of writing) to include more pedagogically-oriented texts, and the number of students studying and researching gender and language as part of their degrees is rising. I hope this book will contribute to this excitement and will make critical questions about gender and language accessible to more readers.

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# THEORIZATIONS OF GENDER AND LANGUAGE



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# Putting gender and language on the map

There is no neutral discourse: whenever we speak we have to choose between different systems of meaning, different sets of values.

(Coates, 1998: 302)

This chapter introduces some key assumptions about language and about gender. It describes early (feminist and non-feminist) approaches to gender and language, and moves on to discuss sexist language. This includes examples of sexist usage, lexical gaps and asymmetries, connotative differences, and the use of generic expressions. It also examines different ways of describing and classifying women, which can result in their invisibility and stereotyping. This is followed by looking at language change and linguistic intervention (e.g. using sex-neutral vocabulary, reclaiming words, creating new terms and guidelines for non-sexist language use). The chapter concludes with a summary of concerns for feminist linguistics.

## A VIEW OF LANGUAGE

In the Introduction, a shift in assumptions about language is mentioned, which is also relevant for our understanding of gender and language: the shift from the view that we use language in certain ways because of who we are, to the view that who we are is partly because of the way we use language. This perspective assumes that language does not simply *reflect* social reality, but is also *constitutive* of such reality, in other words, it shapes how we see ourselves and the world. If language use is constitutive rather than indexical, then it has the potential to help establish and maintain social and power relations, values and identities, as well as to challenge routine practice and contribute towards social change.

### Question 1

In what ways can language shape how we see ourselves and the world?

To address this question, one can consider, for example, why one person's 'terrorist' is another person's 'freedom fighter'; the contexts in which one would use the terms 'liberal', 'collateral damage' or 'axis of evil'; what people mean by 'woman of

colour', 'hooded youths', 'male nurse', or 'spinster'; and how much information is conveyed (or not) by the term 'domestic violence'. In addition, violent, shocking, or high impact events, for example, war, provide vivid and highly charged contexts where language is paramount. During the Second World War, the Japanese were constructed as the dehumanized enemy, described as 'specimens' to be 'bagged'. In Rwanda, during the 1994 genocide, the Tutsis were described as 'cockroaches', the target of 'bush-clearing' by the Hutus, who were ordered to 'remove tall weeds' (adults) and 'shoots' (children). The killing of people in wars has typically been re-conceptualized as 'action', 'severe measures', 'evacuating', or 'rendering harmless'. In many cases, 'war' has become 'conflict', 'killing fields' have become 'free fire zones', and 'killing civilians' has become 'collateral damage' (Bourke, 1999, 2001). These re-conceptualizations help constitute particular versions of events, such as a bombing, and particular social and power relations, such as those between 'us' and the 'other' (whoever the doer(s) and the receiver(s) of an action may be). Similarly, in terms of gender, the use of phrasing such as 'male nurse' or 'female doctor' or 'lady doctor' effectively constitutes particular versions of the social world, where it is necessary or important for speakers to index gender in that way.

The view of language not as a fixed or closed system, but as dynamic, complex and subject to change, assumes that every time we use language, we make meaningful selections from the linguistic resources available to us (Antaki, 1994). This is hardly a straightforward process, not least because these selections are embedded in a local/immediate, as well as broader/institutional and socio-cultural context (Antaki, 1988, 1994; Fairclough, 1992). Consider, for example, a public debate on the topic of abortion. The language that may be used to write or talk about this topic must be viewed in the context of the particular social occasion (e.g. at school, in parliament, in the media); of the medium (e.g. spoken, written); of who argues (e.g. a doctor, a legislator, a campaigner); for what purpose(s) (e.g. to convince, to change a situation) and from what perspective. The range of perspectives on abortion may vary according to the participants' age, sex, education, race, class, or religion, but also their expectations, experiences, knowledge, expertise, and involvement. Different perspectives will also reflect and promote different assumptions (or discourses, as we will see in Chapter 3) around gender, for example, about women's position in a society, their relative power in terms of decision-making, the role of parenting, a society's views about sex, and so on. It then becomes obvious that in order to understand the role that language plays in establishing and maintaining any social relations, including gender relations, we have to look outside of language itself, at the wider social processes in which language plays a part (Graddol and Swann, 1989).

## SEX AND GENDER

The terms *sex* and *gender* are sometimes used interchangeably as synonyms. Language and gender theorists have generally made a distinction between sex as physiological, and gender as a cultural or social construct. According to this distinction, *sex* refers to biological maleness and femaleness, or the physiological, func-

tional, anatomical differences that distinguish men and women, whereas *gender* refers to the traits assigned to a sex – what maleness and femaleness stand for – within different societies and cultures.

Gender can then be seen as a broader, a more encompassing and complex term. As Graddol and Swann (1989) state, the many different life experiences of women and men cannot be simply explained by biological differences between the sexes. Biological differences cannot account for the fact that a person may be more or less ‘feminine’ and more or less ‘masculine’. Further, the many variations of maleness and femaleness over time/from one generation to the next, across cultures, and across contexts, show that the traits assigned to a sex by a culture are socially determined and learned, and therefore alterable (Wodak, 1997; Talbot, 1998). Current theories of gender recognize not only that behaving as men or women within a society will vary from one situation to the next, from one social grouping or community to another, and according to different goals, aims, and interests, but also that people are active agents involved in their own ‘gendering’ or ‘doing gender’ (see Chapter 3).

The distinction between sex and gender is important and political. Biological explanations of socially constructed differences between men and women are often used to justify male privileges or reassert traditional family and gender roles, for example, women’s so-called ‘natural’ role as mothers and nurturers (see Talbot, 1998, for other examples). Unsurprisingly, feminists have strongly criticized biological explanations of ‘natural’ differences between the sexes for perpetuating gender myths, stereotypes, and imbalances that are ultimately damaging for both women and men.

### Question 2

Identify other examples of biological explanations of gender differences. What are their possible effects and implications?

In addition to assumptions about women as carers/nurturers and men as providers, other examples relating to Question 2 may include ‘men as active’ vs ‘women as passive’, ‘male rationality’ vs ‘female emotionality’, men as more suitable for certain jobs than women and vice versa, and the pay gap between male and female employees (see also Chapter 2, *Beyond difference*, p. 40).

Theorizations of the distinction between sex and gender have developed in recent years. As we will also see in Chapter 3, rather than simply talking about a biological sex and a social gender, we have come to ask more complex questions about the processes of gendering, questions of agency in these processes, and questions around gender ideologies. In addition to discussions of gender as context-dependent femininities and masculinities and not as a set of traits characterizing women and men, recently there has also been discussion of sex as a less clear-cut dichotomy. The latter can be seen in cases of inter-sexed infants – born as both male and female, or as neither, or as indeterminate – who tend to develop the gender identity of the sex assigned to them at birth (Giddens, 1989; Lorber and Farrell, 1991; Bem, 1993; Bing and

Bergvall, 1996; Cameron, 1997). For a discussion of how some societies (often in industrialized parts of the world) are less likely to assign binary biological categories than others, see Epstein (1990), Jacobs and Cromwell (1992), and Hall and O'Donovan (1996). Some theorists go even further, to suggest that the concept of two sexes is 'unreal' and purely a cultural construction or perception in discourse (Butler, 1990). The result of such debates is that assumptions about dichotomies in relation to both sex and gender are being challenged.

### Question 3

Consider the following topics being debated in some European countries at the time of writing:

- the preaching, by some Christian groups, of sexual abstinence to teenagers;
- boys' academic under-achievement;
- the ban on wearing Islamic head-scarves in French schools;
- single-sex schools;
- the pay gap between women and men in paid employment;
- the availability of contraception to girls and boys under 16;
- the provision of maternity and paternity leave for employees.

First, would it be possible in each case to talk about the sexes (men, women, boys, girls) without saying something about gender?

Second, would it be possible to talk about gender without saying something about race, ethnicity, religion, class, sexuality, education levels, and the geographical/historical/political/social context pertinent to each of these issues?

## PRE-FEMINIST LINGUISTICS

Early pre-feminist linguistic research moved between the view that women's and men's language signals biological differences, and the view that it symbolizes social gender roles, whereas feminist linguists have argued for the latter (Cameron, 1997).

The former approach can be found as early as 1922, in the work of Danish linguist, Otto Jespersen. Jespersen made claims about certain gender differences (discussed in Cameron, 1990): women using more adverbs of intensity (e.g. 'awfully pretty', 'terribly nice') due to a tendency to hyperbole; women not finishing their sentences, due to not having thought out what they are going to say; men being linguistic innovators (e.g. coining new words) and women having a less extensive vocabulary than men. While there are various reasons for criticizing such claims – especially their reliance on 'folk linguistics' (widely held beliefs about language) and stereotypes rather than rigorous systematic research – it should be noted that not much else was written on the subject at the time.