



Language and gender: Interdisciplinary perspectives

Edited by
Sara Mills



Language and gender

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To Tony and Gabriel

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Introduction

Sara Mills

This book developed from debates and discussions arising from papers which were originally presented at the Language and Gender conference held at Loughborough University in May 1992. The essays in this edition are a selection of the papers which were presented at the conference: they have been significantly revised in the light of recent research and also in the light of debates at the conference and since. The essays reflect some of the diverse facets of the complex interrelationship of the terms 'language' and 'gender'.

The conference itself was structured around a number of themes which were considered to be crucial to the analysis of the relationship between gender and language in current theoretical debates across disciplines, and this is reflected in the structure of this book. The first section is concerned with the theoretical distinction between difference and dominance theorists; the essays in the section on lesbian poetics consider the way that lesbian writers structure their texts in relation to the mainstream; the section on gender/genre examines the relationship between language and the production of texts within specific generic boundaries; the sections on gender, language and education and on gender, language and children both consider the ways in which gender identities are constructed and negotiated through an intense process of socialisation; and the final section on language, media/visual analysis and gender considers the analysis of non-literary texts and gender. Thus, rather than simply structuring the conference and the book on disciplinary lines, it was felt to be more productive to traverse boundaries by using themes as the principal form of organisation. The resulting essays are necessarily diverse and in many ways that is their strength. Some of the essays draw explicitly on empirical work and others are focussed on textual/visual analysis. This

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diversity of focus and methodology leads to a defamiliarisation of the ways that research is undertaken in language and gender studies. The conference was interdisciplinary, drawing on work within literary studies, linguistics (especially sociolinguistics and EFL), cultural/media studies, art history, education and psychology. The essays in this book are interventions into current theoretical debates within these subject areas, but each of the essays attempts to speak across those disciplinary barriers. One of the most important features of feminist work is the fact that it has always attempted to be interdisciplinary, since feminists have had to research outside their field in trying to answer questions which could not be, or were not being, addressed within the mainstream. Cooperation with feminist colleagues from other departments and disciplines has always been an integral part of women's studies courses, but this cooperation and sharing has not always been easy. At the conference itself it was clear that many participants had a feeling of speaking different languages to those of the speakers and much of the debate focussed on this sense of defining and redefining what we meant. This book aims to consolidate those dialogues, arguments and debates across disciplines, following in the tradition of this type of work in earlier books on feminism and language (McConnell-Ginet *et al.* 1980).

LANGUAGE AND GENDER

The two terms of the title of this book are equally problematic in isolation and even more so when they are brought into conjunction. Language is a problematic term, especially in interdisciplinary contexts such as this, since within each discipline the object of analysis is necessarily different – language for a psychologist is very different from language for a psychoanalyst. It is clear from many of the essays in this book that the term 'language' is being used in very different ways. For example, Alison Lee *et al.*, in their essay on children's speech, see language as a series of sounds which may disclose gender identity: language here is more like an arena where 'symptoms' can be disclosed. For Liz Yorke, in her essay on lesbian poets, language is a series of institutionalised constraints within which women writers negotiate their meanings. For Helen Hills, in her essay on language used by experimental women artists, lan-

guage is a site of contestation and necessary ambiguity. For Joan Swann and David Graddol, in their essay on the feminisation of language in the classroom, language is seen as an array of speech styles, some of which are valorised. This book is an attempt to achieve some form of translation of the term 'language' across disciplinary boundaries, however difficult that task. Translation does not entail a dulling of the precision of the meanings of the term 'language' within their disciplinary contexts; it is not the intention of this collection to develop a unitary definition of 'language'. Rather, it is hoped that each of the meanings of 'language' will interact with each other when juxtaposed and indicate other possible areas of research.

'Gender' is also a term which these essays approach from different perspectives. In recent years there has been intense debate about the possible definitions of the term 'gender'. Early feminist work on language focussed almost exclusively on analysis of women's language (Spender 1980; Lakoff 1975). Some feminists have argued that 'gender' is a term which erases the political edge of feminism, and indeed this has been the case in some work in this area, most notably Elaine Showalter's collection, *Speaking of Gender* (1989). Feminists such as Tanya Modleski have been anxious that using the term 'gender' entails treating males and females as if they had the same political power, rights, upbringing, access to education and so on (Modleski 1991). Rather than focussing on women as objects of analysis, as has been the case in women's studies courses, it is feared that this move towards the analysis of gender will bring about a return to the status quo, where women are treated as a marginal group once more. Modleski states that a focus on gender almost inevitably leads to a focus on men and heterosexuality, even when the debates seem to be about a male identity 'in crisis'. She says: 'however much a male subjectivity may currently be in crisis . . . we need to consider the extent to which male power is actually consolidated through cycles of crisis and resolution, whereby men ultimately deal with the threat of female power by incorporating it' (Modleski 1991: 7). For such feminists, the term 'gender' simply allows for all of the gains brought about through feminist work, which have demonstrated the ways in which women and men have been treated differently and oppressively, to be lost. However, other feminists have argued that 'gender' is an enabling term which allows for the analysis of difference – by this I mean that sexual difference is not considered as a given whereby

all males are classified as sharing certain characteristics which are opposed to the characteristics supposedly shared by all women. Instead, women are viewed less as a fixed, homogeneous caste than as a grouping of people intersected and acted upon by other variables and elements, such as class, race, age, sexual orientations, education and so on. Thus, these factors of difference within sexual difference can be analysed, without having to prioritise them over sexual difference and without having to erase them, as frequently happened in early feminist work. The *Journal of Gender Studies* contains examples of some of the work which has been undertaken on gender which does not entail a prioritisation of focus on males. Sexual difference is considered relationally rather than essentially; so that, when discussing the nature of femininity, it is only possible to do so in relation to other forms of sexual identity, such as masculinity. Similarly, this view of gender attempts to be specific about factors such as sexual orientation (for straights, gays and bisexuals), race (for both black, white and mixed race) and class (for all class positions). The essays in this book argue that the term 'gender' can be usefully employed so that the differences within sexual groupings can be considered, at the same time as retaining the categories male, female, gay, straight and so on as indicators of distinctive oppressions and resistances within language.

Much of this new work on gender has been informed by the work of Judith Butler and Diana Fuss (Butler 1990; Fuss 1989). This challenging work has questioned the seemingly self-evident nature of sexual difference, and has thrown into disarray work by both constructionists (those who think that sexual difference is constructed by society and culture) and essentialists (those who think that sexual difference is based on biological difference). Fuss states for example that 'what is risky is giving up the security – and the fantasy – of occupying a single subject position' (Fuss 1989: 19). Fuss attempts to destabilise the category 'woman', arguing that it is impossible to justify the category's boundaries as we cannot base it on essence (not all women share the same characteristics), nor on experience (women do not share a single experience). As she states: 'Can we ever speak . . . simply of the female . . . or the male . . . as if these categories were not transgressed already, not already constituted by other axes of difference (class, culture, nationality, ethnicity . . .)?' (Fuss 1989: 28). Modleski cautions against the move towards emptying the terms 'male' and 'female' of their meaning; she states that this move 'can mean the triumph either of a male

feminist perspective that excludes women or of a feminist anti-essentialism so radical that every use of the term "woman" however "provisionally" it is adopted is disallowed' (Modleski 1991: 15). This is not the aim of this collection of essays. Changing the focus from feminist analysis of women's language to feminist analysis of gender and language does not in any way mean that the feminist nature of our research is tempered or muted; work on gender is obviously and necessarily informed by an awareness of the power differences involved in gender differences. The contributors to this collection will be using the term 'gender' to refer to an analysis which is concerned with the interactions of power, the process of production, consolidation and resistance to sexual identity – a process in which language is of prime importance. The contributors to this collection are female and male and all of them locate their work within a feminist framework; some of them focus on women's language and some of them on men's language, but it is with a focus on the relation between those terms, 'male-female', and on the difficulty of coming to a definition of either of the terms, that each of these essays has been written.

The first section of essays consists of interventions by Jennifer Coates and Deborah Cameron. These two essays embody different approaches to the analysis of gender and language and aim to survey the state of current research from these different perspectives. Coates' essay, 'Language, gender and career', situates itself largely within theoretical work focussing on difference, that is, within a concern with the way that females and males grow up within gendered subcultures (Maltz and Borker 1982). She argues that women and men speak differently, tending to use cooperative and competitive speech styles respectively. She goes on to argue that women and men are still largely segregated into the private and the public sphere and that this division results in language differences, and differences in attitude to women's and men's speech. Coates argues for a revision of the so-called 'weak' characteristics of women's cooperative strategies in speech and analyses the way that women are judged if they use competitive strategies in their work in the public sphere. Deborah Cameron's essay, 'Rethinking language and gender studies: feminism into the nineties', surveys the current popularisation of feminist linguistics, primarily with the publication of Deborah Tannen's book *You Just Don't Understand* (1990). Cameron surveys the main models of feminist linguistics work: difference, deficit and dominance, and she argues that the

difference model of feminist linguistics, that is, one that argues that men and women simply speak differently because of their different upbringing, is at present the most popular. She questions the use of such a model when there are power differences which inform sexual difference, but she does not suggest that the dominance model is one that should be adopted instead. Rather she argues that these theories entail a view of gendered subjectivity as achieved. Instead of this reified view of sexual difference, she argues that we need to see subjectivity as a process which is always being negotiated.

In Section 2, the essays consider the difference that sexual orientation makes – here focussing on lesbianism, but by implication, forcing the reader to consider heterosexuality as a choice in sexual orientation. The essays foreground the fact that most of the discourses within which we write are primarily male, white and heterosexual; in order to claim a space for lesbians it is necessary firstly to demarcate the space as one which silences or denigrates lesbians. The essays consider the *difference* of lesbian writing and its implications for gender ascription and expression of desire, together with the difficult and also productive relation lesbian writing has to 'mainstream writing'. Liz Yorke, in her essay 'Constructing a lesbian poetic for survival', considers the choices that writers who are lesbian have to make, when they are faced with silence and silencing within dominant discourses. She examines the work of Broumas, Ruykeyser, H.D., Rich and Lorde in order to analyse the different strategies that lesbian poets adopt in order to negotiate a lesbian poetic, a lesbian language. She argues that the lesbian can and does challenge patriarchal definitions of herself, within language, in transformed terms. In this essay she argues that these lesbian poets use the language of poetry to represent lesbian libidinal difference, sexual identity and lifestyle – in their own terms. Margaret Williamson, in her essay 'Sappho and the other woman', compares Sappho with a male poet, Anacreon, in order to attempt to map out the difference of being a woman writer. She argues that within Sappho's fragmentary verse, there is a shifting of speaking voices and subject position which is not found within contemporary male-authored verse. The range of voices, speaking positions and self-other relationships in the expression of desire is far wider and more subtly modulated, in contrast to the repeated and clear-cut pattern of erotic domination found in male-authored verse. Instead of the sharply demarcated subject-object positions found in Anacreon, there is a circulation of

desire through constantly shifting and eliding subject positions. Sappho's poetry shares some elements with Luce Irigaray's 'parler femme', raising questions about whether and how French feminist thought can be used to elucidate writing from this early period. Debs Tyler-Bennett's essay, "Her wench of bliss": gender and the language of Djuna Barnes' *The Ladies Almanac* does not represent a close linguistic study of Barnes' work, but rather considers the way in which the text engages with verbal stereotypes and subverts and explores older verbal forms, such as ballads, almanacs and chapbooks. In engaging with the almanac form, Barnes both reworked and rewrote that form. By doing so, Tyler-Bennett argues, she was writing into the past and writing a lesbian past, through the use of pastiche. These essays thus attempt to consider the way that lesbian women writers negotiate with the language constraints in literary writing.

In Section 3, 'Gender/genre', the essays focus on the way that genre categorisation and the rules of the genres themselves tend to correlate with gender difference. Some genres are especially masculinist, for example, science fiction, where focalisation and subject matter are frequently from a masculine, heterosexual perspective. Language used in science fiction thus has to be transgressed by women writers, and as Jenny Wolmark shows in her essay 'Cyborgs and cyberpunk: rewriting the feminine in popular fiction', science fiction written by women makes explicit cross-references to other genres and is characterised by unresolvable narrative dilemmas. Wolmark shows that feminist writers have had a significant influence on male writing in the use of the cyborg – a form of interface between human and machine, one which can replace the opposition between nature and culture and other binary oppositions. Cybernetics and cyberpunk provide a radical context in which feminist writers can explore the potentialities of the disintegration of the unitary self. In Elisabeth Mahoney's essay 'Claiming the speakwrite: linguistic subversion in the feminist dystopia', there is a focus on those texts by women, particularly Suzette Haden Elgin's *Native Tongue*, which specifically suggest linguistic subversion as a means of ending women's oppression. In these feminist texts, there is a concentration on language, to the extent of including dictionaries and texts in newly formulated women's languages. These texts suggest that it is through fundamental changes in language and narration that women can gain control over their lives and bodies. Mahoney attempts to view these

efforts to formulate women's languages as not simple idealism, as has often been claimed, but in fact as a problematising of the notion of a sharing of a common women's language.

The essays in Section 4 consider the relation between the terms 'gender', 'language' and 'education'. These essays consider the way that gender identity is negotiated and consolidated within the school context. Each essay questions the characterisation of gender as a simple category; the essays focus instead on the process whereby gender identity and certain valorised styles of speech and behaviour are imbricated. Joan Swann and David Graddol, in their essay 'Feminising classroom talk?', examine the shift towards the examination of oracy in schools, which may favour girls. They argue that boys have been favoured in the public domain of speech, but that this new focus of attention on oracy and collaborative talk may lead to a 'feminisation' of classroom talk, where the styles of speech more normally associated with girls may be valued highly. However, although this move towards feminisation of classroom discourse may seem to indicate that girls' language skills will be valorised, Swann and Graddol note that girls may not be accorded the same level of positive evaluation as boys when using collaborative speech. Cleopatra Altani, in her essay 'Primary school teachers' explanations of boys' disruptiveness in the classroom', considers the way that some teachers try to justify their own sex-preferential behaviour. Taking as given the fact that teachers do favour boys and concentrate more on responding to them than to girls, Altani compares the types of ideological frameworks which inform teachers' explanations of their concentration on dealing with boys in classrooms. Jane Sunderland, in her essay "'We're boys miss!' Finding gendered identities and looking for gendering of identities', examines the way that in the foreign-language classroom, female students may be prepared to play with gender identity, whereas boys are more rigidly located within their own masculine identity role. This focus on the flexibility of girls' gender identity forces us to recognise that gender identity is a very different process for girls and boys.

Continuing this concern with the processes whereby children assume gendered identity through language, in Section Five, 'Gender, language and children', Farida Abu-Haidar examines the way that children in rural Lebanese communities produce sex-differentiated language behaviour. Drawing on social-network theory, she examines the way that boys display dominance in

mixed-sex communication in marked contrast to the girls' behaviour. Abu-Haidar also notes that this display of dominance seems to entail a lack of communicative competence on the part of the boys. Rather than focussing on the needs of their interlocutors, the boys direct the topic of the conversations to themselves and their own needs. Abu-Haidar considers some of the factors which have led to the development of this speech style. Alison Lee, Nigel Hewlett and Moray Nairn investigate whether it is possible to distinguish between pre-adolescent boys and girls from hearing their voices. They describe a study which they undertook to test out whether a perceptual difference exists between boys' and girls' voices and whether this difference is based in speech production.

The essays in Section 6, 'Language, media/visual analysis and gender', focus on non-literary texts and visual texts for the analysis of language and gender. Barbara Crowther and Dick Leith, in their essay 'Feminism, language and the rhetoric of TV wildlife programmes', investigate the way that both visual and verbal discursive practices can be analysed when examining the rhetoric of television wildlife programmes. In this way it is possible to investigate the gendering of the television audience and the way that this is achieved through specific verbal and visual choices. They also examine the way that gender makes an effect on choices at the level of narration. Carmen Rosa Caldas-Coulthard, in 'Man in the news: the misrepresentation of women speaking in news-as-narrative discourse' examines the notion of accessed voices, that is, who is given voice within the news. She notices that women's voices are generally not represented both at the level of what is represented and at the level of whose speech is represented. This linguistic choice has profound effects on the audience and the evaluation of women in the public sphere. In 'Commonplaces: the woman in the street: text and image in the work of Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger', Helen Hills examines the way that the artists Kruger and Holzer play with representation practices in order to mount a critique of gender identity. Like the essays in the section on lesbian identity, Hills investigates the way that through irony and parody, women artists can attempt to undermine the representational practices within which they work. Both artists work explicitly with gender identity and both of them play with the juxtaposition of texts and images. Hills questions the assumption that their work is necessarily a simple and easy critique and considers the potential dangers of ambiguity.

These intersecting and interrogating approaches to the analysis of gender and language constitute an attempt to see the issue from outwith our disciplinary boundaries and to inform our theoretical perspectives with insights from other disciplines. In the process of reading this collection, it is hoped that the seemingly self-evident and unitary meanings of both terms 'language' and 'gender' will be destabilised, so that we have available to us a range of meanings and a range of areas of future research.

SECTION 1

**POSITION PAPERS: DIFFERENCE OR
DOMINANCE**

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*Language, gender and career*¹

Jennifer Coates

1 INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I want to argue that gender-differentiated language use may play a significant role in the continued marginalisation of women in the professions, particularly in terms of career progress and development. It is now widely accepted that women and men talk differently, that is, that women and men make differential use of the linguistic resources available to them (Thorne and Henley 1975; Thorne, Kramarae and Henley 1983; Coates 1986; Graddol and Swann 1989). There is a great deal of evidence to suggest that male speakers are socialised into a competitive style of discourse, while women are socialised into a more cooperative style of speech (Kalcik 1975; Aries 1976; Coates 1989, 1991, forthcoming). Maltz and Borker (1982), using an ethnographic approach, argue that same-sex play in childhood leads to girls and boys internalising different conversational rules, with boys developing adversarial speech, and girls developing a style characterised by collaboration and affiliation. Support for such a distinction comes from more psychologically oriented research on gender identity and moral development (Gilligan 1982; Gilligan *et al.* 1988) and on gender differences in epistemological development (Belenky *et al.* 1988), which characterises the feminine orientation as focussing on the relationship, on connection, and the masculine orientation as focussing on the self, on separateness.

In public life, it is the discourse patterns of male speakers, the dominant group in public life, which have become the established norm. The isomorphism of male discourse patterns and public discourse patterns is the result of the split between public and private spheres; it was at the beginning of the last century that the division

between public and private became highly demarcated in Britain. This demarcation involved the exclusion of women from the public world. In other words, in the early nineteenth-century, patterns of gender division changed: 'men were firmly placed in the newly defined public world of business, commerce and politics; women were placed in the private world of home and family' (Hall 1985: 12).

One significant consequence of the gendered nature of the public-private divide is that the discourse styles typical of, and considered appropriate for, activities in the public domain have been established by men. Thus women are linguistically at a double disadvantage when entering the public domain: first, they are (normally) less skilful at using the adversarial, information-focused style expected in such contexts; second, the (more cooperative) discourse styles which they *are* fluent in are negatively valued in such contexts.

As women start to enter the professions in greater numbers, there are calls for women to adapt to the linguistic norms of the public domain. A commentator writing in the *Independent* (20 December 1990) criticises women for not 'fighting back' in public debate; she argues: 'If women genuinely want to succeed in these [public] spheres, they can learn to hold their own. And learn they must if they wish to have a voice' (Daley 1990). The possibility that adversarial talk might not always be the most appropriate or effective does not cross this writer's mind; if women want to succeed in the public domain, then women will have to change. This view is endorsed by women who have themselves been successful in the public domain. In a forceful article in the *Daily Telegraph*, Mary Warnock (Mistress of Girton College and ex-chair of the Warnock Committee) is highly critical of women's behaviour on committees. 'I wonder whether women themselves realise quite how bad they can be as members of boards' (Warnock 1987). She lists what she sees as women's shortcomings, such as their proneness 'to think they are entitled to make fey, irrelevant, "concerned" interventions' and 'to disregard economic considerations for "human" ones'. She goes on:

If I were the chairman [*sic*] of a great company, I should be very chary indeed of having one of these old-style wreckers, non-conformists, exponents of the free flow of ideas, on my board. The days of the whimsical and the wayward are over. Addressing the chair is not a

stuffy man's rule to be disregarded by the charming lady-member, but part of the disciplined professionalism that makes the board or committee workable.

She urges women 'to adapt to what is required', implicitly accepting the male-dominated discourse patterns of conventional committee meetings.

Women who succeed in adopting a more competitive discourse style in public meet other problems. Jeanne Kirkpatrick, former US ambassador to the UN, describes the dilemma faced by women in high positions, where there is a clash between gender and work identities. 'There is a certain level of office the very occupancy of which constitutes a confrontation with conventional expectations . . . Terms like "tough" and "confrontational" express a certain general surprise and disapproval at the presence of a woman in arenas in which it is necessary to be – what for males would be considered – normally assertive' (Kirkpatrick, quoted in Campbell and Jerry 1988). In other words, women are in a double-bind: they are urged to adopt more assertive, more masculine styles of discourse in the public sphere, but when they do so, they are perceived as aggressive and confrontational.

In contrast with this, a different point of view is now starting to be heard, a point of view which emphasises the *positive* aspects of women's communicative style. There is space here for only three examples. A female environmental engineer working for the Bonneville Power Administration of Portland, Oregon, claims: 'As a woman, you can communicate in a different way which is helpful in a sphere usually analytical' (quoted in Barker 1988). Carol Tongue, talking about her work as MEP for London East, contrasts 'the friendly and supportive meetings of the women's committee' of the European Parliament with 'the all-male environment of industrial affairs', another committee she serves on (quoted in Lovenduski 1989). The writer Jill Hyems, interviewed for Channel 4 (*Ordinary People*, 6 February 1990) expressed a preference for working with female producers and directors 'because there are a lot of short cuts, one's speaking the same language'.

These conflicting views are indicative of the lack of consensus and the social confusion about women's role in the public arena. The long struggle to give women equal access to professions and to careers is now giving way to the struggle over whether women