

Gender in Discourse

Candace West, Michelle M. Lazar
and Cheri Kramarae

Do women and men use different languages? How does being a woman or a man affect the ways we are talked to and written about? And what is the relationship between the structure of a language and the use of that language by the women and men who speak it? Although interest in these questions goes back at least 100 years (see, for example, issues of *The Revolution*, a newspaper published in New York between 1868 and 1871), it was not until the 1970s that gender and discourse emerged as a recognized field of inquiry. The new wave of the Women's Movement stimulated unparalleled interest in relationships between gender and language among researchers around the world (Aebischer and Forel, 1983; Cameron, 1990a; 1992; Hellinger, 1985; Kramarae et al., 1983: 163–5; Roman et al., 1994; Spender, 1980; Thorne et al., 1983a: 8; Trömel-Plötz, 1982). It also led them to realize that most studies of discourse (for example, of text grammars, the semantics of coherence and the psychology of text processing) had not addressed gender at all.

Since the 1970s, the study of gender and discourse has achieved not only recognition as a full fledged field of inquiry but as one that is growing by leaps and bounds (compare, for example, Henley and Thorne's 1975 bibliography with Kramarae et al.'s 1983 bibliography – or with the results of a computerized search on the subject in a college library today). Interest in the topic crosses many disciplinary boundaries (such as those between anthropology, linguistics, literature, philosophy, psychology, sociology, speech communication and women's studies), and scholars use a wide variety of methods to study it (including ethnographic observations, laboratory experiments, survey questionnaires, philosophical exegeses and analyses of text and talk).

In this chapter, we provide a broad but selective introduction to research on gender and discourse. We focus especially on questions that excite scholars today, but we also attend to the political and sociohistorical contexts in which these questions developed. Our thesis is that gender is accomplished *in* discourse. As many feminist researchers have shown, that which we think of as 'womanly' or 'manly' behavior is not dictated by biology, but rather is socially constructed. And a fundamental domain in

which gender is constructed is language use. Social constructions of gender are not neutral, however; they are implicated in the institutionalized power relations of societies. In known contemporary societies, power relations are asymmetrical, such that women's interests are systematically subordinated to men's. The significance of power relations cannot be overemphasized, in as much as these 'determine who does what for whom, what we are [and] what we might become' (Weedon, 1987: 1).

We begin our discussion with the relationship between discourse and the construction of gender, noting the evolution of interest in this area from studies of gender and language. Next, we consider relations between gender and talk, drawing conclusions about how analyses of talk contribute to our understanding of relations between women and men in social life. Finally, we suggest directions for future research, including work on gender and electronic communications.

A word of caution is in order before we start. To date, much of the published research on gender and discourse focuses on white, middle-class heterosexuals speaking English in Western societies. While journals such as *Discourse & Society* are expanding the breadth of this focus and feminists are advancing new theoretical perspectives to encompass the diversity of women's experiences of subordination across the globe, the gaps in our knowledge are substantial. Moreover, few analytical frameworks treat differences among cultures, classes, sexual orientations and racial/ethnic categories as more enriching than divisive. By and large, *women* and *men* are treated as undifferentiated groups, and theories about them are based on empirical studies with a very limited scope. To highlight this problem and to avoid compounding it, we take the somewhat unusual step of specifying *which* women and men researchers actually focused on in the studies we review. Where we note that this information is noticeably absent, we suspect that the researchers are focusing on whites, heterosexuals, members of the middle class, English speakers, and Western societies.

Discourse and the Construction of Gender

Research on language and gender has grown alongside the broad field of discourse analysis. Since the late 1960s and early 1970s, researchers in both fields have recognized the central place of language in the organization of social action. While many other scholars have resisted the argument that language is deeply implicated in their data and in their lives, those who study language and gender consider the analysis of language practices as a central task in the study of human relationships. For them, power relations get articulated through language. Language does not merely reflect a pre-existing sexist world; instead, it actively constructs gender asymmetries within specific sociohistorical contexts.

Discourse analysts in general recognize that discourse is always embedded in a particular social context. For some scholars, this may mean

studying a society's mode of social stratification in relation to the language practices of its members. For those concerned with gender, this means addressing the relationship between gender inequality and the language practices of a society. For example, Ann Bodine (1990) observes that prescriptive grammarians instituted *he* and *man* as the 'correct' forms for gender-indefinite referents in English only at the end of the eighteenth century, after which these became purportedly 'generic' terms. But contemporary studies of language use (Cameron, 1992; Martyna, 1983; MacKay, 1983) illustrate just how specific masculine pronouns are to men, and many feminists are fighting for the currency of gender-neutral alternatives (such as singular *they* and *he* or *she*, and the use of *she* as a generic). Deborah Cameron (1992: 226), who adopts the generic use of *she*, emphasizes that *all* choices symbolize political alignments. Through our choice of particular language forms, we can either tacitly accept and thereby help perpetuate the status quo, or challenge and thereby help change it.

For example, consider the following extract from the preface to *Satow's Guide to Diplomatic Practice*, a compendium of protocol for diplomats among the British white upper classes:

We have been conscious that in the twentieth century for the first time in known history, diplomacy has become in many countries a profession open to both sexes. The English language has not yet provided a grammatically elegant way of dealing with this change. We have, therefore, used the compromise of occasionally employing the 'he (or she)' formula to show our absence of prejudice; but its constant repetition would be intolerably tedious, and for this edition, the male pronoun has had, once again, to serve both sexes. (Gore-Booth and Paenham, 1977: x)

While the authors claim an explicitly unbiased stand, their ultimate decision to use masculine pronouns nonetheless helps preserve the status quo.

Research on gender and language structure has demonstrated numerous ways that women are ignored, trivialized and deprecated by the words used to describe them (for an overview of these, see Thorne et al., 1983a). Women are denied an autonomous existence through titles that distinguish them on the basis of their marital status ('Mrs' vs 'Miss', 'Señora' vs 'Señorita', 'Madame' vs 'Mademoiselle'). Career choices for women and men are segregated through distinctive occupational terms (waiter vs waitress, actor vs actress, Congressman vs Congresswoman), with modifying markers (woman doctor) added to exceptions to the rule. And words associated with women tend to pejorate over time (for example, *woman* came to mean *mistress* or *paramour* in the nineteenth century, leading to the necessity for *lady* after that: see Lakoff, 1975; Schulz, 1975). Studies of such language practices show a broad pattern of sexism, in which women are conceived of as different from and unequal to men. But, since few of these studies focus on the systematic study of discourse *per se*, they do not offer much explanation of how this pattern comes about. Increasingly,

however, researchers are focusing on actual instances of text and talk, in an effort to understand the conditions under which this pattern is produced.

Socio-Economic Analysis

Some researchers focus on the social and economic contexts that are relevant to generating texts and talk. For example, Linda Christian-Smith (1989), who analyses the discourse of femininity in US romance novels,¹ situated her study in the conditions under which these texts are produced and consumed. In two US middle schools and one junior high school, she examined how teachers use novels for instructional purposes. She found that teachers' selection of romance novels for girls and adventures and mystery books for boys encouraged 'gendered' reading practices among their students. Through their sex-categorical selections, teachers confer their authority on the novels and endorse the normative images of femininity and masculinity the novels espouse. Christian-Smith argues that the depiction of girls, for example, as consumers in romance novels, prepares girls for future roles as wives and mothers and helps reproduce the traditional division of labor. By tying consumption to the home – a place where girls are shown making themselves beautiful for boys and engaging in household chores – romance novels depict young women as mere consumers of commodities, 'never as worker[s] and acknowledged producer[s] of those goods' (1989: 25).

Dorothy Smith (1988) notes that the discourse of femininity in Western women's magazines and television shows necessarily puts girls and women in the position of consumers, since the fashion, cosmetics and publishing industries speak to women in this position. Smith argues that the discourse of femininity in these media not only is embedded in economic and social relations, but also *constitutes* 'a set of relations', which arise in 'local, historical settings' (1988: 55). She notes that images of femininity in magazines like *Bazaar*, *Seventeen* and *Mademoiselle* become the locus of social interaction and activity among women, influencing what they talk about, how they shop, and how they 'work' on themselves to resemble the textual images they see. Smith points out that, until recently, media images of femininity were images of *white* femininity and beauty (for example, women with blue eyes and straight, smooth hair), which, by implication, defined Black women and, we would add, other women of color, as lacking. She further observes that, at any given historical time, a prevailing discourse of femininity coexists and intersects with a corresponding discourse of masculinity. So, for example, in Western societies, a woman's success in conforming to prevailing textual images of femininity is significant for her chances of attracting a heterosexual partner. Her looks determine whether a man can proudly display her in public and so establish his status with other men.

On the basis of her interviews with a group of Australian girls in their early teens,² Patricia Palmer Gillard (in Cranny-Francis and Gillard, 1990)

argues that girls are wont to make decisions about their own socio-economic futures based on the characterizations and actions of the women they see in television soap operas. As one of her interviewees put it, 'If it worked for her [a TV soap opera character], being a woman, it might work for me' (1990: 176). The problem, as Gillard points out, is that such programs depict women mainly as wives and mothers, thus offering girls a limited view of the options available to them as adults. Like the girls in Christian-Smith's (1989) study, Gillard's interviewees could see themselves as consumers of commodities but not as producers.

Such studies show how economic relations work together with other social relations in capitalist societies to define women and men in particular ways and to shape their identities and practices. Small wonder, then, that language practices within these societies define women primarily in terms of their marital status and perpetuate unequal occupational opportunities for women and men.

Content Analysis

Other studies examine the social construction of gender in the content of texts themselves. For example, Angela McRobbie (1982; see also Christian-Smith, 1989) adopts this approach in her analysis of picture stories in *Jackie*, a popular British magazine for adolescent girls. She found a specific repertoire of topics and images conveying the unambiguous message that romantic love is central to a girl's identity.³ The content of the picture stories idealized heterosexual romantic partnerships, ruled out other forms of relationships between girls and boys, eliminated the possibility of strong supportive relationships among girls themselves, and obscured the option of being single and happy. In a quest for love to endow their lives with meaning, girls were defined narrowly through their emotions: rivalry toward other girls, possessiveness, and blind devotion to their boyfriends. McRobbie argues that the 'code of romance' in these texts is fundamentally concerned with maintaining power relationships between girls and boys. It encourages girls to be unassertive and passive, and to simply wait for boys to take the initiative. Moreover, it renders romance a personal experience, dislocated in time and disembodied from the larger societal context.

Of course, a devil's advocate might argue that the causal relationship implicit in McRobbie's (1982) analysis should be reversed: for example, that it is hardly surprising to find such normative conceptions of appropriate manly and womanly behaviors in a magazine for adolescent girls, since that's what adolescent girls like to read. But researchers also find normative conceptions of gender in texts that purportedly have nothing to do with the sex-categorical preferences of their readers. For instance, Roger Fowler (1991) reports that British newspapers categorize women and men very differently through the noun phrases used to describe them. Men in general are more often described in terms of their occupational roles, while women are typically described in relation to their marital and family

responsibilities (for example, as 'wives' and 'mothers'). Paul Simpson's (1993) analysis, also of British newspaper extracts, shows further that it is not at all unusual to see noun phrases describing women *vis-à-vis* their relationships to men (for example, as 'spinster' or 'wife') but very unusual to see corresponding descriptions of men. Such findings suggest that the construction of gender inequality in the content of texts is very pervasive indeed.

Textual Analysis

Still other studies of discourse focus on how gender is constructed through the means of assembling texts, such as sentences, grammatical structures and genres. These studies are less concerned with the content of discourse than with its form. For example, moving beyond the level of words, Deborah Cameron (1990b: 16–18) addresses the sentence structure of British newspaper reports of violence against women. She argues that the historical conception of rape as a crime one man commits against another – robbing him of the chastity of a wife or daughter – is perpetuated in contemporary newspaper stories. Cameron's analysis of one such story in different newspaper reports shows that these reports depicted the man affected by the rape of his partner as the grammatical subject of main clauses, for example 'A man . . .' and 'A terrified 19-stone husband . ..'. By contrast, reports mentioned the woman who was raped at the ends of complex sentences and only described her in relation to the man, that is, as 'his wife'. The rape itself also appeared at the ends of sentences, only after descriptions of the man's personal injuries: 'A man who suffered head injuries when attacked by two men who broke into his home in Beckenham, Kent, early yesterday, was pinned down on the bed by intruders who took it in turns to rape his wife.' Through these means of assembling their ostensibly 'objective' reports, newspapers describe events from the point of view of the husband whose wife was raped – not the woman herself.

In a related study of rape reports (in the *Sun*, a British tabloid), Kate Clark (1992) observes that these texts tend to obscure the guilt of the rapist and transfer blame to the victim or someone else. For example, rape reports often use passive sentence structures that delete the rapist as the agent: 'Two of Steed's rape victims – aged 20 and 19 – had a screwdriver held at their throats as they were forced to submit' (1992: 215). They also use passive sentences that attribute responsibility for the rapist's actions to someone else: 'Sex killer John Steed was set on the path to evil by seeing his mother raped when he was a little boy' (1992: 216). They even describe the victim of rape in ways that might be read as 'excusing' the rapist, for example, as an 'unmarried mum' or a 'blonde divorcee' (1992: 211). Clark hypothesizes that, by manipulating blame in this manner, newspaper reports of rape suppress the question of why so many men assault women in the first place.

Textual analyses of the media reveal competing ways of representing social life, which work insidiously to maintain inequality between women and men. Michelle Lazar (1993) analyses a pair of Singapore government advertisements – one targeted at women, the other at men – promoting marriage between well-educated Asians. The ostensible purpose of these ads is to change the conservative attitudes of Asian men, who prefer not to marry their intellectual peers. Lazar (1993: 451–61) finds that, while parts of the texts appear to redress the issue of men's chauvinism and promote gender equality, the advertisements on the whole jointly reproduce the status quo. On the one hand, she notes, the advertisements achieve an egalitarian discourse by using 'real partner in life' to mean both 'spouse' and 'equality in relationship'. The ads appear to support women's career interests: 'It's wonderful to have a career and financial independence.' And, when speaking to men, they use complementary clauses to indicate a reciprocal relationship to women: 'someone you can be proud of (just as she's proud of you)'. On the other hand, the advertisements simultaneously present a sexist discourse. For example, they use 'but' – a disclaimer – to qualify their support of women's career interests: 'It's wonderful to have a career and financial independence. But is your self-sufficiency giving men a hard time?' They refer to women as 'girls' but not to men as 'boys'. Moreover, they blame women for men's chauvinistic impressions: 'Are you [women] giving men the wrong idea?' And they suggest, through the use of comparatives, that women must do something 'extra' to make themselves attractive to men: '[Be] more relaxed and approachable. Friendlier and more sociable.' Lazar shows that the juxtaposition of these contradictory discourses serves to subtly shift the origins of the problem and responsibility for change from men to women. It encourages women to readily adjust to men's expectations, despite the fact that the root of the problem and the remedy for the problem lie with men. Lazar concludes that this strategy is necessary to preserve Singapore's social system, in which (as in most societies) men hold more institutional power than women.

Textual analyses show the workings of power dynamics not only through the presence of particular textual markers, but also through their systematic absences. For instance, Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis (1991) examines elderly African-American women's experiences with sexism and racism by looking at what they don't say (in addition to what they do say) in the texts of their oral narratives. She finds that a key to understanding these texts lies in their characteristic silences, indirect responses, and deleted nouns and pronouns. Consider the missing pronouns (indicated by empty brackets) that would otherwise name the perpetrators of sexism and racism in the following narrative excerpts:

[Etter-Lewis, 1991: 428]

[] Told me they don't serve niggers here.

[Etter-Lewis, 1991: 431]

First it was the bus driver. [] Came to me and said

As Etter-Lewis observes, the deletion of the agents in these actions may render them less threatening, by making them appear less direct. For instance, one of the women she interviewed, while describing her experience of having been turned down for a university teaching position, avoided saying 'They didn't hire me' by falling silent (as indicated by the ellipsis):

[Etter-Lewis, 1991: 435]

And so they did not . . . they had

Etter-Lewis argues that the many silences and indirect references in these texts are not merely routine space holders or fillers; instead, they mark the suppression of criticism – a characteristic of the speech of people who are oppressed.

Textual analyses also show that particular genres (text-types) of discourse focus readers' or viewers' reading or viewing in specific ways. Like a wide-angle or 'zoom' lens on a camera, the genre determines what those who look through it will see and the angle from which they will see it. For example, Paul Thibault (1988) notes that, in women's magazines throughout Western societies, the genre of personal columns invites girls and women to petition 'experts' for advice on their sexual and emotional dilemmas. Simultaneously, it invites other girls and women to read both the pleas for advice and the responses to those pleas. This genre, says Thibault (1988: 205), serves to standardize and universalize women's behaviors and experiences in relation to dominant Western ideas about heterosexual relations. Cranny-Francis and Gillard (1990) agree, based on their study of Australian soap opera story lines. They find that, as in most Western narratives, the causal sequence of events in soap operas is premised on viewers' unproblematic acceptance of conservative ideologies about gender, race and class – ideologies which encourage viewers to take for granted that 'that's the way things are.' As they observe, soap operas typically portray characters and interpersonal relationships in 'contextless' fashion (1990: 184), thereby concealing the class conflicts, racial struggles, sexual ambiguities and sexist practices that occur in real life. In learning the conventions for viewing this genre, girls come to accept the ideologies it contains as unproblematic, and come to see soap opera characters and relationships as realistic models for planning their own futures (Cranny Francis and Gillard, 1990).

Coda

We have learned a great deal since researchers in the 1970s made their observations about gender and language structure. Beyond the broad pattern of sexism they documented – in which women are conceived of as different from and unequal to men – studies of discourse and the construction of gender have taught us much about the systematic ways this pattern is generated. From those who focus on the social and economic contexts of texts and talk, we have learned of the textual construction of

women as consumers, and men as producers, in capitalist Western societies. We have seen how women come to be defined in relation to their marital and familial roles, and how men come to be defined in relation to their occupational roles – as well as how these definitions influence the hopes and aspirations of those exposed to them. From those who study the content of discourse, we have been given a richly detailed picture of the normative conceptions of appropriate womanly and manly behaviors that pervade a variety of mass media, ranging from newspapers for the general public to magazines for adolescent girls. And from those who analyse the formal features of texts – sentences, grammatical structures and genres – we have developed a deep appreciation for the power of specific practices that allow us to ‘see’ the world as a gendered place.

Uniting these approaches is an unremitting emphasis on the context in which discourse is embedded. Socio-economic approaches point to the significance of social and economic relations in constructing the discourse of femininity and discourse of masculinity that will prevail at a particular historical moment. Content analyses illuminate the broad array of media that feature the same idealized versions of femininity and masculinity, and show how sex categories can be made to matter in the most mundane descriptions of social doings. Textual analyses push our understanding one step further, by exposing the mechanisms that provide us, the readers and viewers of texts, with our sense of ‘context’ in the first place. They show, for example, how the arrangement of building blocks such as nouns and verbs, the choice between voices such as active and passive, and the juxtapositioning of competing discourses, can construct a background – against which existing patterns of gender inequality seem ‘only natural’ to those who look at them.

To this point, we have been focusing on textual analyses of how women and men are talked about. Studies of the form of texts, the content of texts, and the conditions under which texts are produced show how women are described, depicted, categorized and evaluated as different from and unequal to men. But talk *about* women and men is only part of the picture: there is also the issue of how women and men talk. Below, we address this issue, beginning with a brief history of the origins of interest in it.

Gender and Talk

In the early 1970s, research on how women and men speak came to occupy center stage in the study of discourse and gender. A primary focus of this research was what made the talk of women different from the talk of men. In the United States, Robin Lakoff (1973; 1975) stimulated much of the interest in this question through her description of a distinctive ‘women’s language’ – a language that avoids direct and forceful statements, and relies on forms that convey hesitation and uncertainty. Although she based her description on her personal observations in a white, middle-class milieu,

her description was very influential. Because researchers prior to the early 1970s tended to treat men's talk as the standard, and sometimes did not even include women in their research projects, the notion that there might be differences between women's and men's talk was potentially revolutionary.

Initially, however, this notion had the impact of modifying old ideas, rather than transforming them. What it spawned was a wide ranging reassessment of existing linguistic knowledge to see what happened to it when women were included. Often, this involved inventories of differences between women and men across isolated linguistic variables such as pronunciation, vocabulary, or grammar (see Kramarae et al.'s 1983: 233-64 annotated bibliography). For example, women were thought to use more fillers (*you know, uhm*) than men (Hirschman, 1973); to employ intensifiers (*quite, so, such*) more often than men (Key, 1975); and to make more use of terms of endearment (*sweetie, dear, honey*) in a wider range of settings (Eble, 1972). Women's speech behaviors were compared to men's, to see what, if anything, distinguished the two.

Only two areas of consistent difference emerged from these efforts (Thorne et al., 1983a: 12-13). The first was the finding (McConnell-Ginet, 1978; Sachs, 1975) that women display more variability in pitch and intonation than men do. The second was the finding (Labov, 1972; Trudgill, 1975) that women use standard or prestige pronunciations more than men do, for instance, retaining the full /ing/ endings of verbs in English ('wanting', not 'wantin').

As in the case of most descriptive research, the purpose of these efforts was to document differences, not to explain them. In so far as earlier linguistic theory had rarely taken gender into account, one could not look to that source for answers. 'Sex differences'⁴ were not only the point of departure for many studies but also the explanation for any linguistic variations that were found. Currently, however, scholars are directing their efforts to understanding why differences appear, by inspecting more carefully the conditions under which they occur.

A Functional Approach to 'Sex Differences'

Some researchers are tackling the 'why' question through a *functional* approach to 'sex differences' in speech. Janet Holmes (1984; 1990) contends that the same linguistic form, such as a tag question, may serve a variety of functions, depending on the context of its use: to whom one is speaking, with what kind of intonation, the formality of the speech context and the type of discourse (for example, a discussion, argument or personal narrative) involved. Her quantitative analyses of carefully matched samples of middle-class women's and men's speech in New Zealand⁵ offer a much different picture than the one Lakoff hypothesized. For example, contrary to Lakoff's (1975: 16) claim that women use tag questions which undermine their own opinions by expressing uncertainty ('The way prices are

rising is horrendous, isn't it?'), Holmes (1990) finds that men employ many more such tags. By contrast, women use significantly more tag questions that fill a facilitative function for conversation, such as generating 'small talk' ('Sure is hot in here, isn't it?': Lakoff, 1975: 16).

Deborah Cameron, Fiona McAlinden and Kathy O'Leary (1988) take Holmes's (1990) functional approach one step further, contrasting distributions of women's and men's tag questions across different conversational roles and statuses. In their samples of conversation from the Survey of English Usage (based primarily on white, middle-class, southern London speakers), women use more facilitative tags than men do and men use more 'undermining' tags than women do. However, in their recordings of speech involving speakers in 'powerful' and 'powerless' speaking roles (for example, doctor *vis-à-vis* caller on a medical phone-in show), the pattern is very different. Among those in 'powerful' roles, both women and men use facilitative tags to generate talk from other participants; among those in 'powerless' roles, neither women nor men employ facilitative forms, relying exclusively on tags that seek reassurance for their opinions. The authors conclude that 'the patterning of particular linguistic forms may be illuminated by . . . a number of variables, not just gender' (Cameron et al., 1988: 91).

Another approach to explaining 'sex differences' is a thoroughgoing rethinking of the methods that have been used to assess them. Cameron (1988) observes that, traditionally, sociolinguistics has meant the quantitative study of correlations between linguistic and social variables.⁶ As she points out, quantitative methods of gathering data and analysing them are often designed for the study of men's speech and are not necessarily the best means of studying women's. Moreover, sex stereotypes have pervaded researchers' explanations for differences that are found. For example, one widely respected explanation for women's use of more standard linguistic forms is the idea that women are more status conscious than men (Cameron and Coates, 1988, citing Labov, 1972 in the United States, and Trudgill, 1975 in the United Kingdom). From this perspective, women attempt to gain status through their speech patterns because society holds them to a more exacting standard of behavior than men while denying them opportunities to gain status through alternative means. But this explanation rests on stereotyped and culturally specific assumptions about the family as the primary unit of social stratification, including the notion that women's status comes primarily from their husbands' or fathers' occupations (Cameron and Coates, 1988). As Patricia Nichols (1983) demonstrates, differing economic conditions can produce dramatic differences among women with respect to the general pattern. Nichols's fieldwork on the use of Gullah (a 'low prestige' variety of English) and 'standard' American English among Black speakers in South Carolina shows that local labor market conditions are the key to speakers' linguistic choices. Older mainland women, with few job opportunities beyond domestic and agricultural work, rely heavily on Gullah –

which serves them well in their intracommunity contacts with other Gullah speakers. Younger mainland women, with new job opportunities in the service sector, show a dramatic shift toward English – a requirement for communicating with the white world outside their local community. The moral of the story is that ‘women are not a homogeneous group, they do not always and everywhere behave in similar ways and their behaviour cannot be explained in global, undifferentiated terms’ (Cameron and Coates, 1988: 23).

Women's and Men's Styles of Talk

Some scholars have abandoned the quantitative paradigm altogether, focusing instead on women's and men's styles of talk within distinctive speech communities. For example, drawing on John Gumperz's (1982) work on difficulties in communication between members of different ethnic groups, Daniel Maltz and Ruth Borker (1982; see also Tannen, 1982; 1990) argue that observed differences in the talk of US women and men arise from the distinctive norms, conceptions and interpretations of friendly conversation they learn in segregated subcultures (that is, girls' and boys' peer groups). The subculture of girls, they say, stresses cooperativeness and equality; thus, it would encourage the patterns of ‘active listening’ (including precisely timed insertions of ‘um-hmm’ and ‘uh-huh’) that Fishman (1978) observes in the talk of adult women. But the subculture of boys puts the emphasis on dominance and competition, say Maltz and Borker; thus, it would promote the patterns of interruption (violation of a current speaker's turn) that Zimmerman and West (1975) observe in the talk of adult men. And while girls learn to talk their ways around ‘best friend’ relationships and situations, boys learn to speak in ways that gain them positions in social hierarchies. Thus, by the time they grow up, women and men are likely to operate on the basis of differing conversational norms – resulting not only in ‘sex differences’, but also cases of miscommunication between them. Maltz and Borker (1982) advance no systematic evidence for their argument (basing their claims on personal observations and reinterpretations of existing research findings), but other researchers do. For example, Jennifer Coates (1988) finds considerable evidence of women's cooperativeness in conversations that took place over nine months in a women's support group (obviously, a likely site for verbal cooperativeness) in the United Kingdom.⁷ Members of the group built progressively on one another's contributions to talk, arriving consensually at a joint definition of the situation. They employed monitoring responses (such as ‘mm’ and ‘yeah’: see discussions of these in Fishman, 1978; Zimmerman and West, 1975) to indicate active listening and support for the current speaker, and often spoke simultaneously to collaborate in the production of joint utterances. Coates suggests that ‘the way women negotiate talk symbolizes . . . mutual support and cooperation: conversationalists understand that they have rights as speakers and also

duties as listeners; the joint working out of a group point of view takes precedence over individual assertions' (1988: 120).

Many scholars have criticized the speech-styles approach, particularly for its neglect of questions concerning power and control (for example, Henley and Kramarae, 1991; Trömel-Plötz, 1991; West, 1995). As Trömel-Plötz points out, the fundamental assumption of this approach, that girls and boys grow up in separate subcultures, is extremely problematic: 'Girls and boys, women and men . . . live together in shared linguistic worlds, be it in the family, in schoolrooms, in the streets, in colleges, in jobs; they are probably spending more time in mixed-sex contexts than in single-sex contexts, and, above all, they are not victims of constant misunderstandings' (1991: 490). She contends that, by interpreting observed asymmetries in conversation as the result of subcultural misunderstandings, those who adopt a speech-styles approach trivialize women's experiences of injustice and conversational dominance: see, for example, Tannen's discussion of patterned asymmetries in interruptions between women and men (reported by West and Zimmerman, 1977), which she describes as 'a matter of individual perceptions of rights and obligations, as they grow out of individual habits and expectations' (1990: 192).

Some researchers advance a more nuanced version of the speech-styles approach, moving beyond the idea of gender subcultures. For example, Elinor Ochs (1993) argues that the issue is not so much the particular forms women use (such as tag questions) but the specific pragmatic work these forms can accomplish (such as demonstrating a speaker's stance) *and* the norms associated with the distribution of this work between women and men. Thus, 'sex differences' in talk result from habitual differences between women and men in the pragmatic work they must do – a way of mapping or *indexing* gender. Penelope Brown (1980) contends that, among Tenejapan women, members of a Mayan Indian community she studied in Mexico, the use of 'polite' linguistic forms, such as rhetorical questions, in amicable situations displays deference to others' feelings as well as consciousness of one's own position within the social structure. However, when these women find themselves in hostile confrontations (such as occur in a courtroom), 'this stance is evoked, but from a distance, ironically, in the sarcastic politeness of hostile pseudo-agreement' (1994: 336). Brown concludes that such sarcastic politeness is a means of gender indexing: 'Even when women are not being polite, characteristic female strategies of indirectness and politeness are manifested in their speech' (1994: 336).

Gender and Talk-In-Interaction

A third major approach to explaining 'sex differences' in talk is one that takes the context of interaction as its starting point. While many forms of discourse involve mediated relationships among participants (for example, the printed page that intervenes between writers and readers or the electronic screen that stands between senders and receivers), talk generally

does not. For researchers who study talk-in-interaction, this fact has three important implications: people talk (1) in real time, (2) on a turn-by-turn basis, and (3) typically (though not always) face to face in the same social situation. Talk is thus a form of situated social action, and:

The human tendency to use signs and symbols means that evidence of social worth and evaluation will be conveyed by very minor things, and these things will be witnessed, as will the fact that they have been witnessed. An unguarded glance, a momentary change in tone of voice, an ecological position taken or not taken can drench talk with judgmental significance. (Goffman, 1967: 33)

The significance of this for the study of 'sex differences' is that the meaning of any linguistic variation cannot be determined outside the interactional context in which it occurs. For example, Marjorie Goodwin's (1990) research on the talk of African-American, working-class boys and girls at play in a city neighborhood indicates that girls and boys tend to coordinate their activities in dramatically different ways. In organizing tasks such as making slingshots, boys use directives – 'utterances designed to get someone else to do something' (1990: 65) – that emphasize differences between themselves and the other boys they play with.⁸

[Goodwin, 1990: 103–4]

- (48) Malcolm: *All right. Gimme some rubber bands.*
 Chopper: *((giving rubber bands)) Oh.*
- (49) Malcolm: PL: IERS. I WANT THE PLIERS! (0.6)
 Man y'all gonna have to get y'all own
 wire cutters [if this the way 'y'all gonna be.
 Pete: [Okay. Okay.
- (50) *Regarding coat hanging wire*
 Malcolm: Give it to me man. Where's yours at.
 Throw that piece of shit out.
 Chopper: *((gives Malcolm his cut-off piece of hanger))*

Above, Malcolm advances his directives as imperatives, with syntax that stress the distinctions between himself ('me') and his addressees (Chopper and Pete). Goodwin notes that the purpose of such directives is evident from both their form (as imperatives) and their context (for example, in the stretch of talk where Malcolm orders Chopper to throw out 'that piece of shit'). Through these means, boys organize their play hierarchically, developing asymmetrical arrangements between their playmates and themselves.

By contrast, girls employ directives that minimize differences among playmates:

[Goodwin, 1990: 110]

- (3) *Girls are looking for bottles.*
 Martha: Let's go around Subs and Suds.
 Bea: Let's ask her 'Do you have any bottles.'

(4) *Talking about bottles girls are picking out of the trash can*

Kerry: Hey y'all. Let's use these first and then come back and get the rest cuz it's too many of 'em.

Above, Martha, Bea and Kerry organize their plans (to make rings from bottle rims) as a series of proposals, employing 'Let's' to invite one another's collaboration. Often, they downgrade their directives even further, modifying them with words like 'can', 'could' and 'maybe' (for example, 'We could go around lookin for more bottles': 1990: 111).

From a 'sex differences' perspective, Goodwin's (1990) results might be taken as an indication of what girls and boys 'are like' in this society: girls are more polite and boys, more aggressive. From a speech-styles perspective, these results might be seen to reflect the distinctive conversational norms of girls and boys (and subsequently, women and men): boys gain status 'by telling others what to do and resisting being told what to do' while girls 'formulate requests as proposals rather than orders to make it easy for others to express other preferences without provoking a confrontation' (Tannen, 1990: 154). But note that, although Goodwin's analysis focuses on the impact of alternative directive forms in the contexts of their use, sex differences and speech-styles perspectives imply that the differences she observes arise from fundamental differences in what girls and boys know how to do – as a consequence of either 'what they are like' or what they have learned (West, 1995). Goodwin's evidence indicates that neither of these interpretations is correct. For instance, when girls deal with infractions, negotiate the roles of teacher or mother, or get in arguments, they show considerable skill in the use of imperatives:

[Goodwin, 1990: 119]

(40) *Ruby bounces on top of Bea.*

Bea: Ouch girl. Stop. That hurt!

(41) *Ruby is sitting on top of Kerry.*

Kerry: Get off Ruby.

Moreover, they use imperatives with boys, as well as with other girls:

[Goodwin, 1990: 119]

(37) *Boy steps on Ruby's lawn.*

Ruby: Get out the way offa that-get off that lawn!

(39) Chopper: Get outa here you wench.

You better get outa here.

Bea: No! You don't tell me to get out.

Thus, Goodwin concludes that girls' preferences for downgraded directives in their play groups do not derive from their greater politeness or distinctive style. Rather, they result from 'systematic procedures through which a particular type of social organization can be created' (1990: 137).

Why would speakers use systematic procedures to create distinctive types of social organization? Candace West and Angela Garcia's (West and Garcia, 1988; West, 1992) analysis of conversational 'shift work' suggests a plausible answer to this question. West and Garcia examined conversations between white, middle-class, US college students who met for the first time in a laboratory setting. They observed that women and men worked collaboratively to produce the majority of topic transitions: both speakers demonstrated, turn by turn, that they had nothing further to say about one topic-in-progress prior to initiating another. However, men initiated *all* of the apparently unilateral topic changes, and they did so in the vicinity of particular kinds of 'tellables'. For example, a woman's explanation of the relationship between her academic major and her plans for law school (perhaps an unwomanly aspiration) was cut off mid-utterance; a woman's discussion of her feelings about being 'too close' to family members (arguably, an unmanly course of talk) never took place; and, as we see below, a woman's assessment of herself as 'really an irrational person sometimes' met with no disagreement:

[West and Garcia, 1988: 566]

- Andy: There's discuss::ion an': short- .h There's ya' know,
written an' oral exams frequently. Er (.) once in awhile
at least.
- Beth: Yeah, I'd like to take uh- something like Hist'ry (of)
Philosophy 'r something where you don' afta do any of that
kinda-
(1.0)
- Beth: I don't thINK that way,
(0.6)
- Beth: I'm not that logical.
(0.4)
- Beth: Yuh know they go step by step.
(1.2)
- Beth: 'N I just- (0.5) I'm REally an irRational person sometimes.
(.) So
(0.6)
- Andy: Where do you li:ve in Eye Vee?

In interpreting these results, West and Garcia (1988) do not simply argue that women pursue certain courses of conversational activity, such as describing their feelings, which men prefer to avoid. Instead, they contend that women's pursuit of these activities and men's curtailment of them both draw on and demonstrate what it is to be a woman or a man in these contexts. They note:

Whenever people face issues of allocation – who is to do what, get what, plan or execute action, direct or be directed – incumbency in significant social categories such as 'female and male' seems to become pointedly relevant. How such issues

are resolved conditions the exhibition, dramatization or celebration of one's 'essential nature' as a woman or man. (West and Zimmerman, 1987: 143; cited in West and Garcia, 1988: 551)

In other words, what men accomplish through their unilateral topic changes is the then-and-there determination of which activities will be pursued and which tellables will be told. Simultaneously, *both* men and women demonstrate their accountability to normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for their respective sex categories. Thus, given a cultural conception of supportiveness as an essential part of womanly 'nature', evidence of such a nature can be found in women's collaborative efforts to introduce and develop potential tellables. By contrast, given a cultural conception of control as an essential part of manly nature, evidence of it can be found in men's unilateral shifts from one set of tellables to another (West, 1992: 378).

Coda

We have come a long way since Robin Lakoff's (1973; 1975) initial claims about a distinctive 'women's language'. From those who take a functional approach to gender and talk, we have been given a much more systematic picture of the distribution of 'sex differences', and the various expressive functions these may serve. From those who focus on women's and men's styles of talk, we have been given a rich understanding of what goes on in talk *among* women and talk *among* men, and thus, of how 'sex differences' in communicative styles can reflect the distinctive kinds of pragmatic work women and men do. And, from those who study talk-in-interaction, we have developed a profound appreciation of the fact that the local context of any particular 'sex difference' in talk may well determine its status *as* a 'sex difference' in talk.

One thing that distinguishes these three perspectives is how they attend to the question of context. 'Functional' researchers tend to take 'a variable approach' to this question, assessing attributes of linguistic variables and social variables *across* particular populations. For these researchers, 'context' is a matter of deciding which variables (gender, status of participants, etc.) will be included in the analysis, given what we already know about those variables and the relationships among them. Those who focus on communicative styles look at linguistic variations *within* particular populations, and within the social context in which such variations occur. Hence, these researchers take elements of the social context into account (such as the setting, the situation) in so far as they seem relevant to the members of the particular communities they are interested in. For those who study talk-in-interaction, the temporal and sequential context of talk is most important: '[It] supplies the ground on which the whole edifice of action is built (by participants) in the first instance, and to which it is adapted "from the ground up", so to speak' (Schegloff, 1992: 125). As a

consequence of these differing approaches to context, 'sex differences' in talk are explained as characteristics of particular populations (for example, women and men), as products of the distinctive conversational norms within speech communities (for example, girls' and boys' peer groups) or as situated accomplishments (for example, the demonstration of womanly and manly 'natures').

Clearly, another thing that distinguishes these approaches is how they conceptualize gender. For example, those who take a functional approach think of gender as inherent to the individual. From this perspective, gender can be treated as an independent variable, whose effects can be assessed on dependent variables. Those who take a stylistic approach to 'sex differences' conceive of gender as a role – one that is contingent on the individual's social structural position and the expectations associated with that position. From this vantage point, the emphasis is on how the roles that generate 'sex differences' in talk are learned and enacted. Both conceptualizations have been subject to considerable criticism in recent years. For example, conceiving of gender as an individual characteristic makes it hard to see how it can structure distinctive domains of social life (Stacey and Thorne, 1985). 'Sex differences' are still the explanation (as in many early studies of isolated linguistic variables) rather than the analytic point of departure. Conceiving of gender as made up of the 'male role' and the 'female role' implies a 'separate but equal' relationship between the two, obscuring dynamics of power and inequality (Thorne, 1980). The concept of 'sex roles' does not explain 'whose version of the communication situation will prevail; whose speech style will be seen as normal [and] who will be required to learn the communication style, and interpret the meaning, of the other' (Henley and Kramarae, 1991: 19; see also Trömel-Plötz, 1991).

By contrast, those who study talk-in-interaction see gender as 'a routine, methodical and recurring accomplishment' (West and Zimmerman, 1987: 126). From this perspective, the emphasis shifts from matters internal to the individual and focuses instead on interactional and, in the end, institutional arenas. Rather than as a property of individuals, these analysts view gender as an emergent feature of social situations: both an outcome of and a rationale for various social situations – and a means of legitimating one of the most fundamental divisions of society.

Directions for Future Research

As Barrie Thorne, Cheri Kramarae and Nancy Henley (1983a: 16) point out, 'Overviews necessarily look backwards, patterning and joining work that has already been done.' Previews, by contrast, look forward, searching for work still left to do. In concluding this overview of research on gender and discourse, we offer a preview of sorts, assessing the implications of existing work for studies yet to be done.

One implication of existing research is that much of what we 'know' about gender and discourse is really about white, middle-class, heterosexual women and men using English in Western societies. Studies like Etter-Lewis's (1991), Goodwin's (1990), Lazar's (1993) and Nichols's (1983) are the exceptions, rather than the rule. Much more work remains to be done addressing the possibility of considerable diversity in relations between gender and discourse around the world.

A second implication of existing research is that we must remain flexible about our theoretical frameworks and methods of data collection and analysis. Just as methods designed for the study of men's speech may not necessarily be the best means of studying women's (Cameron, 1988), so too, methods designed for the study of white, middle-class English discourse may not be the best means of studying anything else. In particular, we must take care to avoid reducing culture, class, race, and ethnicity to the status of mere variables, to be 'added' to what we already know in mechanical fashion (see West and Fenstermaker, 1995: 8-14).

A third implication of existing research is that we need to pay far more systematic attention to silence. As Etter-Lewis (1991) demonstrates, we can learn a great deal about people's experiences of subordination by looking at what they don't say in addition to what they do say. Silence is a relatively neglected dimension of inquiry into what's 'there' in discourse - as is an emphasis on readers rather than writers of texts and hearers rather than speakers of talk. Moreover, silence can mean different things in different situations, to different women and men in different cultures.

A fourth implication of existing research is that we need to know more about the potential of texts and talk to convey multiple meanings. For example, Lazar's (1993) analysis of governmental double talk about gender equality in Singapore shows that texts can appear to promote equality between women and men while simultaneously conveying sexist messages. Further research on the interaction of multiple meanings in texts and talk (and on the relationship between different modes, such as words and images) could help us understand much more about how discourse reproduces institutionalized power relations between women and men in different societies.

Finally, we note that electronic communications pose new challenges for existing analyses of gender and discourse. Use of the Internet, the global electronic network of computers, is accelerating in Western countries that already have highly developed telephone networks. In many countries without extensive or reliable telephone lines, educators and government officials are using satellites and relatively inexpensive computers to make the Internet accessible to millions more. This network is likely to dramatically alter the ways people in many businesses and institutions establish and maintain relationships, and it will certainly change the way we conduct and publish research. Preliminary work indicates that, just as we are developing the tools needed to study them, traditional power relations between women and men are being quickly established in cyberspace.

Gender Inequality in Cyberspace

Asymmetry in the use and control of the Internet (of current users, an estimated 85 percent to 90 percent are boys and men: Taylor et al., 1993) means that we are witnessing the growth of a system (arguably, the most important social and educational network of our time) in which boys and men are developing and administering the rules of conduct. Even in contexts where women are the purported authorities, for example, in an electronic discussion group focused on issues of concern to women, men appear to be in control: they make up 63 percent of the participants, their messages receive more responses than women's, and their interests dominate discussions. Thus, while the Internet has the potential for facilitating interaction across time and space, it seems to be emerging as a men's forum (Ebben, 1994). Future research might address the question of how exactly this is happening.

Electronic harassment and stalking of girls and women using the Internet is common, and the distribution of pornographic visuals and messages is increasing, as are the numbers of racist and ethnocentric 'jokes' circulating there (Kramarae and Kramer, 1995). In interactive 'communities' on the Internet, many women confess that, to avoid harassment, they often present themselves as men (in name and manner) and refrain from expressing their opinions (Balsamo, 1994). Some men electronically present themselves as women, in order to see what it feels like and get the increased attention they think women receive. What are the mechanisms for displaying oneself as a man or a woman under circumstances like these?

Many women report a general hostility on the Internet (see, for example, Hawisher and Sullivan, in press) that is difficult to document with existing research measures – since many of the features that mark inequality in face-to-face interaction are not readily visible in electronic exchanges. For example, participants in most electronic discussions are free from concerns about securing speaking turns and forestalling interruptions because their contributions are typed in isolation, seemingly at whatever speed and length they desire. This has led some researchers (for example, Herring, 1994) to explore electronic 'indices' of hostility (such as numbers of postings, assertions, instances of name-calling, personal insults, and remarks repeated out of context) and politeness (such as comments that praise others, hedges and apologies) in men's and women's electronic messages. However, the most important lesson we have learned from existing research offers a promising new direction for such efforts: to the extent that categories such as 'woman' and 'man' are accessible through the Internet, and to the extent these categories are omnirelevant to social action (Garfinkel, 1967: 118), they provide users with an ever-available resource for interpreting, explaining and justifying actions as 'womanly' or 'manly' behaviors. Rather than seeking new measures of 'manly' and 'womanly' behaviors, we hope that future studies will address the situated accomplishment of gender – in the discourse of cyberspace, as well as the discourse of everyday life.

Recommended Reading

Cameron (1990a)
 Coates and Cameron (1988)
 Goodwin (1990)
 Graddol and Swann (1989)
 Henley (1995)
 Holmes (1984)
 Houston and Kramarae (1991)
 Roman et al. (1994)
 Thorne et al. (1983a)
 Thorne et al. (1983b)
 Trömel-Plötz (1982)
 West (1995)

Notes

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1 Christian-Smith (1989) reports that suburban white girls, 12 to 15 years of age, are the primary readers of these novels, with Black girls and Latinas comprising a much smaller proportion of readers.

2 Gillard does not specify the class backgrounds or racial/ethnic identities of these Australian girls.

3 McRobbie (1982: 265) notes that *Jackie*, like many magazines produced for adolescent girls, addresses 'girls' as a monolithic group, obscuring important differences among girls, such as class background and racial/ethnic identity.

4 We use quotation marks around this prevailing terminology, because it collapses *sex* (an assignment based on physiological evidence, such as hormones, chromosomes and anatomy) and *gender* (a social accomplishment).

5 Holmes (1990) does not provide a description of the racial/ethnic identities of those in her samples.

6 Aki Uchida (1992) argues that the correlational approach still prevails in many sociolinguistics studies today.

7 Coates does not describe the class backgrounds or racial/ethnic identities of the women in this group, although she identifies speakers in two conversations as white and middle class (1988: 122, n. 4).

8 Transcribing conventions used in the text are presented in the Appendix to this volume.

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