

Feminist Linguistic Research on the Question of Male/Female Deference in their Linguistic Behaviour (Review of the Book Edited by Mary Eagleton: *A Concise Companion to Feminist Theory*)

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ABSTRACT— *In this paper, I examine the complex relationship between gender and language, so that the common-sense nature of each of the terms and their relation to each other are troubled. I also analyse the way in which stereotypes of femininity play a major role in informing our beliefs about women, men and language and I suggest how we can consider the relationship between language, gender and other variables more productively. My first task, though, is to provide some detail about what this is taken to entail. There are, of course, important differences among feminists who have written on this topic, and in the course of the discussion I will highlight some of these. I certainly do not want to suggest that what I am assessing is a single position, nor am I claiming to represent the basis on which most feminists actually do research. My main concern here is solely with feminist writing about the question of male dominance and female reference in conversation.*

Keywords — gender, language, femininity, stereotypes.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last several decades, feminist scholars have become increasingly more reflective with regard to the research process: in addition to undertaking studies related to women and gender, they have offered numerous perspectives on the nature of feminist research itself. Feminist language research in the 1970s focused on the question of male dominance and female deference in conversation (Lakoff, R. 1975; Spender 1980). It criticized both the social system, which it “viewed as patriarchal and as forcing women to speak in a subservient way, and also individual males who were seen to violate the rights of their female interlocutors (Eagleton, 2003: 133).”

2. FEMINIST LANGUAGE RESEARCH

Robin Lakoff’s polemical analysis of what she considered to be female language patterns was one of the first feminist linguistic analyses that made a clear connection between the social and political oppression of women as a group and their linguistic behaviour. This subordinated status was displayed in the language patterns which she describes as ‘talking like a lady’ (Lakoff, R. 1975: 10). She gives, as an example, two statements which, she suggests, characterize the difference between women’s subordinated language and men’s dominant language:

1 Oh dear, you’ve put the peanut butter in the refrigerator again.

2 Shit, you’ve put the peanut butter in the refrigerator again. (Lakoff, R. 1975: 10)

The first, Lakoff asserts, is women’s language and the second is men’s language; this distinction is made primarily on the basis of perceptions that (1) is more polite than (2) because of the ‘softer’ expletive which mitigates the force of the utterance and therefore is less of a challenge to the interlocutor’s face. Lakoff makes a connection between seemingly stronger expletives and stronger positions in relation to power. As she argues:

[I]f someone is allowed to show emotions, and consequently does, others may well view him as a real individual in his own right, as they could not if he never showed emotion [...] the behaviour a woman learns as ‘correct’ prevents her from being taken seriously as an individual, and further is considered ‘correct’ and necessary for a woman precisely because society does not consider her seriously as an individual. (1975: 11)

Thus, within the work of early feminist linguistic theorists like Lakoff, femininity and femaleness are elided and powerlessness is seen as a major factor in the constitution of femininity. Lakoff and also Dale Spender (1980) argued that

women's language style was characterized by the use of elements which signalled subordination. These features consist of: mitigating statements, hedges, tag questions and elements which signal indirectness, tentativeness, diffidence and hesitation. In contrast to this, male speech was characterized as direct, forceful and confident, using features such as interruption. As a polemic, this early feminist research was extremely important, since it challenged the assumption that certain males were sanctioned to act linguistically in ways which could disadvantage women and it made those linguistic acts seem less 'natural' or 'common sense'. Many women also questioned their own deferent linguistic behaviour as 'natural', as just part of being a woman. Thus, this „consciousness-raising research, which was very widely read by people outside academic circles, made a major impact on many women, forcing them to reflect on language use as an indicator of power relations and, indeed, encouraging them to make metalinguistic comments on language use (Eagleton, 2003: 133). Perhaps one of the most important aspects of this work is that women felt that they could comment on an interruption by a male interlocutor and, rather than dismissing such behaviour as solely due to the particular chauvinism of that individual, they could relate it to wider societal structures which made available to men privileged positions which it did not provide for women.

However, critics have noted that this type of analysis seemed to be focused on the stereotypical language usage of a very small group of women, that is middle-class, white Anglo-Americans. It was not based on the examination of any data but rather on personal anecdotes which seemed to uphold a stereotype of submissive women, without any counter-examples being considered. In the 1980s and 1990s many feminist linguists, such as Deborah Tannen and Jennifer Coates, rather than analysing dominance, as such, since it was clear that the nature of power relations between women and men were being fundamentally changed at this time, turned to an analysis of the socially constructed differences between women and men's language. They saw these differences as akin to dialects spoken by different groups, rather than seeing them as indicating dominant and dominated groups (Coates and Cameron 1988; Tannen 1991; Coates 1996). This female and male linguistic difference, Tannen argued, developed because women and men are largely socialized in single-sex groups where they develop different language preferences and styles. Women and men have different aims in conversation which lead to breakdowns in communication or misunderstandings. This is because women are concerned, in the main, to establish rapport between members of a group and to ensure that conversations go smoothly (rapport talk), whilst men are concerned to establish their place in the pecking order and use the production of information as a tool to move up the hierarchy (report talk). Although Tannen claims that men can also do 'rapport talk' and women may do 'report talk', she argues that generally such is not the case. Moreover, she believes, use of these diametrically opposed styles is what leads to misunderstanding between men and women. This focus on difference has been widely criticized by Troemel-Ploetz (1998) and Cameron (1998a) for its reactionary political stance and for its failure to acknowledge the inequality that persists in many relations between women and men. Furthermore, Troemel-Ploetz argues that women and men do not, in fact, grow up in homogeneous and separate linguistic communities but actually spend a great deal of their time in mixed-sex environments, whether in the school, the home or at work. What Troemel-Ploetz is most concerned about is the erasure of the factor of power difference in the analysis of interaction by a male interlocutor and, rather than dismissing such behaviour as solely due to the particular chauvinism of that individual, they could relate it to wider societal structures which made available to men privileged positions which it did not provide for women. However, critics have noted that this type of analysis seemed to be focused on the stereotypical language usage of a very small group of women, that is middle-class, white Anglo-Americans. It was not based on the examination of any data but rather on personal anecdotes which seemed to uphold a stereotype of submissive women, without any counter-examples being considered. In the 1980s and 1990s many feminist linguists, such as Deborah Tannen and Jennifer Coates, rather than analysing dominance, as such, since it was clear that the nature of power relations between women and men were being fundamentally changed at this time, turned to an analysis of the socially constructed differences between women and men's language. They saw these differences as akin to dialects spoken by different groups, rather than seeing them as indicating dominant and dominated groups (Coates and Cameron 1988; Tannen 1991; Coates 1996). This female and male linguistic difference, Tannen argued, developed because women and men are largely socialized in single-sex groups where they develop different language preferences and styles. Women and men have different aims in conversation which lead to breakdowns in communication or misunderstandings. This is because women are concerned, in the main, to establish rapport between members of a group and to ensure that conversations go smoothly (rapport talk), whilst men are concerned to establish their place in the pecking order and use the production of information as a tool to move up the hierarchy (report talk). Although Tannen claims that men can also do 'rapport talk' and women may do 'report talk', she argues that generally such is not the case. Moreover, she believes, use of these diametrically opposed styles is what leads to misunderstanding between men and women.

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trend. Cameron goes further than Troemel-Ploetz in critiquing Tannen's work in particular, since she argues that 'power relations are *constitutive* of gender differentiation as we know it' (Cameron 1998a: 438).

The positive aspects of the 'difference' type of feminist analysis is that it generally calls for a re-evaluation of the styles that are associated with women; thus, Coates (1996) argues that we should revalue what has been classified as gossip and cooperative strategies/rapport talk, in general, and Holmes (1995) argues that what she claims are women's styles of politeness are, in fact, more productive for debating issues than masculine styles of speech. This re-evaluation of women's speech styles has made an important impact in certain areas. For example, in the evaluation of oral performance in secondary schools in Britain, it is generally those aspects of speech associated with 'feminine' speech styles (rapport/cooperative talk) that are most highly evaluated. This would include supportive comments, minimal responses, concern for others in the group and so on. This is a significant shift from other ways of assessing oral performance which are more concerned to evaluate aspects such as rhetorical skill and confidence.

Cameron has suggested that the view that women are more cooperative than men, that their language is concerned with establishing rapport rather than with dispensing information, based as it is on stereotypes of women's speech, has also led to the widespread employment of women in the communications industries, such as call centres (Cameron 2000; Walsh 2001). The so-called 'feminine' skills of communication, however, are not highly valued and workers in call-centres generally receive low salaries.

Thus, whilst this process of re-evaluation of what has been considered to characterize women's speech has been of great value, it cannot make up for the fact that, in general, the shift in the way that women really speak and are evaluated when they speak has been in the direction of women adopting wholesale what are seen to be masculine ways of speaking in the public sphere (and sometimes being negatively evaluated for using this type of language). Thus, assertiveness-training programmes developed for women in the 1980s and 1990s often focused on changing language styles so that, instead of displaying deference and indecision, the woman speaker projects a confident image of herself through her language. There are obviously problems with the type of language advocated for women in some of these programmes since it relies on a number of systematized routines, as Cameron has noted, but as a strategic intervention which enables women in the public and private spheres to assert themselves linguistically, it is clear that such training has a particular value (Cameron 1995).

However, the assumption behind these programmes is that masculine speech is the appropriate form of expression in the public sphere. Despite the value of this early focus on women and men as different speech communities, Bing and Bergvall (1996: 18) remark:

It would be ironic if *feminists* interested in language and gender inadvertently reinforced gender polarisation and the myths of essential female–male difference. By accepting a biological female–male dichotomy, and by emphasising language which reflects the two categories, linguists may be reinforcing biological essentialism, even if they emphasise that language, like gender, is learned behaviour (Eagleton, 2003: 134).

Cameron (1998a) argues that the focus on difference-versus dominance approaches to the analysis of gender and language, with the dominance analysts being criticized for problems with their analytical procedures and difference theorists being critiqued for their political shortcomings, leads to a lack of real debate, since theorists have tended simply to set up camps and defend their own position. She suggests instead that dominance theorists should develop more thorough analytical procedures and focus, not on a simplistic notion of dominance as such, but on conflict. Thus, rather than assuming that breakdown in communication between males and females occurs because participants do not understand the intentions of the other speaker, she argues that perhaps it is not misunderstanding which is at issue but conflicts of interest, conflict over increasingly diminishing resources and power, or conflict over perceptions of the position from which the speaker is/should be speaking.

3. CONCLUSION

Within language and gender research, there has been a wealth of research working within either the difference or dominance frame of reference which has aimed empirically to demonstrate that women or men use a particular feature. The one striking overall assessment which can be made of nearly all of the research done on language and gender differences is that the research is contradictory. The hypotheses are generally very clear, usually taking the format: 'in what way does women's use of such and such an element differ from men's use of the same element, when other variables are kept constant?' However, whichever research article seems to prove that women's language use does differ from men's language use – for example, that women interrupt less, that they are interrupted by men more, that they use tag questions more, or directness less – there is generally another piece of research which proves that, in fact, in other contexts, men use that same element to the same extent or more than women. For example, Chan (1992) discusses studies which contradict each other: Zimmerman and West's study in 1975 suggests that men interrupt women more, whereas Smith-Lovin and Brody's study in 1989 suggests a slightly more complex situation where men interrupt the most but women interrupt men just as much as they interrupt other women; Chan's research seems to find that there are no differences whatever which can be wholly attributed to sex difference alone (1992). This is not to say that empirical research should be completely discarded but it does suggest that other factors than gender may be playing a role in the

way that people behave linguistically. It also suggests that language and gender research must move beyond the binary oppositions of male and female.

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