

Introduction

In 1972, Robin Lakoff published an article entitled “Language and woman’s place,”¹ which created a huge fuss. There were those who found the entire topic trivial – yet another ridiculous manifestation of feminist “paranoia.” And there were those – mostly women – who jumped in to engage with the arguments and issues that Lakoff had put forth. Thus was launched the study of language and gender.

Lakoff’s article argued that women have a different way of speaking from men – a way of speaking that both reflects and produces a subordinate position in society. Women’s language, according to Lakoff, is rife with such devices as mitigators (*sort of, I think*) and inessential qualifiers (*really happy, so beautiful*). This language, she went on to argue, renders women’s speech tentative, powerless, and trivial; and as such, it disqualifies them from positions of power and authority. In this way, language itself is a tool of oppression – it is learned as part of learning to be a woman, imposed on women by societal norms, and in turn it keeps women in their place.

This publication brought about a flurry of research and debate. For some, the issue was to put Lakoff’s linguistic claims to the empirical test. Is it true that women use, for example, more tag questions than men? (e.g. Dubois and Crouch 1975). And debate also set in about the two key parts of Lakoff’s claim – (1) that women and men talk differently and (2) that differences in women’s and men’s speech are the result of – and support – male dominance. Over the following years, there developed a separation of these two claims into what were often viewed as two different, even conflicting, paradigms – what came to be called the *difference* and the *dominance* approaches. Those who focused on difference proposed that women and men speak differently because of fundamental differences in their relation to their language, perhaps due to different socialization and experiences early on. The very popular *You Just Don’t Understand* by Deborah Tannen (1990) has often been

¹ This article was soon after expanded into a classic monograph, *Language and Woman’s Place* (1975).

2 Introduction

taken as representative of the difference framework. Drawing on work by Daniel Maltz and Ruth Borker (1982), Tannen argued that girls and boys live in different subcultures analogous to the distinct subcultures associated with those from different class or ethnic backgrounds. As a result, they grow up with different conventions for verbal interaction and interaction more generally. Analysts associated with a dominance framework generally argued that differences between women's and men's speech arise because of male dominance over women and persist in order to keep women subordinated to men. Associated with the dominance framework were works like Julia Penelope's *Speaking Freely: Unlearning the Lies of the Fathers' Tongues* (1990) or the earlier but more widely distributed *Man Made Language* by Dale Spender (1980).

Lakoff herself had made it clear that issues of difference and issues of dominance were inextricably linked. And many of the early studies of difference were clearly embedded in a dominance framework. For example early studies of interruptions, such as Zimmerman and West (1975), were based on the assumption that interruption is a strategy for asserting conversational dominance and that conversational dominance in turn supports global dominance. And underlying studies of amount of speech (e.g. Swacker 1975) was the desire to debunk harmful female stereotypes such as the "chattering" woman. But as time went on, the study of difference became an enterprise in itself and was often detached from the wider political context. Deborah Tannen's explicit "no-fault" treatment of difference (1990) is often pointed to as the most prominent example.

The focus on difference in the study of language was not an isolated development, but took place in a wider context of psychological studies of gender difference. Carol Gilligan (1982), for example, argued that women and girls have different modes of moral reasoning, and Mary Belenky and her colleagues (1986) argued for gender differences in acquiring and processing knowledge. Each case constituted a powerful response to male-centered cognitive studies, which had taken modes of thinking associated with dominant men as the norm and appraised the cognitive processes of females (and often of ethnic and racial minorities as well) as deficient. While all of this work ultimately emerged from feminist impatience with male-dominated and male-serving intellectual paradigms, it also appealed to a popular thirst for gender difference. And in the end, this research is frequently transformed in popular discourse – certainly to the horror of the researchers – to justify and support male dominance.

By the end of the seventies, the issues of difference and dominance had become sufficiently separated that Barrie Thorne, Cheris Kramarae,

3 Introduction

and Nancy Henley felt the need to counteract the trend in the introduction to their second anthology of articles on language and gender (1983). They argued that framing questions about language and gender in terms of a difference–dominance dichotomy was not especially illuminating, and urged researchers to look more closely at these differences. First of all, they argued, researchers needed to take into consideration the contexts in which the differences emerged – who was talking to whom, for what purposes, and in what kind of setting? For instance, do people speak the same way at home as at work, or to intimates as to casual acquaintances? They also argued that researchers should not ignore the considerable differences within each gender group – among women and among men. Which women are we talking about and which men? When do the differences within each gender group outweigh any differences between the groups? Considering difference within gender groups shifts the focus from a search for what is common to men and to women to what is the nature of the diversity among men and among women, and what are the tolerances for such diversity. In other words, how does diversity structure gender?

Another dichotomy that emerged in the study of language and gender is the one between how women and men speak, and how they are spoken of. It was often thought that the study of people's use of language was quite separate from the study of the embedding of gender in language. After all, the speakers did not make the language. This separation was supported by the academic linguistic canon, which viewed language as a system beyond the reach of those who use it. Thus the fact that expressions referring to women commonly undergo semantic derogation and sexualization – for example the form *hussy* once simply meant “housewife,” *mistress* was just a feminine equivalent of *master* – was viewed as merely a linguistic fact. Once again, the specter of the paranoid feminist emerged in the seventies, as the Department of Linguistics at Harvard University made a public declaration that the use of masculine pronouns to refer to people generically (e.g. *every student must bring his book to class*) was a fact of language, not of society. Feminists' insistence that people should cease using *man* to refer to *humankind*, or *he* to refer to *he or she* was dismissed as “pronoun envy.” But early on, scholars began to question this ahistorical view of language – as, for example, Ann Bodine (1975) traced the quite deliberate legislation of the use of masculine generics in English in the nineteenth century, as Sally McConnell-Ginet (1984) traced the relation between semantic change and the power dynamics of the everyday use of words, and as Paula Treichler (1989) traced the power dynamics involved in the inclusion

4 Introduction

of words and definitions in the great arbiter of linguistic legitimacy – the dictionary. All of this work made it quite clear that language and the use of language are inseparable; indeed, that language is continually constructed in practice.

As a result, there has been increased attention to what people do with language and how linguistic and other social resources can be transformed in the process. Deborah Cameron's 1985 *Feminism and Linguistic Theory* argued that the standard linguistic focus on a static linguistic system obscured the real gender dimensions of language. As Cameron (1998a) observed, the years since the early days have seen a shift in language and gender research from the search for correlations between linguistic units and social categories of speakers to analysis of the gendered significance of ongoing discourse. What we can call for short the “discourse turn” in language and gender studies emphasizes both the historical and dynamic character of language, and the interactive dimensions of its use. The “discourse turn” need not mean that we ignore linguistic units like speech sounds or words, but it does require that such units be considered in relation to the functions they serve in particular situated uses, and it also requires that the units themselves not be taken as fixed and immutable.

At the same time that discourse was becoming prominent on the language side, there was a shift in feminist theory and gender studies in thinking about gender. Rather than conceptualizing gender as an identity someone just “has,” analysts began viewing gender as involving what people “do.” In this view, gender doesn't just exist, but is continually produced, reproduced, and indeed changed through people's performance of gendered acts, as they project their own claimed gendered identities, ratify or challenge others' identities, and in various ways support or challenge systems of gender relations and privilege. As Erving Goffman (1977) pointed out, even walking into a public toilet – which is always saliently gendered – *does* gender. Judith Butler's philosophical work (esp. Butler 1990) was very influential, but there were also related precursors in the different traditions of sociology and anthropology (esp. Kessler and McKenna 1978) that drew attention to the centrality of gender performance. The “performance turn” has led many language and gender scholars to question familiar gender categories like *woman* and *man* and to explore the variety of ways in which linguistic performances relate to constructing both conventional gendered identities and identities that in one way or another challenge conventional gender norms. As we begin to separate “male” and “female” linguistic resources from “men” and “women,” linguistic usages of transgendered people become of special interest.

5 Introduction

By the time we began writing this book, language and gender studies had already been profoundly affected by both the discourse turn and the performance turn. Our earlier joint work and this book bring these two shifts in emphasis together theoretically by insisting that both language and gender are fundamentally embedded in social practice, deriving their meaning from the human activities in which they figure. Social practice involves not just individuals making choices and acting for reasons: it also involves the constraints, institutional and ideological, that frame (but do not completely determine) those individual actions. We attach particular importance to everyday social interactions in face-to-face communities of practice, groups that come together around some mutual interest or concern: families, workplace groups, sports teams, musical groups, classrooms, playground groups, and the like. On this conception, language is never “all” that matters socially, because it is always accompanied by other meaningful aspects of interactions: facial expressions, dress, location, physical contact, and so on.

Once we take practice as basic to both language and gender, the kinds of questions we ask change. Rather than “how do women speak?” or “how do men speak?” we ask what kinds of linguistic resources can and do people deploy to present themselves as certain kinds of women or men. How do new ways of speaking and otherwise acting as women or men (or “just people” or members of some alternative category) emerge? Rather than “how are women spoken of?” we ask what kinds of linguistic practices support particular gender ideologies and norms. How do new ideas about gender gain currency? How and why do people change linguistic and gender practices? The shift from focusing on differences between male and female allows us to ask what kinds of personae can males and females present.

The first two chapters of this book set out the background, focusing on gender and on linguistic resources respectively. The first chapter introduces the conception of gender as a “social construction” – that is, as the product of social practice. We discuss the relation between gender and biology, and the development of gendered identities and behaviors over the life cycle. We also introduce the notion of the gender order, examining institutional and ideological dimensions of gender arrangements. In the second chapter, we focus on the analysis of language, introducing our general take on the discourse turn, and the social underpinnings of linguistic practice. We then turn to the linguistic resources for gender practice, and discuss issues of method and analytic practice in language and gender research.

The remainder – the “meat” – of the book is organized around the different ways in which language participates in gender practice. We

6 Introduction

focus throughout on meaning-making. Gender is, after all, a system of meaning – a way of construing notions of male and female – and language is the primary means through which we maintain or contest old meanings, and construct or resist new ones. We begin in chapter three with an examination of verbal interaction – specifically with the organization of talk. Our main concern in this chapter is how people get their ideas on the table and their proposals taken up – how gender affects people’s ability to get their meanings into the discourse. Getting to make one’s desired contribution requires first of all access to the situations and events in which relevant conversations are being had. And once in those situations, people need to get their contributions into the flow of talk, and to have those contributions taken up by others. Gender structures not only participation in certain kinds of speech activities and genres, but also conversational dynamics. Since this structuring is not always what one would expect, we take a critical look at beliefs about conversational dynamics in this chapter.

Every contribution one makes in an interaction can be seen as a social “move” – as part of the carrying out of one’s intentions with respect to others. After all, we don’t just flop through the world, but we have plans – however much those plans may change from moment to moment. And these plans and the means by which we carry them out are strongly affected by gender. Chapter four focuses on speech acts and other kinds of meaningful social moves people make in face-to-face interactions. Chapter five follows on closely with a focus on linguistic resources that position language users with respect to one another (“subject positioning”) and with respect to the ideas they are advancing (“idea positioning”). We consider such things as showing deference and respect, signaling commitment and eliciting others’ support, speaking directly or indirectly.

In chapters six and seven, we discuss how people build gendered content as they interact in their communities of practice and elsewhere. All communication takes place against a background of shared assumptions, and establishing those assumptions in conversation is key to getting one’s meanings into the discourse. Chapter six develops the idea that much of what is communicated linguistically is implied rather than strictly said. It examines some of the ways in which gender schemas and ideologies (e.g. the presumption of universal heterosexuality) figure as assumed background when people talk, and it explicitly examines strategies for the backgrounding or foregrounding of certain aspects of meaning. For example, although in many contexts men are presented as more “active” than women – as doing more – male activity and men’s responsible agency are often downplayed in talk

7 Introduction

about sexual violence or other kinds of problematic heterosexual encounters. We discuss the powerful role of metaphor in making certain meanings salient: metaphors for talking about gender-related matters, and metaphors that use sex and gender to talk about other topics. We also discuss the question of who is engaging in making what kinds of metaphors and how are they understood.

The ultimate power, one might say, is to be able to dictate categories for the rest of society – to determine what racial categories are (and which people will be viewed as “having no race”), to determine where petty theft leaves off and larceny begins, to determine what constitutes beauty. The focus of chapter seven is on categorizing, on how we map our world and some of the many ways those mappings enter into gender practice. We consider how categories are related to one another and how social practice shapes and changes those relations; and why people might dispute particular ways of mapping the world. We discuss linguistic forms like generic masculines, grammatical gender, and “politically correct” language. The importance of the “discourse turn” here is that we connect the forms not only to the people using them but also more generally to the social practices and ongoing discourses in which their use figures.

In chapter eight, we turn from the things one says to the linguistic variety in which one says it. The variety that we use – our “accent” and “grammar” – is considered to be central to who we are, and it often plays a central role in determining our position on the social and economic market – our access to such things as employment, resources, social participation, and even marriage. In chapter eight, we examine language ideology in its relation to gender ideology, and then we turn to show how people use a wide range of linguistic features (especially small features of pronunciation) to present themselves as different kinds of women and men: as proper, as tough, as religiously observant, as urban and sophisticated, as rural and loyal to the land, and so on.

Chapter nine brings it all together, with a focus on the use of the various linguistic resources discussed in chapters three through eight in the production of selves. In this chapter, we talk about stylistic practice as the means by which people produce gendered personae. Style, we argue, is not a cloak over the “true” self but instantiates the self it purports to be. We consider some gender performances that might seem of dubious legitimacy and that flamboyantly challenge established gender ideologies and norms: phone sex workers in California, hijras in India, the ‘yan daudu in Nigeria. And we look at other cases of gender performance that, while not perhaps so obviously transgressive, nonetheless represent new kinds of femininities and masculinities. We close this

8 Introduction

chapter and the book by noting that the possibilities for gendered personae are indeed changing and that changing linguistic practices are important in these changed possibilities. At the same time, we observe that changes always produce reactions and that there is no nice neat picture of eventual outcomes for language or for gender or for their interaction.

We have tried to write this book so that readers with no special expertise in either gender or language studies will find it accessible and engaging. We hope that it may also interest those who are already familiar with one of these areas, and that it may even offer something to our colleagues who have themselves done work on language and gender issues, or on other dimensions of the interaction of language with culture and society. Readers will not get answers to global questions about differences between the set gender categories “women” and “men.” What they will get, we hope, is a taste for more interesting questions – questions about what makes someone a woman or a man, how language participates in making women and men, and how language participates in changing gender practice as well.

CHAPTER 1

Constructing, deconstructing and
reconstructing gender

We are surrounded by gender lore from the time we are very small. It is ever-present in conversation, humor, and conflict, and it is called upon to explain everything from driving styles to food preferences. Gender is embedded so thoroughly in our institutions, our actions, our beliefs, and our desires, that it appears to us to be completely natural. The world swarms with ideas about gender – and these ideas are so commonplace that we take it for granted that they are true, accepting common adage as scientific fact. As scholars and researchers, though, it is our job to look beyond what appears to be common sense to find not simply what truth might be behind it, but how it came to be common sense. It is precisely because gender seems natural, and beliefs about gender seem to be obvious truth, that we need to step back and examine gender from a new perspective. Doing this requires that we suspend what we are used to and what feels comfortable, and question some of our most fundamental beliefs. This is not easy, for gender is so central to our understanding of ourselves and of the world that it is difficult to pull back and examine it from new perspectives.¹ But it is precisely the fact that gender seems self-evident which makes the study of gender interesting. It brings the challenge to uncover the process of construction that creates what we have so long thought of as natural and inexorable – to study gender not as given, but as an accomplishment; not simply as cause, but as effect. The results of failure to recognize this challenge are manifest not only in the popular media, but in academic work on language and gender as well. As a result, some gender scholarship does as much to reify and support existing beliefs as to promote more reflective and informed thinking about gender.

1 It is easier, though, for people who feel that they are disadvantaged in the social order, and it is no doubt partially for this reason that many recent theories of gender have been developed primarily (though not exclusively) by women. (In some times and places, women have not had the opportunity to develop “theories” of anything.)

Sex and gender

Gender is not something we are born with, and not something we *have*, but something we *do* (West and Zimmerman 1987) – something we *perform* (Butler 1990). Imagine a small boy proudly following his father. As he swaggers and sticks out his chest, he is doing everything he can to be like his father – to be a *man*. Chances are his father is not swaggering, but the boy is creating a persona that embodies what he is admiring in his adult male role model. The same is true of a small girl as she puts on her mother's high-heeled shoes, smears makeup on her face and minces around the room. Chances are that when these children are grown they will not swagger and mince respectively, but their childhood performances contain elements that will no doubt surface in their adult male and female behaviors. Chances are, also, that the girl will adopt that swagger on occasion as well, but adults are not likely to consider it as “cute” as her mincing act. And chances are that if the boy decides to try a little mincing, he won't be considered cute at all. In other words, gendered performances are available to everyone, but with them come constraints on who can perform which personae with impunity. And this is where gender and sex come together, as society tries to match up ways of behaving with biological sex assignments.

Sex is a biological categorization based primarily on reproductive potential, whereas gender is the social elaboration of biological sex. Gender builds on biological sex, it exaggerates biological difference and, indeed, it carries biological difference into domains in which it is completely irrelevant. There is no biological reason, for example, why women should mince and men should swagger, or why women should have red toenails and men should not. But while we think of sex as biological and gender as social, this distinction is not clear-cut. People tend to think of gender as the result of nurture – as social and hence fluid – while sex is simply given by biology. However, there is no obvious point at which sex leaves off and gender begins, partly because there is no single objective biological criterion for male or female sex. Sex is based in a combination of anatomical, endocrinal and chromosomal features, and the selection among these criteria for sex assignment is based very much on cultural beliefs about what actually makes someone male or female. Thus the very definition of the biological categories *male* and *female*, and people's understanding of themselves and others as male or female, is ultimately social. Anne Fausto-Sterling (2000) sums up the situation as follows:

labeling someone a man or a woman is a social decision. We may use scientific knowledge to help us make the decision, but only our beliefs