1 Introduction

Since the 1960s, the issue of sexist language has been keenly debated within feminist circles. The concern to change language which discriminated against women and which seemed to belittle and trivialise those activities associated with women was a key concern for feminist theorists and activists, trying to change the way that women were represented in advertisements, newspapers and magazines, and also the way that they were named and addressed in texts and in interaction. The debate has widened within recent years, so that 'sexism' and the more problematic 'political correctness' are no longer terms which only have currency within feminist theory but which are used by people outside the university context. However, both these terms 'sexism' and 'political correctness' are now used in ways which are often very different from their original feminist usage.[1]

Whilst there are many definitions of sexism, one which is often cited is 'the practices whereby someone foregrounds gender when it is not the most salient feature' (Vetterling-Braggin, 1981). In this book, I interrogate this definition, since it seems to be based on a liberal-feminist notion that sexism is based on an error made by the speaker or writer which can be rectified when brought to their notice. It assumes a position of objectivity from which statements can be judged as sexist and from which gender can be seen to be not in fact 'the most salient feature'. Throughout this book, I question this view that sexism is simply an individual mistake or slip caused by thoughtlessness or lack of awareness (although it is, of course, sometimes the result of these factors) which can be rectified by simply pointing out the error and suggesting alternative usages. Rather than assuming an individual basis for sexism, I will be foregrounding the view that sexism, just like racism and other discriminatory forms of language, stems from larger societal forces, wider institutionalised inequalities of power and ultimately, therefore, conflict over who has rights to certain positions and resources. Whilst not assuming that all men have power over all women, as

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[1] It is debatable whether the term 'political correctness' was in fact developed by feminists. Some have argued that it was from the start a term of irony or abuse, used by political campaigners to mock over-zealous colleagues (see Dunant, 1994).

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many earlier feminist texts on this subject have (for example, Spender, 1980; Lakoff, 1975), I will nevertheless document the ways in which sexism is an index of ongoing conflict between men and women, particularly within the public sphere (Cameron, 1998a; 2006). Instead of seeing language as a neutral vehicle which represents reality, I will rather describe language as a tool which is drawn on strategically by both sexists and feminist campaigners, and as a site of struggle over word-meaning, which is also often a struggle over who has the right to be in certain environments, speak in certain ways and hold certain jobs.

Sexism is not just about statements which seem to excessively focus on gender when it is not relevant, and whilst I will analyse such statements, I will also focus on other contexts where listeners or readers might consider other factors contributing to a text being judged as sexist. For example, statements may be considered to be sexist if they rely on stereotypical and outdated beliefs, when referring to a particular woman (i.e. 'Look at you crying over this film – women are so emotional'). Here, it is assumed that the woman referred to is exhibiting behaviour which is typical of feminine women and therefore she is being classified less as a person in her own right, with her own feelings, but rather as simply an anonymous member of a social group, experiencing an emotion due to membership of that group. A further factor in statements being considered sexist is when they imply that men's experience is human experience (to give an example from a textbook: 'Circumcision was common amongst Americans in the 1950s' – where it is only male circumcision which is, in fact, being referred to). Another factor in the judgement of statements as sexist is when they are based on the presupposition that any activity associated with women is necessarily trivial or secondary in relation to male activities (for example, 'Women tennis players get lower prize money at Wimbledon because the game is less exciting'). These beliefs are ones which are affirmed in some measure by conservative and stereotypical beliefs, some of which have been institutionalised and which form part of a background common sense which it is assumed that speakers and writers can draw on.

As an example of some of these stereotypical beliefs which underpin sexist statements I would like to consider the lyrics of a pop song. Although I am not arguing that all pop songs are sexist, because there are many songs, such as those by American singer Pink, which challenge sexist beliefs about women, there are nevertheless a large number of songs which objectify and portray women as sexual objects. I shall take as emblematic of these types of beliefs a song by Calvin Harris entitled 'The Girls' (2007). In the chorus, Harris sings: 'I got all the girls, I got all the girls' (repeated throughout the chorus).[2] In

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[2] This is a version of the words of the song which I have reproduced from memory. Unfortunately because of the nature of this book, it would be extremely unlikely that I would be granted permission to quote from this song. In past publications, publishers have refused to grant me permission to use advertisements or poems in my work (Mills, 1995b; 1996a).

the verse, Harris chants 'I love them white girls, I love them Black girls, I love them Asian girls, I love them skinny girls, I love them fat girls, I love them carrying a little bit of weight girls' and other varieties of girls who are categorised largely in terms of their appearance, weight or nationality/ethnicity. This song is presumably seen as a testament to the degree to which Harris adores women since he says he 'loves' all of them. However, we might ask ourselves whether it is possible to 'love' women in general without being sexist, since the women's individuality is erased. Harris suggests here that he does not care what women look like, and by implication, since he only lists their physical attributes, we can assume that he is not interested in their personalities or their intellect. In the chorus, Harris sings that he has 'got' all the girls, almost as if he is scoring the number of women he has 'had', which seems to be based on a very stereotypical masculinist view of male sexual drive. In the chorus, he has 'got' women and in the verse he 'loves' women; the juxtaposition of these two elements suggests that for Harris 'getting' women and 'loving' them are the same, so that love is indistinguishable from lust. Further objectification can be observed when he states that he loves all 'them girls', rather than, for example, 'you . . . girls'; here the listener is forced to ask herself who Harris is addressing. In short, these lyrics seem to exemplify a sexist and objectifying attitude towards women. However, we need not see this as a point of view developed solely by Harris himself, but rather he is drawing on stereotypical discourses about women, men and the relations between the sexes.

I shall be arguing for a more social and institutional view of sexism, but I shall not be arguing that sexism resides in certain words or phrases which can be objectively exposed by feminist linguistics. As we can see from the examples given above, none of the words in the sentence 'Women tennis players get lower prize money at Wimbledon because the game is less exciting' are in themselves sexist; and neither is the juxtaposition of 'getting' and 'loving' women in the song by Calvin Harris intrinsically sexist. It is, in fact, the belief systems which are articulated which are sexist, ones which see women as inevitably different and inferior to men. As Cameron (2006: 16) puts it:

If we take it that no expression has a meaning independent of its linguistic and non-linguistic context, we can plausibly explain the sexism of language by saying that all speech events in patriarchal cultures have as part of their context the power relations that hold between women and men . . . This varied and heterogeneous context is what makes expressions and utterances liable to sexist interpretation.

Therefore, I will be discussing not only the language elements of sexism, but also the beliefs or discourses about women and men which are represented in and mediated through language.[3] Although there are certain words and grammatical choices which have a history of usage which seems to indicate

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[3] I discuss this discourse view in more detail later in this chapter.

particular sexist attitudes and which have been associated in past usage with certain types of meanings, this is not to say that these words will always in every context be interpreted as sexist by readers or hearers. In a sense, what I am arguing for is, at one and the same time, a much more social model of sexism (to describe discriminatory attitudes which develop within institutionalised contexts where there are conflicts about access and power) and also a more localised model of sexism (how this particular word or phrase is or is not interpreted as sexist within this particular context by particular readers or hearers). This does not mean that these two levels of analysis are entirely distinct, as it is clear that institutional sexism develops at least in part from individual usages within particular contexts, and interaction between individuals is informed and takes issue with institutional norms. Thus, I will not be assuming an inherent sexism to words, but I will be arguing for a much more fluid and pragmatic, context-dependent view of sexism. As I will demonstrate in this book, this focus on the importance of context runs the risk of challenging any generalisation about sexist language which I make, but I feel it is in the nature of feminist linguistic analysis at the present time to attempt both to challenge and to hold onto the possibility of generalisation about language and gender (see Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2006; Holmes and Meyerhoff, 2003).

The move against generalisation within language and gender research has stemmed from a dissatisfaction with simplistic notions of men's and women's language. As I will discuss more fully later, within feminist thinking there has been a tendency to dismiss what is deemed essentialist thinking, that is, any theoretical or analytical work which is based on the notion of a stable binary opposition of male and female, masculine and feminine (Fuss, 1989; Butler, 1990). However, this has led to a difficulty in arguing that there are any gender differences in language, or that certain language is discriminatory because it refers exclusively to women in stereotypical terms. Holmes and Meyerhoff (2003: 14–15) in particular think that we should make generalisations about data and draw on these findings to argue for the need for change in society; they note:

We should never cease to engage actively with and challenge assumptions about gender norms, and loudly draw attention to the way power, privilege and social authority interact with and are naturalised as properties of independent social categories . . . Such stances of committed engagement may distance us from younger women, or from those widespread contemporary attitudes which valorise diversity and individual expression . . . it may be useful if those working in language and gender research resolved to avoid using terms such as 'essentialist' to dismiss research which focuses on the big picture, research which attempts to identify regularities and make generalisations about global patterns observable in the relationship between language and gender.

For Holmes and Meyerhoff, it is important that we recognise that not all thinking about gender which discusses men and women or generalises about the

language associated with women or men should be assumed to be essentialist.[4] It is possible to generalise about gender without making simplistic assumptions about gender difference. However, I would modify this argument slightly. The assumption which has held sway from the 1960s until now that feminists can only make political statements when we can generalise about women's conditions needs to be interrogated. Page (2005: 44) comments:

> Various writers have argued that when theoretical arguments and paradigms are divorced from their actual contexts, then a discussion of feminist principles has the potential to become apolitical. Once the discussion shifts from the particular into the abstract, it becomes difficult to ask vital feminist questions, such as to whom the differences of gender matter and what might be done about them.

Thus, the focus on the particular instance allows a more focused interrogation of the way gender is being deployed. Page is arguing that focus on the particular context can in fact enable us to make political statements about the way that women are treated within particular contexts and propose action to change that particular problem, whilst at the same time being aware that the particular instance occurs in relation to other wider instances of discrimination.

1.   Problems with research on sexism

When I have discussed writing a book on sexism with other colleagues and at conferences, many people have looked slightly askance at the thought of working on such a topic. In recent years, campaigns about sexism have been the focus of a great deal of humour and ridicule in the media and have been the subject of verbal play and irony. The term which has been generally adopted by the popular press in discussions about sexism has been 'political correctness' which suggests an over-punctilious concern with the 'trivial' issue of language, rather than serious questions of equal opportunities and discrimination against women, as I will show in more detail in Chapter 4. Thus, feminist, disability and race-awareness campaigns within universities and local councils have been reported as being concerned with whether to use the term 'manhole cover' or 'personhole cover', and whether it is acceptable to talk about 'black coffee' and 'blackboards'. Jokes on the lines of 'vertically challenged' and 'follically challenged' have proliferated. Despite the fact that the examples which are given are almost always invented by the media, these parodies of campaigns against discriminatory language have had a major impact on the way that people, both within institutions and outside them, think about the issues of sexism, racism and other forms of linguistic discrimination.

[4] Perhaps also we need to be more aware of the negative evaluation assumed by the use of the term 'essentialist'.

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Even within feminist circles, the use of the term 'sexism' is problematic. When it is used, it often has a slightly jaded and anachronistic feel about it. Sexist usage and the English language as a whole are clearly changing so much that, for example, each year when I teach an undergraduate course on Language and Gender, which has a session on sexism, I have to change my examples, as it is generally the case that one or more of them has fallen out of usage. For example, several years ago, I would discuss the distinction between such terms as 'courtier' and 'courtesan' (with 'courtier' referring simply to a male who works in the court, whereas a 'courtesan' is someone who has a sexual relationship with a member of the royal family or the aristocracy). Such examples now have a very dated feel to them and do not seem to be part of the vocabulary that is of interest to or in use by women and men of university age. This may be partly because the recognition of language items which are considered to be discriminatory was researched and the subject of popular discussion during the 1970s and 1980s, due to the work of feminists such as Dale Spender and Robyn Lakoff (Lakoff, 1975; Spender, 1980). However, now that the sexist attitudes of these terms has become apparent to many people, there is an assumption that overt forms of sexism will simply fall out of usage. Other sexist usages are assumed to be easily recognised and thus easily challenged and reformed. However, as Cameron has shown, linguistic reform is not so readily achieved, and language-reform measures may be used in problematic ways by both individuals and institutions to mask fundamental discriminatory practices (Cameron, 1998c). The very notion of reforming language has come under increased scrutiny, being categorised by Cameron (1995) as 'verbal hygiene', that is, the attempt to change language because of fears about incorrect, irritating or offensive usages. Cameron argues, in addition, that 'many people care deeply about linguistic matters; they do not merely speak their language, they also speak copiously and passionately *about* it' (Cameron, 1995: ix). Cameron includes in her analysis of verbal hygiene the historical debates about grammar and style and discussions about political correctness. I would take issue with this analysis, since I see feminist anti-discrimination campaigns as being of a different order to debates about grammatical correctness. The sexist statements made about women which have been objected to by feminists since the 1980s contributed to and were emblematic of wider discriminatory practices in the workplace and within relationships with men.[5]

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[5] Another problematic aspect to the concept of sexism is that feminist concern with linguistic sexism often had a heterosexual bias, which it was assumed could be simply rectified by having homophobic terms 'added on' to the list of terms which are problematic for straight women. This is clearly not the case and homophobic terms need to be part and parcel of our consideration of sexism as a whole. Thus, what is defined as sexist is in need of a thorough re-examination and reformulation, taking on board the research which has been undertaken within Queer theory and gay and lesbian studies (Kulick, 2000; Cameron and Kulick, 2003).

Many feminists are no longer interested in sexist language. It is assumed that identifying examples of sexism is, in a sense, too easy. Toolan (1996: 4) notes that it is now no longer enough to accuse texts of being coercive and describing ways in which they manipulate the reader; it is necessary to 'include a clear sense of how a particular control-revealing, hegemony eliciting, manipulative text might have been constructed, so as to more nearly attain the status of being a non-manipulative and non-hegemonic text'. He argues that we need to move to analysing 'the subtle and hence more insidious discriminatory and exclusionary discourses that abound'. This is one of the main aims of the book, i.e. moving from a simple analysis of overt sexism, which I feel we need to do, since examples of overt sexism still abound, to an analysis of indirect sexism, that more subtle form of contextualised sexism. Conventional linguistics alone will not equip us with the tools to analyse discrimination, since if sexism is more socially determined and only locally made meaningful, we will need a model of analysis which can do more than analyse phrases in isolation. I have argued in *Feminist Stylistics* (1995b) that we need to look above the level of the sentence to the level of discourse. Drawing on Foucault's (1972; 1978; 1981) work, I see discourse as the 'practices that systemically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault, 1972: 49). To explain this assertion by Foucault, I argue in *Discourse* (2004: 14) that:

A discourse is something which produces something else (an utterance, a concept, an effect), rather than something which exists in and of itself and which can be analysed in isolation. A discursive structure can be detected because of the systematicity of the ideas, opinions, concepts, ways of thinking and behaving which are formed within a particular context, and because of the effects of those ways of thinking and behaving. Thus we can assume that there is a set of discourses of masculinity and femininity, because women and men behave within a certain range of parameters when defining themselves as gendered subjects. These discursive frameworks demarcate the boundaries within which we can negotiate what it means to be gendered.

Discourses can be seen as the 'rules' and 'guidelines' which we produce and which are produced for us in order to construct ourselves as individuals and to interact with others.

Sunderland (2004: 203), from a similar position, argues that we need therefore to approach sexist belief systems at the level of discourse; she states: 'intervention in *discourse* . . . needs to be distinguished from the feminist "non-sexist language" linguistic activism . . . of the 1970s and 80s' (original emphasis). Whilst I would agree that we cannot describe and combat discoursal sexism by focusing on individual words alone, I feel it is important to focus on the linguistic *and* the wider discourse level. She argues that discourses are those collections of statements which seem to group together to form particular views of men and women, such as the 'neat girls' discourse, the 'girls as good language learners' discourse, the 'father as bumbling parent' discourse. In her

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book *Gendered Discourses*, she aims to categorise discourse structures around gender and provide ways of intervening at this discursive level. She suggests that we can use six different strategies:

1) meta-discoursal critique [that is, commenting openly on someone's use of a particular gendered discourse]
2) principled non-use of discourses seen as damaging [therefore we simply refuse to use such discourses in our own speech and writing]
3) principled non-confrontational use of discourses seen as non-damaging [so we choose to use progressive discourses about women and men without drawing attention to the fact that we are doing so]
4) principled confrontational use of discourse seen as non-damaging [here we draw attention to our use of progressive discourses about women and men]
5) facilitated group intervention by people other than feminists and linguists [we encourage others to comment on gendered discourse use]
6) rediscursivation [we construct new, more progressive discourses]

(Sunderland, 2004: 203)

We can avoid or affirm certain views of women and men by drawing on certain discursive resources. However, this is often not easy; since, if friends or colleagues begin to use one of the discourses which Sunderland identifies, a discourse of 'fathers as bumblers', stressing the fact that they have had difficulty looking after their children, it is much easier (in English at least), to simply contribute to the discourse by offering examples from one's own experience, than providing counter-examples from more progressive discourses about male parenting. However, what Sunderland has isolated is that, whilst it may be a more difficult option, there is no compulsion to contribute to gendered discourses. We can comment on their use explicitly and simply reframe the comments so that they are positioned within another discursive structure. For example, we could link the discussion of paternal incompetence to an anecdote about fathers who enjoyed looking after their children or we could comment pointedly on the fact that not all fathers are incompetent. In this way, we can begin even in a small way the process of rediscursivation, that is, the process whereby we redraw the boundaries of discourses and begin to develop discourses which are more productive for women and men.

Toolan (1996: 9) suggests that we can integrate a concern with the discourse level with the more local linguistic level; he argues that:

while language is never a code, it is apparent that most individuals become habituated to a code-like predictability of usage, forms and meanings . . . Part of the human response to finiteness and normativity is the tireless schematising that we evidently undertake, the sorting of past experiences into remembered scripts, activities and stereotyped situations. It is through this shifting multidimensional mental network of scripts, situations and styles that we undertake the making of contextualized sense of particular episodes of linguistic interaction.

Thus, for Toolan, we become habituated to certain ways of talking, writing and interpreting which spring from institutionalised settings, from our interactions with others, which we then adopt and use more or less unthinkingly. Schultz (1990: 130) argues that 'analysis of language tells us a great deal about the interests, achievements, obsessions, hopes, fears and prejudices of the people who created the language'. Whilst this is broadly accurate, it is important to take issue with this notion that there were people who 'created' the language – a view which seemed to be prevalent amongst Second Wave feminists such as Schultz and Spender (1980). We need to see language evolving in a very gradual way with certain meanings and usages being kept in play for long periods of time whilst other usages and meanings fall out of circulation fairly rapidly (Deutscher, 2005). No-one in the past 'created' the language wholesale; rather it developed out of a series of struggles and crises over whose views should be represented and which groups were in a dominant position.

Language does indeed reveal to us the values of groups and institutions within our culture in the past who were instrumental in encoding their own perspectives within the language. However, the language as it is used at present and the resources available within it, reveal to us the struggles, both political and moral, over whose voices should be represented and mediated. Thus, sexist usages are still available but they are more stigmatised than they were in the past. Feminist alternatives to sexism are available for usage, but some of them also pose difficulties for usage, since, for some people, they appear to be marked forms, seeming odd or difficult to use. Sexism, in this view, is an ever changing resource which is available to people to use in their own writing, thinking and speaking, which is more or less institutionalised, affirmed or contested by particular influential bodies, and challenged and contested by feminists.

Part of the reason that the study of sexism sometimes feels outdated and archaic is that the model of language which it presupposes is itself outdated, assuming that meanings reside in words and that words are stable in their meaning and unaffected by their localised and contextualised usage. A more adequate view of sexism would see sexism as a judgement made about particular language usages, with certain facts and linguistic and social histories being used to justify that judgement. It is important to analyse these judgements about language, as they are also judgements about us as individuals. If we adopt constructionist positions on the relation between identity and language, that is, that the self is constructed through language, then analysis of sexism is still important as it affects how we think about our identity as women. Benwell and Stokoe (2006: 4) argue:

There is no such thing as an absolute self, lurking behind discourse. A constructionist approach examines people's own understandings of identity . . . Although discourse is not all there is in the world, we understand who we are to each other in this public and accountable realm.

That is why I still feel that, since discourse plays such an important role in the construction and negotiation of identities, despite this anachronistic feel to a concern with sexism, discursive structures which are available as a resource to degrade and trivialise those activities associated with women, must still be analysed.

1.1.   Overt sexism and indirect sexism

Sexist language is a term used to denote a wide range of very different elements, from the use of such items as generic pronouns such as 'he' (when used to refer to both males and females); word endings such as '-ette' used to refer to women (for example 'usherette'), nouns referring to men and women (such as 'landlord' and 'landlady', 'manager' and 'manageress', which seem to have a different range of meanings), insult terms which seem to differ for men and women, the names we are given and those which are used for parts of our bodies, and so on. The term sexism is, however, also used to categorise a set of stereotypical beliefs about women which cannot be directly related to a certain set of linguistic usages or features. Take this example from a humorous magazine entitled *The Joy of Sexism*, which is presented in the format of a newspaper report on world records:

Car Parking: The smallest kerbside space successfully reversed into by a woman was one of 19.36m, 63ft 2ins, equivalent to three standard parking spaces by Mrs Elizabeth Simpkins (GB) driving an unmodified Vauxhall Nova 'Swing' on the 12th October 1993. She started the manoeuvre in Ropergate, Pontefract and successfully parked within three feet of the pavement 8 hours and 14 mins later. There was slight damage to the bumpers and wings of her own and the two adjoining cars, as well as a shop frontage and two lamp posts. (Donald, n.d.: 6)

This is followed by another world record report entitled 'Incorrect Driving' which states:

The longest journey completed with the handbrake on was one of 504 km 313 miles from Stranraer to Holyhead by Dr Julie Thorn (GB) at the wheel of a Saab 900 . . . The journey also holds the records for the longest completed with the choke out and the right indicator flashing. (Donald, n.d.: 6)

These 'humorous' reports are based on the assumption that women are bad drivers, an assertion which can be classified as sexist for most people, since it seems to be asserting that gender is an important element in driving ability. Because this is a stereotypical view of women's driving, it is available for use by individual speakers and writers. However, it is important to note, as I will be making clear later in this book, that stereotypical statements do not go unchallenged, and part of the discursive framework within which statements such as this are made, are feminist interventions about sexism. This often makes the sexist statement itself one which might be mediated, for example,