Words Matter

History and current affairs show that words matter – and change – because they are woven into our social and political lives. Words are weapons wielded by the powerful; they are also powerful tools for social resistance and for reimagining and reconfiguring social relations. Illustrated with topical examples, from racial slurs and sexual insults to preferred gender pronouns, from ethnic/racial group labels to presidential tweets, this book examines the social contexts which imbue words with potency. Exploring the role of language in three broad categories – establishing social identities, navigating social landscapes, and debating social and linguistic change – Sally McConnell-Ginet invites readers to examine critically their own ideas about language and its complicated connections to social conflict and transformation. Concrete and timely examples vividly illustrate the feedback loop between words and the world, shedding light on how and why words can matter.

Sally McConnell-Ginet is Professor Emerita of Linguistics at Cornell University and a Past President of the Linguistic Society of America.
Words Matter
Meaning and Power

SALLY MCCONNELL-GINET
Cornell University
Contents

List of Figures page viii
Acknowledgments ix

Getting Started 1

1 Labeling: “What Are You, Anyway?” 8
Shifting Ethnic/Racial Labels for a Single Individual? 9
What Do Ethnic and Racial Identity Labels Label? 11
Deep Historical Antecedents to Recent Labeling Disputes: Latino vs Hispanic 16
Creating Labels to Mobilize Groups: The Case of Asian American 23
“My Mom Says It’s Not Polite to Call Someone Black” 25
Tracking People: Sex/Gender Labels 30
“One Name to Rule Them All”: Strategic Labeling Dances 38
Labeling vs Describing 42
Notes 46

Marking and Erasing: First Pass 50
Us vs Them Marking 54
How Did English Man Lose Its Generic Inclusiveness? 55
Squeezing Marked Subcategory Members Out: Where Are the Women? 57
Modifiers and Marking 62
“Jocks, You’re Not Aware of It”: Becoming ‘Normal’ People 67
Trying to Mark Dominant Groups: The Politics of Cisgender and Its Kin 71
Notes 76
3 Generalizing: “All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave” 78
   Implicit Stereotypes and Prejudices 79
   Colorblind? 86
   Black Lives Matter … Or Should! 90
   Quantificational Generalizing: Who Counts? 92
   Generic Generalizations: When Do They Essentialize? 95
   Norms 103
   Notes 105
4 Addressing: “All Right, My Man … Keep Your Hands on the Steering Wheel” 107
   Vocatives 108
   Power and Solidarity 110
   English Address (and Reference) Resources 117
   Naming, Nicknaming, and Authority 125
   Being (In)Considerate, (Dis)Respectful, (Im)Polite 130
   Notes 133
5 Putting Down: “[They] Aren’t People – They’re Animals” 135
   “Words Will Never Hurt Me” 136
   Malevolent Metaphorical Moves 138
   Escalating Language Games 143
   S-Words Nearer to My Home 146
   Native American Team Names and Mascots: “In Whose Honor?” 153
   Slurs Targeting Women 158
   Other Insults and (Apparent) Name-Calling 162
   Reclamation: A Success Story? 165
   Notes 170
6 Reforming/Resisting: “It’s Like a Kind of Sexual Racism” 174
   The Birth of Sexism 175
   Reshaping Existing Linguistic Resources: The Case of Racism and Racist 182
   Is It About Language? Redefining Rape 192
   Preferred Gender Pronouns 199
# Contents

Euphemism vs "Identity-Affirmation” or “Correction” 208
Notes 212

- Dictionaries 216
- Division of Linguistic Labor: Expertise 221
- Dueling Experts: The Pluto Wars 222
- Courts Authorizing Meanings: *Fruit* and *Marriage* 224
- Inclusive Language Guidelines: Prescribing and Proscribing 231
- Politically Correct (PC): Virtue-Signaling and Mockery 235
- Empowering First-Person Semantic Authority 238
- Communities Are the Ultimate Semantic Authorities 242
Notes 244

8 Concluding 246
- Does It Seem Crazy? Why? 247
- Using Language Recommendations to Expand Minds 252
- Naming Frontiers 256
- Typographical Distinctions: Boundary-Policing and Dog-Whistling 262
- "Why Don’t You Go Back Where You Came From?” 267
- Framing the Free Speech Debate 275
- Linguistic Change Can Be Painful 279
Notes 283

References 287
Index 304
## Figures

1.1 The Sex Spectrum  
1.2 Who are the Haudenosaunee?  
4.1 A Short Guide to Using *Vous* and *Tu*  
4.2 English Address Options  
5.1 The Queer Nation Manifesto (excerpts)  
6.1 Urban Dictionary Definitions of Racism (in order of rankings)  
7.1 Definition of *Glory* from MerriamWebster.com  
8.1 An Open Letter to Our Friends on the Question of Language (excerpts)  
8.2 Cornell’s Latina/o/x Student Success Office Name Change
Acknowledgments

Writing this book has been challenging and rewarding. For more years than I care to admit, I have circled around the topic of the embedding of meaning-making in social life. This book finally brings together some of my thinking on that topic in a way that I hope will engage people who have not thought much about these issues before and will also interest some who have. I could not have done it without a large community of supportive friends and colleagues to whom I am very grateful. Some readers may just want to look for names or skip this section altogether; these acknowledgments situate my gratitude in my intellectual history, and I have not written that for the book’s general audience. Inevitably, I will have neglected to mention names of some important contributors to or supporters of my work. I hope my imperfect memory will be forgiven.

My first paper in graduate school was for a semantics course taught by Adrienne Lehrer, whose own work has explored a variety of topics connected to lexical meaning. That paper, which I revised and published a decade later, focused on the abstract and difficult word good and the way in which the words it modified (good dancer vs good mother vs good wine) shifted how it was understood. Adrienne graciously agreed to supervise my PhD on the semantics of comparatives, which focused on the map between syntax and semantics rather than on specific meanings of content words.

By happy accident, just as I was beginning my dissertation, I was able to attend an NEH summer program on semantics organized by philosopher Gil Harman. There I heard and learned directly from such people as Gareth Evans, Paul Grice, David Kaplan, Saul Kripke, Barbara Partee, Bob Stalnaker (later a Cornell colleague in philosophy), Rich Thomason, and others. And I was introduced to work by Joan Bresnan, Hans Kamp, Irene Heim, David Lewis, Richard Montague, Hilary Putnam, and more. Their ways of thinking about language resonated for me, so I was ‘primed’ when
Gennaro Chierchia arrived at Cornell in the 1980s and suggested we coauthor a text to introduce semantics to linguists, which turned out to be a very rewarding collaboration. That collaboration might never have borne fruit without Craige Roberts’ help. I was on leave in Palo Alto and beginning to work on ‘my’ chapters when I sustained a diagonal break of my tibia, the same injury that had kept me in a wheelchair for many months as a nine-year-old. Craige happened to find out about this early on. She rescued me from my growing despair by suggesting that the two of us form a reading group and also discussing with me the chapter on presupposition I was drafting for the semantics text. And she’s continued to support my work, including this book.

Not surprisingly, the chapter in the semantics text on lexical meaning was the most difficult for me to write (and the one about which Gennaro and I had the most intense arguments – I miss arguing with Gennaro, whom I see too seldom these days). For the second edition, published in 2000, I scrapped most of what I had said about lexical meaning in the first so that I could highlight the important work showing that even content words show considerable semantic systematicity, especially in abstract matters like causation. But I could not embrace the view that lexical meanings were fully analyzed by recurring components, even though I found many such analyses enlightening. In an earlier paper on adverbs, I had returned to matters of modification about which I had first written in my good paper. I proposed that, in a technical sense, adverbs actually shift the meanings of the verbs to which they attach. In an aside, I also suggested that adverbs like botanically or technically indicate alternative interpretations of some word and direct interpreters to interpretations serving particular purposes. Languages offer a range of resources for tinkering with what words mean, I somewhat tentatively suggested.

But this work had very little to do with social life or power. In the early 1970s, immediately after I got my PhD, I was hired for a visiting position at Cornell in what was then called Women’s Studies (and at Cornell is now called FGSS, pronounced like ‘figs’ and standing for Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies) and Philosophy. That first year I taught a seminar in the first semester that helped me develop an undergraduate course for the second semester called ”Women and Language,” which eventually became

Acknowledgments
“Language and Gender.” The linguists then took me on to teach the undergraduate gender course (and other courses in the structure of English, semantics, and pragmatics). I was already influenced by feminist activism and popular literature like *The Feminine Mystique*, but teaching about the interaction of language with gender issues led me to explore not only the burgeoning literature in feminist scholarship (and later queer studies) but also some of the relevant theoretical literature in the social sciences. Jane-Carol Glendinning, a Penn PhD in linguistics who attended my first seminar, introduced me to empirically grounded studies of language use being done by William Labov and students. Our contact has been somewhat sporadic, but she remains a valued friend and supporter. With literary scholar Nelly Furman and anthropologist Ruth Borker (who, very sadly, died shortly after turning forty), I coedited and contributed to *Women and Language in Literature and Society* (with indexing help from Ruta Noreika, an undergraduate in that first language and gender course, who remains a close friend). My undergraduate education included no social science, and the only literature class I took was one in German. Nelly, Ruth, and anthropologist Kathryn March helped educate me. Kath had been a grad student in that initial seminar and later became a Cornell colleague with whom I taught several times and who remains a good friend. Other friends and colleagues in Women’s Studies like social psychologist Sandra Bem (also dead far too early) and political scientist Mary F. Katzenstein (who read a draft of this book and offered useful suggestions) also helped expand my intellectual horizons to ideas about patriarchy, injustice, ideology, and more, as did Zillah Eisenstein, a major figure in socialist feminism at Ithaca College.

Initially I was uncomfortable thinking about issues of meaning and gender. After all, I had been reared with the myth that “he includes she” by virtue of some mysterious ‘linguistic convention.’ I even used male names in the invented examples of my dissertation. The study of meaning was abstract as I understood it, the sort of thing a former math major like me felt comfortable pursuing. Well, I could hardly ignore the social in thinking about gender, but I tried at first to contain it to matters I thought of as in the scope of sociolinguistics, safely not my field, or pragmatics. Maybe I could keep the social action to matters like variation in pronunciation (for
others to study and me to teach), politeness, and whether women and men might perform different speech acts (or the same ones in different ways – or be understood differently). But students and colleagues fairly soon made my compartmentalization of the two strands of my research and teaching deeply problematic. From when I first saw Kath March slap stickers proclaiming “This is offensive to women” on posters and the like, the two strands got entangled. I began to suspect that saying generic masculines were “just conventional” was a cop-out. How might conventions like that arise? Empirical research already showed clearly that in actual linguistic practice he was not freely useable in all circumstances of reference to human beings. So I began to think, write, and give talks about pronouns in English and then about how it might be that expressions referring to women so often became infected with negativity. Soon there was no turning back.

I fully embraced research on the interaction of meaning with gender and sexuality in the early 1980s after I met and started talking with sociolinguist Penelope Eckert. Penny and I began actually collaborating at the beginning of the 1990s and published the first edition of our coauthored Language and Gender in 2003. Penny inspired me by just charging ahead and working on issues that concerned her without paying attention to the kinds of questions that always seemed to plague me. “Is this linguistics?” or “Is this semantics?” I used to ask myself, worried that the answer was “no.” Of course, having tenure has made it much easier to ignore disciplinary boundaries, but Penny had ignored them before being so protected. She introduced me to Bourdieu and Goffman and many other important thinkers about language in our lives. And we talked and talked (and sometimes argued) when writing together, a highlight being a joint residency at the Rockefeller Institute in Bellagio in 1998. Penny’s wonderful “Indexical Fields” paper was the basis of a talk she gave on the occasion of my retirement from teaching at Cornell. (My good friend and colleague Molly Diesing also gave a talk then that used syntactic and pragmatic theory to analyze spells in the Harry Potter books; she and I collaborated on developing the paper further, but, sadly, potential publishers wanted more revisions to it than we were willing to make.) Although I was glad in 2013 to see my first print copy of the second edition of Language and Gender, greatly changed from

xii

Acknowledgments
the first, I was sad that my work with Penny had ended. Our friendship, of course, continues.

I had begun thinking about writing this book (or something like it) after Betty Birner and Gregory Ward invited me in the early 2000s to submit a paper to the festschrift they were editing in honor of Larry Horn. (Gregory and I had become close colleagues and good friends through our work for the LSA and through co-teaching a course on language and sexuality at the LSA Linguistic Institute at Michigan State in the summer of 2003. I owe Gregory special thanks for useful comments on the draft of this book sent to Cambridge in August 2019.) That paper on defining marriage and the connected disputes over the institution of marriage was my first solo project fully embracing the “who cares if it’s really linguistics?” orientation that Penny’s example (and being tenured!) helped me finally adopt. And I thank Deborah Cameron for abridging it for inclusion in a collection she was coediting with Don Kulick on language and sexuality. (Debbie is another hero, who, long before being professionally secure, did not listen to “that’s not linguistics.” She just did and continues to do brilliant feminist work about language, now on her wonderful blog, Language: A Feminist Guide, at debuk.wordpress.com.) The marriage paper was followed by my LSA Presidential Address, “Words in the World.” Encouraged by an editor no longer in the publishing business, I began then to think about writing a book that developed some of the ideas in that paper, a book pitched toward nonacademics.

And in 2015 I got several invitations pushing me forward. The first was from the Yale linguistics department inviting me to give a talk at a workshop celebrating Larry Horn on the occasion of his retirement. I used the occasion to explore linguistic issues of special significance to transgender people. (I should say here that without Larry’s published work as well as his constant attentiveness to media sources attesting to changing linguistic practices I would have been hard put to write this book.) And then Brian King, to whom New Zealand linguist Janet Holmes, a wonderful feminist scholar and supporter, had introduced me years earlier, invited me to speak at IGALA (International Gender and Language Association) 9, the theme of which was transition. With valuable input from Andrea James, a transgender writer and activist I met online, I developed the paper from the “Hornucopia” event and,
after giving that talk, met some inspiring transgender activists in Hong Kong in May 2016. (Chu-Ren Huang, my PhD student at Cornell, had invited me to spend a week at Hong Kong Polytechnic University in 2010; he and other linguists in Hong Kong, including his wife, Kathleen Ahrens, have been greatly supportive of my work.)

Perhaps most critically, in 2015 Sebastian Bücking invited me to participate in the two-week DGfS (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Semantik) summer school, “Mapping Meaning,” that he was organizing at the University of Tübingen for late August 2016. “Meaning, Society, and Power” was the title of my eight-session course, which touched on many though not all the topics in this book. This book benefitted enormously from comments not only by the enrolled students but also from several faculty attending, Tübingen professors Erhard Hinrichs and Claudia Maienborn as well as visiting professor Nicholas Asher.

Coincidentally, my friends Fred Landman, a former colleague, and Susan Rothstein, also a distinguished syntactician and semanticist, were in the final weeks of eighteen-month research fellowships that had brought them to Tübingen from Tel Aviv. I was able to spend time with them, including a marvelous day at a nearby spa with Susan, where we soaked in mineral water and talked about my book project. Susan was enormously supportive of all my work and very insightful in her comments. Like many others, I was devastated by her unexpected and too early death in the summer of 2019.

I returned from Germany with the book still in its early stages. Donald Trump’s defeat of Hillary Clinton a couple of months later helped move me to commit (finally) to writing this book. In the spring of 2017, I lunched with Andrew Winnard of Cambridge University Press. Andrew encouraged me to submit a proposal, which the syndics accepted that June. The worries of one of the Press’s reviewers that I might focus too much on gender and sexuality spurred me to do even more reading and thinking than I already had about matters of race and ethnicity. And in late August 2017 I began teaching “Language in Society,” a Cornell undergraduate course for which the text was Miriam Meyerhoff’s *Introducing Sociolinguistics*. (Colleague Abigail Cohn had recommended to chair John Whitman that I step in while she was on leave; Abby also read and commented on part of this book.) I’d
Acknowledgments

naively thought that I would combine drafts of my projected book with assignments from Miriam’s text (one of her exercises originated in my language and gender course, which she’d attended while at Cornell on a postdoc) and thereby progress with my writing. Well, it worked less smoothly than I’d hoped. Drafts rolled out quickly at first but then slowed. And the organization I’d envisioned in my proposal did not work as I’d imagined. Nonetheless, the interaction with the undergraduates was stimulating and their enthusiasm helped me move along.

That same fall, Luvell Anderson invited me to give a talk, which I called “Truth, Trust, and Trumpery.” A slightly different version of that paper had been published shortly before in a festschrift honoring Janet Holmes and edited by Meredith Marra and Paul Warren, to whom I owe thanks for getting permission for republication of that paper by the *Southern Journal of Philosophy* as part of the proceedings from the University of Memphis conference organized by Luvell. This book does not address directly the issues that paper raises, nor does it deal with a number of relevant matters covered in *Propaganda* by Jason Stanley, a former colleague. It was, however, Jason’s invitation to speak at a Yale conference on language and authority in the spring of 2018 that helped me develop the chapter on semantic authority (Chapter 7). And David Beaver, coauthor with Jason of a published paper and of a book in progress on related matters, not only read the entire manuscript of this book in September 2019 but offered some very useful comments and suggestions.

Not long after the Yale conference, Heather Burnett invited me to spend a week in April 2019 with her and her colleagues and students in the stimulating linguistics group at Paris 7. I gave a talk based on the chapter on linguistic reform and resistance to it (Chapter 6) in their departmental colloquium and a new version of the semantic authority material in a workshop organized for the final weekend of my stay. Even more important, I got to talk with Heather, Andrea Beltrama (then a postdoc in Heather’s group), and others in the department as well as the other workshop participants.

A host of others have given me useful references or read and commented on portions of the material in the book or read the manuscript and sent encouragement. In addition to people I have already mentioned, they include at least the following: Susan
Acknowledgments

Brison, Richard Brooks, Liz Camp, Susan Gelman, Karen Jones, Dan Jurafsky, Rae Langton, Barbara Deutsch Lynch, Sarah Murray, Donna Jo Napoli, Joan Ormondroyd, Mandy Simon, Will Starr, Zoltan Szabó, and Rob Voigt. Colleagues who gave me more substantial comments include not only David Beaver, Mary Katzenstein, and Gregory Ward, whose help I have already mentioned, but also Anne Adams (a Cornell colleague from Africana and a good friend), Mary Kate McGowan (a leading contributor to social philosophy of language whom I’ve met at a couple of conferences), Matt Shields (recent Georgetown PhD in philosophy who invited me to serve on his doctoral committee), and Mia Windhearn (Cornell grad student in semantics).

Other Cornell colleagues, especially but not only in linguistics and philosophy, have supported this work in various ways. I’ve mentioned Molly Diesing, Abby Cohn, and John Whitman already. The semantics reading group, begun by Sarah Murray and Will Starr, has been a wonderful resource and a lively audience for ‘practice’ talks I’ve given on material from the book.

It was Sarah who suggested Mia Windhearn (now Windhearn) serve as my research assistant in the final months of manuscript preparation. Mia has given me excellent substantive feedback and has also taken over technical details, including mastering Word’s indexing capabilities. Funds for hiring Mia and for other expenses came from a PEAES (Podell Emeriti Award for Research and Scholarship) grant, ably administered by Cynthia Robinson in the office of CAPE (the Cornell Association of Professors Emeriti) and then by Gretchen Ryan, administrative manager of Cornell’s Department of Linguistics. Albert P. Podell, Cornell Class of 1958, set up PEAR in 2005 to help “support research and scholarship related to making the world a better place for all peoples of the Earth.” What impact a book like mine can have I’m unsure, but I hope very much that it does do at least some small good. I greatly appreciate Mr. Podell’s support of mine and other projects undertaken by retired Cornellians.

I’ve already mentioned Andrew Winnard of Cambridge University Press, with whom I’d earlier worked on Language and Gender. Andrew was mainly involved in acquiring the book, but he also helped draft a licensing agreement for Figure 5.1 with Abby Muller of Algonquin Press. Isabel Collins, however, was my
primary Cambridge editorial contact in late 2019. In December 2019, Grace Morris began managing production and by late January 2020 Stanly Emelson and Frances Tye were handling the (almost) final stages. Jayavel Radhakrishnan and team took over final typesetting corrections in April. In the pandemic shutdown of the Cornell campus, friend and neighbor Bonni Voiland scanned sheets for me to send Jay. CUP’s Rachel Tonkin began the advertising push. Thanks to them all.

Many others, in Ithaca and afar, have also supported me – friends in Eastwood Commons, Drama Club, yoga class, Women Swimmin’, theatre boards, and more. Diana Hotaling’s political insights have been as invaluable as her cleaning skills. And I thank Judith Richwine and Alison Spransy, my sisters, along with nephews and nieces, cousins, as well as others who are ‘family’ by virtue of something other than a bit of shared genetic material. I do hope that at least some of you read this book.

Two people reading these acknowledgments may well be wondering why their names have not yet appeared. The first is Gillian Moore Jondorf, retired from Cambridge’s Modern Languages Faculty and a Life Fellow of Girton College, Cambridge. Jill has been a close friend for six decades, beginning when I went to Cambridge on a Fulbright in philosophy. I sent Jill the manuscript in August 2019, hoping but not daring to expect that she would read and comment on it. Jill is a linguist in the sense of knowing very well languages other than her native English, but she is neither a philosopher of language nor a linguist as understood by most university departments and programs of linguistics. She is, however, a meticulous reader and proofreader, which I knew. I was delighted when she returned the manuscript a month or so later with copious and extremely helpful annotations. Typos, inconsistencies, unclarities: she is not to blame if some of these remain. I tried to respond to all her comments but I may have missed a few and may also have introduced new infelicities in making other revisions. I was especially touched and pleased that she said she found the process enjoyable. Thanks are inadequate.

The second is Carl Ginet, my husband. Carl has read and reread many versions of the material in the book, listened to me talk about it in public, discussed it with me over dinner and on many other occasions, and in countless ways propped up my sometimes
flagging commitment to the project. Carl has been retired from Cornell’s philosophy department for a couple of decades, but he still reads philosophy papers for pleasure. His own writing is beautifully clear. And he has always advised me as well as his students to use plenty of examples. Often as I was writing I heard that injunction. When I did hand over drafts, sometimes reluctantly, his careful criticism was leavened with what seemed like real enthusiasm (though I do have to remember that he’s a very talented actor!). Without him I doubt if I could have finished.

Carl is also the love of my life, whom I met at age 20 just a few months before I met Jill. I dedicated my previous book to him. This one I want to dedicate to his and my now middle-aged children – Lisa, Alan, and Greg Ginet – and to Jill Dreeben, Greg’s wife, and Bob Spatz, Lisa’s husband. And I include our millennial grandchildren – Simon, Chris, Michael, and Vanessa Ginet. In different ways, they too have all cheered me on.

Ithaca, New York, USA
April 2020

Acknowledgments