LANGUAGE AND GENDER

Suzanne Romaine

Merton College, University of Oxford, UK

Keywords: gender, language, markedness, asymmetry, generics, sexism, invisibility, reform

Contents

Summary

Feminist research from the 1960s onwards has articulated a critical stance towards gender as an analytical category. This chapter examines the fundamental role of language in constructing and representing gender. One strand of research has addressed the question of whether women and men speak differently, and explored the nature of femininity and masculinity and how their associated ideologies are expressed in language. Another has illustrated how language plays an active role in the symbolic positioning of women as inferior to men. It both constructs and perpetuates that reality, often in obvious ways, but at other times in subtle and invisible ways. Women are often marked as deviant and deficient, or made invisible through a variety of linguistic practices revealing the ideological construction of MAN (male as norm). Evidence can be found in asymmetries between pairs of gender-differentiated terms such as *master* and *mistress*, etc., where the female term has negative associations, while the male term is either neutral or positive. Another example consists of the use of masculine forms such as *he*, *man* and compounds such as *mankind*, *chairman*, etc. in a so-called generic sense to include women, e.g. *all men are created equal*. Another example is the marking of terms and names referring to women and/or the derivation of female terms from male terms, e.g. *actor/actress*, etc. Such usages illustrate how women have been constructed as 'Other' and how femininity is perceived as masculinity inverted. Women are the 'second sex' or [-male]. Reform of sexist language has played a crucial role in the struggle for gender equity. Because languages vary in terms of the amount of sexism they display, language reform has taken somewhat different directions in languages such as English compared to other languages such as French, where attention is constantly drawn to the issue of gender by virtue of the requirements of

grammatical agreement.

1. Gender as a Communicative Process

Gender is an inherently communicative process that is constructed and enacted largely through language. If someone is heard talking about people named *Paul*, *George* and *Henry*, we assume they are male. English names for females, however, are often derived from or are diminutive forms of male names, e.g. *Paulette/Pauline/Paula*, *Henrietta*, *Georgina*, etc. Conventional terms of address and titles in English and many other languages force women to choose forms that are marked in some way; *Miss* and *Mrs.* indicate marital status in addition to gender while the male title *Mr.* signals only that the person referred to is male. Such usages reflect societal assumptions about gender and gender roles, in particular, the high premium placed on women's potential availability to men as marriage partners. When someone describes a color as 'baby blue', 'carnation pink', 'lavender' or 'mauve', the speaker is more likely to be imagined a woman rather than a man. When readers see stories about scientists in the newspapers, many still have mental images of men, despite the fact that many women are now scientists. When many people read a newspaper headline *Doctor seduced patient*, they assume the doctor is male and the patient, female. The use of the term *man* instead of a more gender neutral term such as *human(s)*, *humanity*, *people*, etc., obscures women's contributions to language and its evolution. When Neil Armstrong became the first man to set foot on the moon in 1969 he uttered these words: "That's one small step for man, but one giant leap for mankind."

Nowadays, such usage would be called 'sexist'. Most publishers and many organizations including government agencies in many countries have guidelines telling authors how to avoid language which either excludes women or stereotypes them in negative ways. The Guidelines issued to contributors to this encyclopedia state that "EOLSS (Encyclopedia of Life Support Systems) should be free from sexist and racist expressions. Preferred expressions are: *Humankind*, *Humans*, *Chair* or *Chairperson* etc." Such alternatives are conscious choices language users can make, and thanks to several decades of feminist reform, decisions not to make them increasingly stand out. In many areas of public life so-called 'gender neutral' language now prevails. University departments now have *chairpersons* or *chairs*, and some restaurants have *waitpersons* or *waitrons*. Although these terms do not mark gender, they still force speakers to make choices and various alternatives are socially and/or politically loaded. In some cases the choices convey meanings that their users do not intend. Meanwhile, seemingly gender neutral terms such as *person*, *member of society*, *scientist*, *doctor*, etc. are often still interpreted as masculine by default (see Section 4.).

Cross-linguistic examination has revealed a number of key areas of grammar and vocabulary where gender is displayed or indicated in various ways. Studies have paid particular attention to personal pronouns, occupational terms, titles and forms of address as highly strategic sites where gender is either optionally or obligatorily indexed in language, often by means of forms that convey negative attitudes and stereotypes about women. To be referred to as *the Mrs.* or *the little woman* is indicative of the subordinate place assigned to women. In some languages, especially those with so-called grammatical gender like French and Russian, gender is more overt than in languages like English. Grammatical conflicts arise now that women hold titles or positions which have traditionally been

masculine in gender in languages like French, e.g. *le capitaine* 'captain', *le policier* 'policeman', *le professeur* 'professor', etc. The masculine status of these nouns is indicated by the use of the masculine form of the definite article *le*, which contrasts with the feminine *la*. By contrast, in English nouns such as *secretary*, *nurse* and *teacher* referring to low status occupations are technically gender neutral because they do not overtly mark gender. Although English does not normally encode gender overtly in its occupational terms, personal pronouns obligatorily indicate gender in third person singular pronouns, i.e. *she/he*, *her/him*, *hers/his*. Nouns such as *lawyer*, *doctor*, etc. referring to high status occupations have traditionally been pronominalized with male pronouns when the sex of the person is unknown, e.g. *A doctor should always give his patients the best care*. Finnish and other languages make no distinction of gender in pronouns, and in Japanese men and women use different sets of first and second person pronouns. In Japanese and other languages with elaborate markers of politeness and honorifics indicating the social status of the interlocutors, women are expected to use higher levels of politeness and honorifics to male interlocutors than they receive in return.

Other studies have identified systematic male-female differences in many languages. These range from differences in vocabulary, differences in linguistic forms (e.g. phonology, morphology and syntax) to whole communicative styles, e.g. politeness, directness, etc. (see Section 3.). However, alleged differences in male and female speech represent only part of the picture. Scholars must also look at how men and women are spoken about, and how ways of speaking and acting fit into cultural beliefs about the roles of women and men. Gender stereotypes are sets of beliefs about the attributes of men or women, e.g. men are stronger and more aggressive, women are passive, talk more than men, etc. Stereotypes are often associated with and not easily separated from other salient variables such as race, class, culture, age, context, etc. Stereotypes about how men and women speak reveal insights into our attitudes about what men and women are like or what they are supposed to be like according to the norms of a particular culture. Many languages have proverbs and sayings that indicate gender hierarchies in which men are more highly valued than women, and women are stereotyped as stupid, overly talkative and fickle. In Turkish there is a proverb saying 'Let the one who bears a son be proud, let the one who bears a daughter beat herself.' A Romanian proverb states 'Nothing changes more quickly than the weather and women.'

Perceived gender differences are often the result of these stereotypes about such differences rather than the result of the actual existence of real differences. It is all too easy to confuse expectations with actual behavior. Take, for example, the stereotype of the talkative, gossiping woman, and the ideal of the silent woman in medieval woodcuts and paintings where the Virtue Prudence is portrayed as a housewife with a padlock on her mouth. How are these competing images to be reconciled with women's claims that they have been silenced? When silence is the yardstick, any woman who talks at all seems to be talking too much. Gender is not just about biological and cultural difference, it is also about power. Much of this power and symbolic domination is achieved and validated through talk across a range of contexts, e.g. at home, in school, in court, in the work place, etc. Crucial decisions are often arrived at on the basis of verbal interaction in interviews, meetings and other public encounters. It is largely through talk that the powerful legitimate and reproduce their point of view. Male privilege sustains the myth that male talk is not gendered, that men's talk is neither trivial nor gossip.

2. Man-made Language

The women's movement made sexism in language a political issue. Gender scholars have argued that English and other languages are made BY men FOR men in order to represent their point of view and perpetuate it. In this world view women are marked as deviant and deficient, or made invisible. This so-called 'sexism in language' can be demonstrated with many different kinds of evidence. The first type of evidence involves asymmetries between pairs of gender-differentiated terms such as *sir* and *madam*. The female term has negative associations, while the male term is either neutral or positive. Another kind of evidence is the use of masculine forms such as *he*, *man* and compounds such as *mankind* in a so-called generic sense to include women. Another is the marking of words and expressions referring to women, e.g. *career woman/lady/girl*.

2.1. Asymmetries

Many words for women have negative connotations, even where the corresponding male terms designate the same or similar condition for men. If we examine pairs of gender marked terms such as *lord/lady*, *baronet/dame*, *Sir/Madam*, *master/mistress*, *king/queen*, *lady/gentleman*, etc., the female terms may start out on an equal footing, but become devalued over time. *Lord*, for instance, preserves its original meaning, while *lady* is no longer used exclusively for women of high rank. In the 17th century it became a synonym for a prostitute. So did *courtesan*, which originally meant a female member of the court, the female equivalent of a *courtier*. *Baronet* still retains its original meaning as an aristocratic title, but the female counterpart *dame* is used derogatorily, especially in American English. A *governor* is a male ruler, but a *governess* is a woman who looks after children. *Sir* is still used as a title and a form of respect, while a *madam* is one who runs a brothel. Likewise, *master* has not lost its original meaning, but *mistress* has come to have sexual connotations and no longer refers to the woman who had control over a household. In Italian the related word *maestro* can mean a 'schoolmaster' as well as a 'great teacher', whereas the feminine form *maestra* refers to a 'schoolmistress'. There is a considerable discrepancy between referring to someone as an *old master* as opposed to an *old mistress*. In Moroccan Arabic *wld zznqa* 'boy of the street' has a positive meaning of being 'street smart', but the female equivalent *bnt zznqa* 'girl of the street' means 'loose woman' or 'prostitute'. The negative connotations of the latter reflect partly the assumption that women's place is in the home; a woman outside the domestic sphere is not a virtuous woman. These examples show how the connotations of words do not arise from words themselves but how they are used in context. The meanings of words are constructed and maintained by patterns of collocation or co-occurrence. Collocations transmit cultural meanings and stereotypes that have built up over time and can be difficult to change.

Society has regarded women's marital status and availability as a distinguishing feature and their sexuality as a major threat to social order. Over time words referring to women have become tainted by their association with female sexuality so that euphemisms arose to avoid reference to them. The term *lady* was commonly (and in some instances still is) used as a 'polite euphemism' for *woman*. Nevertheless, the term *lady* is not simply the polite equivalent of *gentleman*, as is sometimes claimed. It is used in circumstances where *gentleman* would not be (with the exception of the phrase *ladies and gentlemen* used to address a mixed audience). Compare the commonly used term *cleaning lady* with non-

existent *cleaning gentleman*.

-
-
-

TO ACCESS ALL THE **18 PAGES** OF THIS CHAPTER,
Visit: http://www.eolss.net/Eolss-sampleAllChapter.aspx

Bibliography

Cameron, D. Ed. (1998). *The Feminist Critique of Language*. London: Routledge. [This is a collection of critical essays on language from a feminist point of view].

Coates, J. (1996). *Women Talk: Conversation Between Women Friends*. Oxford: Blackwell. [This is a study of the conversational styles used by a group of female friends].

Coates, J. (2003). *Men Talk: Stories in the Making of Masculinities*. Oxford: Blackwell. [This is a study of the conversational styles used by a group of male friends].

Hellinger, M. and H. Bussmann, Eds. (2001-2003). *Gender across Languages*. Vols. 1-3. Amsterdam: Benjamins [These volumes examine gender representation in more than 20 languages including different varieties of English (British, American, Australian, New Zealand)].

Holmes, J. (1995). *Women, Men and Politeness*. London: Longman. [This book discusses the notion of politeness and examines differences between men and women].

Holmes, J. and M. Meyerhoff Eds. (2003). *The Handbook of Language and Gender*. Oxford: Blackwell. [This collection provides an overview of the field of language and gender].

Lakoff, R. (2004). *Language and Woman's Place. Text and Commentaries*. Ed. Mary Bucholtz. Oxford: Oxford University Press. [This is a reprint of a classic text first published in 1975, and often said to mark the beginning of the study of language and gender. It is supplemented by recent annotation by Lakoff and a series of commentaries by current researchers].

Livia, A. and K. Hall Eds. (1996). *Queerly phrased: language, gender and sexuality*. New York: Oxford University Press. [This book contains essays on language in gay and lesbian communities].

Romaine, S. (1999). *Communicating Gender*. Mahwah, NJ: Laurence Erlbaum. [This provides an overview of the field of language and gender].

Tannen, D. (1990). *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*. New York: William Morrow and Co. [This bestselling book explains male-female differences in conversational style in terms of cross-cultural communication].

Biographical Sketch

Suzanne Romaine has been Merton Professor of English Language at the University of Oxford since 1984. She has held a variety of scholarships and visiting fellowships at other universities, including the Rotary International Foundation fellowship (University of Edinburgh) and the Canada Commonwealth Scholarship (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto). In 1991-1992 she was Kerstin Hesselgren Professor at the University of Uppsala. This award for outstanding women in the Humanities is sponsored by the Swedish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences. Her research interests lie primarily in historical linguistics and sociolinguistics, especially in problems of societal multilingualism, linguistic diversity, language change, language acquisition, and language contact in the broadest sense. Her book *Vanishing voices. The extinction of the world's languages*, written jointly with Daniel Nettle (Oxford University Press, 2000) won the British Association for Applied Linguistics

Book Prize in 2001. Other books include *Language in Society. An Introduction to Sociolinguistics.* (Oxford University Press, 2000 2nd ed.), *Communicating Gender* (Lawrence Erlbaum, 1999), *Bilingualism* (Blackwell, 1995 2nd ed.), *Language, Education and Development: Rural and Urban Tok Pisin in Papua New Guinea* (Oxford University Press, 1992), and *Pidgin and Creole Languages* (Longman, 1988).