



## Language and Gender

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While the most obvious function of language is to communicate information, language also contributes to at least two other equally important, but less often recognized, functions: (1) to establish and maintain social relationships, and (2) to express and create the social identity of the speaker.

These functions may be recognized less often because information such as class or race is conveyed not as much through *what* we say, as through *how* we say it. In other words, information is conveyed as much by how we compose our utterances as through the precise character of our thought. This is certainly true of gender.

### Early Studies

People have long known that gender and language use are connected. Early anthropological studies on gendered language focused on non-Western cultures, for which it was reported that men and women spoke different languages, although these reports were ultimately discovered to be exaggerated.

Gendered language in industrial societies was not taken as a serious topic of study until the 1960s, and did not explode as a subfield in its own right until the publication of Robin Lakoff's book *Language and Woman's Place* in 1975.

A programmatic, feminist piece, Lakoff's book presents impressionistic conclusions regarding the speech of (heterosexual, white, middle class, American) women. Some of the features of what Lakoff calls "women's language" include specialized color terms (for example, *mauve*), words to "hedge" the strength of a statement (such as *sort of*, *maybe*), expressive *so* (as in *It is so cute*), tag questions (such as *This room is quite hot, isn't it?*, which is "softer" than *This room is quite hot.*), rising pitch in declarative statements (so that they sound like questions), and avoidance of swearing and other taboo words. Lakoff argues that women use these features because they are denied means of strong expression within a male-dominated society.

Lakoff's book, while groundbreaking in the field, is also problematic. First, it largely confounds the notions of sex (as an inborn, essentially binary opposition) with gender (as a learned, socially-constructed continuum). For example, the work ignores the fact that women in high status positions (such as corporate CEOs) may portray a very different image of femininity than, for example, a sex worker.

Second, Lakoff implicitly views female language as deviant from a male norm. Finally, distinctions other than heterosexual-male and heterosexual-female (or even variability within these categories!) are not discussed beyond stereotyped statements such as that gay men use some of the characteristics of "women's language" (for example, a wider range of color terms).

### Cross-gender Communication as Cross-cultural Communication

Many later studies recapitulated this focus on heterosexual, white, middle class women, and many accepted Lakoff's observations about language use. At the same time, however, *explanations* for "women's language" have changed.

For example, Tannen's best-selling book *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* (1990) argues that gender differences are parallel to cross-cultural differences. She claims that when interpreting the cultural information encoded by language, men and women rely on different subcultural norms. Female subculture uses language to build equal relationships, while male subculture uses language to build hierarchical relationships.

Thus, when a man says "I didn't sleep well last night," a woman will interpret the man's original statement as a request to build an equal relationship by showing that both people are the same, and she may respond with a similar complaint: "I didn't sleep well either." The man, however, would interpret the woman's response as an attempt to deny his uniqueness, putting him in a subordinate position in the conversation.

In other words, Tannen argues that differences in language between women and men result from a misunderstanding of the intent of the other sex, and not (necessarily) from the dominant position of men in society. While Tannen's book was harshly criticized by many feminists for denying societal inequality, a theoretical shift ultimately demonstrated that these two explanations--subcultural difference vs. social dominance--are not necessarily contradictory.

### **"Performing" Gender through Language**

In the late 1980s, study of the relationship between language and gender moved towards viewing language as *performative* of gender and not simply *reflective* of it. In short, people *create* gender through speech (and other actions). If people perform gender roles, it is expected that the performance will vary from one context to the next, and different theories may explain different situations.

Gender may be performed through language in a variety of ways. As a single example, Penelope Eckert investigated the speech of Detroit high school students who could be categorized as either "jocks" or "burnouts." She found that girls pronounced three vowels differently from boys, but did not themselves constitute a uniform group. Instead, the girls were using language in order to *polarize* themselves as either jocks or burnouts. In other words, the girls were using language to perform both a gender and a jock or burnout identity.

Eckert argued that language was used to create social identity specifically because self-definition through action (such as by being a star athlete) was unavailable for girls. Studies such as Eckert's have been important for understanding the ways that gender is performed within context, and the degree to which both gender and its linguistic expression can vary from one situation to the next.

### **The Place of GLBTQ Language Studies**

The idea that gender is performed opened the door for studies on the speech of non-heterosexual groups, although the importance of GLBTQ language studies for language and gender studies generally is not yet clear.

The speech of gay males has, to date, received the most attention. There is a growing literature on lesbian language use, and a few studies each on drag queens and transgender people, but by comparison with other areas of research on language and society, evidence for a gay language has been lacking.

Don Kulick, currently one of the most outspoken critics of existing research on gay and lesbian language, goes so far as to say that previous research "has failed to come up with any structural, morphological, or phonological features that are unique to gay men or lesbians."

He argues that the lack of concrete results, among other reasons, suggests that sexuality should be studied as an example of desire, not an example of gender. In short, he (implicitly) denies that sexuality is a social identity of the same sort as "woman" or "African American," subject to expression through language. Kulick argues that research should instead focus on "the role that fantasy, repression, and unconscious motivations play in linguistic interactions."

Not all researchers would state the condition of the field in such bleak terms, and even fewer would accept the position that sexuality (either as a subcategory of gender or as a distinct phenomenon) is not a social identity that is expressed through language.

However, if we allow that the linguistic creation of glbtq identities exists, this phenomenon is less well understood than, for example, the linguistic creation of a heterosexual African-American urban male identity. In short, the study of the speech of glbtq people has great promise within a performative framework, but that promise has yet to be fulfilled.

### **Summary**

Language and gender studies were historically concerned with the study of heterosexual, white, middle class women. Early studies focused on how the oppression of women in society is manifested through language (especially in America), while some later work conceptualized gender difference as being parallel to cross-cultural difference. However, as linguistic research in the 1990s shifted towards investigating the ways in which people use language to "perform" gender, studies of men, non-heterosexual, and other gender identities have become of increasing interest, and those topics promise to be more central to the field in the future.

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### **About the Author**

**Andrea D. Sims** is a Ph.D. student in linguistics at Ohio State University. She often teaches *Language and Gender*, a course that covers, among other topics, lesbian, gay, and transgender speech. She has a general scholarly interest in the ways in which identity is constructed through language, focusing her research on Croatian.