Gender, Sexuality, and Language

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Gender, Sexuality and Language

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Gender initially became a focus of linguistic interest in the first half of the 20th century when field linguists discovered what they perceived as stark differences between European languages and the indigenous languages they had begun to document in the Americas and elsewhere. Of particular interest was the finding that a number of these languages differentiated between women's and men's speech on the basis of grammar, phonology, and lexicon. These so-called 'women's languages' and 'men's languages' were characterized as vastly different and mutually exclusive, and were often held up as evidence for the rigidity of gender roles in traditional societies in contrast to the enlightened gender liberalism of Western modernity. In addition to the problematic exoticism of native languages and cultures that informs this view, such a dichotomy between traditional and modern structures of gender is empirically untenable. It has recently been shown, for instance, that it was only under the conditions of modernization that gender differentiation through the creation of 'women's language' emerged in Japan.

In these early texts, sexuality was not theoretically distinguished from gender; researchers assumed a direct mapping from one to the other and of both onto language. Thus a speaker's departure from normative speech patterns was interpreted as gender deviance as well as sexual deviance, with 'effeminate' and 'bisexual' speakers occupying the margins as linguistic exceptions to an otherwise unyielding gender dichotomy. What was missing from such a perspective was the concept of 'indexicality,' the process whereby language 'points to' the social and discursive context of its own production. Seen in this way, many instances of perceived cross-gender language use might more accurately be understood as indexing interactional stances such as affect or force/mitigation, not gender identities.

Despite its flaws, the early anthropological research on women's and men's languages did call attention to the important relationship between gender and sexuality. However, this connection was not developed theoretically until the 1990s, in spite of the small but steady stream of linguistic publications on sexuality. In the 1970s, a number of ethnographically oriented researchers published a flurry of studies on sexualized insults and banter, focusing primarily on male speakers. Although the intention of such work was to bring underinvestigated communities and genres into linguistic scholarship, many of these studies unwittingly worked to reinscribe stereotypes of the licentious and hypersexed Other.

As linguistic anthropologists began to turn their attention to at least some aspects of sexuality, gender was gaining a more central role in linguistic scholarship due to the influence of second-wave feminism, especially in sociolinguistic research on Western languages. One of the earliest and most important contributions to this new line of feminist scholarship offered a different conceptualization of 'women's language' as primarily pragmatic rather than structural and suggested that women's speech both produced and reflected real-world powerlessness. This view was complicated by contemporary anthropological research, however, which revealed that women's speech in other cultures could be forceful and assertive, though still devalued.

Recognizing the widespread deprecation of social practices associated with women, by the 1980s many feminist social scientists, including linguistic anthropologists, were seeking to validate women as competent cultural members in their own right. Meanwhile, the concept of 'culture' was adopted by some researchers of American society to account for what were still seen as vast differences between women and men. Though inspired by anthropological work on cross-cultural communication, this body of work overlooked widespread efforts to rethink the concept of culture within anthropology in this period.

A more complex understanding of culture emerged in language and gender research in the next decade, accompanied by more explicit theorizing of the concept of gender.

Much research on gender and language from the 1990s to the present has been greatly enriched by attention to the ideological symbolic aspects of talk as produced within particular communities of practice. In language and gender research, these insights led scholars to set aside a monolithic model of women's gender identity in favor of an examination of diverse versions of femininity even within a single 'culture' such as the United States.

Developments in poststructuralist gender theory and queer theory have further contributed to this shift. Drawing on and revising the poststructuralist feminist concept of performativity, which borrows heavily from the concept of the performative in the philosophy of language, linguistic anthropologists have documented the linguistic practices of gender-transgressive and sexually marginalized social groups around the world. Some of this research has been positioned within the theoretical perspective now known as 'queer linguistics,' which focuses on how sexuality is regulated by hegemonic heterosexuality and how nonnormative sexualities are negotiated in relation to such regulatory structures. Recent scholarship has considered how such groups use language to index varying stances of modernity and tradition in the context of postcolonialism and globalization.

In addition to the new focus on such groups, many of which have been understudied due to their social marginalization, linguists have also turned to those aspects of gender and sexuality that have gone uninvestigated due to their unmarked and hegemonic status, namely, masculinity and heterosexuality. The ethnographic study of desire has likewise received more attention in linguistic anthropology, as scholars have begun to consider the ways in which romance and eroticism are both produced and constrained socioculturally. Newer research on sexual joking shares this ethnographic focus, analyzing linguistic humor as a product of localized understandings of power, marginality, and socioeconomic class.

There has recently been a vociferous call to reframe the field of language and sexuality more narrowly in terms of psychoanalytically construed desire rather than sexual identity. The recent explosion of scholarship on a variety of compelling topics, however, including a more richly theorized concept of identity, suggests that the field's boundaries will continue to expand rather than contract. The intersection of sexuality with phenomena such as globalization, life stage, asexuality, health, and bilingualism, for instance, has only recently begun to receive linguistic attention. Currently, language, gender, and sexuality is a vibrant and dynamic area of research that is increasingly shedding its formerly marginal status to become a central empirical and theoretical contributor to the field of linguistic anthropology.

See also: Critical Discourse Analysis; Gender; Gender and Political Discourse; Indexicality: Theory; Sexist Language; Speech Acts.

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General Semantics

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General semantics was initiated by Korzybski (Korzybski, 1958 [1933, 1938, 1948]) and propagated through the journal *ETC.*, by Chase (Chase, 1938, 1954) and by Hayakawa (Hayakawa, 1972 [1949, 1964]). Its aims are "The study and improvement of human evaluative processes with special emphasis on the relation to signs and symbols, including language" (Chase, 1954: 128). Korzybski wrote:

> The present-day theories of 'meaning' are extremely confused and difficult, ultimately hopeless, and probably harmful to the sanity of the human race.
> . . .
> There is a fundamental confusion between the notion of the older term *semantics* as connected with a theory of verbal 'meaning' and words defined by words, and the present theoretical term *general semantics,* which deals only with *neuro*semantic and *neuro*linguistic *living reactions* of $Smith_1$, $Smith_2$, etc., as their reactions to neurosemantic and neurolinguistic *environments as environment* (Korzybski, 1958: xxx).

General semantics was (and is) supposed to have therapeutic value: "In general semantics we utilize what I call 'neuro-semantic relaxation,' which, as attested by physicians, usually brings about 'normal' blood pressure" (Korzybski, 1958: xlvii) – but no attestations are in fact supplied. The heir to semantics-as-therapy is neuro-linguistic programming (Bandler and Grinder, 1975, 1979, 1982; Grinder and Bandler, 1976; O'Connor and Seymour, 1990).

General semantics has a mission to educate people against the dangers of being hoodwinked by propaganda, euphemism, gobbledygook, and even ordinary, everyday language. In part, the movement was a response to the affective and all too effective jargon of 20th century European totalitarianism (both fascism and communism) and of McCarthyism in the United States. So a constant theme is "Don't be bamboozled by what is said, search for the meaning and substance in all that you hear." Bolinger blames general semantics for giving rise to the jibe *That's just semantics* in which the word *semantics* has the sense 'pettifogging' (Bolinger, 1980: vii).

General semantics "tells you *what to do* and *what to observe* in order to bring the thing defined or its effects within the range of one's experience" (Hayakawa, 1972: 157). More precisely, the literal meaning of a statement expressed by sentence Σ is given by defining the method for observationally verifying the conditions under which Σ is properly used. There are several problems with this method. First, as Ayer (Ayer, 1946: 12) admits, there is no upper limit on the number of conditions on Σ's use. Second, verificationism interprets "conditions under which Σ is properly used" as "conditions under which the truth of the statement expressed by Σ is true"; consequently, values other than truth must be found for types of illocutionary acts such as requestives, directives, expressives, permissives, and declarations. Third, Hayakawa (Hayakawa, 1972: 54) contrasts the simplicity of using a tapemeasure to verify the truth of *This room is fifteen feet long* with the impossibility of operationally verifying to everyone's satisfaction *Angels watch over my bed at night* or *Ed thinks he dreamt he was in bed with Marilyn Monroe*. Such sentences are judged meaningless and therefore synonymous with one another – which they are not. Fourth, operational semantics affords no account of the compositionality of meaning. Fifth, general semantics has little or nothing to say about semantic relationships within a language.

In sum, general semantics has little to offer the 21st century linguist; but for what it does offer, check out the Institute of General Semantics.

See also: Psychotherapy and Counselling; Taboo, Euphemism, and Political Correctness; Use Theories of Meaning.

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