CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

Researching Language and Gender

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Language and gender is a wide-ranging field, the 'language' aspect encompassing 'use' (talk and writing, what is 'produced' and how it is understood) and 'code' (e.g. English, Gujarati, particular dialects). Modern, feminist-inspired language and gender studies first blossomed in the very early 1970s, prompted by what can be called the 'second wave' of the western women's movement.[1] Since then, 'use' and 'code' have increasingly converged for the field, with a shared movement towards and emphasis on *discourse* and on *diversity* (among women, among men). Accordingly, the thrust of much empirical research now is not on *speakers*, embodied as female or male, as in traditional variationist sociolinguistics and in the early days of gender and language study, but on *what is said or written*, about women, men, boys, girls and gender relations, and *how* – what we might term 'gendered discourse' and, more generally, *representation*. This is to conceptualize gender as including, but going far beyond, socially taught and learned 'differences' between women and men. It is also to see gender as not just a matter of socialization of children according to dominant gender stereotypes (though these may play a role). Gender is now largely seen as a question of social construction *of and by* social, embodied individuals, in linguistic and social (including institutional) practices, throughout those individuals' lifetimes, in ways which entail both individual agency and resistance (but see Motschenbacher & Stegu 2013, for more radical understandings, associated with post-structuralism and Queer Theory).

Approaches to researching language and gender

Gone are the days when a researcher, perhaps inspired by Noam Chomsky, could introspect and use themself as a source of data – as Robin Lakoff did in her pioneer work *Language and Woman's Place* (1975), providing a spirited defence of her methodology (pp. 4–5). *Language and Woman's Place* was the first monograph in the field. A child of its time, the book looked at sexist language ('Talking about women') but was mainly concerned with apparent differences between women's talk and men's talk. There has been debate about whether Lakoff's work should be characterized as an example of the 'deficit' (retrospectively named) approach to the interpretation of women's language use, or the '(male) dominance' approach (see e.g. Litosseliti 2006; Talbot 2010).[2] But she was clearly conceptualizing gender as a male–female *binary*. Current research has moved a considerable distance from this, and now (if it even asks about 'differences') assumes a prevalence of 'gender similarities' in language use, along with context-related nuancing and diversity among women and among men. Relatedly, it acknowledges the importance of intersectionality (i.e. weakly, gender in relation to class, ethnicity, age, and sexuality, *inter alia*, and, more strongly, sexism in relation to racism and homophobia, *inter alia*). In particular, the names of books and conferences in the field now accordingly often include both gender *and* sexuality, with *heteronormativity* a frequent target of critique. An obvious example is *The Handbook of Language, Gender and Sexuality* (Ehrlich et al. 2014), the first (Holmes & Meyerhoff 2003) edition of which was entitled *The Handbook of Language and Gender*.

Because the field is wide-ranging, so, accordingly, are the theoretical and methodological/empirical approaches used to research it. Indeed, it is hard to imagine an approach which is not suitable for some form of language and gender investigation. Below, I identify six different approaches, drawing on the collection *Gender and Language Research Methodologies* (Harrington et al. 2008), which readers are advised to consult for further detail and exemplification (the first part of this chapter is based on but goes beyond the introductory chapter, by Jane Sunderland and Lia Litosseliti). These six (non-comprehensive, non-mutually-exclusive) approaches are broadly theoretical, with associated data and methodologies. They are:

- sociolinguistics
- corpus linguistics
- conversation analysis
- discursive psychology
- critical discourse analysis
- feminist post-structuralist discourse analysis

Missing from this list (due to the need to select) are approaches drawing on stylistics (but see e.g. Mills 1995), pragmatics (see e.g. Cameron 1998) and Queer theory (see e.g. Motschenbacher & Stegu 2013; Sauntson 2008).

Sociolinguistics

Sociolinguistics has the longest history of the six, pre-dating the 1970s birth of (feminist-inspired) language and gender study. The original sociolinguistic paradigm was variationist (i.e. looking at differences in spoken language use in, say, people of different ages, social classes, geographical regions or biological sex) and correlational, hence quantitative. The typical methodology for early sociolinguistic studies of gender and language was large-scale *surveys* in which men's and women's language use – usually, their pronunciation and/or grammar (e.g. Labov 1966; Trudgill 1972) – was compared in terms of standard and vernacular usage. The notion of *gender* was largely unproblematized (rather, 'sex' was the key independent variable).

Some other pre-feminist 'gender differences' sociolinguistic work, though not carried out for feminist ends, produced findings of relevance to the later feminist project, in particular demonstrating the importance of context. Susan Gal (1978) revealed a striking tendency in Oberwart (on the Austrian-Hungarian border), that is, that men at the time of the study were more likely to retain their Hungarian than were women – for the highly situated reason that the women tended to want to marry out of the community, the men to remain within it, doing traditional farming work. Lesley Milroy (1980) found that a group of women in one Belfast community (the Clonard), who worked and socialized together, produced more of some vernacular forms than did their husbands (this in contrast to the findings of Labov (1966) and Trudgill (1972)) and concluded that social network (and its density and multiplexity) could be more relevant than gender. (Here, she was anticipating the notion of 'relevance' as applied to the field: that gender is sometimes, but sometimes is not, relevant to a given situation.) The notion of context is key to sociolinguistic work and has been considerably refined with the emergence of 'Communities of practice' (CofP) approaches (e.g. Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1992), which emphasize the *local*, language as a form of social practice, and also the relevance of non-linguistic social practice. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet define a CofP as 'an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in some common endeavour' (1992, p. 64): three examples might be a book club, a family breakfast and a school assembly. Gender will be enacted in different ways in each CofP, in terms of language use and other social practices, and may be more relevant in some CofPs than others.

Many modern gender and language studies (local, qualitative explorations of intersections of gender with other social identities, including race, class

and sexuality), in which data is naturally occurring and contextualized, can be described as *sociolinguistic*. One example is Christine Mallinson and Becky Childs' (2007) investigation of language variation among rural Appalachian black women (two CofPs – the 'porch sitters' and the 'church ladies'). The two groups differed, *inter alia*, in their (non-)omission of the third person singular 's' (e.g. 'She like to eat'), omission being characteristic of the 'porch sitters' rather than the 'church ladies'. Mallinson and Childs see this variation as contributing to the identity construction of members of the two groups (for the benefit of themselves, and of others). Their study is concerned with diversity *among* women and does not involve binary or even nuanced comparisons between women and men. For a reminder that sociolinguistics goes beyond the private, see Janet Holmes' (2006) monograph on gender and workplace talk and Louise Mullany's (2014) *Sociolinguistics of Gender in Public Life*.

Corpus linguistics

Corpus linguistics quantitatively analyses corpora of up to several million words, of spoken or written language, enabling the researcher to establish frequencies and probabilities of words or phrases of interest, often together with demographic characteristics of their users. Corpus linguistics is ideally placed to investigate such 'traditional' questions as whether a particular word or phrase is used more by men or women (with, depending on the corpus, if the analyst wishes, inflections of age, ethnicity and/or social class). However, it can also be used to investigate how women and men are differentially *constructed* in the way they refer to themselves or are referenced by others. For example, Sally Johnson and Astrid Ensslin (2007) explore how gendered language use is represented in newspaper texts, basing their analysis on ninety-six instances of the terms <his language> and <her language>. As an example of a finding, in an analysis of *bachelor* and *spinster* in the British National Corpus, Paul Baker (2008) shows that while the former collocates with positive words such as *eligible* and the latter is constructed as unattractive and lonely, the corpus also reveals a conflicting *feminist* discourse surrounding spinsters. While many corpora already exist, a corpus can be built by the analyst and compared with another 'reference' corpus (see also Baker's (2010) *Sociolinguistics and Corpus Linguistics* and in particular his (2014) *Using Corpora to Analyse Gender*).

Corpus linguistics has the potential to make robust claims which other approaches cannot. Despite this, it faces a particular challenge in the current *qualitative* gender and language (indeed, social science) climate. However, frequencies and probabilities do not determine *interpretations*, and good corpus studies are by no means 'mechanical': the analyst often looks closely at at least a sample of their findings, deselecting as appropriate in interpretation; the 'co-text' (words on either side of the word/phrase in

question) can be as wide as the analyst wishes to make it. Depth does not have to be sacrificed for breadth, and indeed, corpus linguistic studies can support and complement small-scale qualitative studies.

Conversation analysis

Conversation analysis (CA) is concerned particularly with the sequential organization of naturally occurring, interactive talk (everyday conversations or sometimes institutional talk) and 'accomplishments' in that talk. Using micro-analysis and very detailed transcription, CA identifies recurrent, structural characteristics – namely organizational patterns such as turn-taking, interruptions and repairs. For example, Celia Kitzinger (2008) shows how the details of the achievement of interruptions may point to positive outcomes for women (rather than 'male dominance') in particular interactional contexts.

The classic 'warrant' (see Swann 2002) for the relevance of gender in CA is *speakers' own orientation to gender*, for example, if a speaker starts an utterance with something like 'As a mother,…', or refers explicitly to women, men, boys or girls. Elizabeth Stokoe (2008) demonstrates the value for CA of looking *inter alia* at 'members' categories' in talk (such as *girls/women, fellas/men, secretary*; see also Speer & Stokoe 2011; Stokoe 2012).

In rejecting 'prior variables' or analyst agendas, such as gender, CA however can be seen as problematic for language and gender study, the 1990s' saw a long-running debate about claims for gender in a localized stretch of talk, together with the role of the analyst and insights she can bring (e.g. Schegloff 1997, 1998; Wetherell 1998).[3]

Discursive psychology

Discursive psychology, a branch of social psychology, arguably shares more with linguistics than with psychology. Whereas traditional work on 'sex differences' in psychology treated gender as a more-or-less fixed and monolithic entity, early work on discourse and gender in social psychology focused on ways in which gender identity positions 'emerged' from discourses and were 'accomplished' locally, in spoken texts (Edwards & Potter 1992). Key concepts are 'interpretive repertoires' and 'ideological dilemmas' (Billig et al. 1988; Edley 2001; see also below).[4] For a recent example of a study of 'interpretive repertoires', see Charlebois's (2010) work on the discursive construction of femininities by Japanese women.

Rather than being interested in cognitive processes, or the 'inner self', discursive psychologists look at the different sorts of things that are *said, how, to what purpose* and to what *effect* in interaction – including when the data is 'elicited', as in interviews and focus groups. Discursive psychology

has taken two different directions (see McIlvenny 2002): one branch focusing on detailed fine-grained analysis and participants' concerns in talk, following the tradition of conversation analysis; the other branch being more closely related to post-structuralism and critical discourse analysis (CDA), drawing on the Foucauldian notion of *discourses*. Similar, but not identical to 'interpretative repertoires', these can be seen as ways of seeing or representing the world which 'systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault 1972, p. 49), that is, are constitutive. A challenge for discursive psychology is (whether and how) to combine analytical principles from both branches. Nigel Edley and Margaret Wetherell (2008) argue precisely for such an integrative trajectory, claiming that an expanded and integrative discursive psychology that aims to work across both the micro and the macro could combine a focus on how speakers *do* gender in their talk and 'how they are simultaneously *done* (constructed) as gendered beings in that talk: how speakers construct (and use) gender categories and how they are constructed – as gendered beings – by those very categories' (2008, p. 166).

Critical discourse analysis (CDA)

Discourse analysis is concerned with naturally occurring language within a given context and usually beyond the sentence (though not always – consider interjections such as 'No!'), and with what 'work' certain discursive features do (e.g. close a conversation).

CDA goes beyond this to provisionally identify, analyse and often evaluate the workings of discourses (including gendered ones, of which many can be proposed (see Sunderland 2004)). CDA has very particular epistemological roots – including critical linguistics, with its Marxist underpinnings (see Fairclough 1992, 2003).

There are several different meanings of 'critical', and several forms of CDA (see Wodak & Meyer 2009), which can be seen as constituting a 'program' (Weiss & Wodak 2007). For example, Ruth Wodak (2008) has developed a 'discourse-historical' approach to CDA and, in a study of (female) migrant identities, deploys an analysis that is both macro- and micro-, addressing different levels of spatial, historical and linguistic context. Konstantia Kosetzi (2013) in turn applies Faircloughian CDA to Greek TV fictional texts and considers the special challenges of fiction for CDA. However, all CDA focuses on power (and agency, and contestation), works towards progressive social change, identifies presuppositions, challenges assumptions and opens up new possibilities through different readings of texts. It considers non-discursive as well as discursive practices. Its understanding of *discourse* extends to images, and hence to critical visual and critical multimodal analysis (see e.g. Kress 2009; van Leeuwen 2008). All CDA also assumes a dialectical relationship between discourse and the

material, that is, that discourse shapes but is also shaped by some form of material reality (a position largely rejected by post-structuralist writers).

A question frequently raised is whether CDA's conventional focus on social class and on the 'dominant' and 'dominated' enables it to deal fully with gender (in which, for example, power and powerlessness may fluctuate – with context, conversational goal, within individuals and among gender groups; see Baxter (2003)). Some gender and language analysts self-identify as critical discourse analysts; others do not, though their work may well be feminist (hence 'critical') (see also Wodak 1997). One researcher who has explicitly used CDA effectively in her work on gender is Michelle Lazar (2005), who shows how the representation of the modern father in 'pro-natalist' ads in Singapore 'continue[s] to maintain, through subtle and seemingly innocuous ways, gender difference and inequality' (p. 140). Similarly, Busi Makoni (2013) uses 'feminist critical discourse analysis' to explore 'migration narratives' of 'dual career' Zimbabwean migrants.

Feminist post-structuralist discourse analysis

Developed by Judith Baxter, feminist post-structuralist discourse analysis (FPDA) (Baxter 2003, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2014) has roots in post-structuralism and feminism. Its concern is 'to release the words of marginalised or minority speakers' (2002, p. 9). FPDA also 'responds' to CDA and CA (it is informed by broad social issues *and* includes very detailed analysis of talk). It is intended in part to *supplement* CDA by focusing on instances of power (or powerlessness) which may fluctuate and/or be too fleeting or unconventionally manifested for conventional CDA to deal with (see Baxter 2003, 2008).

FPDA emphasizes individuals' *agency*, manifested in different linguistic forms, and their potential to recognize how and through which discourses they are being 'positioned', to *take up* particular subject positions and to *resist* others. FPDA thus rejects any notion of individuals being 'at the mercy of competing discourses' (Baxter 2003, p. 31). Agency does not entail, however, what Baxter characterizes as a 'liberal-humanist conception of the free individual in control of their destiny' (2003, p. 31), as the range of possible subject positions for women remains politically and socially limited.

It is not possible to identify a 'best' approach for gender and language study – or even for feminist language study. We already have 'feminist post-structural discourse analysis', 'feminist CDA', 'feminist conversation analysis' and indeed 'feminist stylistics' (Mills 1995) (see also Ergun 2013; and Holmes 2008 on 'feminist sociolinguistics') and there is no reason why we should not have feminist corpus linguistics/discursive psychology. Indeed, we already do, in all but name. However, discourse analysis (say) can be used in the interests of misogyny as well as feminism (see Gill 1995). A given researcher will choose her approach(es) in relation to her own

epistemological stance, and of course her research question(s). Some approaches may be theoretically compatible, and hence 'combinable', and some can then be used to 'serve' others (corpus linguistics could serve CDA, for example). However, this may not be possible for all potential 'pairings' (CDA is unlikely to be used to 'serve' CA, say, because of the usual 'agenda-free' underpinning of CA). More than two compatible approaches can be combined, of course, as I show in the study below.

Data, research strategies and techniques

In the early days of language and gender study, data was characteristically transcripts of naturally occurring talk in private contexts between white middle-class heterosexual couples. Just as the 'spoken' field has widened and extended to public and institutional talk (e.g. Lazar 2008; Walsh 2001), written texts (including digital ones) of many genres have also come into their own (see e.g. Bengoechea (2011) on media representations of a Spanish woman Defence Minister). In either case, data for language and gender study does not have to be naturally occurring texts or talk, but rather *reported* beliefs or practices, elicited through questionnaires, interviews or focus groups (e.g. in discursive psychology projects). It can also be represented and/or mediatized talk (or indeed writing), for example in films, soap operas and novels, as well as multimodal representations of gender more widely.

As with approaches, it is not possible to exclude any research strategy or technique from the gender and language field. Data collection methods include questionnaires, diary studies, interviews, focus groups, observation (including fieldnotes, audio and video recording),[5] researcher participation (e.g. in a particular Community of Practice) and compilation of corpora, as well as methods often associated with research in education (there is huge scope for language and gender work across the curriculum (see Sauntson 2011; Sunderland 2000), such as stimulated recall and think-aloud protocols). When data is a set of written, visual or multimodal texts, we are talking about gender *representation* rather than naturally occurring spoken data, and the issue is data *selection* rather than *collection*. Needless to say, this is not a comprehensive list, neither are the strategies/techniques mutually exclusive.

A sample study

The following example of current language and gender research is an investigation of a written text: a set of electronically circulated jokes about women, and how such jokes can be 'dealt with' by (feminist) readers. As such, it contributes to the growing fields of gender representation (in a range

of genres) and of gender and humour (e.g. Kotthof 2006). Here, a single text was *selected* after being identified as a fairly typical representative of a familiar genre: a written, digital set of jokes about women, men and gender relations, circulated electronically. Although data-driven, the study is a largely theoretical one – but *empirical* work on readings of these jokes would constitute an important subsequent project. The theoretical insights, I hope, have implications for texts beyond this particular illustrative dataset – for both language and gender study, in particular gender representation, and reading theory (for a fuller version, see Sunderland 2007). In terms of methodology, the study draws substantially on CDA in terms of close textual analysis and consideration of text 'consumption', and on discursive psychology (in particular the notion of 'ideological dilemma') and post-structuralism in its conceptualization. It can also be seen as falling within a modern sociolinguistic paradigm (in which written and indeed digital texts are increasingly of interest).

In their conceptualization of *ideological dilemma* for discursive psychology, Billig et al. (1998) cite examples of contradictory proverbs (e.g. 'look before you leap'/'he who hesitates is lost'). But we also *knowingly* use expressions such as 'On the one hand,… on the other…', and 'One part of me thinks… while the other part of me thinks…' And we draw on different discourses/interpretive repertoires at different times and in different situations: 'Academically selective schools are socially divisive' on the one hand, and 'Parents should do the best for their children (and my child would do best at an academically selective school)' on the other. We may be able to discursively reconcile these two positions ('Academically selective schools are socially divisive *but* I can live with that as I have to do the best for my child'), but we may still experience this 'reconciliation' as an uncomfortable ideological dilemma.

The jokes

The data/jokes in question were circulated by email – I received them from an ex-student who shared my interest in gender, who would have received them from someone else, and so on – and they may thus have been digitally altered, more than once, since their original launching. They are likely, I propose, to sound familiar to readers of this collection. The set of jokes (Figure 29.1) is entitled:

> *NEW COURSES AVAILABLE FOR WOMEN: Training courses are now available for women on the following subjects.*

The list concluded: 'Please register immediately as courses are expected to be in great demand.'

- Silence, the Final Frontier: Where No Woman Has Gone Before.
- The Undiscovered Side of Banking: Making Deposits.
- Parties: Going Without New Outfits.
- Man Management: Minor Household Chores Can Wait until After The Game.
- Bathroom Etiquette I: Men Need Space in the Bathroom Cabinet Too.
- Bathroom Etiquette II: His Razor is His.
- Communication Skills I: Tears? The Last Resort, not the First.
- Communication Skills II: Thinking Before Speaking.
- Communication Skills III: Getting what you want without nagging.
- Driving a Car Safely: A Skill You CAN Acquire.
- Telephone Skills: How to Hang Up.
- Introduction to Parking.
- Advanced Parking: Backing Into a Space.
- Water Retention: Fact or Fat.
- Cooking I: Bringing Back Bacon, Eggs and Butter.
- Cooking II: Bran and Tofu are Not for Human Consumption.
- Cooking III: How not to Inflict Your Diets on Other People.
- Compliments: Accepting Them Gracefully.
- PMS: Your Problem ... Not His.
- Dancing: Why Men Don't Like To.
- Classic Clothing: Wearing Outfits You Already Have.
- Household Dust: A Harmless Natural Occurrence Only Women Notice.
- Integrating Your Laundry: Washing It All Together.
- Oil and Petrol: Your Car Needs Both.
- TV Remotes: For Men Only.
- Getting ready to go out: Start the day before.

FIGURE 29.1 *Training courses for women*

The above is clearly a 'spoof' list of Adult Education courses, workshop sessions or even academic conference sessions. As spoofs, they may be found amusing because of the recognizable structural features of the genre: the initial short, snappy phrase (a rather general noun, noun phrase or gerund), followed by a colon anticipating the specific focus of the 'course'.

But the jokes are also clear expressions of familiar gender stereotypes, with the first, seventh, eighth, ninth and eleventh being folklinguistic stereotypes/representations of women's talk. The jokes self-evidently, if jocularly, draw on a dominant 'gender differences' discourse (see Sunderland 2004) – 'a discourse', as indicated, being an important notion for both CDA and post-structuralism – 'gender differences' allowing neither for differences

among women (or among men), nor similarities *between* women and men. So, assuming obvious contradictions between the premises of these jokes and our own largely feminist convictions, why did I (and my 'Gender and Language Research Group' members) simultaneously recognize the sexism *and* find the jokes, or at least the experience of reading them, mildly amusing? Did we experience an 'ideological dilemma'? What, precisely, were we laughing *at*?

What/who the text is about

CDA extends beyond texts and textual representation to their production and 'consumption' (see Fairclough 1992). As regards consumption, and informed also by Stylistics:

> A dissatisfaction with formalist accounts [of written texts] and with attempts to trace author intentions have led to concerns with the reader. Once the author is considered 'dead' [Barthes 1987], then it seems to be a logical move to try to institute the reader in that position of stability (Mills 1994, p. 8).

Some version of *reader response* may be particularly apposite when looking at digital, electronically circulated texts, whose original author is not traceable. A reader is normally capable of saying what they see a text they are reading as being 'about', partly through the guidance of the text itself. This includes its *interpellation* (Althusser 1998), that is, who is being addressed, and as what? Althusser's own example is of a policeman addressing a guilty person by 'hailing' him or her with 'Hey, you there!', and the person turning round, that is, accepting that she/he is being addressed. That person is, however, also being addressed by *ideology*, that is, she/he turns through acknowledgment of guilt *within a particular ideological framework*. Similarly, readers will recognize particular ideological workings of gender in these jokes.

On the surface, bolstered by the title, the pronouns *you* and *your* suggest that it is *women* who are being 'hailed' in these jokes: 'Getting what you want without nagging', and so on. Deeper and more inferential consideration of who the jokes are *actually* (if indirectly) interpellating however suggests that the 'ideal readers' or 'implied readers' (see Talbot 1995, 2010) are primarily *men*, who are being invited to laugh at women's behaviours which apparently merit correction, that is, talking without thinking, nagging and being:

- excessively talkative
- spendthrift
- vain

- preoccupied with appearance
- manipulative
- bad drivers
- irrational
- non-technical
- disorganized

Conceptually related to *interpellation* is *focalization*, the 'presentation of a scene through the subjective perception of a character' (Benwell 2002).[6] This is often achieved through direct speech or thought or a perception attributed to a particular speaker, or through first-person narration. Here, however, the focalization here is arguably that of those men who apparently find these alleged behaviours of women incomprehensible, in need of correction and/or simply amusing. More broadly, it is achieved because these 'behaviours' of women are all described in critical, prescriptive or proscriptive ways, which crucially also draw on existing, familiar, socially recognizable representations/stereotypes (e.g. talking too much, being serial clothes shoppers). Accordingly, it is *men's* interests that are being jocularly defended ('His razor is his'), and hence men whose perspective is shown. Note here the constructed opposition of interests (implicit or explicit) between the female (reader) and the implied male reader (see Sunderland 2004 on the 'Battle of the sexes' discourse). Even the 'gender-neutral' cases, like 'The Undiscovered Side of Banking: Making Deposits', can be read as being *about* (not addressed to) women, given the historical stereotype of women as spendthrift and serial shoppers, as well as the co-text (this joke follows 'Silence, the Final Frontier: Where No Woman Has Gone Before').

Exploring feminist readings of the jokes

If they do not simply dismiss the jokes, women sympathetic to feminism (as well as those who are not) may find them amusing in part if, like it or not, they recognize themselves in them. Pleasure, Freud notes, can come from recognition (1905/1976, p. 170). But, given post-structuralist insights that the meaning of a text is never fixed, and that any text affords more than one reading (e.g. about women, about men), we can also acknowledge not only that two readers can respond differently to a particular joke – with different conceptualizations (of what or who the joke is 'about') and evaluation (whether it is amusing, sexist, ironic or whatever) – but also that a *single* reader can also simultaneously entertain more than one reading of a text. This may not, of course, be a comfortable experience – an ideological

dilemma. This takes us some way to looking at simultaneously critical and pleasurable responses to the same joke.

CDA takes as given that certain ways of seeing, representing, conceptualizing and evaluating the world are more hegemonic than others. And here, we return to *discourses* – value-laden and constitutive (within and potentially beyond texts themselves; manifested in and recognized through particular linguistic *cues* and *traces* (e.g. Talbot 2010, p. 121)). In these jokes, we can recognize an overall 'traditional', dominant gendered discourse: entailing that women are, *inter alia*, spendthrift and bad at reverse parking. Women readers are thus positioned by traditional discourses of gender as the very people who are the butt of the jokes. And, to make sense of such texts, women readers must *recognize* the indirect interpellation of women. If they do this, they must – however indirectly – have themselves been interpellated as such (Mills 1992).

However, importantly, feminist (and other) readers of the jokes are likely to be aware of other, intertextually related, oppositional, discourses – which as active readers they can 'invoke' or 'activate'. These, I suggest, include:

- a *critical anti-sexist discourse* (entailing awareness of sexism in its various historical, social and linguistic manifestations);
- a *feminist discourse of agency/non-victimhood/self-value* (entailing an awareness of women as strong, independent and worthy); and
- a *post-feminist discourse* (see below).

Feminist readers can thus be seen as 'multiply positioned', given the inter-discursive links of these sexist jokes with *competing* as well as supporting discourses. A feminist reader, while acknowledging the jokes' sexism, might at the same time find them – or at least their existence – amusing, given the awareness and self-confidence that can *simultaneously* come from also having access to the first two of these discourses (but see also Mills 2008).

Amusing, really? The above argument can be made more convincing, I suggest, if the feminist reader is seen as also able to access a 'Post-feminist discourse'. I propose five possible meanings of *post-feminism* – none of which is 'The need for feminism is over' or 'Feminism is dead'. ('We', here, refers to feminist readers of these jokes.)

- Although there is no longer a clear feminist platform for grievances, there has been in the recent past.
- We do and see things knowing about feminism and with the benefit of having experienced feminism.
- We can adopt a feminist perspective not just a 'sexism awareness' perspective.

- We see sexism (including 'indirect/subtle sexism' (Lazar 2005; Mills 2008) *and beyond* (e.g. its causes, but also its spin-offs and backlashes)).
- We can see sexist practices and ideas as dated, unthinking, foolish and ultimately of little value to *men*.

In other words, the relationship between such jokes and their readers can be seen broadly as: 'we know about feminism, others know, we know they know, and they know we know they know', where 'we' can be the reader *or* producer. This relationship holds true too for the producers and consumers of men's 'lifestyle' magazines such as *Loaded* (by-line: 'for men who should know better') – whose readership is now apparently in serious decline. Acknowledging this 'knowingness', Bethan Benwell writes: 'it seems that the reader is required to tread a subtle and practised course though a minefield of irony, ambiguity and double-voicing' (2002, p. 166).

The concept of *double-voicing* (Bakhtin 1984) can be used to refer to the possibility of two or more readings of a text being made available simultaneously, something Benwell (2002) also claims of *Loaded:* ('Yes, it's sexist, but we know that, and (so) we're [writers/publishers] being ironic'). Here, I am suggesting that our experience of double-voiced texts, together with the accessibility of a range of discourses, allows us to actively 'double-voice' a text *for ourselves*, as an active and productive form of 'reading against the grain' (see Cosslett 1996). As *active* readers, we can deliberately read these jokes in more than one way (including that not intended by the writer), simultaneously; together with the text, we can *co-construct* irony.

Feminist reading positions

What, then, are some alternative *reading positions* for the feminist who encounters these jokes?

Sara Mills (1992) looks at alternative positions in relation to the individual reading of a male-focalized poem, 'Valentine', and I have adapted these here. I suggest that there are four possible positions, which shade into each other, *vis á vis* the jokes: critical rejection, resistant reading, critical enjoyment and feminist reclamation.

A feminist reader may *critically reject* these jokes materially, by deleting them, or discursively, for example by adding a critical rejoinder (and/or perhaps asking the person who forwarded them not to do so again). If she engages in *resistant reading*, she may recognize and negatively evaluate the sexist discourse, positioning herself as an 'overhearer' of jokes addressed to men (though, as indicated, understanding means that she has been successfully interpellated (Mills 1992)).

Third, she may *critically enjoy* the text. For example, as suggested above, she may co-construct the text's ironic potential, 'double-discourse' the text

and take intellectual pleasure in that process, rather than in the joke itself. This also allows her to see different possibilities for what or who the joke is about. In the fourth (related) reading, *feminist reclamation*, she can also co-construct the jokes as being *not so much* about women as about (foolish) *men*, the (presumed/ideal) consumers of the jokes. Cognitively more complex, but perhaps ultimately more satisfying, this is to 'refocalize' (ironize?) the jokes and take the woman's perspective (but far beyond the 'your laundry' reading), actively moving the 'object' of the joke (women) to subject position and make the original implied focalizers, men, the object. She can then see humour in the fact that some people *still* enjoy these tired old stereotypes which are *still* in circulation: 'Nice spoof – but how ridiculous these jokes *and* the people who find their presuppositions funny are!'[7]

The four reading positions may provide psychological survival strategies, allowing readings which constitute critique, enjoyment and/or an achieved refusal to be subject positioned as manipulative, a bad driver or irrational. The fourth position additionally helps us identify what exactly is amusing if we find ourselves smiling at these jokes: rather than their sexism, it is the dated and foolish assumptions behind them, and the amazing fact that these still retain some currency for some, that is, *as well as* worrying, entertaining. With the fourth position, the 'real joke' is thus at the expense of these particular social norms, and the butt is those who adhere to or uncritically enjoy them. It should be noted that the men in the jokes are also interpellated as not minding, or even as enjoying, being constructed as somewhat 'unreconstructed'.

All this raises the wider question of how feminists handle sexism (explicit, subtle or ironic) in a 'post-feminist' age. Saying to a man who is audibly enjoying such jokes, 'Your reaction does you no favours, you know', sounds unproductively pompous. More effective may be a humorous, playful riposte – in the spirit of 'fun feminism' (Kamada 2008). 'Double-voicing' facilitates sexism in *Loaded*, because of the potential for irony. Can it also be deployed to allow for the *contestation* of sexism? Can and does societal familiarity with double-voicing also work in favour of feminism?

A second question is whether – contradictions aside – such jokes point (in some sense) to a failure of feminism. Of *Loaded*, Benwell claims:

> [the] 'knowing' tone, the ambiguity, the double-voicing are all strategies employed to preserve [traditional, heterosexual] masculine values in the face of a disapproving world (2002, p. 170; see also Benwell 2004).

Johnson (1997) has similarly observed that, to survive, traditional institutions and practices simply need to *adapt* – and many do. The ironic potential of these polysemantic jokes can be seen as just such a form of adaptation. The trajectory of adaptation however will almost inevitably entail contradictions and dilemmas, and hence windows and avenues with progressive potential for both activists and analysts.

This example of a small-scale research project involving qualitative analysis of a naturally occurring written text has drawn on CDA, FPDA and the notion of *ideological dilemma*, from Discursive psychology. It will be clear that interpretation and evaluation, from a particular perspective, were key, as hence was a measure of subjectivity. Gender and language research is of course not alone here. What is important, I propose, is that interpretation precedes evaluation, and that both follow a description which is as denotative as possible: what is the text 'about', and how is it structured? Lastly, if the interpretation and evaluation of the analysis is to be informed by some form of feminism (as is the case in much gender and language research), then the researcher is likely to wish to make this explicit.

Notes

1 The 'first wave' is the campaign for women's suffrage in the early twentieth century; the 'third wave' is associated with postmodernist understandings and ways of being, sexuality (and Queer Theory) and 'post-feminism' (see Mills 2003; Mills & Mullany 2011).
2 A third 'gender differences' approach is widely referred to as '(cultural) difference' (see Litosseliti 2006; Talbot 2010).
3 CA has also been *reclaimed* by and for gender and language study (e.g. Kitzinger 2000, 2008; Speer & Stokoe 2011; Stokoe & Smithson 2001).
4 Another key concept of Discursive psychology is 'subject positioning' (Billig et al. 1988).
5 Transcription is associated with both naturally occurring and elicited spoken data, making the transcript the 'object' of analysis.
6 Focalization is a notion largely employed by Stylistics – a field regrettably absent from the above account of approaches to gender and language research. An early relevant text here is Sara Mills' (1995) *Feminist Stylistics*.
7 She can even reject the premises on which the jokes are based and consider, for example, the *value* of talk and of getting rid of dust. This also enables her to be *critical* of the specific masculine focalization. Actively making men the object of the jokes ('men simply do not appreciate the value of talk, etc.') allows her to see humour in this represented *lack* of appreciation.

Resources for further reading

Cameron, D, Frazer E,, Harvey, P, Rampton, B & Richardson, K (eds), 1992, *Researching Language: Issues of Power and Method*, Routledge, London.

Cameron et al. provide a penetrating examination of the ethics of research on language use. Gender is one of several foci here.

Gender and Genre Bibliography, 3rd edn, Centre for Language and Social Life, Lancaster University), viewed 22 July 2014, http://www.ling.lancs.ac.uk/groups/gal/projects/index.html

This includes references to studies of gender and language in relation to wide range of written (and spoken) genres, including dictionaries, posters and classroom talk.

Harrington, K, Litosseliti, L, Sauntson, H & Sunderland, J (eds), 2008, *Gender and Language Research Methodologies*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.

This explores the six approaches detailed above, with exemplificatory empirical studies.

Ehrlich, S, Holmes, J & Meyerhoff, M (eds), 2014, *The Handbook of Language, Gender and Sexuality*, 2nd edn, Blackwell, Oxford.

This book is a very substantial 'state of the art' collection (with reviews of 'background' work) with contributions by key writers in the field. The book is divided into seven sections: Theory and History, Methods, Identities, Ideologies, Global and Cross-Cultural Perspectives, Domains and Institutions, and Engagement and Application. This second edition is thoroughly updated, with the topic of sexuality integrated throughout.

Miller, C & Treitel, C 1991, *Feminist Research Methods: An Annotated Bibliography*, Greenwood Press, Westport, CT.

This book is divided into disciplines. 'Language and speech' is a sub-section of 'Communication'.

Sunderland, J 2006, *Language and Gender: An Advanced Resource Book*, Routledge, London.

This includes extracts from classic and other important publications, as well as tasks which can be the basis of assignments or MA dissertations.

Sunderland, J 2000, 'Review article: Issues of gender and language in second and foreign language education', *Language Teaching*, vol. 33, no. 4, pp. 203–223.

This includes a substantial Bibliography, including references to work on achievement, 'ability', the 'four skills', motivation/investment, teacher perceptions, learning styles and strategies, classroom interaction, English as a sexist/non-sexist language, teaching materials, language testing, teachers and professional organizations, teacher education and identities (including masculinities).

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