3 *Language and gender research in an experimental setting*[1]

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The search for female and male speech differences

Since the beginning of this century, linguists and social scientists from a variety of disciplines have sought to uncover the causes of the supposedly mysterious differences in the speech of women and men; in the process, far too many inaccurate generalizations about female and male speech have been made. From Jespersen's work in 1922, to Lakoff's pioneering 1973 article, to Tannen's popularized 1990 depiction of women's speech, we can trace a well-established pattern of widely read and frequently cited writings about women, men, and their language differences based on introspection and anecdotal information but for which there is little empirical foundation. I single out these three works because of their historic value: although Jespersen's portrait of women was extremely stereotyped, his work was unique in devoting an entire chapter of a book on the nature of language to a discussion of the characteristics of women's speech. The publication of Lakoff's work legitimized the study of women's language within sociolinguistics and simultaneously provided a political context for the interpretation of women's speech. The release of Tannen's book, for better or for worse, brought the topic of potential differences between women and men's speech to the attention of an enormous general public.

Each of the above-mentioned scholars described women and men as belonging to socially and linguistically distinct groups and each portrayed the groups as internally homogeneous. These researchers largely disregarded the multitude of social and cultural differences among women and among men that have long been

recognized as affecting speech.[2] Unfortunately, the quantitative studies of such notable sociolinguists as Labov (1972) and Trudgill (1972), while empirically based, provided no meaningful correction to this historic trend and did little to advance us beyond a conventional and traditional view of the sexes. (See Cameron and Coates 1989 for a critique of the sociolinguistic paradigm for language and gender research.) Due to the notoriety and importance attributed to the work of Jespersen, Lakoff, Tannen, Labov and Trudgill, and despite the significant diversity of approaches used by these five linguists, most people outside of language and gender studies accept the conclusions that these researchers present about the speech of women and men and most trust the interpretations that they provide of their research results. People generally persist in believing that women are more conservative in their speech than men (Jespersen 1922), that women are more polite than men (Lakoff 1975), that women seek more verbal intimacy than men (Tannen 1990), that women are less secure and more status-conscious in their speech than men (Labov 1972), and that women use standard ('correct') speech more than men (Trudgill 1972).

In contrast, relatively few non-specialists are familiar with the many more significant studies which explicate the specific social or discourse conditions which motivate the language choices of particular groups of women and men. Among these are Gal (1978), Brown (1980), Milroy (1980), Nichols (1983), Holmes (1986), Eckert (1989) and M. Goodwin (1990). An excessive amount of research energy has been devoted to testing and/or refuting a relatively small number of claims about the language of women put forth by a few prominent individuals. That the academic community is still discussing unsubstantiated statements about women's language made more than 20 years ago is quite disturbing. Still more troubling is the fact that researchers are still responding to stereotypic representations of women as essentially (and primarily) conservative, nurturing, hesitant and status conscious.

To begin anew, researchers need to treat as archaic the frequently asked questions: 'How do women talk? How do men talk? What differences exist between women's and men's speech?' As interesting as these questions may be to individuals attracted to a discussion of sex differences of any kind, it is now evident that such queries are basically misguided and naive. The error lies in viewing sex and gender as simple bipolar distinctions and in believing in the existence of natural and inherent differences between women and men (Butler 1990, Bem 1993, Bing and Bergvall this volume). As

applied to language research, the mistake is more subtle and perhaps more complex; it resides additionally in the overgeneralizations that are drawn about women's and/or men's verbal behaviour based on language samples taken from specifically situated speech and in the stereotyped interpretations that continue to be offered about such data. (See above.) The problem may also result from what Cameron (this volume) describes as the 'inadequate sociological apparatus of mainstream sociolinguistics' that does not begin to address the complexity of gender. Researchers need to exert extreme caution before generalizing about any characteristics garnered from specific women's or men's verbal interactions and should hesitate before attributing to sex or gender linguistic differences which can more accurately be accounted for by economic privilege, subcultural phenomena, setting, activity, audience, personality, or by the context-specific communicative goals of the particular speakers who are being studied.

While there is a growing consensus among language and gender researchers that we must cease partitioning the world into two simple populations composed of either all women or of all men, there remain a significant number of unresolved issues about how to attain the research goals to which we are committed. In the discussion which follows, I outline some of what I believe we need to examine and I attempt to articulate the sorts of questions which I think we should be addressing. The discussion illustrates how a laboratory setting, often scorned as unnatural, artificial and socially without value, holds some unexpected merits for language and gender research. I will provide details of a research project that a colleague and I recently conducted in an experimental setting that illustrate the social symbolism carried by particular ways of speaking and demonstrate the socially constructed nature of what others have called 'gendered speech styles'. It will be seen that the character of the experimental situation and the nature of the verbal tasks performed by the participants are more critical variables for explaining the language that occurs than the sex or gender of the speakers.

The research value of an experimental setting

Several years ago, my friend and colleague Alice Greenwood and I embarked on a research project which had as its goal the linguistic analysis of informal conversations between pairs of female friends. The first major stumbling block was that we saw no reliable and

ethical way of gaining access to such conversations. We were not interested in investigating our own interactions or the limited samples which we could gather by studying the conversations which each of us had with other close friends. We wanted to collect a large sample of conversations so that we might carry out a systematic study of specific linguistic features and pragmatic devices which others had asserted existed in the speech of women.

Since we sought to collect a fairly large sample of private interactive speech from people who knew each other but with whom we, ourselves, would not be interacting, a device had to be created that would bring friends together in our presence. While we knew that data collected in a laboratory setting risked being inauthentic, we believed that if the project were designed properly, the problems and constraints associated with this type of data could be minimized and turned to our advantage. We decided to proceed as if doing a study of friendship and solicited volunteers from linguistics and women's studies classes at Montclair State University in New Jersey and from among women we knew in the local community. We invited individuals who wished to participate to come with a friend of the same sex (from inside or outside the university community) to a specified location at a prearranged time. Since three male students volunteered, we decided to include them in our sample. (A fourth pair of men was invited to participate by one of the women who volunteered.) All together, 30 conversations were recorded. The research described here focuses on the conversations of the four pairs of male friends and four pairs of female friends. The four female pairs used for this study were selected so that their ages and lengths of friendship roughly matched the ages and lengths of friendship of the male participants. No analysis of the conversations was undertaken until after the eight pairs had been identified.

The location which we chose for our data collection was a room in the university's Psycho-education Center. The room, equipped with a one-way mirror, was designed as a nursery school classroom and was normally used to evaluate the behaviour of young children. This physical arrangement allowed us to video-tape our participants unobtrusively through the one-way mirror; all had been informed in advance that they were to be audio- and video-taped. We eventually settled on a research design which divided the conversations into three different time periods. When the participants first arrived, we told them that we were not completely ready to begin and we left them alone, encouraging them to relax and

enjoy the juice and doughnuts which we had provided. Microphones and a tape recorder were in full view on the table at which they were asked to sit; they were informed that the tape was running before we left them alone. We call this first part of the conversation the 'spontaneous' talk segment because, although the participants were aware of the recording equipment, they alone controlled the conversation and they were under the impression that the study had not yet formally begun. Each pair spoke about matters unrelated to the subject of the study.

After 10 minutes, we re-entered the room, apologized for the delay and then spent several minutes talking with the participants. We presented ourselves as women's studies faculty and told them that we wanted to know what they thought about friendship between women as compared to friendship between men. We explained that an interview with each of them separately would not be as interesting as a conversation on the subject between friends. We intentionally employed a casual and personal style while talking, joked together and asked whether they thought that men and women had the same kinds of close friendships and whether they thought that a woman and a man could be close friends if they did not have a sexual relationship. We related a funny male-bonding story that a male student in one of our classes had told; the story, which was recounted complete with off-coloured language, produced a good bit of laughter from everyone. Following this four-way interaction, the participants were left alone to talk. The series of questions that we asked and the story that we related successfully elicited fairly natural conversation from everyone, although some of the speakers seemed somewhat more self-conscious during this second part of the conversation than they had in the first segment. We label this second part of the conversation 'considered' speech since the speakers were focused on a specific assigned topic of conversation.

At the end of 15 minutes, we interrupted the participants, thanked them, and asked them each to fill out an anonymous demographic questionnaire and a form granting us permission to use the taped conversations. Since the documents had to be filled out individually, no conversation was required. Nonetheless, there was usually a good deal of verbal interaction between the speakers. Most of the participants appeared more relaxed knowing that the formal part of the study was over; they made jokes about the questions, read them aloud to each other, decided together on answers to some of the questions and engaged in general commentary about

filling out the questionnaires. This segment, which lasted between 6 and 13 minutes, provided us with an opportunity to observe what we decided to call 'collaborative' talk.

The terms 'spontaneous', 'considered', and 'collaborative' do not describe the conversational style used by the participants but refer instead to the 'type of talk' (Freed and Greenwood 1996) exchanged by the speakers. The terms focus on the fact that in the first part of the conversation, the participants **spontaneously** chose what to talk about; in the second part they **considered** an assigned topic and, in the third part, they **collaborated** on the answers to a questionnaire that each speaker could have completed individually and in silence. These terms have been used elsewhere (Greenwood and Freed 1992, Freed 1994, and Freed and Greenwood 1996) to describe 'the types of talk' in these conversations.

The data generated by this project are considerable; the corpus consists of more than 15 hours of conversation between 30 pairs of same-sex friends. Yet the speech samples recorded probably do not represent the type of conversational exchanges which were initially sought. Instead we collected three different sorts of conversational samples from each of thirty pairs of friends. Each part of the conversation (the spontaneous, considered and collaborative talk segments) constituted a somewhat different speaking situation for the participants and each elicited a different kind of verbal interaction. While the conversations are of varying degrees of intimacy with different amounts of self-consciousness evident from speaker to speaker and from pair to pair, for the most part there are great similarities in the conversational dyads. Of greatest significance was the fact that in analysing the phrase *you know* and the use of questions, we discovered a striking quantitative and qualitative difference in distribution of these forms across the three separate segments of the conversation for all of the speakers (Freed and Greenwood 1996). Thus, the original purpose for which the samples were collected became subordinated to the research possibilities which presented themselves as a result of the data collection techniques and the data themselves. We began to understand the power of the laboratory setting for the collection of natural language samples.

Detailed discourse-based findings

The present discussion is centred on an analysis of two discourse features that have been regularly associated with a female speech

style, the occurrence of *you know* and the use of questions. Over the past 20 years, these two language forms have been continually described as signals of women's conversational style. The expression *you know* has been characterized as a female hedging device and interpreted as a marker of hesitancy, insecurity and/or of powerlessness (Lakoff 1973, 1975, Fishman 1978, 1980, O'Barr and Atkins 1980, Ostman 1981, Coates 1986). Question use has also been stereotypically associated with the conversational style of women (Lakoff 1973, 1975, Hirschman 1973, 1994, Fishman 1978, 1980, Tannen 1990). Lakoff (1973), among the first to claim that women used more questions than men, declared that women used tag questions as a hedging device and that women had a greater tendency to use rising intonation on declaratives, thereby turning their statements into questions. As with *you know*, this usage was interpreted as a sign of women's hesitancy and societal powerlessness. By examining the use of these forms in comparable conversations of four pairs of female friends and four pairs of male friends, Greenwood and I (Greenwood and Freed 1992, Freed and Greenwood 1996) have been able to determine that it was the discourse requirements associated with the three different types of talk in the conversations studied and not the sex or gender of the speakers that explained the distribution and the function of *you know* and of questions in these conversations. Our analysis revealed that the women and men in this study displayed remarkably similar language behaviour.

The corpus examined contained 612 instances of *you know* from approximately four and a half hours of informal conversations between the eight same-sex pairs of friends. Of the total 612 tokens of *you know*, women used the expression 310 times and men 302 times. The frequency of occurrence of *you know* varied widely with the type of talk of the three different parts of the conversation and all the speakers in the sample, female and male, varied their usage of *you know* in identical ways in accordance with the three types of talk. Furthermore, in every conversational pair, one speaker used the expression more frequently than the other. (See Freed and Greenwood 1996 for further detail.)

More specifically, the distribution of *you know* changed dramatically across the three parts of the conversation. We found that a startling 89 per cent (546 tokens) of the total 612 instances of *you know* occurred in part two, the 'considered talk' segment of the conversations as compared to only 9 per cent (56 tokens) of *you know* in part one of the conversations and a mere 2 per cent (10

tokens) in part three. (Adjusted for the time differences among the three parts of the conversations, 13 per cent of the instances of *you know* occurred in part one, 84 per cent in part two and 3 per cent in part three.) The only change that took place in moving through these conversations, where the setting remained constant and the relationship between the participants was unaltered, was the requirements of the various tasks presented to the speakers. This distribution of the occurrence of *you know* was nearly identical for the female and male speakers.[3]

In part one of the conversation, when the speakers were becoming accustomed to their physical surroundings and to talking to each other in this new environment, and when, furthermore, the participants thought that the actual research project had not officially begun, a fairly wide range of topics was discussed. The participants sometimes commented on the nature of the classroom they were in, speculated on the purpose of the research project, talked about what they had been doing earlier in the day or the night before, discussed school-related topics and miscellaneous events in their own lives. The interactions were marked by natural sounding speech, a good bit of eating and drinking, and relatively little self-consciousness about talking. There were some signs of physical awkwardness from some of the speakers while they adjusted to the surroundings. Some fidgeted and some participants got up and walked around the room inspecting the toys they saw and then proceeded to talk about the toys; in contrast, others just sat down and picked up a conversation that seemed to have begun earlier. There were a greater number of questions uttered in this part of the conversation than in either of the following two parts and there was usually a fairly disjointed series of topics discussed. As stated above, only 9 per cent of the total number of all occurrences of *you know* took place in this part of the conversation.

It was in part two of the conversation that the speakers were asked to discuss their thoughts on the nature of friendship between women as compared to the character of friendships between men; thus, it was in this part that the participants were asked to jointly develop an assigned topic of conversation. The process of responding in tandem to an assigned topic produced a subtle change in the demeanor and the manner of speaking of the participants. This was exhibited by longer speaker turns, slower speech, increased phatic communication through question use, greater attention to a single topic – the assigned one – and a greater use of such discourse devices as *you know*. The relative frequency of *you know* in this

part of the conversation clearly tied speaker-turns together, allowed the speakers to check in with one another, and reinforced the joint production of conversation. These discourse functions can be seen in the following examples of *you know* from part two of the conversation.

1. *Female pair*
   A: um, I know. It's good. I don't know. It's different like there's a lot of kinds of friendships, **you know**, like
   B: like when I talk to my best friend Jen, it's interesting. Because the two of us, **you know**, we can talk about guys, we can talk about stuff that's going on in our life, we can talk about, **you know**, soaps and school. It's, **you know**, it's just something I can, I feel like I can relate more to her than I do to
   A: anyone else.

2. *Male pair*
   A: Two people I know of, two guys that, **you know** if I don't talk to them for two years, I could call them up and **you know** it would
   B: it would still be the same
   A: no big deal.
   B: Yeah.
   A: We're still friends. It doesn't matter if you don't keep in touch all the time. It doesn't matter this; it doesn't matter that. And that's, that's kind of **you know** like my friend Mike. **You know**. He's lived in town. There's no reason I, I just
   B: Yeah.
   A: We just haven't gotten together for a long time.

In part three, during which only ten instances of *you know* occurred, still another speaking pattern became apparent. Speakers were noticeably more relaxed and consulted with one another while answering the questions on the demographic survey. They joked about the questions, sometimes explained them to one another ('What does sexual orientation mean?'), collaborated on their answers ('How long have we known each other?'), and though they talked together, they were more superficially involved in the conversation than they had been earlier since talking was not the main activity (Freed and Greenwood 1996).

The investigation of question use also unearthed patterns of usage related to the different discourse requirements of the three

parts of the conversation and, as with *you know*, failed to reveal a different distribution of forms for women as compared to men. Using syntactic and intonational criteria to identify utterances as questions, we identified six types of questions in the corpus: (1) Yes/no questions characterized by simple subject–auxiliary inversion; these included reduced yes/no questions where the auxiliary is deleted and alternative questions; (2) wh-questions; (3) full declaratives and other syntactic phrases with a final phrase rise; (4) tag questions including both canonical (or auxiliary) tags, e.g. *They didn't hit you, did they?* and invariant (or lexical) tags, e.g. *That's where you lived, right?*; (5) wh-questions, followed by a phrase with a final rise in tag position, *What's today's date? the 25th?*, sometimes called 'wh-questions plus guess' constructions (Norrick 1992); and (6) questions of the form *how/what about ...* , e.g. *What about when women get older, like when they get married and stuff?*

The corpus contained 787 questions used by the sixteen different speakers. Of the total number of questions uttered, women used 404 questions and men 383. The frequency of occurrence of questions varied with the type of talk of the three different segments of the conversation and all the speakers in the sample varied their usage of questions in comparable ways in accordance with the three types of talk. (See Freed and Greenwood 1996 for further detail.) In five out of eight of the conversational pairs, one speaker asked noticeably more questions than the other.

As with *you know*, the distribution of questions changed across the three parts of the conversation. While questions were used in all parts of the conversation by all speakers, it was evident that the differing discourse requirements of the three parts elicited a different frequency of questions for all speakers. The pattern is a non-random distribution with 42 per cent of all questions occurring in the first 10-minute segment, 33 per cent in the second 15-minute segment, and 25 per cent in the third segment that lasted between 6 and 10 minutes. (Adjusted for time, the distribution is 45 per cent in part one, 24 per cent in part two and 31 per cent in part three.) The women and men in the sample responded to the differences in exactly the same way. Again, the only change that took place in the conversation, where the setting remained constant and the relationship between the participants was unaltered, was the nature of the talk exchanged.

By analysing the discourse function of each question in the corpus as it occurred in context, we were able to establish a taxonomy

of question functions (Greenwood and Freed 1992, Freed 1994). We determined that not only did the number of questions vary per segment, but that the functional types of questions used were different from segment to segment. Questions that sought factual information about the lives and activities of the two speakers (e.g. *Did you watch* 90210 *last night?*) as well as metalinguistic questions that focused on the 'talk' of the conversation (e.g. *What did you say?*) predominated in part one of the conversation. That is, it was in this segment that the women and men alike asked a large proportion of questions that either sought factual information of a personal nature or sought clarifications, repetitions and confirmations about preceding utterances. In part two, these two types of questions occurred significantly less often than in part one. Instead there was a very high proportion of two other classes of questions. Speakers used questions that asked for agreement, phatic communication and for elaboration of comments made (e.g. *Do you know what I mean?*; *So what do you talk about?*); alternatively, they conveyed their own feelings through the use of self-directed questions, rhetorical questions, and questions used for humour, etc. (e.g. *Why'd I say that?*; *Who knows?*).[4]

Part three of the conversation, during which the participants were filling out questionnaires, showed a still different pattern of question usage. In this segment, questions that were used to elicit specific factual information (e.g. *What's today's date?*) occurred more than twice as often as any other type of question. The sorts of questions that were characteristic of the other parts of the conversation were noticeably absent; questions that sought elaboration, those that were used for phatic communication, and those that asked for repetitions and clarifications occurred infrequently. Once again, the female and male speakers were remarkably similar in their use of questions. From the analysis of these data, Greenwood and I concluded that it was the requirements of the different types of talk of the three segments that produced the varying question patterns and not the sex or gender of the speakers or their relationship to each other.

Taken together, these findings indicate that the women and men under investigation in this study responded in like ways to the discourse requirements of the talk situations and that it was these demands that controlled the frequency of occurrence and the function of *you know* and of different sorts of questions. These results are significant since they provide concrete evidence about the effect on discourse of variables internal to the speech situation itself when

sex (or gender) and the relationship between speakers remain constant. Furthermore, these results illustrate the valuable theoretical lessons which can emerge from the collection of data and from the analysis of speech samples obtained in a controlled environment, even when such outcomes are not anticipated in the original research design. This point is reminiscent of the one made by Edelsky (1981) when she describes the process by which 'both variables and hypotheses ... [can] emerge from the data' (1981: 384) in a piece of sociolinguistic research.

Interpretation of data

In musing about these data and the implications of this research, I find that the most provocative question to ponder is why the language patterns of the women and the men who participated in this project turn out to be so similar despite the fact that other researchers have so often found differences in the speech characteristics of women and men. When I contemplate this question, I am led to two seemingly contradictory conclusions. On the one hand, I am prepared to conclude that this work verifies what I have long suspected, that the notion of 'gendered speech styles', that is, styles uniquely associated with just women or just men, is a myth. Indeed, these data strengthen the belief that it is specific social circumstances, particular types of activities that people are engaged in, various sorts of daily occupations, together with the artificial constructs created in our gender-differentiated society that are responsible for the way people conduct themselves verbally. On the other hand, I am tempted to argue that the experimental conditions created by this particular research design may themselves be responsible for the men's using language in a manner that others have claimed are characteristic of a female speech style (Hirschman 1973, 1994, Fishman 1978, 1980, Coates 1989, Tannen 1990). (Recall that the features under discussion have been previously identified as characteristic of women's language and that here the women and the men follow nearly identical patterns of usage for the forms analysed.) Perhaps when social conditions are reproduced in a laboratory setting, the conditions themselves generate particular communicative styles for both female and male speakers.

In other words, do these data provide the much sought-after verification that women and men do not necessarily (and automatically) have different speech styles? Perhaps all that was needed to detect this was an experimental setting that sufficiently controlled

the appropriate variables. Or is it rather that, as researchers, Greenwood and I created a particular 'community of practice' through the process of recruiting students from particular sorts of classes to participate in a college-centred research project on friendship? The speakers in this study certainly appear to share a wide range of conversational features (only two of which have been analysed in detail) which may be characteristic of their age group, their regional variety of speech and representative of this student population, or, more interestingly, may be a by-product of the structure of the experimental setting. These two apparently contradictory viewpoints, which would lead to fairly different conclusions about the relationship between women, men and language, need to be explored.

The limited demographic data that were collected from the participants could potentially shed light on their language use and direct my thinking. However, a review of the material provided by the speakers on their demographic surveys (see Appendix) reveals little that is relevant to solving the question of why the female and male speakers showed such closely parallel speaking styles despite the fact that other language and gender research would predict greater linguistic divergence between the groups. There is not a significant amount of social diversity either within or across the female and male groups (although a slightly greater degree of heterogeneity was present among the male speakers). If we reject the belief that sex and gender can alone be responsible for speech differences, then the parallel speaking patterns of the women and men are not surprising given the general similarities among the participants aside from sex and gender. So, other aspects of the sociolinguistic context in which these language samples occurred need to be examined in order to move the focus of the analysis away from anything inherent to the speakers themselves towards an examination of the linguistic context and the activities in which the speakers were engaged.

One area that calls for investigation is the experimental design itself. As Cameron *et al.* (1992) remind us in their discussion of research techniques, since it is impossible to completely remove the researcher from the research setting, perhaps in the process of establishing a format conducive to natural conversation between pairs of female friends, Greenwood and I inadvertently created an experimental space which is *symbolic* of what our society views as a 'female space'. This in turn may have produced the sort of talk which is associated in our society with the speech of women

speaking in private, a speech style which itself has become *symbolically* (and stereotypically) associated with women.

By designing an experimental setting that placed women and men in symmetrical social relations and by compelling them to undertake identical tasks, we have drawn attention to two crucial facts: first, participating in the same practice produced in the women and men the same kind of talk; second, outside of this experimental setting, it is possible that women and men would be less likely to find themselves in such similar settings, given the sex- and gender-differentiated society in which we live – that is, given a choice among the vast number of communicative settings, and different 'communities of practice' (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992a, 1992b) that exist as a matter of custom, men may less commonly choose the sort of community space created in this experiment than women. Thus language and gender studies conducted in natural settings may often find differences not similarities in women's and men's speech simply because women and men are frequently engaged in different activities (see M. Goodwin 1990) and not because of any differences in women and men themselves. Since it is increasingly clear that speech patterns are products of the activities that people are engaged in and not inherent to the participants, we can conclude that communicative styles are not 'speech habits' or styles appropriately associated with one sex or gender over another but are customs related to actions, activities and behaviours differentially encouraged for women and men.[5]

It appears that the specific conditions which were produced in this laboratory setting – including the nursery school classroom complete with children's toys, juice and doughnuts, two female women's studies researchers purposely using informal nurturing conversational tones, as well as the types of tasks given to the speakers, may themselves be responsible for the particular sort of talk which occurred. I am suggesting that the setting and associated communicative tasks became an index of a 'gendered style' (Ochs 1992). If this is the case, then not only can a particular linguistic feature be an index of a social meaning (which in turn is attached to gender), but certain social activities may themselves be indexed for certain types of talk. These activities and practices may then themselves become symbolically gendered if they are regularly and consistently associated with either women or men. (Similarly, certain activities and practices become symbolically associated with adults or children, with members of certain professions or particular ethnic groups, based on the frequency or regularity with which

individuals, possessing some externally identifiable characteristic, participate in that activity.) The speech situation created here, consisting as it did of sitting face-to-face with a friend in a fairly fixed posture to discuss the nature of friendship, may encourage a particular language style. In our culture, this activity and the language style associated with it may be conventionally connected to women simply because women have participated in this sort of activity more frequently than men. This language style should not be construed, however, as a simple behavioural habit of women. Individuals consciously choose to construct, signal, emphasize and even de-emphasize gendered identities by participating (or refusing to participate) in practices associated with one group or another (see Hall and O'Donovan this volume). It should be clear that there is nothing about any particular activity or communicative task (or communicative style) that is itself inherently female or male, nor are the speaking patterns of individuals mindless habits that exist as disembodied linguistic reflexes.

We seem to have come full circle. We can substantiate the claim that the language used by the speakers in this study was affected by the conditions under which they were speaking and by the communicative tasks which they were assigned. We can, in addition, document the similarity of the speech of the women and the men and hypothesize that the setting and related speaking activities themselves were responsible for the sameness in language. We see that the male participants were not without the skills needed to participate in the assigned tasks (see Freed 1992). What we learn most emphatically from the results of this study is that gender was not a significant variable and that, therefore, the linguistic patterns which emerged cannot be described or characterized as female language; at most, we can characterize the style as one which has become symbolically associated with activities in which women commonly participate. The idea that sex difference brings with it specific gendered behaviours is thus seriously challenged as we conclude that the notion of binary gender categories, in and of themselves, have little to do with the findings.

Conclusion

I am compelled to ask why, if neither sex nor gender is a salient feature here, should we expect these to be significant features in other sociolinguistic research? The results of this study certainly call into question any easy assumptions about sex and gender being

universally basic or salient. And if they are not consistently proved to be significant, why do we pursue this line of research? The answer lies in the role that gender continues to play in society. When I assert that gender is not salient, I do not intend any general claims about the insignificance of gender in our lives. Rather, I wish to emphasize the degree to which gender has been imposed on us as a 'lens' (Bem 1993) through which we view the world. I want to underscore the extent to which gender has been over-used as a unitary theoretical construct. And I want to stress what Bem (1993) so eloquently explains: the imposition of gender polarization on our world reinforces similarities among women where differences actually exist, creates the impression of difference between the sexes where little would otherwise be found, supports and strengthens androcentrism by fostering an essentialist view of male and female styles of thinking, of speaking, of playing, of dressing, etc., which is accompanied by a view of maleness as the norm, and finally 'turns men and women into gender caricatures' (1993: 194) whereby women and men acquire the 'the idea of being a "real" man or woman as opposed to a merely biological man or woman' (194).

As researchers, we now realize, perhaps with some reluctance, that we need to abandon a number of our early and fairly simplistic feminist ruminations about the role of gender in language research. As we gain additional sophistication about the construction of social identities (Ochs 1992), the overriding significance of context (Duranti and C. Goodwin 1992), the nature of talk as social organization (M. Goodwin 1990) and the notion of communities of practice (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992a, 1992b), we must concede that sex and gender, as straightforward dualistic categories for sociolinguistic investigation, are unsatisfactory. We are beginning to understand that instead, we need to embark on a close examination of different communities and settings and of the various individuals who move in and out of these communities as they engage with one another in talk. We must abandon, as Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992a: 91) say, the idea that 'gender works independently of social identity and relations, that it "means" the same across communities, and that the linguistic manifestations of that meaning are also the same across communities'.

We might consider the relation of language to gender suggested by Ochs (1992). Ochs correctly asserts that particular language features do not simply represent women's or men's speech but rather that language features operate as indexes of 'certain social meanings

(e.g. stances, social acts, social activities, etc.), which in turn help to constitute gender meanings' (p. 341). Since, unfortunately, there continues to exist in every society a well-organized set of social expectations about who, women or men, will convey which social meanings, then it follows that in most societies, women and men are seen as having differential access to the enactment of specific social roles, activities, etc. It follows also that our very perceptions of one another are related to our expectations of who should convey which social meanings and these expectations and resultant preconceptions are part of the well-entrenched gender stereotypes which many of us have sought to fight. When the language behaviour of individual women (or men) does not conform to society's expectations, a set of judgements is formed about them. Their language is seen as marked (Ochs 1992: 343) and they themselves are often seen as deviant. Thus Ochs' characterization of language and gender does not assist in the description of the changing roles of women (and men); nor does it describe the resistance mounted by members of both sexes to rigid gender-assignments and to the stereotyped expectations which may themselves result in part from indexical relations between language and social meaning (see Bergvall this volume).

When I contemplate the role of gender in our lives, I realize that what connects women to one another in our culture (and no doubt in cultures all over the world) is most irrefutably the persistent perception of women – by other women and by men – as women, despite significant heterogeneity among women. It is this view of women, so long ago described by Simone de Beauvoir (1952) as 'other', that ultimately drives our research and fuels our need to focus on sex and gender even after we realize the error of viewing these as independent, unitary categories of social scientific research. Whether this gender-determined perception is tied to the androcentric norm of most societies (Bem 1993) and facilitates the perpetuation of women as a separate underclass of humans, or whether the perception is merely connected to predetermined sex and gender-expectations and is symbolic of societal gender stereotypes matters little. For as long as individuals in society feel the need to emphasize sex and gender differences and to profess the existence of static unchanging gender-identities, overgeneralizations and prejudice will persist. And as long as gender dichotomies persist, researchers will be obliged to consider gender (as a variable that interacts with other social variables) in the process of analysing the interaction of language and social life. But we will

need a much clearer understanding of the concept of gender itself. As Saville-Troike (1989: 182) explains (referring also to Hymes 1966), social differences that exist (or that may be created) influence our attitudes about language. The linguistic differences that emerge from these social differences become symbolic of the social dimensions themselves and can be used to discriminate against certain people and to control them as they are categorized and 'ke[pt] ... in their place'. When language styles are identified as symbolic of the social nature of women, it is these very associations that can then be used to perpetuate the unequal treatment of women in our world.

Appendix: Demographic profile of participants

The participants ranged in age from 19 to 28. Two of the women (ages 23 and 24) and three of the men (ages 24, 28 and 28) were older than the traditional college student. Two pairs of women and two pairs of men had been friends for only 5 or 6 months. One female and one male pair had been friends for 2 to 3 years. The oldest pair in each group were friends of long-standing; the female pair had been friends for 13 years; the male pair reported an 18-year friendship.

Seven of the eight female speakers were Montclair State students; only four were students who had ever been in class with one of the researchers. (All four of these were from women's studies classes.) The eighth female participant was not a student. In contrast only four of the male speakers were students at Montclair State University. Two were students at other institutions and two were not students at all. Of the four Montclair students, three knew one of the researchers: one was a graduate student in linguistics and two were from women's studies classes.

All the participants described themselves as single and heterosexual. Twelve of fourteen stated that they were middle-middle class; one male participant stated that he was upper-middle class and one female said that she was lower-middle class. (These answers were based on a subjective question in which the speakers were asked to choose from a range of social classes without any specifics about financial status. Two students left the question blank, one declaring herself as being financially independent and surviving on $6,000 a year.)

Of the males, six stated that their family was Catholic; six females also named Catholicism as their family's religion. There

were two Protestants among the female speakers; there was one Protestant and one Jew among the male participants. Twelve of the speakers grew up in New Jersey; one listed Brooklyn, New York, as his hometown and one participant simply wrote 'Italy'. One female failed to give a hometown and another said that she had moved around too much to have a hometown. All of the participants appeared white; one male and one female each listed their ethnic identity as Hispanic. Two other males wrote 'Italian' for their ethnic identity.

Seven women reported that English was spoken in their homes; one of these seven said that Spanish and English were used. One other woman listed only Spanish as the language spoken at home. Six of the men said that their families used English at home; of these six, one said that English, Italian and Spanish were spoken and another indicated that both English and Spanish were spoken. One man said that Italian was spoken at home. (None of the speakers had a non-native accent that either researcher detected. It was only upon reviewing the demographic surveys that information about the participants' language backgrounds became known.)

The educational background of the speakers' parents differed considerably from speaker to speaker. Overall, the parents of the male speakers had attained a slightly higher educational level than parents of the female speakers. The eight men described their sixteen parents as follows: five had a high school education; three had some college but no degree; seven had a college degree and one had a graduate degree. Of the female speakers, two had less than a high school education; five had finished high school; one had a few years of college; four had graduated from college and one had a graduate degree. The educational level of three of the women's parents was unknown.

Fifteen of the participants stated that they worked at least part time. The women were employed as waitresses, as food preparers, one as a baby-sitter, others in 'retail sales' (one as a retail manager), and in a library. The men were in retail sales, in the insurance business, one worked with international exchange visitors; two of the students said that they were in a band together and two others listed 'actor, musician, employee playwright' as their secondary occupations.

Four women and four men said that they did not spend a lot of time talking on the telephone. Three men said that they talked on the phone frequently and one said that he sometimes did. By coincidence, the women's responses were identical.

Notes

1. I would like to thank Vicky Bergvall, Janet Bing, Deborah Cameron and Alice Greenwood for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this chapter. I valued all of their suggestions, even if I did not always follow them. This work was partially supported by a grant from the Separately Budgeted Research Fund at Montclair State University.
2. In some of her other work, Tannen emphasizes the interplay of ethnicity, regional difference, culture and conversational style (Tannen 1981, 1982, 1992); however, in her 1990 publication, she focuses on women and men as homogeneous groups without regard for the importance of the interrelatedness of sex and gender with these various other social phenomena.
3. As another part of the same research project, Greenwood and I studied the use of *you know* and the occurrence of questions in the conversations of four pairs of women who ranged in age from 39 to 52 years. These women used *you know* somewhat less frequently than did the younger women and young men (207 tokens as compared to 310 for the younger women and 302 for the young men) but the pattern of usage across the three parts of the conversation still showed a substantial increase in moving from part one to part two. The change was, however, far less dramatic than shown for the eight pairs of young speakers. These women used *you know* 56 times in part one, 137 times in part two and 14 times in part three. Adjusted for the time difference of the three parts, 34 per cent of the tokens of *you know* occurred in part one, 56 per cent in part two and 10 per cent in part three.
4. Women and men showed a slight difference in part two, with men using more questions that expressed their own opinions and women asking more questions that sought elaboration. But more significant than the small difference was the distinct and parallel pattern of question usage for each group in moving from one part of the conversation to the next (Freed and Greenwood 1996).
5. The belief that women and men participate in very different sorts of communicative events during which they display, respectively, cooperative versus competitive speech styles, is widely held in white middle-class America. I, personally, do not believe that the type of verbal behaviour used by the men in this study is as uncommon as has been suggested. (See also Freed and Greenwood 1996.) It is my view that the findings that report extensive verbal competitiveness among men are an artefact of our research techniques and are a product of the limited access that we have to private conversations between men in a wide range of situations.

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