



ENG 423A: Current Issues in Linguistics

# Feminist Critique of Language

Chaithra Puttaswamy

# Why study language and gender

- Development of Sociolinguistics
- Rise of feminist movement
- “In practically all fields of research, it is women’s differences from men and masculine norms which are seen as standing in need of some explanation. Because women (and other minority groups in society) are devalued, so is their language. (Romaine 2000 :103)
- Irrespective of their age and class, women are said to use more standard forms than men.

# What does a feminist critique exist?

- Language, as it exists, is not good enough for women and needs to be changed to make it fit for their use.
- Feminist activists have challenged the generic use of English terms like *man* and *he* and the use of titles to mark a woman's marital status.
- They have also negatively assessed the conventional linguistic practices that do not provide much scope to express women's experiences and lives.
- Feminist critique revives the age old debate on determinism questioning how far language underpins as opposed to just reflecting our understanding on the world.

# Women's silence

- It has been argued that a woman's silence is above an absence of woman's voice from high culture – religious ceremonial, political rhetoric, legal discourse etc.
- Women may be prevented from speaking either through explicit taboos and restrictions or in the garb of customs and traditions.
- Even where it seems women could participate if they choose to, the conditions under which they are obliged to live their lives may make it risky, difficult and sometimes dangerous.
- Silence may sometimes mean censoring oneself for fear of being ridiculed, attacked or ignored.

- Gal (1991) argues that women's relatively powerless position may in fact be what impels them to develop distinctive verbal skills, such as the ongoing attentiveness and ability to adjust to others in conversation, marked by features like politeness, well-timed supportive minimal responses, style-shifting and code-switching.

# Literacy skills

- Powerful groups often fear that the ability to read and write, should it spread among the powerless, will give uncontrolled access to subversive ideas, and so facilitate critical thought, opposition and finally rebellion.
- Even in societies where literacy is the norm, literary practices may not be evenly distributed across all social groups. For example, computer-mediated skills via internet.
- Women often lack the economic independence and time needed to indulge in sustained literary effort. (Virginia Woolf in *A room of one's own*).

# Writing and difference

- Feminists advocate that women should find ways of writing that acknowledge and attempt to express women's *difference*.
- Elaine Showalter (1981) has argued that language itself is not what silences women; rather it is the restrictions placed on a woman's ability and entitlement to use it:

“The appropriate task of feminist criticism is to concentrate on women's access to language.....on the ideological and cultural detriments of expression. The problem is not that language is insufficient to express women's consciousness but that women have been denied the full resources of language and have been forced into silence, euphemism and circumlocution.”

# Language and woman's place

- Our use of language embodies attitudes as well as referential meanings.
  - Marginality and powerlessness of women are expressed in two ways:
    - in the way they are taught to use language,
    - and in the way general language use treats them. For example,  
*“Beauty is the wisdom of women. Wisdom is the beauty of men.”* -Chinese proverb
  - *“There was never a conflict without a woman.”* -English proverb
  - *“Where a woman rules, stream run uphill. “* -Ethiopian proverb
- Lakoff, R. (1973).



# Division of labour

- Human socialisations evolved gender specific roles like care-giver and provider.
- There was more economic value associated with the tasks of the provider and there was more emotional value associated with the task of the care-giver.
- The biological considerations related to child birth and nurturing infants ensured that the female stayed indoors and the male ventured out.
- Eg: The semantics of words such as “confinement”, “nurse”

# Lack of education and opportunities

- Over the years women were increasingly left behind or had restricted access to scholarly pursuits.
- They were actively discouraged from following occupations that led them out of their homes.
- When they did, it was for jobs that required manual labour rather than intellectual activities.
- Hence, their intellect was stigmatised in many ways and gave rise to several stereotypes.

# Patriarchy

- Names and identity
- Power relation in reference terms
  - Singular vs plural : husband and wife
  - Using first names vs *X ke papa*
- Jokes about wives
- Talk like a girl vs girl talk
- Head of the family
- Naming conventions \_use of surnames
- Man-made, mankind, history
- God as He

# Gender-neutrality

- There has been a great deal of feminist concern over the supposedly gender-neutral use of terms like 'he' and 'man'.

Examples:

- 1) Man is a primate.
- 2) When a students wants to meet the DoSA, he should send an email.
- 3) He who reaches the finishing line first is the winner.

Mercier (1995) in her critique suggests that we should understand the 'gender-neutral' use of 'man' as referring to either

- (a) a person or persons of unknown sex; or
- (b) (b) males or a combination of males and females.

# Obscuring women's importance

- Fighting the invisibility of women is an important feminist project in many areas, and language that makes one less likely to think of women clearly contributes to this invisibility.
- There is good psycholinguistic evidence that those who encounter sentences (like 1, 2 and 3) using the terms 'he' and 'man' think more readily of males than of females.
- If this is right, then the use of these words can be seen as contributing to the invisibility of women. This gives feminists a good reason to object to the 'gender-neutral' use of these terms.

# Maleness as the norm

- Terms such as “lady doctor” , “woman entrepreneur” draw attention to the fact that it is a deviation from a norm for women to pursue these professions.
- Moulton (1981a) understands these terms on the model of brand names, like ‘Hoover’ or ‘Scotch tape’ that become generic terms for a product type. The message of such terms, she suggests, is that the brand in question is the best, or at least the norm.

# Sex-marking

- Frye argues, it is impossible to use singular personal pronouns in languages like English without knowing the sex of the person one is discussing, and in many cases sex would otherwise be utterly irrelevant. Frye takes this to be an instance of a general tendency to make sex relevant where it need not be, which she takes to be a key feature of sexism.
- For Frye, this is a key factor in perpetuating male dominance: male dominance requires the belief that men and women are importantly different from each other, so anything that contributes to the impression that sex differences are important is therefore a contributor to male dominance.

# Metaphors

- The tendency to describe nature in feminine terms is a long-standing and widespread one, well-documented in Lloyd (1984).
- Lloyd links this to a tendency to describe reason and the mind as male, and to contrast these with supposedly feminine emotions and bodies.
- She argues that these metaphors play a powerful role in the history of philosophy, shaping and often distorting our views both of reason, mind, emotion, and body and of men and women.



# Dominance vs difference theory

- The Dominance approach was created by Robin Lakoff (1975) who proposed that men are naturally more dominant than women. This could be through speech patterns or behaviour towards or around women.
- Example: Suno, pani le aana vs zara pani pila denge?

# Dominance vs difference theory

The Difference approach was further studied by Deborah Tannen (1990). She presented the idea that male and female individuals' lifestyles are often presented as being different cultures. There are six main sections to her theory:

- Status vs support
- Advice vs understanding
- Information vs feelings
- Order vs proposals
- Conflict vs compromise
- Independence vs intimacy

# Lexical bias

- Bachelor vs spinster
- Mr President vs ?
- Mr vs Mrs vs Miss
- Saheb vs memsahib
- Kanya vs?
- Sundar, susheel, sarvgun sapann \_\_\_\_\_ vs kuldeepak
- Young lady , but not young lord?!
- Dude vs babe
- Single parent vs single mother
  
- What gender is Doctor, Nurse, Driver, Gardener, Teacher

# Hermeneutical Injustice

- Fricker (2007) argues that there is a distinctive kind of injustice that has to do with the inability to properly understand and communicate important aspects of one's social experience: she calls this *hermeneutical injustice*.
- According to Fricker, people in a position of marginalization are prevented from creating concepts, terms and other representational resources that could be used in order to conceptualize and understand their own experiences, especially those having to do with being in that position of marginalization.
- People in a position of power will tend to create concepts and linguistic representations that help to conceptualize the experiences and phenomena that matter *to them*.

# Generics

- Generic statements are ones which are neither universal generalizations nor existential generalization.
- For example, “boys don’t cry” or “women place their families before their careers”.
- ‘Woman’ may pick out a normative concept—an ideal, which might include such things as a focus on family over career; or, alternatively, it may pick out a descriptive concept, and refer to women regardless of whether they focus on family over career.
- Leslie (2015) uses this as a foundation for explaining utterances like “Hillary Clinton is the only man in the Obama White House”, suggesting that ‘man’ here refers to the ideal of manliness.
- Haslanger (2011) argues that generic claims often carry conversational implicatures about natures, and that these help them to serve as a key mechanism for perpetuating the ideologies that hold unjust social structures in place.

# Lexical bias

- Men come first in terms of reference:
- Man-woman
- Son-daughter
- Husband-wife
- Masculine is the norm, feminine is the derivative
- Manager-manageress
- Poet-Poetess
- Actor-Actress

# Morphological diminutive

- George- Georgette ~ cigar- cigarette
- Henry –Henritta
- Paul- Pauline ~ figure – figurine
- Dabba –dibbi
- Katora - katori

# Semantic shifts

- Words for women have a negative bias
- Master-mistress
- Governor-governess
- Step-mother → wicked tormentor ~ step-father → ??
- Terms of abuse – maa-behen ki gali
- Seemingly gender-neutral terms such as *aggressive* and *professional* have different connotations when applied to men and women. Adjectives like *frigid*, *neurotic*, *loose* are used more often with women.



# Reform efforts: Success

- Much feminist effort has been devoted to this endeavour, and a huge variety of reforms have been proposed (see, for example, Miller and Swift 1976, 1980, and the papers in part two of Cameron 1998a).
- One especially successful reform effort has been the increasingly accepted singular use of the third-person gender-neutral pronoun ‘they’ (in place of ‘he’) as in the sentence below:

Somebody left their sweater behind.

- In very recent years, it is also becoming increasingly widespread to use ‘they’ as one’s chosen personal pronoun, or, less frequently, to use another gender-neutral option such as ‘ze’ (Bennett 2016; Dembroff and Wodak 2017).

## Reform efforts: limitations

- Other reform efforts have met with greater difficulties. Even some that have caught on seem to have backfired. Susan Erlich and Ruth King (1992 [1998]), for example, discuss the case of ‘chairperson’, intended to serve as a gender-neutral replacement for ‘chairman’. Instead, in many places it is often used to indicate women who fill the post of chair, while men are referred to as ‘chairman’. They take this to show that reforms cannot succeed unless attitudes change as well.

# Differences

- It has been pointed out that the dangers of making the concept of differences a unitary one, polarizing masculine and feminine while glossing over the multiple differences that exist among women (or men).
- There is no potential for language to “reinvent” itself from scratch in the literal sense like some feminists advocate. Language depends on innate cognitive faculties which constrain the form a language can take.
- One cannot speak outside of structure, either language or society.



- Cameron, Deborah. 2003. *Feminist Critique of Language*. London: Routledge.
- Lakoff, R. (1973). Language and woman's place. *Language in society*, 2(01), 45-79
- LAKOFF, R. (1975) *Language and Women's Place*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Leslie, Sarah-Jane, 2015, "'Hillary Clinton is the Only Man in the Obama Administration': Dual Character Concepts, Generics, and Gender", *Analytic Philosophy*, 56: 111–141. doi:10.1111/phib.12063
- Tannen, Deborah 1990. *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*. Virago Press