

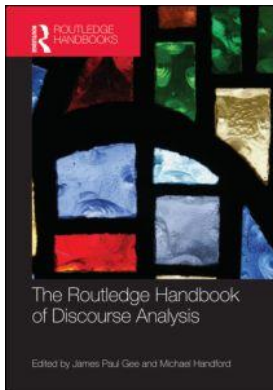
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### **Gender and discourse analysis**

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# Gender and discourse analysis

Jennifer Coates

## Language and gender

One of the most striking phenomena in language study in the 1970s and 1980s was the development of the field of research known as ‘language and gender’. This area of research continues to grow: the International Gender and Language Association was founded in 1999 and holds biennial conferences, and a new journal – *Gender and Language* – was launched in 2007, dedicated to the publication of research in this area.

The language and gender field consists of two main strands. The first developed as part of quantitative sociolinguistics: sociolinguists analysing the co-variation of language and variables such as social class began to notice that their data also revealed gender differences. Peter Trudgill (1974, 1983), for example, examining the pronunciation of a wide range of speakers living in Norwich, UK, realized that women and men of the same social class patterned differently. Women on average used forms closer to Standard English, while male speakers used a higher proportion of vernacular forms. Trudgill’s analysis demonstrates that use of non-standard forms of language seems to be associated not only with working-class speakers, but also with *male* speakers, and thus with masculinity. This strand continues to flourish, with more recent research taking a communities of practice approach (see for example Eckert, 1998; Mallinson and Childs, 2007).

The second strand of language and gender research, which will be the subject of this paper, focuses not on phonological, morphological, or lexical features of language but on language as a ‘concrete living totality’ (Bakhtin, 1981) – in other words, on *discourse*. The move in linguistics from the micro-analysis of phonemes and syntactic structure to a more macro-analytic approach, looking at language in a more holistic way, was undoubtedly a paradigm shift with significant consequences. The freedom to think about talk in general and to analyse whole conversations has led to new understanding of the relationship between discourse and social life. Huge emphasis was placed on using authentic language data and on analysing these data in their social context.

At the same time as attention was shifting from isolated grammatical sentences to discourse, the old term ‘sex’ was replaced by ‘gender’. In the early 1970s, ‘gender’ was a linguistic category referring to a morphological characteristic of nouns, and sociolinguists referred to *sex differences*. So linguistic analysis was oriented to the binary male/female, a binary based on biology. But by the late 1980s linguists and discourse analysts had adopted the new term ‘gender’ from the social sciences, and with it a new understanding that gender was not a given, but was culturally constructed and malleable.

## The turn to discourse

The turn to discourse in sociolinguistics and in social psychology, combined with growing synergies with anthropological research, led to a huge creative burst in research and writing on language and gender. Researchers studied a wide variety of conversational data, encompassing talk in both mixed and single-sex groups and in both public and private contexts. Family talk, friendship talk, and workplace talk were all interrogated in the quest to understand how gender is constructed and maintained in everyday life.

Over the last thirty odd years, there have been three main approaches to language and gender research: the *dominance* approach, the *difference* approach, and the *social constructionist* approach. These developed in a historical sequence, but the emergence of a new approach did not mean that an earlier approach was superseded. It is probably true to say, though, that most researchers now adopt a social constructionist approach. Research that takes a dominance perspective interprets the differences between women's and men's linguistic usage as reflexes of the dominant-subordinate relationship holding between women and men. Research that takes a difference perspective, by contrast, sees the differences between women's linguistic usage and men's linguistic usage as arising from the different subcultures in which, it claims, women and men are socialized (this approach is sometimes called the subcultural or two-cultures approach). Research taking a social constructionist perspective sees language use as constitutive of social reality and gender not as a given but as accomplished through talk. In the rest of this section I will give a brief sketch of work done using the first two of these approaches (the social constructionist approach will be the focus of the following section).

### *The discursive construction of dominance*

Early work on language and gender was inspired by the feminist movement of the 1970s and 1980s. In the book widely acknowledged as marking the beginnings of the new field, *Language and Woman's Place* (1975), Robin Lakoff was concerned to make people aware of the ways in which language use helped to keep women in their (subordinate) place. The feminist concern to expose discrimination against women meant that much early language and gender work analysed everyday interaction to reveal the ways in which male speakers dominated female speakers through talk. The classic example is the study carried out by Don Zimmerman and Candace West (1975) on the campus of the University of California, examining the use of interruptions.<sup>1</sup> They observed two-party interactions and demonstrated that interrupting – that is, starting to talk before another speaker finishes their turn – was rare in conversation involving two women or two men, but more common in talk involving a woman and a man. In mixed dyads, interruptions were nearly all made by the male speaker (46 out of a total of 48 interruptions). The following are typical examples:

(1) [*Two university students*]

FEMALE: so you really can't bitch when you've got all those on the same day (4.2) but I uh *asked* my physics professor if I couldn't chan[ge that]

MALE: [don't touch that]

(1.2)

FEMALE: what?

MALE: I've got everything just how I want it in that notebook (#)  
You'll screw it up leafin' *through* it like that

(*from West and Zimmerman, 1977*)

(2) [*brother and sister discussing wild rice*]

Anna: wild rice is nice/ you've never tasted it [so ((xx))-

Bill: [well the Indians don't eat

Anna:

Bill: it so why the bloody hell should you?

*(from Coates, 2004)*

In both these examples, the female speaker is prevented from continuing her turn by the male speaker's interruption. (Also note the 4.2 second pause in the first example, where the female student waits for a response from the other speaker – pauses of this length are a sign of a malfunctioning conversation.) As these examples make clear, '[g]ender relations are power relations' (Osmond and Thome, 1993: 593). (For more on discourse and power, see Blackledge, this volume.)

Interruptions are not the only linguistic form involved in conversational dominance. Speakers may also dominate by holding the floor for lengthy periods or taking many turns. Joan Swann's (1989) research on classroom talk, in which she analysed videotapes of sessions in two different English primary schools, revealed that boys dominated discussion: on average, boys contributed more to the sessions, both in terms of the number of turns taken and in terms of the number of words uttered. A research project exploring conversational dominance in a very different context was Herring, Johnson, and Benedetto's (1992) analysis of interactive behaviour on the Internet. Susan Herring (1992) had observed that participation on the e-mail discussion list known as Linguist (subscribed to by professional linguists worldwide) was highly asymmetrical, with male participants contributing 80% of the total discussion. Herring, Johnson, and Benedetto therefore undertook an investigation of a smaller, more woman-friendly list, to see if a less adversarial environment would facilitate more symmetrical patterns of participation. In fact, women still only contributed 30 per cent of the discussion. But during the five weeks of discussion chosen for analysis, there were two days when women's contributions exceeded men's. The resulting disruption, when men claimed they were being 'silenced' and threatening to 'unsubscribe' from the network, suggests that there is an underlying cultural assumption that women and men do not have equal rights to speak.

A very different dominance strategy can be non-response or silence. Victoria DeFrancisco's (1991) study of seven married couples in the USA focused on non-cooperation in interaction. DeFrancisco asked the couples to record themselves at home for a week or more, using the method developed by Pamela Fishman (1980). She found that, although the women talked more than the men and introduced more topics, this was not associated with dominance. In fact the women were less successful than the men in getting their topics accepted. The men used various non-cooperative strategies to control conversation: no response, interruption, inadequate or delayed response, and silence. DeFrancisco concludes that men have the power to establish the norms of everyday conversation in the home, and that women have to adapt to these norms.

More recently, the dominance approach has fallen out of favour: there has been less research in this area – particularly on talk in the private sphere – as a result of the tension between the postmodern idea that 'woman' cannot be treated as a uniform social category and the awareness that there continues to be systematic discrimination against women. However, interest in discourse patterns in the workplace has grown dramatically, and, although these studies draw explicitly on a social constructionist framework, they are also implicitly drawing on ideas of conversational dominance. Large studies, such as the Wellington Language in the Workplace Project (see Holmes, 2000; Holmes and Stubbe, 2003), have revealed how complex power relations can be in the workplace, with women as well as men in powerful positions. However, overall the picture is not encouraging, as the following two examples show. Sylvia Shaw (2006)

carried out research which looked at the experience of women MPs (members of parliament in the UK). Parliament has been, until very recently, an arena reserved for the male voice. An important way to 'do' power in parliamentary debate is to hold the floor. Shaw analysed floor apportionment and established that women MPs had trouble holding the floor, even when it was legally theirs, because male MPs frequently break the rules, making illegal comments (such as 'Rubbish') without being censored by the Speaker (who moderates parliamentary behaviour). In five debates, male participants made 90 per cent of all individual illegal utterances, which suggests that this kind of rule breaking is seen as normal by male MPs, while women MPs are disadvantaged because they are reluctant to break the rules. Another example comes from Ostermann (2003), who compares two institutions that work with victims of domestic violence in Brazil. Both workplaces are all-female, but the interactional patterns found in them are very different. Ostermann shows how female police officers, working in a male-dominated system, use more distancing and controlling interactional strategies, in part because they fear that using interactional patterns seen as more typical of women will disadvantage them in the symbolic market of the police system.

As Judith Baxter comments: 'Women still struggle for acceptance within institutional settings such as government, politics, law, education, the church, the media and the business world' (Baxter, 2006: xiv). Women are expected to adapt to androcentric norms, for example to use the more adversarial, information-focused style characteristic of all-male talk, and typical of talk in the public domain. But women who successfully adapt to characteristically male linguistic norms run the risk of being perceived as aggressive and confrontational, as un-feminine, while those who choose to use a more affiliative, cooperative style risk being marginalized.

### *Discourse patterns in same-sex talk*

While the dominance approach proved helpful in analysing mixed talk, some researchers began to question the wisdom of focusing exclusively on talk involving both women and men. In the '80s and '90s, these researchers increasingly turned their attention to same-sex interaction and to the conversational strategies adopted by speakers in everyday talk. They adopted a theoretical framework known as the *difference* or *two cultures* approach. The idea of linguistic differences arising simply from boys and girls growing up in different subcultures (see Maltz and Borker, 1982) may seem simplistic now, but the difference approach was a breakthrough: it allowed researchers to show the strengths of linguistic strategies characteristic of same-sex talk. This meant, in particular, demonstrating the strengths of linguistic strategies characteristic of all-female talk and celebrating women's ways of talking.

Coates' work on the talk of women friends (1989, 1996, 1997a) focused on groups of close women friends in a single context: informal gatherings where the main aim is 'to talk'. Talk is revealed as highly cooperative, with hedges, questions, and turn-taking strategies all used to promote symmetry and cohesion in the group. Topics tended to be personal, and topic shift was gradual. In the case of turn-taking, Coates argues that women prefer to establish a collaborative, or all-in-together floor, rather than the more conventional single, or one-at-a-time floor (the terms 'collaborative floor' and 'single floor' come from Edelsky, 1993). This means that women's friendly talk is characterized by repetition, overlap, and the joint construction of utterances, as well as by frequent laughter, as illustrated in the following examples:

(3) [Pat tells Karen about her neighbour's attack of acute indigestion]

P: he and his wife obviously thought he'd had a |heart attack/

K: |heart attack/

(4) [*talking about aging parents*]

Liz: and I mean it's a really weird situation because all

Sue: | you become a parent/ yeah/

Liz: of a sudden the | roles are all reversed/

(5) [*Amanda, Jody and Clare talk about a friend's mother's dubious boyfriend*]

A: I mean the man has a mobile phone <LAUGHING> so | one thing leads to

J: | he's an architect/

C: <LAUGHS----->

A: another [...] <LOW LAUGH>

J: [...] would you want to marry this man?=  
would you want

C: =no

A: =would you want to bloody.

J: to be in the same room as this man?=  
=no

C: =no

A: | USE THIS MAN'S MOBILE PHONE? <LAUGHS>

J: | <LAUGHS----->

C: | yeah <LAUGHS----->

These characteristics have also been found in subsequent research looking at a range of all-female groups, for example, teenage school students in the north of England (Davies, 2003); deaf friends at university in Bristol using British Sign Language (Coates and Sutton-Spence, 2001); elderly Austrian Jewish refugees living in London, code-switching between German and English (Epler, 2009).

This is in contrast with what we find in all-male talk. Analysing the talk of a range of all-male groups, Coates (2003) found that men talked about topics such as sport, politics, cars, and avoided introspective topics. Their talk was characterized by fewer hedges than were found in women's talk (a direct consequence of topic choice), questions tended to be information-focused, and turn-taking followed a one-at-a-time pattern. Male speakers like to play the expert and take it in turn to hold the floor, which leads to a pattern of serial monologues. The following is a typical male monologue<sup>2</sup>:

(6) [*Chris and Geoff are talking over lunch. Chris introduces the topic of mobile phones and proceeds to hold forth about mobile phone technology. Minimal responses from Geoff in italics.*]

Cos you know we've got BT internet at home (*mhm*) and I've set it up so that (.) um through the BT internet WAP portal so that Kate can read (.) her email that she gets (.) um her phone (*oh right*) which is qui- which is quite useful if you're kinda not behind a computer but I was musing the other day on (.) on how funny it is that the sort of graphics you get on WAP phones now (.) is like you used to get on the ZX81 (*yeah*) and every-everything's having to adapt to that kind of LCSD based stuff (*that's right*) um computers have got to the point they've got to (.) and now they've gone all the way back with WAP technology

(Coates, 2004: 134)

At other times, and in other groups, men enjoy the cut and thrust of more adversarial, bantering talk, as illustrated in the following example:

(7) [*Men working in a bakery in New Zealand*]

Ray: crate!

Sam: case!

- Ray: what?  
 Sam: they come in cases Ray not crates  
 Ray: oh same thing if you must be picky over every one thing  
 Sam: just shut your fucking head Ray!  
 Ray: don't tell me to fuck off fuck (...)  
 Sam: I'll come over and shut yo-  
 Jim: yeah I'll have a crate of apples thanks [*laughingly using a thick sounding voice*]  
 Ray: no fuck off Jim  
 Jim: a dozen...  
 Dan: shitpicker! [*amused*].

(From Pilkington, 1998: 265)

Deborah Cameron (1997) analysed the conversation of a group of male students, recorded while they watched sport on television. One of the ways that these men perform gender in their talk is through their comments on the basketball game they are watching. Cameron suggests that 'sportstalk' is a typically masculine conversational genre. Besides sport, these friends talk about women and about alcohol, topics stereotypically associated with all-male conversation. But they also gossip about non-present others: they discuss in great detail certain males of their acquaintance, accusing them of being gay. Overall, the talk displays solidarity: the five friends are bonded through their shared denigration of the supposedly gay outsiders. Interestingly, Cameron shows how the talk of these men involves several features normally associated with 'cooperative' women's talk – hedges, overlapping speech, latching. But it also displays more competitive features – two speakers dominate the talk, and speakers vie for the floor. She argues that cooperation and competition as styles of talking cannot be simplistically attributed to one gender or the other.

While the cooperative/competitive divide is not neatly isomorphic with femininity and masculinity, there are still arenas where discourse styles are strikingly gendered. One of these arenas is the classroom. Julia Davies (2003) worked in three different secondary schools in the north of England, focusing on small discussion groups involving 14-year-old pupils dealing with specific tasks, such as answering questions about a poem or carrying out a role play of teachers dealing with bullying. In this paper Davies focuses on all-boy and all-girl discussion groups. She describes the girls' ways of talking as being characterized by 'polyphony' (borrowing the metaphor from Coates, 1996) and the boys' ways by 'cacophony'. Girls' discourse styles in the discussion groups involved both personal narrative and collaborative, jointly constructed text. Talk was highly cohesive, with lexical and grammatical repetition and the use of similar pitch levels and intonation patterns. By contrast, the boys' talk was full of interruptions, joking asides, insults, and was frequently off-topic. The chief goal of boys in classroom discussion was to demonstrate that they were 'real boys'. Classroom goals of cooperation and focus on the task in hand were seen as non-macho or 'gay', which made it very difficult for boys who wanted to engage with academic work. This is an important study, in that it not only demonstrates significant differences in discourse style between male and female speakers, but also draws attention to the conflict between the discourse of learning and expressions of heterosexual masculinity. (For more on classroom discourse, see Tsui, this volume.)

The discussion about male–female differences was popularized by Deborah Tannen's (1990) book *You Just Don't Understand*, which (following Maltz and Borker, 1982) linked gender differences to cross-gender miscommunication. This has led to the difference approach falling out of favour, because it became associated with a political stance which ignores male dominance. However, interesting work on same-sex talk continues to be carried out which implicitly draws on a difference or subcultural approach. But in many areas researchers have moved on, assimilating

ideas from European social theory. Not only does more recent work view gender as fluid and malleable, but masculinity and femininity are no longer viewed as singular: analysts explore a range of femininities and masculinities.

### Competing discourses: multiple femininities, multiple masculinities

Social constructionism is now the prevailing paradigm in discourse analysis and sociolinguistics. Gender is understood as a social construct rather than a ‘given’ social category, and speakers are seen as ‘doing’ gender – doing femininity or doing masculinity – in everyday interaction. Besides challenging the idea of a singular femininity or masculinity, current research takes the view that speakers have available to them a whole range of (often conflicting) discourses (see Weedon, 1987; Fairclough, 1992; Lee, 1992; Coates, 1997b). This use of the term ‘discourse’ is derived from the work of Michel Foucault. Discourse, in this sense, can be conceptualized as a ‘system of statements which cohere around common meanings and values’ (Hollway, 1983: 131). So, for example, in contemporary Britain there are discourses that can be labelled ‘conservative’ – that is, discourses that emphasize values and meanings where the status quo is cherished – and there are discourses that could be labelled ‘patriarchal’ – that is, discourses that emphasize meanings and values that assume the superiority of males. Dominant discourses such as these appear ‘natural’: they are powerful precisely because they are able to make invisible the fact that they are just one among many different discourses.

Thus at any one time there is a wide range of femininities and masculinities available to speakers. The next two examples, which both come from conversations about mothers, demonstrate how these discourses can conflict:

(8) [*talking about the function of funerals*]

MEG: I would see it [*mother’s funeral*] as honouring her memory in some way/

(9) [*Sue is complaining that she phones her mother but her mother never phones her*]

SUE: |((xx)) I’m not very close to my mother really/

LIZ: |cos most mothers are a pain in the bum/

In the first example Meg positions herself as a loving and dutiful daughter. She and her friends discuss whether it would be taboo to miss your mother’s funeral. They draw on a dominant discourse where the family is revered and parents are to be honoured, a discourse that upholds the taboo against missing your mother’s funeral. The second example represents mothers in a very different way. Here Sue and Liz resist dominant discourses of the family and express feelings that reveal a different picture of mother–daughter relations. This discourse challenges the hegemonic idea that all families are happy and all parents benevolent. Most people have probably experienced both positions, and may even hold both views simultaneously. This is possible because of the existence of alternative discourses, alternative ways of thinking about the world.

Just as there is a range of discourses encoding femininity today, so there is a range of discourses encoding masculinity. The following examples (from Coates, 2003) illustrate contemporary hegemonic masculinity:

(10) [*Julian tells 2 friends a story of a sporting triumph*]

so I took it on the half-volley, and it just went flying, [...] and it was just the most beautiful ball I’ve ever ever ever seen <EMPHATIC>



- (11) [*Max tells Rick about the state of his car – Rick's words are in italics*]  
 can't believe my car, it's ((2 sylls)) [*really*] mhm, speedo's fucked [*oh no*]  
 [...] wind[screen]wipers are fucked [*oh right*] and now the fucker won't  
 start [*oh no*]
- (12) [*Rob tells his friends about a fight at work*]  
 what he did was he threw this knife at me, this is honest truth, threw a knife at me, and  
 then – and there was this cable [...] he fucking chased me with it, and I thought 'Fuck  
 this', and he kept like having a go and teasing me, and I just smashed him straight round  
 the face with a bell box in front of the boss

The men in these examples align themselves with hegemonic masculinity through their choice of topics (sport, cars, fights), through their emphasis on achievement (in sport or fighting), through their construction of a tough image through the use of swear words and (in the case of the third example) the appeal to violence. These men also construct a masculinity characterized by emotional restraint. Male inexpressivity is recognized as a major feature of contemporary masculinity, and is increasingly seen as problematic: as Vic Seidler puts it, 'we have learnt to use our language to set a safe distance from our felt experience' (Seidler, 1989: 63).

Alternative masculinities represent a challenge to the hegemonic form. Some men, in some conversations, construct themselves as more reflective, as having experienced fear or pain. But there is a constant awareness that this exposes them to ridicule or to accusations of deviance – in particular, to the accusation of being gay. The two men in the next example met in the pub after work and began to discuss what it means to try to be more open with each other.<sup>3</sup> This discussion began because one of their friends had talked about some difficult aspects of his life the previous week, and Pete and Tony agreed that this is something they admired. Tony says he is trying to be more open in his relationships with other people:

- (13) *Tony*: I think it's because I decided that– . that (1.0) I ((really)) didn't like this way of relating to people very much and that . life actually would be . improved by . people being more open with each other . not that I'm . brilliant at it <QUIET LAUGH>
- Pete*: makes you vulnerable though don't you think? . um don't don't you feel vulnerable? . sometimes?
- Tony*: yeah but . I suppose that . that's a useful reminder really isn't it ((I mean)) vulnerability is er– (1.0) all the– all the– the– the masks and so on are supposed to keep vulnerability at bay but . .hh they only do this at a very high cost

(From Coates, 2001)

But even when they do discuss more personal issues and thus potentially challenge masculine norms, in most contexts men will choose to use linguistic strategies that neutralize this by aligning themselves with conventional masculinity. The following exchange comes from a conversation between four male friends talking about the infidelity of a friend's girlfriend:

- (11) [*four men in a flat in Manchester, Northern England*]  
*Dave*: fucking 'ell, harsh that...  
*Chaz*: bit harsh that, innit?

*Dave:* yeah, it's a bit heavy innit?

*George:* blues big time

*Ewan:* I'd be fucking gutted...

(From Gough and Edwards, 1998: 419)

The young men's use of taboo words here performs dominant masculinity and thus maintains masculine norms, despite the (more sensitive) topic. But note the use of repetition and tag questions (*innit?*) in this brief exchange – linguistic strategies more often associated with all-female talk.

## Queering the study of gender and discourse

One of the key stimuli to fresh thinking about gender has been the new field of queer linguistics. In a recent paper, William Leap, for example, explicitly addresses the question: What do queer theories have to offer researchers of gender and language? (Leap, 2008; see also Chapter 39, this volume). This new field 'has the sexual and gender deviance of previous generations at its centre' (Hall, 2003: 354). Language in queer linguistics is studied from the twin perspectives of gender and sexuality, so research focusing on the language of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender communities is at its heart. The notion of gender as fluid and multiple is intrinsic to queer linguistics, since binary categories like *man/woman* are unhelpful when studying communities like these. Recent examples include a study of British gay slang, known as *Polari* (Lucas, 2006), of the use of sexual insults by *hijras*, a class of transgendered individuals in India (Hall, 1997), of the language use of *travestis* (transvestite prostitutes) in Brazil (Kulick, 1998), and of lesbian coming-out stories in the UK (Saunston, 2007).

A seminal paper was that by Rusty Barrett (1999), which focused on a very particular subgroup of gay men – drag queens. Like female impersonators, drag queens dress in women's clothes and entertain people in clubs and bars, but, unlike female impersonators, who are straight, drag queens are gay. The drag queens that Barrett's paper concentrates on are 'glam queens' – that is, glamour-oriented drag queens who aim to produce a physical representation of hyperfeminine womanhood. He explores the way that speakers draw on a multiplicity of identities, and in particular shows how the drag queens he studied use language to index their identities as African Americans and gay men, as well as drag queens. Speakers exploit different speaking styles, switching between white-woman style, African American Vernacular English (AAVE), and gay male speech. The white-woman style indexes 'ideal' feminine behaviour and contrasts with other styles: in their performances, drag queens will use a stereotypically feminine speaking style but will deliberately subvert this by using taboo words or by switching into a stereotypically masculine voice. As Barrett puts it: 'The polyphony of stylistic voices and the identities they index serve to convey multiple meanings ...' (1999: 327).

More recently, research into the discursive construction of gender and sexuality has broadened to other cultures and to other languages. A good example is Hideko Abe's (2006) paper 'Lesbian bar talk in Shinjuku, Tokyo'. Abe investigates the naming and identity construction of lesbian women in Tokyo and the linguistic patterns typical of their interactions. These women self-identify as belonging to two different groups: *rezubian* and *onabe*. *Rezubian* are women who are attracted to other women and who identify as female; *onabe*, by contrast, are women who are attracted to other women but whose social and emotional identity is male. These two groups are catered for by two different kinds of bar: *rezubian* bars and *onabe* bars. Abe's fieldwork involved frequent visits to these bars in a small area of Tokyo over a ten-month period. Among other things she analysed pronoun usage. In Japanese, first-person pronouns are gendered (just like third-person pronouns in English: *he/she*). Abe established that the general pattern was that *rezubian* use the first-person pronoun *watashi* (a pronoun available to both women and men) while *onabe* use *jibun* (a reflexive pronoun

associated with men in sports or in the army). But the same speaker can use multiple first-person forms depending on the context, demonstrating the fluidity of lesbian identity in this community. Research like this shows very clearly how constricting a binary approach can be. Here all the people being studied are biologically female, but some identify as female and some as male. It would be all too easy to expect that first-person pronoun usage would correlate neatly with these two kinds of gay woman, but Abe's research shows that this is not the case.

The first book devoted to the subject of language and sexuality appeared in 2003 (Cameron and Kulick, 2003). We can anticipate growing interest in this area, the preoccupation with gay and lesbian language being overtaken by wider concerns such as the linguistic representation of erotic desire, the politics of sexual consent, and the language of sexual prejudice. Case studies like the ones discussed here have been invaluable not only in breaking the stranglehold of simplistic understandings of gender but also in opening up research into non-English-speaking cultures. The new focus on language and sexuality has also served to problematize heterosexuality and to make more visible the way language is used to impose heteronormativity. The aim of queer theory to disentangle sexuality from gender has proved to be less achievable. In particular, dominant norms of masculinity are intrinsically heterosexual (see Cameron, 1997; Kiesling, 2002; Coates, 2007). As Cameron and Kulick (2003: 141) put it: 'Since desiring subjects and desired objects are never genderless, you cannot "do sexuality" without at the same time "doing gender".'

## Ideologies of gender and discourse

The last twenty years in language and gender research have been marked by battles over essentialism. Early researchers relied on a biologically based binary – male/female – and used the term 'sex' rather than gender. The realization that gender was culturally constructed meant that the original biologically based binary was replaced by a new cultural binary: masculine/feminine. But in the 1990s binaries of all kinds came under fierce attack. The argument was that binaries relied on an essentialist view of gender, reducing the complexities of masculinity and femininity to a homogeneous duality. The terms 'woman' and 'man' were seen as intrinsically flawed, since they appealed to an essentialist and binary notion of gender.

With the turn of the century came a new awareness of the role played by *ideology* in structuring society. Even though researchers talk in terms of the fluidity and plurality of gender, it is important to acknowledge the power of the social ideology of gender as dichotomous. Most people in most cultures align themselves with this ideology. Gender is seen as a simple mapping onto sex, and sex is construed as binary (male/female). And the ideology has force because gender is not just a cultural construct – it is also a physical reality. 'There is an irreducible bodily dimension in experience and practice' (Connell, 1995: 51)

When speakers perform gender, they are inevitably influenced by prevailing ideologies of gender (see Cameron, 2003; Talbot, 2003). Ideologies of gender and language have varied over the last 200 years, but one thing that is constant is 'the insistence that in any identifiable social group, women and men are *different*' (Cameron, 2003: 452, italics in original). These ideologies of gender and language maintain gender distinctions and help to naturalize the idea that there are two 'opposite' sexes.

Recent work in the language and gender field is increasingly paying attention to the ideologies of gender and language underpinning everyday interaction. For example, Susan Ehrlich (2006) looks at the language used in a Canadian court room, in a trial about sexual assault, and shows how dominant ideologies of gender and of sexual behaviour make it very difficult for the woman complainant to be heard. A second example is research done by Sylvia Shaw (2006) (discussed briefly in section 'The discursive construction of dominance'), who looked at the experience of women members of Parliament in England. Women have trouble making themselves heard in Parliament, a problem

arising from an ideology that still sees Parliament as a male arena and women as outsiders. Jie Yang's (2007) research looks at the impact sexist ideology can have on women's everyday lives. Yang identifies a meta-pragmatic discourse on domestic violence in China around the term *zuiqian*, meaning 'deficient mouth'. This discourse includes a series of terms such as *zuisui* 'broken mouth' (talking about trivial things in great detail) or *chang shetou* 'long tongue' (being too inquisitive and nosy). In effect this discourse blames women's 'deviant' speaking styles for the serious social problem of domestic violence. The Chinese terms for women imply there are lots of different sorts of women with different (deviant) ways of speaking. But a feminist analysis makes clear that the true basis of violence against women is simply the fact that they are women.

Cameron (2003: 448) argues that we need to understand the way ideologies work if we are to understand the way ideological representations of language and gender 'inform everyday linguistic and social practice among real women and men'. She looks at how language and gender ideologies vary through time and in different cultures. She argues that the role of ideologies is to make the (unequal) relationship between women and men in any society appear natural, rather than unjust. She also charts what she calls 'the fall and rise of women's language', arguing that women's language skills are no longer seen as deficient, but as superior to men's. However, this new ideology of women as great communicators has not resulted in better pay or higher-status jobs for women, who are simply seen as doing what they are 'naturally' good at. Interestingly, Cameron shows how, while working class males are disadvantaged by these new ideologies, powerful men combine the new 'feminine' communicative skills (emotional expressiveness, good listening, rapport) with traditionally masculine ones (authority, enterprise and leadership). Good examples of such men in the recent past are Bill Clinton, ex-president of the USA, and Tony Blair, ex-prime minister of the UK. Cameron points out that, while men who combine the masculine and the feminine like this are widely admired, women in senior positions are not rewarded for developing masculine characteristics: 'Nobody ever said approvingly of Margaret Thatcher that she was "in touch with her masculine side"' (Cameron, 2003: 463).

### Gender and discourse: the case for strategic essentialism?

The last twenty years have been tumultuous, with researchers disagreeing on the goals of language and gender research and on the theoretical frameworks and methodologies best suited to achieving these goals. During these last twenty years, ideas about language and gender have changed considerably. What used to be called 'language' is now seen instead as a heterogeneous collection of competing discourses. Gender is no longer viewed as monolithic or static but as multiple and fluid. Researchers have moved on to observing the discursive production of a wide range of femininities and masculinities, and have broadened the range of communities investigated, both geographically and in terms of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender speakers.

However, in the twenty-first century there has been a re-appraisal of the roots of language and gender research, and some researchers have begun to argue explicitly for a revival of feminist awareness in language and gender research (see Baxter, 2003; McElhinny, 2003; Swann, 2003; Holmes, 2007). While it is not true to say that there is now consensus, there is a sense that a more pragmatic approach needs to prevail. Some are arguing for 'strategic essentialism', a phrase coined by the post-colonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1987) to refer to the careful and temporary use of essentialism when the main goal is to expose discrimination against subaltern (subordinate) groups. As Holmes (2007) argues, the category of 'women' as a group (and some level of generalization about this category) is still 'strategically indispensable' if the aim of the scholar is to explore the 'gender order', that is, the 'ways in which women are the victims of repressive ideologies and discriminatory behaviour' (p. 56).

What this means for research in the area of discourse and gender is that there is currently a sense that researchers are now free to analyse talk in whatever way seems to make sense of the data; the fear of being accused of essentialism, which inhibited many researchers, has now begun to dissipate. Post-structuralist ideas have led to a loosening of ideas about gender, while at the same time a new understanding of the role of ideology has led to the re-emergence of binaries when used strategically. The discursive reproduction of gender is being explored all over the world and in a wide range of contexts, from the family dinner table to the twenty-first century global workplace. It seems likely that research in this area will continue to flourish and that our interest in the relationship between gender and discourse will continue unabated.

## Further reading

Cameron, Deborah (2003) 'Gender and language ideologies', in J. Holmes and M. Meyerhoff (eds.) *The Handbook of Language and Gender*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 447–467.

A key paper – Cameron argues clearly that speakers are not free agents but are constrained in their language choices and in their sense of themselves as gendered by current ideologies.

Coates, Jennifer (2004) *Women, Men and Language*. Third Edition.

This comprehensive survey of the language and gender field covers all aspects of the subject. This edition contains several new chapters, including one on contemporary developments.

Davies, Julia (2003) 'Expressions of gender: an analysis of pupils' gendered discourse styles in small group classroom discussions', *Discourse and Society* 14 (2): 115–132.

This paper demonstrates very clearly how the discursive strategies of boys and girls in the classroom differ widely. It draws attention to the conflict between the discourse of learning and expressions of heterosexual masculinity.

Janet Holmes (2007) 'Social constructionism, postmodernism and feminist sociolinguistics', *Gender and Language*, 1 (1): 51–66.

A key paper, arguing for less rigidity in approaches to language and gender and emphasizing the importance of a feminist approach.

Pichler, Pia and Eppler, Eva (eds.) (2009) *Gender and Spoken Interaction*. London: Palgrave.

An important collection of up-to-date papers by researchers in the field covering a wide range of topics, with a theoretical introduction by Deborah Cameron.

## Notes

- 1 Some commentators are less convinced about the role of interruption in conversational dominance; see for example James and Clarke (1993). Analysis of so-called 'interruptions' has not always distinguished clearly between supportive overlap, typical of collaborative talk, and simultaneous speech resulting from one speaker taking an illegitimate – and often adversarial – turn while another speaking is still talking. It is only the latter that is involved in conversational dominance.
- 2 Thanks to Kate Harrington, who collected the conversation this extract comes from and who allowed me to include the conversation in my database.
- 3 Most conversations in my database involved three or more male friends. This conversation was unusual in that one member of the group arrived late at the pub, which resulted in a short spell of two-party talk. It seems that talk among two men only is far more likely to involve self-disclosure than talk among larger numbers, a contrast not found so clearly in all-female conversation.

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