

## EXPLORING GENDER DIFFERENCES IN VERBAL AND NONVERBAL INTERACTIONS: THE FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF LANGUAGE APPROACH

Dana PERCEC

West University of Timișoara

Language is the most important of all the forms of human communication; through the acquisition of language we become human and social beings, while the words we speak situate us in our gender and class. Lacan (1999) emphasizes the importance of language as the signifying practice in and through which the subject is made into a social being. The mastery of language succeeds the mirror stage and is the true point at which subjectivity is attained. For Lacan, language is the symbolic order, embodying the abstracted relations of the laws of a particular culture. Our individual speech does not free us in any simple way from the ideological constraints of our culture, since it is through the forms that articulate those constraints that we speak in the first place. The definition of meanings as relations of difference and the crucial role of language in the development of the child's consciousness of the self relate to women's use of language. The social entry into patriarchal culture is made in language, through speech. There is a relationship between the acquisition of subjectivity through language and the recognition of the social nature of female identity. How men and women speak, how they see each other through speech, the social taboos on speech for children and women, all these relations bear upon the way in which new symbolic identifications and relations are created.

The feminist critique of language starts from these very assumptions. The field, developed in the past thirty years or so, comprises the range of feminist ideas about language placed in a cultural and political context. It includes feminist thinking about language, feminist literary theory, poststructuralist approaches to language and gender, empirical research findings on language and gender, the feminist critique of earlier feminist critiques, which dated very quickly given the numerous social changes witnessed by the western society since the 1970s and were, therefore, subjected to critical scrutiny from within.

Regarding language as a device for labeling and categorizing, many feminist critics of language saw in these linguistic preoccupations a possible solution to solving identity problems inside and outside the feminine community. The last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw a growth of interest in the complex interactions between different aspects of individual or group identity and in the complex interactions between different kinds of power relations. Despite the unfortunate presence of ethnocentric and class-biased overgeneralizations in much of this research work, some of the aspects it revealed have remained valid. An example concerns the finding that sexism works differently for rich or poor women, or that the experience of poverty and/or racism is gendered, taking different forms and having different meanings for men and women. This implied the recognition of differences in the structuring of oppression and the existence of real conflicts of interest between differently positioned women, which, in turn, helped to promote the theme of diversity, difference and conflict among women. Since the feminist critique of language

focuses on sexism in language and, more generally, in communication, its scope includes the discussion of such identity and sociological issues.

Early in the 70s, the idea that men and women speak different languages began to gain increased attention among linguists and communication researchers. Virtually any possible source of linguistic variation – pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, syntax – was regarded as a possible locus of sex differences. Stylistic differences (politeness, hesitancy, non-assertion) were also seen as gender-linked. This trend, which appealed to the non-specialized public as well, was partially inspired by the publication of a series of anthropological findings about the existence of quite a few exotic languages, whose conventions required women and men to use different words for the same concept. Though there are no such limitations in western languages, researchers came to identify a sub-category they labeled “women’s language”.

The pioneer of the field was Robin Lakoff (2004), who defined women’s language as a system of sex-linked linguistic signals, a set of features used by both sexes but more frequently by women. Her declared purpose was to provide diagnostic evidence from language use on gender inequity, by pointing out that linguistic behaviour reflects hidden feelings and attitudes. There are lexical, syntactic and pragmatic features that distinguish women’s speech. First of all, this is characterized by a specialized vocabulary. Women tend to have more names for colours and shades of colour, while men tend to use a more limited chromatic gamut: *mauve, cream, or peach* (2004:8) would be lexical items more likely to be found in a woman’s vocabulary. Then, women appear to have more words designating realities in the areas traditionally regarded as female specialties, such as cooking, kitchen outfits, household devices. Similarly, though, men would have more things to say in their respective fields of interest, such as sports or automobiles. Lakoff was also the first to claim that the use of expletives is different in men and women. While men use stronger forms (*damn it, the hell, etc.*) women use milder forms, such as *oh dear* (2004:9). The use of “empty” adjectives is also a woman’s specialty, according to Lakoff. These are adjectives conveying an emotional reaction rather than specific information. For example, while *great* would be a gender-neutral term, there are specifically feminine ones that men would not normally employ: *adorable, divine, sweet, or cute* (2004:9).

At the level of syntax, Lakoff argued that tag questions, structures midway between a question and a statement, signaling indecision, are more often encountered in women’s talk. They express the speaker’s lack of confidence, hesitation, non-assertive character. The same message about women’s behaviour can be inferred from their use of hedges in conversation. Expressions like *well, you see* (2004:10), or indirect requests would function, Lakoff thinks, as an apology for making an assertion at all. Women, like children or people belonging to lower social categories, also tend to use more correct grammatical forms, standard pronunciation, and avoid vulgar terms, as a sign of their social insecurity. In paralinguistic terms, women’s intonation is also different from men’s, a wider range of pitches being used, with exaggerated expressiveness and rising intonation for declarative statements. Last but not least, communicational behaviour in a wider sense was said to be different in women, an example being joke-telling and humour – or rather their absence. This was explained as the result of the internalization of clichés about women ruining the punchline or not “getting” the joke at all. Lakoff thought these features formed a recognizable style with a largely negative effect, connoting deferential behaviour, uncertainty, girlish confusion, powerlessness, non-responsibility for one’s action. The feminist critic accounted for all these by invoking women’s traditional positions of inferiority in society.

But this approach worked only up to a certain extent, Lakoff's followers argued, trying to see why women would persist in using "women's language" now that they no longer lack power and have a public voice. Thus, Dale Spender's influential study (1998) argued that women's subordination in language lies in their negative relation to it, which cannot be overruled by the construction of new and positive terms because the problem lies not in the words themselves, but in the semantic rule which governs their positive or negative connotations. Being "man-made", language imposes a relation of subordination on women, who remain outside it or at its borders, negotiating with it but never being part of it. Similarly, Sara Mills (1997:97) defines the feminine as an absence in relation to the masculine, the extension to language of a biological-medical observation that patriarchy has used for centuries to stigmatize femininity, a widely spread sex-gender confusion. Mills argues that there are not two genders, only one, the feminine, since masculine is not a gender, but the general norm against which everything else is projected.

The French feminist Luce Irigaray (in Cameron 1998:118) also criticizes the initial claims made by Lakoff's theory. She argues that women's entry into the public world, the social relations they have among themselves and with men have made cultural transformations and especially linguistic ones a necessity. A sentence like *Ils se sont rencontrés* – "they have met" – is, for her, a grammatical (and not only) anomaly when it is meant to summarize the meeting between, say, the Queen of England and the President of the French republic. Though the anomaly is not apparent in English, in French, where gender is to be found more often in morphological inflections, the use of the masculine gender as a generic term could be regarded, in this particular case, at least impolite to Her Majesty. The sentence uses the masculine gender inappropriately twice: the first time in the third-person pronoun which, in French, has a masculine and a feminine variant even in the plural; secondly, in the masculine plural inflection of the past participle, which, in French, must agree in gender with the subject.

Irigaray points out that such grammatical impasses are the result of the strong bearing linguistic rules have on the realities outside language. Neutralizing the grammatical gender amounts to an abolition of the differences between sexed subjectivities and to an increasing exclusion of a culture's sexuality, which is far from the desired end. What is needed is an equality that implies differences of equal value, equivalent rights in exchange systems. This does not mean that it isn't necessary to analyze the cultural injustices of language and its generalized sexism from a linguistic perspective, in grammar, in vocabulary, in the connotations of a word's gender. For centuries, whatever has been valorized has been masculine in gender, whatever devalorized, feminine. The sun and the moon are, in English, personified as masculine, respectively feminine. In French, their grammatical gender is masculine, respectively feminine: *le soleil*, *la lune* (in Cameron 1998:119). The positive connotation of the masculine as word gender derives from men's appropriation of the divine (man becoming God as the Word), says Irigaray, which pushed the archaic importance of the feminine principle backstage, into a secondary position. Most linguists counterbalance this claim made by the feminist critique of language, stating that grammatical gender is arbitrary, independent of sexual denotations and connotations, and therefore, cannot and should not be disputed by feminists or anybody else for political purposes.

Irigaray considers this assumption to be wrong: linguists identify the masculine with an arbitrary universal, but "a patient study of the gender of words almost always reveals their hidden sex" (in Cameron 1998:120). In French, *fauteuil* and *château* are masculine, while *chaise* and *maison* are feminine. While most linguists would argue that the former are not more masculine than the latter, Luce Irigaray points out that, in fact,

the former have a different, superior connotation when compared to the latter. They suggest something of greater value, they are higher-class goods, indicating their owner's privileged position. And the examples could continue. Such an analysis would make the word's and the notion's secret sex apparent, signifying their adherence to an as yet uninterpreted syntax.

Another fashionable field in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that postulated the existence of a huge gap between men and women in communication was that of cognitive-behavioural psychology. It suggested that communication between men and women is communication across cultures, the two genders using a common language, but different ways of expressing politeness, conversational involvement, etc. Some psychologists argued that talk between men and women is fraught with potential misunderstandings for the same reasons that communication across ethnic groups is. Many popular variants of this scientific stance were published for the general public. Perhaps the most influential and widely known example is Dr. John Gray's *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* (1992), which argued, basically, that men and women are so different – biologically, culturally, emotionally, intellectually, etc. – that they could as well be from different planets. The postulation of major differences between the way in which men and women approach communication was also supported by yet another popular fad, the assertiveness training. In books and lectures on the topic, women were marked early on as especially in need of assertiveness training, together with minoritarian categories (coloured people, old people, teenagers, social groupings, etc.), signaling that women were viewed as a stigmatized population. The self-help manuals blamed gender socialization, drawing heavily on stereotypes of female passivity. Women were said to carry "early messages" (Stevens 2005) in their heads (that made them, for example, tremble before employers, inhibiting any competitive behaviour). Women were also described as prone to a "compassion trap", being too attentive to the needs of others and therefore incapable of self-assertiveness. A gender role conditioning model could potentially be applied symmetrically to those studies: if women needed assertiveness training to counter socialized passivity, men needed it to counter socialized aggressiveness and insensitivity. However, the male half of the model received little attention in those studies.

Body language experts contributed to the generalization of the distinctive behaviour in men and women. Allan Pease (1997) goes as far as to label submissive or emotional body language as "feminine". Submissive body language would include motionlessness, making the body small (hunching inwards), keeping the head down, widening eyes, open mouth (women also smile more), small gestures (hair tugging, face touching, showing the palms, jerky movements), slow moves (that avoid alarming the conversational partner), sweating, whiteness of face. Emotional body language would focus especially on expressing feelings such as fear or surprise. The kinesics of fear would include paralinguistic elements like voice tremour, varying speech tone or flat speech tone, visible high pulse (on the neck), tension in muscles (clenched hands, elbows drawn in to the side), gasping and holding breath, fidgeting, crossed arms and legs, drawing in of limbs, sudden backward movements, etc. Most of the gestures signaling these "negative" feelings are explained in behaviourist terms, as reminiscences of instinctive behaviour in the natural world, where the smaller and weaker survived by adopting a defensive, non-aggressive conduct. The woman's social position is, thus, depicted as one of essential survival in an aggressive, hostile environment. A notion that emerged from this equation was that of learned helplessness: women's behaviour is embedded in their weakness. One of the counter-arguments brought by the feminist

critique of language here was that this notion was regarded as an attitude, rather than a consequence of powerlessness whose causes have to be identified and eliminated.

In sociological or sociolinguistic studies about cross-cultural encounters, conversation is said to proceed on the basis of shared assumptions about what is taking place, and miscommunication is expected to result when conversational partners do not share the same assumptions. Seemingly minor stylistic differences, such as whether a speaker uses a rising inflection with a question, can determine whether he or she is perceived as rude and hostile or polite and friendly. But communication difficulties between ethnic groups are explained by the fact that they live separate lives (different neighbourhoods, different family backgrounds, a different education, etc), while the same difficulties occurring between men and women cannot be accounted for in the same manner. In contemporary western culture, boys and girls receive a common education: they are raised by the same families in identical domestic contexts, go to mixed schools and acquire the same type of information, have access to the same kind of entertainment. However, the feminist critics of language tend to agree with this theory up to a certain point (Crawford and Unger 2003). Though they admit that it would be an exaggeration to claim that men and women live in different subcultures, they point out that the social rules for friendly conversation are learned between 5 and 15, when play groups are maximally segregated by sex, the children even consciously exaggerating differences in order to differentiate themselves from the other sex. There are, therefore, different social contexts in which they learn the meanings and goals of conversational interaction. According to Mary Crawford and Rhonda Unger (2003:205), girls learn to do three things with words: create and maintain relations of closeness, criticize others in indirect ways, interpret sensitively the speech of other girls. Conversely, in their view, boys learn three totally different things from their interactions with peers: to assert their position of dominance, to attract and maintain an audience, to assert themselves when another person has the floor.

The subject of silencing women in and by language, where language is less an end in itself than as a larger terrain of culture, identity and history is quite important in literary theory and literary criticism. Virginia Woolf pioneered the field of the feminist critique of language in the field of literature in her famous *A Room of One's Own* (1989), focusing especially on the material and social constraints on women that prevented their access from writing literature. One dimension of this area of the feminist critique of language is the finding that women are more present in writing particular genres and styles, especially the novel and less present in the poetic genre. Cora Kaplan and Jennie Batchelor (2005) follow suit, arguing that poetry is a forbidden genre for women because it is the most concentrated form of symbolic language, a privileged metalanguage of patriarchal culture, the romantic notion of the poet as the transcendent speaker of a unified culture. In a similar approach, Sara Mills (1997) addresses the question whether women writers produce texts which are significantly different in terms of language from those of males. Continuing the direction initiated by Virginia Woolf, she points out that the female sentence is the result of the confusion about the same sexual-gender difference we mentioned before, the idea that women cannot fit their ideas and expressions into a language which has been constructed according to the needs of males. She argues that the standard sentence structure does not fit the woman, being too loose, too heavy, too pompous. The male sentence is insufficient for women writers: it is much more formal, using nominalizations rather than verbs or adjectives, parallel phrasings, omitting agency, and having an impersonal tone.

The feminist critique of language regards sexist language as an exclusive idiom that promotes stereotypes (*an old woman* for "a fussy, complaining man" would be only one such example). Sexist language reinforces harmful stereotypes but also renders women's presence and achievements invisible. Many people believe that discrimination in society will not change simply by riddling our language of sexism. In this view, using non-sexist language is seen by some only as a way of paying lip-service to reform rather than addressing the very real problems of sexism in society, including discrimination, harassment, or economic inequality. Others consider non-sexist language as being merely the symbolic concession one can make to feminism without ruining one's dominant status. Says Deborah Cameron ironically, "No feminist fairy with a magic wand ever comes up and says: <OK, you can have non-sexist language or equal pay; now which is it to be?>" (1998:155)

The use of inclusive language, Margaret Doyle (in Cameron 1998) considers, does not have to be clumsy and it does not remove colour from language, since most sexist terms have lexical alternatives, the result being a more widely received language. As the same Margaret Doyle puts it, "English can credit its survival to its marvelous adaptability. New words make their way quite easily into common usage, while words that fall out of favour are gently shed, giving the language a fluidity that allows it to respond to changes in society" (in Cameron 1998:149). An archaic, unadapted language causes problems to English usage when it does not reflect the way we live, becoming awkward, ambiguous, inaccurate, and insensitive. If language leads to misunderstanding, it means it fails to do what we want it to do, it ceases to be an effective tool for communication.

### References

1. Cameron, Deborah (ed.), *The Feminist Critique of Language. A Reader*, London and New York: Routledge, 1998.
2. Crawford, Mary, Rhonda Unger, *Women and Gender: A Feminist Psychology*, McGraw-Hill Humanities/Social Sciences/Languages, 2003.
3. Gray, J., *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*, London: Harper Collins, 1992.
4. Kaplan, Cora, Jennie Batchelor (eds.), *British Women's Writing in the Long Eighteenth Century: Authorship, Politics and History*, New York: Palgrave, 2005.
5. Lacan, J., *Écrits*, vol 2, Paris: Seuil, 1999.
6. Lakoff, Robin, *Language and Woman's Place*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
7. Mills, Sara, *Discourse*, London and New York: Routledge, 1997.
8. Pease, A., *Limbajul trupului*, București: Polimark, 1997.
9. Spender, Dale, *Man Made Language*, London and New York: Pandora, 1998.
10. Stevens, T. G., "Assertion Training: Be More Competent and Confident with Anyone!", on [www.csulb.edu/tstevens/assertion\\_training.htm](http://www.csulb.edu/tstevens/assertion_training.htm), 2005.
11. Woolf, Virginia, *A Room of One's Own*, Fort Washington: Harvest Books, 1989.