



Gender, Language, and Discourse: A Review Essay

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Gender and Language

Gender, Language, and Discourse: A Review Essay

In 1978 *Signs* published a review essay, “Perspectives on Language and Communication,” by three of the pioneers of feminist language study in the United States: Cheri Kramer (later Kramarae), Barrie Thorne, and Nancy Henley. “Since the new wave of feminism drew attention to the neglected topic of language and the sexes,” they wrote, “there has been a burst of interest and research” (Kramer, Thorne, and Henley 1978, 638). Twenty years later, that interest is undiminished; indeed, the field seems to be in the middle of a notable “burst” of publishing activity. It is, then, a good moment for feminist scholars to reflect on current tendencies and new directions in the study of gender, language, and discourse.

In this essay I restrict myself to discussing book-length publications (including both single-authored studies and edited collections, but excluding books written as teaching texts or for a nonacademic audience) that have appeared, in (and mainly about) English, since 1993.¹ I will consider only those works of interest to a *feminist* readership.² And although the first business of a review essay must be to summarize rather than criticize, I will

¹ A significant omission from the following discussion is that of works published in, or primarily concerned with the analysis of, a language or languages other than English—though the collections of articles reviewed here do include contributions dealing with other languages (e.g., Catalan, Spanish, Hindi, Japanese), many of which are contributed by a researcher native to the relevant speech community. There has always been a strong ethnographic and comparative strand in feminist linguistics (compare a number of the articles in Philips, Steele, and Tanz 1987), but the internationalization of the field is an important and welcome development, even if in this context I cannot do it justice. Readers with an interest in modern European languages will find much useful material (especially on German, but also Dutch, Cypriot Greek, Polish, Spanish, and Swedish) in Kotthoff and Wodak 1997; another significant work with a comparative dimension is Pauwels 1998, discussed below.

² My criteria for judging this will be broad, encompassing any work that specifically identifies itself as feminist and not excluding work by men that is clearly shaped by a feminist problematic of gender. However, many references turned up by a literature search using “language and gender” as key words neither draw on nor contribute to any variety of feminist debate. They belong to the tradition of empirical sex difference studies that do no more than

not try to stand wholly aside from the debates I discuss, which would be equivalent to disguising my own stake in them.³

In fact, the vitality of internal debate among feminists is one general theme I try to bring out. Whereas Kramer, Thorne, and Henley could organize their review largely around the question, What do we know? I cannot organize mine in the same way. Not only is the relevant literature too voluminous for any one survey to encompass, there is no longer consensus on how to evaluate its claims: some of the most familiar generalizations have been subject to radical doubt in recent years, and critical scrutiny of the way knowledge is constructed and used has been increasing. Shan Wareing, for example, has shown how certain findings have been subject to what she labels the “hall of mirrors” effect (1996): in the course of being cited, discussed, and popularized over time, originally modest claims have been progressively represented as more and more absolute, while hypotheses have been given the status of facts.⁴

Wareing is not the only feminist researcher who perceives a need to revisit old assumptions—theoretical, methodological, and empirical. There has been a reframing of the field’s original research questions, summarized succinctly by Kramer, Thorne, and Henley as follows: “Do women and men use language in different ways? In what ways does language—in structure, content, and daily usage—reflect and help constitute

set out to find statistically significant differences between women’s and men’s behavior. This research formula has proved as durable as it is dubious (not to say dull); here I pass over its products without regret.

³ I should point out here something that will otherwise not be obvious but that readers arguably ought to know, namely, that I myself am a contributor to two of the collections reviewed below (Bergvall, Bing, and Freed 1996; Johnson and Meinhof 1997.) Although I have refrained from commenting on my own contributions to these volumes, I felt it would do readers a disservice to exclude them from this review merely on the grounds that my own work appears in them. Kramer, Thorne, and Henley were in a similar position in 1978, and they seem to have reached similar conclusions.

⁴ The classic example of a claim being exaggerated by constant repetition in both scholarly and popular sources is the well-known generalization that men interrupt women more than the reverse (Zimmerman and West 1975), a claim that is thoroughly critiqued by James and Clarke 1993, but in Wareing’s view without due respect for the modesty of the original researchers’ formulation. Examples could be multiplied of researchers being criticized for sweeping statements they never made, but which were attributed to them by later writers whose attributions were then uncritically repeated. An instance of hypothesis being represented as fact is the suggestion made by Maltz and Borker 1982 that women and men tend to attach different meanings to minimal responses like “yes” and “mhm.” These authors neither had nor claimed to have any empirical evidence for this proposal, nor has any been produced since, to my knowledge. Nevertheless, it is regularly cited as a bona fide male-female difference.

sexual inequality? How can sexist language be changed?" (1978, 638). Those questions have not been totally superseded, but they are no longer posed in exactly the same ways.

One reason for reframing them is the progressive abandonment in feminist scholarship of the assumption that "women" and "men" can be treated as internally homogeneous groups. Critiques of ethnocentricity and class bias have caused a shift away from global generalizations about "women's language": researchers are taking to heart the recommendation of Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet, who gave an influential article the title "Think Practically and Look Locally" (1992). The focus is on *specificity* (looking at particular women and men in particular settings) and *complexity* (looking at the interactions of gender with other kinds of identity categories and power relations).

A further important reason for reframing Kramer, Thorne, and Henley's questions has to do with the "turn to language" across the humanities and social sciences—a "turn" whose effects were not yet fully evident in 1978. As Rosalind Gill, writing in a collection titled *Feminism and Discourse* (Wilkinson and Kitzinger 1995), explains: "Suddenly it is no longer just linguists who are interested in language, but sociologists, geographers, philosophers, literary critics, historians and social psychologists too. Language is no longer simply a sub-disciplinary area or topic, but a central concern of researchers across disciplines. This shift was brought about by the prodigious influence of poststructuralist ideas, which stressed the thoroughly discursive, textual nature of social life" (Gill 1995, 166). After the "linguistic turn," the prevailing feminist view of language gives it a more strongly constitutive role than did Kramer, Thorne, and Henley. This, however, is another issue on which there is lively internal debate.

The cross-disciplinary "linguistic turn" is largely a turn to *discourse analysis*, the examination not of sounds, words, or decontextualized sentences but of more extended samples of language in use. The popularity of this approach has produced competing varieties of feminist discourse analysis, based on what seem at times to be incommensurable assumptions and definitions of the term *discourse*.⁵ For feminists who are also linguists,

⁵ The main division here is between linguists' usage and the usage of other social scientists influenced by poststructuralism, especially the work of Michel Foucault. To clarify: the usual linguist's definition of *discourse* is "language above [organized in units larger than] the sentence." As Henry Widdowson (1995) points out, however, unit size is not a satisfactory criterion: one can in principle carry out a discourse analysis of a one-word text (such as the word *Ladies* on a bathroom door). This is discourse because it communicates a meaning in a context, and to analyze what and how it means would require more than looking up the lexical item *lady* in a dictionary. An appealingly terse if slightly enigmatic definition of

“discourse” is not just a site on which to observe the construction and contestation of gender relations, it is a highly organized linguistic phenomenon whose formal characteristics are of interest in their own right. For those whose allegiance is to poststructuralism and not linguistics, by contrast, the formal organization of discourse is rarely a priority.

At the end of this essay I will return to the theoretical and methodological questions raised by differing approaches to “discourse” among feminists. In the body of the review, however, I have chosen to organize the material thematically and not primarily in relation to disciplinary or theoretical divisions. In this I follow the grain of the material itself: in line with the interdisciplinary traditions of feminist scholarship, many of the titles reviewed here are self-consciously eclectic, or concerned, precisely, to try to bring together poststructuralist understandings of discourses with an interest in the microanalysis of linguistic form and structure. My own use of the two terms *language* and *discourse* in the title of this essay is intended *both* to recognize the importance for feminist scholarship at large of the “turn to language” *and* to make the point that from a linguist’s perspective, *language* and *discourse* do not always amount to the same thing.

Dominance and difference

The question, Do men and women use language differently? played a central part in the emergence of a feminist sociolinguistics more than two decades ago, and it casts a long shadow—not least because virtually all researchers agree that the simple answer is yes. Most would hasten to add, however, that such simplicity is deceptive. Unlike some of their mainstream colleagues, feminists have never been content with merely cataloging the facts of difference, and on the more important issue of its nature, origins, and significance there have always been intramural arguments.

During the 1990s these arguments have been pursued most vigorously in a debate sparked by the popular success of Deborah Tannen’s book *You Just Don’t Understand* (1990). Tannen is an interactional sociolinguist; her work exemplifies an approach to language and gender that likens male-female difference to cultural difference and studies its linguistic or interactional manifestation in the same way that other sociolinguists have studied (mis)communication among speakers of different racial, ethnic, and na-

“discourse” in the other, Foucauldian sense, is Foucault’s own: discourses are “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (1972, 49). Keith Harvey and Celia Shalom’s introduction to *Language and Desire* (1997; reviewed below) includes a useful discussion of the definition issue.

tional groups. This “difference” or “subcultural” approach to the “conversational troubles” that arise between women and men has, however, attracted criticism from other feminists who regard what Tannen calls misunderstandings as instances of *conflict* between subjects positioned not just differently but unequally. As one commentator put it, gender relations are an instance “when ‘difference’ is ‘dominance’” (Uchida 1992; emphasis added).

Critics of Tannen’s popular books will welcome (although not necessarily accept without reservation) the more extended theoretical arguments set forth in *Gender and Discourse* (Tannen 1994), a volume that brings together six of her scholarly essays on that topic with a new introduction and contextualizing editorial material.⁶ Of particular interest are the two essays that frame the collection, “The Relativity of Linguistic Strategies” and “The Sex-Class Linked Framing of Talk at Work.” These can be read as, among other things, a considered response to feminist criticism of *You Just Don’t Understand*.

In “The Relativity of Linguistic Strategies,” Tannen argues it is not a question of choosing *between* dominance and difference, both of which are relevant to any conceptualization of gender, but of rethinking their relationship in linguistic analysis. She notes the important principle that linguistic strategies very often have not merely different but opposite potential meanings, connected with the sociolinguistic poles of solidarity and status: interruption, for example, can be either a status-linked denial of someone’s speaking rights or a mark of “high involvement” that signals affiliation rather than power. It is therefore misguided to read dominance and subordination from the surface fact that someone continually interrupts someone else. Feminist linguists who prefer a “dominance” approach are charged with making the same mistake—overlooking the “relativity” of a given strategy and so imputing to others meanings they did not intend—that so often leads to misunderstandings among women and men in conversation.

While it is good to see Tannen going on record with some responses to feminist criticism, I do not think her critics will be fully convinced, and Mary Crawford’s book *Talking Difference* (1995) illustrates several reasons. Whereas Tannen presents her work as “quite different from . . . the work

⁶ Tannen has also edited a collection of scholarly work by other feminists, *Gender and Conversational Interaction* (1993). While this is a useful volume containing much high-quality material, I will not discuss it here because the pieces contained in it are mainly reprinted “classics” representing an earlier phase of research than the one this review is concerned with. The exception is Tannen’s own contribution, “The Relativity of Linguistic Strategies,” which is reprinted in Tannen 1994 and will be considered in my discussion of that volume.

that grows out of a political agenda” (1994, 7) — several essays are contextualized with remarks to the effect that she had not initially approached her data with the intention of looking at gender issues at all, but they simply leapt out at her when she was looking at something else — Crawford’s thesis, pursued in a series of chapters that critically examine various (feminist and nonfeminist) paradigms for studying language and gender, is that “talking difference” invariably has a political agenda, whether or not this is deliberate or acknowledged explicitly.

Crawford represents a strand of feminist social psychology according to which questions of difference are the wrong questions for feminists, since they locate gender in individual subjects rather than in social relations and processes. Hence, she argues, the fact that successive paradigms of language and gender research have been turned so easily to antifeminist purposes: either blaming women for their supposed linguistic deficiencies (as in assertiveness training, viewed by Crawford as an ill-founded resocialization program) or minimizing conflicts of interest between women and men by redefining them as “communication problems” (as in some approaches to preventing rape on college campuses). In each case, individuals (in practice, usually female) are urged to monitor and adjust their “problematic” behavior while structural inequalities go unaddressed.

Janet Holmes’s *Women, Men and Politeness* (1995) follows a similar rationale to Tannen’s work in identifying significant differences in the verbal politeness behavior typical of women and men (her own research deals with New Zealand English speakers, both Maori and Pakeha [white]) and in relating these differences to varying (sub)cultural norms — crudely, women (and in certain respects Maoris of both sexes) are “more polite” because they place a higher cultural value on achieving consensus and showing overt consideration for others. Yet Holmes is more in tune with Crawford than with Tannen in rejecting “tolerance” as the preferred response to variation and in problematizing the issue — inescapably a political one — of who ends up adjusting to whom. She argues that men are perfectly capable, when they need to be, of more consensual and considerate speech styles; it is their gendered dominance that licenses them not to attend closely to others’ “face,” that is, their desire to be treated in a way that is explicitly respectful, in many contexts. Holmes also suggests that adopting something closer to women’s interactional norms in public and formal settings would improve the quality of communication. This privileging of women’s behavior represents an alternative feminist take on the “difference” approach, in tension both with Tannen’s “different but equal” position and with Mary Crawford’s more robust opposition to the entire paradigm.

Tannen's most direct responses to feminist criticism of her work are to be found in the introduction to *Gender and Discourse*, in which she seeks to refute the charge of "essentialism"—which she appears to understand as a matter of attributing male-female differences to nature rather than nurture. If that were the whole story, then certainly Tannen is no essentialist. But she entirely misses the broader critique of what Crawford labels the "sex difference approach"—that it constructs its own object of knowledge, uncritically recycles commonsense ideas about the depth and stability of difference, homogenizes both women and men, and is thus more likely to work with sexism than against it.

The final, previously unpublished article in *Gender and Discourse*, "The Sex-Class Linked Framing of Talk at Work," would seem, however, to represent a shift away from essentialism. Using Erving Goffman's notions of "sex-class" and "framing," Tannen argues (1994, 198): "Ways of talking and behaving that are associated with gender are a matter not of identity but of *display*. In other words, the behavior is not a reflection of the individual's nature (identity) but rather of some performance that the individual is accomplishing (display)." Such a view puts Tannen much closer to those who are articulating the relationship between "language and the socially constructed self," with theoretical support from either feminist post-modernism or (as in Tannen's own case) symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology.

Socially constructed selves

Language and the Socially Constructed Self is the subtitle of Kira Hall and Mary Bucholtz's stimulating collection *Gender Articulated* (1995). The editors and some contributors have been influenced by postmodernist and queer theoretical approaches to gender, including Judith Butler's notion of "performativity" (Butler 1990). Since the term *performative* was invented by philosophers of language to explain how people are able, in J. L. Austin's phrase, to "do things with words" (Austin 1962), there is a certain aptness in its reappropriation for the analysis of how gender identities are accomplished in and through the use of language. A striking example is given by Hall and Bucholtz in their introduction: they tell us that among the most avid readers of books that purport to describe global differences in male and female speech styles are "transgendered" individuals looking for guidance on how to mount an "authentic" performance of their chosen gender identity.

But it is not only transsexuals and drag artists who perform gender. Hall's (1995) chapter, "Lip Service on the Fantasy Lines," reports research

with female telephone sex workers in California, many of whom have consciously adopted a style of speaking to clients that recalls Robin Lakoff's description of "women's language" as a register of stylized feminine powerlessness (Lakoff 1975). The sex workers use this style, in a context in which language and voice are the sole means for constructing identity, because they calculate it is the version of femininity their customers want to buy; they are well aware that there are other femininities potentially at their disposal and that their performance "on the job" is, precisely, a performance.

The behavior of the telephone sex workers points to the plural, nonnatural character of femininity, but as Hall also notes, it recycles entirely conventional notions of male-female difference, which do not work to the advantage of women collectively, even if in this particular context they advantage individual women. Parallel observations could be made about the effect of transsexuals basing their linguistic performance of femininity on a reading of Lakoff or Tannen. This underlines a difference between queer and feminist emancipatory projects: feminism's goal is less to make gender categories permeable than to make them redundant.

Another objection to queer approaches, with particular force for researchers of conversation, is that linguistic performance is necessarily, and intricately, *intersubjective*: in conversation performances mutually shape one another from moment to moment, since what one person says now constrains what it is possible or intelligible for another to say next. Many analysts would emphasize that the selves produced in linguistic interaction are "coconstructed" or "jointly accomplished"; feminists committed to this view (such as Goodwin [1990], Tannen [1994] in the "sex-class linked framing" article, and many contributors to Kotthoff and Wodak [1997]) often prefer to pursue quite similar questions to Hall's within the frameworks of symbolic interactionism or ethnomethodology and its language-oriented offshoot, conversation analysis.

In her contribution to *Gender Articulated*, "Language, Gender and Power: An Anthropological Review," Susan Gal criticizes the classic sociolinguistic tendency to equate "women's language" with "the language used by women":⁷ "The categories of *women's speech*, *men's speech*, and *prestigious* or *powerful speech* are not just indexically derived from the identities of

⁷ Gal's article is a revised and shortened version of an essay titled "Between Speech and Silence" (Gal 1991). The earlier piece is, in my opinion, the finest critical review essay ever written about language and gender studies, and it deserves to be read by any feminist interested in the subject.

speakers. Indeed, sometimes a speaker's utterances create her or his identity. These categories, along with broader ones such as *feminine* and *masculine*, are culturally constructed within social groups; they change through history and are systematically related to other areas of cultural discourse such as the nature of persons, of power, and of a desirable moral order" (1995, 171). "Women's language" from this point of view is a symbolic category, whereas "the language used by women" is an empirical one. The interesting question is how they articulate with one another, how, for example, the symbolic construct "women's language" is drawn on in various ways by "real" speakers — speakers who, as Bucholtz and Hall's transsexual example shows, do not have to be "real" in the sense of "anatomical" *women*. The complexity of the question should not however be underestimated: the relationship between using a certain kind of language and constructing a certain kind of gender identity is almost always an indirect or mediated one. In the succinct formulation of Elinor Ochs, "*few features of language directly and exclusively index gender*" (1992, 340; her emphasis).

Another source of complexity is that even within one society, differing cultural constructs of femininity may be in contradiction and in conflict with each other. The power relations at stake in such conflicts are examined in Cathryn Houghton's (1995) "Managing the Body of Labor," a study focusing on young Latina single mothers who have been involuntarily institutionalized for their "antisocial" behavior in having children they cannot support. Houghton shows how the discourse norms of group therapy are used to undermine these women's accounts of their own experience and motivations: for instance, expressions such as "you know how it is when . . . ," which signify some *collective* dimension to the women's life stories, are proscribed in favor of saying "I," a move that redefines the woman's story as an individual and asocial narrative, thus clearing the way for it to be further redefined as pathological. By being disciplined to talk about themselves in ways acceptable to the institution, the women are being socialized into a different kind of feminine selfhood, one more in tune with mainstream U.S. norms such as individualism, the work ethic, deferred gratification, the nuclear family, and so on.

But as Houghton also shows, the women are able to use the discourse norms of "girl talk" as a form of resistance to the institution's norms. Girl talk focuses on the very things that are meant to be under scrutiny in group therapy sessions — sexuality, feelings, and personal relationships. Unlike "proper" therapy talk, though, girl talk is constructed as a collective and solidary activity and performed according to the linguistic and cultural norms of the women's own communities. This kind of talk knowingly

subverts institutional goals, but since its topics are ones the institution wants inmates to discuss, the authorities find it difficult to justify their (accurate) view of it as a mode of resistance.

Houghton's piece shows young women resisting oppression with some of the same linguistic resources that are used by others to oppress them. By contrast, linguistic resources that proclaim themselves as inherently subversive and resistant to traditional authority relations may fail to deliver on their promises. In their discussion of gender on the Internet (a topic that is likely to assume increasing importance for feminist researchers on language use; it is not often that gender has been on the agenda right from the birth of a new communication medium), Susan Herring, Deborah Johnson, and Tamra diBenedetto (1995) find themselves unable to concur with utopian predictions about computer-mediated communication facilitating (because there are no bodies in cyberspace) the creation through language of radical new gendered/nongendered/transgendered subjectivities.⁸ These researchers suggest that, on the contrary, the gendered linguistic relations of the virtual world look a lot like those of the real one.

As its title suggests, *Rethinking Language and Gender Research*, a collection edited by Victoria Bergvall, Janet Bing, and Alice Freed (1996), exemplifies the current trend among feminist linguists toward critical reevaluation of previous work; like *Gender Articulated*, it also shows the influence of feminist postmodernism on linguists' attempts to theorize gender in nonessentialist ways. The first chapter, written by two of the editors and functioning as an introduction, is titled "The Question of Questions: Beyond Binary Thinking" and notes that "the contributors to this volume question the division of speech on the basis of a binary division of gender or sex" (Bing and Bergvall 1996, 3). The authors go on to make some useful points about the ideological presuppositions and pitfalls of research that fails to problematize that binary division.

While these points are well taken, there is something of a mismatch between this theoretical chapter, with its view of gender dualism as a simplistic construct imposed by (pseudo)scientists on more complex realities, and many of the empirical studies that follow. What is striking about the latter is the evidence they provide that gender dualism, for all that its forms are culturally specific and variable, remains a potent meaning-resource shaping language users' own beliefs and behavior. Contributors do ap-

⁸ The topic of language, gender, and computer-mediated communication has already inspired a full-length book by a feminist, Dale Spender's *Nattering on the Net* (1995). It is not considered here because it is not addressed primarily to an academic audience, but for a summary and some critical comments, see Butterworth 1996.

proach the male-female binary critically, but in most cases their data oblige them to acknowledge its significance for the speakers they are studying. It is not some endless play of difference that is seen in the linguistic practices of communities ranging from engineering students at a technical university in the United States to Hindi-speaking *hijras* in India; it is rather the variable (and sometimes strategic) deployment of linguistic resources that are symbolically marked as “masculine” or “feminine.” As Kira Hall and Veronica O’Donovan observe about the *hijras*—an instructive case, since as castrated males who are regarded locally as a “third sex,” their gender identity cannot be taken as either “natural” or fixed, and this is signaled in the variable use they make of Hindi grammatical gender markers—“Instead of occupying a position outside the female-male binary, the *hijras* have created an existence within it, one that is constrained by rigidly entrenched cultural constructions of femininity and masculinity” (1996, 229). Indeed, could the same not be said of transsexuals and other “anomalous” gendered subjects in what might fondly be imagined to be the less rigidly differentiated societies of the (post)modern urban West?

While the shift away from naive and essentialist conceptions of gender among sociolinguists is unequivocally welcome, it need not—and on the balance of the evidence, should not—entail deconstructing gender dualisms out of existence. Arguably, what feminists need to account for is rather gender dualisms’ continuing power and pervasiveness in the world’s speech communities—although without losing sight of the varying forms they can take, the complex uses to which they may be put, and their variable local effects in terms of power and resistance.

Femininities and masculinities

The current feminist concern with “looking locally” is manifest in a number of recent studies that focus on particular women and particular men talking in particular settings for particular purposes. An example of this approach is Jennifer Coates’s *Women Talk: Conversation between Women Friends* (1996), a study of an extensive conversational corpus produced by twenty-six women and girls talking at length and in depth with their friends, supplemented by material from ethnographic interviews with the same women about friendship.

Coates remarks on the importance her informants accord to conversation with women friends, quoting their perception of friends as the people with whom you can “be yourself” and commenting: “If friendship provides the arena in which [women] ‘learn to be ourselves,’ then talk is the means by which this learning takes place” (1996, 44). While the bulk of

the analysis focuses on the linguistic organization of women friends' talk, taking up a range of issues familiar in the language and gender literature (e.g., narrative, the uses of questions, hedges and repetition), Coates also brings her data to bear on other issues of interest to feminists. She considers, for instance, whether women's friendships support or subvert compulsory heterosexuality, with its norm (overtly shared by most of the informants) of putting men and heterosexual relationships first, and whether there is any homoerotic component to female friendships.

This study underlines the point about "coconstruction" mentioned above: in Coates's data the "socially constructed self" emerges in and from interaction with valued and equal others. Yet some interesting issues are raised by the focus on "sameness," which is a corollary of studying, specifically, *friends'* talk. A whole strand of research on women's speech has rested implicitly on the assumption Coates here brings to the surface: that we are most "ourselves" when in the company of people very like us. But should feminists privilege this kind of women's talk as the typical or most authentic instance? The question of what happens to "women's talk" when its participants are different — and unequal — on dimensions other than gender is still a comparatively neglected one.

Another important issue concerns the *coercive* aspects of women friends' talk. Coates does not disguise her wish to celebrate an activity often trivialized by the culture at large; her analysis shows that its supportive and egalitarian norms do much to maintain the kinds of social relationships women find so satisfying. But — unusually for a sociolinguist — Coates also devotes a chapter to the "discourses" of femininity her informants draw on in their talk: not only are these on the whole more difficult for a feminist to celebrate, there is clearly some connection between the "good" (supportive) interactional norms and the continuing hegemony of "bad" ([hetero]sexist) discourses. It is arguably *because of* the norm of supportiveness and "sameness" that there are some "selves" (powerful ones, expert ones, non-heterosexual ones) these women must censor in exchange for the rewards of friendly talk.

In one conversation Coates analyzes, for instance, a group of schoolgirls observe the interactional norm of "mirroring" by constructing a chain of anecdotes about premenstrual tension. Their exchange shows vividly how it is that girls and women may come to participate actively in discourses that damage them. In this context, to produce a female self *not* at the mercy of her hormones would be to break the rules of friendly talk, which require that each participant must "mirror" the experience of the others. For one of these young women to challenge the "raging hormones" discourse would be to risk alienation from the group.

Do the (allegedly very different) norms of men's talk have a comparable "policing" function? This is a question to which researchers are only now beginning to turn their attention. That men are also "socially constructed selves" may seem obvious, but for understandable reasons, feminists have tended to prioritize women's talk over men's. If one reason is practical (a woman researcher cannot be a participant-observer in all-male settings), another is political: it is all too easy for research on masculinity to be seen as endorsing the still-prevalent view that men are simply a more important topic than women.

That might seem to be the implication of the jacket blurb for Sally Johnson and Ulrike Hanna Meinhof's collection *Language and Masculinity* (1997), which announces this, the first-ever book-length treatment of the subject, with the ominous sentence, "Feminist linguistics has come of age." Happily, the statement has been taken out of context; both the editors' introduction and Sally Johnson's (1997) first chapter "Theorizing Language and Masculinity" avoid the predictable traps and pitfalls and outline what is clearly a feminist agenda.

A theme that runs through the volume is the need to reassess some of the rather simplistic generalizations that have been made in the past about men and their speech styles — not (or not only) in order to do justice to men, but to break down stereotypes that help to keep in place present, unequal gender relations. If one way to do this is to show (as several contributors do) that there are differing versions of masculinity, another is to show by close analysis that *none* of those versions has the monotonic quality sometimes claimed for them. No one who reads this volume will find it easy to give much credence in the future to the long-lived opposition between male "competition" and female "cooperation" or to the celebration of "gossip" as a distinctive women's genre.

Many contributors are concerned with the complex articulation of gendered selves — in this case, masculine ones — through the "indexing" of different aspects of a varied and indeed contradictory set of cultural discourses. In "Power and the Language of Men," for example, Scott Fabius Kiesling (1997) discusses the behavior of a group of fraternity brothers, arguing that the power associated with masculinity is not undifferentiated: there are a number of types of power that his subjects bring into play by linguistically indexing contrasting but recognizably masculine "alignment roles" (e.g., the athlete or manual worker whose power derives from physical prowess, the "hard worker," the elite professional who commands respect for his intelligence or articulacy, the caring father). Kiesling shows how the same individual may take up different alignments in different settings, while different individuals in the same setting may take up positions

in contrast to one another (and so make competing claims to power, status, or authority).

What Kiesling calls alignment roles may be indexed not only through the use of different discourse strategies but also through patterns of phonological variation that are revealed only through statistical analysis, and the linguistic substance of which (e.g., whether *-ing* is pronounced with an alveolar or a velar nasal) has no inherent meaning (or meanin'). This kind of phenomenon is the province of quantitative variationist sociolinguistics, a field whose central problematic (explaining the mechanisms of language change) is not strictly speaking a feminist one and whose (copious) discussions of gender-linked variation have rarely been situated in any feminist framework. Since, in addition, much variationist work is difficult for non-specialists to understand—it deals in arcane sound changes presented through complex statistics—there would be some justification for placing it outside the scope of this essay. An exception must be made, however, for Penelope Eckert's *Variation as Social Practice* (1998), whose approach to gender is a challenge not only to her variationist colleagues but potentially also to the assumptions of many feminists outside that paradigm.

The research reported in the book mixes ethnography (Eckert hung out for two years with students in a public high school outside Detroit) and quantitative analysis of how students pronounce a set of vowels that are involved in an ongoing linguistic change (the “Northern Cities Chain Shift”). Variable pronunciation of these vowels is a carrier of complex social meanings, and Eckert wants to relate these to the organization of the high school community, which is divided on two main axes, gender and subcultural affiliation (“jocks” vs. “burnouts”).

Eckert disputes the view taken by researchers such as Tannen that gender differences in the use of language are primarily reflexes of the segregated peer group arrangements typical of childhood and adolescence. High school students are adolescents, and their social practice is characterized by a high degree of segregation (both by gender and by subculture); nevertheless, Eckert argues, nothing about their behavior can be understood without reference to the workings of the “heterosexual market.” That it mostly goes on in same-sex peer groups, the production of commodified, highly differentiated feminine or masculine selves becomes intense and all-consuming at a stage of life when heterosexuality is not only legitimized but, in essence, made compulsory—it is part of the price of growing up. This affects not only how individuals relate to members of the opposite sex but also—especially in the case of girls—how they relate to (and differentiate themselves from) others of the same sex.

For girls the heterosexual market makes it imperative that they use every

symbolic means available (from jeans to vowels) to create a self. As Eckert notes, skill alone (e.g., athletic prowess) is a tradable commodity for boys, but it is less valuable for girls, whose success in the marketplace depends more on appearance, personality, and “popularity.” The greater dependence of girls and women on symbolic resources is a reason they make more extensive use than boys and men of the meanings associated with phonological variation.

Considering the heterosexual market as an overarching principle organizing the terms on which gender is constructed and displayed (and not only among adolescents) might prompt questions about the distinction some researchers have made between comparative and single-sex studies of linguistic behavior, according to which the effects of power are visible mainly in cross-sex interaction, whereas single-sex interaction gives more insight into fundamental patterns of gender difference. I hope this notion will already have been problematized in my discussion of, for instance, Coates’s work and Kiesling’s; Eckert’s contribution is to make more explicit just why it will not do to treat talk between women as a refuge from the constraints of heteropatriarchy.

Eckert’s argument, which stresses the particularly close interdependence of gender and sexuality as mutually constructing categories, also has implications for the emergent field of lesbian and gay sociolinguistics. What it implies is that sexuality cannot usefully be treated simply as an “add-on” variable, nor can gay and lesbian sexualities be assumed to be “the same thing” — variants of an undifferentiated homosexuality that is contrasted to an undifferentiated heterosexuality. As Eckert observes, there is a general need to find ways of talking about difference that are not merely aggregative (gender plus race plus class, etc.) but are fully alive to the ways in which social categories are articulated with and through one another.

Questions of “community”

Queerly Phrased: Language, Gender and Sexuality, a collection edited by Anna Livia and Kira Hall (1997), promises a more considered treatment of the relationship between gender and sexuality. There are three sections: “Liminal Lexicality” deals with the terminology used to talk (and sign) about sexual identities, “Queerspeak” is concerned with the linguistic strategies used by speakers to index nonstraight sexual identities, and “Linguistic Gender Bending” addresses the use anomalously sexed subjects (e.g., *hijras*, transsexuals) make of gendered linguistic resources. The individual chapters are diverse, in terms both of their disciplinary or methodological allegiances, which range from literary criticism to ethnography, and of the

languages discussed, which include American Sign Language, English (in several varieties), French, Hausa, Hindi, Japanese, and Yiddish.

A volume on this topic raises two questions: what is the central problematic of a “queer” sociolinguistics, and how should the variable(s) of sexual identity be treated for sociolinguistic purposes? There are a number of possible answers, and the most compelling offered here, in my view, are also the most radical in the challenge they pose to sociolinguists’ usual assumptions about the nature of “community.”

One possible starting point for a queer sociolinguistics, discussed in Livia and Hall’s introduction (4), is the idea that too little is known about the use of language to mark specifically sexual identities because previous research unreflectively assumed the heterosexuality of its subjects. I find this oversimplified, at least in the case of early feminist research, in which the assumption was not that all subjects were straight, but that gender was a more significant influence on speech—and also a more fundamental social status—than sexual identity. This assumption derived from a particular, woman-centered form of feminist politics to which many researchers (both lesbian and straight) subscribed. The problem with this assumption in a queer context is that it does not necessarily make sense for gay men. What troubles me here is not that Livia and Hall reject it (it is not clear whether they do), but that they do not acknowledge it as a *political* question—one of a number on which feminism and queer theory may diverge.

A similar criticism may be made of Arnold Zwicky (1997), who proposes in “Two Lavender Issues for Linguists” that “for many lesbians, what is most important is identification with the community of women . . . while for many gay men, what is most important is distancing themselves from straight men. . . . Gay men will consequently be inclined to see their sexuality as a rejection of gender norms. . . . many lesbians might not in fact be distinguishable in speech from straight women” (30). This account of a much-remarked gender asymmetry (i.e., [some] gay men have “the voice,” lesbians don’t) is persuasive up to a point, but it omits any reference to either feminism or power. Something lesbians and straight women share is membership in the subordinate gender group, and this may explain the gender solidarity displayed by many lesbians. It does not however follow that women-identified women are less oppositional than gay men with respect to mainstream gender norms. On the contrary, if it is recognized that the norms of “feminine” behavior, including speech, are not just arbitrary indices of gender identity but symbolic of powerlessness, then one might expect feminists to be highly critical of them; since this stance is based on a rejection of subordinate status it need not be exclusive to *lesbian*

feminists. However, it might not be shared by lesbians (there are and always have been some) who do not define themselves as feminists.

In sum, if it is obvious one cannot talk about *one* gay and lesbian speech community, it is not clear that increasing the number to two—one for each gender—is a satisfactory solution either. I might also point out that observations about lesbians being more “like” other women than gay men are “like” other men depend (ironically) on positing a degree of homogeneity among heterosexuals, which is hardly justified by the evidence.

An alternative approach is offered by Rusty Barrett (1997) in his wittily titled chapter “The ‘Homo-Genius’ Speech Community.”⁹ All communities are imagined, but queer communities know it; any language they devise to mark community membership is also a product of their collective imagination, for as Barrett dryly remarks, “generally, people do not raise their children to talk like homosexuals” (191). Rather than study “queerspeak” as if it were a dialect, the cultural inheritance of some externally defined, preexisting group (the conventional “community” model in sociolinguistics), Barrett proposes to adopt what Mary Louise Pratt (1987) terms “the linguistics of contact,” focusing on encounters across community boundaries, in which typically there is mixing and switching of codes, as identities and relationships are negotiated.

Robin M. Queen (1997), whose chapter “I Don’t Speak Spritch” is also indebted to Pratt, suggests that lesbian language is located not in some uniquely lesbian style but in a community practice of putting together elements from different styles in a particular way. Examining the language of lesbian comic book and comic strip characters such as Hothead Paisan and the protagonists of *Dykes to Watch Out For*, which are chosen as examples of community self-representation, Queen identifies a number of recurrent tropes that carry conventionalized gender and class-related meanings. “Lesbian” meanings are produced when the tropes are used in marked combinations (e.g., stereotypically male and working-class cursing alongside the hedging and rising intonation stereotypically associated with middle-class women).

There is much to interest feminists in *Queerly Phrased*. It contains a lot of interesting information, and some contributions mark a new level of sophistication in this area of inquiry. However, there are aspects of the

⁹ A note for nonlinguists: this title puns on the famous formulation of Noam Chomsky, according to which the object of linguistic theory is the “ideal speaker-listener in a completely homogeneous speech community.” Sociolinguists locate the homogeneity of the speech community not in the uniform behavior of its members but in their shared understanding of what differing behaviors (e.g., pronouncing or not pronouncing the [r] sound in *car*) signify.

book that feminist readers may find problematic. If this sounds like equivocation, bear in mind that this is an emergent field of study; the quantity of recent publications suggests the field is developing and cohering quite rapidly (see Leap 1995; and the work reviewed in Jacobs [1996]), but it remains too early to assess the long-term impact of queer sociolinguistics or to say what its precise relationship with feminist linguistics will be.

From sexist language to gendered discourse

The “turn to language” in the humanities and social sciences has affected many feminists’ approach to the question framed by Kramer, Thorne, and Henley (1978, 638) as how “language—in structure, content, and daily usage—reflect[s] and help[s] constitute sexual inequality.” It is more likely to be assumed, now, that the role of language is a strongly constitutive one, and some may even take this to mean that there is no social reality outside language and discourse.

A consequence of the “linguistic turn” for feminist language studies has been to change the way the field itself is implicitly divided up. In the past, studying the speech behavior of women and men (sex or gender “difference,” a topic for sociolinguists) was often sharply distinguished from studying their representation in linguistic texts (“sexist language,” a topic for stylisticians, grammarians, lexicologists, or language historians). Now these may be regarded as aspects of one process, the linguistic and discursive construction of gender across a range of cultural fields and practices. When a researcher studies women and men speaking she is looking, as it were, at the linguistic construction of gender in its first- and second-person forms (the construction of “I” and “you”); when she turns to the representation of gender in, say, advertisements or literary texts she is looking at the same thing in the third person (“she” and “he.”) In many cases it is neither possible nor useful to keep these aspects apart, since the triangle “I-you-she/he” is relevant to the analysis of every linguistic act or text.

This redrawing of old boundaries has also had consequences for the way feminists address Kramer, Thorne, and Henley’s third question, “How can sexist language be changed?” (1978, 638). While “sexist language,” conceived as a finite, context-free set of objectionable items (like generic *he* and *man*), undoubtedly remains a salient issue in the politics of everyday life (indeed, the recent furor over “political correctness” has provoked a new wave of public arguments about it), it has become far less central in recent feminist theoretical discussions. This change is largely attributable to the fact that “discourse” rather than language per se is seen as the main locus for the construction (and contestation) of gendered and sexist mean-

ings. As discourse has attracted more attention, “sexist language” has attracted less.

One notable exception to this trend, however, is Anne Pauwels’s *Women Changing Language* (1998), which shows, among other things, that there is still theoretical life in traditional concerns about sexist language and the reform thereof. Pauwels treats feminist linguistic reform as a case of language planning and surveys the forms it has taken in a number of countries and languages (Dutch, German, and English are particularly well covered, and there is also material on French, Spanish, Italian, the Nordic languages, Russian, Lithuanian, Japanese, and written Chinese.) A valuable feature is the author’s assessment of the technical as well as the political problems involved in reform; she remarks for instance on failures to assess the linguistic viability of specific reforms within particular language systems. (A simple example is that many people avoid saying *Ms.* because [mz] is not a permissible freestanding consonant cluster in English. While the same problem in principle arises with *Mrs.* and *Mr.*, these are well-established items; whereas in the case of *Ms.* there is no tradition of pronouncing it, no indication of what item [if any] it abbreviates, and thus no clue as to what vowel should be inserted. This, Pauwels suggests, can only exacerbate the problem of ideological resistance.)

Pauwels is by no means unaware of current arguments emphasizing the role of discourse in the reproduction of sexism. The concentration of feminist reform efforts at the level of *words*, which for many nonlinguists are synonymous with language itself, is another of the limitations she discusses, noting that few guidelines concern themselves with sexism at the level of the sentence or text. Partly this results from the limited institutional concerns most reformers address (most obviously, the need for nonsexist occupational terms to comply with antidiscrimination legislation). Even here, however, there is evidence of reformers’ intentions being frustrated in practice (e.g., women become “chairpersons” and “salespersons” while men remain “chairmen” and “salesmen”).

It is in relation to this sort of observation that the topic of “sexist language” is illuminated by, and starts to overlap with, work from a “discourse” perspective. The criticism discourse analysts would make of many institutional reform efforts is that the latter underestimate, or even run counter to, the insight that meaning is not fixed or handed down by fiat. Rather, it is socially constructed, which means it is continually negotiated and modified in everyday interaction. It is therefore unsurprising that discursive processes often frustrate feminists’ attempts to cleanse sexist language from what remains a sexist society (a succinct and well-illustrated version of this argument is Ehrlich and King [1994]). What people do in

discourse overrides changes initiated at other levels, because discourse is the key site for the social construction of meaning. Understanding the complexity of that process is the central goal of many varieties of discourse analysis, including feminist varieties, which concern themselves in particular with the construction and reproduction of gendered (and sexist) meanings.

Debating “discourse”

Surveying current work in feminist discourse analysis is a challenge for the reviewer: the scope and diversity of this work is both its strength and its problem (not to mention mine). How far the strengths outweigh the problems is, moreover, a matter of some dispute. One area of debate, to which I will return below, concerns the descriptive tools discourse analysts ought ideally to use. An even more fundamental question, however, is whether analyzing language and discourse—with whatever tools—is necessarily the best way to understand every phenomenon of interest to feminist researchers.

That question is foregrounded in *Feminism and Discourse: Psychological Perspectives* (Wilkinson and Kitzinger 1995). As the subtitle indicates, this volume represents the efforts of feminists within a single discipline—social psychology—to make sense of discourse analysis and to apply it. Editors Sue Wilkinson and Celia Kitzinger have divided the book into two sections, one, “Empirical Work,” illustrating what feminist psychologists can do with discourse analysis, while the other, “Theoretical Advances,” discusses, and in some cases problematizes, the general project of feminist discourse analysis.

Under the “empirical” heading there are chapters on the discourse of preadolescent girls and boys about menstruation, of male and female workers about sexual harassment, of various popular cultural texts about childhood, and of medical and other “experts” about anorexia. In most cases the (familiar) point is that phenomena such as menarche and anorexia are not simply represented by language but actually *constructed* by the ways in which it is intelligible and legitimate to talk about them in a particular time and place; since they are essentially the constructions of expert discourses, their function in relation to women is a disciplinary one inviting feminist critique.

In the case of sexual harassment, however, the problem is the opposite: an attempt by feminists to construct a new and (literally) disciplinary category through discourse has been strongly resisted in everyday talk and practice. In “Sexual Harassment: A Discursive Approach,” Celia Kitzinger

and Alison Thomas (1995) echo the skepticism of feminist linguists such as Ehrlich and King about the effectiveness of coining terms and trying to police their meanings through the institutional promulgation of ever more explicit definitions. Their analysis of interview data brings out a series of contradictions and double binds whose cumulative effect is to make the category of "sexual harassment" almost literally empty. Thus if something "happens all the time" between women and men, then it cannot be harassment; if, in contrast, it happens very rarely, then it cannot be the sort of problem that needs a name and a procedure; if it is more about asserting power than procuring sex, then it cannot be "sexual" harassment.

The theoretical advances section presents five essays in which the merits of discourse analysis as a method for doing feminist research are debated. Is it intellectual sloppiness, or trendiness, or what Gill (1995, 172) refers to as "epistemological correctness" that underpins the now-common assumption that there is something politically "progressive," or specifically feminist, about discourse analysis? Is it necessary, as Erica Burman suggests (quoted by Gill 1995, 168), to "distinguish between the *applications* of discourse analysis and the theory itself," entertaining as a corollary the possibility that "the theory itself" may pose serious problems for feminists? Among the potential problems identified by contributors are the denial, in many discourse-based approaches, of anything extra-discursive (such as the materiality of women's oppression); the moral and political relativism that marginalizes questions of value (Gill's chapter is an excellent discussion of the relativist dilemma); and the absence, at the end of a hard day's deconstruction, of any clue as to what, in the realm of feminist politics, might actually be done about anything.

How serious, in practice, are the problems pinpointed here? Kitzinger and Thomas's empirical chapter shows that one can take a discursive approach without necessarily having a value-free standpoint or denying there is some "extra-discursive" reality (these authors clearly believe that sexual harassment exists and is a bad thing, irrespective of whether and how it is talked about). On the question, "What is to be done?" however, it does seem they have little to offer beyond further deconstruction: "What is needed instead [of yet more codes of practice and legislation] is an understanding and deconstruction of the discursive techniques used to render sexual harassment invisible or non-existent, and an understanding of how it is that the 'victims' of sexual harassment are made complicit in this process" (Kitzinger and Thomas 1995, 46).

Undeniably, these things *are* needed, and it is surely unreasonable to demand of feminist discourse analysts that they provide a political program as well as an analysis. Yet even if one accepts that all politics is discursive

politics, it might be wise to acknowledge that there is more to be done than simply discourse *analysis*. The supposition that discourse is all there is too often seems to lead (in a way that would not be warranted, to my mind, even if the supposition were incontrovertibly true) to the idea that when the analyst has deconstructed something — taken it apart and understood how it works — she has thereby *changed* it. Not so: at best she has only met one of the conditions on which it may be changed, through people using their new awareness that what counts as “reality” is constructed, contingent, and (crucially) unjust and on that basis taking different actions in future (including discursive ones such as defining a particular experience as “sexual harassment”).

At the other end of the disciplinary spectrum from *Feminism and Discourse* are Sara Mills’s *Feminist Stylistics* (1995) and Terry Threadgold’s *Feminist Poetics* (1997). These two books are in many ways extremely different (Threadgold’s a sustained and “difficult” engagement with canonical and not-so-canonical poststructuralist theory, Mills’s more of a vade mecum for the would-be text analyst), but they have certain things in common that are worth remarking on in the context of the ongoing debate within feminism about the nature and status of “discourse analysis.” The latter term, in fact, is one neither author would use straightforwardly to describe her own approach. Both are influenced (Threadgold more systematically than Mills) by a particular model of language — Michael Halliday’s systemic functional grammar — and proponents of functionalist approaches (whether Halliday’s or the contemporary European reflexes of Jakobson’s) tend to talk about “text” rather than “discourse.”

Both authors are interested in bringing together feminist poststructuralist understandings of gender with linguistic theory and the formal descriptive apparatus it supports. Each is trying to make an intervention in the two fields denoted by their portmanteau titles: poetics and stylistics must acknowledge the claims of feminist theory, and feminists need to make more use of the tools offered by linguistics. Thus, although she is in sympathy with key parts of the poststructuralist project, Threadgold remarks on the idleness of supposing that one can “turn to language” without at the same time turning to some detailed, systematic, and minimally convincing *theory* of language. (The linguistic theory implicitly underlying poststructuralist approaches — Saussure’s — is one linguists have not taken seriously for fifty years.)

In fact, Threadgold’s intervention in “poetics” is comparable, in its scope and theoretical boldness, to Eckert’s intervention in variationist sociolinguistics: a review essay cannot do full justice to works of this complexity. The ambitions of *Feminist Poetics* are best summarized in the

author's own words: "I want to question the patriarchal nature of the linguistic/structuralist contexts in which the production and reception of texts has been understood historically, but also to suggest that aspects of linguistics and structuralism can again be made functional for an embodied feminist textual practice. This involves rethinking a version of linguistics to challenge also the current feminist and theoretical anxiety about meta-language. It also involves challenging the (by now) institutionalized belief in some quarters that women are oppressed *by language*" (Threadgold 1997, 2). The book contains not only a wealth of stimulating theoretical argument but also several fine examples of extended discourse analysis, as Threadgold uses her preferred linguistic apparatus to interrogate texts dealing with (in varying combinations) gender, race, class, sex, violence, and performance.

Mills is less committed than Threadgold to a particular linguistic theory, but she too insists that feminist discourse or text analysis needs some model of what language is and how it works. Alternative feminist approaches to texts (in effect, literary critical ones) are taken to task in *Feminist Stylistics* for being intuitive, linguistically uninformed, and relatively inattentive to the formal detail of textual organization. Stylistics by contrast is criticized for ignoring the insights of both feminism and post-structuralism.

Feminist Stylistics is a more "practical" book than *Feminist Poetics*, and it is useful less as a source of extended discussion of feminist literary and linguistic theory than as a survey of various feminist reading practices whose shared goal is to uncover the workings of gender in texts. The texts reproduced and analyzed range from part of Toni Morrison's *Sula* to the paper bag in the women's bathroom intended for the disposal of used sanitary napkins. Mills's aim is to show how "gender is foregrounded in texts at key moments" (1995, 17), even or especially in features that "do not at first sight seem to have anything to do with gender; for example, metaphor, narrative and focalization" (17).

The project of bringing together poststructuralism and formal linguistic analysis (often, once again, of the Hallidayan functionalist variety) is also pursued, albeit rather unevenly, in a collection of articles titled *Language and Desire* (Harvey and Shalom 1997). In their excellent introduction, editors Keith Harvey and Celia Shalom draw attention to a paradox: sexual desire needs to be encoded linguistically if it is not to be inchoate and ephemeral, but at the same time it is a form of human experience that always exceeds the linguistic resources available for its encoding. How do speakers and writers deal with this contradiction?

Some contributors address this question using the methods of corpus

analysis, a subfield that combines aspects of discourse analysis with more traditional lexicography and grammar. The enterprise is made possible by new technology: vast on-line collections (“corpora”) of spoken and written discourse, such as the Bank of English, can be searched with concordancing software to uncover statistical patterns in language use.¹⁰ The approach has obvious applications in relation to feminist questions about gender and sexism in language and discourse; one reason for reviewing this volume (although it is neither uniformly feminist nor in my view uniformly successful) is to draw attention to the possibilities of corpus linguistics for the investigation of (some) gender-related linguistic phenomena.

Often, corpus analysis is used for the relatively limited purpose of giving statistical support (or not, of course) to prior intuitions about what patterns of usage are most common in a particular linguistic domain. For instance, one chapter of *Language and Desire* deals with reciprocal verbs, a grammatico-semantic category in which more than one agent is understood to be involved in the action (e.g., *fight*). It turns out that gender systematically influences the use of reciprocal verbs denoting sex. *Fuck*, for example, is potentially reciprocal (e.g., “we fucked [each other]”), but in the Bank of English corpus it is frequently used in just the manner implied by the aphorism “men fuck women: subject, verb, object.” The reciprocal construction “fuck with” has mainly metaphorical rather than literal uses (typically in the negative, as in “don’t fuck with me”).

Other chapters of *Language and Desire* analyze samples of language from a single genre (those covered include personal ads, erotic narratives, and romantic novels). For me, however, the most interesting contributions are also the ones that diverge most from the goals and methods of formal linguistics, particularly Wendy Langford’s (1997) psychoanalytically informed discussion of what she calls “alter relationships,” in which couples re-create themselves as “Pooh and Piglet” or “Furball and Monster.” This practice is to a considerable extent linguistic (using a combination of conventionalized baby talk and specific personal references), and it is publicly

¹⁰ The Bank of English is a joint venture by Birmingham University (United Kingdom) and Collins Dictionaries, a division of HarperCollins Publishing. This collaboration reflects the fact that the main application of corpus linguistics, and the driving force behind its growth, is a commercial one: the making of language teaching materials (dictionaries, grammars, and usage guides) whose selling point is that they tell foreign learners how a language is *really* used. The Bank of English contains 211 million words of spoken and written text (including both British and American English) and is the basis for the COBUILD project (the acronym stands for Collins-Birmingham University International Language Database). To the extent that the corpus can be taken as representative of usage generally, there is food for thought for feminists in what it says about “real” English.

attested in the Valentine's Day messages that appear in newspapers along the lines of "Bunnikins I love you snugly in your warren," a quote Langford takes as her title. What I find interesting in her discussion, however, is the data she presents from interviews with couples in long-term alter relationships. These data are themselves discourse, so Langford could be said to be doing a kind of discourse analysis; yet her contribution shows that the "public" texts that typically preoccupy more formally inclined analysts do not always tell the whole story. By comparison, some of the purely text-analytic chapters are lacking in cultural contextualization. The one on personal ads, for example, considers why the formula "seeks similar" should be particularly common in ads placed by lesbians and gay men without ever referring to the phenomenon of "tourism"; that is, "seeks similar" is code for something like "straight people seeking illicit thrills need not apply."

Putting together the various works discussed in this section shows in microcosm the kinds of unity and diversity that characterize the whole field of feminist discourse or textual analysis. One could make fruitful connections between the discussion of preadolescents' menstruation talk in the psychology volume and Mills's analysis of various menstrual product texts, including the coy "disposal bag" that never quite says what it is for. Gill's discussion of relativism and reflexivity engages some of the same issues as Threadgold's observations on poeisis, the making of meaning. What divides the linguists from the others, however, is the claim that in order to make valid statements about the data of discourse and text analysis, which are ultimately *linguistic* data, some properly theorized and formalized linguistic apparatus is necessary.

This is the argument about "tools" to which I alluded earlier, and the question arises whether it is anything more than a rather tedious disciplinary turf dispute. After all, arguments invoking "rigor" and "objectivity" have a certain incongruity coming from feminists in any discipline, whose preferred research protocols have often been disparaged for lacking those sterling (and figuratively masculine) qualities. Within linguistics itself, the "rigor and objectivity" argument has become a familiar device used by "liberals" against "criticals" (i.e., practitioners of Critical Discourse Analysis).¹¹ The former are wont to inquire rhetorically of the latter what distinguishes

¹¹ See Widdowson 1995 for an example of this strategy. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is another area of work in linguistics (again with links to Hallidayan functionalist models of language) to which feminists have made significant contributions, although its precise relationship to feminism is difficult to pin down: it is one of those broadly progressive projects whose founders and dominant figures are nevertheless all straight white men, and Wilkinson and Kitzinger (1995) specifically remark on these men's failure to give credit to

a “committed” (read: subjective and nonrigorous) discourse analysis from a “running commentary” on a text or from a piece of “literary criticism.” This is a game that no one engaged in what Gill (1995, 175) calls “passionately interested inquiry” can win, and it is not clear to me why feminists should want to play.

Yet underneath the misleading rhetoric of “rigor,” perhaps there is a real issue that is not about formalism per se. Often, for feminist purposes, a good “running commentary” is exactly what is needed: I would place Kit-zinger and Thomas’s essay in that category, for instance, also Houghton’s; both are excellent discussions. Conversely, some of the more formalist contributions to *Language and Desire* are rich in descriptive and statistical detail, but sketchy on the extralinguistic context that is needed, from a feminist point of view, to give the description significance.

A more pertinent question than whether “formal analysis” should be preferred to “running commentary” might be how to tell the difference between “good” and “bad” examples of either. This questioning, I think, comes closer to the real issue: in the much more intellectually and politically diverse interpretive community feminists concerned with language and discourse now inhabit, how do we persuade one another that a given interpretation is more or less valid, insightful, useful? It is a question (political as much as technical) whose inherent difficulty we underestimate at our peril. But it should not stop feminists—and on the evidence of the work reviewed here, has not stopped us—from trying to describe carefully, and to interpret persuasively, the ways in which words are used to make and remake the world.

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feminists by citing their work. Some contributors to the collections reviewed above would call themselves practitioners of CDA; there is also an important strand of feminist CDA in work that has appeared in the journal *Discourse and Society*. The reason I have not treated this work as a distinct category is that, so far as I know, no edited collection or single-authored work explicitly locating itself within “feminist critical discourse analysis” has yet appeared.

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