5 Language and gender

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> . . . Why can't a woman talk more like a man?
>
> (H. Higgins, phonetician)

5.0. Introduction

Questions of gender are now seen as a major challenge in almost every discipline that deals with human behavior, cognition, institutions, society, and culture. Within linguistics, however, sex/gender studies have played a relatively minor role: 'feminist linguistics' is far better known in literary than linguistic circles (see e.g. Ruthven 1984, Chapter 3). There are, of course, occasional publications in linguistics journals and papers at linguistics meetings. It is fair to say, however, that the recent 'feminist intervention,' which is largely responsible for the increased attention to gender in so many areas of intellectual inquiry, has been little felt by most linguists, many of whom have scoffed at claims (e.g. in Spender 1980) that language is 'man made.'

Why have linguists been relatively inactive in the rapidly growing area of research on language and gender? One reason is that most of the initial impetus for investigation of this area derived from feminist thinkers' concern to understand gender, especially the mechanisms that create and maintain male dominance, and not from interest in language as such. This emphasis made the early research of limited professional interest to linguists though often of considerable personal and political interest to many of us as participants in the women's movement.

In fields like anthropology and literature, however, many leading non-feminist scholars soon saw gender studies as of great potential theoretical significance, whereas linguistic theoreticians (correctly) saw gender as irrelevant to the questions of formal grammar that have been center stage in mainstream linguistics. Many linguists do not see how to combine their linguistic interests and their feminism. Can sex and gender function as central analytical categories in linguistic thought? Can a feminist linguistics profitably interact with mainstream linguistic research traditions? Must we swim against that mainstream to explain the language component of gender phenomena? For those of us whose intellect and passion have been fired by

75

recent feminist thinking but who are also engaged by questions in linguistic theory, there is real urgency in the project of connecting issues of gender to some of the issues we care about as linguists.

Much recent linguistics has as its primary concern the principles that constrain the possible structure of *languages* – linguistic systems represented by grammars. Formal linguistics has little to say directly about *language* – the practice of using a language (i.e. a linguistic system) or languages in a community and the relation of individuals to such systems and their use. Nonetheless, the systematic study of possible properties of languages is necessary for illuminating work on language; conversely, any adequate theory of languages and grammars must ultimately be able to support or be compatible with an account of language.

The critical distinction between systems – languages – and their situated uses and relations to users – language – is often ignored by those whose main interest is gender (or more generally, society and culture). (I adopt Lewis 1975's use of the court versus mass distinction – *language* versus *a language* or *languages* – as shorthand for the 'system versus uses and users' distinction.) The distinction has been challenged by linguists whose primary concern is language function rather than form. But to understand just how function and form connect, and how gender systems shape and are shaped by language, I find it very useful to consider both language and languages, while keeping sight of the difference between them. The sexual politics of language can be played out, for example, in struggles over which system(s) a community should use. (See Valian 1977 and Black & Coward 1981 for discussion of the limitations of gender studies that conflate the linguistic system and its uses.)

The word *gender* in the title of this chapter refers to the complex of social, cultural, and psychological phenomena attached to sex, a usage common in the behavioral and social sciences. The word *gender* also, however, has a well-established technical sense in linguistic discussions. Gender in this technical sense is a grammatically significant classification of nouns that has implications for various agreement phenomena. In the familiar Indo-European languages for which gender noun classes were early recognized, there is some connection, albeit highly attenuated, between gender of nouns and sex of their referents. The connection is shown not only by the class labels *feminine* and *masculine* but also by the fact that gender 'agreement' can depend on sex of a deictically given referent rather than on gender class of an antecedent. Many languages, however, show a similar agreement-based categorization of nouns where the nominal classes show no connection at all to sex. Thus as a technical linguistic notion *gender* has virtually severed the connections to sex it had when first introduced to describe languages like Latin and German.

76

Gender is a useful term for present purposes precisely because it suggests an arbitrariness or conventionality in the socio-cultural construction of the (non-sexual) significance of sex and sexuality not unlike that involved in the construction of Indo-European grammatical gender classes with weak connections to sex. (McConnell-Ginet 1983a, Section 4 and Smith 1985, Chapter 2 discuss the relevance for language studies of the cultural construction of sexual difference.) In the title of this chapter, ambiguity does not really arise, since *gender* in its grammatical sense does not conjoin any more happily with *language* than does *ablaut* or *adjective* or *anaphora: language and x* suggests that *x* designates something considered separate from language – the law, race, literature – not a linguistic component or concept.

Gender studies can illumine some important questions of potential linguistic relevance, especially for understanding the connection between language and languages. How do grammars, mental representations of linguistic systems, connect to other modules of the mind (e.g. those involved in social cognition, in person perception, in the planning of intentional action)? How do minds connect to each other through language use? What do rules of phonetic realization look like and how can they vary within a speech community and from context to context? How are social and linguistic change connected to one another? What role does language use play in social categorization and cultural evaluation of its users? More generally, to what extent are patterns of language use reflective of social structure and of cultural values, of inequality and oppression? Can language be in part constitutive of culture and society, of women and men and their relationships? If so, how? Gender-focussed studies shed some light on these and other questions, although we are still a long way from providing satisfactory answers.

Gender studies have made it quite clear that language users have a wide range of beliefs and knowledge about language that go beyond the rules and representations specifying grammars. There are, for example, gender-related norms as to who should use which expressions in particular social contexts, gender differentiation in access to rules for special genres of language use such as lamentations or ritual insults, and gender-related 'frozen' patterns of expression (English *man and wife*, #*husband and woman* versus Spanish *marido y mujer*, #*hombre y marida*). Are all such pragmatic beliefs and knowledge governed by principles common to other kinds of social cognition or do some have a distinctive structure because they are about linguistic expressions and actions? How are they represented and how do they connect to grammars?

More generally, a focus on gender raises forcefully some fundamental questions about the links between language and social and cultural patterns.

How are linguistic forms endowed with significance? How do the meanings a grammar associates with an expression interact with contextual factors in constraining what speakers mean and what hearers understand them to have said by uttering that expression? What is the role of power and of conflict in constructing interpretations and in choosing among competing interpretations? Do our linguistic practices tend to sustain existing gender arrangements, to avert fundamental challenges to those arrangements? ('Obviously,' says the feminist. 'But tell me how,' says her other self, the linguist.)

Gender is of special theoretical interest because it is so pervasive. Gender is implicated not only in race relations, in social stratification, in legal codes and practices, in educational institutions (language in academia is thoughtfully discussed in Treichler & Kramarae 1983) but also affects religion, social interaction, social and cognitive development, roles in the family and the workplace, behavioral styles, conceptions of self, the distribution of resources, aesthetic and moral values, and much more. And gender is of special practical interest because it is the focus of a widespread struggle to change the material conditions and the ideological frameworks of women's (and men's) lives.

Rather than attempt a comprehensive (and necessarily sketchy) survey, I have chosen to emphasize a particular theoretical perspective on language/gender studies. Recent books in this area with some sort of linguistic orientation (and with their own rather different emphases and limitations) include Kramarae 1981; Vetterling-Braggin 1981; Thorne, Kramarae & Henley 1983; Cameron 1985; Shibamoto 1985; Baron 1986; Frank & Treichler (forthcoming); Philips, Steele & Tanz (1987); Thorne *et al.* also includes an invaluable annotated bibliography that updates and extends the useful bibliography in Thorne & Henley 1975. The newsletter *Women and Language*, now edited by Paula Treichler and Cheris Kramarae at the University of Illinois, is a useful guide to ongoing research not only in America but also elsewhere (see e.g. the Winter 1984 'multicultural issue'), citing work in many different disciplines.

Language (use) involves the *production* by linguistic agents (speakers or writers) of linguistic forms; in using these forms, agents are *meaning* to express content and to present themselves as social beings and actors in the world. I discuss first production and then meaning.

5.1. **Production: patterns of linguistic forms**

How does gender interact with patterns of linguistic expressions produced (spoken or written)? This is often construed as a question about how the sex or gender of the linguistic agent, the speaker or writer, affects which linguis-

tic forms are produced. Moving from sex to gender can make the investiga-
tion more subtle: gender categories are not restricted to the male/female
dichotomy, females need not be feminine, and femininity can be a matter of
degree.

Nonetheless, focus on gender as just involving properties of individual
linguistic agents can obscure important insights into how gender affects
language production. For example, there might be no connection at all
between agent's sex or gender and patterns of language produced but sig-
nificant interactions between forms produced and sex or gender of the
audience (Brouwer, Gerritsen & de Haan 1979 discusses one such case).
Production patterns might show systematic dependence on the sex/gender
relations between agents and their audience, e.g. same-sex versus cross-sex
situations of language use, or the Yana data reported in Sapir 1929 in which
what mattered was whether or not the group was male only. Or they might
show dependence on other features that make gender more or less salient in
particular situations of language use, e.g. my colleague Eleanor Jorden
reports that a Japanese woman can use a relatively low level of so-called
'feminine' speech markers when speaking to a male classmate about their
studies but a much higher level when talking with that same classmate at a
party. In a real sense, agents are responsible for what is produced. But this
does not mean that it is only through agents' sex or other individual gender
characteristics that sex/gender systems can affect linguistic production.

There are two reasons why we might tend to view the study of linguistic
production as the study of speakers. The first is a general psychological
phenomenon observed in our strongly individualistic culture. Language
production is a form of behavior, and the 'ultimate attribution error' (Pet-
tigrew 1979) is to explain a person's behavior as due to intrinsic properties
of the person – e.g. her grammatical knowledge or her intellectual capabili-
ties – without reference to contextual factors that might play a role. Those
involved in language/gender studies have not been immune to this error.
The second reason lies in linguistics itself. Linguists have primarily studied
grammars, systems instantiated in the minds of the linguistic agents. Ling-
uistic production is *prima facie* evidence only for the grammar (or gram-
mars) in the mind of the agent responsible for the production. For many
linguistic purposes (e.g. writing grammars), there is little reason to look
beyond the speaker to her audience or her situation. But to look at language
in interaction with gender (or with other socio-cultural phenomena for that
matter), it is not enough to observe how features of linguistic production
connect to characteristics of the producers. The study of how gender affects
linguistic production is not exhausted by the study of how the gender
characteristics of speakers affect their speech (of writers their writing). Yet
this is all that the prevalent sex-difference approach considers.

Even where linguistic production patterns do covary systematically with gender characteristics of speakers (e.g. with speaker sex), there are still important questions to be asked about what explains this covariation. It might be evidence of (1) gender differentiation in the grammars or systems of linguistic knowledge that underlie speakers' uses (this is what phrases like 'women's language' and 'genderlect' seem to suggest), (2) grammaticized gender display, which I discuss and illustrate below under the rubric 'gender deixis,' (3) pragmatic systems and expectations about how the grammar is or should be used ('nice girls don't say *what the fuck*!'), (4) favored linguistic strategies for achieving given aims ('get him to think it was really his idea to do what you want done'), (5) emphasis on particular aims or goals ('what's really important is sharing feelings'), or (6) some combination of two or more of the above.

Most contemporary linguists would expect no sexual differentiation in the acquisition of grammars UNLESS there were differences in the grammatical systems underlying the language usage that girls and boys encounter. This is because we take core linguistic capacity to be a species-universal biological characteristic. To put it slightly differently, gender interacts with linguistic knowledge only to the extent that it interacts with linguistic exposure. Children might, of course, be exposed to multiple systems, to which they might attend somewhat differently. For example, in developing their own grammars, girls might attend specially to the linguistic productions of their older female playmates, their mothers, and other female models. It is theoretically even possible that sex has some connection to certain details of what Chomsky calls the 'language organ,' although there is no evidence that this is so (a few papers concerned with neurolinguistic investigations and sex differences appear in Philips *et al.* 1987). But one thing that makes gender especially interesting is that in most cultures there is significant cross-sex linguistic communication at all stages of the life cycle, suggesting that there must be considerable linguistic knowledge shared by the sexes.

What I call *gender deixis* provides the most explicit link between gender and linguistic units produced; here the particular form of some linguistic unit *expresses* or *means* something about gendered properties of the circumstances of language production, the gendered perspective from which an utterance is produced. Like person or social deixis (see Levinson 1983, Chapter 2), gender deixis is in some sense grammaticized, part of the language system. One clear example of gender deixis can illustrate the kind of phenomena involved. Ekka (1972) reports that in Kŭṟux, a Dravidian language, 'feminine' conjugations of verbs signal that the speaker is speaking 'as a woman among women;' apparently, these verbal forms linguistically express the 'femininity' of the conversational group. In contrast, *gender stereotypes* (models 'of') and *gender norms* (models 'for') incorpor-

80

ate respectively the community's views about how gender *is* related to language and how it *ought* to be. The English *-fuckin-* infix (as in *absofuck-inlutely*) provides an example of a gender stereotype, useful to film-makers for evoking a certain 'macho' image, whether or not the 'macho' types in question actually are the main users of these forms; a gender norm preaches that such forms aren't to be used by women or 'in mixed company.' *Gender markers* represent actual associations between occurrence of linguistic units and gender phenomena that are informative for (and thus potentially manipulable by) community members, even though the association might not be a matter of conscious knowledge. In Montreal French the use of *tu/vous* rather than *on* for indefinite reference is strikingly sex-differentiated among younger speakers (Laberge & Sankoff 1980); this is one of many examples of a gender marker. (Smith 1979 discusses mainly what are markers in this sense, ranging over a variety of ethnographic situations.) Gender-deictic expressions will, of course, be gender markers (because of the connections between linguistic meaning and language use discussed in section 5.2), though the converse does not hold (e.g. the use of indefinite *on* in Montreal, though strikingly associated wth female speakers does not 'mean' anything about gender and thus is not gender-deictic). Gender stereotypes, norms, and markers are matters of language and not part of a language; thus they involve production frequency, not just categorical production or non-production. (Bodine 1975 distinguishes sex-preferential or sex-exclusive distributional patterns, an important distinction but limited to surface occurrence data that do not directly indicate gender significance.)

Gender deixis is also direct, whereas stereotypes, norms, and markers may all involve either a direct or an indirect connection between linguistic phenomena and gender. For example, people might associate utterance of 'Let's wash yourself now, honey' (at least preferentially) with female speakers, but make the association through a primary link with child tending and additional background beliefs about the connections between child care and women. In fact, it can be argued that most links between language production patterns and gender characteristics of producers are indirect (Brown & Levinson 1979, McConnell-Ginet 1985a), many both a reflection and a component of male dominance (O'Barr & Atkins 1980 put it in almost these terms). Finding a correlation between a language feature (e.g. frequency of tag questions with a final rising intonation) and a gender phenomenon (e.g. sex of speaker) does not in itself tell us anything about the social and cultural contexts, the mechanisms, that produce the correlation.

So-called 'women's language' has often involved (pervasive) gender deixis rather than the gender-differentiated grammars suggested by this phrase. (See e.g. Sapir 1929, Haas 1944, and Flannery 1946 – recently

81

reviewed in Taylor 1983 – for Amerindian situations in which gender deixis was apparently enforced and pervasive.) Among the languages of the world, however, gender deixis is apparently rare: i.e. we fairly seldom find distinct ways of saying the same thing where the difference between the two means something about gender properties of the context-of-utterance. Rarer still are situations where agents *must* express something about gender in the context (as English-using communities enforce the use of first person forms for agent reference in speech) or where such expression is pervasive (like social deixis in Japanese), affecting so many forms that few utterances will not express gender meaning.

Furfey (1946) argued that in none of the then reported cases of gender-differentiated speech did the sexes have distinct codes or grammars; more recent assessments of different ethnographic situations support that claim (in addition to references already cited, see Philips 1980, Borker 1980, Sherzer 1983, and Philips *et al.* 1987). Where quite distinct language systems are in a community's repertoire, gender is often implicated in their use (see e.g. Gal 1978 for Hungarian/German contact and many other references in Thorne *et al.* 1983). Languages reserved for ritual use or other specialized functions are generally accessible only to participants in these rituals and functions, such participation being frequently gender-differentiated (medieval Latin, for example, was almost exclusively 'men's language'). And Hakuta (1986) reports that among some Amazon Indians, marriage partners must be selected from a different (home or first) language group, a situation where there is universal multilingualism.

What did Lakoff (1975) mean when she spoke of 'women's language' (WL) among English speakers? Was she claiming gender deixis in English? Certainly some people took her to be claiming that, for example, *magenta* 'means' that its user is speaking 'as a woman,' feminine or effeminate. What Lakoff actually did was simply to identify a number of features as constitutive of American English WL: tag questions (in certain contexts), a set of positive evaluative adjectives, certain specialized color words, 'question' intonations on declaratives, euphemisms, hedges, indirect request forms and other 'polite' expressions (*could you perhaps manage to pass the salt?*), prescriptively sanctioned forms (*To whom do you wish to speak?*), and others. Her method was essentially that used in grammatical investigations: elicitation of 'acceptability' judgements from herself and other native speakers. The difference was that her data involves judgements not just of a linguistic form but of that form *as produced* by a certain kind of speaker. She does note that not all women use these forms and that men sometimes do, but she does not say exactly what meaning should be attached to their presence or absence or relative frequency in someone's speech. In contrast, she does explicitly speak of women as compelled to become bilingual if they

82

want to function in the public 'men's' world, suggesting that she is assuming (perhaps only a normative or stereotypical) dual system or 'genderlect' model. (See McConnell-Ginet 1983a for further discussion of that model.)

Whether Lakoff intended to be understood as saying that WL features involved gender deixis or constituted some sort of genderlect is not really clear. What is clear from her explicit denials, however, is that she was not proposing an account of the distribution of WL features in actual women's and men's speech. Most readers nonetheless supposed that she was claiming that her WL features were (also) what I have called gender markers, significantly gender-differentiated in their actual distribution. Lakoff herself was not unaware that acceptability judgements might well reflect systematic beliefs about how gender does (stereotype) or should (norm) affect speech better than they reflect actual usage. Edelsky (1976, 1977), Haas (1979), Kramer (1974, 1978), Siegler and Siegler (1976) and others offer evidence that certain elements of the picture Lakoff detailed have some reality as stereotypes. But even as stereotype, Lakoff's WL seems most relevant for the WASP middle class populations that American researchers have mainly studied. Middle class black women, for example, do not find 'coherent images of themselves in the contemporary literature on language and gender' (Stanback 1985: 177). And one woman complained to Barrie Thorne (personal communication): 'I'm tired of being told that I talk like a man. I talk like a Jew.' As a normative model, the WL features have rather limited support, even among mainstream white women.

Although actual distribution of WL features was not what Lakoff was interested in, actual distribution is of considerable interest not only for learning whether gender-differentiated systems exist in a community but also for exploring other ways in which gender may affect production. Lakoff's ideas about WL inspired many quantitative descriptive studies of women's speech (especially in American English – see Thorne *et al*. 1983 for references), some of which failed to find the differences that stereotypes suggest (e.g. Dubois & Crouch 1976). Other studies find some of the suggested differences but only in certain contexts (e.g. Crosby & Nyquist 1977, Jay 1980) or connected with gender through other intervening variables like power (e.g. O'Barr & Atkins 1980). Such findings suggest that the phenomena involved are situationally sensitive rather than attributable simply to speakers' gender. There has also been recent linguistic research on the WL question in other languages (see e.g. Light 1982 on Chinese, Shibamoto 1985 on Japanese, and a number of the papers in Philips *et al*. 1987).

Frequential gender markers that are not generated by strategic choices or tied to other intervening variables like social status generally indicate gender-differentiated social networks. Do such markers, which are found,

demonstrate the existence of 'genderlects'? There have been some sophisti-
cated quantitative studies that find low level phonetic and morphosyntactic
variation statistically linked to speaker sex (see e.g. Nichols 1983; Trudgill
1983, Chapters 9 and 10) within particular communities. Syntactic variation
has been studied less often than phonological, in part due to greater diffi-
culties in defining the unit that 'varies.' (See Lavandera 1978; the crucial
point is that different syntactic constructions often differ in function, unlike
alternative phonetic realizations of a single underlying phonological seg-
ment.) Some evidence has been offered, however, of statistically significant
links between syntactic variants and speaker sex both in English (e.g.
Philips 1983) and in other languages (e.g. Japanese, as reported in
Shibamoto 1985). And Guy (Chapter 3 in this volume) provides other
examples of quantitative studies of systematic variation correlated with
speaker sex, including lexical and intonational variants as well as differences
in segmental phonology and syntax.

When systematic variation is found, some theorists incorporate it into a
grammar with variable rules. Though language users clearly are capable of
regulating their speech to achieve a certain frequency of realization of
variable units, showing sensitivity to and tacit knowledge of statistical
regularities, what underlies this capability seems to me cognitively quite
distinct from what underlies (categorical) grammatical knowledge. But even
if we do take frequencies of alternative variants to be specified by the
linguistic system, to be part of what an individual knows (perhaps a distinct
'variable rule' module in her grammar), it would be appropriate to speak of
'genderlects' only if the frequency setting of *individual* grammars were
directly linked to gender; to the extent that variationists focus on *group* data
within a community they show us nothing about what I would call
'genderlects,' individual gender-conditioned grammars.

Much of the empirical research on WL, not only in English but also in
other languages, suffers from the absence of any principled theory of how
and why gender phenomena might or might not interact with language
production. It can be useful to count surface structural features of actually
occurring corpuses and correlate these with gendered properties of the
speech situation: sex and (perceived) gender of speaker, sex and
(perceived) gender of hearer, gender relations of participants, gender
salience of situation. The more difficult and interesting step is explaining
correlations that do occur, detailing the mechanisms that produce them, and
it is this step that some investigators refuse to attempt, since in doing so they
would have to move beyond what is directly observable. (Hiatt 1977 is an
ambitious computer study of written texts that I criticize in McConnell-
Ginet 1979 for such limitations.) A recurring suggestion has been that
women tend to adopt the 'prestige' variant in their community more often

than men, but matters are more complicated than this (see e.g. Nichols 1980, 1983, 1984 for useful discussion); explanations of this putative tendency are at best limited (Trudgill's, 1983, is one of the more interesting).

One of the reasons Lakoff's work has been of continuing interest is that she does link her proposals to some kind of theory of why language use might show gender differentiation, proposing that WL signals womanliness through its connections with deference and unwillingness to assume responsibility for one's assertions. There are, of course, other interpretations of the features Lakoff associates with deferring and abrogating responsibility, as I and others have pointed out many times (see e.g. McConnell-Ginet 1983a for some alternatives that present a more positive view of women as linguistic agents), but what I want to emphasize here is the importance of Lakoff's recognition of the fact that investigations limited to what is directly observable and easy to count cannot explain how gender affects production.

Brown (1976, 1980) has contributed to development of a theoretical perspective on language and gender by proposing explicit links between micro-level linguistic variables and macro-level strategic patterns of language use involved in politeness and connecting those patterns to gender-differentiated social networks and relations in a particular ethnographic setting. Brown and Levinson (1978) develop a general theory of linguistic politeness as involving attention to both positive and negative 'face needs' of conversational interactants. Positive face is connected to being identified with others and their interests and social connections. Negative face is tied to respect for others' rights, individual integrity or autonomy. It is possible to show concern for both positive and negative face (which is what the Mexican women whom Brown studied did with other women and with men), although there is tension between them. Certain forms can be seen as indicative of the agent's attending to positive-face needs of the audience (e.g. Brown so categorized a Tzeltzal diminutive particle in the Mexican community she studied) and others as indicative of attention to negative-face needs (e.g. certain adverbial modifiers that 'soften' or ameliorate directives). Given a functional analysis of the forms, counting them *can* provide information about strategies. The change of emphasis from a system one acquires simply by virtue of one's social identity to a set of strategies one develops to manage social interactions is one of the most promising developments in research on language production and producer's gender.

Looking at the significance of the forms produced, especially those whose function is primarily to handle social relations, can put WL questions in a different light. Brown and Levinson's politeness model suggests some

useful hypotheses as to why and how forms produced might both reflect and maintain male dominance. In egalitarian relations, negative politeness shows mutual respect, tending to suggest distance, and positive politeness suggests intimacy or affection, associated with closeness. To give negative politeness attests to the recipient's independence, whereas to give positive politeness can imply the recipient's vulnerability to the giver's good offices. In stratified relations, the inferior is generally constrained to give (the semblance of) negative politeness and receive (the semblance of) positive, which explains, I think, why we find again and again that the form used in situations of distance between equals (e.g. German *Sie*) is required usage from the inferior speaking 'up,' the one used in situations of closeness (e.g. German *du*) is freely permitted to the superior speaking 'down.' Brown and Gilman's classic study (1960) of the 'pronouns of power and solidarity' notes this conjunction but does not really show why it is so pervasive and useful to those who want to mask coercive power relations as ordinary social relations of interdependence. McConnell-Ginet (1978) and Wolfson and Manes (1980) study the sexual politics of address in light of this 'ambiguity.' What we have is less an ambiguity than a form whose linguistic significance – perhaps in this case something like attention to positive face – does not say what particular aims and motives speakers have in producing it. That is, the (very) general content is compatible with a variety of different, more specific, interactional moves. You may consider your address form or your compliment an act of friendship, but I may hear it as condescending or manipulative; I may intend my rising intonation to encourage you to continue, but you may hear it as insecure or deferential (McConnell-Ginet 1983b). The linguistic forms themselves support such sharply divergent functions. Goffman (1977) notes that 'the arrangement between the sexes' in our culture is constructed on the model of that between parents and their children, involving *both* affection and asymmetrical control; this observation helps explain the ambivalence of what we say to one another, the complex significance of cross-sex power and solidarity.

5.2. Meaning: expressing content and announcing attitudes

Research on gender and language production focussed initially on two issues. How do women (and men) speak? How are they spoken (or not spoken) of? My first course on language and gender was organized around these headings, with little connection between them. We have seen above that the first question is only one small part of a much larger one: how does gender affect language production? The second question raises issues of 'sexist language'; see e.g. Schulz 1975, Stanley 1978, the papers in Vetterling-Braggin 1981, and many other sources for documentation of the dero-

gation, sexualization, and homogenization of female reference, the universalization of male reference, and other aspects of the expression of misogynistic and sexually biased content. But the second question is also ultimately unduly restrictive. Rather than focussing just on how we are spoken of (or not spoken of), I want to draw attention to a more general question: how does gender affect what (and how) agents *mean* by their linguistic productions?

In meaning, agents are both *expressing content* and *announcing themselves and their attitudes*, roughly the functions Brown and Yule (1983) dub *transactional* and *interactional*, respectively. Languages, interpreted systems, assign content or content structures; we present ourselves and convey our attitudes only in situated language use. Content is the message: its expression is accompanied by meta-messages that situate the content in particular social contexts, provide guides to how that expression should be understood and acted upon, announce the agent's stance towards the message.

Attitudes ('women are the eternal mystery') and self-presentation (e.g. certain kinds of gender perspectives) may themselves actually be part of content, of what the speaker expresses. Content, however, is never a component of interactional meaning, an asymmetry which partly explains the focus of linguistic semantics on content. Nonetheless, the content one expresses is a powerful indicator of attitudes and the act and form of its expression often an important element in the construction of social relations. Van Dijk (1984) notes, for example, that expression of negative attitudes towards ethnic minorities by white Dutch 'majority' speakers (whose audience is also from the same group though an unknown interviewer rather than a friend) frequently involves strategies designed to forestall negative judgements of the expresser as racist. Thus content and social significance interact.

Many analysts assume that the 'illocutionary attitudes' the agent means (e.g. whether she is performing the speech act of asserting or one of inquiring) belong to content. To mean a particular illocutionary attitude, however, is to mean the expressed content to have a particular sort of effect on the context: conveying illocutionary attitudes involves conveying a 'meta-message' about where this particular content is to fit in the whole transaction. The same linguistic expression can be used with radically different illocutionary 'forces,' but such multiple functioning seems less like ordinary content ambiguity than like the tension noted above between whether the expression of familiarity stems from closeness or from disrespect. (Like any other attitudes, the illocutionary ones may themselves be part of expressed content: e.g. 'I claim that . . .'). Illocutionary meaning, however, is different from other kinds of interactional meaning in being a virtually ubiquitous accompaniment of the expression of content and essen-

tial to an agent's meaning anything at all. It is like them in being radically underdetermined by linguistic form and thus heavily context-dependent.

Genderized expression of meaning and interpretive conflicts emerge often in interactional meaning, where assumptions about goals and about one another's personal positions are especially critical. Tag questions and rising intonations on declaratives, for example, are primarily of interactional significance and have multiple functions (e.g. indicating willingness to engage in further talk or a relatively low commitment to one's assertion); it is not surprising that the meaning recipients assign them does not always coincide with what their producers intend to convey.

Meaning and language production are, of course, intimately connected to one another: in order to mean anything at all, a person must become an illocutionary agent, a producer of linguistic expressions endowed with significance, with meaning. The basic conception of what it is for an agent, a speaker or writer, to mean something by producing some linguistic expression directed towards some potential recipient(s), hearers or readers, I draw from Grice (1957). My reformulation goes like this:

> Agent A means utterance U to express content C and a particular attitude towards that content to recipient(s) R just in case (i) A intends U to direct R's attention towards C and to give grounds for R to think that A has the attitude in question towards C, and (ii) A intends this effect on R to be produced by virtue of R's recognizing that A does so intend.

There are problems with this (and with other formulations), but it retains Grice's two central ideas. First, the agent's intentions are of crucial importance: to mean is to engage in a certain kind of intentional action. Second, however, what the agent can mean, can intend to express by some utterance U, is constrained by what effects she can reasonably expect (or hope) to produce in the recipient(s) by virtue of his (their) recognition of her so intending: to mean is to engage in a social action.

Intentions to mean – 'illocutionary' aims (Austin 1962) – are fulfilled simply in being recognized, in being comprehended. In contrast, intentions to persuade, dissuade, comfort, impress, delight, frighten, or amuse – 'perlocutionary' aims – are easily recognized without being fulfilled. We are not surprised, therefore, to find sexual bias affecting accomplishment of these perlocutionary aims, a bias often reflected in evaluations of women's language productions. (Baron 1986 provides historical perspective on how women's speech has been evaluated, and Ostriker 1986 examines the genderized language of critical discourse about women's poetry.) It may be somewhat more surprising to discover that women can suffer discrimination even in obtaining understanding, in conveying what they mean, quite apart

from how people judge its efficacy or the quality of its expression. We might want to say that to ensure understanding, an agent need only say exactly what she means, i.e. choose words and syntactic constructions whose linguistic meaning expresses exactly the content she seeks to convey.

My Gricean-type definition of what the speaker means makes no reference to linguistic meaning at all, says nothing about what linguistic expressions –as opposed to language producers – mean. Grice (1982) identifies linguistic meaning with social norms that regulate what agents are to mean in their productions of particular expressions. Familiar approaches to linguistic meaning analyze a language as assigning semantic values of some appropriate type to linguistic expressions, with recursive principles for combining word and phrasal meanings to yield sentential content. The Gricean definition is sometimes thought of as just delineating how agents can mean more than what they explicitly say (indirectness as in 'would you happen to know what time it is?' as a request that the addressee tell the speaker what time it is) or even something different (nonliteralness of various kinds or even mistakes). But even when the agent's intentions are to say exactly what she means, the Gricean account still does some work; the agent can be said to intend to invoke mutual knowledge of the language system assigning the desired interpretation. In fact, it will generally be presumed that the linguistically assigned meaning is part of common background (cf. the 'linguistic presumption' discussed in Bach & Harnish 1979) and that this linguistic meaning is intended to play a role in identifying what the speaker means.

The fundamental aim an agent must have in her act of meaning is to be understood, to communicate – and to direct this act (at least potentially) to an audience beyond herself. This is built into the Gricean definition. Sometimes communication of content is most crucial, whereas at other times adopting a social stance is what has primacy. But to get started at all, one must be able to speak or to write, to produce linguistic expressions for apprehension (and in the happy case, comprehension) by others. This can be problematic.

Conversation is not an equal-opportunity activity. For example, West and Zimmerman (1983) find men pushing women off the conversational floor, taking longer turns and more of them in cross-sex conversations and even disrupting the turn-taking system by interruptions that 'violate' the current speaker's rights to sole occupancy of the conversational floor until the end of her current unit. On the basis of detailed analysis of conversations of three heterosexual couples, Fishman (1983) argues that women bear a disproportionate share of the maintenance work in cross-sex conversations, helping men develop their topics through providing minimal encouraging responses (*mmhmm*), asking questions, and listening. In contrast, the men did not so help their female conversational partners, whose attempts to develop their own topics tended quickly to run out of steam through the men's non-

responsiveness. Interruptions and topic control typically mark the dominant person in overtly stratified pairs: doctor–patient, employer–employee, parent–child.

Still what happens is not fully explained by pointing to male privilege and dominance. Edelsky (1981) has proposed that women fare much better when conversationalists suspend the 'one at a time' rule that usually prevails in favor of a 'shared floor.' Her analysis found some instances of mutual talk that was not interruptive; this occurred when participants knew one another well and were very much engaged in the conversation. Under such conditions, women and men produced roughly the same amounts of talk. There has been relatively little of this kind of analysis of single-sex conversations, although Goodwin (1980a) compared boys' and girls' play groups, with particular focus on the form in which directives were cast, finding that the boys tended to use bald imperatives whereas the girls tended to use forms like *let's* and *why don't we*.

Maltz and Borker (1982) draw from this and related research two different normative models of conversation, which, they hypothesize, girls and boys develop in their (mainly single-sex) peer groups. The boys learn to use language to create and maintain dominance hierarchies; the girls create horizontal ties through their words and negotiate shifting alliances. Drawing on Maltz and Borker's analysis, Tannen (1986, Chapter 8) suggests that adult women and men bring different expectations of their conversational partners to cross-sex conversations, that we come from different 'cultures' that have shaped our views of conversation.

This picture of gender-differentiated conversation models is based on limited populations and does not address the influence of ethnicity, social class, or the demands of particular situations. Nonetheless, there seems to be some support for the notion that middle class American women and men typically learn, in their childhood social groups, to structure discourse in different ways. This may explain some of the prevalent patterns of cross-sex conversational problems. Especially suggestive is Tannen's (1986) claim that 'women are more attuned than men to the meta-messages of talk,' by which she means what is 'implicated' over and above what is explicitly said. Meta-messages frequently (though not exclusively) involve social and interpersonal dimensions of meaning; analysts have suggested that those dimensions often also enter into women's messages, are part of their overtly expressed content (see e.g. Harding 1975, Goodwin 1980b, Hughes 1985, Cazden & Michaels 1985).

Two main suggestions of the research on gender and conversational interaction are relevant for present purposes. First, in trying to mean, 'she' may pay more attention than 'he' to whether her intentions can be expected to be recognized by their intended recipient: she tends to be more attuned

to the social dimensions of her acts of meaning and the attendant potential problems. Her cultural experience provides a less individualistic view of the world and recognizes more social interdependence. Second, to the extent that men dominate language production where audiences include both sexes – not only cross-sex conversations but also public speaking to mixed-sex audiences and writing for mixed-sex readership – a 'woman's eye' view of the world will be less familiar to the general (mixed-sex) public than a 'man's eye' view. There is not *a* view of the world common to members of each sex. The point is rather that men (and dominant groups generally) can be expected to have made disproportionately large contributions to the stock of generally available background beliefs and values on which speakers and writers rely in their attempts to mean and which are particularly critical in attempts to mean to an unfamiliar audience.

These observations may help us to understand charges of sexism in language and, more generally, claims that women are a 'muted' group, denied the 'power of naming' and linguistically alienated (see e.g. Spender 1980, Kramarae 1981 and from the perspective of literary theory, Showalter 1982). My aim is to suggest something of the mechanisms through which social privilege leads to a kind of linguistic privilege, making it appear that the language itself supports the interests and reflects the outlook of those with privilege (by virtue of sex or class or race), that the language itself resists threats to that privilege. The appearance is not illusory, although it is not a language (an interpreted system) but language (use) that helps subordinate women (and other dominated groups).

Socially directed intentions play a role both in cases where what is *meant* is different from what is *said* (linguistically assigned meaning) and in cases where the two coincide. To succeed in meaning more than what one's sentences themselves express, an agent relies on general principles (e.g. that utterances will be assumed 'relevant') plus whatever can be taken as part of the mutually accessible background. For example, precedent and assumed accessibility of negative appraisals of women's intellectual powers make it easy for someone to mean to insult by an utterance of 'you think just like a woman,' harder to do so by an utterance of 'you think just like a man' (though with the right audience, the second sentence might be the more powerful insulter). What is successfully conveyed implicitly by uttering an expression can eventually, by virtue of precedents, become conveyed explicitly by that very same expression: this has apparently happened to *sissy* and *hussy*, for example (see McConnell-Ginet 1984). To understand 'you think like a woman' as an insult a hearer need only recognize the general accessibility of devaluation of women's thinking; she need not accept it. On the other hand, a speaker who means to insult through uttering 'you think like a woman' and succeeds in so doing may (perhaps mis-

91

takenly) take his success to signal his hearer's agreement with the negative appraisal he depends on. Since she sees that he intends to insult, she might respond with 'no, I don't' and simply mean thereby 'no, I am not shallow, irrational, etc.' He, on the other hand, might take her to accept his implicit negtive evaluation of women's thinking but to be dissociating herself from the general run of women. Because that negative evaluation remains implicit when she replies 'no, I don't,' it is likely to go unchallenged, and the subsequent discussion may even reinforce its hold.

The general point is that in order to mean, agents presuppose, take things for granted, and that what can be taken for granted depends on what has been (often and audibly) expressed and can be assumed to be readily accessible. Views that are little heard, that are not common currency, can reliably function as background only in linguistic exchanges between familiars. Such views will not contribute to general patterns of meaning more than what is said and thus they will not leave their mark on standard interpretations (the *hussy* case). Lewis (1979: 172) claims that there is a rule of accommodation for presupposition; namely, that 'if at time t something is said that requires presupposition P to be acceptable, and if P is not presupposed just before t, then – *ceteris paribus* [unlikely in a world of unequal speakers] and within certain limits – presupposition P comes into existence.' But not all speakers are assumed to be saying something acceptable, and accommodation is especially unlikely if what is said is in conflict with what might generally be thought presupposed. Views that are common currency cannot easily be ignored, even by those who challenge or disavow them. To devise reasonable strategies for being understood, agents must take account of what their audience is likely to take for granted – not necessarily to believe, but to treat as the 'unmarked' opinion.

In attempting to speak literally and directly, agents must presuppose access to an *interpreted* language system, must take for granted standard assignments of semantic value. For words, semantic values are sometimes thought of as feature sets or 'definitions' in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions for application of the word. On this view, we can count on others to understand because we can count on their assigning the same features or applying the same definition as we do. Definitions or feature sets in individual agents' heads 'regulate' their (literal) usage of expressions. But there are problems of several kinds with this picture, among which are vagueness and instability of criteria for using expressions.

The alternative view that I want to sketch here is the radical one, developed in several of the articles in Putnam 1975, that 'meanings [of syntactically simple expressions] ain't in the head,' which is to say that we can't always regulate our usage for communicative purposes by reference to our individual cognitive constructs. People use many words for which they

have at best limited knowledge of criterial features, words for which they lack a definition. What guides the ordinary person in using the word *gold*, for example, is what Putnam calls a stereotype of gold, a set of widely held beliefs or presumptions about gold, that may sometimes lead to labeling as gold what is really pyrites. This doesn't mean that in the ordinary person's language, what *gold* means allows it to be applied to pyrites; it just means that the ordinary person talks about gold without being able to tell definitively what is and what is not gold, and thus can sometimes misapply the word. Suggestively, Putnam speaks of a 'linguistic division of labor': there is a scientific theory that distinguishes gold from pyrites, which some scientists know. The rest of us intend to use *gold* to speak about the same 'natural kind' of stuff that the scientific experts call gold, though we are sometimes fooled by the superficial appearance of pyrites.

Expertise seems straightforward in the case of identifying gold. It becomes problematic, however, when we turn to words and concepts that play a role in our informal, everyday theories of ourselves and our social world, our values and our ideologies. A fairly simple case that has been much discussed is that of the pronoun *he*, over whose interpretation there has been considerable dispute. In contexts of reference to a specific person, *he* unambiguously conveys maleness: 'someone$_i$ is at the door but I don't know who he$_i$ is' implies the maleness of the unknown person. In contexts where femaleness has been made explicit or is especially salient, it is difficult to use *he* even where there is no reference to a specific individual: *any boy or girl who thinks that !? he knows the answer . . .*' is generally judged bizarre. Yet prescriptive grammar enjoins English users to use *he* when the antecedent is a sex-indefinite generic: *when the child is around two, he will . . .* is a familiar kind of example.

Martyna (1980, 1983) has investigated *he–man* language. One thing she has shown is that women and men tend to produce *he* in somewhat different contexts, with men more likely than women to adopt the so-called masculine generic uses. On the other hand, women interpreting *he* in such contexts are a bit less likely to infer that maleness is somehow meant. Why might it matter what interpretations are assigned to pronouns? Because the interpretations assigned play a role in what speakers can do by means of uttering sentences containing those pronouns. Allowing the same form to be interpreted so that it presumes maleness in the case of specific reference makes it problematic to connect that form to cases where maleness is ostensibly not presumed. For such connections to work reliably requires tacit appeal to a theory that people are male unless proven otherwise, that femaleness is contrasted with maleness in being a special and distinctive form of humanness, a marginal condition. That such a theory does still operate was made clear to me once again when I heard a radio commentary

on the November 1984 Mondale–Ferraro defeat. Some Democrat suggested that the party should draw the moral that it can not identify with 'marginal' and 'special interest' groups – blacks, the handicapped, union members. Rather, this man went on, we must recognize that the 'average voter is a white middle class male.' Given that more women are registered and vote than men, we know this politician must mean 'average' in a quite special normative and not a statistical sense. In other words, this man made explicit the semantic connection between typicality and maleness which I have suggested is implicit in norms that urge us to use *he* when presumptions are not being made about sex.

The challenge to the prescriptively endorsed 'meaning' of *he* is a challenge to a view of the world in which human beings are presumed to be male unless proven otherwise, which helps us understand why it is resisted so vigorously. In principle, one can learn to apply *he* in the generic cases without accepting the theoretical perspective that connects those uses with those in which *he* refers to a specific individual. Still, it is rather difficult to *mean* a genuinely sex-indefinite *he*, simply because one can not rely on audiences to recognize that one does not intend to suggest maleness.

I want to reemphasize that I am not suggesting monolithic women's and men's views of the world. In McConnell-Ginet 1985b, I discussed how a large body of feminist discourse has been structured around the essentially semantic question of what being a lesbian means. Should we define 'lesbian' as a matter of psychosocial orientation towards women, as a 'continuum' of concern with and interest in women, as a political stance in opposition to patriarchy, as an erotic choice? Women writing in the past decade or two have urged these and other meanings. Feminism has assigned multiple meanings to lesbianism, but it is not just a matter of 'ambiguity.' Much of this discourse *proposes* meanings, *urges* them, as part of constructing a theory and politics of sexuality, sexual oppression, desire. These are couched as questions of semantics but they are not thereby insubstantial.

Given that a 'question of semantics' is often a 'question of values and action,' we can see that linguistic agents cannot always take shared access to a particular interpreted language for granted. Indeed, one thing linguistic agents and their interpreters do is negotiate some kind of accord on interpretation, choose among what we can think of as alternative interpretations of the (underinterpreted) system they do share. I suggest that it is precisely because natural languages are themselves so relatively empty of meaning, so 'formal,' that language users are able to do so very much with their words, indeed are forced to interpret those words actively. Expressions in formal systems are uninterpreted; it is their multiple interpretive possibilities that make them so useful for modeling diverse domains. Similarly, it is the multiple interpretive possibilities afforded us by natural languages that

allow us to use those languages in developing our common thoughts, shaping our desires, and planning what we will do. Interpretation of natural language systems, endowing linguistic forms with significance, is not primarily a matter of identifying form–meaning links, of encoding and decoding. Interpretation is much more an active process, a socially situated and sometimes socially divisive construction of meaning.

The Gricean definition assigns the agent authority over what is meant; after all, it is agentive intentions that are crucial. But since those intentions are directed towards a recipient and are reflexive in the sense that the recipient is intended to recognize them and intended to recognize that he is intended to recognize them, the agent is not free to intend any meaning whatsoever. I might want to mean just something about humanity in my use of *he*, but I now have substantial reservations about the possibility of so meaning, reservations that block my forming certain intentions. And of course people can be less than candid about their intentions, sometimes even deceiving themselves. In many cases, there are established conventional meanings for linguistic expressions and often acknowledged 'experts' whom we depend on for regulating usage. What it is important to remember is that (1) those meanings are typically supported by background beliefs or 'theories,' often implicit and sometimes ungrounded and biased, and (2) their being 'conventional' is a matter of social prescription to use only certain interpretations of a language system, to use only certain 'languages,' prescriptions enforced by social privilege. The agent who challenges such prescriptions can only succeed where she is empowered by alternative *socially* endorsed practices (see Scheman 1980 on a new conception of anger arising in consciousness-raising groups).

In what ways does language shape the message(s), what agents mean? How do meanings get 'authorized,' inscribed in the culture's collective repertoire? Is there a politics of meaning? Which messages are conveyed to whom? How is gender implicated in what is meant? In what sense does language 'construct' gender? Does language 'define' women as unimportant, properly subservient to men? If so, what are the mechanisms? Frank and Treichler (forthcoming) include discussion of these issues (see especially Treichler's contribution). Kramarae and Treichler (1985) present some 'women's words,' which offer alternative perspectives on human beings and their relations (and also on language itself). And Trömmel-Plötz (1982, discussed in Mey 1984), proposes a vision of women using language to 'change the world,' especially the world of women's oppression. I have been able only to hint at the richness of these issues and some ways they can be fruitfully addressed.

In conclusion, three points should be emphasized. First, gender is not simply a matter of individual characteristics (e.g. sex) but also involves

95

actions and social relations, ideology and politics. Second, patterns of language production depend on more than just the agent's intrinsic characteristics, her sociolinguistic 'identity:' they also reflect her assessment of social situations and her choice of strategies for the linguistic construction of her social relations (not just to men but to other women as well). Third, meaning interacts with gender because it links the social/psychological phenomenon of language with the abstract formal notion of a language, an interpreted linguistic system. The individual (what she means, her intentions) is also here inextricably enmeshed in the social (the constraints on the intentions she can have recognized and thereby realized, the social support required for invoking interpretations). In sum, a theory that accommodates the dual psychological and social nature of language and its relation to languages can help further understanding of gender and language.

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