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# Can There Be a “Feminist Linguistics?”

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## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to explore the relationship between some current feminist theories concerning language and current approaches to linguistics. The title of the paper comes in the form of a question which subsumes a number of other avenues of inquiry. Sally McConnell-Ginet (1988), a linguist who is also a feminist, provides a sampling of some of the concerns of this area of investigation and some of the questions to be answered if the area is to develop. She states that:

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) [sic] 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 thought? Must we swim against that mainstream to explain the language component of gender phenomena? (1988:75)

As mentioned above, there has been a considerable feminist intervention in other humanities fields such as anthropology and literature. This intervention has advanced a number of theories which make interesting and somewhat revolutionary claims concerning language and the English language in particular. Although it is not conventional to interject a personal response into the academic register in which I am now functioning, I feel it is appropriate since these feminist linguistic theories appear designed to summon personal responses.

I am proud of my field. I think linguistics does a lot of practical good throughout the world especially when its theories are applied to assisting oppressed peoples gain some control over their lives. For

example, much of my professional career has been involved in assisting Indochinese refugees, Mexican Americans or Aboriginal Australians as they have struggled against various forms of institutional and social racism caused, in part, by their inability to function in empowering linguistic domains. Recently, I have listened to students and colleagues tell of another form of language oppression. I have heard that males, white European males, like me, were oppressing females through language. For example, Spender (1980) claims,

the English language has been literally man made and that it is still primarily under male control .... this monopoly over language is one of the means by which males have ensured their own primacy and consequently have ensured the invisibility or ‘other’ nature of females (1980:12).

As I investigated this startling hypothesis further, I found that I was not only identified as an oppressor because of my gender and my race, but I was also an oppressor because of my chosen field of academic study. Penelope (1990:1, 55) alleges that linguists are leaders in forming theories and approaches towards the study of language that contribute significantly to the oppression of women.

My initial reaction to these claims was to dismiss them as a set of wild, unfounded accusations. However, I remembered when I was a member of a group of ESL teachers who accused refugee camp administrators of racism because they refused to consider the needs of the Vietnamese refugees under their control. Vietnamese think of eating lamb the same way we would think of eating horse meat. Yet they were frequently served lamb in the refugee cafeteria — the only place they could eat. At first the administrators scoffed at our requests to stop serving lamb; then they demanded to see evidence of our claims; then they dismissed that evidence; then they attacked us by suggesting that

we were attempting to take control of the camp. This power conflict was resolved only after a number of refugee bungalows were destroyed by fires caused by the Vietnamese attempting to cook food in their living quarters.

This type of experience has been repeated a number of times throughout my professional career. So now it was my turn to be accused as an oppressor. I decided that I could not, and would not, react like the typical oppressors of my past when confronted with their oppression. Rather I would try to understand my accusers. I am still learning, but I believe I have learned enough to at least pose and partially answer the question, "Can there be a feminist linguistics?"

The question is not necessarily addressed to you, or to me. In a sense it is a question concerning reality in the same way as a question such as, "Can a crow fly backwards?" is. By the way, they can and do in the Australian outback at least. Feminists say a lot about language. Other academic areas with much to say about language have merged to create linguistic sub-fields such as psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics and anthropological linguistics. Even political movements have combined with linguistics. For example, there is a Marxist linguistic tradition which concentrates on the language of the class struggle. So, is it possible to bring feminist thought and linguistic thought sufficiently close to at least make it conceivable for there to be a feminist linguistics?

#### FEMINISM: A DEFINITION

Broadly speaking, feminism is seen as a movement that wishes to replace what feminists see as a dominating patriarchal conceptual framework with an alternative value system (Reuther 1975) — a value system which includes, acknowledges and encourages the views of women and which will ultimately end the oppression of women. As I began my attempt to understand the relationships that feminists say exist among gender, language and oppression, I became aware of at least four approaches to feminism. These have been labeled "liberal feminism, traditional marxist feminism, radical feminism, and socialist feminism" (Warren 1987:9-17).

#### LINGUISTICS: A DEFINITION

As mentioned above, linguistics is the scientific study of language. Linguists have long realized that they study an entity (language) that just about every human being possesses and holds as a valuable portion of human individual and collective identity. Linguists have also realized that it is an almost universal human trait that we have strong opinions about language and language behavior regardless of whether we have studied language. To ensure that our individual, somewhat subjective opinions about language do not cloud our theories about language, linguists have invested heavily in objective scientific principles and procedures when conducting research.

A typical linguistic procedure is to observe a particular linguistic feature, ask questions, create hypotheses, create procedures to test the hypotheses, collect data, analyze the data, and draw conclusions from that analysis. In recent years, with the explosion in availability and sophistication of computer driven data analysis techniques in the sciences, linguists have begun to use advanced inferential statistical procedures which sometimes involve huge data bases comprised of multiple dependent and independent variables. Multivariate analysis of this type has helped us realize that language behavior is not a single entity influenced by single causes. Rather, language behavior is multilayered and is influenced by multiple variables.

#### DISCUSSION

Thus, in investigating the compatibility of feminism and linguistics, I can focus on a myriad of variables and relationships. However, because of time constraints, I will only concentrate on a few facets of the question, beginning with an attempt to relate aspects of the four mentioned feminist approaches to broad linguistic theory and knowledge.

#### LIBERAL AND MARXIST FEMINIST APPROACHES TO LANGUAGE

Liberal feminist thought agrees with Marxist feminist thought in promoting the concept that men have created a society where women are oppressed because they have been prevented from entry into

the more powerful, and rewarding, language domains. The claim is made that one way men have done this is through structuring the language of these empowering domains in such a "male" way that women are prevented from being able to express themselves. In essence, men are accused of creating their own empowering restricted codes. Thus the only way women can express themselves in empowering language is through a code which is not of their own making. Women, therefore, are a muted, unempowered social group (Kramarae 1981; Spender 1980). Because of space restrictions, I will examine, in some detail, one particular feature of this restricted code which supposedly supports this concept, and briefly mention a number of claims typical of feminist approaches to language.

Feminists state that males have created a hierarchical, linear impersonal rhetorical mode and have positioned that rhetoric as the preferred model for developing topic in empowering restricted domains such as academia and law. Women find it difficult to function in this male-created mode, because, as Humm (1986) claims,

women think in circles rather than lines,  
[women] tend to be holistic rather than partial,  
[women] prefer open to closed systems;  
[women] employ associational rather than  
sequential logic (1986:14).

This assumption, then, is built on the contrasting nature of male and female preferred rhetorical styles.

One response from linguists to these assumptions would draw attention to the contrastive rhetoric paradigm first established by Robert Kaplan (Kaplan 1972). Kaplan originally hypothesized that speakers and writers of individual languages prefer to develop topic in culturally influenced patterns. For example, a preferred mode in English academic discourse is the above mentioned linear, hierarchical order. However, speakers and writers functioning in other languages, other cultures and other registers prefer to develop topic differently. Recently, a considerable amount of empirical research has supported, and more clearly defined, this contrastive rhetoric hypothesis (Connor and Kaplan 1987). For example, through the application of linguistic analysis, I have shown that the preferred Korean academic mode is circular and associational. However, Korean

scholars who gain competence in English do eventually acquire the linear discourse structures while writing in both English and Korean (Eggington 1987).

Koreans are not the only non-native English speakers to master different rhetorical modes. An incredible number of English as a Second Language students graduate with advanced degrees from American, British and Australian universities. They have mastered the restricted linear code of academic English. They have not been muted.

Elsewhere, I have investigated the circular rhetoric preferred by certain Aboriginal language speakers and hypothesized that circularity even in written discourse is an indicator of a primary oral culture, or an oral residue culture or an unplanned, informal language register (Eggington 1991; Eggington 1990). Indeed, when linguists analyze unplanned spoken and written discourse, circularity, openness and associational thinking are common features regardless of the gender of the speakers or writers. Thus, these rhetorical features are not female in nature. They are just some of many discourse modes available to all speakers of all languages. Likewise, linear, hierarchical depersonalized discourse is not a preferred male trait, but rather an efficient way of transacting information that one particular community of writers has chosen as a standard.

This discourse style has evolved not because of an exclusionary desire to create a restricted code, but rather as a reflection of the nature of the subject matter and as an aid in effective communication. Atkinson (1991) has conducted a diachronic study of the evolution of rhetorical norms in the *Edinburgh Medical Journal* from 1735 to 1985. His study indicates that initial medical discourse was open, narrative, non-linear and associational. However, as the speech community grew and the base of knowledge expanded, the rhetorical norms became more "informational", less "involved" and more linear. This change in rhetorical norms was a response to both the communicative demands of the speech community and the nature of the discourse topic. Interestingly enough, Atkinson's research indicates that the preferred writing style of the *Edinburgh Medical Journal* is continuing to evolve once again mostly in response to the evolving ways

that research is conducted and the evolving expectations of the speech community.

Written academic discourse is part of a vast information storage and retrieval system which transcends time and space. Obviously the message that is put into the system by the writer should be the same message that is retrieved from the system by the reader regardless of whether the reader knows the writer, is familiar with the writer's culture, the writer's time frame, gender, age, race, nation or any other personal variable. A depersonalized, linear hierarchical development of topic ensures clearer understanding across temporal and spatial distance.

This rhetorical style is simply one of the many language registers or codes available to all human beings regardless of race, gender or religion. There is no evidence to suggest that one particular individual would have a more difficult time mastering this code than another individual *based on the linguistic nature of the code*. Difficulties in mastering this code, as in mastering any code, depend upon a host of non-linguistic social variables. As McConnell-Ginet (1988) suggests,

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 (1988:91).

She argues that oppression of women is not in the language itself, but comes through the way language is used as part of social structures and institutions. This, of course, is not a new understanding. As mentioned at the commencement of this paper, linguists have been aware of oppression through language use for a long time.

The above example hints at a number of underlying problems I have faced while trying to understand feminist views on language. Perhaps because they are constrained by a tight definition of feminism, feminists seem to have a biased, single causality, single dimensional approach to language analysis. Language appears to be investigated with the aim of finding evidence for the male oppression of females. Once that evidence is found, no other explanations to account for the evidence are sought. The evidence then becomes a given which is not challenged nor supported.

In a sense, feminist language findings involving women's language enter a folk linguistic category. For example, I have quoted Humm's (1986) declaration that women think in circular patterns. Here is something that is testable through the application of the scientific method, but Humm states it as a given. Her claim is then cited in at least one other work focusing on feminist rhetoric (Hart 1990:416). Thus, an unsupported claim becomes a given fact. Other folk linguistic claims involving women's language are:

1. Women use more tag questions than males. Since tag questions are a sign of linguistic insecurity, this proves that women are insecure about their language. However, linguistic analysis shows that the tag question is used more by women in some domains, more by men in others. In addition, the tag serves multiple functions with very few of these functions indicating linguistic insecurity (Penelope 1990: xxiii). In some instances, the tag is a powerful rhetorical device, isn't it?
2. Women use a rising intonation when concluding declaratives which once again shows insecurity. Linguistic study has shown that rising intonation is a variable that is found in many regional and social varieties of English (Millward 1989:317). This linguistic factor does not seem to be related to speaker insecurity.
3. Women use more specific terms for color than males. Some studies have indicated that this may be true in certain language domains. However, what does it reveal about female/male relationships? Lakoff alleges that this heightened color naming specificity derives from the exclusion of women from important decision making, rather they are left to make trivial finite distinctions between color as a "sop" (Lakoff 1975:9). The labelling of colors is an area which has been extensively researched by anthropological linguists. Once again, there appears to be no correlation between the ability to name colors and social oppression.

As mentioned above, much of the research on "women's language" (WL) tends to be single cause, single effect, and single dimensional. Much has been written about the language of WASP middle class American males and females. However, as McConnell-Ginet (1988) indicates:

middle class black women, for example, do not find 'coherent images of themselves in 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 (1988:83).

#### RADICAL AND SOCIALIST FEMINIST APPROACHES TO LANGUAGE

The remaining two approaches to feminism, radical feminism and, in part, socialist feminism blame the oppression of women on patriarchal attitudes towards reproductive biology and the sex-gender system. In this approach, women are defined by men as people whose reasons for existence are either to bear and raise children as mothers or to satisfy male sexual desires as sex objects.

Radical feminists have built upon the sex-gender and language notions of Freud, Saussure and Lacan in an attempt to show that, in the Patriarchal Universe of Discourse, or present day male dominated English the prevailing metaphors are LANGUAGE IS A CONTAINER, LANGUAGE IS A WOMAN and LANGUAGE IS A TOOL, LANGUAGE IS A PENIS (Penelope 1990:44). Radical feminists claim that these prevailing metaphors are built into the language, and from that language, the metaphors enter our consciousness and our beings. We are "born in a language and the language speaks us, dictates to us its law" (Helene Cixous as quoted in Cameron, 1985:114). Thus, there is a strong reliance on both Saussurian/Lacanian and Whorfian linguistic deterministic theories. That is, radical feminists agree with "language determines thought" hypotheses.

It is ironic to note that, in much current psycholinguistic or applied linguistic research, about the greatest faux pas one can commit is to base one's argument on linguistic determinism. Linguistic

determinism is an appealing concept, a concept that has been around for a long time. There is a relationship between language and thought, but that relationship does not have to involve causality. Indeed, McGuire (1985), in a review of language/thought causality research, states that "the low correlations .... have been a scandal of the field for a half century". Even basic introductory texts on linguistics and language study discredit these theories (Yule 1985:196-198).

On a more sinister note, linguistic determinist hypotheses have been used as a weapon of oppression against indigenous minorities. For example, many Australian Aboriginal languages do not have a counting word for any number above two. They mostly refer to any grouping above two by using qualifiers and collective nouns such as the English word "mob", or "little mob" or "big mob", or "b-i-g mob". In this case, linguistic determinism would hypothesize that, because Aboriginal languages do not have counting words above two, Aboriginal people themselves are unable to think of numbers above two. Thus, the notion that they are a primitive people, the most primitive people on earth, was reinforced. This notion was used to rationalize incredible acts of terrorism against Aboriginal people.

Empirical research conducted by Fatemeh Khosroshahi (1989) reveals some interesting findings concerning the application of linguistic determinism to gender discrimination in language. She acknowledges that the generic "he" suggests a male referent in the mind of the reader. But her findings reveal the multivariate complexity of language and language analysis. She states,

Traditional language men and women still consistently use the generic "he" in their writing and they also interpret generic sentences primarily in terms of male referents; both their language and their thought are androcentric. Reformed-language women, on the other hand, have changed their pronoun usage according to feminist ideology, and their comprehension of generic sentences is not androcentric. Their language includes women and so does their thought. Thus, like the traditional men and women, their language and thought are consistent. However, the men who have reformed their language and use pronouns in the new way do not show a

compatible pattern of thought. Their language includes women, their thought does not, or at least not yet. Thus, if we consider the weak form of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which states that differences in language are correlated with differences in thought (Brown 1958), we can restate our conclusions in this form: all groups conformed to Whorf's thesis except the men who had reformed their language (Khosroshahi 1989:520).

What these conclusions suggest is that deep attitudinal change (thought/culture change) precedes surface level language change. And more significantly, surface level language performance does not influence deep attitudinal and cultural values. Consequently, to suggest that man-created systemic language works to oppress women because it controls even our abilities to think flies in the face of reality.

### LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

The above discussion does not deny that there is discrimination in the way language is used in our society. English is an Indo-European language. Indo-European languages were, and many still are, based on strong grammatical gender relationships. Over the past one thousand years the English language has removed most of its gender specific nouns and pronouns, and its male/female pairings. The trend is continuing because the cultural and situational variables are changing.

Linguists acknowledge that there is a strong relationship between language use, culture and situation in the sense that language behavior reflects and is determined by cultural and situational variables (Halliday and Hasan 1985). For example, the English language has evolved from a Northern European situational and cultural context. Its roots go back to hunter-gatherer and agrarian cultures living in Britain 1500 years ago. Consequently, the lexicon and the morphology of English were born in cultural and situational contexts very different from our current contexts. In my study of Aboriginal language, I noticed that many of these languages are still bound to their roots because the culture and situational contexts of Australian Aboriginal people have changed little over the past 20,000 years.

However the English language has been transplanted numerous times over its 1,500 year history. This transplanting of the language some-

times creates situations where the language and the cultural and situational contexts are out of alignment. Let me give you a personal example. Last Easter, perhaps because of my Australian accent, I was asked to be the narrator of the Easter service at my local church. I was to read from a prepared text authored by a local composer. The text began with something like, "In this season of spring when the whole earth celebrates rebirth, when the whole earth witnesses new life, how fitting it is to remember the resurrection of our Savior." Throughout the service, spring and resurrection were linked as a given. But for me, that is not so. In Australia, we stop swimming about Easter, the leaves begin to turn, the days get shorter and the cold westerly winds come up from the Antarctic. How do I react to the language I had to read? Do I accuse the English language of being dominated by Northern Hemispheric centrists, or do I accept that there is a lag time between culture and language — that language, because it is used to transmit culture, is often behind cultural movement?

Sociolinguists view the interactions of language in a society in terms of language domains. For example, I as the composer of this paper, and you as the reader of this paper are currently functioning in an academic situational and cultural domain. I am writing in the preferred genres and registers of this particular domain. When I change domains, I change the type of language I use. During the early middle ages, the power domains of England were filled with Norman French speakers. English was an oppressed language. Due to a number of historical and cultural changes, the English speaking people began to be more involved in the power domains. English rose in importance to the point where it replaced French as the dominant language (Millward 1989: 122). Thus, before there were changes in language, there were situational and cultural changes within the society.

At the present time, there is significant domain change in western societies. Women are moving into empowering domains. As they do, the language of these domains will change. Academics no longer use the third person singular "he" as generic third person because more women are participating in the academic domain. This trend will continue. Incidentally, I think white middle class American

males are being called upon to move into domains that they have been traditionally unable or unwilling to enter. The strong, silent Gary Cooper type is no longer seen as the model husband and father. Because of cultural changes, males are developing language proficiency in interpersonal, intimate domains. Once again, cultural change precedes language change.

## CONCLUSION

So, can I answer the original question? Can there be a feminist linguistics? I hope I have shown that there are some significant gaps in the separate approaches to language. Feminists seem to have carefully constructed an argument about the oppressive nature of language based on selective conclusions, a narrow data base and single causality. At present the scientific base of linguistics which emphasizes objectivity and multi-causality would seem to make it impossible to accommodate this type of approach.

In addition, linguists have an approach to the study of language which attempts to exclude any attachment to a political or social cause. Peirce (1931), one of the prominent early linguists states that people motivated to conduct linguistic research with a political and practical end

begin to look upon science as a guide to conduct, that is, no longer as pure science but as an instrument for a practical end. One result of this is that all probable reasoning is despised. If a proposition is to be applied to action, it has to be embraced, or believed without reservation. There is no room for doubt, which can only paralyze action. But the scientific spirit requires [us] to be at all times ready to dump [our] whole cartload of beliefs, the moment experience is against us. The desire to learn forbids us to be perfectly cocksure that [we] know already (1931:24).

Does all of this mean that linguists are not interested in male/female language inquiry. Definitely not. Two of my students presented mini-papers at the 1991 DLLS symposium which contrasted the language of an all female "Relief Society" meeting verses the male language of a "Priesthood" meeting. They found some interesting features which can be applied to real-life situations. But they

did not extrapolate from those features some universal domination of women by males. Why didn't they? Because the information wasn't there, and because they were doing linguistic research rather than feminist research. Much more can and should be done in investigating the relationships that exist between language, language-use and gender. However, for any research to mean anything substantial, it needs to be as objective, as unbiased and as empirical as possible. Such an approach would seem to preclude much of the conclusions derived from current feminist language study.

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