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Chapter 5: Language and gender

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5.1 Introduction

In the preceding chapters, we have focused on the ways in which **representation** in language can have an impact on perception, and on forms of language use which are typical in two contexts: politics and in the media. This chapter also looks at representation and at typical forms of language use, in this case, in relation to gender. We will consider **asymmetrical** representations of women and men, and why these can be considered sexist. We will then look at whether women and men use language in different ways, and the possible reasons for gender based differences in conversational styles. The chapter ends by probing the concept of gender.

It may help to start with an explanation of what is meant by the terms 'sex' and 'gender'. 'Sex' refers to biological category, which is usually fixed before birth. 'Gender' refers to social category, which is associated with certain behaviour. Bicycle design

neatly illustrates the difference between the two: bike saddles designed for women are usually wider than saddles designed for men, because women have a wider pelvic girdle (a sex difference). Bikes without a crossbar, so riders can wear skirts, are designed in response to a gender difference, since there is no biological reason why, in some cultures, women wear skirts and men don't.

So what is meant by 'sexism'? Sexist language represents women and men unequally, as if members of one sex were somehow less completely human, less complex, and had fewer rights than members of the other sex. Sexist language also presents stereotypes of women and men, sometimes to the disadvantage of both, but more often to the disadvantage of women.

It is debatable whether language can actually be sexist against men (as opposed to just rude), or only against women. Clearly language can represent men as less complex, less fully human or entitled to fewer rights than women. However, whether this counts as sexist or not can be argued to depend on the distribution of power in society as a whole. Generally speaking, men still hold more 'high status' occupations in this society than women do; men still own more property and earn more than women. There are still more male politicians, more male company directors, more male judges, professors, surgeons, head teachers and film directors. Men also tend to have more physical power; domestic violence is perpetrated more often by men against women than the other way around. It is debatable whether using language to diminish men has the same effect as using language to diminish women, since the power relations underlying the language use are different. The following statistics relating to gender inequality are published on the website http://www.womankind.org.uk/:

- On average, in developed countries, women earn 23% less than men. In developing countries, they earn 27% less. (World Bank, 2000)
- Women work two-thirds of the world's working hours, produce half of the world's food, and yet earn only 10% of the world's income and own less than 1% of the world's property. Almost a quarter of the global population lives in extreme poverty - on less than the equivalent of $1 per day. 70% of these people are women. (World Development Indicators 1997)
- Gender violence causes more deaths and disability among women aged 15 to 44 than cancer, malaria, traffic accidents or war. (World Bank Discussion Paper 255 - Heise, Pitanguy & Germain, 1994)
- In Great Britain, where one woman in ten is severely beaten by an intimate partner every year, the cost to health and social services is estimated at over £1billion per annum. ("Counting the Costs", Crime Concern, London, 1998)
- In Switzerland, Japan and Belgium, for every 100 men enrolled in higher education there are respectively just 53, 63 and 78 women. (The State of the World Population, UNFPA 1995)
- Women hold only 1% of executive positions in the world's biggest international corporations. Women hold only 6.2% of all ministerial positions worldwide. (Focus on Women. UN. 1995)

Given the distribution of power suggested by these facts, in this chapter we will mainly be looking at sexist language which diminishes women, but one example of language which represents men in demeaning ways appears in section 5.2.6.

5.2 How is English sexist?

Sexist language can be discussed in two ways; first, as the extent to which the English language system is inherently sexist, and second, as the extent to which some ways of using language are sexist. To consider the first approach, the extent to which the English language system is sexist, one of the things we look for is **symmetry** versus **asymmetry** in the vocabulary or **lexis**.

5.2.1 Symmetry and asymmetry

A clear example of symmetry can be found in English terms for horses. *Horse* is a **generic** term which covers animals of both sexes:

(1)	generic	horse
	female	mare
	male	stallion
	young	foal (either sex)
	young female	filly
	young male	colt

The terms for human beings follow a similar system, but are not so symmetrical in the way they are used:

(2)	generic	Man
	female	woman
	male	man
	young	child
	young female	girl

young male boy

Example (2) indicates the ambiguity of the term *Man/man*. Speakers and writers often blur the distinction between the use of the word *Man* generically, to mean women, men, girls and boys, and the use of *man* to mean only men (and not women or children). This is illustrated in example (3) below, where the first mention of *Man* appears to be in its generic sense, but the next sentence makes it clear that in fact *Man* here means men and not women.

(3) For decades, pubs have been Man's best friend. He could take his wife, his girlfriend, but not his children. But now that's all about to change.

(News at 10, ITV[1], 3 January, 1995, on changes in the laws regarding children in licensed drinking bars)

Another kind of asymmetry in the way the system shown in (2) is applied, is the use of *girl* to describe adult women, where *man* would almost certainly be used if the reference were to an adult male. Consider this headline and the first sentence of an article from the *Daily Mail* (24 September, 1997):

(4) Police girl wins sex bias case by a split verdict

A policewoman who allegedly threatened to kill her chief constable and have the legs of a senior officer broken won a controversial sex discrimination case yesterday...

The 34-year-old officer, who said her high-flying career was ruined by bullying male colleagues, now expects to receive up to £250,000 in compensation...

Since women tend to be judged on their attractiveness far more than men are, the use of *girl* to imply that an adult woman is not yet 'old' is usually assumed to be a compliment. Would a male police officer (aged 34) be called a *police boy* in a headline?

The use of titles is also asymmetrical:

(5) woman Miss/Mrs/Ms

man Mr

An adult male can be assumed to use the title *Mr* before his family name, unless he has another title such as *Dr* or *Judge*. However, an adult woman (who does not use another title) may use one of three titles: *Miss*, *Mrs* or *Ms*. Thus any woman who gives her preferred title on a form is revealing far more information about herself than a man does. *Miss* reveals she is unmarried (or chooses to present herself as such). *Mrs* indicates that she is married. *Ms*, a relatively new title, was introduced to end the inequality in the system but instead you could say that the inequality has increased. Instead of having only one title (which does not reveal marital status, in line with titles for men) there are now three possible titles in circulation, and all three appear alongside *Mr* on many forms.

If you choose not to tell the world your marital status by selecting *Ms*, some people will assume you are divorced; others will assume you are a feminist; i.e. the use of *Ms*, if you had the choice of using *Miss* or *Mrs*, can seem to carry information about your political opinions. Furthermore, since the introduction of *Ms*, selecting *Miss* or *Mrs* as your title can seem to indicate that you do not want to appear to be a feminist. Therefore not only do two of the titles women use reveal marital status, all three titles can appear to carry information about the user's political affiliations. This is not a situation men face!

The titles *Miss* and *Mrs* are a reminder of a time when the power relations between women and men were much more markedly unequal than they are today for most women living in Europe or the US. Women were then regarded as the responsibility, or indeed the property, of either their father or their husband. Some forms of marriage service still require women to be 'given away' by their father (or other male relative) to their husband. Women's political and economic rights have changed considerably over the last 100 years or so, with, amongst other changes, the advent of votes for women, equal opportunities policies, and effective birth control. However, our language still allows us to indicate the marital status of a woman in way that does not exist for men.

5.2.2 Unmarked and marked terms

Another useful concept when analysing sexism is that of **unmarked** and **marked** terms. This is still asymmetry, but of a specific kind. For example, *lion*, an unmarked form, can refer to a male or female lion. However, the term used for a male lion is also lion, while a female lion is referred to by a marked term, *lioness* (it is 'marked' because it has the additional suffix *-ess*). It is quite common for 'unmarked' terms to refer to males, while to refer to a female, the terms are 'marked' by adding a suffix. This may make terms for females appear to differ from the 'standard'. For example:

(6) waiter/waitress
host/hostess
actor/actress

The marked terms on the right are used less nowadays, and the unmarked terms on the left are often used for women as well as men, which indicates that language and attitudes are changing. However, it is also true that some terms which can apparently refer to females or males, such as surgeon, doctor, professor and nurse, are in fact sometimes used as if they really only applied to one gender. People may refer to a lady doctor, a woman professor or woman surgeon, implying that the norm is male, and to a male nurse, implying that the norm is female. It should be noted that nurses are of lower status than the other occupations mentioned. Therefore one way which these examples can be interpreted as sexist is that they imply that 'normal' (or, in the case of the medical profession, 'high status') people are men.

5.2.3 Semantic derogation

The process of words which refer to women acquiring demeaning or sexual **connotations** has been widely observed, and has been termed **semantic derogation**. (*Semantic* is a linguistic term referring to meaning; *derogation* means 'to cause to seem inferior'). Examples (7) to (10) illustrate this process.

(7) gentleman or lord/lady

Lady is used in contexts where is it highly improbable that *gentleman* or *lord* would be used. In the UK, *lady* is commonly used to form the expressions such as *dinner lady* (a woman who serves meals to schoolchildren) or *lollipop lady* (a woman who helps school children to cross roads). Would you expect men filling these roles to be referred to as *dinner gentlemen*, or *dinner lords*? As *lollipop lords* or *lollipop gentlemen*? Probably not! *Lady* is used in contexts where *man* or a gender-free term is used if the job is done by a

male. Here's an newspaper extract describing a television programme about how animals communicate to illustrate the point:

How does a randy polar bear find a mate? Not very easily is the answer. After all, most of them mope about solitary, icy territories the size of Britain. And even when a lady polar bear does come mooching along, males have about as much chance of spotting her white coat against a sea of ice and snow as David Seaman[2] has of tracking a 30-yard lob.

The Observer, 30 June, 2002

(8) master/mistress

'He is my master' usually means 'he is my boss' or 'he has more power than me'. 'She is my mistress' is most likely to be interpreted as meaning 'she is my illicit lover'. This demonstrates two phenomena; first that words for women tend to lose status (being someone's illicit lover usually is a much less powerful position than being their boss), and second, that words for women often end up referring to women in a sexual capacity. This has clearly happened to *mistress* and not to *master*. Even the term 'woman' is also sometimes used to refer to women as sexual activity, as in the phrase *wine, women and song*.

(9) sir/madam

Sir and *madam* can both be used to refer to high status people, but *madam*, unlike *sir*, is also used to refer to a brothel keeper.

(10) bachelor/spinster or old maid

All three terms refer to an unmarried person, but *spinster* and *old maid* appear to be rarely used nowadays, perhaps because their associations are so negative. *Bachelor*, however, usually has positive connotations. The *bachelor life* and a *bachelor pad* (an

apartment for a single man) are generally regarded as glamorous; a bachelor is someone who has succeeded in not getting tied down. *Spinster* and *old maid* on the other hand suggest to many people someone old, grey, ugly, and unable to 'get a man'. *Bachelor girl* can be used to refer to an unmarried woman, to avoid the stigma of the other terms; however, this expression follows the pattern of unmarked and marked terms discussed above (*bachelor* is the 'norm', *bachelor girl* the marked form), as in the newspaper headline from the *Daily Mail* (2 March, 2002): Are these the most eligible bachelor girls in Britain?

The examples cited above are all asymmetrical, and diminish women rather than men, by representing women as the property of men, as being of lower status, and as being primarily sexual beings. If we agree with the arguments laid out in Chapter 2, these usages not only represent women unequally, they may also contribute to perceptions held by both men and women which contribute to women have less power over their own lives and other resources than men.

Activity 5.1

Buy a selection of newspapers over a few days and collect as many examples as you can of asymmetrical references to women and men. Do you think your national newspapers (if they are not British) are less sexist than suggested by the examples above, or perhaps sexist in other ways?

5.2.4 Sexism in discourse

In section 5.2, it was stated that sometimes sexism is not located in specific words but in the **discourse**, that is, by meanings created in a whole utterance or sentence, or a longer text. Below are some examples of apparently non-gender specific terms being used in a context which in fact shows they are being used to refer exclusively to men. The information which indicates that the use is specific is contained elsewhere in the discourse. Sometimes this additional information is described as **disambiguating** the generic term (that is, it indicates more exactly to what the term refers). *Generic* (non-gender specific) terms are shown in italic; GENDER SPECIFIC terms are in SMALL CAPITALS.

(11) *People* feel entitled to the car, the GIRL, etc. If *they*'re let down, *they* blame *themselves*.

(Oliver James, quoted by Emma Cook in *The Independent* 31 August, 1997)

(12) Scanners that could determine *our* political beliefs, pinpoint *our* involvements in crime, or even uncover extramarital liaisons are being developed by neurologists… Such research raises the prospect that attitudes and feelings *we* try to conceal will one day be uncovered by researchers. Lying *politicians*, *spin doctors* and cheating SPORTSMEN (and HUSBANDS) will suddenly find life uncomfortable.

(Robin McKie in *The Observer* 10 March, 2002)

(13) ...several of Hollywood's most powerful *players* have arrangements with what in pre-palimony terms were 'common-law WIVES' – Kurt and Goldie, Tim and Susan, and Hugh and Elizabeth – one has to wonder: why do *stars* bother to get married at all?

(Alison Powell, *The Guide* (*The Guardian* newspaper's weekly guide to arts and entertainment) 13 September, 1997)

(14) *People* in *their* twenties and thirties will have to work until *they* are 72 unless *they* do more now to save for *their* retirement, a new report says. A *worker* making typical contributions to a company pension scheme will either face a big cut in HIS income at 65 or have to keep working for another seven years, according to research by the Pensions Policy Insitutue.

(*The Times* newspaper 27 February, 2002)

(15) According to disapproving church writers, *the Vikings* were addicted to drink, gluttony and WOMEN.

(The Jorvik Viking History Centre, York (seen in 1997))

Activity 5.2

In example (16) below, identify the gender specific references and the generic, or gender neutral, refrences in these descriptions of dress codes in London restaurants.

(16) Who dresses for dinner?

The Causerie Restaurant, Claridge's Hotel

The rule of jacket and tie at all times has become more relaxed. The public rooms require smartness without formality; the restaurant remains firmly jacket and tie. Those who come without a tie are invited to choose one from a selection held at the door – 'all very fine ties'. The restaurant used to ask any gentleman who removed his jacket during the meal to put it on again, but this practice appears to be dying out. The recalcitrant 'star'

who came in less than formal clothes would be admitted, but respectfully asked to improve next time.

The Ritz

Tries very hard to ensure no denims or trainers. Smart casual is the norm for breakfast, while at lunch, tea and dinner, jacket and tie are mandatory. A spokeswoman draws attention to 20 silk Turnbull and Asser ties, and a selection of jacktes, for guests who do not provide their own. Ladies' only requirement is to be smart. 'It's hard with the ladies but we try not to make an issue of it'.

The River Café, Hammersmith

Owned by the wife of architect Sir Richard Rogers, and one of the most fashionable restaurants in London, it has no code at all, but a spokesman did indicate that bare chests would not be allowed, 'although people haven't actually started stripping off', he adds. (James Bristow, The Independent 20 September, 1996)

You will probably have noticed that 'guests' are assumed in all three paragraphs to be male, since jackets and ties are rarely regarded as appropriate formal wear for women, and the Ritz paragraph distinguishes explicitly between guests and ladies. You may also have noticed that the owner of the River Café is not identified by name at all, only by her relationship to her husband!

5.2.5 Other explicit examples of sexism

One aspect of sexism in language which we have not discussed yet is probably the most obvious kind: remarks which make inequality explicit and direct insults. On *PM*, BBC Radio 4's early evening news programme, a journalist from *The Independent* newspaper

(28 February, 2002) explained why media award ceremonies, such as the Oscars, are given so much media coverage: ‘We get to see beautiful actresses and interesting actors'. This makes explicit the dynamic which places greater emphasis on women’s looks and men’s personalities.

Activity 5.3

Insults and obscene words are often to do with sexual behaviour and parts of the body. To investigate whether there is a sexist bias in insults and obscene terms, make a list of as many as you can think of. Now group the terms you have collected into separate lists according to what they describe. Compare the lengths of your lists and the kinds of terms they contain; which terms are funny? blasphemous? mildly or very obscene? How many are to do with sexual behaviour or parts of the body? Decide whether your lists provide you with evidence of sexism in English.

It is common, as a result of this activity, to find that there are far more terms to describe promiscuous women than men, that insults for women are often harsher and less funny, and that the words that many people find most obscene describe women’s sexual organs, not men’s. This can be illustrated by an extract from a television guide, joking about a TV chef who, in a previously broadcast programme, had sworn on air. Amongst a range of swear words, the writer (or editor) decided just one of them should not apear in full, but should have some of its letters replaced by asterisks:

(17) See? He’s human! I can picture the spin-off recipe book – Jamie’s Fuckin’ Kitchen. “Here’s a recipe I call Shit-Hot Spag Bol – 1lb minced cow bollocks, 2

onions, garlic, a tin of fucking tomatoes and a pissload of spaghetti. And if you don't like it, you're a c***.

(Charlie Brooker, *The Guide* (*The Guardian* newspaper's weekly guide to arts and entertainment) 2 November, 2002)

(Chapters 6 and 7 deal with insult terms centred on ethnicity and age.)

5.2.6 Sexism against men?

In introducing this section, I raised the question of whether language could be sexist against men. The following example seems to illustrate the other side of the coin:

(18) Last week I asked for alternative suggestions for the phrase toy boy. Hundreds have poured in from men and women. Here's my pick of the best: HRT (Husband Replacement Therapy), Youthfool, Wrinkle picker, Joy Boy, GIBBET (Good In Bed But Extremely Temporary), Mantress, Sugar laddie, POW (Prefers Older Women), Mutton Fodder and Booster Rooster. Glad Lad, Juvenile Lead, Studlet, Born-Later-Babe, Bimboy, Bounty Hunter, Nappy Chappy, Ego Booster, Mini Mate, Play Mite, Lap Chap and Tom Kitten. Muscle Tussle, Handsome Sansom, Younger Monger, Romp Tot, Cub Class, Game Boy and Sapling. Homelette, Boncubine, Little Soldier, Beddyboy, Passion Puppy, Honkybonk, Kideology Kid and Himbo.

(*Daily Mail* 28 May, 1997)

Do you think the sexist effect in example (18) is the same as in the previous examples discussed? Do you think there is a difference between sexism directed at women and at men, or does sexism always have the same effect?

5.3 Do women and men talk differently?

Perhaps some of the examples discussed above seem to you more likely to be used by women or by men. There is plenty of anecdotal evidence around that there are differences in the way men and women talk. A common stereotype is that women talk more than men; perhaps you have heard people say things like: ‘women never stop talking’. Women’s talk is often described in terms seldom used about men’s talk: *gossip, chatter, nag, rabbit, yak,* and *natter* are all terms used to refer predominantly to women’s conversations. They all imply that women’s talk is plentiful but rather pointless. (See also Chapters 6 and 7 on the value placed on the language or talk of other minority groups.) There has been a considerable amount of research in this area; the majority of the research on which the remainder of this chapter has been based has been conducted in English speaking countries such as the USA, the UK and New Zealand, in a variety of ethnic and social groups. The research findings have been that there are quite dramatic differences in the ways men and women talk, which are sometimes the opposite of what you might expect. For example, the evidence strongly suggests that men on the whole talk far more than women, in contradiction of the stereotype. This is an important finding, because it shows **ideology** at work (as discussed in Chapter 3). It is so much a part of our ‘common sense’ that women talk more than men, that we tend to assume it’s true despite plentiful evidence around us to the contrary. The fact that we do tend to believe that women talk too much, when research shows men on average talk more than women, also indicates how women, and women’s activities, have tended to be undervalued.

The differences between women's and men's use of language are remarkably many and varied. For example, there is evidence at the level of **phonology** that women and men vary in their pronunciation. If you are interested you should read Trudgill (1972), Milroy (1987), Thomas (1989) and Coates (1993: 61–86). There is also evidence of **syntactic** differences, i.e., the kinds of grammatical constructions we use (see Coates, 1993: 76–7). In this chapter we will concentrate on the area of discoursal differences, that is, variation in the kinds of things we talk about, and how we conduct conversations.

5.3.1 How much talk?

As stated above, stereotypes of women's and men's talking styles usually portray women talking far more than men (see Coates, 1993:16–37, for an overview of common stereotypes and prejudices). As also stated above, men (and boys) in fact appear from the research to talk more in mixed sex groups than women (and girls) do. Studies on this which you might want to check for more information include Fishman, 1980; Spender, 1980; Swann, 1989. Spender (1990: 41–2) gives an overview of the research. The proportions most frequently quoted are that in a mixed sex conversation, the average amount of time for which a man will talk will be approximately twice as long as the average amount for which a woman will talk. There is evidence that women who talk for more than one third of the available time will be regarded by others as talking too much. This unevenness in how much women and men are expected to talk is also found in school classrooms, where boys talk more in front of the whole class than girls do, and absorb more of the teacher's time. As a consequence of this research, changes to teaching

styles in the UK were made to distribute the amount of classroom talk, and the teacher's time, more fairly.

5.3.2 Turn construction and interruption

One of the very famous findings from research into language and gender differences is the extent to which men interrupt women. It appears that men interrupt women more than they interrupt other men, far more than women interrupt men, and more than women interrupt other women (see Coates, 1993: 107–13; and for a critical review, see James and Clarke, 1993). The finding that men interrupt women so frequently is often argued to indicate that men act as if they have more right than women to speak in mixed sex conversations, and that women act as if they had less right to speak than men.

The research in this area also discovered that women, particularly in single sex conversations, are more likely to overlap one another's talk than men are. This overlapping talk differs from interruptions because two or more speakers can continue talking at the same time on the same topic without any apparent sense of their right to speak being violated. This data is often used to argue that women value co-operation and collaboration very highly in their conversations, while men perhaps feel uncomfortable with the degree of intimacy that overlapping talk involves.

5.3.3 Back channel support

Research suggests women are often more active than men in supportive roles in conversation. It appears that women give more **back channel support** than men do. Back channel support is the verbal and non-verbal feedback listeners give to speakers.

Listeners can give feedback by saying things like *mmm*, *uhuh*, *yeah*, and by nodding, smiling, frowning, and by other body language including gestures and body posture. People who have written on this include Zimmerman and West (1975); Fishman (1983); Coates (1989); Jenkins and Cheshire (1990).

Not only do the studies suggest that women give more back channel support than men, some studies suggest that women's sense of when it is appropriate to give back channel support is more 'finely tuned' than men's, so that the speaker really feels they are being listened to. Not giving back channel support is usually reported as making the speaker feel unsure of themselves, and can lead to the speaker hesitating, repeating themselves and sometimes to their just ceasing to speak. If you are interested in testing this out, experiment with giving different amounts of back channel support and monitor the effect it has on the conversation.

5.3.4 Mitigated and aggravated forms

Women have been shown in some studies to use more **hedges** and **epistemic modal forms** than men. Hedges are linguistic forms which 'dilute' an assertion; for example: *sort of, like, I think,* and *kind of*. Epistemic modal forms indicate explicitly the speaker's attitude towards their utterance. For example, *should, would, could, may* and *might* (which are all **modal auxiliary verbs**) can be used to indicate you don't want to sound completely certain about something. Other words with a similar function are *perhaps*, *really* and *maybe*.

The studies suggest that women exploit hedges and epistemic modal forms more than men, although why this happens is disputed. Some scholars claim it is because

women are less confident than men and feel nervous about asserting anything too strongly (see Lakoff, 1975, one of the first people to publish on this area). Other studies claim that women prefer to avoid conflict and so use forms which, by being less direct, allow disagreement to take place without explicit confrontation.

Here is an example of a 15-year-old girl using hedges to mitigate the force of her statement, in which she is questioning the interpretation made by another girl of a character in a play they are studying in school:

> Laura:-But but *do you not think* that's just a big a- it *could* be just a big act he *might* not

Laura is suggesting that her classmate's interpretation is wrong and that the character is just putting on 'a big act'. To make her objection, however, she uses very mitigating language, emphasised here with italics.

5.3.5 Topic development

Another way women's and men's conversations appear to vary is in the topics they choose to discuss. Women, it is said, select more personal topics: their family, their emotions and their friendships. Men, on the other hand, are said to prefer more impersonal topics, often based on factual or technical knowledge, such as football, cars, or home improvements. These require fewer intimate revelations, and also emphasise the exchange of information as the reason for the conversation. Women's conversations, it is claimed, focus more on the development and maintenance of the relationship between speakers, fostered by the exchange of intimate details and supportive listening (as discussed above).

Activity 5.4

Ask their permission to tape a group of people talking. Transcribe approximately three minutes' worth oif conversation and see which, if any, of the features discussed above you can identify. Does you recording follow the gender-specific uses outlined above? Transcription is a very time-consuming activity, but worthwhile because it reveals so much.

5.4 Possible explanations

So why might these differences exist? The situation is different from those which give rise to people speaking different languages or different dialects, which are usually associated with geographical or social distance. Women and men, on the other hand, grow up in the same families, go to school together, work together and socialise together.

5.4.1 Dominance

One explanation offered for these variations is 'dominance' theory, which takes the difference in power between women and men as the main cause of discoursal variation. As stated above, it is statistically the case that men tend to have more power than women, physically, financially and in workplace hierarchies. The ways we talk may be a reflection of the material differences between the sexes, and may also reinforce those differences, making them seem 'normal', part of the 'natural order of things'.

Research which supports this explanation includes Fishman (1980), and DeFrancisco (1991). The strength of this explanation is particularly clear in some

situations, such as business meetings, where women often report that they have difficulty in gaining the floor (i.e. the right to speak), that they are more often interrupted, and that their points are not taken as seriously as men's are.

5.4.2 Difference

Two of the problems with dominance theory are that first, it may appear to cast all women as 'powerless victims', and second, it casts men as undermining, excluding and demeaning women. 'Difference theory' is a response to these difficulties. It suggests that women and men develop different styles of talking because, in fact, they are segregated at important stages of their lives. Deborah Tannen's work (1990, 1991) is often taken as an illustration of difference theory.

According to 'difference' theory, playing in single sex groups as children, and having same sex friendships in adult life, leads men and women to have separate 'sub-cultures' each of which have their own 'sub-cultural norms', that is, rules for behaviour and in particular, talking. Within their own sub-cultural groups, women's and men's conversational norms work perfectly well for what they want to accomplish. Women, the theory explains, desire from their relationships collaboration, intimacy, equality, understanding, support and approval. Men, on the other hand, allegedly place a greater premium on status and independence, and are less concerned about overt disagreement and inequality in their relationships. The rub comes when women and men try to communicate with one another: their different styles can lead to misunderstandings.

Some people link these characteristics to biological factors: that men's different hormonal balance means they are more aggressive than women. Others link it to

socialisation: that girls are rewarded very early for behaving politely and putting the needs of others before their own, but are told off more than little boys for rough behaviour. Little boys, on the other hand, are praised for being ‘active’ and ‘spirited’. These gendered socialisation patterns are not neutral, as you will probably have noticed: they still prepare women for being less socially powerful than men.

5.4.3 Analysis of gender

The weakness of both the models described above is that there is a tendency to regard ‘women’ as being all more or less the same: talking in the same ways and having the same expectations from relationships. In fact differences of age, nationality, religion, class, sexual orientation, regional and cultural background mean that two women may have different ideas of what it means to be ‘a woman’, and different expectations of their friendships and sexual relationships. Equally, men are not an homogenous group with shared values, but have diverse ways of thinking about their identity.

Another way of looking at the differences between the ways in which women and men use language is to see the differences in the way we use language as part of what creates our perception of gender. Newborn babies cannot easily be identified as ‘girls’ or ‘boys’ if they are dressed identically. However, in many cultures, babies are frequently dressed in ways to make their gender clear, for example by the colours of their clothes. The use of colour to indicate gender is particularly marked when it comes to dressing boys. Many people would feel quite disturbed by the thought of dressing a baby boy in pink. We use clothes, and other physical attributes we control such as our jewellery, hairstyles and use of makeup, to indicate our gender. Similarly, perhaps women and men

adopt certain styles of talking as part of the process of demonstrating to the world what their gender is.

Finally, it is worth considering how many of the differences we observe are linked less to what people actually do when they talk and more to our perception of gender, and how we interpret the differences we notice. For example, in studies of interruption, it is notoriously difficult to agree on exactly what an interruption is and when one has occurred, making it a slightly ambiguous area. And because of this ambiguity, it is easy for our expectations to affect what we notice, and how we interpret what we notice, while ignoring other evidence which does not fit so neatly into our preconceptions.

5.5 Summary

In this chapter we looked first at sexism in English, created through asymmetry, marked and unmarked terms, and semantic derogation. We also looked at how it's possible to be sexist in discourse using terms which in another context might not be sexist at all. You were asked to consider whether it is possible to be sexist about men in the same way as it is about women. Bearing in mind the arguments made in Chapter 2, that representation reflects, and has an effect on, the way we perceive the world, you might consider whether the evidence of sexism in language is also evidence of sexism in society.

In the second part of the chapter, we looked at differences in the way women and men talk, and how evidence of these differences sometimes contradicts our 'common-sense' ideas. Two possible explanatory theories were put forward: dominance and difference theory. We ended with a word of warning: that it is very hard to be objective

in our analysis of gender, since our perceptions in this area can easily be distorted by our expectations.

Notes

1 Commercial television in the U.K.

2 English soccer player

Suggestions for further reading

Goddard, Angela and Patterson, Lindsey Meân (2000) *Language and Gender*, Lomdon: Routledge.

A straightforward and comprehensive introduction to the field.

Cameron, Deborah (1998) *The Feminist Critique of Language*, 2nd edn, London: Routledge.

A wide and fascinating range of essays on the topic of women and language.

Coates, Jennifer (1993) *Women, Men and Language*, 2nd edn, London: Longman.

The definitive overview of differences in women's and men's speech (phonological, syntactic and discoursal), written in a clear, accessible style.

Mills, Sara (1995) *Feminist Stylistics*, London: Routledge.

Sexist language and how to analyse it: examples from literature, songs and advertisements.