Gender and Discourse

Edited by **Ruth Wodak**

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: SOME IMPORTANT ISSUES IN THE RESEARCH OF GENDER AND DISCOURSE

Ruth Wodak

Aims and goals

Research on gender and sex in sociolinguistics and discourse analysis started in the early 1970s. Investigators examined two domains of language behaviour in particular: speech behaviour of men and women on the phonological level, and interactions (conversational styles) between women and men in discourse. In this introduction, I will first discuss some concepts of 'gender/sex' and 'discourse' and suggest possible working definitions. In addition, I would like to trace briefly the theoretical development of gender studies in feminist linguistics, thereby providing a general introductory framework for this volume (see Wodak and Benke, 1996; Holmes, 1996).

Studies of gender-specific language behaviour are often contradictory and depend on the author's implicit assumptions about sex and gender, methodology, samples used, etc. As a result, as stated by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 'women's language has been said to reflect their conservatism, prestige consciousness, upward mobility, insecurity, deference, nurturance, emotional expressivity, connectedness, sensitivity to others, solidarity. And men's language is heard as evincing their toughness, lack of affect, competitiveness, independence, competence, hierarchy, control' (1992: 90).

Owing to the many contradictory approaches, assumptions and results, it is necessary to develop a critical approach to this vast literature. All the claims made about women and men at different times, in different circumstances and with totally different samples, on the basis of different implicit ideologies about gender, must be analysed carefully and viewed in relation to the development of gender studies in the social sciences.

In my view, many empirical studies have neglected the context of language behaviour and have often analysed gender by merely looking at the speakers' biological sex (see the arguments in Nichols, 1983; Eckert,

1989; Cameron and Coates, 1990; Henley and Kramerae, 1991; Duranti and Goodwin, 1992; Crawford, 1995; Kotthoff and Wodak, 1997). Some of the research has isolated the variable of sex/gender from other sociological or situational factors and has made hasty generalizations about genderlects. Instead, I would like to propose that a context-sensitive approach which regards gender as a social construct would lead to more fruitful results (see Harres, 1996; Wetschanow, 1995). Moreover, I would like to suggest a look at gender in connection with the socio-cultural and ethnic background of the interlocutors, and in connection with their age, their level of education, their socio-economic status, their emotions and the specific power-dynamics of the discourse investigated.

Gender and sex

Basic assumptions

The point of departure for gender studies is (or was) the critique of the assumption of binary sexuality, the presupposition that the differentia-tion between the two 'sexes' is a natural fact, 'evidently' represented in the body. The feminist movement criticized not this assumed biological, binary concept of sex but the frequently accepted biological determina-tion of culturally conditioned traits as 'gender-typical qualities'. Here, above all, feminists criticized those traits employed in justifying the unequal and unjust treatment of women. On the one hand, they dismantled myths of femininity which, from an evolutionary viewpoint, were derived from traditional stereotypes such as the myth that all women are 'caring' from birth in a biologically determined way. On the other hand, they criticized that, through its constant reiteration, the traditional division of labour between the sexes contributes towards the reinforcement and perpetuation of these myths about biologically conditioned gender traits (Wetschanow, 1995: 12).

> By contrast, here the sociologically reasoned view is advocated that the gender roles allotted by society are based on the anatomical difference between the sexes, but that their manifestations evince such enormous differences over different historical eras and in different cultures that the attempt to legitimize them by recourse to 'nature' seems untenable and – wherever it is never-theless undertaken – ideologically highly suspicious. . . Painstaking investiga-tions, including intercultural comparisons, have not to date produced any evidence of the biological determination of those 'typically' male and female traits and forms of behaviour which constitute the sexual characters in the common understanding. . . To name just one example, this applies to Freud's idea that 'activity' is male and 'passivity' female. (Rohde-Dachser, 1991: 25ff)

To avoid such a naturalization of characteristics and attributes, research-ers differentiated between 'sex' and 'gender'. This sex/gender concept results from the assumption that a cultural sex – a gender – takes on a

culturally specific form against the background of biological sex. Such an understanding implies that the sex/gender concept operates on the principle that, while the binarity of the sexes is an immutable fact, the traits assigned to a sex by a culture are cultural constructions, that they are socially determined and therefore alterable.

Recently, critics of gender studies have aimed their attacks at the 'construction of a basic binary structure' as such. The category of gender has itself become the centre of analysis and the deconstruction of difference has become a subject (see Cameron, Chapter 1; Simpson, Chapter 8 in this volume; and see the section on 'The constructedness of the sexes' in this chapter, 11–12).

Some definitions

The British sociologist Anthony Giddens defines 'sex' as 'biological or anatomical differences between men and women', whereas 'gender' 'concerns the psychological, social and cultural differences between males and females' (1989: 158). On the basis of these characterizations, it seems relatively easy to distinguish between the two categories. However, the definitions miss the level of perception and attribution, the way gender stereotypes often influence the interaction of self- and other assessment. Giddens does mention some syndromes of 'abnormal' development, such as the testicular feminization syndrome and the androgenital syndrome, that is where infants designated as 'female' at birth, even if chromosomally male, tend to develop female gender identity, and vice versa (see Cameron's discussion in Chapter 1 in this volume; Wodak and Benke, 1996: 128ff).

In a social construction perspective not only gender, but even sex is seen as a socially developed status (Lorber and Farrell, 1991a). In this context sex is understood more as a continuum constructed of chromosomal sex, gonadal sex, and hormonal sex – all of which 'work in the presence and under the influence of a set of environments' (Fausto-Sterling, 1985: 71). It makes no sense therefore to assume that there is merely one set of traits that generally characterizes men and thus defines masculinity; or likewise, that there is one set of traits for women which defines femininity. Such an unitary model of sexual character is a familiar part of sexual ideology and serves to reify inequality between men and women in our society. It also makes possible numerous sociobiological explanations relating neurological facts with linguistic behaviour (Chambers, 1992).

In contrast to such biological ideologies, Connell (1993: 170ff) proposes a non-unitary model of gender. Both femininity and masculinity vary and understanding their context-dependent variety is regarded as central to the psychology of gender. He argues also that, since masculinity and femininity coexist in the same person, they should be seen not as polar natural opposites but as separate dimensions. 'Femininity

and masculinity are not essences: they are ways of living certain relationships. It follows that static typologies of sexual character have to be replaced by histories, analyses of the joint production of sets of psychological forms' (Connell, 1993: 179).[1]

In addition to such a perspective Lewontin stresses the relevance of the socialization process: the development of a person's gender identity 'depends on what label was attached to him or her as a child. . . Thus biological differences became a signal for, rather than a cause of, differentiation in social roles' (1982: 142). This definition connects the impact of societal norms and evaluations, power structures and the role of socialization remarkably well (see also Sheldon, Chapter 9 in this volume; Wodak, 1986; Wodak and Schulz, 1986; Wodak and Vetter, forthcoming; and the 'Social-psychological Theory of Text Planning', proposed in the latter studies, which will not be elaborated upon here).

In the context of this perspective, it is more coherent to talk of gender as the understanding of how what it means to be a woman or to be a man changes from one generation to the next and how this perception varies between different racialized, ethnic, and religious groups, as well as for members of different social classes (see Gal, 1989: 178; Stolcke, 1993: 20; Lorber and Farrell, 1991a: 1ff). Gender categories thus are seen as social constructs. They institutionalize cultural and social statuses and they serve to make male dominance over women appear natural: 'gender inequality in class society results from a historically specific tendency to ideologically "naturalize" prevailing socio-economic inequalities' (Stolcke, 1993: 19).

Discourse

The term 'discourse' integrates a range of occasionally contradictory or exclusionary meanings in its daily and philosophical uses (Vass, 1992: 1; Maas, 1988). Fairclough (1992: 3) points to several ways in which the concept appears, stressing how they arise in modern discourse analysis: 'samples of spoken dialogue, in contrast with written texts', 'spoken and written language'; 'situational context of language use'; 'interaction between reader/writer and text'; and 'notion of genre' (newspaper discourse, for example). In 'discursive psychology' (Harré and Stearns, 1995: 2ff), moreover, 'discourse' refers to the totality of signs that carry meaning: the mind is seen as the product of the signs encountered, including non-verbal signs.

These various meanings of 'discourse' are usually employed in an unreflecting way. It is frequently unclear as to whether a short text sequence is meant or a whole variety of text, or if a very abstract phenomenon is to be understood under this heading.[2] Consequently, I shall try to clearly distinguish between the concepts of discourse, text and discourse analysis.

It is not possible in this chapter to provide an extensive overview of all developments in discourse analysis or all the different notions of 'discourse' established in divergent paradigms (see van Dijk, 1985: 4; 1990; Schiffrin, 1993: 21; Renkeema, 1993; Vass, 1992: 9; Titscher et al., 1997). Instead, I would like to focus only on definitions that are important for the contributions presented in this book. I will begin by differentiating between 'text' and 'discourse'. I shall then offer my own approach to the concept of 'discourse' which has developed and changed over many years of studying gender, institutions and political discourse from a discourse sociolinguistic point of view (Wodak, 1996; Wodak et al., 1997a) and which shares elements, but is not identical, with the approaches of Teun van Dijk (1990: 163ff; 1993) and Norman Fairclough (1992: 62ff; Fairclough and Wodak, 1997).

Discourse and text

Gisela Brünner and Gabriele Graefen (1993: 7–8) characterize the main differences between 'text' and 'discourse' in the following way:

> By *discourse* are to be understood units and forms of speech, of interaction, which can be part of everyday linguistic behaviour, but which can equally appear in an institutional sphere. Orality, admittedly, is not a feature which holds true for *all* forms of discursive behaviour . . . but is very much the typical case. Regarded systematically, discourse requires the co-presence of speaker and listener ('face-to-face interaction'); this can, however, be reduced to a temporal co-presence (on the telephone).

Brünner and Graefen also define discourse as the totality of interactions in a certain domain (medical discourse, for example) which appears similar to the definition offered by Foucault (see Wodak, 1996: 24). 'Text', however, has different roots, in both philology and literature:

> In the context of a theory of linguistic behaviour, it is an essential determination of the text that the linguistic behaviour, which is made material in the text, is detached from the overall common speech situation just as is the receptive behaviour of the reader – the common ground being understood in a systematic, not a historical sense. In a text, speech behaviour assumes the quality of knowledge, which is in the service of transmission and is stored for later use . . . the written form, which is constitutive for the everyday use of the term, and today is frequently regarded as almost synonymous with 'text', is therefore not a necessary feature of a text.

Text does not have to be written, according to Brünner and Graefen (1993) who rely on the theory of 'functional pragmatics', founded by Konrad Ehlich. There Ehlich also speaks of the 'extended speech situation' (1983) (*zerdehnte Sprechsituation*) which, in his opinion, is characteristic for 'texts', in contrast to 'discourse'. Discourse must not be oral. The main difference lies in the function of 'handing down' (*Überlieferung*) and in the simultaneous existence (or absence) of a

situational context. Thus, discourse may be defined as 'text in context' (van Dijk, 1990: 164) on the one hand, and as a 'set of texts' on the other (Dressler and Merlini-Barbaresi, 1994: 6).[3]

Van Dijk also points to a decisive aspect, which is that discourse should also be understood as action: 'I understand "discourse" . . . both as a specific form of language use, and as a specific form of social interaction, interpreted as a complete communicative event in a social situation' (1990: 164; see also Eggins and Iedema, Chapter 7 in this volume). The behavioural aspect is very important and relates to Ludwig Wittgenstein's concepts of 'language game' and 'form of life' as well as to Jürgen Habermas's concept of 'ordinary language' (Leodolter, 1975: 27; Wodak, 1996: 12). Both are also of crucial significance to the development of speech act theory of D.A. Austin and John Searle (see Schiffrin, 1993: 49; Wodak, 1986: 229). These approaches emphasize the integration of non-verbal and verbal language behaviour, as well as the definition of discourse to be seen as action (Sprachhandlung). Discourse is thus inseparable from other forms of social practice.

Discourse as social practice

In most studies, the self-contained communicative act is the centre of interest. This points to a fundamentally more difficult and complex question – the extent to which a unit of discourse may be defined as self-contained at all. We shall return to that question again (see Chapters 3, 4 and 5 in this volume). At this point, it only needs to be noted that, in terms of the range of the concept of discourse, there is no objective beginning and no clearly defined end. *In principle* – because of intertextuality – every discourse is related to many others and can only be understood on the basis of others. The limitation of the research area and on a specific discourse therefore depends on a subjective decision by the researcher, on the formulation of the questions guiding the research (Kress, 1993).

Taking all these considerations into account, I would like, above all, to emphasize the behavioural aspect and therefore suggest the following definition of discourse (see Fairclough, 1992: 62; Fairclough and Wodak, 1997):

> Critical Discourse Analysis sees discourse – *the use of language in speech and writing* – *as a form of 'social practice'*. Describing discourse as social practice implies a dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and the situation, institution and social structure that frame it: the discursive event is shaped by them, but it also shapes them. That is, discourse is socially constituted, as well as socially conditioned – it constitutes situations, objects of knowledge, and the social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people. It is constitutive both in the sense that it helps sustain and reproduce the social status quo, and in the sense that it contributes to transforming it. (Wodak, 1996: 17)

This provides a direct link to our discussion of organizations and institutions (see Chapters 2, 5 and 6 in this volume) in which the reality constituting element of discourse is emphasized.[4] In addition, it becomes evident that questions of power and ideology[5] are connected with discourse, every interaction is thus influenced by power relationships resulting in the speech-situation and the overall context.

The distortion of discourse (in Habermas's sense: see Wodak, 1996: 28) leads to 'disorders of discourse' in everyday interaction. Understanding seems to be an exception; misunderstanding and conflict are frequently to be detected. Critical discourse analysis in my view, is an instrument whose purpose is precisely to expose power structures and 'disorders of discourse'.

Feminist linguistics

Analogous to the term 'racism', the word 'sexism' was invented in the 1960s. It refers to discrimination within a social system on the basis of sexual membership. In Western culture, as in most other social systems, this means, in concrete terms, that there are exactly two sexes in binary opposition to each other: female and male. The relationship between these two categories is not an equal or egalitarian one but a hierarchical one, where the category 'man' or 'male' is the norm and the category 'woman' or 'female' represents the 'other' and the 'abnormal', that is the 'marked version' - logically following the normativeness of the male (Wetschanow, 1995: 18ff; Crawford, 1995; Coates, 1993; Chapters 1 and 2 in this volume). With the concept of 'sexism', women defined themselves for the first time as a social group and as a suppressed minority. As such, they sought to reveal the mechanisms of suppression, making others aware of and fighting these devices. Social groups often define themselves by means of their common language which plays an important role in identity creation and, for subcultures, serves as a means of differentiating themselves from the outside world. This specific identity manifests itself in certain conversational styles, manifestations of emotions etc. (see Coates, Chapter 10 in this volume).

Research conducted by feminist-oriented women should by no means be equated with either research conducted by women or research on women. Feminist scholarship in every discipline is characterized by its criticism of science and its criticism of the androcentric view within 'traditional science'. Feminist linguistics (FL) developed within linguistics. Many proposals and basic assumptions of FL relate to and overlap with principles of critical linguistics and critical discourse analysis (see Fairclough and Wodak, 1997; Wodak, 1996: 17ff) as well as with the qualitative paradigm in the social sciences (Cicourel, 1992). It would be beneficial to investigate these parallel developments from the standpoints of the theory of knowledge, history and sociology to find

reciprocal influences (which, unfortunately, cannot be accomplished in the course of this introduction). Throughout this volume, however, some intersections and influences of critical discourse analysis and FL with and on each other are mentioned (see especially Chapters 2 and 5).

According to Marlis Hellinger, FL is distinguished from all other disciplines by the following three aspects, which similarly analyse the relationship between language and gender:

1. FL places female and male linguistic behavior and the linguistic phenomena connected with the designations of women and men at the centre of its considerations.
2. FL interprets persons-related asymmetries in the field of language systems and language use as expressions of the linguistic discrimination of women (sexism) and links these directly to the plane of social discrimination. Traditional studies usually make do with descriptive results . . . .
3. FL does not accept phenomena as given, but seeks alternatives in keeping with the principle of the linguistic equal treatment of women and men. It pursues explicitly political goals by criticizing ruling linguistic norms and understanding the linguistic change it advocates as part of an overall change in society. (Hellinger, 1990: 12)

For FL researchers, both the system-oriented and the behaviour-related approaches to language are of interest as the following two questions must be answered:

1. How are women represented in the existing language system?
2. How does the linguistic behaviour of the group of women differ from that of men?

'Language has never been seen by feminists as a detached system and speaking never as a detached technique' (Günther and Kotthoff, 1991: 17). Representatives of FL do not have a 'purely scientific' interest in investigating the connection between language and sex, that is in describing this connection, but they are concerned with assessing this relationship. FL is an explicitly partisan form of linguistics. It goes beyond analysis. It produces concrete proposals for change and makes socio-political claims (Wodak et al., 1997b; Postl, 1991: 27).

Sociolinguistic studies of sex/gender

In the 1970s, 'sex' was established within sociolinguistic research as a social variable next to the already-existing variables of social stratum, age, nationality, ethnic affiliation, religion, class and region. In correlative-quantitative sociolinguistic investigations on the prestige and stigma variants of languages (see Kotthoff, 1992) the sex variable became a factor which significantly affected the use of language. The best-known representatives of this quantitative-correlative approach in