

# Gender Voices



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and  
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# *Gender Voices*

David Graddol and Joan Swann



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## Introduction



*Andy Capp* by Reg Smythe, *Daily Mirror*, 11 October 1982

'If the women in your street tend to yak over the garden hedge, do what they do in Meikleour, Perthshire – grow big hedges. The Meikleour beech hedge has a trimmed height of 85 ft. Mind you, it was planted in 1746, so you may have to wait a bit for some peace and quiet.'

(*The Pint Size Guinness Book of Records*, no. 4 High Society)

'Her voice was ever soft, gentle and low, an excellent thing in woman.'

(Shakespeare, *King Lear*, V iii)

'Mr Rex Winsbury wrote in the Financial Times with a bitchiness which made me forget he was a man.'

(*Guardian*, 1980)

'Do you not know I am a woman? When I think, I must speak.'

(Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, III ii)

'There can be no doubt that women exercise a great and universal

influence on linguistic development through their instinctive shrinking from coarse and gross expressions and their preference for refined and (in certain spheres) veiled and indirect expressions... Men will certainly with great justice object that there is a danger of the language becoming insipid if we are always to content ourselves with women's expressions.'

(O. Jespersen, *Language: its nature, development and origin* (1922))

## The Study of Language and Gender

Stereotypes of women's and men's speech are plentiful and they seem to have an extremely long history. They reflect popular images of women's and men's language, perpetuated through proverbs, jokes, journalism, literature and even by serious language scholars. One of the striking features of these stereotypes is the way they rarely favour women, who are consistently portrayed as chatter-boxes, endless gossips or strident nags patiently endured or kept in check by strong and silent men.

The fact that such persistent and well-developed images exist suggests that this is a sensitive aspect of relationships between men and women which will repay further study. And it is only reasonable to wonder whether there is a grain of truth in the idea that women's speech and use of language are, in systematic ways, different from those of men. If it proves to be the case, then further questions are raised, such as *why* such differences should exist. And does it particularly matter? Can the allegations put forward by some feminists be supported – that language is itself sexist and that popular images serve both to denigrate and control the speech of women? These are some of the issues that we are concerned with in this book. In reviewing the answers that various scholars and writers have given to such questions we will provide not only a survey of the way women and men differ in their language habits but also an exploration of the links between language and the structure of society, of how the way women and men speak ultimately affects their position in society, their economic and political achievements, and even their personalities and perceived identities.

Language and gender is an unusual and exciting area of research which has enjoyed a phenomenal growth in the last decade or so. One of the standard bibliographies (Thorne et al., 1983) lists the work of over 1,000 authors and the number has grown considerably

since this list was compiled. Many universities and colleges offer courses in the subject and it is now a regular topic in textbooks and conferences on linguistics, sociology, women's studies and others. Alongside this academic activity, there have been the more practically oriented activities of researchers, journalists, feminists and writers of letters to the media who wish to bring about a change in women's and men's use of language, and in the language itself. And, of course, there has been the corresponding literature from people who resist such attempts at change. Language and gender has, then, both an academic and a popular appeal. It holds out the promise not only of advancing linguistic and social theory, but also of providing a social critique and a programme of political action aimed at reducing sexual inequality.

The popularity of the field, both within the academic community and the wider public, has not been entirely to its advantage. Its sheer diversity has made the development of a common theoretical perspective extremely difficult. And language and gender studies have been regarded with some suspicion by those who detect a bandwagon or who regard the field as just too fashionable; and by others who fear that some researchers' links with the women's movement and with identifiable political commitments prevent their work from being academically respectable. Such controversy routinely surrounds research which attempts to explain how society works, maintains its stability and permits change, but is nonetheless a reminder of the need for careful examination of any research which purports to link language with women's oppression. It is all too easy, in this as in other fields, to allow political sympathies to get in the way of intellectual rigour.

The present book attempts to provide a compact and readable introduction to the field of language and gender, dealing with both local and larger theoretical issues. We have tried to show how some important ideas in linguistics, psychology and feminist thought illuminate the role of language in establishing and regulating gender divisions, and we explore some of the possibilities for individual and social change. The 'voices' of the book's title are hence both literal speaking voices and figurative ones – the collection of opinions and positions held by those in the field.

### **The Nature of Language**

Difficulties in defining the term *language* present the first obstacle to

understanding the various claims made about the role of language in constructing gender divisions. The literature is filled with many lively debates, between writers of differing political persuasions and those with differing disciplinary backgrounds, and it is difficult to decide which conflicts of opinion have substance and which arise from different uses of the word language and from different understandings of what language is. It is not difficult to see why there exists such a problem of definition. Language, like gravity, is one of those things with which everyone is familiar but few can adequately describe and explain. This is a surprising fact considering the intimate part that it plays in our lives, but people have less privileged access to many of their own mental processes than they often imagine. Perhaps this is one reason why there are many popular conceptions and misconceptions about language, how it works, and how it affects people. But if there is a danger in taking language for granted, there is an equal danger of mystification. It is all too easy to talk about language in ways which make it appear a complex, mysterious and paradoxical thing which is beyond the understanding of non-specialists.

Both the authors of this book have a background and training in linguistics and take the view that, although complex, language can be described in a methodical and scientific manner. Our approach has been to adopt a traditional linguistic framework where possible, and to explain how competing ideas depart from this. In linguistics, for example, a clear distinction is usually made between the idea of language as a social phenomenon and the speech of an individual person. There also exists an orthodoxy that language is a specific human faculty, which can be distinguished from both animal communication and other kinds of human behaviour. Both these distinctions make a good starting point for any discussion of language and gender. The remainder of this introduction outlines these, and other preliminary notions, which we assume in later chapters.

### *Language is Personal*

There exists a whole sub-discipline, *psycholinguistics*, that is concerned with discovering the individual mental processes involved in speech production and comprehension. In a cognitive sense, language is very much a private matter; it is said to be the vehicle of

our internal thoughts and (some would say) desires. But our language is also an important part of our personal and social identity; our linguistic habits reflect our individual biographies and experiences. In all these ways, our language is our individual property.

### *Language is Social*

Simultaneously, a language has an existence outside of ourselves; it pre-exists and continues when we are gone; it is much larger than us, embracing words and grammatical structures of which we are unaware. Language, in this sense, seems to be a public resource, like the water supply, that services a speech community and provides for the communication between individuals needed for social maintenance. The parallel with a public utility goes further. Many people seem to accept that some municipal authority, and not they themselves, has responsibility for the maintenance and upkeep of the language; for determining what is and what is not acceptable or grammatical; what should (or should not) be published and disseminated. Those who use words and structures that are not officially condoned are sometimes accused of 'polluting' this community resource.

### *The Saussurean Model*

This tension between the personal and the social belongs to a long western tradition of language study but the distinction is particularly associated with the name of Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist working at the beginning of this century. Following Saussure, the object of linguistic study is often taken to be the social, rather than the personal, facts of language. A 'language' is usually thought of as being an abstract system: a vocabulary and set of grammatical rules which govern how words may be combined to produce sentences. The concept of a system is more technical than it first appears, since it suggests that the elements that make it up are connected together in some specific manner. Saussure argued that the individual elements which made up a language system (the words of a language, say) did not have any meaning in an absolute sense, but could be defined in terms of their *relation* to one another. That is, the meaning of a word like *woman* cannot be defined

without describing its opposition to other words such as *man* or *girl*. Furthermore, the relationship between a particular word and its meaning is essentially an arbitrary one. In order to understand such words, a listener must be party to what Saussure called the 'social contract' which bound all members of a speech community. The terms of this contract have evolved over many years and cannot be changed by any individual speaker, only through collective action.

These two Saussurean ideas – that of viewing language as an abstract system and that of the social contract – are still extremely influential among linguists. Some linguists, including the well-known grammarian Noam Chomsky, have gone so far as to claim that *language use*, being an aspect of individual behaviour, is of no linguistic interest. In this book, however, we are concerned with language in all its variety: in the character of men's and women's voices; in their patterns of interruption in conversation; in differences in accent as well as in certain aspects of vocabulary. At some points in this discussion it will be apparent that the crude equations *language system = a social abstraction* and *language 'use' = individual behaviour* cannot easily be sustained. Many aspects of conversational behaviour, for example, are undoubtedly features of language use, but they are nevertheless institutionalized and socially recognizable behaviours. They seem to be part of a social contract rather than the idiosyncratic speech behaviour of an individual.

### *The Semiotic Approach*

The phenomena we've just described are all closely associated with language, even if one is unsure of their precise status, but verbal language is only one of many ways in which people communicate their gender identity and recognize someone else's. We communicate with body gesture, with repertoires and rituals of action, by the clothes we wear, with graphic images and all manner of cultural practices. We can refer to all of these as 'signifying practices'; as well as communicating ideas they communicate much about the identity, ambitions and attitudes of the communicator. Whether it is a matter of a man holding open a door for a woman, or a woman serving a man with an extra egg for breakfast, such signifying practices can all be regarded as 'languages' of a kind, and there is at least one analytical tradition – that of *semiotics* or *semiology* – that provides

a framework which embraces them all. Such semiotic systems are rough and ready ones compared with verbal language but, according to semiologists, the way in which they work and in which we understand them is very similar to the processes involved in language comprehension. For example, we can regard repertoires of action as a Saussurean system – a set of elements whose meaning is determined by a system of oppositions. Hence, part of the meaning of a ‘skirt’ is through its contrast with ‘trousers’, just as the word *woman* is opposed to *man* in the linguistic system. Saussure, and semiologists, regard both words and cultural practices as *signs* whose meanings are essentially arbitrary, a matter of social convention. The semiotic notion of a language is much wider in scope than is normally found in linguistics, but it is one employed by many writers in the language and gender literature. While the chief concern of this book is language in its more conventional (and restricted) sense, we shall draw on semiotics in chapter 2 and chapter 6.

These conceptual distinctions provide essential background for the discussions of research in later chapters, where it will be clear that however broad – or narrow – a view of language one wishes to take, it is essentially the *continuity* between both language as an individual and a social possession, and between verbal and other forms of human communication that allows language to play a major part in the construction and reproduction of culture – including gender divisions.

## **The Nature of Gender and the Gendered Nature of Society**

The word *gender* can also give rise to misunderstanding, particularly when used in connection with language. *Gender* is used as a technical linguistic term relating to the grammatical categories of words in certain languages; we use the term in this specialist sense in chapters 3 and 5. Elsewhere *gender* is used in its more everyday sense to refer to a social distinction between masculine and feminine. In this sense it can be distinguished from the term *sex*, which relates to the biological and by and large binary distinction between male and female.

The opening words of Simone de Beauvoir’s historic book *The Second Sex* capture the essential characteristic of gender: ‘One is not

born, but rather becomes, a woman.' Gender is a socially rather than a biologically constructed attribute – people are not born with but rather learn the behaviours and attitudes appropriate to their sex. During the last decade of research, it has become clear that gender is a very complex category. Theories are still being developed which try to grapple with this complexity but they share the idea that gender, unlike sex, is a continuous variable. A person can be more or less 'feminine' and more or less 'masculine'. Furthermore, a man can display 'feminine' characteristics just as a woman may demonstrate 'masculine' ones.

When we refer to society as being 'gendered' we mean that gender represents an important division in our society (and probably all human societies). Whether one is male or female is not just a biological fact, it assigns one to membership of one of two social groups. A great many consequences – social, economic and political – flow from this membership. Women and men, girls and boys, are treated in systematically different ways (by both women and men); they have different experiences at school, at work and at home; they do different things and different things are expected of them. In other words, women and men have different life experiences to an extent that cannot be satisfactorily explained by simple biological differences between the sexes. Furthermore, these differences between women and men seem such a natural and obvious part of our existence that we are usually unaware of their full extent. The way we talk is one of these all-pervasive and unobtrusive aspects of gender behaviour.

Gender is much more than a psychological attribute. It involves a person's sexuality, which has both a private and public dimension, and must always be understood in the context of particular, and changing, social relations between men and women.

### **The Relation Between Language and Gender**

The two substantive words in the phrase 'language and gender' are linked by a small, unobtrusive word which gives little clue as to the precise nature of the relationship between the two. But it is this relationship which is most at stake. In exactly what way is language related to gender and vice versa? We have said that we wish to go beyond a catalogue of sex differences in language behaviour to



explore why there should be such differences, and what social functions they serve. This book, if you like, is about the 'and'.

There are, broadly speaking, three kinds of relationship which can, and have been, put forward. First, there is the view that language merely *reflects* social divisions and inequalities; second, the position that such divisions and inequalities are actually *created* through sexist linguistic behaviour; and third, a view that argues that both processes apply, and that any full account of language and gender must explore the tension and interplay between the two.

### *Language Reflects Gender Divisions*

Linguistic differences are merely a reflection of social differences, and as long as society views women and men as different – and unequal – then differences in the language of women and men will persist. (Coates, 1986, p. vi)

The view that linguistic behaviour merely reflects social processes is far from being a straightforward one. In chapter 3, for example, we discuss research on accent and dialect that shows how the language variety one speaks owes much to the patterns of interaction in a community, to the people one routinely talks to and to the status relationship one has with them. All these things are structured by social and economic processes that have little to do with language. In some communities, women have looser and more dispersed contacts with other people than men do (because of a conventional sexual division of labour, demographic patterns, and so on). Sociolinguistic theories have become adept at explaining why language usage is sensitive to patterns of living and patterns of interaction. In these ways one can say that certain sex differences in language behaviour are a side effect of the systematically different social experiences of women and men.

But certain kinds of speech may be regarded as socially appropriate for a particular sex, and may be learned by children just as they learn other kinds of gender appropriate behaviour. Men may swear and speak roughly, whilst women are more polite. We examine such claims in later chapters, but it can be argued that such sex differences in speech reflect different concepts of masculinity and femininity whose origins lie outside of language.