

LANGUAGE AND GENDER: A brief Literature Review

Here is an example of a **Literature review**, on the subject of *Language & Gender*. It was written by Alastair Pennycook, as an example for his students.

<http://ecdev.hku.hk/acadgrammar/litrev/examples/three.htm>

After reading this, Work out:

1. The comparison the writer establishes in the review
2. The sequence to his review (why that sequence?)
3. What the writer's own perspective is

Note:

1. The use the writer makes of *each* of the sources he refers to.
2. How, in his language particularly, he avoids a "black and white", right/wrong type of judgment of the positions he reviews.

With the general growth of feminist work in many academic fields, it is hardly surprising that the relationship between language and gender has attracted considerable attention in recent years. In an attempt to go beyond "folklinguistic" assumptions about how men and women use language (the assumption that women are "talkative", for example), studies have focused on anything from different syntactical, phonological or lexical uses of language to aspects of conversation analysis, such as topic nomination and control, interruptions and other interactional features. While some research has focused only on the description of differences, other work has sought to show how linguistic differences both reflect and reproduce social difference. Accordingly, Coates (1988) suggests that research on language and gender can be divided into studies that focus on dominance and those that focus on difference.

Much of the earlier work emphasized dominance. Lakoff's (1975) pioneering work suggested that women's speech typically displayed a range of features, such as tag questions, which marked it as inferior and weak. Thus, she argued that the type of subordinate speech learned by a young girl "will later be an excuse others use to keep her in a demeaning position, to refuse to treat her seriously as a human being" (1975, p.5). While there are clearly some problems with Lakoff's work - her analysis was not based on empirical research, for example, and the automatic equation of subordinate with 'weak' is problematic - the emphasis on dominance has understandably remained at the Centre of much of this work. Research has shown how men nominated topics more, interrupted more often, held the floor for longer, and so on (see, for example, Zimmerman and West, 1975). The chief focus of this approach, then, has been to show how patterns of interaction between men and women reflect the dominant position of men in society.

Some studies, however, have taken a different approach by looking not so much at power in mixed-sex interactions as at how same-sex groups produce certain types of interaction. In a typical study of this type, Maltz and Borker (1982) developed lists of what they described as men's and women's features of language. They argued that these norms of interaction were acquired in same-sex groups rather than mixed-sex groups and that the issue is therefore one of (sub-)cultural miscommunication rather than social inequality. Much of this research has

focused on comparisons between, for example, the competitive conversational style of men and the cooperative conversational style of women.

While some of the more popular work of this type, such as Tannen (1987), lacks a critical dimension, the emphasis on difference has nevertheless been valuable in fostering research into gender subgroup interactions and in emphasizing the need to see women's language use not only as 'subordinate' but also as a significant subcultural domain.

Although Coates' (1988) distinction is clearly a useful one, it also seems evident that these two approaches are by no means mutually exclusive. While it is important on the one hand, therefore, not to operate with a simplistic version of power and to consider language and gender only in mixed-group dynamics, it is also important not to treat women's linguistic behaviour as if it existed outside social relations of power. As Cameron, McAlinden and O'Leary (1988) ask, "Can it be coincidence that men are aggressive and hierarchically-organized conversationalists, whereas women are expected to provide conversational support?" (p.80). Clearly, there is scope here for a great deal more research that

- is based on empirical data of men's and women's speech;
- operates with a complex understanding of power and gender relationships (so that women's silence, for example, can be seen both as a site of oppression and as a site of possible resistance);
- looks specifically at the contexts of language use, rather than assuming broad gendered differences;
- involves more work by men on language and gender, since attempts to understand male uses of language in terms of difference have been few (thus running the danger of constructing men's speech as the 'norm' and women's speech as 'different');
- aims not only to describe and explain but also to change language and social relationships.

References

Cameron, D., F. McAlinden and K. O'Leary (1988). "Lakoff in context: the social and linguistic function of tag questions." In J. Coates and D. Cameron (op. cit.). pp. 74-93.

Coates, J. and D. Cameron (Eds.) (1988) Women in their speech communities. Harlow: Longman. Coates, J. (1988). Chapter 6: "Introduction." In J. Coates and D. Cameron (op. cit.) pp. 63-73.

Lakoff, R. (1975) Language and Woman's Place. New York: Harper and Row Maltz, D.N. and R.A. Borker (1982). "A cultural approach to male-female miscommunication." In J. Gumperz (Ed.), Language and social identity. Cambridge: Cambridge U.P.

Tannen, D. (1987). That's not what I meant. London:

Dent.Zimmerman, D. & C. West (1975) "Sex roles, interruptions and silences in conversation." In B. Thorne & N. Henley (Eds.) Language and sex: difference and dominance. Rowley, Mass: Newbury House.