



# LANGUAGE AND GENDER

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QUESTION:



WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT  
LANGUAGE AND GENDER?  
BRAINSTORM SOME IDEAS...



# GENDER



- **Biologically constructed:** researchers used to think there was a male and a female brain with different structures, outputs and capabilities
- **Socially constructed:** each society or culture trains men and women to behave in a specific way (boys raised to be aggressive, girls passive)
- **Individually constructed:** each individual constructs his or her own perception of his or her own gender, and decided how to portray that to the world




# INTRODUCTION

- From two perspectives: Ferdinand de Saussure – **langue** and **parole**
- **Langue**: language as a code, the words available to us
  - new coinages of words such as *Ms, chairperson, s/he*
- **Parole**: language in use, what people actually say or write
  - we can question whether women and men actually speak differently from each other
- **Discourse**: brings langue and parole together, it refers to what is said or written in relation to those aspects of the language which are available in the language



# GENDER DIFFERENCES IN SPEECH

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- **Biological differences:**  
voice – breathy voice interpreted as sexy/alluring in females
  - **Stereotypes:**  
women's talk – chatty, gossipy, i.e. superficial and unimportant  
men – strong, silent, i.e. a select and rare commodity
  - **Ideological relationship** between language use and gender
  - **Underlying prejudices** about the relative merit of men's and women's talk



# STUDIES OF LANGUAGE AND GENDER

- The first main study: *Language and Woman's Place* by Robin Lakoff (1975): women forced to use language that “softened” or “weakened” their speech because of their **lower-status social position**
- **Women's speech** had to be more standard, softer, and more polite than men's to get things done
- Lakoff proposed the **dominance theory**: differences in speech related to gender are a result of men's socially superior position
- **Men**: greater use of interruptive behavior, fewer conversational support indicators, fewer mitigated directives, and more control over conversational topics
- **Women**: less success with the features above, the need to show more conversational responsiveness and to be less direct



# STUDIES OF LANGUAGE AND GENDER

## cont.

- Women use greater numbers of hedges, tag questions, and other indirect linguistic features – making their speech seem **weaker** and more **uncertain**
- Society teaches women to “**speak like a woman**”
- Lakoff’s book started a flood of research – it was suggested that her claims were either overstated or incorrect.
- Linguistic features themselves mean nothing – it is the context in which they are used – how their use is perceived is based on our **social preconceptions**
- After Lakoff’s book – a **paradigm shift** – focus from **biological sex** (being male or female at birth) to **gender** (the socialized process of becoming male or female)
- Research must focus more on **lifestyle patterns** and **environment** than on biology



# ORIGINS OF GENDERED LANGUAGE USE

- Socialization into **gendered linguistic practice** begins at birth
- Babies were found to babble in different pitch ranges with mothers or fathers
- Children enter into **sex-segregated** activities, playgrounds, and sports
- This same-sex tendency help create **gendered patterns** in language use
- Differences then arise from socialization into different gender subcultures: this approach to male/female language differences is known as the **cross-cultural miscommunication approach**.
- **The dominance theory:** assumes an asymmetrical status between men and women – this asymmetry creates the differences in language
- **The cross-cultural miscommunication approach:** suggests that gender differences are similar to cross-cultural differences.






# ORIGINS OF GENDERED LANGUAGE USE

## cont.

- 1982, influential article by Daniel Maltz and Ruth Borker:  
**men:** adopt a more competitive, hierarchical style  
**women:** engage in a more cooperative, noncompetitive style
- **Males:** more directives, storytelling, and ritual insults to gain and hold the conversational floor
- **Females:** more mitigation, minimal responses, and support strategies to establish rapport and equality
- These differences can cause **miscommunication** that is similar to cultural misunderstanding
- Thus, problems in cross-gendered interaction can be blamed on **differences in gender subcultures**
- By being aware of the differences, we can be more sensitive to each other's styles and strategies.



# CONTEMPORARY VIEWS AND RESEARCH

- The position of the cross-cultural miscommunication approach is hard to maintain
  - Its main **weakness** is that it fails to recognize that the linguistic choices of men and women are tied to a larger social and economic framework
  - **Contemporary research:** examines how linguistic choices are tied to the larger society in which we operate
  - **Gendered roles in the workplace:** women are positioned more in the standard language market (because of work: caregivers, educators, maids, hostesses and mothers)
  - More women enter traditionally male jobs: however, they will not use as many nonstandard features or taboo words as men because of **societal beliefs** about how women should talk
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# SEXIST LANGUAGE

- ▶ Feminist linguists were concerned with what grammars and dictionaries **prescribed** (instead of described)
- ▶ *He* and *man* were **masculine generics** (e.g. *Man breastfeeds his young.*)
- ▶ Other **problematic generics**: *chairman, spokesman* (they referred to women as well)
- ▶ **Male firstness** as in “*he or she*”
- ▶ **Female diminutives** such as *usherette*
- ▶ **Gender marking** such as *lady doctor*
- ▶ *Mr* as an **honorific** for men (does not indicate his marital status)
- ▶ *Mrs* or *Miss* (indicates marital status)
- ▶ **Derogatory** lexis such as *a blonde* (used of women but rarely of men)
- ▶ **Overlexicalization**: the excessive number of derogatory terms to describe sexually active or elderly women
- ▶ Underlying these concerns was a belief that language **not only reflected** but also **shaped** thought and social action



# CLASSROOM INTERACTION

## ▶ TEACHER TALK

- ▶ Studies have found that teachers tend to **talk** far **more** to the **male** students
- ▶ This phenomenon found to be **widespread** across all subjects in the curriculum
- ▶ However, it's **not intentional**, but rather unrecognized process
- ▶ Other studies (meta-analysis – Kelly, 1988):
  - boys being given **longer to answer** a question (mathematics)
  - girls being asked **challenging and open questions** less often than boys
- ▶ In **conclusion**: boys get more high-level questions, more academic criticism, and slightly more praise than girls



# CLASSROOM INTERACTION cont.

## ➤ STUDENT TALK

### ➤ In mixed-sex classrooms:

- boys **talking** more than girls
- boys **interrupt** both girls and other boys more than girls interrupt each other

### ➤ Though disruptive, boys' talk may develop their **self-confidence** to seize and hold the floor, to control topics, and in general prepare them for the skills of competitive, public speaking

### ➤ **Gender** may intersect with **ethnicity**:

- **black boys** approach teachers less often than most girls
- **white males** challenge statements of fact
- **black males** challenge application of rules




# LANGUAGE USE AND GENDER

- **HOW LANGUAGE IS USED TO TALK ABOUT MEN AND WOMEN**
  - Vocabulary: brainstorm **insult terms** that are used **for men only**, insult terms that are used **for women only**, and insult terms that are used **for both men and women**
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# LANGUAGE USE AND GENDER cont.

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- **Vocabulary:** insult terms
    - men: insults attack intellectual capability, physical strength and masculinity
    - women: insults attack sexuality
    - both: insults are fairly generic
  - **Symmetry and Asymmetry:**
    - symmetry: terms used to represent males get equal usage and scope of use as terms used to represent females
    - asymmetry: terms used to represent males and females DO NOT get equal usage and scope of use
    - symmetry: e.g. horse (adult generic), stallion (adult male), mare (adult female)
    - asymmetry: e.g. human (adult generic), man (adult male and human generic), woman (adult female)


# LANGUAGE USE AND GENDER cont.

- **Titles:** men – Mr., women – Miss, Mrs., Ms. (one title for men, three for women), generic: Dr., Judge, President
- **Unmarked and marked terms:**
  - unmarked: terms **without** specific endings used only for males or females
  - marked: terms **with** specific endings for only males and females
  - waiter (unmarked – male or female), waitress (marked – only female)
  - women are choosing nowadays unmarked versions (e.g. waiter, actor)
- **Semantic derogation:** a word that is normally positive takes on a negative connotation in specific situations (especially for women)
  - e.g. gentleman/lady – e.g. cleaning lady (lower status), lady of the night (prostitute); bachelor/spinster – e.g. spinster is old, not beautiful (bachelorrete)





# LANGUAGE USE AND GENDER cont.

- ▶ **Grammar:** human beings in general – he, she, or combination?
    - the third person singular problem
  - ▶ **Discourse:** we can see discourse about men and women in TV advertisements and internet-based advertisement
    - spoken/written
    - multimodal
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# LANGUAGE USE AND GENDER cont.

## ➤ HOW MEN AND WOMEN USE LANGUAGE

- A lot of research is inconclusive
- **Verbosity:** who speaks more? Depends on the context, closely linked to power dynamics
- **Turn-Taking and Interrupting:** depends on the situation, personality plays a role
- **Back Channel Support** (active listening strategies, eye contact, posture, facial support):
  - *Really? Wow, that's interesting!, I didn't know that.*
  - asking open-ended questions, interested facial expressions, forward leaning posture
  - slightly more use of back channel support by women



# LANGUAGE USE AND GENDER cont.

## ➤ HOW MEN AND WOMEN USE LANGUAGE

- **Mitigating:** strategies and words that we use in order to decrease the power of what we're saying
  - hedging: hesitation (sort of, kind of, um)
  - epistemic modals: reducing forcefulness (should, could, may)
  - other mitigators (possibly, probably)
  - results are mixed, less power = more mitigation
- **Rising intonation:** adds a questioning tone, or degree of uncertainty to a statement
  - "I'm going out tonight." – certain
  - "I'm going out tonight?" – uncertain
  - women use it frequently, especially teenage females
- **Content:**
  - women talk more about people, emotions, internal processes and thought processes
  - men talk more about external events and conversation topics typically associated with men, such as sports