

Deborah Cameron\*

# Language and gender: Mainstreaming and the persistence of patriarchy

<https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl-2020-2078>

**Abstract:** Issues related to gender (and sexuality), largely ignored in the early development of sociolinguistics, have emerged as a cornerstone of the field. Spurred on by the feminist movement and new generations of engaged scholars addressing how language use both reveals and embeds gender inequalities, scholarship on such questions is now “mainstream” across a range of disciplines. Deborah Cameron argues that the primary focus in recent decades on social identity and performance, while path-breaking in many ways, has had the unintended consequence of drawing attention away from core issues of power and patriarchy in terms of gender relations.

**Keywords:** Feminism, identity, inequality, language and gender studies, power

When I first studied sociolinguistics as an undergraduate in the United Kingdom in the 1970s, I had no idea that elsewhere (mainly, at that stage, in the United States) a new subfield was emerging that I would eventually become part of. Today it is generally known as “language and gender studies” (or, increasingly, “language, gender, and sexuality studies”). It has gradually acquired the institutional apparatus of a respectable field of scholarly inquiry: courses, textbooks, handbooks, a professional organization (the International Gender and Language Association, IGALA) that sponsors regular conferences, and a dedicated journal (*Gender and Language*). When it first emerged, however, during the peak years of the post-1968 feminist second wave, it was more like a grassroots initiative, or a series of them, reflecting the desire of many women at the time to bring their academic training to bear on questions of sexual politics.

---

**\*Corresponding author: Deborah Cameron**, Oxford University, Oxford, UK,  
E-mail: [deborah.cameron@worc.ox.ac.uk](mailto:deborah.cameron@worc.ox.ac.uk)

 Open Access. © 2020 Cameron, published by De Gruyter.  This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 Public License.

# 1 Women on the margins

An online history of the linguistics department at the University of California, Berkeley,<sup>1</sup> identifies 1972 as the year when one of the department's members, the linguist Robin Lakoff, "created the modern field of language and gender" with her essay "Language and Woman's Place" (though better known in its slightly later incarnation as a book, it was originally published in 1973 as an article in the journal *Language in Society*). In fact Lakoff was not a lone pioneer, but one of a number of scholars who took up similar questions in the early 1970s. Some were linguists – Sally McConnell-Ginet, whose PhD was in semantics, recalls that her own interest in language and gender began in 1973 when she was asked to teach a course for Cornell University's women's studies program – but others were based in departments of anthropology, speech communication (the journal *Women and Language*, now in its forty-first year of publication, continues to be run by communication scholars), English, psychology, and sociology.

This diversity was showcased in the collection *Language and Sex: Difference and Dominance*, edited by the sociologist Barrie Thorne and the psychologist Nancy Henley, which appeared in 1975. The volume's contents underline another key feature of much early work in the field: its concern to illuminate, through linguistic analysis, the day-to-day problems experienced by women in male-dominated societies. One of the guiding principles was, in the words of Lakoff (*ibid.*), that "linguistic imbalances are worthy of study because they bring into sharper focus real-world imbalances and inequalities. They are clues that some external situation needs changing." (p. 73). Whether their focus was the historical tendency for words denoting women to become pejorative, the cross-culturally widespread exclusion of women from the speech events and forums where power was exercised, or the patterns of interruption found in mixed-sex conversation, researchers aimed to raise consciousness about the extent to which everyday linguistic practices both reflected and reproduced structural sexual inequality.

It would take time for this enterprise to be accepted by the wider academic community. None of the literature I've mentioned featured in any course I took as a student between 1977 and 1983: I only discovered its existence when I read, for a discussion in my local women's group, Dale Spender's (1980) popular feminist polemic *Man Made Language*. Many senior academics – of both sexes, though in those days they were mostly men – made no secret of their disapproval of a field they considered trivial, unscientific, and politically

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://lx.berkeley.edu/about/history-berkeley-linguistics>.

partisan. In the mid-1980s, when a junior lecturer in Berlin invited me (also at the time a junior lecturer) to give a talk in her department, a couple of professors surprised us by showing up; it turned out, however, that they had only come to register a protest, by pointedly opening their newspapers the moment I began to speak.

## 2 Moving into the mainstream

Today the anecdote I've just told prompts incredulous laughter. Language and gender is mainstream: a popular offering in many undergraduate linguistics programs, and the subject of numerous doctoral dissertations. Publishing on it is no longer an obstacle to getting hired, or getting tenure. It has also become more internationalized, with active research communities in Asia, Africa, and Latin America as well as the older strongholds of North America, Europe, and Australasia. These are undoubtedly positive developments. But with them, arguably, has come something I find less positive: a retreat from the engagement with real-world sexual inequalities that was once seen as the field's *raison d'être*.

I started to think seriously about this in 2015, when the resurgence of grassroots feminist activism, particularly among young women, prompted me to start a blog addressed to feminists. I called it *Language: A Feminist Guide*<sup>2</sup>: the idea was that I would choose topics that feminists were currently talking about and try to shed fresh light on them using the concepts and findings of language and gender research. As I put this plan into practice, I found it striking how many of the topics that came up, in the news or in feminist conversations on social media, were twenty-first century iterations of problems that had first been discussed in the 1970s (though the younger readers I was targeting often did not know that). How do women get marginalized – interrupted, talked over, patronized, not listened to – in so many discussions? Why did criticism of Hillary Clinton's “shrill” voice figure so prominently in the 2016 presidential election campaign? What should feminists make of the taped conversation in which Donald Trump talked about “grabbing [women] by the pussy,” a remark he later dismissed as “locker room banter”? These may not be new questions, but for women they are still everyday issues. And when I went looking for recent research evidence about them, I began to notice how little of the relevant research had been done by language and gender researchers. It would be an overstatement to say that concerns about “real-world imbalances and

---

2 <https://debuk.wordpress.com/>.

inequalities” have disappeared from language and gender studies, but I think it would be fair to say that they no longer occupy such a central position. And the reasons for that, I believe, speak to more general trends in both sociolinguistics and feminist or gender theory since the 1990s.

### 3 The turn to identity

In her contribution to the first edition of *The Handbook of Language and Gender*, published in 2003, Susan U. Phillips made a pertinent comment from her perspective as an anthropologist who had been involved in the feminist theoretical debates of the 1970s and 1980s:

While a great deal was gained by the new feminist conceptualizing of women as intersections of various aspects of social identity, a great deal was lost too. The rhetorical force of the focus on the universal key problem of a very broad male power over women ... was obscured, and really has not regained center stage in feminist writing since. (p. 260)

As I read this observation, Phillips is alluding to two significant (and related) developments: the turn to *identity* as the central problematic for feminist theory, and the rejection of *essentialism*, equated not merely with belief in fixed essences, but with any attempt to universalize or even generalize about the situation of women. While both developments had complex intellectual and political trajectories, in retrospect it can (crudely) be said that the publication in 1990 of Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, which conceptualized gender as “performative,” a form of identity that was not given in advance, but constituted through repeated acts, marked a defining moment. This way of thinking about gender had a significant influence on the way research on language and gender developed during the 1990s, with a focus on documenting the diversity of ways in which gender was performed across cultures and contexts, and often an emphasis on the agency of the performers and the potential of their performances to subvert conventional gender norms.

These trends have continued in the twenty-first century. The turn to identity, and to Butlerian queer theory, enabled the study of language and sexuality, which had previously followed its own path, to become more integrated with language and gender studies. The interest in performances that troubled or subverted the sex/gender binary prompted more research on queer, trans, and other unconventionally gendered subjects. One consequence, as Phillips observes, is that the question this research tradition began with – how language and language-use reflected, and contributed to maintaining, male power over

women – no longer takes center stage. The decentering of both women and power in contemporary understandings of the field is evident in the statement that appears on the website of IGALA's journal *Gender and Language*, which explains that it publishes “research on femininities and masculinities, on heterosexual and queer identities, on gender at the level of individual performance or perception and on gender at the level of institutions and ideologies.”<sup>3</sup>

## 4 The persistence of patriarchy

It would be hard to disagree with Phillips that much has been gained – in terms of precision, nuance, and attention to the way different systems of dominance and subordination interact – from adopting new perspectives on gender. But increasingly I have come to share what I take to be her worry about throwing the feminist baby out with the essentialist bathwater. In any mature academic field there will be pressure to move on – find new subjects, ask new questions, adopt new theoretical ideas – because originality is one criterion for evaluating research. But in this case a problem with moving on (and I think this is much more obvious now than it was in the politically quiescent, “postfeminist” 1990s) is that patriarchal social relations remain deeply embedded in almost all societies. Many aspects of most women's situation have changed far less since the 1970s than we might like to think. Some, indeed, have arguably changed for the worse, and it is anger about this that has sparked a new wave of feminist militancy.

One of the lessons I have learned from blogging for a nonacademic feminist audience is that concerns academic researchers have moved on from, considering them too familiar or too basic to be of interest, may still be highly salient for many women. Those who respond to my blog (some of them activists and frontline workers in women's services, and a fair number located outside the Anglosphere) still experience language as an instrument of male power over women, used to silence, misrepresent, belittle, and harass them. What they want from experts is evidence and analysis that they can use to build resistance. If language and gender researchers want to support their efforts, there is a need both to revisit questions on which our evidence-base is now decades old, and to engage with new problems that arise from more recent cultural and political developments.

---

3 <https://igalaweb.wixsite.com/igala/journal>.

Some researchers are doing this. The discourse analyst Ruth Wodak (2015), for instance, devoted a chapter of her book about right-wing authoritarian populist discourse, *The Politics of Fear*, to the discourse of modern political misogyny; Rodrigo Borba is currently researching the uses of gendered language in the politics of repression and resistance in Brazil. Other researchers are using a range of methods to examine the increasingly widespread and serious problem of online misogyny (see Hardaker and McGlashan 2016; Jane 2017). In these projects (and some others I have no space to mention), language and gender researchers are responding, as their predecessors did, to the real-world problems of the moment; but there is far more that could, and I hope will, be done in future.

## References

- Hardaker, Claire & Mark McGlashan. 2016. Real men don't hate women': Twitter rape threats and group identity. *Journal of Pragmatics* 91. 80–93.
- Jane, Emma. 2017. *Misogyny online: A short (and Brutish) history*. London: Sage.
- Lakoff, Robin. 1973. Language and woman's place. *Language and Society* 2(1). 45–80.
- McConnell-Ginet, Sally. 2011. *Gender, sexuality and meaning: Linguistic practice and politics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Phillips, Susan U. 2003. The power of gender ideologies in discourse. In Janet Holmes & Miriam Meyerhoff (eds.), *The handbook of language and gender*, 252–276. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Spender, Dale. 1980. *Man made language*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Thorne, Barrie & Nancy Henley (eds.). 1975. *Language and sex: Difference and dominance*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Wodak, Ruth. 2015. *The politics of fear: What right-wing populist discourses mean*. London: Sage.

---

**Article note:** This essay was originally published in *Items: Insights from the Social Sciences*, a publication of the Social Science Research Council. Cameron, Deborah. “Language and Gender: Mainstreaming and the Persistence of Patriarchy.” In “Sociolinguistic Frontiers.” Series, *Items: Insights from the Social Sciences*. <https://items.ssrc.org/sociolinguistic-frontiers/language-and-gender-mainstreaming-and-the-persistence-of-patriarchy/>. Reprinted with permission.