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## GENDER STUDIES: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The given article reviews the main theories of the study of gender and discourse. Three points of agreement of the theories analyzed are singled out. Gender duality and performativity are defined as the most widely debated issues. The functional and constructivist approaches to gender differences are revealed.

Key words: Female Deficit Theory, Difference / Two Cultures Theory, Muted Group Theory, Cross-Cultural Communication Theory, Dominance / Social Power Theory, Psychological Difference Theory, Gender and Discourse Interactive Theory.

В статье рассматриваются основные теории гендерной лингвистики, выделяются точки их соприкосновения и различия в подходах к трактовке гендера.

Ключевые слова: теория речевого дефицита, теория двух культур, теория *приглушенных голосов*, теория межкультурной коммуникации, теория гендерной доминантности, теория психологических различий, теория взаимодействия гендера и дискурса.

The study of discourse and gender is an interdisciplinary endeavor shared by scholars in linguistics, anthropology, speech communication, social psychology, education, literature, and other disciplines. Many researchers have been concerned primarily with documenting gender-related patterns of language use, but the field has also included many for whom the study of language is a lens through which to view social and political aspects of gender relations. Tensions between these two perspectives arose in early research and continue today [13, 3]. Regardless of the vantage point from which research emanates, the study of gender and discourse not only provides a descriptive account of male/female discourse but also reveals how language functions as a symbolic resource to create and manage personal, social, and cultural meanings and identities.

The year 1975 was a key one in launching the field of language and gender. That year saw the publication of three books that proved pivotal: Robin Lakoff's *Language and Woman's Place* (the first part appeared in *Language and Society* in 1973), Mary Ritchie Key's *Male/Female Language*, and Barrie Thorne and Nancy

Henley's edited volume *Language and Sex: Difference and Dominance*.

These pioneering works emerged during the feminist movement of the 1970s, as scholars began to question both the identification of male norms as human norms, and the biological determination of women's and men's behavior. A conceptual split was posited between biological *sex* and sociocultural constructs of *gender*. Early language and gender research tended to focus on (1) documenting empirical differences between women's and men's speech, especially in cross-sex interaction; (2) describing women's speech in particular; and, for many, (3) identifying the role of language in creating and maintaining social inequality between women and men.

The study of language and gender continues to stimulate research and debate across the social sciences, linguistics and beyond. Answers to the question *do and why do men and women talk differently* were thought within several theoretical frameworks.

**Female Deficit Theory** (Lakoff). Women's speech style is inferior to men. A primary consequence of female deficit theory is the expansion of notions of male normativeness. The focus on female difference emphasizes the underlying assumption that the female is deviant, while the man is "normal" and speaks "the language".

Lakoff makes "an attempt to provide diagnostic evidence from language use for one type of inequity that has been claimed to exist in our society: that between the roles of men and women" [10: 11]. She posits a cycle that begins with the unequal role of women and men in society, resulting in differential gender socialization by which girls learn to use a "nonforceful style" because unassertiveness is a social norm of womanhood, given men's role in establishing norms. The use of women's language, in turn, denies women access to power, and reinforces social inequality.

Lakoff identified the linguistic forms by which women's language weakens or mitigates the force of an utterance: "weaker" expletives (*oh, dear* versus *damn*); "trivializing" adjectives (*divine* versus *great*); tag questions used to express speakers' opinions (*The way prices are rising is horrendous, isn't it?*); rising intonation in declaratives (as seen in the second part of the sequence, *"What's for dinner? Roast*

*beef?*"); and mitigated requests (“*Would you please close the door?*” versus “*Close the door.*”) [10].

Close to the previous one is **the Muted Group Theory** (Arderner and Kramarae). Many theorists and researchers have written about the ways that dominant groups of a social hierarchy (e.g. men) largely determine the dominant communication system of the society, and about the ways subordinate groups (e.g. women) are silenced and made inarticulate in the language. This theory argues that women’s voices are less heard than men’s in part because they are trying to express women’s experiences that are rarely given attention and they are trying to express them in a language system not designed for their interests and concerns; hence their language may at times seem unfathomable to men.

**Difference, or Two Cultures Theory** (West, Zimmerman, Maltz and Borker): women and men occupy different subcultures, and so develop different, but equally valid, communication styles. Men and women have different conceptions of friendly conversation, different rules for engaging in it, and different rules of interpreting it. Maltz and Borker discuss six areas “in which men and women probably possess different conversational rules, so that miscommunication is likely to occur” [11: 198]:

1) Minimal response. A minimal response is something like *uh-huh* or *mm-hmm*, given in response to another’s talk. Women’s meaning by the positive minimal response is said to be something like *continue, I’m listening*, while men’s is said to be something like *I agree, I follow you*.

2) The meaning of questions. Women use questions for conversational maintenance; men tend to use them as requests for information.

3) The linking of one’s utterance to the previous utterance. Women tend to make this link explicit, but for men no such rule seems to exist, or they explicitly ignore it.

4) The interpretation of verbal aggressiveness. Women see verbal aggressiveness as personally directed and as negative. For men, it helps to organize conversational flow.

5) Topic flow and shift. In women’s conversations, topics are developed and

expanded, and topic shifts are gradual. But men tend to stay on a topic as narrowly defined, and then to make an abrupt topic shift.

6) Problem sharing and advice giving. Women tend to discuss and share their problems, to reassure one another and listen mutually. Men, however, interpret the introduction of a problem as a request for a solution, and they tend to act as experts and offer advice rather than sympathize or share their own problems.

**Cross-Cultural Communication Theory** (Tannen). The publication of *You Just Don't Understand* (Tannen) in 1990 can be seen as ushering in the next phase of discourse and gender research. This book combined a range of scholarly work with everyday conversational examples to illustrate the hypothesis that conversations between women and men could be understood, metaphorically, as cross-cultural communication.

Combining the cross-cultural perspective of Gumperz, the interactional principles of Goffman, Lakoff's framework of gender-related communicative style, and her own work on conversational style, Tannen posited that gender-related patterns of discourse form a coherent web that is motivated by women's and men's understanding of social relationships [15]. Building on Maltz and Borker's reinterpretation of the research on children's interaction, she concluded that patterns of interaction that had been found to characterize women's and men's speech could be understood as serving their different conversational goals: whereas all speakers must find a balance between seeking connection and negotiating relative status, conversational rituals learned by girls and maintained by women tend to focus more on the connection dimension, whereas rituals learned by boys and maintained by men tend to focus more on the status dimension.

**Dominance, or Social Power Theory** (Fishman, Spender and West, Zimmerman, West): patriarchy is realized at the micro-level of interaction. Men's conversational dominance parallels their social political dominance, men's speech being a vehicle for male's displays of power.

Arguments based on social power are crucial to an understanding of female/male communication and its problems—both social power (a) regarding

dominance display correlating with sex hierarchy, and social power (b) regarding dominance in communication styles to which the genders are differently socialized.

Zimmerman and West found that men interrupted women more than the reverse in thirty-one dyadic conversations tape-recorded in private residences as well as in coffee shops, drug stores and other public places in a university community. The authors concluded that “just as male dominance is exhibited through male control of macro-institutions in society, it is also exhibited through control of at least a part of one micro-institution” [16]. Their conclusion confirms the 1970s feminist slogan, “the personal is political”, by positing that asymmetries in everyday conversational practices reflect and reproduce asymmetries found in the wider social environment.

**Psychological Difference Theories** (Irigaray and Cixous). They argue the importance of women’s different biology, distinctive sexual differences that create a different unconscious from that of men and that language is a medium that places humans in culture and the potential source of new female discourses to resist conventional androcentric culture and language. These approaches focus on commonalities of psychosexual differences rather than on historical and material factors of women’s lives.

**Gender and Discourse Interactive Theory** (Kotthoff, McConnel-Ginet, Eckert, Wodak) as a major approach to explaining “sex differences” in talk, is one that takes the context of interaction as a starting point [9, 5].

Gender is accomplished *in* discourse. Womanly or manly behavior is not dictated by biology, but rather is socially constructed. And a fundamental domain in which gender is constructed is language use. Social constructions of gender are not neutral, however; they are implicated in the institutionalized power relations of societies. Research on language and gender has grown alongside the broad field of discourse analysis. Since the late 1960s and early 1970s, researchers in both fields have recognized the central place of language in the organization of social action. Language does not merely reflect a pre-existing sexist world; instead, it actively constructs gender asymmetries within specific sociohistorical contexts.

Discourse analysts in general recognize that discourse is always embedded in a

particular social context. For some scholars, this may mean studying society's mode of social stratification in relation to the language practices of its members. With regard to gender, this means addressing the relationship between gender inequality and the language practices of a society. Some researchers focus on the social and economic contexts that are relevant to generating texts and talk.

Dorothy Smith notes that the discourse of femininity in Western women's magazines and television shows necessarily puts girls and women in the position of consumers, since the fashion, cosmetics and publishing industries speak to women in this position. Smith argues that the discourse of femininity in these media not only is embedded in economic and social relations, but also constitutes "a set of relations", which arise in "local historical settings" [14]. Other studies examine the social construction of gender in the content of texts themselves.

Ethnographic work influenced by Goffman [6] explores gender and discourse as an organizing component of social interaction. Drawing on Goffman's concept of face, Brown (1980) examined politeness phenomena in a Mayan community. She found that Tenejapan women used more speech particles to strengthen or weaken an utterance, as well as strategies that were qualitatively more polite than those used by men. For example, women tended to use irony and rhetorical questions in place of direct criticism (*Just why would you know how to sew? implying Of course you wouldn't*), which both de-emphasized negative messages and emphasized in-group solidarity. In addition (as Lakoff predicted), although both women and men used hedging particles in cases of genuine doubt, only women used them to hedge the expression of their own feelings (*I just really am sad then because of it, perhaps*). In contrast, Brown claimed, the men's communicative style was characterized by a lack of attention to face, and the presence of such features as sex-related joking and a "preaching/declaiming style" [6: 330].

Goffman's influence is also seen in the pioneering ethnographic work of Goodwin [7], based on fieldwork with African-American children in an urban neighborhood. Goodwin found that girls and boys in same-sex play groups created different social organizations through the directive-response sequences they used

while coordinating task activities: the boys created hierarchical structures, whereas the girls created more egalitarian structures. For example, the boys negotiated status by giving and resisting direct directives (*Gimme the pliers!*), whereas the girls constructed joint activities by phrasing directives as suggestions rather than commands (*Let's go around Subs and Suds*). Goodwin points out that the girls can and do use the forms found in boys' play in other contexts (for example, when taking the role of mother in playing "house"), emphasizing that gender-related variations in language use are context-sensitive.

As our understanding of the relationship between language and gender has progressed, researchers have arrived at many similar conclusions, although these similarities frequently go unrecognized or the most widely debated issues have emerged. Points of agreement include (1) the social construction of gender, (2) the indirect relationship between gender and discourse, (3) gendered discourse as a resource, and (4) gendered discourse as a constraint. The most widely debated issues are gender duality and performativity.

A social constructivist paradigm has prevailed in gender and discourse research. That is, scholars agree that the "meaning" of gender is culturally mediated, and gendered identities are interactionally achieved, in this sense, the field has come full circle from Goffman's pioneering work to the currently fashionable performative approach commonly credited to feminist theorist Judith Butler [2]. Hall [8], for example, discuss performativity gender and language research; Kotthof and Wodak [9] argue in favor of the latter.

That is, ways of speaking are not identified with every individual man or woman but rather are associated with the class of women or the class of men in a given society. By talking in ways that are associated with one or the other sex class, individuals signal their alignment with that sex class. A similar theoretical perspective is provided by Ochs, who posits that ways of speaking are associated with stances that are in turn associated with women or men in a given culture, thus, ways of speaking "index gender" [12].

**A functional approach to gender differences** contends that the same

linguistic form, such as tag question, may serve a variety of functions, depending on the context of its use: to whom one is speaking, with what kind of intonation, the formality of the speech context and the type of discourse (for example, a discussion, argument or personal narrative) involved.

Deborah Cameron takes Holmes's functional approach one step further, contrasting distributions of women's and men's tag questions across different conversational roles and statuses.

This approach rests on stereotyped and culturally specified assumptions about the family as the primary unit of social stratification including the notion that women's status comes primarily from the husbands' or fathers' occupations [4]. It demonstrates that differing economic conditions can produce dramatic differences among women with respect to the genetic pattern.

**The constructivist approach** entails a distinction between expectations or ideology guides and actual discursive practices. In other words, "gendered speaking styles exist independently of the speaker" [1:15]. If gendered discourse strategies are a resource, they are simultaneously a constraint. Both views underlie Tannen's framing approach by which a researcher asks, first, what alignments each speaker is establishing in relation to interlocutors and to the subject of talk or task at hand; second, how these alignments balance the needs for both status and connection; and, third, how linguistic strategies are functioning to create those alignments. Only then should one ask how these language patterns are linked to gender.

The notion of gendered discourse as a constraint also underlies Eckert and McConnell-Ginet's influential exhortation that language and gender researchers examine women's and men's language use in *communities of practice*: groups of people who "come together around mutual engagement in some common endeavor" [5:92].

The conception of gendered discourse as a resource accounts for diversity in speaking styles: many women *and* men do not speak in ways associated with their sex; they use language patterns associated with the other sex; there is variation within as well as between sex groups; gender interacts with other socially constructed



categories, such as race and social class; individuals create multiple - and sometimes contradictory versions of femininity and masculinity; and women and men may transgress, subvert, and challenge, as well as reproduce, societal norms.

The conception of gendered discourse as a constraint accounts for the stubborn reality that if women and men do not speak in ways associated with their sex, they are likely to be perceived as speaking and behaving like the other sex—and to be negatively evaluated. This is demonstrated at length by Tannen for women and men in positions of authority in the workplace.

A movement toward the study of language within specific situated activities reflects the importance of culturally defined meanings both of linguistic strategies and of gender.

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