Language and Gender

Sex: the biological difference between men and women

Gender: the behavioural characteristics brought about by a socialisation process and cultural influences

Language

• Assumptions about men and women are embedded in our language
• Derogatory and endearing terms reinforce stereotypical ideas about how men and women should behave

Language and Gender

JANET HOLMES: LANGUAGE DISCRIMINATION
- Metaphors to describe women are largely derogatory
- Animal imagery for women is negative (sweet but helpless), whilst for men it is positive (predatory, sexual prowess)
  - Saccharine food imagery is common for women, e.g. sweetie
  - Less complimentary terms are also reserved for women, e.g. tart

NEUTRAL OR AFFECTIONATE TERMS ACQUIRE NEGATIVE CONNOTATIONS AND REFER TO WOMEN AS SEXUAL OBJECTS

• Feminine inanimate - female pronouns referring to objects suggest male ownership

The Stereotypes

FEMALE STEREOTYPES LIMIT THE POTENTIAL OF WOMEN
MALE STEREOTYPES LIMIT THE POTENTIAL OF MEN

• These double standards show inequality
• Even if the connotations of words change, their denotations do not
Binary Opposition

• Society places masculinity and femininity in binary opposition
• These are heterosexual constructs
• Idea of ‘battle of the sexes’ - men and women on opposite sides

Media

Men: dominant, strong, active, independent, intellectual and authoritative

Women: submissive, passive, focus on physical beauty and sexuality and emotional; they are often defined through their relationships with men

Black, lesbian and older women are still underrepresented in the media

Today

• There is more equality
• Men still more likely to be shown having an occupation, away from home and as authorities
• Female protagonists in films are often objectified, e.g. Lara Croft

Verb processes

Material: actions or events - dynamic, e.g. push
Relational: states of being/identification - stative, e.g. seem
Mental: perception, thought or speech - stative, e.g. believe

• In female narratives there tend to be fewer verbs, which are mostly stative; this presents them as weaker participants
• In male narratives there tend to be more verbs, which are generally dynamic; this presents them as controlling
• This is clear in adverts and fiction and packaging

Linguistic Evidence of sexism

• Marked forms: form of a word that stands out as deviant from the norm, e.g. lionness, priestess
• Overt marking: marking a word through a modifier or affix, e.g. lady doctor, priestess, male nurse
• The male and female terms are often asymmetrical, as they have different connotations, e.g. bachelor/spinster
These suggest that male roles are more important as they are the standard.

Linguists like Margaret Doyle have promoted gender-neutral terms like ‘school teacher’ and ‘seducer’ instead of ‘schoolmaster’ and ‘seductress’.

**Masculine and feminine pronouns**

- **Exclusive language** is when the male pronoun is applied to an unspecified individual (inclusive language is the opposite).

- ‘Man’ and ‘mankind’ are used to refer generically to the human race.
- Reinforces male superiority.
- ‘Humankind’ is now often used as an alternative.

**Ms** Male and female titles are asymmetrical

- Mrs/Miss convey marital status.
- Mr does not.
- Mrs is followed by husband’s surname.
- Ms does however suggest widowhood, divorce or feminism.

Each student must hand his paper to an invigilator at the end of the exam.

18th Century grammarians said that ‘they’ was an incorrect pronoun for the singular.

**Order of precedence**

- Placing the male word first assumes men have higher status.

Treating people differently because of their gender.
Women have different lexicon
• Didn’t do any research - more theoretical than empirical

Women
- Speak more
- Talk about relationships and domestic issues
- Emotionally literate
- Empty adjectives
- Politeness, e.g. apologies and hedges
- Standard English
- Gossip

Men
- Bottle up emotions
- Talk about objects and facts, e.g. computers
- Speak more in courtship and public
- Vulgar language and slang
- Functional
- Banter/mocking derogation

Our experiment results:
• Women and men use an equal number of technical expressions
• Hesitation and uncertainty are equally noticeable in male and female speech
• Women and men both use expletives, however different types
• Women and men are equally precise at giving directions
• Men have more words for certain colours than women, e.g. pink

Remember: this is a theoretical idea, and not a proven concept
Sometimes called ‘folklinguistics’ - mythological
1. Deficit Model: 1920s and 30s
   - Men’s speech is standard
   - Women’s speech falls short of this standard, so is weak
   - Sometimes argued that men are more educated
   - Dale Spender said that language itself reinforces the patriarchal order that establishes male as the norm

   Otto Jespersen (1922) said: “there is a danger of the language becoming vague and insipid if we are to content ourselves with women’s expressions”

2. Dominance Model: 1960s and 70s
   - Robin Lakoff
   - Men have traditionally more power in our patriarchal society
   - Women are subservient
   - This causes language differences

3. Difference Model: 1980s
   - Deborah Tannen
   - Men and women have different aims in conversations
   - Are raised with different social expectations
   - “male-female conversation is cross-cultural communication”
   - There are differences, but neither is superior
   - Men compete, women cooperate
   - Status vs support; independence vs intimacy; advice vs understanding; information vs feelings; orders vs proposals; conflict vs compromise

4. Diversity Model
   - Deborah Cameron
   - Gender is one of many influencing factors on language
   - There could be more intra- than inter-gender differences
   - If you look for differences you will find them
   - Power plays a greater role
   - Women are generally told to accommodate male preferences

Students need to focus on aspects contradicting genderlect claims, not always those supporting the dominance or difference models - data sometimes challenges a theory

Geoffrey Beattie said some interruptions reflect interest and involvement, not dominance

An overlap becomes an interruption when there is asymmetry, as the speaker gives way
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Linguist</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trudgill</td>
<td>1972</td>
<td><em>Men are more likely than women to use non-standard forms</em>&lt;br&gt;</td>
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<td></td>
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<td><em>Men seek covert prestige, women seek overt prestige</em></td>
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<td>Zimmerman and West</td>
<td>1975</td>
<td><em>There is no significant difference in interruptions in single-sex conversations</em>&lt;br&gt;46/48 interruptions in mixed-sex interruptions were men interrupting women&lt;br&gt;Silences were on average 1.96 seconds longer in mixed-sex conversations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Milroys</td>
<td>1978</td>
<td><em>Men are more likely to use non-standard forms than women</em>&lt;br&gt;</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>Male unemployment meant more women in working roles. More women then picked up non-standard forms</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>O’Barr and Atkins</td>
<td>1980</td>
<td><em>150 hours of court proceedings</em>&lt;br&gt;<em>Speakers of low status used Lakoff’s ‘female’ features</em>&lt;br&gt;<em>They renamed this powerless language</em></td>
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<td>Fishman</td>
<td>1980</td>
<td><em>Women do ‘interactional shitwork’ - backchannel support</em>&lt;br&gt;</td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>Women work to keep conversations going, supporting male power</em></td>
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<td><em>Women ask 3 times as many questions as men</em></td>
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<td>Jones</td>
<td>1980</td>
<td><em>Categorised gossip into house talk (domestic tasks), scandal (judging others), bitch (bemoaning subordination) and chatting</em></td>
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<td>Cheshire</td>
<td>1882</td>
<td><em>Her Reading study showed that young boys use more non-standard grammar than their female counterparts</em></td>
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<td>Holmes</td>
<td>1984</td>
<td><em>Modal tags benefit the speaker through seeking clarification - more men use these</em>&lt;br&gt;<em>Affective tags benefit the hearer through reducing JTA and drawing the addressee into the conversation - more women use these</em>&lt;br&gt;<em>Women apologise more, whilst men do to save face</em></td>
</tr>
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<td>Woods</td>
<td>1989</td>
<td><em>In three-way asymmetrical conversations between business colleagues, the male speakers controlled the floor more regardless of their occupational status</em>&lt;br&gt;<em>Women used supportive interactional strategies even to subordinates</em></td>
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| DeFrancisco      | 1998 | - Women introduce more topics and work harder to maintain conversation, but were less successful  
                   |      | - 70% of delayed responses and 68% of 'no responses' were from men - they controlled the discourse  
                   |      | - Challenged folklinguistic assumption that more talk means dominance |
| Coates           | 1998 | - Women use features expressing epistemic modality  
                   |      | - "women use them to mitigate the force of an utterance in order to respect the addressee's face needs"  
                   |      | - Female conversations relate more to sensitive topics  
                   |      | - Women topic shifts are related, whereas men jump from one topic to a random other  
                   |      | - Men hold the floor for a long time, taking it in turns to "be the expert"  
                   |      | - "Exchanges of insults are a common part of male sub-culture"  
                   |      | - Scarcity of overlapping in male talk  
                   |      | - Women use more back channelling  
                   |      | - Women use questions to involve others |
| Julie Blake      | 2006 | - Her students did studies  
                   |      | - Women swear twice as much in single-sex conversations (8%)  
                   |      | - Men have more romantic, exotic terms for colours whilst women use domestic descriptions  
                   |      | - In domestic arguments, women were responsible for 66% of interruptions  
                   |      | - Young people use marked occupational terms as part of the feminist backlash  
                   |      | - Middle aged people use the most unmarked terms  
                   |      | - Older people use marked terms |
How might an audience respond to gender stereotypes in literature?

1) **Preferred reading**: accept unthinkingly

2) **Oppositional reading**: reject and challenge

3) **Negotiated reading**: be aware and conscious but accept the pleasure gained by reading

**Answering questions on the representation of gender in a text**

**Language features** → **Connotations/semantics/effects** → **Stereotyping** → **Effect on audience**

**What do the stereotypes do?**
- They place men and women in binary opposition
- They are limiting
- They don’t reflect the full picture
- Perpetuate folklinguistic assumptions
- Reflect fairy tale discourse

**Different perspectives**
- **Linguistic determinism**: Representations of gender create stereotypes
- **Linguistic reflectionism**: Representations of gender reflect stereotypes

**To PROMULGATE**: to promote/make known