1.1 Introduction: the gender debate

In the twentieth century, linguists began to become interested in gender as a language variable. In particular, they were fascinated by whether men and women used language in different ways. Of course, today, more recent scrutiny of what 'gender' actually means has reignited the debate again.

Three Ds mark the twentieth-century gender debate – deficit, dominance and difference. What they have in common is that they all define and judge women's language against that used by men, something that we'll be exploring in more detail through this chapter. However, more recently, the focus has shifted to how society influences the language we use and whether we actually 'perform' our gender by demonstrating features and ways of speaking associated with being a woman or a man. These debates have altered as society and its attitudes have changed, with movements such as feminism and changing attitudes towards equality affecting not only gender but sexuality, disability, and race, amongst others.

KEY TERMS

Variable: a contextual factor that can influence speech and writing

Deficit theory: the belief that the language used by women is inferior to that used by men

Dominance theory of language: the belief that the language differences between men and women can be explained by the hierarchical dominance of men in society

Difference theory of language: the belief that men and women have innate differences in the style and function of their speech and writing

Before we start exploring the various approaches taken to explaining gender and language use, we need to try to define the concept of gender itself. This is important as it informs our collective ways of thinking about gender. Firstly, gender can be identified as a biologically determined difference: we are born either male or female. Secondly, we can think of it as a socially shaped difference from birth, through such things as dress, toys and the language used to present gender to us.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Feminism and women's rights

The history of language and gender study is also linked to the social and political history of feminism and changing attitudes to women, especially in the twentieth century. It's therefore a good idea for you to start by gaining a broader understanding of the social, historical and political contexts. Research these topic areas (either individually or in groups):

- a chronological summary of these movements: first-wave feminism, second-wave feminism and post-modern feminism
- legal changes to women's rights (political, employment, sexual)
- social changes (work, occupation and domestic roles)

You could present your findings in a slide format or simply make your own notes.

KEY TERMS

First-wave feminism: the movement that focused on getting the right for women to vote, to have property rights and the right to an education

Second-wave feminism: the movement that focused on women's roles and rights within the workplace and in reproductive, sexuality and family issues

Post-modern feminism: the movement that covers different views and beliefs about women's rights and sees women as individuals as well as part of a group

1.2 The 'deficit' approach

In this approach, male language is seen as the norm and women's language is viewed as deficient to men's. This was the view of the earliest researchers into gender, based on:

1 Identifying women's language as different to that of men

2 Judging women's language as inferior.

1.2.1 Otto Jespersen and an early study into women's language

In 1922, Danish linguist Otto Jespersen published *Language: Its nature, Development and Origin*. This included a chapter titled 'The Woman' where he explored some of his ideas about women's language – interestingly, there was no corresponding chapter for men, showing his view that perhaps men's language was the norm and so did not need special discussion. Jespersen offered observations about women's conversational strategies, arguing that women much more often than men break off without finishing their sentences, because they start talking without having thought out what they are going to say.

He also argued that women's language could simply be typified as 'lively chatter' since their roles consisted of:

> 'the care of the children, cooking, brewing, baking, sewing, washing etc, things that for the most part demanded no deep thought'. (Jespersen 1922)

One of the criticisms of Jespersen's work was that it was observational, and not based on detailed evidence. Yet it could be argued that one positive from his ideas was that gender was being investigated and emphasis was being placed on women as worthy of linguistic study. Jespersen was undertaking a form of ethnographic research (something that we'll be looking at later in Chapter 5 as a research method), as he was basing his findings on participant observation and in natural settings, and this allowed him to see language use in practice. But Jespersen's work is what would be called folk linguistics today, meaning that many of his points represent basic and flawed ideas about women's language that seem more anecdotal than based on valid and reliable research methods.

KEY TERMS

Ethnographic research: the systematic study of groups of people and cultures carried out by close observation

Folk linguistics: the opinions and beliefs that non-linguists hold about language use

ACTIVITY 1.1

Exploring folk linguistics

To test out some common perceptions in folk linguistics, ask family and friends what they think about the following statements:

- Women talk more than men.
- Women gossip more than men.
- Women ask more questions than men.
- Women are better listeners than men.
- Women will talk about anything but men are more economical with words.

Keeping a record of their responses will introduce you to some of the strategies that you can use to generate data when investigating a particular language topic. (We are going to explore this in more detail in Chapter 5, along with the ethical considerations that you need to be mindful of.) Here are some options:

- You could ask people to write down their own responses.
- You could record them (with their permission, of course) and transcribe their responses.
- Finally, you could interview them and note down their responses yourself.
- Whatever method you use, collate their responses and see if there is a pattern in the beliefs expressed. There might be some overall similarities or, if you have obtained information on the age and gender of the respondents, you might be able to identify some differences. You should also consider the evidence that your respondents offer for these beliefs. What anecdotal evidence do they offer for believing that these are 'truthful' statements?

1.2.2 Robin Lakoff and women's language

The observational approach started by Jespersen continued with the next wave of linguistic focus on gender, and specifically women's language, with Robin Lakoff's *Language and Woman's Place* published in 1975. Lakoff made it clear that she was looking at a very specific group of women – American, white, middle class and educated – but her findings were interpreted as relating to all women.

Lakoff labelled women's spoken language in a way that implied an almost complete dissimilarity from men's language, and characterised it as having linguistic features that highlighted women's uncertainty and powerlessness. Even the linguistic labels Lakoff used appeared to confirm that women's language was inferior to men's. For example, she claimed that women used 'empty' adjectives, a questioning intonation on statements and hedges in their spoken interactions. These lexical and prosodic choices are all seen, to an extent, as undermining the content of the talk and foregrounding women's lack of authority.

ACTIVITY 1.2

Revisiting Lakoff's colour study

You can use one of Lakoff's findings to conduct an experiment, testing her interesting assumption that men and women have different lexicons. Lakoff concluded that women had a much more extensive and subtle vocabulary for colours than men. She deduced that whereas men might identify a colour shade as simply blue, purple or green, women were likely to make finer distinctions. To exemplify this, according to Lakoff when asking a woman to label something that is purple in colour, women might label particular shades as 'lavender', 'lilac', 'mauve', 'violet' or 'indigo'.

- Take a colour chart and cut out some of the range of options for the colours blue, green and purple.
- Ask five males and five females to describe the colour they can see. Either speak to each participant separately so that they cannot influence each other, or photocopy the colours onto a sheet of paper and ask them to write down the colour term that they would use to describe this beneath each one.

Can you find any evidence to support Lakoff's claims? Do you think that any other factors apart from gender might impact the kind of responses you got? (Lakoff suggested that sexuality might also impact the use of special lexicon, as her notion of men's colour identification was based on a heterosexual male.)

1.3 The variationist approach to gender study

One of Lakoff's claims was that in addition to being politer than men, women also used more standard forms of English. This was not new. Other well-known earlier studies by variational sociolinguists had found this pattern, most notably those undertaken by William Labov and Peter Trudgill. Interest in sociolinguistic variations evolved out of the study of dialectology rather than an interest in gender and combined some significant factors:

- A focus on how language varies and changes in particular communities of speakers
- Recognition that other social factors were relevant (age, gender and how much part of the community people were)
- An exploration of linguistic structures (such as phonology and grammar).

Labov's emphasis was on using reliable and ethical data generation methods – valuing these above just personal intuition – and creating corpora of speech recordings from a wide range of speakers that made his findings more valid.

KEY TERMS

Variational sociolinguistics: the study of the way that language changes in communities of speakers and the interaction between social factors and linguistic features

Dialectology: the study of accents and dialects

Corpora: a large collection of data usually stored electronically

One of his most famous studies was that of New York Department Stores (Labov 1966). In this he asked shop assistants in three different stores – Saks Fifth Avenue (an upmarket and expensive store), Macy's (a mid-priced store) and S. Klein (a cheap store) – the same questions in order to get them to say a particular sound – an 'r' sound in 'fourth floor'. Labov was investigating the 'r' sound that appears after a vowel (as in 'car') that New Yorkers would associate with a higher class of speaker. Although his studies were not primarily focused on women's language use, he concluded, like Lakoff, that women (of all social classes) are more likely to use the perceived correct term or the pronunciation with more social status attached to it. He also found that women often use hypercorrection (the over application of a perceived grammatical rule, for

example saying 'between you and I' instead of 'between you and me') and believed that women used this in order to gain what he named overt prestige, or respect from others for using the correct form.

In his 1972 investigation, Trudgill explored whether people from Norwich, a city in the East of England, pronounced the *-ing* suffix on verbs like 'walking' and 'going' (Trudgill 1972). His findings showed a marked difference between men's and women's use of the more 'correct' Standard English form. As women used the standard form more frequently in formal situations, despite using the non-standard form in their casual speech, he concluded that women saw the standard form as a way of signalling or gaining social status and, consequently, prestige. In his later work, Labov (2001: 293) coined the term gender paradox to describe how women prefer to use forms of language that seem to have more prestige, but stated that women also tend more than men to use creative, newer forms of language.

KEY TERMS

Hypercorrection: a pronunciation, word form or grammatical construction mistakenly perceived to be standard usage and substituted in a desire to be correct

Overt prestige: status gained by speakers from using a particular dialect or language

Standard English: a dialect of English considered 'correct' and 'normal', because it has distinctive and standardised features of spelling, vocabulary and syntax; it is the form of English usually used in formal writing

Gender paradox: the phenomenon that women use more prestigious standard forms of English than men but that they also lead language change by adopting new forms of everyday English

ACTIVITY 1.3

Testing men's and women's use of standard and non-standard forms

Both Labov's and Trudgill's research explored how sounds were produced by different speakers and the variables that affected these (class, age, gender, etc.). As you saw, Trudgill focused particularly on the pronunciation of the suffix *-ing*.

You can also investigate whether women and men seem to say *-ing* differently, either by pronouncing it with the 'g' or by omitting it and ending the word with 'n' (so it sounds more like *goin'*). Here are two research options for you:

- Use an internet search engine to find song lyrics by solo female and solo male artists. Highlight all the words that end in the 'n' sound. Listen to recordings of these songs and identify where the singers use the 'g' sound or end the word with the 'n' sound. Can you find a difference between the male and the female singers?
- Write a list of five words ending with the *-ing* suffix or a paragraph containing these. Ask women and men to read these out and record their responses, after you have their permission. Tally by gender the speakers who pronounce the 'g' or end with the 'n'. Is there any difference between the genders?

1.4 The 'dominance' approach

The dominance approach occurred against the historical and political backdrop of second-wave feminism, which had a central goal of removing gender inequality. This approach understands men as positioned above women because of their social and political power. From a language perspective, men were seen as using language as a means of reinforcing or maintaining their power in conversations, and women were viewed as asserting their lack of power through their language choices.

1.4.1 Testing the dominance approach

Numerous further studies in the 1970s and 1980s seemed to confirm Lakoff's ideas. Many researchers focused on recording same-sex and mixed-sex conversations, identifying dominance from the features Lakoff had already identified or finding other ones. One of the most famous of these was Don Zimmerman's and Candace West's (1975) college campus study, which found that men were responsible for 96 per cent of the interruptions in conversations occurring between men and women. Men's dominance seems from these to lie in their conversational management – i.e. speaking more, having longer turns and, in conversations with women, being interrupted less and interrupting more.

Dale Spender, in *Man Made Language* (1980), drew further attention to this verbal dominance by interpreting women's silence as a form of oppression. However, linguists also saw other types of language as asserting dominance, although perhaps more subtle than men interrupting women in conversation. Just as Lakoff saw asymmetry used in labels for men and women (for example, 'master'/'mistress'), Spender saw language as asserting male dominance in the

generic use of the male pronoun 'he' and the ultimate dominance of having an all-powerful God as male.

KEY TERM

Asymmetry: a power imbalance between speakers shown by the unequal way they address each other

Pamela Fishman, in her 1980 study of conversations between three American couples, drew similar conclusions to Lakoff. Fishman viewed the hard 'work' that women do in conversations as the result of their inferior social status – something she had already noted in earlier studies and called 'interactional shitwork' (Fishman 1977: 99–101). This focus on the styles of men and women in talk led to the next approach to studying gender.

1.5 The 'difference' approach

What began to emerge was a debate about whether male dominance was enough of an explanation or if there was indeed a difference between male and female language. What academics now began to debate was what might account for the difference. Was it a simple matter of biology or was it the result of social factors? So, research began to focus on exploring both men's and women's language and looking at their verbal behaviours and even the conversational topics that they chose.

1.5.1 Mars and Venus: the great divide

Deborah Tannen is one of the most influential academics whose work represented the difference view. She argued that male–female conversation could be viewed as a form of miscommunication where women were naturally inclined to be cooperative in conversation, and men more competitive.

Table 1.1: Pairs of differences between men and women

Men	Women
Status	Support
Advice	Understanding
Orders	Proposals
Conflict	Compromise
Independence	Intimacy
Information	Feelings

The title of her book, *You Just Don't Understand: Men and Women in Conversation* (Tannen 1990), highlighted this perceived difference through its title. Within it she established 'six contrasts', which was how she labelled pairs of differences between men and women, as shown in Table 1.1.

Tannen coined the term genderlect to describe the different language use of men and women. It's easy to see how these contrasts may have influenced the types of non-academic self-help relationship books that rely on emphasising these ideas of stereotypical differences. One of the most famous of these was John Gray's 1992 book, *Men are From Mars, Women are from Venus*. Gray used the names of different planets with their classical mythology connotations for the gods (Mars, the Roman god of war and Venus, the Roman god of love) to explore stereotypes.

KEY TERM

Genderlect: the particular language used by men and women according to their gender

1.6 The 'diversity' approach

More recently, sociolinguistics has moved away from the 'three Ds' of gender study (deficit, dominance and difference) to acknowledge instead the importance of individual differences amongst men and women, rather than simply pitting the genders against each other. One of the key research focuses has been on how people within groups use language, calling upon social network theory and the concept of communities of practice, and viewing gender as only one element of our identity. Both of these focus on the shared social nature of our interactions and explain how language behaviours can be affected by the groups that we belong to.

KEY TERMS

Social network theory: the study of how people in organisations and groups interact with each other

Communities of practice: a group of people who come together for the purpose of a shared activity

1.6.1 Gender and social networks

Links to the work of Labov and Trudgill can be seen in more recent studies that apply Lesley Milroy's social network theory (1980). In Milroy's theory, particular informal and formal relationships create what Milroy calls a 'web of ties' (2002: 550). Patterns of language use evolve as linguistic variation characterises the speech behaviour of groups. In 1982, Jenny Cheshire conducted a study into the use of non-standard linguistic forms used by a group of 25 mainly teenage girls and boys in Reading, England. Her participants were users of adventure playgrounds in the area which were regarded as trouble spots by the residents locally, as some of the children were frequent school truants. She was interested in male and female differences but also considered individual differences too.

Similar to earlier studies, Jenny Cheshire found that girls tended more than boys to alter their language to a prestige form when speaking to their teacher (Cheshire 1982). She argued that the key factor in some girls using more non-standard forms was the degree to which they felt affiliated to the local youth subculture of appearing tough. However, some more individual differences emerged. Of the 12 girls, a third did not associate themselves so much with the other girls and criticised their language and behaviours. Cheshire found that this group of 'good' girls used far fewer non-standard forms than the other girls – a striking 26 per cent compared to the 58 average of the rest of the girls.

1.6.2 Gender and communities of practice

Jean Lave's and Etienne Wenger's community of practice (CoP) model (1991) is a means of describing how people come together for a particular purpose to establish ways of doing things and ways of interacting to achieve their shared purpose. Wenger (1998) separates CoP into three crucial areas of mutual engagement, a joint negotiated enterprise and a shared repertoire. From a gender perspective, other researchers such as Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet (1992) took this notion of a CoP to explore how gender is produced and reproduced within these communities. In their discussion not only did they suggest that we all belong to multiple communities of practice but that our gender may also inform which groups we become members of. The CoP examples that they suggested perhaps reflected the time in which they were writing: they saw men as more traditionally being members of a football team and women as members of a dance-based fitness class. They also proposed that participation levels with the CoP might be impacted by the different roles and status given to women and men within the group, offering the military as an example where women's involvement may not be the same as men's.

KEY TERMS

Mutual engagement: members of a community of practice come together in a common negotiated activity

Joint negotiated enterprise: communities of practice share common goals and work together to achieve them

Shared repertoire: communities of practice share the same resources to communicate with each other and may have particular ways of doing or speaking

1.7 Gendered language: censorship or correction?

Another approach has been to recognise diversity through the language choices we make and value this through making conscious decisions to adopt a political correctness strategy and avoid sexist or discriminatory language. Deborah Cameron in her book *Verbal Hygiene* (Cameron 1995) coined this phrase to describe the political correctness movement that sought to 'clean up' language. She defended the sometimes criticised practice of using euphemisms for minority groups because she said that it allows people to understand that the language we use can have social consequences. Rather than viewing political correctness as another form of linguistic prescriptivism and censorship, she presented politically correct language as a means to challenge the idea that one group of people has an undisputed right to decree language over any other group.

KEY TERMS

Political correctness: refers to the belief that language should not be used in a discriminatory way

Euphemism: words or phrases that are substituted for more direct words or phrases in an attempt to make things easier to accept or less embarrassing

Prescriptivism: the notion that language should be fixed, prescribing a set standard of rules for language usage, with any shift away from these rules or standards being seen as incorrect

Deborah Cameron also addressed the issues that some aspects of language are sometimes considered preferable to others – whether it's for moral reasons or

move from domestic roles to the workplace from the 1970s onwards caused some problems. There were long-held stereotypes about the desirable feminine qualities of women's speech and the problem in the workplace, she identified was that women's language was seen as too feminine to be taken seriously. She accounted for this by the fact that through the decades and centuries before, women had not been socialised into speaking in public contexts.

Like Jespersen, she devoted a whole chapter to women. In 'The new Pygmalion: verbal hygiene for women' she surveyed some of the advice given to women as to how to be more successful in the workplace. Here, she used the myth of Pygmalion – and its dramatic presentation in George Bernard Shaw's play – to explore the ways that people seek to 'improve' women. (In the play, the main character Professor Higgins, who is a phonetician, bets that he can turn an ordinary London flower girl into a 'lady' by teaching her to speak "properly".) Even her chapter exploring attitudes to grammar deliberately called upon more prescriptive ideas of male firstness in the ordering of titles 'Mr Syntax and Mrs Grundy', something that we'll be exploring more in Chapter 2.

KEY TERM

Phonetician: a person who specialises in the study of sounds

1.8 The 'performance' approach

In the 1990s linguists took a different approach to gender study – that of social constructivism – and this has had a profound influence on ways of thinking about gender in contemporary linguistics. A social constructivist approach moves away from issues of inequality and language as a reflection of gender. Instead it sees gender as active, negotiated and sometimes self-positioned. In a sense it is concerned with a big picture, not of power and inequality, but with what is communicated by, to and about men and women, girls and boys; gender, from this viewpoint, is not a fixed identity but an interpreted identity and one that is socially constructed.

KEY TERM

Social constructivism: places the importance on social interaction as constructing identity and people coming together to form a shared construction of the world

1.8.1 The trouble with gender: performativity and social constructionism

Judith Butler's book *Gender Trouble* (Butler 1990) raises the argument of gender as a performance. She argues that we are constantly engaged in constructing gender. Here, and in her later work, Butler says that gender is something we *do* and is not what we *are*. The initial basis of her argument stemmed from speech act theory. John Austin (1962) and John Searle (1969) had recognised that certain speech acted as performatives as they brought something into being rather than describing something that existed already. In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler cited the statements such as those performed in a marriage service ('I now pronounce you man and wife') and the kind of statements that people make after a child is born (like 'it's a girl/boy') socially construct gender and start the process of a child being aware that it is being categorised as female or male (Butler 1993: 232).

Butler argues that language use is only one element of this. We have already seen from Robin Lakoff's earlier work that certain linguistic features are closely associated with women's language. This means that speakers could adopt specific language features as a kind of resource to perform being a woman, along with other resources such as clothing, ways of walking, and so on. By calling upon these verbal and non-verbal resources, people are performing being a man or being a woman, and this is a key to Butler's concept of performativity. According to Judith Butler, the ways that we present ourselves, and repeat these presentations, *constructs* our gender rather than *reflects* it.

KEY TERMS

Speech act theory: the study of how words can be used to carry out actions

Performatives: speech acts that explicitly perform an act, usually in a socially conventional situation such as a wedding ceremony, e.g. saying 'I do'.

Performativity: the ability to use speech and other communication methods to construct or perform an identity

You can see this shift from the view that language use *reflects* gender to the view that language use *constructs* gender by considering the difference between saying 'I speak like this because I am male or female' to 'I speak like this and because of this I come across as masculine or feminine'. In the first statement, the speaker is explaining that the language that they use is a result of their gender. In contrast, in the second statement the speaker is announcing that

looks at some situations which expressly call upon the 'performer' to adopt and present more stereotypical expressions of masculine and feminine traits. Butler uses the example of a professional drag queen, as the role calls explicitly upon the male performing to adopt or exaggerate 'female' language and physical markers of women's appearance such as dress and make-up. Butler sees these performances as subversive (upsetting a commonly held view of gender) because they query the ultimate belief in a link between biological sex and gender.

1.9 Recognising and celebrating diverse identities

It is interesting that in the context of the twenty-first century 'diversity' debate, Butler relies on a notion of gender as a binary (male/female), heterosexual model. We now live in a world where identity is not presented simply as binary opposites. There are new and evolving gender and sexual 'identity' labels. Additionally, there is the recognition that religious, ethnic and cultural identities may also affect the enacting or presentation of gender, and that even within the masculine and feminine binary, there are diversities within different masculinities and femininities. And, finally, there is the recognition that gendered language patterns and behaviours may be context-driven and localised. Overall, new directions in research have moved the study of gender away from Jespersen's simplistic model of a global difference between all men and all women.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Greetings cards

In any card shop – online or physical – there are cards deliberately aimed at male and female family members (aunt, uncle, etc.), age-related cards (for example, cards for children or key milestone cards), and cards for key events (births, weddings, etc.) or simply gender-related cards that are aimed at men and women separately.

Survey these and look at how these construct ideas about gender.

- What stereotypes are there of men and women?
- What topics are associated with men and women?
- How is gender reproduced in these cards through the images and pictures and through the slogans, jokes or sayings?

1.10 Conclusion

This chapter has given you the story of gender studies from the earliest approaches taken to very recent views, charting the changes of perspective and investigation methods. Many of these will be revisited as we consider in more depth specific aspects of gender and language, identity and representation. Additionally, some of the research methods that these linguists have used – observations, quantitative studies and transcriptions amongst them – are ones that we will return to in Chapter 5 to show the range of research methods available to you to carry out your own investigations into language and gender.

Wider reading

You can find out more about the concepts and ideas in this chapter by reading these books:

Butler, J. (2004) *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge.

Coates, J. and Cameron. D. (eds) (1988) *Women in their Speech Communities: New Perspectives on Language and Sex*. London: Longman.

Milroy, L. (1987) *Language and Social Networks* (Second edition). Oxford: Blackwell.