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Politeness, Power, and Women's Language: Rethinking Study in Language and Gender*

By Nina Eliasoph

Hundreds of empirical studies in the past several years have documented the existence of gender inequalities in language use. The studies have also generated puzzling anomalies. Sometimes women use particular linguistic features—qualifiers, for example—much more than men, and sometimes men use them more than women. Sometimes the researchers interpret these linguistic features as signs of powerlessness, especially if they are features of women's speech, and sometimes they see these as signs of power, especially if they are features of men's speech. By viewing these data from a theoretical perspective, perhaps I can suggest a new way of understanding these anomalous findings.

I would like to ground this research in two theoretical contexts. One perspective derives from the works of Erving Goffman (1961; 1979). For Goffman, power does not inhere in any particular action in itself. Rather, an act acquires meaning only as a "move" in a "game." Before addressing the "powerfulness" of any given language feature we should determine *within which linguistic game this move is being played.* My first set of questions, then, seeks to clarify what "powerful" language means: language moves that in one game command power may in another "game" appear feeble. Different games allow for different kinds of power; and some kinds of power might be more agreeable to women than to men.

The second theoretical perspective through which I view this research is the recent gender scholarship of Nancy Chodorow (1974; 1978), Carol Gilligan (1982), and others. This perspective could provide a way of seeing what the difference might be between women's and men's "games." I look through the lens of these "difference feminists" at the well-documented fact that men and women talk differently in same-sex groups. Previous research has hung all of these differences on the peg of women's assumed powerlessness. I suggest that at least some of the differences in men's and women's speech can be seen as *choices*, based on the genders' different orientations to personal separateness and attachment, individuation and

* Delighted appreciation to Arlie Hochschild and Paul Lichterman

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empathy, as the "difference feminists" describe. From this perspective, it seems clear that women and men would look for different things in their linguistic games. Whereas women might be more interested in emphasizing their connection to each other, men would be more interested in asserting their autonomy. For a related, though different, feminist approach to the issue of the genders' different socially determined predispositions, I refer to Dorothy Smith's work. Like the psychoanalytically based feminists, she also observes that women are more likely than men to see themselves as enmeshed in a context; men more likely to assert their separation from any particular context, more likely to believe they can find a point of view outside of themselves. For Smith, the difference comes from the different places women and men occupy in the division of labor. Women's work typically serves to anchor the more abstracted and decontextualized work of men in the realm of the concrete world, she says. While I have questions about some of her premises,[1] Smith's theoretical contribution is useful here insofar as it allows for a critique of the conventions of public speech, in its impersonality and pretense of universality. Her work makes explicit the link between the genders' different dispositions and the underpinnings of typical public, professional speech.

By grounding the research in the work of the "difference feminists," I hope to categorize different language situations in terms of their ability to accommodate typically female speech. Where the features of women's talk are seen as "powerless," perhaps we are in the presence of a context—a language "game"—skewed to accommodate and to give credence to male speech, since the ways men talk to each other and the ways women talk to each other are different. By looking at the kinds of language seen as appropriate for a given mixed-sex context, we can begin to understand the accessibility of that context to the different voices of men and women. That is, we can begin to see what kinds of barriers inhibit typical women's contributions in a given language game.

This theorizing should begin to lay the groundwork for another paper, which would uncover the various strategies women and men use to undermine whatever the official language of a context is and assert their own ways of speaking. Once I have determined the genders' different verbal predispositions, I can see how men and women mediate these predispositions in different contexts

Women and men have different ideas of how to talk in any "game," have different ideas of which games are fun to play, and have therefore devoted their practice time to different games. If managerial work in a bureaucracy requires a particularly male approach to language, for example, then bureaucracies are less accessible to women's voices than to men's. Yet the notion of

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bureaucracy, as Weber puts it, requires "a discharge of business according to calculable rules and 'without regard for persons'." (1946: 215) A focus on the "game" could show how the seemingly neutral bureaucracy systematically constructs barriers to women's typical speech, if the appropriate language games played in the bureaucracy are usually the ones men like to play. The notion that the games themselves are not gender neutral challenges the ideas put forth by such corporate feminists as Rosabeth Moss Kanter, who says:

> My examination of how forms of work organization, and the conceptions of roles and distribution of people within them, shape behavioral outcomes leave very few verifiable "sex differences" in behavior that are not better explained by roles and situations—and thus able to account for men's behavior, too. (1977: xiii)

I suggest that people come to such seemingly neutral institutional languages not as clean slates blankly waiting to be inscribed with the institution's linguistic rules, as Kanter would say, but rather as active and pre-socialized agents. It means a different thing for men than it means for women to play the "same" role, and even to follow the "same" linguistic rules.

Showing how official institutions like bureaucracies are not in fact as "neutral" and universally accessible as they pretend to be should begin to dispel the meritocratic myths which permeate our ideology of social mobility and success. In fact, this approach undermines the "status attainment" model of social theory, which measures individuals' ascents through the social hierarchy without looking at the class, gender, or race, as a whole. While a few women may "rise," our idea of which direction is "up" is still defined in a male way.

Discussing power the way this essay does takes the individual out of the center of the theory.[2] While the individual may benefit or suffer from changes in the language accepted in a context, any fundamental change must occur in the linguistic relations between groups of people rather than in the individual's adjustment to the given language. Any fundamental change would give a different group the power to determine what kind of language game is in play.

The fact that language situations are not gender neutral also calls into question some of the basic ideas of Habermas (1977; 1984) and his followers. For Habermas, undistorted communication is the key to democracy. An ideal speech situation would be one in which social actors could rationally debate their ideas in a public situation. While this idea remains appealing, more attention needs to be paid to the gender and class basis of any speech situation. The implicit rules governing a speech situation may systematically put certain groups at a disadvantage.

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Other scholars researching the reproduction of class (Bourdieu, 1977; 1984; Heath, 1983) have also focused on the role of language use in perpetuating inequality. Concentrating on schooling, Bourdieu shows that members of different classes come to school with different class cultures, different modes of expression, different *languages*. Once in school though, the elite class's particular mode of cultural expression wins out over the others; the non-elite students' cultural forms are not recognized by the educators, who do not breathe the same cultural air as their lower class students. The teachers know how to decipher only the expressions of their more elite students, while the cultural forms of the lower classes remain an uncharted territory for the school officials. Educators' devalorization of non-elite students' symbolic expression constitutes "symbolic domination." Even beyond the specific predilections of any one teacher, the elite forms are institutionalized as the "correct" ones. The dominant class's typical ways of dressing, eating, speaking, in short, their ways of symbolically structuring everyday life, always accrue more prestige, says Bourdieu. I hope to show that something similar happens between the *genders*.[3]

Exposing institutionalized linguistic bias is a first step toward changing it. Whether or not linguistic subversion is possible in all contexts is not as immediately relevant as is the conscious understanding that the rules are skewed in favor of certain categories of people. When players become aware of the game as a whole, they perhaps can resist collectively, rather than simply letting resistance erupt in a piecemeal, individual, untheorized way.

ARE POWER AND POLITENESS MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE?

Robin Lakoff's important 1975 treatise, *Language and Women's Place*, presented what she thought were the characteristics of women's speech as displays of powerlessness. Use of tag questions (e.g., they show powerlessness, *don't they*?), qualifiers (e.g., women's speech is *awfully* weak), excessive politeness, a specialized vocabulary (e.g., mauve, pinking shears), a propensity to issue requests rather than commands, and a host of other features marked, in her eyes, women's speech as the speech of an insecure, intimidated group. The powerless speech, in turn, made people treat women as if they really were powerless, whether they were or not. The first studies in the area of gender/power differences in language, then, investigated whether or not women really did speak in these supposed obviously powerless ways.

Their findings were entirely equivocal. For example, Thorne, Kramarae, and Henley discuss the use of tag questions in their essay "Language, Gender, and Society: Opening a Second Decade of Research" (1983):

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> Two studies—one of college students assigned to study groups (McMillan et al, 1977) and the other of heterosexual couples conversing at home (Fishman, 1980)—did find that women used more tag questions than men. However, Baumann (1976) found that in a classroom setting women and men used about the same number of tag questions. Lapadat and Seesagai (1977) found that in informal conversations men used twice as many tag questions as women; Johnson (1980) found in analyzing meetings of engineers and designers in a corporation, that the male leader used the majority of tag questions and DuBois and Crouch (1977) found men participants in a professional conference used 33 tag questions, while women used none. It is hard to draw conclusions from all of this, except that the initial claim was phrased too simply. (1983: 13)

There were, in most of these studies, drastic differences between women's and men's language, but not in all of the studies; and the drastic differences found were not the same ones in each study. *Whatever* distinguished women's talk from men's was interpreted as a sign of powerlessness. It would clearly be impossible, then, for a woman to talk differently from a man without the researcher's devaluing her speech. The swarms of "facts" which researchers had "found" were buzzing around with no theoretical nest but the one automatically provided by an unintentionally sexist ideology. The data collectors assumed that facts are discovered "out there," not generated (Kuhn, 1961; Feyerabend, 1975) in the nest of one's theory. Where no consciously articulated theory incubated and housed the "facts," the ideology of patriarchy slid in to do the job. "What makes women's language powerless?" the original theorists asked; not, "What kind of context lets women speak in a way comfortable for them?"

I am assuming that women's oppression lies in the complicated intersection of psychological and structural forces and plain discrimination. A simpler approach than this, first suggested by Lakoff and then absurdly simplified by pop sociologists trying to tell women how to succeed in business, could use a content analysis approach. These researchers could count the number of times a woman uses a particular kind of word or phrase and then say, as Candace West ironically puts it in an essay criticizing this approach, "Why Can't a Woman Be More Like a Man?" (1982) Pop sociologists like Betty Lehan Harragan (1977) advocated something like the widely propagated "dress for success" theory of the seventies, which claimed that if women dressed like men, they, too, could be executives. Harragan urges women to play the game like men: "Come on, come on! You're not 'playing house.' You're in a ball game... If an opposing player drops the ball, you pick it up and run." (1977: 138) Girls learn to be women by the games they play, games which leave "destructive" impressions, says Harragan, since they imply "that they are typical of

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real-world" situations. In fact, she says, "girls' games...have no intrinsic value, they teach nothing." (1977: 7) The pop sociologists and Lakoff, too, focused almost exclusively on the women's psychological and linguistic "deficiencies."

West focuses much more on the last of the forces in the complicated intersection outlined earlier: outright discrimination. Thus, she pays a great deal of attention to the unequal standards applied to men and women talking in the same ways in the same kinds of situations. She compares, for example, the number of times a woman and a man make a certain linguistic "move," such as an interruption. While the approach I sketch in this essay does not contradict hers, it illuminates other additional currents which make contexts more, or less, accessible to women's speech. In other words, the problem of gender inequality in language is overdetermined.

West's work in particular forcefully shows that we measure women's and men's talk by different standards. However, she does not focus on a difference in the gender orientation of the context. I will focus not on the language "moves," as West does, but on the game in which the moves are being made. This poses a different research program, requires an examination of a different set of facts.

A study that began to move away from the skewed content analysis approach and toward an approach somewhat more consonant with the one I am proposing was Penelope Brown's investigation of politeness in a Mayan village. She asked, "Under what conditions and in what situations do women actually use more polite expressions than do men in comparable situations? And why?" (1980: 117) Rather than simply counting the use in general of some particular word, syllable, or type of phrase, she divided speech into three different *contexts*—women to women, men to men, and mixed—to compare the different verbal strategies women choose in the different situations. Her "contexts" are not the same as my "games," since she assumes that various moves meant the same thing from one context to another. However, attending to differences between the three contexts she named was a clear step forward from the approach that implied that women's language was some kind of bad female idiosyncrasy, like wearing flowered, ruffled dresses in a serious, navy and beige bureaucracy. She explained how the use of polite language was functional for the women, saying that different levels of politeness functioned as strategies to deal with different levels of power in the contexts she studied. Her women were actively maneuvering their ways through a patriarchal society, *choosing* politeness as a "disarming" strategy

This study asked questions similar to my own, but with important differences. Brown said women had to be polite because they lacked power, but it could also be the case that women had more

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positive reasons for choosing politeness. If women were more polite than men in this village, Brown said, it must have been because "women are more sensitive from moment to moment to the potential face threateningness of what they are saying and modify their speech accordingly." (1980: 93) She said that this heightened sensitivity was *due*, in turn, to the women's relative lack of power in the village society. Because of their lack of power and greater social distance from their communities in this patrilocal society, women used the strategy of politeness in their relations with all people.

I want to suggest an additional interpretation of the same data. Maybe the Mayan women's reasons for speaking the ways they did were overdetermined, both in the structure of patriarchal power, as Brown showed, and in women's predispositional orientations to words, as I will try to show. Maybe these two reasons feed each other in unexpected ways. My interpretation explains the following puzzling anomaly Brown found. In the village, Brown says, women were generally *more* polite to *each other* in terms of what she calls "negative politeness"—hedging, apologizing for imposing, minimizing. This did not make sense for her theory, which saw politeness only as a strategy for navigating through sensitive, dangerous, or other potentially "face threatening" situations where women might feel powerless. She attributed this seeming anomaly to small sample size and the difficulty of finding "comparable" conversations between women and women and between men and women.

However, this anomaly may actually point to an explanation of politeness related not only to greater or lesser amounts of power but to a *different* brand of potential power which women brought to a situation. Brown says,

> if linguistic form differs in two styles it is because language is being used for different ends...only by probing below the surface and identifying the strategies that actors are pursuing when they speak can we see how the linguistic minutiae of utterances are related to the plans of human actors." (1980: 117)

The problem is, Brown did not devote enough attention to what exactly determines the "different ends." The earlier hypothesis on language and gender, as articulated by Lakoff, saw men and women trying to do the same things with words but women just losing the game. Here, Brown said that, because of power differences, women and men were not playing the game with the same rules, but she still assumed that there was only one game to play. It was only power differences that forced women to use different strategies in the game. I am suggesting that women came to the playground also with different ideas of what games to play, so that they adjusted the rules not only because power forced them to, but because the male game did not satisfy them.

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There was no single standard, no universal game, but rather, a number of different games corresponding, in this case, to the social groups Brown examined. A parallel can be drawn to the class cultures that scholars like the Birmingham school theorists (such as Morley, 1980; and Hall, 1973) have described. Everyone might not be weighing in on the same scale of definitions, but might be operating according to different standards, using different "codes." A class, or gender, would win the game, then, not by accepting another class' or gender's scale, but by imposing its own set of standards. The point is not who wins the game, but who gets to decide what game is being played.

The struggle in Brown's village, then, may have been between different "games" or discourses which allowed for different kinds of power that were more, or less, accessible to different kinds of people. The apparent anomaly Brown found was that women talking to women were *more* polite than women talking to men. If we introduce a theory of the "game," this anomaly can be explained by seeing that the women may have been playing a different game when the men were not around. Sometimes, although not all the time, in the company of men, the women had to adjust their politeness level *downwards*, because they were trying to speak in, or at least to adjust to, a form of talk which more closely resembled men's language. They were trying to play the men's game. The rules for talk were different in the different contexts because the games were different, and the kinds of satisfaction the games afforded were different.

Taking the character of the game into account, it becomes easier to explain a number of other anomalies in the data. The first problem it explains is one I described earlier: women's and men's talk is sometimes systematically different and sometimes not. By looking at what kinds of contexts yield what kinds of access to men's and women's voices, we can see that the different contexts, yielding different kinds of power, result in a whole range of different possible linguistic gender/power configurations. After determining the gender *valence* of a context, then we can look at the strategic devices such as tag questions and qualifiers that women and men use in the various cases. Different "moves" mean different things in different contexts. The strategies are, to continue Goffman's image, *moves in games.* There are a variety of language games played in a society, and while the varieties of languages clearly do not swing only on a gender hinge, this is one obviously crucial valence in the division of power and interactional styles.

DOCUMENTING THE DIFFERENCES

The following will be a re-reading of some more articles on women and language in light of this idea, both to clarify it and to

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document its possible validity. The research points to a more overtly cooperative nature of a women's game. Women's games, the research shows, typically do not acknowledge having winners and losers. Women will be more likely to play down their individual, separate power, trying to spotlight the harmony of the group. Men will more likely try to assert individual, separate control, more likely want other people in the group to see their separateness.

A study on the relation between expertise and gender showed that even when a woman is an expert on a topic, she will not lord this over a non-expert man, but a male expert will dominate discussions with non-experts. "Whereas the name of man's game appears to be 'Have I won?', the name of woman's game is 'Have I been sufficiently helpful?'." (Leet-Pellegrini, 1979: 212) Some languages leave a space for the expert to flaunt knowledge, I would add, and where there is no flamboyant display of knowledge, ominous silence is heard, perhaps signifying lack of expertise to the non-expert. To be seen as knowledgeable, the expert may have to make of show of expertise, but, as the study shows, women are less likely to be as interested in that kind of strutting than men generally are.

Treichler and Kramarae (1983) discussed the differences between men's and women's talk in academia. They cite a number of studies showing that woman-to-woman speech was based on support and "collaborative building":

> This manifests itself in such speech markers as a greater use of personal and inclusive pronouns ("you," "we") and phrases ("let's," "shouldn't we"); more ongoing reinforcement (head nods, mmhmms, etc.); more signs of interest in the forms of questions, interruptions for clarification and concern that all group members have a chance to speak; explicit acknowledgement of and response to previous speakers; utterances which build upon or elaborate previous utterances; and the resolution of conflict and competition in direct and usually non-public ways. (1983: 20)

They found that men's interactional style was more competitive and individualized.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s W. Edgar Vinacke and his associates (Vinacke, 1959; Bond and Vinacke, 1961; Uesugi and Vinacke, 1963) devised games in which the three players could sometimes benefit from forming coalitions with each other. An article (1963) co-authored with Thomas K. Uesugi showed that men formed coalitions only when they believed it would help them win. Women, however, "did not see the objective to be a matter of winning so much as a problem of arranging a 'fair' outcome." (1961: 78) The women's game-playing strategies reflected this goal. Initially, the researchers were surprised, wondering "How could anyone miss the point that the objective of such a game is to win?" (1961: 80) The

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women seemed to be playing a different game. In an admirable move for the era, the authors then confessed, "It occurred to us that it (the game) had been designed to have an inherently masculine character." (1961: 80) So they designed a new game[4] which they thought would be more appealing to women. In the new game, the men continued to play in the same "exploitative" style they had used previously. The women's style in the new game, however, changed dramatically, to a style even more "accommodating" than the one they adopted in the original game. Further, the authors noted that "much the same acts may have different implications as functions of different strategies." (1961: 88) My hypotheses echoes theirs: women's games and men's games differ systematically; the same move "means" different things in different games.

In a final article I will consider in this section, Marjorie Harness Goodwin (1980) found similar discrepancies between the ways girls and boys talked while they played in same sex groups. Boys' groups' typical style employed direct commands and insults, while girls rarely used these tactics in all-girl groups.

Further, she found that the girls learned to talk with the boys in the boys' competitive tone and were perfectly competent at "speaking the boys' language." The girls' avoidance of direct commands and insults when in all-girl groups could only be seen as a choice. These girls lived in a world in which the "neutral" *lingua franca* was male. They had, perhaps, less control in the mixed-sex group than the boys over the type of language used—over the type of game played. Even though they also might have been competent at speaking the boys' game, *it was not their game of choice.*

The research of Goodwin and Vinacke and his associates might allay any fears that *both* women and men change their speech to adapt to cross-sex discussion; that the genders' languages are equidistant to the third, cross-sex language. Though women and men both have to change their language to some extent in cross-sex interactions, there are drastic differences between all-female and cross-sex groups, and only slim language changes from all-male groups to mixed groups, the studies discussed above show.

THEORETICAL DISCUSSION OF THE DIFFERENCES

The "girls' play" described by Goodwin, Vinacke, and Kramarae and Treichler cries out for an insight provided in Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice* (1982: 14). The similarities between her description of gender differences in playing styles and their descriptions of gender differences in language styles are striking. Following Chodorow (1974; 1978), Gilligan connects these differences to boys' and girls' different processes of separation from and identification with parents in the nuclear family. Without going into

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this already widely known theory any more than is relevant to language research, I think that this explanation of differences in verbal styles shows that they are not simply due to women's having been *forced* into "powerless" roles. Even in a powerful role, a woman's idea of what *is* power will be different. To translate to the game analogy, different games are fun for different reasons. We can learn the second language, but it is not the language of our choice. Men are more likely to want to display freedom from any interpersonal constraints. Women, on the other hand, will enmesh themselves in a particular context, paying such careful attention to the needs of others that they may even deny their own needs in the process of accommodating others'. (Orbach, 1985)

This does not mean that women's language games are all sweetness and harmony. Control in women's games will be exercised differently from control in men's games, but that does not mean domination will be absent, or control will always be more benign in a women's game. It just means that we have to look at different things when we look for control in women's games.

Just because men need to *assert* their separateness in an interaction does not mean that they in fact *feel* more separate or authoritative in their games. Similarly, women's games can exhibit more signs of cooperation without always in fact feeling more cooperative. Dorothy Dinnerstein (1977) argues that boys and men continually need to assert their difference from their mothers in order to assert their own maleness. Yet, she continues, this does not mean that men have simply given up their identification with their mothers. The repressed identification does not simply disappear. Extending Dinnerstein's ideas to language study, we can see that men's language games may make a show of individualism in order to cover over any basic sense of connection, just as women's games may make a show of cooperation to cover over any feeling of separateness. Both feelings can be present at once; the question is, which kinds are likely repressed? Women's games will tend to mask the exercise of individual power, while men's games will have more problems exhibiting personal connection. The masked, repressed feelings do not disappear, though. Rather, they ooze out, in disguise.

Women's talk is not inherently "better." As Dinnerstein would say, women's psychological imbalances are no better than men's. For a language to empower women, it need not necessarily closely resemble typical women's speech. The problem is that "neutral" talk is usually closer to men's talk than to women's, the studies discussed above show. A truly neutral language would be as distant from men's talk as it would be from women's talk. Rather than pretending that we could invent a neutral language, though, we should simply strive towards a speech context which makes us conscious of these

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differences. Instead, we continue to circle around in the same well-worn grooves which partly caused the imbalances and inequality, digging them yet deeper with each cycle.

EQUALITY OR DIFFERENCE?

The discussion above raises the question of difference, while West's and others' language and gender theorizing tended to focus on equality. West's and others' model for language and gender research did not include any idea of the psychological predilections women and men bring to a situation. They were more interested in demonstrating outright discrimination against women, even when the women spoke in the same way as men. In their important work, West (1979; 1982; 1985) and West and Zimmerman (1975; 1983) showed that women were marked as potential victims of interruption simply by the fact that they were recognized as women. Women, West demonstrated, do not react any differently from men in the face of interruption. The problems women have "being heard" in cross-sex interactions are not due to any gender differences in ability to speak forcefully. The women were not, she argues, "asking for it;" rather, interruption was perpetrated on women "against our will" (as she entitles her 1979 essay, after a book of the same name, on the topic of rape).

Women may *both* have less power in the men's game *and* prefer not to play it. Women could be unsuccessful in playing the men's game West describes because no one can stand to see women have more individually displayed power than men, and in a men's game, interruption equals power. But in a game with a different definition of power, interruption does not confer any kind of power which is acceptable to the player. In a game with no acknowledged winners and losers, trying to look like the "winner" just does not make sense. Even if women *could* play the men's game and win, would we want to? Women who try to exhibit discursive power are usually judged unfavorably. Women also do not typically prefer to play the same game men like to play.

West (1979) says that studies seeking to prove that the genders are playing different games are merely "blaming the victim." Indeed they often are. Articles popularized in women's magazines tell women to learn to "play the men's game," simply to adjust to the men's style, and to forget that this is not the women's preferred game. The "victim blamers" say the problem resides in the individual woman, who is not asserting herself forthrightly enough. Her problem can be solved individually, they say. Unlike the "victim blamers," I am "blaming" the context and the social system of child-rearing which gives rise to these imbalanced interactional styles, *as well as* the factors West describes. Of course, women want respect as

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full members of society, but why should this mean that we adopt men's interactional styles? West demonstrates that even if women do learn men's style, they cannot exercise it with impunity.

What I am adding is that the meaning-giving contexts must change. Only in a women's game can we assess any interruption that is perpetrated with the intent to dominate as a violation, not jockey for the unwanted position of "dominator." Without changing the nature of the game itself, we are left with two dead end possibilities. On the one hand, we could try to make people value women's interruptions in a men's game as much as men's. Then women would still have to play the men's game. On the other hand, women could play their typical game of not displaying dominance, but still accept the double standard which devalorizes that kind of interaction. Either approach on its own is incomplete.

It is possible, for example, for an entire group to speak a language not its own, as when groups of academic women reproduce men's linguistic games among themselves. While it may be a step forward for some select women to be able to exercise the kind of control usually reserved for men, those women are still having to give up their gender culture to play the men's game. With the approach outlined in this paper, it should also be possible to look in a new way at the situation of women who are engaged in the *sale* of any particular form of verbal labor. Perhaps a female corporate lawyer or executive, for example, is not in control of the means of linguistic production in her work.[5] Insofar as she "embraces" her role (as Goffman puts it), she is simply an instrument for the production of that language, but will never herself accumulate enough verbal capital to begin producing a language which will be adequate to explain her own world.

NAMING THE CONTEXTS: COLLABORATIVE VS. FORMAL FLOOR

It may be possible to divide different kinds of mixed-sex languages in terms of their accessibility to women's voices, women's typical modes of talking. In an extraordinary article, "Who's Got the Floor?" (1981),[6] Carole Edelsky discovered a crucial difference between men's and women's speech contexts: the nature of "the floor." Edelsky began with the standard ethnomethodological technique of trying to transcribe tapes of discussion "as they really happened" according to a transcription method usually used by this school of sociolinguists. She came to realize that the ethnomethodologists' assumptions, deeply embedded in their transcription method, is that only one person has the *floor* at a time. In her tapes, the times women seemed the most comfortable talking (although they still did not talk more than men) were precisely those times in which more

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than one person commanded the floor. Women spoke more frequently, joked more, and spoke less hesitantly at those times in which talk was more of "a collaborative venture where two or more people either took part in an apparent free-for-all or jointly built one idea, operating on the 'same wavelength'." (1981: 384) People acted as friends as well as colleagues here.

Edelsky found that it was not the case that the different kinds of floor corresponded to different topics under discussion, or that the one-turn-at-a-time type floor (which I will call the "formal floor") was the only one employed during official meeting times. Further, a person could hold the formal floor *without saying anything*, as when someone in her study was counting a pile of papers and the rest of the room maintained a respectful silence or only made non-*floor*-taking *sotto voce* comments! So, Edelsky said, where other sociolinguists had collapsed the idea of a "turn" in speech with the idea of "having the floor",[7] she saw that turns were different things in different kinds of "floors." The only kind of floor that had previously been studied was the one in which speakers competed for time to monologue; however, "a metaphor of competition may ... be appropriate for one but not all ways of having the floor." (1981: 386)[8]

The question should be then, what is "had" when one "has the floor" in different kinds of floors? And, as she asked, "under what conditions do the sexes interact (e.g. hold the floor) more or less as equals, and under what conditions do they not?" (1981: 386) What other kinds of floors are there?

Edelsky's work makes possible a critique of Parson's and Bales's (1955) notion of an instrumental and expressive split. A women's context calls for leadership styles different from the kind Parsons and Bales described. In a "collaborative floor" involving friendly banter, and spontaneous "chiming in," *leaders have to collaborate, too.* Any instrumental task will be thoroughly infused with expressive friendliness.

This feminine way of combining instrumental and expressive elements in a group has been capitalized on by such corporations as Mary Kay Cosmetics. Mary Kay teaches her saleswomen to use "warm chatter" to sell their products to "casual" groups of "friends" in their homes. (Eliasoph, 1985) Mary Kay saleswomen typically explain that their sales pitches are more successful if they "do some warm chatter" before making their sale; the friendliness has been completely instrumentalized. This imitation of expressive friendliness plays on a hidden everyday occurrence, by which women form their expressive bonds *while getting things done* (unlike Bales' mythical housewife, who presumably has nothing to "get done" but be sweet to her children); in which getting things done/following the

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rules of the game/winning the debate/taking care of the children is only as good as the process is friendly. Like Gilligan's playing girls then, their game ends if the process is not overtly friendly, and a new game begins. An instrumental "leader" could only get things done in a collaborative floor by carefully orchestrating other people's friendly chiming in, and thus would have to be, also, an expressive leader. As discussed earlier, to find out who is in control in a situation like this, we would have to establish a different set of criteria than we would if looking for control in a male game. Women will be less likely to exhibit their dominance overtly, but will cover it over with the "warm chatter" Mary Kay advocates.

NAMING THE CONTEXTS, PART II: "ABSOLUTIZING" VS. "CONTEXTUALIZING" DISCOURSES

Feminist psychoanalytical theory, combined with a specific focus on the gender division of labor, can perhaps explain not only some gender differences in the form of the floor, but also in the choice of "discourse." In this section, I will use the works of Louise Marcil-LaCoste (1983) and Dorothy Smith (1978) to illuminate further gender differences in speech, showing, in particular, how public, official, or political speech is often based on a male relation to language. Smith's focus relies less on psychoanalytic theories and more on Marxian concepts of the production of ideology. However, psychoanalytic ideas will also prove useful in this section on public discourse and talk about society.

The genders have different kinds of work, and so, different paradigms with which to structure "reality," says Dorothy Smith (1978). There is a glaring paradox in the notion of doing universally objective investigation from a woman's point of view if the woman's point of view is to be any different from the one which is already established. When we try to compare or discuss things which we perceive as the "same," women and men will systematically disagree about what constitutes the "same" thing (Louise Marcil-LaCoste, 1983). Scientific perception is not any more neutral in this sense than any other way of seeing. The discourse of social science is not neutral, but based on a drastic separation of subject and object. According to LaCoste and others (in Harding and Hintikka, 1983) that is something which interests men, with their need to display their separateness from femininity, but does not make sense for women. So one basic form of talk about society is rooted in male attitudes.

This separation between subject and object does not constitute an absence of social relation. Rather, as Dorothy Smith puts it in a provocative essay entitled, "A Sociology for Women,"

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> anonymity, impersonality, detachment, impartiality, objectivity itself are accomplished by socially organized practices that bring into being a relation of a definite form between knowers and known. Integral to the relation thus formed is its organization to suspend the particular subjectivities of knower and known in such a way that its character as a social relation disappears... In entering the discourse as practitioners we enter it as subjects of the kinds of sentences it can properly generate, the assertions it can make. (1977: 158)

The language of social science is typically what I will call an "absolutizing" language; a quality it shares with the language of bureaucracy, law, and any form which pretends to rationalization and neutrality. The center of this language's "matrix" (womb in Latin) appears to lie outside of any body. However, Smith says, the universalizing language's center cannot in fact be as disembodied as it appears.

> In the social division of labor the labor of articulating the local and particular existence of actors to the abstracted conceptual mode of ruling is done typically by women. The abstracted conceptual mode of ruling exists in and depends upon a world known immediately and directly in the bodily mode. (1977: 166)

It is precisely that "bodily mode" which is barricaded behind the wall of silence. Social science's "negative heuristic" obscures the work women do, work which mediates between abstract modes and particular actualities: typing, providing for the "logistics of (the husband's) bodily existence," cleaning up the human being before the surgeon extracts a part, doing the routine tasks of making abstract systems into concrete entities. Social science establishes categories based on men's lives. She says that the distinction between work and leisure, for example, makes sense for men's work, but not for the "work" and "play" involved in mothering.

For the activities of the conceptual mode, we need a language as distant from "home talk" as Latin was from any medieval's vulgar tongue. In her essay on what a feminist sociology would be, she says that the language of academia obscures the very relation women need to name. For her, "education" is a process of internalizing this strange scholars' tongue, so that we forget any kitchen table talk we may have ever known. As Chodorow theorizes, this education is partly completed for men when they work through the Oedipal drama and learn to identify with the father. Since the father is typically less omnipresent than the mother (if he is there at all) the boy learns to identify with a *role* rather than a specific, contextual person, such as the mother is for the infant. Thus, men's "relationships with other men tend to be based not on particularistic connection or affective ties, but rather on abstract, universalistic role expectations." (Chodorow, 1978: 53) "A sociology for women," says Smith, would be a

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process of learning to repersonalize language, name experiences, discover a "home talk." It would be "the repudiation of the professional, the expert, the already authoritative tones of the discipline, the science, the formal tradition..." (1977: 144)

It is important to note here that she is *not* saying that any abstract thought is necessarily decontextualized and therefore less "feminine." Rather, she is simply distinguishing the kinds of thought that treat their contexts of origin as a *positive bases* of their compositions from the kinds of thought which eliminate as much as possible any reference to the contexts in which they were conceived. The difference is perhaps between "absolutizing" and "contextualizing" discourse. The absolutizing discourse treats its own matrix as an unmutable "given," rather than a ground for debate. A feminist method would acknowledge its origins.[9]

Not all "absolutizing" language need sound neutral, either. It simply must absolutize its own origins. For example, exploratory tapes I made of political protest group meetings showed repeated instances in which a woman making a point would be ignored, only to hear the same point restated more "strongly" by a man. The man's "strong" restatement would elicit a chorus of cheers, applause, and "go for it"s. In these cases, "strong" meant more absolute, drawing a more rigid boundary between "us" and "them." Like the language of the expert, the social scientist, and the bureaucrat, it absolutized its origins; also like the expert's, scientist's and bureaucrat's language, this "strong" language was based on a distinct, rather specialized idiom, the language of political protest. These men could not just say their piece without dressing it up in a special Latin, without appearing to be "experts" at it. They took it away from the kitchen table, thus making politics *seem* like a strange and difficult activity (when clearly what is needed in this country is just the opposite).

So far, this essay has sketched two ways of categorizing a language situation: according to the kind of "floor" and according to the kind of "discourse" permissible. Perhaps there is a third ingredient to add to the soup of factors which determine the gender/power valence of a discussion: how is credit allocated? Is explicit credit given for verbal prowess? Is implicit credit given through nods, mmhmms, chuckles, chiming in in agreement and the thousands of other minute, ongoing ways with which women usually give credit? Is credit given behind the scenes? Is credit not given at all or given only formally, outside of the daily working of the group, through grades, promotions, etc.? I have not seen any empirical research specifically dealing with the verbal allocation of credit, but my hunch is that in women's language games, credit giving is much more subtle, small and steady, cumulatively gratifying, whereas men

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will throw a giant verbal extravaganza at the end. Though lacking any systematic data, I can point towards and frame the questions.

What if *outside* of the meeting everyone in a group secretly suspected that the men were just paraphrasing the women's words into more abstract, or more militant, or otherwise more "absolutizing" language? Clearly a discourse dissident can plant the seeds of conversational subversion in the minds of individuals without ever personally seeing those individuals change their use of language within the group. Yet, they might, eventually, indeed change. Does this constitute power for the discourse dissident, even if there is no credit?

Personal credit must be *given in a way which the recipient can understand.* There is a dialectical relationship between "getting credit" and shifts in language, in that a shift in language will allow for different kinds of credit; different kinds of credit will encourage or repress different kinds of people's subversion of the language. A person who receives no credit for linguistically deviant behavior will not be encouraged to repeat the offense. Getting credit for it might result in enough dissidents feeling encouraged enough to overthrow the old linguistic system.

So there are important differences between credit given during the meeting, outside of the meeting behind the scenes, and three years later upon a chance meeting on the street.

TOWARD FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper has suggested two kinds of floor, "collaborative" and "formal," two kinds of discourse, "contextualizing" and "absolutizing," and perhaps some number of kinds of credit. This way of dividing up kinds of conversations merely simplifies the multifarious kinds of talk that actually occur. They are "ideal types" which can serve as heuristic devices to help theorize about the different contexts. They can perhaps show a way to new methods for investigating language difference.

Within each kind of floor—"collaborative" or "formal"—and discourse—"absolutizing" or "contextualizing"—there are often differences based on the kinds of institutionalized, structural power people already bring to the situation. Control has to be exercised differently, and means something different, in the different kinds of floors and discourses.

For example, in a "collaborative" floor, it will be difficult to recognize or exercise clear leadership. Jo Freeman's article about the earlier days of the feminist movement, "The Tyranny of Structurelessness" (1973) clearly demonstrates the problems a women's "game" has acknowledging its covert leadership. She describes how

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the pretense of "structurelessness" hid women's unwillingness to acknowledge that there were leaders. The result was that leaders were often resented and unregulated, since they were not selected intentionally by the group. The problem is that women's typical "floor" has difficulty acknowledging individual power, though it clearly may be present. Mary Kay's "warm chatter" shows how that difficulty can be intentionally exploited for profit. The fault lines, the particular tensions, in a women's game are different from the ones peculiar to a men's game.

Within each type of floor then, are variations. A crucial set of variations of the floor types revolves around what is not acknowledged: is the women's game in question really collaborative and contextualizing, or is "warm chatter" a cover for a more controlling kind of relation? If it is just a cover, the different linguistic "moves" mean different things when they come from different points on the hierarchy, just as they would in a men's game. Once we establish what kind of game is in progress and what kind of control is at work behind or beneath the scenes, then we can begin to see what the various linguistic "moves" mean. Silences, interruptions, tag questions, minimizing: all of these moves mean different things in the different games, and come from different mouths within the games.

A research program for this type of theory clearly could not rely on the techniques used by previous researchers. Content analysis is meaningless outside of a context, as even the most avid fans of the method emphasize. Counting "moves" as West does, does not make sense for project suggested here, until the researcher determines in what context the moves are being made. Next on the research agenda, then, is to figure out if there is any systematic way of determining what kinds of "floors" and "discourses" are in play. Edelsky could not find one, and ultimately based her important observations on her "subjective impression." Could an empirical researcher name some particular conventions of the various games and thus, determine which game is in motion by observing how often the different kinds of conventions appear? To some extent this would be possible, but many factors would make such research difficult: the games are often under attack by *ad hoc* subversives, and as noted numerous times above, the same moves might be present in a number of different games but mean different things in each one. Interruption in a women's game, for example, might mean cooperation, whereas in a men's game it would mean domination. Further, as West shows, the rules in any given game may be different for men and women, though rules are at work and so, should be observable. In addition, not all men "speak male" or women "speak female;" gender and sex do not always coincide; and the boundaries between "masculine" and "feminine" are themselves the results of a not always completely resolved social struggle. Considering all of this, it seems that this kind

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of study would have to rely somewhat on "subjective impressions" of what kind of game is at work.

SUBVERSION

Now we can begin to look at ways that discourse dissidents operate, and in what contexts dissent is possible. As Goffman sees people appropriating roles in various ways, maybe I could see how people can appropriate or divert these languages. Resistance strategies can range from Goffman's private "role distancing," in which a person may be speaking a dominant language but not have her heart in it; to the "backstage" undermining of authority's power he describes in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959); to active factionalizing, saying, "Let's form a new group with a new language," or "Let's change our code in this group. If you persist in speaking what used to be the dominant language, your speech will be devalued." This last strategy is one by which discourse dissidents become actually subversive, in that their moves can contribute to *structural* changes. Revisions of what constitutes the appropriate languages can then afford a more easy linguistic access in a more systematic and less *ad hoc* way to groups which previously had a more tortuous path to full linguistic participation.

A good example of this is the formation of "affinity group"[10] structures in some leftist and feminist organizations over the course of the 1970s and 80s. This is a "game" in which *potentially* all decision making gets done in small, collaborative floor type situations, replete with personal discourse, rather than in large, formal meetings in which speakers refrain from anything less than universal declarations. This kind of organization, many women recognize, allows women more comfortable access to speech, though, as Freeman's article (1973) underlines, it also allows women access to the *pitfalls* of that kind of speech. At least the pitfalls are their own.

Sometimes it is possible, however, as a discourse dissident, to acquire a kind of power many people in the group find compelling, without changing the whole game. As any pompous pontificator knows, formal floor power can be seriously undermined by collaborative floor exchanges happening simultaneously with his or her talk. Collaborative floors can be undermined by insistence on monologuing, and silent rather than active listenership. Behind the scenes, dissidents can recruit for their language, exposing the linguistic agenda hidden in their translators' words. Thus, they can somewhat divert the course of power in the group in favor of their own idiom, thereby gathering a different kind of power from the one mustered on the scene.

Dissent usually only works in contexts in which participation is not compulsory or "authority" not backed by coercion. Schools are

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crucial areas in which this kind of subversion is often impossible: no matter how convincing a discourse dissident is to the rest of her/his classmates, ultimately the teacher's coercive power often wins. This, of course, has an enormous effect on the students' future life chances. Understanding the biases inherent in particular forms of talk, however, can certainly begin to *delegitimize* those official rules. This delegitimization process is crucial to the formation of any resistance which will not simply accept the meritocratic notions of the "neutrality" of our society's central institutions.

There is no such thing, as Jean Baudrillard (1975) would have it, as a situation with no dominant "code," with no game, no tacit rules. The quest is not to abolish language games altogether; this would be impossible. The dream of a situation with no dominant "code" is a continuation of the dream of absolute separation, a dream which Smith (1977), Marcil-LaCoste (1983), and others described as peculiarly male. Rather, we should *negotiate*, to decide *which* game we will play, and we should be conscious that the game is not natural or neutral. My object in this paper has been to begin to develop a theory which could lead to a research program capable of uncovering the genders' various "games." By beginning to bring the importance of the game to the surface, this approach may begin to clarify important gender differences in preferred language. Social awareness of the game, rather than individual attempts at conforming to already given contexts, perhaps allow more potential for change.

Footnotes

1. A part of her theorizing assumes that most women do "the dirty work" for men, and that men engage in abstract conceptualizing. Actually, most men also do the mucky, concrete work she says women do.

2. Here I am relying on insights provided not only by Goffman, but also Michel Foucault. Interestingly enough, they are two very similar thinkers. Compare, for example, Goffman's *Gender Advertisements* (1976: 25), with Foucault: "Gender stereotypes run in every direction and almost as much inform what supporters of women's rights approve as what they disapprove...in all of this, intimacy certainly brings no corrective. In our society in all classes the tenderest expression of affection involves displays that are politically questionable..."

   Foucault also emphasizes the idea that power is not something that is exercised only in one corner of society, leaving the rest of the world free of power relations. Rather, he too would say that even our tenderest expressions of affection are constructed in relation to an idea of power.

3. Attention should also be paid to the question of race, and Heath's book to some extent does this. Bourdieu for the most part neglects the

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question of gender and leaves race questions entirely out of the picture. Eventually, the goal should be to put all of these different axes of domination together into one grand omnibus theory, but this paper has a more humble and incomplete project. Of course, it is not quite satisfying when Bourdieu separates out class from gender and race; neither am I satisfied with my separation of gender from race and class. Race, class, and gender interact in unexpected ways, so that if the sociologist were just to *add* the effect of gender to the effect of class, the conceptualization would be much too simple. On the other hand, there is something to be gained from separating out some of the strands of these questions.

Further, the examples woven throughout this paper come from a range of cultures, races, classes, and ages, suggesting that at least some of the language differences described may, in some general way, translate across at least some ethnic, racial, class, or age boundaries.

4. They changed it from a dice game to a quiz game, with questions about cooking, movie stars, and etiquette. Though this change may seem silly to us now, it may not have been so insignificant for women in that era. Clearly, it "worked" in bringing out some differences in men's and women's strategies that the original game somewhat masked.

5. Actually, an interesting project in this light would be to interview some women corporate lawyers (e.g.) or other members of the linguistic proletariat—to do for words what Arlie Hochschild does for emotions in *The Managed Heart* (1983)—to see if speaking in the language of law makes these women feel powerful.

6. This formed part of the basis of the Treichler and Kramarae (1983) article to which I refer.

7. Though they recognized, by the way, that not all utterances constitute a "turn," so that a "mmhmm," an "encouraging remark," e.g., is not a "turn."

8. Though Edelsky presents this all in a dead-pan academic tone, the implications for analyses of conversation data are enormous: she could discover no "objective" conversational elements which she could say always distinguished a "formal floor" from a collaborative one, and says, "ultimately I used my subjective impression...[!]" (Edelsky, 1981: 417)

   It also, incidently, calls into question the idea of the neutrality of Habermas' "ideal speech situation": a *debate*, in which one side *wins*, is already slanted toward male access. The only society in which all would have equal access to his ideal debate is one in which we will all be brought up as men like Habermas—not by having egalitarian child-rearing by both sexes but by institutionalizing a policy of only allowing the intimate intense childcare to be done by the opposite sexed parent! Then we would all have equal access to the "ideal" situation. (Habermas, 1984)

9. For example, I could talk about how my experience in women's groups compared to my experience in graduate school sparked the intuitive basis of this paper. In my first graduate level seminars, I was

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astounded at the silence emanating from the female half of the class. A few of the women in the class said that they "just didn't feel like talking"; but it seemed to me that not to talk was to give up any power we might have had, and also to abdicate any responsibility for the course of the discussion. The class's lack of concern for this obvious and systematic inequality cut a sharp contrast to all of the women's study and activist groups in which I had worked the year before, in which the distribution of talk was a constant focus of implied and often stated attention. Thus, I began to dig up more scholarly investigations of the topic which so interested me. Why do I not put this in the main body of the paper? A solitary linguistic rebel is not powerful enough yet.

10. Affinity groups are small groups, based, as the name suggests, on "affinity" as well as agreement on theoretical analyses and positions. The standard leftist organization usually organizes only on the basis of the latter. The affinity groups coordinate their activities but operate semi-autonomously, and most importantly for my discussion, meet separately, at, e.g. people's kitchen tables.

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