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The Cornell Lectures

Women in the Linguistics Profession

Editors
Alice Davison
Penelope Eckert
Discussion of meaning-changing transformations
a. John even kissed Kate!
b. Kate was even kissed by John.
c. Maisie didn't shoot her husband.
d. Maisie didn't shoot her husband. (290-92)

Discussion of progressive tense marking
Will is hunting for deer.
Percy is holidaying in France.
He's telephoning her now.
She is crying. (334)

Discussion of novel or untrue but grammatical sentences
John insisted that the smallest prime number is 2.
John diagonalized the differential manifold.
Almond Eyes ate her Kornies and listened to the radio. (41-42)

Reflections on Women in Linguistics

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In preparing my remarks for this opening session of the conference on Women in the Linguistics Profession, I thought it would be useful to frame some basic issues by posing the following questions, "Why should we have a conference on women in linguistics?" "What do we already know about women in linguistics and what more do we need to or want to know?" My purpose in these few minutes is not to answer these and other questions about the meaning of gender for linguistics as a discipline, but rather to ask what have heretofore been unmentioned, unmentionable and hard to mention questions about women and gender in our field, that is, to open up a place for us to begin to examine such questions.

Women and men in any academic discipline function in at least four areas (Bordo forthcoming). First, we see our primary function as intellectual: to explore and understand our subject matter. The subject matter of linguistics is the study of language from two broad perspectives: one perspective is the description of the properties of linguistic systems, of grammars, of language; the second perspective is the description of how individuals and cultures use linguistic systems as well as how a linguistic system is shaped by individuals and cultures. The second area in which we function is institutional. We function within particular institutional arrangements both within the linguistics profession and within our particular universities, which have a long-standing history from which women, until recently, were almost entirely absent, absent as shaping forces of disciplinary and academic institutions and absent as intellectual consumers, i.e. as students. Third, we function in a sociological and cultural context, in the broad and narrow sense. In the broad sense we are members of groups beyond our profession and beyond
academia, and in the narrow sense we are held to cultural practices within our profession and our postsecondary institutions. The fourth area in which we function is the psychological, which encompasses our own particular personal histories. Therefore, in undertaking a conference about women in linguistics, we need to explore woman-focused issues in all four of these contexts: the intellectual, the institutional, the sociocultural and the psychological, as well as at the intersections of these areas.

Feminist scholars and others have pointed out that gender is the primary category by which the social world is organized (Hare-Mustin and Marecek 1988). In other words, everything is gendered. How are each of the four areas that I mentioned bound by our culture’s gender ideology? Gender ideology prescribes particular practices, for example, the acceptability of sexually harassing women, or the double standard of expecting women to be more nurturing and therefore more accessible to students, colleagues and family than men, to name just a few of the ways in which our lives are gendered. To what extent does gender ideology permeate the structures and practices in our intellectual, institutional, sociocultural and psychological spheres? How are we all shaped by this gender ideology, in what ways do we all perpetuate it, and to what extent can we change it so that our lives are less limited?

One answer to the question of "Why should we have a conference on women in linguistics?" is that we have important things to say to each other and to the profession when we take a woman-centered approach to professional issues, and that we don’t or can’t say these things in our everyday professional interactions. In other words, underlying this conference is the assumption that women’s realities, women’s perspectives, women’s histories, women’s concerns in each of these aspects of the discipline are different from men’s in important ways. In addition, women’s realities, perspectives, histories, and concerns are not well integrated into or addressed in the discipline’s public history and daily discourse. Consequently, they deserve special attention. This is because the institutional, sociocultural and intellectual spheres in which we function are largely or exclusively male cultures which often are antithetical to women’s interests, or do not take women’s points of view. It is difficult to always recognize this, but I hope that the sense in which I mean it will become clear.

Hence, women in linguistics need time and space to reflect on, to explore, and to discover what we care about as women in our profession. To do this, we need to create a community of women in which we can interpret to each other the multiplicity of what it means to be a woman in linguistics. What will be the effect of thinking about the place of gender in our academic lives? The answers to this question also, I hope, will become clearer.

Having framed the conference as I see it in terms of these general remarks, I would like to add remarks of a more personal and intimate nature. I have long been puzzled by the fact that my own discipline has remained largely untouched by the intellectual revolution resulting from feminist theory and scholarship which has been at work for years in such fields as literature, epistemology and other subfields of philosophy, anthropology, psychology, sociology, history, political theory, film and the fine arts, and critiques of science. It has seemed to me that there are insights from feminist scholarship that also apply to the philosophical foundations of linguistics. I just have time to mention a few of these avenues of inquiry here as a way of suggesting future directions for feminist inquiry in linguistics.

1. Feminist scientists and philosophers of science (e.g. Bleier 1984, Bordo 1986, Harding 1986, Keller 1987) argue that objectivity and scientific neutrality are connected to masculinist
psychological processes. In short, in their view, the scientific point of view as we know it is gendered. The search for knowledge as well as interpretation and understanding is gendered. Feminist critiques of science, according to Keller (1987:234) "all claim that science embodies a strong androcentric bias", a charge which can be interpreted in various ways in various disciplines. Keller points out that corrections to this bias are needed in the form of 'critical self-reflection' on the ways in which science is the product of a gendered social system and the ways in which masculinist ideology in particular has influenced scientific methodology and theory. The work of critical self-reflection in a discipline is to "distinguish that which is parochial from that which is universal in the scientific impulse, reclaiming for women what has historically been denied to them; and to legitimate those elements of scientific culture that have been denied precisely because they are defined as female" (Keller 1987:237-38).

2. Feminists in sociology (Stacey and Thorne 1985:309) have observed that fields that are defined by positivistic epistemologies, (e.g. psychology or economics) are more resistant to feminist critiques, than fields that use an interpretivist approach to knowledge (e.g. anthropology, literature or history). They also mention that the 'objectifying stance,' the separation of knower and known, has been linked by people such as Habermas and Keller to our culture's masculinist ideology of 'control and power'.

3. The connections between the making of meaning, the institutionalization of power, the representation of reality, and the central place that masculinist thought and language have in both scholarly as well as popular culture – as seen in the greater access to written language that men have, their control over the print and electronic media, their authority as arbiters of language usage and their folkloric disparagement of female speech styles – have been explored throughout the history of feminist scholarship, most recently by feminist postmodernists and social constructionists (e.g. Hare-Mustin and Marechek 1988).

Surely the fruits of feminist scholarship in these and other areas of inquiry have some bearing on linguistics. It is puzzling why a 'critical self-reflection' has not taken hold in our field. I attribute the largely unexplored connection between linguistics and feminist thought to be partly due to the fact that women in linguistics have entered and continue to enter the field and go about their business believing that it is neither necessary nor politically feasible to take the fact that we are women into consideration in linguistics as it is currently constructed or as it could be constructed in the future. The high visibility of women students (who account for about half of our graduate student population) and the high visibility of women faculty in the field might also be tacitly interpreted to mean that linguistics is a field in which everything is "all right", that it is possible for women to go about our business without needing to give a second thought to the fact that we are women and how that shapes our lives. For many people, the presence of women is taken as a sign that a woman can pass in the male culture of universitas without paying any price for either impersonating male behaviors and denying female behaviors and realities, or that women can pass strictly by being our own womanly selves. In short, the field shapes women to expect to not have to deal with being women in a public way, or in any way, and that all problems that befall us will be of our own making, due to our own personal inadequacies rather than the way our culture socially constructs gender. Consistent with this
is the fact that there are very few women (or men) in linguistics who pursue their degrees and research precisely to study the connection between language and the social construction of gender. In response to these observations, I ask, "Why?"

My own history in the field encompasses both types of women: initially, I assumed that I could go about my business with gender being irrelevant to being a linguist, a woman linguist. Subsequently, I have been forced to see that gender is part of everything. My research program in language acquisition has begun to incorporate questions of how gender socialization becomes part of language socialization. I was able to pursue this work in 1988-89 at the Society for the Humanities at Cornell (as did Paula Treichler) because the Society chose to devote its resources to a year of major conferences, lectures, discussions, seminars, and other activities which were focused on feminist theory. My point is that the study of gender can thrive when it has institutional support. In contrast, we in linguistics go about our daily business outside of the local, national, and international networks of feminist scholarship, uninformed about the transformative insights, the disciplinary critiques, or the amount of feminist scholarly activity and publication in various disciplines.

My reorientation as an academic woman followed from the changes in my life and in our society since my graduate school days. These personal and cultural changes falsified for me the myth of gender neutrality. I spent my graduate student and pre-tenure years as a single woman. I have spent my post-tenure years as a married woman with two daughters who were born less than three years apart. My view of everything both personal and professional was greatly affected by physical, psychological and social changes of state as a parent. These were changes of material reality. They involved daily - hourly struggles to be a good mother and to sustain a demanding career as a good experimental psycholinguist in an institutional and societal culture that largely ignores the importance and hard labor of mothering (and fathering). One's feminine consciousness has a way of undergoing radical shifts in proportion to what we suffer in a culture that devalues girls and women, and that devalues women's work.

Women in the professions, out of necessity, become good 'shape-shifters', code-switchers, and performers of double workloads. As mothers we develop these skills because mothers are the chief executive officers of the family. We are the mothers who, because our university has no maternity leave policy, correct final exams three days after giving birth and return almost immediately to the classroom. We are the mothers who have not had a full night of sleep for two-and-one-half years because our child does not sleep through the night or because the only free time we have to prepare classes and write is when everyone else at home is asleep. We are the mothers who take time from our research and teaching to be the unsung architects of new university maternity leave policies or university day care policies and facilities so that future parents can lead postpartum lives that are slightly saner. We are the mothers who undergo numerous operations that our colleagues never hear about in order to restore fertility. I have used the woman-as-mother in these examples because I know the role well. But we can just as well talk about the shapeshifting of single women, older women, gay women, women of color, or disabled women. The shapeshifting that all women in linguistics have tacitly learned as graduate students and new Ph.D.'s is to both do our jobs well and walk the minefield of being the outsider in a male culture. The feminine voice often is the minority voice in departmental faculty meetings, the unprivileged newcomer to the university and its networks and repositories of survival information. We shape-shift and code-switch to survive in institutional and sociological structures and practices that were not originally designed for women and in which the realities
of our lives often do not fit. It is a mark of our successful incorporation into the male academic culture that when we actually do have a conference on women in linguistics I am self-conscious of breaking a taboo, the taboo of calling attention to myself/ourselves as women. We are taking risks in breaking long-held silences in linguistics by talking about how our femininity affects every part of our lives, from our graduate student lives, the job search, the tenure review, our teaching evaluations, how we are (mis)perceived or ignored in our universities, the topics of our research, our time in rank, our collegial relations, the juggling of employment with personal lives, and so on. Indeed, the the personal is political. Our survival in the profession has crucially depended on demonstrating that women are as intellectually capable as men. Yet our mental health also depends on exploring the real ways in which women's lives do exact different things from us compared to what men's lives exact from them. Our health depends on recognizing how the institutional settings we work in have long excluded us. We are poignantly aware of the prices we and our friends have paid as women in linguistics. We need to make discussions of women, such as those that will take place here, an acceptable part of our daily public discourse, if we hope to figure out how to make our work places and work lives more sensitive to women's needs.

Therefore, in my opinion, this conference will be successful if as a result of it we discover some new clarity in the presence of the complexities we are going to explore, if we discover new questions, new information, new challenges and areas of inquiry, if we discover commonalities as well as differences in what we had previously thought were our personal, idiosyncratic dilemmas. In short, success will be seeing new perspectives as a result of putting women at the center of our focus, as both the inquiring subject and the interpreted object.

Since an NSF-Cornell sponsored conference on women in linguistics is a statement that what we are about to do here is legitimate and important, it is my hope that our efforts achieve disciplinary legitimacy as well, among ourselves as well as among colleagues who are not here. A woman-centered inquiry into the intellectual, institutional, sociocultural and psychological processes of being a woman in linguistics should continue as a project that we actively give a future to, beyond this conference.

Notes

1 Thanks are due to Paula Treichler for her comments on an earlier version of this paper.

2 A term used by Rayna Green in a plenary talk at the Georgetown University bicentennial conference on Women in America, April, 1989.

References


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The Structure of the Field and its Consequences for Women

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In December of 1924, 29 prominent linguists met in New York City at the American Museum of Natural History to sign a 'call' for a society devoted exclusively to the scientific study of language. The time had come, they felt, to break away from the Modern Language Association, the Philosophical Society, and other organizations that were no longer adequate to the needs of a discipline that was rapidly developing its own professional identity.

All 29 of the participants were male. One's first thought might be that this fact was a simple consequence of there being no prominent women linguists at the time. But such was not the case. At least two women, Louise Pound and Cornelia Catlin Coulter, were in accomplishment and stature uncontroversially the equal of the majority of the 29 men. There were other women scholars who arguably deserved a place among the first dozen or two linguists in America.

Why then were there no women present at the founding meeting of the Linguistic Society of America? Martin Joos, in his history of the Society, gives a candid explanation: 'Family reasons' (1986:9) prevented women from attending. It was apparently unthinkable 65 years ago that a woman with a family could leave husband and children for a couple days, even for such a momentous occasion as founding what would soon become the largest professional body of linguists in the world.

The pressures that women felt in the early years of the LSA came as much from within the organization as from society at large. In 1942, Louise Pound, the prominent