

Part I

History and Theoretical Background to the Study of Language and Gender

1 Theorizing Gender in Sociolinguistics and Linguistic Anthropology

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1 Introduction

Increasingly, feminist scholars in linguistics and in other fields have realized that we must ask how empirical gaps come to be created. Feminist scholars have discovered “that many gaps were there for a reason, i.e. that existing paradigms systematically ignore or erase the significance of women’s experiences and the organization of gender” (Thorne and Stacey 1993: 168). The task of feminist scholarship thus goes beyond simply adding discussions of women and women’s experiences into our disciplines, to encompass the broader task of interrogating and transforming existing conceptual schemes. In history, for instance, feminist and other radical scholars have challenged the assumption that history is primarily about politics, public policy, and famous individuals. The inclusion of women has led to a rethinking of the notion of historical periodization itself, since historical turning points are not necessarily the same for women as for men (Kelly-Gadol 1977). In literature, feminist scholars have extended their project from the critique of texts by male authors and the recovery of texts written by female authors to asking questions about how literary periods and notions of dominant aesthetic modes are established, and thus how certain writers, texts, and genres become valued as central or canonical (see e.g. Feldman and Kelley 1995). Feminist anthropologists have also asked questions about how the canon of anthropological thought gets constructed (Behar and Gordan 1995).

Feminist sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists are also increasingly asking questions about fundamental analytic concepts that must be revalued when women and gender are taken seriously. The definition of hypercorrection (Cameron and Coates 1988), standard and vernacular language (Morgan 1994), definitions of speech community (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992; Holmes 1999), and even theories about the way language constructs social identity (Ochs 1992) have all been examined by feminist sociolinguists. It is not only,

however, analytic concepts which are distinctively sociolinguistic that require feminist re-examination. We also need to consider how certain basic categories of analysis found in other disciplines are implemented in our own. I argue here that the fundamental feminist category of "gender," as implemented in sociolinguistics, has often included certain political and social assumptions which prematurely narrow our area of inquiry.

Early sociolinguistic studies of gender often assumed that gender should be studied where it was most salient, and that gender was most salient "in cross-sex interaction between potentially sexually accessible interlocutors, or same-sex interaction in gender-specific tasks" (Brown and Levinson 1983: 53). At its best, work based on this assumption led to a series of insightful studies of the linguistic styles of men and women in romantic heterosexual relationships or in experimental settings designed to simulate such relationships (e.g. Fishman 1983; Gleason 1987; Tannen 1990; West and Zimmerman 1983). There are, however, at least four significant, and increasingly controversial, theoretical assumptions about gender embedded in this recommendation: (1) gender is closely wedded to sex, and the study of gender is closely wedded to the study of heterosexuality; (2) gender is an attribute; (3) the study of gender is the study of individuals; and (4) gender is best studied where most salient. In this chapter I explore each of these in turn. In this discussion, as elsewhere, theories about gender always have more than theoretical significance; they always suggest the cause of inequities and thus indicate where society should direct its resources to redress inequity (see Jaggar 1983). Deciding amongst different theories of gender is thus no mere theoretical exercise; it is directly linked to deciding upon political strategies for feminist activism.

1.1 The relationship of gender to sex and sexuality

The distinction between sex and gender has been one of the foundations of Western feminist thought. The following pairs of definitions are typical.

[Sex and gender] serve a useful analytic purpose in contrasting a set of biological facts with a set of cultural facts. Were I to be scrupulous in my use of terms, I would use the term "sex" only when I was speaking of biological differences between males and females and use "gender" whenever I was referring to the social, cultural, psychological constructs that are imposed upon these biological differences. . . . [G]ender designates a set of categories to which we can give the same label crosslinguistically or crossculturally because they have some connection to sex differences. These categories are however conventional or arbitrary insofar as they are not reducible to or directly derivative of natural, biological facts; they vary from one language to another, one culture to another, in the way in which they order experience and action. (Shapiro (1981), cited in Yanagisako and Collier 1990: 139)

The distinction between sex and gender attempts to counter views which attribute differences and inequalities between women and men to sex or biology, as in opinions like the following:

In all primate societies the division of labor by gender creates a highly stable social system, the dominant males controlling territorial boundaries and maintaining order among lesser males by containing and preventing their aggression, the females tending the young and forming alliances with other females. Human primates follow this same pattern so remarkably that it is not difficult to argue for biological bases for the type of social order that channels aggression to guard the territory which in turn maintains an equable environment for the young. (McGuinness and Pribam, cited in Sperling 1991: 208)

In this sociobiological view there is no gender, for there are no cultural determinants of human life. All is "sex." This view of sex as naturally dictating behavior and roles supports a functionalist model of human social organization. Feminists who make a distinction between sex and gender do not necessarily abandon the idea that there are some biological differences between women and men, but most attempt to sharply circumscribe that which can be attributed to such differences. Often implicit in such distinctions is the idea that what is socially constructed (gender) can be more easily transformed than what is biological (sex).

An increasing number of feminists argue that sex/gender models like Shapiro's are problematic, both in their conception of gender and in their assumptions about sex (see also Cameron 1997b). To say that "gender" refers "to the social, cultural, psychological constructs that are imposed upon these biological differences" implies that there are TWO genders, based upon two sexes. Linda Nicholson (1994) calls this the "coat-rack" model of sex and gender. This dichotomous picture of gender is problematic because it overstates similarity within each of the categories so designated, and understates similarities across these categories. Further, underlying the assumption that the sex-gender distinction is dualistic is an assumption that these differences are necessary for procreative sexuality, which is understood as heterosexuality (see e.g. Kapchan 1996: 19). The methodological recommendation to study gender "in cross-sex interaction between potentially sexually accessible interlocutors" illustrates how the idea of just two genders can be conflated with a presumption of heterosexuality. Historically and cross-culturally sexual attachment has not always been ideologically organized in terms of a dichotomy, but in Western capitalist countries at present "objects of desire are generally defined by the dichotomy and opposition of feminine and masculine; and sexual practice is mainly organized in couple relationships" (Connell 1987: 113).¹ Assumptions about heterosexuality as normative thus directly inform notions of sex and gender, while normative notions of sex and gender inform those about heterosexuality. To focus only on studying gender, then, in heterosexual interactions may be quite misleading: gender differences may be *exaggerated* in such interactions.

Feminist scholars have taken two different paths to redressing problems with the sex/gender distinction. One path, often followed by physical anthropologists and biologists, is to offer a more nuanced picture of the biological, and how it interacts with the social (Sperling 1991; Worthman 1995). This approach challenges the notion of biology as more fixed and less amenable to change than culture is. For instance, Worthman (1995) considers the ways that gender as a principle for social organization affects biological development in terms of risk factors for breast cancer. Much recent work in sociolinguistics adopts a second approach, one which in effect subsumes what was traditionally placed under the domain of sex into the domain of gender. Scholars with this view look at the social construction of "sex." In addition to recognizing cultural differences in understanding the body (Nicholson 1994), proponents of this view may argue that we need to look at how certain definitions of sex/gender become hegemonic and are contested within a given society. Philosopher Judith Butler argues that:

Gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pre-given sex. . . . gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established. As a result, gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which "sexed nature" or "a natural sex" is produced and established as "prediscursive" prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts. (1990: 7)

Instead of asking "what are the gender differences?", this approach (an approach which has been called *post-structuralist* or *deconstructive* feminist) leads one to ask "what difference does gender make?" and "how did gender come to make a difference?" To argue that differences found in people's behavior, including their speech behavior, can simply be explained by invoking gender is to fail to question how gender is constructed. Instead, one needs to ask how and why gender differences are being constructed in that way, or what notion of gender is being normalized in such behavior. This approach, then, proposes to investigate how categories such as "woman" are created and which political interests the creation and perpetuation of certain identities and distinctions serves. Where people's behavior does not conform to dominant norms of masculinity or femininity, it is rendered unintelligible or incoherent: certain people or certain behaviors may not be recognized as legitimately human. Because they deviate from normative conceptions of how sex, gender, and sexuality should be aligned they are subject to repercussions and sanctions which vary according to local context. Some are economic, with people being confined to certain kinds of work and expelled from others. In the USA, women working as police officers often find themselves addressed as "sir" and occasionally find that others assume they are lesbians, regardless of any other information about sexual identity, simply because of the work that they do. Other sanctions are physical interventions, in the form of violence ("gay-bashing") or medical procedures (in North America, intersexed infants are operated on in

order to be easily categorizable as male or female). Yet other sanctions are emotional: witness the expulsion from biological families of many Indian *hijras*, Nigerian *'yan daudu* (both discussed below), and American gays and lesbians. That the boundaries of what is seen as appropriate gendered behavior are policed and sanctioned is seen as evidence that certain definitions of gender are used to maintain a certain social order. (Below I suggest that the detailed specification of what "social order" means remains one of the tasks that scholarship in language and gender has yet to adequately address.)

Challenges to norms of sex and gender can cast a particularly illuminating light on the construction of sex and gender because they make visible norms and counternorms of gender. Indeed, the study of such challenges has become one methodological corollary of a post-structuralist theoretical approach. Although one argument against a deconstructive feminist approach has been that it focuses on marginal cases of gender construction, cases of deviance, in ways that do not explain gender construction in the majority of people's lives, this argument fails to recognize the principal point being made by this approach, a point that is more familiar perhaps in the study of other marginalized groups. From the perspective of Marxism, the notions of elite groups about why and how social stratification and conflict comes about are suspect because they are more likely to reify the status quo than to question it. For instance, a bourgeois perspective might see each worker as a free agent, constrained only by free will in how s/he contracts out labor power, while workers see domination, exploitation, and the accumulation of wealth among a few.² Similarly, gender "outliers" bear the costs of hegemonic views about gender in ways that may cause them to question why such views are so powerful and so widely held.

In linguistics and elsewhere, a post-structuralist approach has led to a recent series of studies which focus on various kinds of sex/gender "transgression," in part for what they help reveal about dominant norms of sex/gender/sexual identity. For instance, Hall's work with Indian *hijras* (ritual specialists, mostly men, who describe themselves as hermaphrodites but have often undergone a castration operation) highlights the process of socialization into gender: femaleness and femininity must be learned by *hijra*, much like others acquire a second language. Hall's work also interrogates the assumption that highly visible and culturally central gender ambiguity suggests higher cultural tolerance for gender variation, pointing out the range of exclusion and abuse experienced by *hijra* in India (Hall 1997; Hall and O'Donovan 1996). By looking at the ways that *'yan daudu* (Nigerian men who talk like women, and often have men as sexual partners) transgress norms of gender and sexuality, Gaudio (1996, 1997) suggests how, even in a patriarchal Islamic society that in principle accords all men potential access to masculine power, this access is not equally distributed, nor unconditional. Cameron's (1997a) study of college men watching a basketball game, and gossiping about other men whom they label "gay," shows how some men continually construct themselves as heterosexual by denigrating other men, labeling them as "gay" in the absence of any information or

even any indicators about their sexuality because their clothes or behavior or speech are perceived as “insufficiently masculine.” Kulick’s work on Brazilian *travestis* addresses the question of what it is about the hegemonic definitions of sexuality and gender in Brazil that make it logical and meaningful for males who desire other males to radically modify their bodies (1998: 225). See also Besnier (1993, this volume) for work on gender liminality in Polynesia.

Studying discourse from or about sexual minorities is not, however, the only strategy for highlighting how gender is learned and performed. Indeed, to study gender in this way may suggest or assume that there is a closer relationship between sexuality and gender than between either of these and any other aspect of social identity, a question which itself deserves empirical investigation (Sedgwick 1990). It may also suggest that the construction of hegemonic gender norms is most closely linked to procreational needs (Hawkesworth 1997). The ways in which gender is imbricated in other axes of identity, the ways in which certain notions of gender can reinforce or challenge certain notions about class and ethnicity, is part of what we must begin to investigate more closely. Barrett’s (1994) study of the linguistic strategies used by African American drag queens shows how they appropriate stereotypes of White women’s speech in order to parody and critique certain White stereotypes about Black men (including the myth of the Black male rapist). Inoue’s (forthcoming) genealogical approach to Japanese women’s language (JWL) highlights the co-construction of gender, class, and national identity. Although some linguists have described JWL as a speech variety spoken by all Japanese women, traceable back to feudal Japan, Inoue shows how JWL was actively constructed during the late nineteenth century as part of the construction and consolidation of a modern nation-state meant to withstand the Western colonial inroads visible elsewhere in Asia. Similarly, Siegal’s (1994) study of White women in Japan who resist using certain Japanese linguistic strategies deemed appropriate for women because they perceive them as overly hesitant or humble suggests both how certain kinds of Japanese femininity are constructed with language use and what gendered norms prevail for these White Westerners. Finally, my work on women working in a traditionally masculine, working-class workplace highlights some prevailing notions of what it means to be a woman, what it means to be a man, and what it means to be a police officer, as it examines how those notions are critiqued and changed by female police officers (McElhinny 1994, 1995, 1996). By looking at men and women’s crossover into spheres and spaces often predominantly associated with the other, we begin to get a sense of how the boundaries between those spheres are actively maintained, how gender is policed, how people resist these boundaries, and perhaps what transformation requires.

It is worth considering why post-structuralist models of gender have been so readily embraced by sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists working on gender. Our very subject matter – language – may lend itself to an ability to focus on gender and the social construction of “sex.” People’s ability to adapt language readily and rapidly from situation to situation, addressee to addressee,

may accord people an unusual degree of agency and flexibility in their construction of themselves in a way that other forms of cultural and actual capital can and do not (e.g. body hexus, occupational opportunities). The fruitfulness of this approach for sociolinguistic inquiry should not too quickly lead us into endorsing this approach as “the” appropriate model for understanding gender/sex systems, without carefully attending to the ways different cultural and economic contexts may lead to other ways of understanding sex, gender, and sexuality. The question of how to think of gender as something which is structure and practice, institutional and individual, is one I develop in the next two sections.

2 Gender as Activity and Relation

To suggest that gender is something one continually does is to challenge the idea that gender is something one has. A variety of metaphors have arisen to capture this idea: gender as activity, gender as performance, gender as accomplishment. As a group they can be understood as embodying a practice-based approach to gender, and as such they participate in a wider move within linguistic and sociocultural anthropology since the mid-1970s to use practice-based models (Abu-Lughod 1991; Hanks 1990; Ochs 1996; Ortner 1984, 1996). Practice theory reacts against structural-determinist social theories (e.g. British-American structural-functionalism, determinist strands of Marxism and French structuralism) that did not incorporate a sufficient sense of how human actions make structure. Although Ortner (1996) argues that key practice theorists (she lists Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens, Marshall Sahlins, and Michel de Certeau) often make little attempt to engage with work by feminist, subaltern, post-colonial, and minority scholars, and vice versa, her argument ignores feminist linguistic anthropological work, perhaps in part because it works outside the intellectual genealogy she establishes here (see McElhinny 1998). A number of recent works in feminist linguistic anthropology *do* draw on practice theory, but they have been often as influenced by the work of Soviet psychology (especially Vygotsky and his students) as by the theorists she names. Before exploring these works, it is, however, useful to consider the roots of the notion of gender as an attribute, and the problems with that notion that a practice-based approach tries to address.

Judith Butler argues that:

[H]umanist conceptions of the subject tend to assume a substantive person who is the bearer of various essential and nonessential attributes. A humanist feminist position might understand gender as an attribute of a person who is characterized essentially as a pregendered substance or “core” called the person, denoting a universal capacity for reason, moral deliberation or language. (1990: 10)

She goes on to contrast this view with those historical and anthropological approaches that understand gender as a relation among socially constituted subjects in specifiable contexts. The model of personhood described by Butler has been called abstract individualism, defined as an approach to understanding the relationship of people to society which “considers individual human beings as social atoms, abstracted from their social contexts, and disregards the role of social relationships and human community in constituting the very identity and nature of individual human beings” (Weiss 1995: 163). Although Butler does not make this point, others have pointed out that abstract individualism is a part of the liberal political philosophy which arose alongside and helps undergird capitalist social relations in Western nation-states. Liberal philosophy argued for the inherent equality of men (I use the masculine noun advisedly), based on each man’s inherent rationality. Each was supposed to be able to identify his own interests, and to be enabled to pursue them. Ensuring the conditions for each man’s autonomy and fulfillment has been linked to preserving the right to private property (Jaggar 1983: 34). The focus on rationality as the essence of human nature has, as has been frequently remarked, led to an ahistoricism and universalism in liberal theory: “[liberalism] does not place any philosophical importance on such ‘accidental’ differences between human individuals as the historical period in which they live, their rank or class position, their race or their sex” (Jaggar 1983: 32).

Contrasting conceptions of gender in commodity- and in gift-based societies helps make clear how and why gender comes to be seen as possessed by individuals in capitalist societies, as Strathern has pointed out. Commodity and gift each refer to ways to organize social relations. In commodity societies, a relationship is established between the objects exchanged, while in gift exchange a relation is established between the exchanging subjects. In a commodity-oriented economy, people experience a desire to appropriate goods; in a gift-oriented economy, people desire to expand social relations. In a commodity society, “both the capabilities available to the person and the resources available to society are construed as ‘things’ having a prior natural or utilitarian value in themselves” (Strathern 1988: 135). People who are understood as owning their own labor also “own their minds . . . and their minds turn the proprietor of his or her own actions also into the author of them” (1988: 135). It is an idiosyncratic feature of a Western bourgeois way of understanding property that suggests that singular items are attached to singular owners, with the fact of possession constructing the possessor as a unitary social entity. Individuals, in this view, are understood as a source of action, an embodiment of sentiment and emotion, and an author of ideas.³

Often enough, anthropologists working from within a Western tradition have continued to use a commodity logic to understand gender. They have, that is, continued to be fascinated by the attributes of things, and to locate possession, ownership, control, in a one-to-one relation between discrete attributes and the unitary individual. In Melanesia, however, metaphors of interaction are more useful than metaphors of possession for understanding gender: selves

are understood as registers of their encounters with one another, microcosms of interaction. People are understood as dependent upon others for knowledge of their internal selves, rather than as authors of accounts of them.

Now, ways of conceiving gender as something other than a possession or attribute are not only found in non-Western cultural systems. They also are part of a challenge to hegemonic world-views in North America and Western Europe. Significantly, one of the best-developed scholarly accounts in the sociolinguistic tradition of gender as an activity draws on a Marxist psychological tradition: Soviet activity theory. The roots of activity theory are in the work of Vygotsky, with its emphasis on the social origins of consciousness (drawing upon Marx's Sixth Thesis on Feuerbach). The concept of activity was further developed by Leontyev, who elaborated upon Marx's First Thesis on Feuerbach. In *He-Said-She-Said*, Marjorie Harness Goodwin (1990) draws on the Vygotskian tradition to argue that activities, rather than cultures, groups, individuals, or gender, should be the basic unit of analysis for the study of interactive phenomena.⁴

Goodwin examines the different social structures created by African American boys and girls in a range of speech activities (directives, argument, gossip/dispute, instigating, and stories) and in a range of play activities (playing house, making slingshots, making glass rings, arguments). In some activities she finds girls and boys building systematically different social organizations and gender identities through their use of talk, and in others she finds them building similar structures.⁵ A focus on activities suggests that individuals have access to *different* activities, and thus to *different* cultures and different social identities, including a range of different genders. We discover that

stereotypes about women's speech . . . fall apart when talk in a range of activities is examined; in order to construct social personae appropriate to the events of the moment, the same individuals [will] articulate talk and gender differently as they move from one activity to another. (Goodwin 1990: 9)

Crucial to note here is that it is not just talk which varies across context, a point long familiar in sociolinguistics. Gender identity also varies across context. Language and gender co-vary. The particular contribution a focus on activities makes to linguistic research on gender, then, is that it changes the research question from what the differences are between men's and women's speech (an approach which serves to perpetuate and exaggerate the dichotomous gender categories, and to undergird the idea of gender as a possession) to when, whether, and how men and women's speech are done in similar and different ways.

In theoretically related work, Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet have argued that studying how gender is constructed in communities of practice challenges existing approaches to the study of gender in sociolinguistics. A *community of practice* "is an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavour. Ways of doing things, ways of talking,

beliefs, values, power relations – in short practices – emerge in the course of this mutual endeavour” (1992: 464).⁶ A community of practice identifies a somewhat larger analytic domain than does *activity*. Communities of practice articulate between macro-sociological structures such as class and everyday interactional practices by considering the groups in which individuals participate and how these shape their interactions. The groups in which they participate are in turn determined and constituted by their place within larger social structures. The notion of community of practice thus serves as a mediating region between local and global analysis (Bucholtz 1993). Studying communities of practice also allows us to investigate how gender interacts with other aspects of identity because “people’s access and exposure to, need for, and interest in different communities of practice are related to such things as their class, age, and ethnicity as well as to their sex” (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992: 472). In addition to investigating which communities speakers belong to, one can investigate how people manage memberships in different communities or different (perhaps hierarchical) positionalities within communities of practice, and how communities of practice are linked with other communities of practice. Sociolinguists still, however, need to explore the ways in which recent critiques of practice theory may or may not apply to our use of the concept of community of practice. Ortner (1996) points out that the practice-based approach moves beyond a view of social behavior as ordered by rules and norms, but that it also grants actors a great deal of agency, thus perhaps reproducing the hegemonic model of personhood (abstract individualism) of Western commodity-based societies. A deeper-seated critique of practice theory has arisen from the work of some Marxist scholars (see e.g. Smith 1999) who see the invocation of practice theory too often as the end of analysis rather than the beginning of a careful historical and cultural enquiry.

To focus on activities and practices does not lead us in precisely the same direction. Practice, in particular, allows one to retain some sense of the sedimentation of practice that occurs in certain institutional or cultural contexts. Still, the projects are similar in this sense: Eckert and McConnell-Ginet and Goodwin are each trying to find a way to critique essentializing analytic categories. This may not require us to abandon such notions as “gender,” as Goodwin recommends. “Gender” retains significance for people living their lives, not just people analyzing how people live their lives. This, too, is part of what we must capture in our analysis, without *assuming* the significance of gender. Ortner’s comments on the need to retain some notion of culture could equally well apply to gender:

Yet for all the problems with the use of the culture concept – the tendency to use it in such a way as to efface internal politics/difference, and to make others radically other – it does more violence to deny its presence and force in the social process than to keep it in the picture. For “culture” in the borderlands is both the grounds of negotiation and its object: it sets the terms of the encounters, but it is also what is at stake. (1996: 182)

The study of gender in workplaces also suggests some need to modify the strong claim that "the relevant unit for the analysis of cultural phenomena, including gender, is thus not the group as a whole, or the individual, but rather situated activities" (Goodwin 1990: 9). Gender is used as a way of allocating access to different forms of work and other resources. To focus on gender in activities alone may be to focus on the gender of individuals, but to lose sight of the gender of institutions. In this, activity theory may be said to betray its psychological origins. Many activity theorists, drawing on Marxist social theory, have remained cognizant of the importance of situating activities within larger social systems (cf. Leontyev 1981: 47). Nevertheless, in Soviet psychology, and in American practices influenced by it, the move beyond small-group interactions to the analysis of "the *system* of social relations," the study of "collectivities, institutions and historical processes" (Connell 1987: 139) is endlessly deferred. I believe, however, that the use of activities as a unit of analysis can be readily reconciled with a systemic focus, if it is adopted as a methodological tool rather than a theoretical approach.

A careful focus on activity becomes a rigorous tool for ethnographic analysis, asking either that one demonstrate that activities are understood as the "same" by participants, or that one find principled ways to explain differences. Different individuals may agree that they are participating in the same social activity (e.g. working as police officers), and even agree on the goals of that activity (e.g. preventing and punishing crime), but believe that there are different ways of achieving those same goals (for instance, writing an excellent report or stopping suspicious people on the street). The choice of an appropriate activity, then, for comparing the verbal strategies of men and women is crucial, and even after that choice is made, it must be demonstrated (rather than assumed) that the activity is the same for all participants, that they all interpret the goals of that activity in the same way, and that they believe the same interactional strategies are required for effecting those goals.

The study of work activities also highlights some problems with a notion related to "activity" and "practice" which currently enjoys significant popularity in gender theory, that of *performativity* (see Butler 1990; Case 1990; Parker and Sedgwick 1995). A focus on the construction of gender in activities seems to accord speakers a great deal of agency in their language choice, and in their construction of social identity. And yet, gender is perhaps only so malleable in a limited range of activities, including play activities, movies, masquerades. To focus only on the situations where gender is malleable diverts focus from continuing patterns of exclusion, subordination, normalization, and discrimination (see my discussion of when gender is relevant, below, as well as Cameron 1997b). Critiques such as this have led Butler to develop a revised notion of performativity, going under the name *citatornality* (1993), that in its very name seems to focus less on agency and more on institutional constraints. Livia and Hall (1997) make a strong case that Butler's use of speech act theory attends closely to institutional constraints, while Butler herself has repeatedly argued against an approach to agency that does not take political conditions underlying

its possibility into account (Butler 1992). However, this later version of her work may have swung too far in the opposite direction, with too great a focus on construction in ways which make agency invisible. In addition, "institutional constraints," as described by Butler, remain abstract rather than historically or socially precise.

3 The Gender of Institutions

The third problem with a focus on studying gender in heterosexual dyads is that it suggests that "gendered talk is mainly a personal characteristic or limited to the institution of the family" (Gal 1991: 185). This is then accompanied by a preference for studying gender in "informal conversations, often in one-to-one or small-group relationships in the family or neighborhood" (Gal 1991: 185). A focus on interactions between romantic partners in sociolinguistics draws attention away from the importance of studying the ways that "gender is a structural principle [organizing] other social institutions: workplaces, schools, courts, political assemblies and the state" and the patterns they display in "the recruitment, allocation, treatment, and mobility of men as opposed to women" (Gal 1991: 185). Because certain linguistic strategies are indirectly and indexically linked with certain groups, institutions need only be organized to define, demonstrate, and enforce the legitimacy and authority of linguistic strategies associated with one gender while denying the power of others to exclude one group without needing to make that exclusion explicit. In the case of policing, the downplaying of the importance of talk for effectively doing the job, and the overplaying of the importance of physical strength, can be seen as one strategy for excluding women from the job.⁷

Gender differences are created, for instance, in the division of labor into paid and unpaid work, in the sexual segregation of workplaces and the creation of "men's" and "women's" work, in differences in wages, and in discrimination in job training and promotion (see Connell 1987: 96). Gender differences are created in bureaucratic interactions in legal, medical, psychiatric, and welfare settings (McElhinny 1997). Gender thus should be understood as a principle for allocating access to resources, and a defense for systematic inequalities. It is, like class and racialized ethnicity, an axis for the organization of inequality, though the way each of these axes work may have their own distinctive features (Scott 1986: 1054, 1069). Though an institutional definition of gender has been influential in history (Scott 1986), sociology (Connell 1987: 139), and sociocultural anthropology (Ortner 1996; Silverblatt 1991), its implications have yet to be fully explored in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology (though see Gal 1997; Inoue 2000; Kuipers 1998; McElhinny 1994, 1995, forthcoming; Philips 2000), as well as recent work on gender and language ideology (Philips, this volume).

To assume that gender is attached only to individuals is to adopt uncritically the hegemonic ideology of gender in the USA. Perhaps the most elegant

exposition of this is in Ortner (1991), where she points out that one analytic puzzle for anthropologists studying the USA is how to talk about class when Americans rarely use this analytic category themselves.⁸ She argues class must be understood in terms of its displacement onto other categories: because hegemonic American culture takes both the ideology of social mobility and the ideology of individualism seriously, explanations for non-mobility not only focus on the failure of individuals (because they are said to be inherently lazy or stupid or whatever), but shift the domain of discourse to arenas that are taken to be “locked into” individuals – gender, race, ethnic origin, and so forth (1991: 171). Such an account becomes a serious critique of definitions of gender that uncritically adopt this hegemonic American notion of gender as attached to individuals in ways that fail to allow the theorizing of gender as a structural principle or the interaction of gender with systems of inequity.

4 When Gender is Relevant

Finally, we arrive at a question about the theorizing of gender that strikes at the heart of feminist analytic practice: is gender always salient and relevant? When she began her study of elementary school children, sociologist Barrie Thorne found that she was drawn to the moments when gender divisions were highlighted. These gender-marked moments seemed, she wrote, “to express core truths: that boys and girls are separate and fundamentally different as individuals and as groups. They help[ed] sustain a sense of dualism in the face of enormous variation and complex circumstances” (1990: 107). But the “truth,” she argues, turned out to be much more complex: we need, she maintains, to understand when gender is largely irrelevant, and when it seems central, when gender is marked and when it is unmarked, for it is only in “developing a sense of the whole and attending to the waning as well as the waxing of gender salience [that] we can specify not only the social relations that uphold but also those that undermine the construction of gender as binary opposition” (1990: 108). If part of the strategy, then, for studying gender is not assuming that gender is always relevant, do we need some method for determining and demonstrating when and how gender is relevant?

The question of relevance has been extensively discussed within conversational analysis. One of the implications of the recommendation that we study when gender is relevant and when it is not, is that even though a woman may be speaking, that does not mean that she is always speaking “as a woman.” To determine which aspects of an identity or a setting are relevant a conversational analyst must demonstrate that they are relevant to participants, something which is taken to be evident in their behavior since they must display to one another what they take their relevant identities to be as the basis for their ongoing interaction (Schegloff 1987, 1992). The principle of relevance means that “CA transcripts of talk pay little attention to social relations and to what other

approaches call 'social context,' e.g. social identities of participants, setting, personal attributes, and so on. By intentionally ignoring what are often assumed to be static features of a social world . . . CA reflects . . . the ethnomethodological avoidance of premature generalizations and idealizations" (Schiffrin 1994: 235).

An example of work which arrives at such premature generalizations, in Schegloff's view, is a well-known series of studies of interruptions, by Candace West and Don Zimmerman, which argues that men interrupt women more frequently than women interrupt men (West and Zimmerman 1983; Zimmerman and West 1975). The problem with such work, argues Schegloff, is that it is not at all clear that the characterizations which the investigator makes are those which are grounded in the participants' own orientations in the interaction (1987: 215). So far, this argument resonates with some of the most careful and sensitive critiques of studies of interruption (cf. especially Tannen 1989, 1990) which argue that studies focusing solely on gender fail to take into account ethnicity, personality, ongoing relationships, and other aspects of identity which might be relevant. However, this is not the way Schegloff's argument proceeds. The problem, he argues, is that gender (and class and ethnicity) are not "analytically linked to specific conversational mechanisms by which the outcomes might be produced" (1987: 215). They are not, he argues, linked to conversation in any specific way:

the resolution of an overlap is, in the first instance, not determined or effectuated by the attributes of the parties; otherwise the outcome of an interruption would be entirely determined at its beginning. . . . It may well be that women are interrupted more than they interrupt, but the introduction of such an "external" attribute early in the research process or the account can deflect attention from how the outcome of the conversational course of action is determined *in its course, in real time*. (emphasis in original – 1987: 216)

The principle of demonstrating relevance leads Schegloff to believe that analysts can often only responsibly talk about people's identities in terms of the roles they play in conversation:

[A]lthough it may be problematic to warrant "in a hospital" as a formulation of context, or "doctor/patient" as an identification of the participants, it may be relatively straightforward to warrant "two-party conversation" or "on the telephone" as contexts and "caller/called" as identifications of the participants. Because they are procedurally related to the doing of the talk, evidence of orientation to them ordinarily is readily available. (1987: 219–20)

Talking about identity in this way leads one, as Schegloff freely acknowledges (1987: 228–9), to grant priority to a "unitarian" approach to social theory rather than an approach that focuses on variations in social identity. Although Schegloff quite reasonably asks why the differences linked to class, ethnicity, gender, and institution should be perceived as more interesting than what is similar, his recommendation does not seem to accord much space for

determining whether a focus on difference or similarity is more important in a given context. Schegloff's argument thus challenges the idea that gender is always relevant with an approach that suggests analysts should ask when gender is relevant; but he ultimately seems to suggest that gender is never relevant. This approach simply returns us to abstract individualism. It is perhaps noteworthy that Marjorie Harness Goodwin, a feminist practitioner of conversational analysis, does not use this rigorous criterion for gender relevance.

Feminist scholars in all disciplines have rightly been suspicious of theories which seem to focus on abstract individuals and which leave little space for the study of gender and other aspects of social identity. Although invoking similarities between men and women may be warranted by, and politically effective in, some situations (see McElhinny 1996; Scott 1990), in many others such invocations have led to the application of unacknowledged masculine norms to women in ways that have led their behavior to be judged as inferior. The solution to this problem may be not to focus on *when* gender is relevant but *how* it is relevant, a question which has been recently addressed by Ochs (1992). Ochs critiques earlier feminist work on language (e.g. Lakoff 1975) which assumes that there is a straightforward mapping of language onto gender (or that, in more technical terms, language is a referential index of gender). Such referential models have been shown to be the dominant ideology of language in many Western capitalist countries (e.g. Silverstein 1979). Schegloff also adopts a referential model of language and social identity, though instead of using that model (as Lakoff 1975 does) to specify the features of "women's" language, he denies that there is any such possibility. Ochs argues that in any given community there is only a small set of linguistic forms that referentially, or directly and exclusively, index gender. Examples in English include third-person pronouns – *he, she, him, her* – and some address forms like *Mr, Mrs, and Ms*. Instead gender and other aspects of social identity are much more frequently non-referentially, or indirectly, indexed with language. Non-referential indices are non-exclusive (that is, a given form is not used only by a single group, such as women) and constitutive (that is, the relationship between a linguistic form and a social identity is not direct but mediated). With this view the relationship of language and social identity moves from a model which suggests that *A means B* to one in which *A can mean B, which can mean C*. It moves, for example, from a claim that the use of tag questions means that you are a female speaker, to a claim that the use of a tag question is sometimes a way of softening a harsh utterance, or indicating tentativeness, or eliciting contributions from a silent or isolated person. One or other of these strategies may be more often adopted by women because of cultural and ideological expectations about femininity, or a given hearer may be more likely to assume that a woman speaker is using one of these strategies because of cultural and ideological expectations about femininity.

This indexical model of the relationship between linguistic forms and the construction of social identity thus accounts for different interpretations that different hearers may assign to a single speaker's utterance: someone with an

ideology about women that suggests that they are hesitant and tentative may interpret a tag question in one way, while another hearer interprets the same tag question as that speaker's attempt to mitigate an otherwise harsh statement. Crucially, the assignment of situational meaning is interactionally governed: "Interlocutors may use these structures to index a particular identity, affect, or other situational meaning; however, others co-present may not necessarily assign the same meaning" (Ochs 1996: 413). Indeed, speakers and hearers may exploit this ambiguity. The range of meanings that a form potentially indexes is larger than those it actually indexes in any given instance of use. This structurally limited indeterminacy means language can be used to build different social orders: either simultaneously, or sequentially. Thus, "members of societies are agents of culture rather than merely bearers of a culture that has been handed down to them and encoded in grammatical form. The constitutive perspective on indexicality incorporates the post-structural view that the relation between person and society is dynamic and mediated by language" (1996: 416). Clearly part of what we must ask when asking if gender is relevant is "to whom? for what?"

Duranti argues that ultimately the question of relevance is one which requires ethnographic investigation (1997: 271–5), but even this may not suffice if one is not also cautious in one's definition of culture and ethnography.⁹ What is taken for granted about reality and what is questioned may not be a function of the culture taken as a whole, since members of a culture do not accept the same parts of the world as granted, in part because people's horizons of relevance are shaped by the tasks in which they are engaged, and in part because knowledge of the world is shaped and regulated by power (Blommaert 1999; Smith 1999).

5 Conclusion

This chapter has suggested that certain theoretical assumptions about gender have led to a focus on certain kinds of studies in sociolinguistics (especially studies of heterosexual dyads), to the neglect of others. Indeed, "theoretical assumptions" is perhaps too general a description. Instead, it is possible to speak of these presuppositions as ideologies linked to some dominant ways of conceptualizing gender in Western capitalist contexts. If studies of gender proceed without assuming a close association between gender, sex, and (hetero)sexuality, if gender is understood as an activity rather than a relation, if we consider gender as an institutionalized principle for allocating access to resources, and if we carefully explore when, and how, and why, and to whom gender is relevant, then it becomes possible to study gender and language in communities, contexts, cultures, and times where alternative assumptions prevail, and to challenge these dominant ideologies where they help to perpetuate inequities in Western contexts.

NOTES

- 1 Thorne (1990) points out that the assumption that gender is best studied when maximally contrastive has led to opposed assumptions about how gender should be studied amongst children and adults.
- 2 For descriptions of feminist standpoint theory see Harding (1991), Collins (1990), and Jaggar (1983).
- 3 For further ethnographic critiques of this focus on individual "ownership" of utterances see Duranti (1992), Morgan (1991), and Rosaldo (1982).
- 4 Goodwin's recommendation that we focus on activities has parallels in the recommendations of cultural anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod (1991).
- 5 Edelsky's (1981) work on the construction of conversational floors in mixed-gender committee meetings at a university supports a similar conclusion.
- 6 See Holmes and Meyerhoff (1999) and Bucholtz (1999) for discussions of how "community of practice" differs from traditional sociolinguistic definitions of speech community. Other papers in Holmes (1999) explore the potential and limits of the concept.
- 7 Bergvall (1999) also calls for more attention to larger-scale formations that sustain and regulate gender, though in ways different from those described here.
- 8 Di Leonardo (1998) rightly critiques Ortner (1991) for claiming that research on social class is a marginal anthropological concern. Nonetheless, Ortner's consideration of complex interactions of systems of inequity asks us to do research in ways that not only consider gender, ethnicity, class, age, etc., but also the relative local prominence of these, and the ways inequities in one can be obscured by ideologies which foreground another (see also Ortner 1996; Ortner and Whitehead 1981).
- 9 See Cameron (1997b) for a recommendation similar to Duranti's.

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