

Epilogue: Reflections on Language and Gender Research

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1 Introduction

In the second half of the twentieth century, social science researchers, among them linguists, directed what might easily be considered an excessive amount of attention to the discussion of *differences* between the sexes, including sex differences in language. Starting in the 1960s, sociolinguists, working as urban dialectologists, began providing detailed descriptions of characteristics that were said to distinguish women's and men's speech (Wolfram 1969; Trudgill 1972; Labov 1972). In 1973, Robin Lakoff's now classic article, "Language and Woman's Place" (Lakoff 1973), changed the research landscape and launched a new era of work on "women and language." Lakoff's work did not change the emphasis on difference, however, and women's and men's speech continued to be compared and contrasted. With some notable exceptions (e.g. Gal 1978; Nichols 1983), it has only been since the early 1990s that researchers have seriously rethought the validity of taking sex and gender *difference* as a starting point for research on the interaction of language, sex, and gender. It has only been in those years that sociolinguists have finally begun examining and reporting the significant heterogeneity within women's linguistic practices and within men's, and have begun noticing the similarity of the language of many women and many men. Perhaps even more importantly, since the early 1990s, researchers have increasingly understood the need to examine the complexity and the fluidity of the concept of gender. Despite the changes that have taken place in the scholarly field of language and gender and the innovative approaches that have emerged in the years since 1990 (see, for example, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992, 1995; Hall and Bucholtz 1995; Bergvall, Bing, and Freed 1996; Livia and Hall 1997; and Bucholtz, Liang, and Sutton, 1999), there are still relatively few widely available published discussions which criticize the approach that takes female-male difference as both a starting point and as an explanation for linguistic behavior.

In this final chapter of the *Handbook of Language and Gender*, I would like to outline what we have now learned from language and gender research, drawing in part from the chapters in this collection and in part from other research published since 1973. Many (but not all) of the chapters in this volume reflect the shift that has taken place in the field of language and gender. This shift, as Janet Holmes and Miriam Meyerhoff explain in the Introduction, is best described as a movement away from “essentialist and dichotomous conceptions of gender to a differentiated, contextualized, and performative model which questions generalized claims about gender” (Introduction, p. 7). Despite this change, popular accounts of male and female language remain unchanged; institutional discourse and the invocation in institutional settings of stereotypes about women and men remain strong. Many of the authors in this volume address this phenomenon as they focus on the culturally constructed ideological underpinnings that help secure the belief in a sharp dichotomy between men and women.

In what follows, I will provide evidence that indicates that neither trade, academic, nor scholarly publications adequately represent the research findings of this area of sociolinguistics. I will illustrate that despite limited corroboration that significant language distinctions even exist between women and men, a considerable amount of print media continues to characterize women’s and men’s language as different. This will lead me to the principal theme of this chapter, namely an examination of why public perceptions of the way women and men talk do not match the language patterns that researchers have identified through careful investigation. I will examine the basis for the pervasive fascination with and emphasis on sex and gender difference, and I will investigate the tenaciousness of the public portrayal of women and men as speaking in ways that are distinctly different from one another regardless of how each is depicted. I will propose three reasons or possible causes for this persistent and most curious phenomenon.

First of all, it occurs to me that those of us doing language and gender research are partially responsible for the mismatch between research findings and public discussions of language and gender. We have not sufficiently concerned ourselves, and I include myself in this criticism, with public attitudes about language, sex, and gender. We commonly dismiss popular views about language as uninformed and continue talking to and writing only for one another. Second, we have not always adequately guarded against perpetuating, albeit unintentionally, a fair number of sex and gender stereotypes by overgeneralizing our own research results as well as the findings of others. Deborah Cameron, Janet Holmes and Maria Stubbe, Bonnie McElhinny, Mary Talbot, and Sara Trechter make similar points in their chapters in this volume. Mary Talbot goes so far as to suggest that the mere act of listing features of speech traditionally, but incorrectly, assumed to be associated with women or men serves to perpetuate the belief in these very language characteristics. Deborah Cameron makes a similar point in her chapter on gender and language

ideologies (this volume, p. 463). Finally and most importantly, it is my contention that at least in the West, we are witnessing a reaction to (perhaps a backlash against) the process of gender destabilization whereby the supposed certainty of two sexes and two genders, and the concomitant certainty of the naturalness of heterosexuality, is gradually being eroded.

2 Research Findings: Language and Gender from 1973 to the Present

From 1973 to the end of the twentieth century, language and gender research was dominated by three major themes which theorized both the impressions and the presumed realities of female and male speech. Because these frameworks have been exhaustively described, evaluated, and critiqued elsewhere in the language and gender literature (see Crawford 1995; Freed 1995; Cameron 1998), and are reviewed in a number of the chapters of this volume (e.g. Bucholtz, Cameron, Romaine, Sidnell, and Talbot), I will sketch them only briefly. The earliest modern theory about “women’s language,” most often associated with Robin Lakoff (1973), is commonly referred to as the *deficit theory*. It described women’s language as ineffective in comparison to men’s and explained women’s manner of speaking as being a reflection of women’s insecurity and powerless place in society. By contrast, the *dominance theory* of language and gender, presented first by Barrie Thorne and Nancy Henley in 1975 (see also Fishman 1983), focused on issues of patriarchy – that is, male power and dominance. Researchers characterized the social and political arrangement between the sexes as one in which women were viewed and treated as unequal to men because the norms of society had literally been established by men. The division of labor between women and men was seen to include a division of language practices, one belonging to the powerful and the other belonging to women. Language differences were identified as part of a structure of unequal access and influence. Finally, the *difference theory*, represented by the writings of Daniel Maltz and Ruth Borker (1982) and Deborah Tannen (1990, 1994), hypothesized that women and men used specific and distinct verbal strategies and communicative styles which were developed in same-sex childhood peer groups. Researchers who adhered to this framework believed that by focusing on language difference instead of power difference (or male dominance), the antagonistic comparison between women and men could be avoided and the positive values of each language style could be celebrated. Feminist linguists who objected to the difference framework (Troemel-Ploetz 1991; Freed 1992; Uchida 1992) argued that the particular sets of verbal strategies associated with women and men emerged not in a vacuum but were an integral part of the power arrangements between men and women in societies around the world.

As has been argued by numerous researchers in recent years, all three of these approaches are limited and flawed. (For useful discussions see Henley and Kramarae 1991; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992, 1995.) Each of the frameworks concentrates on the verbal characteristics of women, or as Sally Johnson (1997) observes, each of the approaches is “characterized by almost exclusive *problematization of women*” (Johnson, 1997: 10), and each makes use “of a concept of gender based on *binary opposition*. The tacit hypothesis of many studies seems to be that men and women are essentially different and that this difference will be reflected in their contrasting use of language” (1997: 11). The shortcomings of this essentialist view are rigorously argued in many chapters of this volume and the analyses provided explain how women and men have been continually naturalized into separate categories by a variety of deeply embedded social, historic, and linguistic ideologies. (For further discussion, see, among others, the chapters in this volume by Deborah Cameron, Penelope Eckert, Bonnie McElhinny, Miriam Meyerhoff, and Susan Philips.)

Not only did considerable debate develop about how to conceptualize the nature of language and gender research but, as Penelope Eckert and Suzanne Romaine each describe in their chapters of the Handbook, a substantial body of criticism arose of the entire quantitative sociolinguistics paradigm, a paradigm that attempted to correlate linguistic behavior with sex (or gender), race, and social class, as straightforward categories of social scientific investigation. We have now established with sizeable amounts of data the diversity of speech patterns and the mosaic of language practices within the category called “male” and within the one designated as “female.” As magnificently portrayed in many of the chapters in this book, the over-reaching conclusion to be drawn about language practices among girls, boys, women, and men is the presence of elaborate variability. Janet Holmes and Maria Stubbe (this volume) remind us that when studied closely, gendered linguistic practices that have been over-generalized “unravel” and become more complex. Marjorie Goodwin’s data (this volume) confirm that “the notion that girls are fundamentally interested in cooperative, face-saving interaction” is called into question by “transcripts of naturally occurring behavior in disputes” in cross-cultural comparisons (this volume, p. 243). Penelope Eckert concludes that “if there is a consistent gender pattern in all these data, then, it is the girls’ greater overall use of linguistic variability across social categories” (this volume, p. 393). We can cite large numbers of examples in which men and boys talk the way “women” are expected to sound; similarly, we have determined that girls’ and women’s speech often fails to conform to the speech patterns that had been assumed. And yet, despite the extensive body of data that have been amassed, analyzed, interpreted, and published, the general impression that the lay public and the academic community (at least in North America) seem to have about the way women and men speak remains fairly unaltered. (See James and Clarke 1993; James and Drakich 1993; and James 1996 for reviews of conflicting findings regarding three language features that have repeatedly been described as characteristic of women’s speech.)

3 Disputing “Female” and “Male” as Binary Categories

Disagreement with and opposition to studies that frame social scientific research around binary dichotomous categories (whether considering difference between the sexes, among socio-economic classes, between public and private activities, or racial and ethnic groups) is gaining ground in all the social sciences and is well represented in this volume. (For additional discussion, see Bem 1993; Crawford 1995; Bing and Bergvall 1996; Gibbon 1999.) The fundamental problem with describing human beings in terms of difference is that the concept invariably leads to a ranking or privileging of one group over another. Establishing one group as “different” from another situates one of the two groups as the standard or norm by which the second is judged; the second group can then be characterized as deviant, deficient, or just slightly on the margin. In the case of sex or gender, the masculine norm has defined activities in the arts, in education, in publishing, in government, in sports, in the health industry, in work, play, and sexual practice. Accordingly, women are measured and their nature determined based on how they differ from men.

Discussions that emphasize difference also lead to a reification of the notion of human social difference, thereby creating a sense that these distinctions are natural, static, and immutable. Catherine MacKinnon (1984) provides a useful illustration of this principle when she cautions that if women and men are theorized to be different, then the notion of different but equal under the law in the United States is an impossible goal. As she explains it, in the realm of the law, equality is a prize awarded to likes:

According to the approach to sex equality that has dominated politics, law, and social perception, equality is an equivalence, not a distinction, and sex is a distinction. The legal mandate of equal treatment . . . becomes a matter of treating likes alike and unlikes unlike; and the sexes are defined as such by their natural unlikeness. Put another way, gender is socially constructed as difference epistemologically, . . . a built-in tension exists between this concept of equality, which presupposes sameness, and this concept of sex, which presupposes difference. (MacKinnon 1984: 32–3)

Similar themes have long surfaced in feminist scholarship. Cynthia Fuchs Epstein in her book *Deceptive Distinctions: Sex, Gender and the Social Order* (1988) explains:

Analyses of research on modes of communication, like research on other behavioral and attitudinal differences between the sexes, indicate that what “everyone knows” to be true may turn out not to be true at all. Differences tend to be superficial, and they are often linked to power differentials – associated with female and male status but not necessarily paired with them – and they are situation-specific.

But beyond these findings, the research shows that many widely assumed differences turn out to be mere stereotypes; that there are more similarities in men's and women's behavior than is commonly believed. Whether humans need to create differences between the sexes actively or symbolically . . . or whether the creation and maintenance of distinction are a self-conscious activity of the powerful whose interests are served by them or whether differences once created by intent or accident become perpetuated through a process of institutionalization, it seems clear that most gender differences are socially created and therefore may be socially altered. (1988: 231)

As expressed repeatedly in the chapters of this volume, feminist researchers writing on this topic consider that it is the popular and prevailing understanding of *gender* as the social and behavioral manifestation of *sex* that lies at the heart of the issue we are dealing with. That *language* is the vehicle for conveying expectations about gendered behavior further complicates matters because this deeply entrenched view of gender is recursively articulated and becomes naturalized and normalized through countless everyday language activities and linguistic practices. As William Leap explains (this volume), texts, that is, various forms of linguistic production, are a primary site of gender construction. He writes:

Genders are cultural constructions, and not determined entirely or primarily by bodily form or biological function. Accordingly, studies of gendered experience frequently use *text* as an entry point for such inquiry, because gender is negotiated and contested through the production and circulation of life stories, personal anecdotes, gossip and other narratives, legal statements, ritual oratory, words of advice and practical caution, jokes, songs, and other forms of expressive language, as well as through word borrowings, modifications to existing vocabulary, and new word formations. (p. 402)

The simple acts of referring to, describing, and addressing one another, the topics so well captured in Sally McConnell-Ginet's chapter on social labeling, all create notions of gender as seemingly fixed and stable. Proverbs and folktales, as Robin Lakoff points out (this volume), as well as the multitude of ways that language represents us, the "linguistic sexism" that Anne Pauwels studies (this volume), all conspire to create a sense of fixed reality. We are constantly reminded, however, that reality is indeed in the eyes of the beholder.

This is a good place to digress with a terminological concern. A key element of my discussion is that we need to break down various destructive dichotomies in order to learn more about the legitimate character and interworkings of language, sex, and gender. I am contesting the widely held view that humans can be naturally and categorically classified into two neat groups called either "women" and "men" or "females" and "males." Yet in the process of criticizing the use of these dichotomies, I am invoking several dichotomies of my own and I want to acknowledge straight away my awareness of this inconsistency. In this chapter, I am focusing on the dichotomy between perceived or believed as distinct from actual or empirical accounts of language use. I am simultaneously

assuming the existence of an essentialist versus a constructed theory of sex and gender. Furthermore, I am continuing to use the words *female* and *male* and *woman* and *man* (see Rosenblum and Travis 1996) while arguing against the immutable nature of the very categories that these terms are said to name. This predicament is forced upon me by the nature of the language available to us for the purposes of a discussion such as this. (See Bing and Bergvall 1996.) So as we contemplate the public perceptions of language use that are distinct from established linguistic evidence, we need to recognize the ways that our own use of language infiltrates and partly shapes what we are able to say.

4 The Language Data

Three decades into the study of language, sex, and gender, we still find a remarkable discrepancy between public perceptions of how women and men speak (and how they are expected to speak) and the actual character of the language that people use. The persistence of this contradiction underscores the vitality of well-entrenched stereotypes about sex and gender and the weight and influence of societal efforts to maintain the impression of difference between women and men.

Sociolinguists, linguistic anthropologists, and other scholars have now analyzed vast quantities of naturally occurring speech samples from a wide range of contexts. These data demonstrate in vivid detail that the amount of talk, the structure of narratives, the use of questions, the availability of cooperative and competitive speech styles, the employment of prestige speech forms, the use of intimate friendly talk, the occurrence of various phonological and prosodic patterns sometimes representative of linguistic change, the occurrence of vernacular speech forms, lexical choices, the use of silence, interruption, aggravated forms of address, and forms of politeness – these do not correlate in any consistent pattern with either sex or gender. Researchers have substantiated again and again that speakers use language in creative and divergent ways depending on a wide range of factors including (but not limited to) setting and context, type of activity engaged in, group, social, and personal identity, topic of conversation, channel of communication, community of practice, audience, language repertoires of various sorts, economic and symbolic resources, political purpose, symbolic and actual resistance to various forms of oppression, relative rank, and nature of relationship to addressee. Despite our knowledge base, the stereotypes, the ideas that we might call folklinguistic beliefs, remain strong. As Mary Talbot reminds us (this volume), “Stereotyping as a representational practice is at the center of the notion of folklinguistics” (p. 472).

Consider just a fraction of the research findings for English: we have an analysis of the speech of United States senators speaking at the confirmation hearings for the nomination of Clarence Thomas to be a Justice of the United

States Supreme Court (Mendoza-Denton 1995); a study of Latina teenagers engaged in and resisting therapeutic discourse in California (Cathryn Houghton 1995); details about middle-aged African American women telling stories in their homes in Chicago (Marcyliena Morgan 1991); an ethnography of groups of European American high school students talking among themselves in Detroit, some identified with mainstream culture and others rebelling against it (Penelope Eckert 1989a, 1989b). We have a description of female and male telephone sex-workers (Kira Hall 1995), of female and male police officers at work (Bonnie McElhinny 1995), of White middle-class adolescents verbally engaged at the dinner table (Alice Greenwood 1996), of college students talking about friendship as part of an experiment (Alice Freed and Alice Greenwood 1996); of members of a Canadian university tribunal examining cases of sexual assault (Susan Ehrlich and Ruth King 1996; Susan Ehrlich 1998). There are investigations of male students speaking in American college fraternity houses (Scott Kiesling 1997), of an African American teacher working with her students in a classroom (Michele Foster 1995), of college-aged men gossiping (Sally Johnson and Frank Finlay 1997), of lesbians telling their coming-out stories (Kathleen Wood 1999), of White middle-class American women telling their pregnancy stories (Freed 1996), of people interacting over the Internet (Susan Herring et al. 1995), of school-aged children playing jump-rope (Marjorie H. Goodwin 1999), of middle-class British women talking to close personal friends (Jennifer Coates 1996), of doctors and patients interacting (Candace West 1990), of people talking in the workplace (Shari Kendall and Deborah Tannen 1997), gay speech (William Leap 1995), lesbian language, heterosexual communication, political and legal discourse, conversation at university faculty meetings, testimony before grand juries and special prosecutors, telephone exchanges, old speakers, young speakers, speakers with a variety of kinds of aphasia and dementia. From a wide array of published accounts we have learned that our language use is vital, ever-changing, flexible and creative, sometimes stilted, other times polite, occasionally rude and vulgar, alternately filled with slang or with literary forms, useful for political, social, and personal affirmation, rebellion, resistance, confrontation, conformity, argumentation, love-making, and friendship.

From this we have definitively substantiated significant degrees of linguistic variation in the speech of women; we have clear evidence that men's language does not constitute a single style or form. Yet despite the enormity of our research results, the public representation of the way women and men speak is almost identical to the characterization provided thirty years earlier. These deeply entrenched gender-specific linguistic stereotypes apparently serve critical social purposes; they appear to maintain not only a status quo that advantages men over women and heterosexuals over homosexuals and lesbians, but one that helps establish and maintain rules of feminine and masculine behavior even if these generalizations fail to reflect social or linguistic reality.

5 Sources of Evidence about Public Views of Language Difference

We may ask what evidence exists that our research has not had an impact on public perceptions, or at least public discourse about women's and men's language. I will provide two types of data to support my claim: (1) an informal and anecdotal review of twenty-five years of students' comments on the topic, and (2) an analysis of several on-line library databases of print media sources.

When I have queried my own American university students about how women and men talk, they have always quickly and easily provided predictable responses. Although I no longer ask the question, they still volunteer the same information – just less directly. My students say that women curse less than men and that little girls are explicitly taught not to curse at all. Students report that men use obscenities quite freely, though in theory, not around women because boys are admonished from cursing in the presence of their mothers or sisters. I learn each year from a new crop of students that women are less direct in their speech, though students find it hard to describe what it means to be verbally indirect. Women are consistently portrayed as more polite, friendlier in their use of language, and are said to use better grammar than men. Men make more sexual comments, my students report. Men use blunter language. Women are more hesitant in their speech than men. Women ask more questions than men. Men won't ask for directions when they are lost. Some of these verbal myths have even passed into American popular culture and turn up on Internet lists of "100 reasons why it is good to be a man" (or a woman, as the case might be). These are all well-known examples of linguistic practices stereotypically associated with women and men.

When I ask my students if they believe what they are saying, they quickly, unhesitatingly, reply that they are merely reporting stereotypes. Then the personal stories emerge. The students, one by one, describe a friend or relative who talks like a woman – even though he is a man. They talk about how their own language was corrected by parents or teachers when they were children but how they pay little attention to these instructions now that they are adults – except maybe during a job interview or perhaps, they admit, in class. The students I interact with never fail to give me specific examples that are in direct contradiction to the very list of characteristics that they have helped compile.

If the students realize that the speech characteristics that they are cataloguing are not real, why do they supply almost identical lists, year after year? Is it the question itself about male/female verbal differences that prompts their reply? Why don't they resist the question? The list of linguistic features is on the tips of their tongues and the thoughts about the assumed nature of women's speech and men's speech are very much part of their cultural

knowledge. Just as much part of their knowledge, however, is the reality that each of them speaks in different ways at various times and that they are able to alter their language, change their projected image, shape their identity, and affect their interactions with others through the language they use. Where do our students', or at least my students', impressions originate? How do their ideas, let us agree to call them folklinguistic beliefs, evolve? What creates and maintains their beliefs? What mechanism is at work that perpetuates these sex- and gender-related stereotypes?

In order to answer some of these questions, I decided to investigate the degree of coverage given to the topic of sex and gender difference in the English-language press. Following the lines of Deborah Cameron's suggestion that the popular press is obsessed with differences between women and men (1995: 202), I decided to search a variety of databases for evidence that academics and the public at large are being exposed to an avalanche of information (or propaganda) about sex differences – including material on language and sex difference.

6 On-line Databases of Popular, Educational, and Academic Print Media

I searched a variety of large on-line databases that indexed four different kinds of published material; these comprised widely circulated magazines and journals, major English-language newspapers, educational publications, and academic (i.e. scholarly) journals. The results of this database search quickly confirmed my suspicions. Despite the innovative and ground-breaking writing done on language and gender since the 1990s, work that has criticized using female–male difference as a starting point, I did not find discussions reflecting this fact in popular, news, or academic publications. In such widely circulated popular publications as *USA Today*, *Parade Magazine*, *Newsweek Magazine*, or the *New York Times*, there was little that suggested that the boundary between the sexes was becoming fuzzy or that the edges of the two-gender system were softening. Instead readers were repeatedly exposed to articles that conformed to existing assumptions and common perceptions about sex and gender. A great deal of excitement was generated by reports about negligible and obscure scientific findings related to sex differences in the brain; a significant amount of discussion connected academic findings of gender differences to their possible application for educators, therapists, industry managers, government in-service training centers, parents, etc. Not surprisingly, the traditional view of the relationship between the sexes was the one conveyed in the popular press. It is not difficult to conclude that the treatment of this topic by the mass media constitutes a very effective mechanism for reinforcing and maintaining the impression of sex and gender difference as a normal aspect of human existence.

I began with the on-line version of the *Reader's Guide to Periodic Literature* where a total of 306 popular magazines and journals are indexed. (Some of these have been added since this database was created in 1983, while other magazines have ceased publication in the intervening years.) Using the keywords "sex differences" (the words "gender differences" were not among the searchable terms in this database), and checking for a period of ten years, January 1990 through December 1999, I found no fewer than 280 articles that dealt with sex (or "gender") differences in one form or another. It was evident from scanning the titles that some of these articles dealt with topics from the social sciences and some were from the so-called hard sciences; a few treated topics related to species other than our own, such as one entitled "How cardinals tell her songs from his," which appeared in *Science News* in August 1998. Most of the articles, however, were what we would expect: "Listening in on girl-talk," *Newsweek*, November 1998; "Sex talk (male-female language differences)," *Esquire*, January 1997; "Why men lose weight faster than women," *Jet*, July 1996; "What I got when I acted like a guy," *Redbook*, April 1995; "All I want for Christmas . . . (differences in boys' and girls' letters to Santa)," *Good Housekeeping*, December 1995; "The difference between macho sex and true intimacy," *Ebony*, July 1995; "How to give orders like a man," *The New York Times Magazine*, August 1994; "What women do better," *Redbook*, August 1993; "Sex differences in the brain," *Scientific American*, September 1992; "Why women live longer than men and what men can do about it," *Ebony*, February 1991; "It's all in your head: Gender and pain," *Esquire*, April 1990.

For the magazines indexed by the *Reader's Guide to Periodic Literature*, the peak coverage of the topic "differences between the sexes" was in 1994 when 44 articles appeared; there were 32 in 1993, and 39 in 1995. (This pattern was roughly duplicated in my other searches.) For the period considered, the number of articles ranged from a low of 20 (1990) to a high of 44 (1994). Because I was unable to determine the exact number of magazines scanned per year, thus leaving open the possibility that the higher and lower numbers reflected the fluctuation in the total number of scanned magazines, I compared the number of articles found for "sex differences" with the number for "race differences." Searching for "race differences" in place of "sex differences" for the same ten-year period, January 1990 through December 1999, I found only 63 articles (as compared to 280).

I decided to explore a bit further, noting that this was a relatively small number of articles given the hundreds of magazines that were involved in the search. I wondered whether I would find different sorts of number in databases for newspapers, educational, or academic publications. Using the on-line database *Lexis-Nexis*, I examined the number of articles that appeared under the category "General News" based on keyword searches for "sex differences," "gender differences," "racial differences," and "ethnic differences." (The choice of "race difference" versus "racial difference" was again determined by the available keywords in the particular database being used.) The category "General News" is described as "U.S. & international newspapers, magazines,

newsletters & journals." Under this rubric are "Major Newspapers," described in the on-line *Lexis-Nexis* site as consisting of US newspapers which "must be listed in the top 50 circulation in Editor & Publisher Year Book. Newspapers published outside the United States must be in the English language and listed as a national newspaper in Benn's World Media Directory or one of the top 5 per cent in circulation for the country."

The results of this second search were slightly different from those of the *Reader's Guide to Periodic Literature*. While there was an increase in the number of references for five-year periods under both sex differences and gender differences, comparable increases showed up also for racial differences. Again a search was done for the ten-year period from January 1990 through December 1999. For this particular database, the keywords "gender differences" and "racial differences" turned up more sources than either "sex differences" or "ethnic differences." "Gender differences" produced a total of 319 articles; "sex differences" revealed 117. Surprisingly – a result not duplicated in any other search – under "racial differences" a similar total, 314 references, was found; for "ethnic differences" 213 articles were cited.

Also using *Lexis-Nexis* but this time for the category "Magazines and Journals," the pattern was as found in the *Reader's Guide to Periodic Literature*. (As before, the keywords "gender differences" and "racial differences" turned up more sources than either "sex differences" or "ethnic differences.") Thus, searching with the keywords "gender differences," from January 1990 through December 1999, I found 59 articles. For the same time-period for the same database, using "racial differences" from January 1990 through December 1999, 24 articles appeared.

The exercise was repeated with two more databases: (1) ERIC, the US Department of Education's Educational Resource Information Center database, which contains citations and abstracts from over 980 educational and education-related journals and the full text of more than 2,200 digests; and (2) EBSCO's "Academic Search Premier," a privately operated database which provides full text for 3,288 scholarly publications covering academic areas of study including social sciences, humanities, education, computer sciences, engineering, language and linguistics, arts and literature, medical sciences, and ethnic studies.

For ERIC, the keywords "sex differences" and "racial differences" turned up more sources than either "gender differences" or "ethnic differences." Thus, searching with the keywords "sex differences" from January 1990 through December 1999, a stunning 9,233 articles were found. For the same time-period with the same database, using "racial differences" from January 1990 through December 1999, only 2,214 articles were cited.

EBSCO's "Academic Search Premier" revealed the same pattern. Again using the keywords "sex differences" and "racial differences," the following numbers appeared: with the keywords "sex differences," there were 4,309 articles from January 1990 through December 1999. For this same time-period with the same database, using "racial differences," 481 articles appeared.

Table 1 Keyword searches, January 1990 to December 1999 (number of articles)

<i>Reader's Guide to Periodic Literature</i>	
"Sex differences"	280
"Race differences"	63
<i>Lexis-Nexis "General News"</i>	
"Gender differences"	319
"Sex differences"	117
"Racial differences"	314
"Ethnic differences"	213
<i>Lexis-Nexis "Magazines and Journals"</i>	
"Gender differences"	59
"Racial differences"	24
ERIC	
"Sex differences"	9,233
"Racial differences"	2,214
EBSCO Academic Search Premier	
"Sex differences"	4,309
"Racial differences"	481

The results of all these searches are summarized in table 1.

These searches were undertaken in an attempt to document the degree of interest in, or at least the degree of coverage given to, the topic of male and female difference (including language difference) in popular, educational, and scholarly publications. These numbers bear out and verify the impression that many of us have, that "sex difference" and "gender difference" are extremely fashionable topics, topics that we, the reading public, come across with tremendous regularity in both professional and personal contexts. The numbers substantiate the existence of a bedrock ideological foundation that feeds the interest and belief in the two-gender system. Not coincidentally, a discussion of the existence of such powerful ideologies is a common thread in the chapters of this Handbook. While the topics and approaches of the chapters vary considerably, we find this theme, perhaps more than any other theme. A consideration of the ideological underpinnings which provide the cultural foundation for public views of gender, combined with an analysis of the degree to which public discourse provides a forum for the expression of these views permeates the volume. Deborah Cameron's chapter focuses specifically on gender and language ideologies, but in addition, no less than half of the other articles herein discuss the phenomenon of ideology and its role in constructing and naturalizing such diverse but everyday notions as: adolescence (Eckert), authority (Meyerhoff), sex- and gender-related roles and practices (Philips), sociolinguistic research (McElhinny), judicial processes (Ehrlich), the place of ethnicity in language and gender research (Trechter), advertising (Cameron),

management training (Talbot), and labeling/naming (McConnell-Ginet). A detailed analysis of how ideologies shape and help perpetuate the belief that women and men are different (regardless of how each is represented) is also addressed in the chapters by Besnier, Lakoff, Swann, and Wodak.

7 What the Database Numbers Reveal

In the remainder of this chapter I would like to explore what the numbers from these databases contribute to our understanding of the continued discrepancy between public views of language and gender and our own empirical observations about language. That an ideological basis for this trend exists is now transparent; that such deeply rooted and nearly invisible ideologies mold our belief systems and infiltrate our public and private institutions is not surprising. What remains mysterious, however, is why the strength of our research findings has not enabled us to make inroads into changing, or at least adjusting, the public discourse on language and the sexes. I will suggest three reasons for what appears to be remarkable stability in discussions of the two-gender and two-sex system.

First of all, considering the extensive research findings generated by years of studying language and gender, it seems that we, as feminist linguists, have done a fairly dismal job of conveying to the public what we have learned about language and the sexes. Why, we might ask, are professional linguists so little able to make headway in showing the public, even though they seem to already know this, that language is much more diverse than represented by stereotypes? Why have we failed to influence people outside the small group doing related research? It is my impression that language and gender researchers, including myself, have tended to dismiss (as nonsense and therefore as unimportant) the public's ideas about how women and men talk. We express our dismay but, in general, we have simply not made this a research priority. (In a related commentary, Joan Swann (this volume) addresses the "alarming" gap that is developing between educational policy and language and gender research. Also see Susan Herring's discussion (this volume) about gender equality and the Internet.) The continued mismatch between what sociolinguists working in this field know and what the public and other self-appointed language experts express about language and gender is, therefore, in part due to the fact that we as a field have not chosen to address this inconsistency. In my view, the contrast between speakers' actual language use and others' perceptions of and expectations about language use should be more rigorously taken into account in our work. There are certainly many practical obstacles to our accomplishing this – such considerations as limited research time, tenuring and publishing pressures within the academy, issues of funding, the preferences shown by major media outlets, to say nothing of researchers' personal intellectual priorities. Nonetheless, our failure to communicate to the

public our acquired knowledge about language and gender is a critical component of the perpetuation of gendered stereotypes and is thus part of the very problem that needs to be addressed.

A second reason that an incongruity persists between perceptions and actual speech practices seems to stem from a continued emphasis on sex and gender difference within the academic community itself. The perils of the difference paradigm are quite real due to its capacity for creating stereotypes and over-generalizations. For this reason, it is disappointing that many researchers are themselves slow to give up this approach. Barbara Johnstone (1996), in her book *The Linguistic Individual*, reminds us of the dangers of generalizing about the speech behavior of any individual based on that person's group identity. She says:

No student of variation in discourse structure or style would expect any individual to be a perfect match for the generalized description of regions, classes, genders and so on generated by research; . . . Aware as we may be of the fact that we are generalizing away from particular cases, and as well as we may understand what we gain and lose by doing this, there is still some danger in it. The danger is that idealized descriptions sometimes come to be used as explanatory devices. From discovering that, in some respects, an individual's style matches expectations generated in other studies of groups to which the individual belongs, it is a short and easy step to supposing that group identifications account for the individual's behavior. (1996: 86)

Simple observations about similarities in the speaking styles of superficially related groups of people fail to explain the mechanism whereby individual speakers make the choices that they make. Linguists themselves need to be more cautious about the generalizations that they draw from their own work and from that of others. Editors compiling anthologies and scholars writing textbooks need to be more aware of the traditional nature of the choices they make with regard to the content of their books; their decisions help shape the opinions of the next generation of students and scholars.

Deborah Cameron makes similar points in her chapter in this volume. She notes that while "Researchers may be motivated by a wish to explode the stereotype [about language and gender] . . . the stereotype has set the agenda" (p. 465); and while conceding that it is difficult to think about language and gender "without reference to prior understandings of the phenomenon" she urges language and gender scholars "to be *reflexive* about the cultural resources that have shaped their own understandings, as well as the understandings of the people whose language use they study" (p. 465).

Altogether, the evidence is compelling that the world around us is convinced that women and men are essentially different and that the way we speak is a perfect indicator of just how different we are. Our students say so, our colleagues in other fields say so, the articles, newspapers, and books that we read say so. And yet we have compiled substantial evidence that neither biological nor linguistic data support these assumptions. We know that reports of small

brain differences between women and men have minimal (if any) effect on either how we conduct ourselves in our social lives or how we function as thinking individuals. We understand that the linguistic choices that speakers make, those which set their language off from the language practices of others, are often manifestations of speaker-determined agency and indices of speaker identity. *Language as used* regularly reflects speaker-driven decisions about how we, as speakers, want to present ourselves and how we want others to view us. *Language as perceived* is another matter entirely and it is precisely these stereotyped perceptions of language use that are cause for concern. We may conclude that the sheer volume of published reports about sex differences provides energetic sustenance for the continuing misperceptions of how we speak and the enduring disparity between this view and the data that document how we actually use language. But, there must be more.

8 The Breakdown of the Two-gender System

There is a third reason that I would like to suggest for the trend of emphasizing, over-reporting, and even exaggerating evidence of sex and gender difference: it appears that some cracks in the towering edifice of the two-sex, two-gender system are beginning to show. I suspect that discomfort or concerns about the weakening of distinctions between the sexes has aroused public resistance to acknowledging variability in gendered behavior. I have the impression, as Deborah Cameron (1995) also suggests, that it is the fear of gender instability that is galvanizing the insistence on difference. "It is striking," she reminds us, "that popular discourse on gender, though seemingly prompted by the increasing complexity and fuzziness of gender boundaries, continues to be organized around a simple binary opposition" (1995: 202). Perhaps the urgency of attention being conferred to male and female difference is due to the public's gradual realization that things are falling apart. Perhaps, when a sufficiently large number of men and women deviate from the stereotyped expectations that society has had for them, change actually begins to take hold. Perhaps, as Cameron (1997) suggests, the insistence on gendered behavior is part of the mechanism not only for constructing but for attempting to maintain traditional gendered distinctions.

The real threat to the two-gender system may be that people are increasingly aware that women and men are able to recreate themselves (that is, create different selves) in part through language. People are experiencing first-hand the constructed nature of gender and grasping the degree to which gender is "performed" and variable. Changes and variations in speech behavior thus become symbolic (or even represent concrete evidence) that things are not the way they used to be, or perhaps, that things never were as they had been represented. Indeed, several chapters in this collection make specific reference to social and linguistic changes that are occurring. Sally McConnell-Ginet

provides examples of address term usage that “seem to indicate something about ongoing changes in the gender order” (p. 81). Robin Lakoff, while examining a number of public events covered by the press, remarks that “change is coming” and that the clock cannot be turned back. Niko Besnier and Kira Hall provide detailed examples of innovative language practices employed by people in transgendered communities; Anna Livia examines how authors create alternative gender identities for their characters. If there is a threat to the central ideology on which White Western heterosexual male-based norms and power rest, then perhaps public efforts to affirm the “naturalness” of gendered patterns of behavior need to be redoubled.

Overall, the American landscape is gradually changing and evidence is abundant that conceptualizations and public displays of sexuality and gendered behavior are in flux. In recent years in the United States, we have had many surprising images. We looked upon Bob Dole, a White man in his early seventies, former Majority Leader of the United States Senate and once Republican Presidential candidate, as he appeared in advertisements for the drug Viagra which combats “erectile dysfunction,” while at the same time his wife was setting up an exploratory committee to consider launching a campaign to become the first female president of the United States. On American day-time television, we watch talk-show host Jerry Springer interview young adults as they reveal their sexual infidelities that invariably turn out to be with same-sex partners, always to the apparently staged bewilderment of their current heterosexual lovers. We read *Newsweek* magazine’s cover-story about the increasing popularity of bisexuality on and off college campuses (July 17, 1995) and *The New York Times Sunday Magazine* featured story on the persistence of polygamy (May 1999). We notice that *The New York Times Sunday* “Styles” section describes an increasingly large number of traditional wedding ceremonies while it also reports that in the United States, hair color, hairstyle, and hair lengths for men and women vary widely, and body piercing, tattoos, and jewelry cover more and more parts of young American male and female bodies. We learn from newspaper accounts that women in their fifties and sixties are having babies as younger men and older women pair off. We witness female sports stars taking center stage at high schools across the United States and Canada.

Transsexuals, cross-dressers, and transgendered individuals are not as rare as they used to be. In the remarkable 1999 movie *Boys Don’t Cry*, screen actress Hilary Swank dramatizes the true story of Brandon Teena, a young woman who takes on a male identity in the rural town of Falls City, Nebraska. What is most noteworthy about this film is that the fairly conservative Academy Awards Association bestowed on Swank the coveted Academy Award for Best Actress for her unglamorous role as a female–male cross-dresser/transgendered individual. It is hard to imagine that this could have happened twenty years earlier. It is not yet a new world. Sexual violence against women has not declined. Pay differentials between women and men are still in evidence. White men still dominate most major institutions in the West and, in countries around

the world, women are veiled, raped, or often under the equivalent of house arrest in their own homes. The two-sex, two-gender system is still enforced but the edges are blurring and the signs of discomfort are on the rise.

In 1992 Robin Lakoff (1992, 1995), gave a fascinating account of six highly publicized events, each involving a different American woman, events which Lakoff believes served to change the nature of women's public voices. (Her essay in this volume develops a similar theme.) In this earlier work Lakoff discusses the significance of the actions, escapades, and misfortunes surrounding the lives of Anita Hill (who accused US Supreme Court Justice nominee Clarence Thomas of sexual harassment), first lady Hillary Clinton, Lorena Bobbitt (who was brought to trial for cutting off her husband's penis while he slept), Olympic figure skaters Tonya Harding and Nancy Kerrigan, and Nicole Brown Simpson, murdered ex-wife of football star O. J. Simpson. According to Lakoff, as a result of what transpired in these women's lives, women began to appropriate what Lakoff called "interpretive control" or the "making of meaning" (1995: 29) for the first time in history. These events, Lakoff claims, "increased women's interpretive control over public discourse, [that is] their ability to determine the meaning of events in which they were involved" (1995: 30). She observes:

the existence of all of these cases and the extraordinary interest focused on all of them say several things. They show the culture at a nodal moment, when it may go forward or back but can never really revert to the pre-[Anita] Hill situation. Male discourse control has been wrested from the realm of presupposition and "normality," allowing it to be seen as only one possible choice and to be commented upon as an aberration. . . . The passions generated by all these events make perfect sense seen in this light: we are enmeshed in the most serious cultural revolution of all time, and the stakes are very high. (1995: 43)

I would like to place Lakoff's comments in the context of the present discussion, and have the reader observe with me what amounts to a continuation and intensification of the trends that Lakoff noted at that time. The cast of public female luminaries has changed in dramatic detail in the United States in the intervening years and the various circumstances involving women have been quite remarkable. Think for a moment about some of the women who were prominent in the news at the end of the twentieth century in the United States, that is at the beginning of the new millennium. First Lady and now Senator from New York, Hillary Rodham Clinton; former Attorney General Janet Reno; Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright; former Governor of the State of New Jersey and now Presidential Cabinet member and head of the Environment Protection Agency, Christine Todd Whitman; Paula Jones, Monica Lewinsky, and Linda Tripp, three prominent figures in scandals associated with former President Bill Clinton; television actress Ellen Degeneres, television talk-show host Oprah Winfrey; NBC's "Today Show" Host, Katie Curac; and pop-singer Madonna. This list could certainly be expanded. What we are

dealing with here is not simply, as was the case with the six events analyzed by Lakoff, specific identifiable incidents in which women played important roles. Instead the women I have named have been associated with a diversity of circumstances and situations, each of which is symbolically identified with particular trends involving women. These women have been simultaneously mistreated and adored by the mass media and the American public. Several of them have suffered breathtaking humiliation and denunciation. Many have undergone "make-overs" while their appearance, marital status, sexual habits, personal tragedies, and moral character has been dissected. As Lakoff said of the women she discussed: "The list . . . may seem tendentious because it mixes the holy with the profane, or at least the serious with the trivial. . . . What unites them is the media frenzy every one of them has occasioned" (1995: 31) I would add, that what unites the women I have mentioned is the firmness of their images and places in the American social and political scene.

9 Conclusion

I do not pretend for one moment that the popular press has turned soft on women or that women are now portrayed more positively and less stereotypically than a decade ago. But what I do think is different is the nature of the activities that women are routinely engaged in, the stories that their lives represent, and the public's reactions to events that even ten years previously would have seemed unthinkable. Women are not being silenced in the same fashion as was true just ten years ago; each of the women mentioned above has been heard and each has managed to effect some change in her own self-definition and in public images of women. The details of what women are saying and doing, their activities, speech, and behavior, are sufficiently different from the stereotypes that we have been handed in the past that there is undeniable evidence that things are changing; despite enormous efforts to hold the line, social patterns are not settling back down into familiar configurations. There is persistent confirmation that long-established notions of sex-determined and gender-determined differences are being destabilized. And while these changes are occurring, while these unprecedented events are unfolding, the popular press, television programs, the self-help industry, books on popular psychology, relentlessly inform us that women and men are different. We are told that we shop differently, that we vote differently, that we think differently, that we process information differently, and that we speak differently. Some of the time, it is true, some women and some men do some things differently from some particular subset of other men and women. But we know with certainty that this is not simply based on sex. What we may well be witnessing in the press's obsession with sex difference is a new tactic to counter the changing tides. Instead of simply ridiculing women, as the press has done in the past, we may wonder if what we are observing is not a

deliberate or perhaps unwitting intensification of the volume of the rhetoric of difference. The insistence on the authenticity and naturalness of sex and gender difference may be part of an ideological struggle to maintain the boundaries, to secure the borders, and to hold firm the belief in women and men as essentially different creatures. We will be watching as a new age dawns and as language and other social practices continue to reveal the real texture and complexity of people's everyday lives.

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