

Part IV

Stereotypes and Norms

19 Gender and Language Ideologies

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1 Introduction

Language ideologies have emerged in recent years as a distinct focus for research and debate among sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists (see e.g. Schieffelin, Woolard, and Kroskrity 1998). The term “language ideologies” is generally used in this literature to refer to sets of *representations* through which language is imbued with cultural meaning for a certain community. In these representations of language, certain themes recur: examples include where and how language originated, why languages differ from one another and what that means, how children learn to speak, and how language should properly be used. Accounts of these matters may be more or less widely diffused. Some myths of linguistic origin, for example, are localized to a single small community; others, such as the biblical account in the Book of Genesis of Adam naming God’s creatures, have been much more widely disseminated. A more recent example of a “diffused” ideology of language is the representation of ancestral vernacular languages as privileged carriers of the identity or spirit of a people. Originating in the thought of German-speaking philosophers and historically associated with the political ideology of nationalism, this language ideology has spread and persisted: it remains salient in the post-colonial and post-Cold War debates of the present day.

It is worth commenting briefly on the definition of language ideologies in terms of *representations* of language rather than, say, *beliefs* or *attitudes* relating to it. The term “ideology” is often used in ordinary discourse to denote beliefs or belief systems (e.g. “communism,” “feminism,” “racism”), and it is especially likely to be used in connection with belief systems which the speaker takes to be misguided and/or partisan. Explicitly or implicitly, “ideology” is opposed to “truth” (or sometimes more specifically to “science,” as a mode of thinking which makes particularly strong claims to truth). One reason why academic commentators prefer not to equate “language ideology” with “beliefs about

language" is precisely to avoid this common-sense identification of ideology with false or objectionable beliefs. The linguist's axiom "all languages are equal" will probably be regarded by readers of this book as both scientifically "true" and socially "progressive" – which is to say, neither false nor objectionable – but it is nevertheless also "ideological." It is part of a "liberal" ideology which has deeply influenced the social and human sciences since the mid-twentieth century. This example also shows why "language ideologies" cannot be equated simply with folklinguistic stereotypes (see Talbot, this volume).

In addition, such terms as "attitude" and "belief" denote, or are commonly assumed to denote, *mental* constructs which essentially "belong" to individuals. Ideologies, by contrast, are *social* constructs: they are ways of understanding the world that emerge from interaction with particular (public) representations of it. The study of language ideologies, then, involves examining the texts and practices in which languages are represented – not only spoken and written but also spoken and written *about*. It is from these representations that language users learn how linguistic phenomena are conventionally understood in their culture. That need not imply, however, that they internalize a particular understanding as a set of fixed beliefs: representation is also a means for *contesting* current understandings of language and creating new alternatives.

Challenging established ideologies of language has been among the aims of many social and political movements, including feminism. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century feminist writings on language took up the subject of what I have been calling "language ideologies" long before that term was used in its present scholarly sense. It was a salient issue for feminists because of the salience of gender itself in many (pre- and non-feminist) representations of language. Ideas about how women and men use language, and how they ought ideally to use it, have been a recurring theme in discourse about language produced by many societies in many historical periods. Women in particular have also been prime targets for the kind of ideological discourse I have elsewhere labelled "verbal hygiene" (Cameron 1995), which sets out actively to intervene in language use with the aim of making it conform to some idealized representation.

These observations suggest a number of questions which need to be considered in an essay about gender and language ideologies. How has the relationship between language and gender been represented in different times and places, and what purposes have been served by representing it in particular ways? Has political (feminist) intervention succeeded in changing the repertoire of representations? How and to what extent do ideological representations of the language/gender relationship inform everyday linguistic and social practice among real women and men?

Before I examine these questions in more detail, though, it is relevant to consider the more general question of what ideological work is done by representations of language. In an earlier discussion (Cameron 1995), I argued that many such representations belong to a "double discourse" in which language is simultaneously both itself and a symbolic substitute for something else.

Pronouncements on the “proper” uses of language at one level express the desire to control and impose order on *language*, but at another level they express desires for order and control in other spheres. Putting language to rights becomes a surrogate for putting the world to rights. One familiar example of this is the persistent equation of grammatical “correctness” with law-abiding behavior, and of failure to follow prescriptive grammatical rules with lawlessness or amorality.

Recent writers on language ideologies have also called attention to their symbolic dimension, the sense in which they are always concerned with more than just the linguistic issues they purport to be about. Kathryn Woolard (1998: 4) quotes Raymond Williams: “a representation of language is always a representation of human beings in the world,” while Susan Gal (1995: 171) reminds us that ideas about what is desirable in language are always “systematically related to other areas of cultural discourse such as the nature of persons, of power, and of a desirable moral order.” These insights are highly relevant to any analysis of representations which focus on the relation of language to gender. In many cases it is not difficult to argue that the underlying subject of these representations is gender itself: one purpose of making statements about men’s or women’s language is to instruct the hearer or reader in what counts as gender-appropriate behavior. To take a now notorious example, Otto Jespersen’s assertion that “. . . women exercise a great and universal influence on linguistic development through their instinctive shrinking from coarse and vulgar expressions and their preference for refined and (in certain spheres) veiled and indirect expressions” (1922: 246) is readily understood as an expression of what were at the time mainstream societal views on proper femininity.

Yet the idea of the “double discourse” suggests that language does not only stand in for other things when it is represented, it also remains “itself.” It might be observed, for instance, that Jespersen’s assertion about women’s linguistic refinement is not only a representation of gender, it is also part of a discourse on the supposed nature of language. If you read the whole chapter in which Jespersen expounds on the subject of “The Woman,” it becomes clear that he is adopting a view of languages as ideally balanced between “masculine” and “feminine” elements. The natural inclinations of men are needed to give a language “variety and vigour,” while those of women are needed to keep it within the bounds of propriety that civilized society requires. As well as telling us something about historical understandings of gender, this tells us something about historical understandings of language.

2 Representing Language and Gender: Uniformity and Diversity

Jespersen’s chapter “The Woman” provides us with a prototypical example, from early twentieth-century Europe, of what is probably the most general,

most culturally widespread, and most historically persistent of all language ideologies pertaining to gender: that there are clear-cut, stable differences in the way language is used by women and by men. In many versions of this ideology the differences are seen as natural, and in most they are seen as desirable. Beyond that, however, representations of gendered linguistic behavior are extremely variable historically and culturally. From the most accessible popular texts on the subject (e.g. Lakoff 1975; Spender 1980; Tannen 1990) it would be easy to get the impression that women have always and everywhere been measured against a similar linguistic ideal, constituted by such qualities as reticence, modesty, deference, politeness, empathy, supportiveness, and cooperation. On inspection, however, the picture is more complicated.

Joel Sherzer (1987) has suggested one useful overarching generalization: that in any community the normal linguistic behavior of women and men will be represented in ways congruent with the community's more general representation of the essential natures of the two groups. If women are said to be "naturally" modest, for example, their speech will be represented as expressing that modesty – community members may explain that "women don't like to speak in public," for instance. In observed reality, there may be little evidence for this generalization, or the evidence may be contradictory. Or it may be that women do indeed behave "modestly," precisely because the representation of women as modest has the force of a norm, which is enforced in various ways (e.g. denying women the opportunity to practice speaking in public, or sanctioning individual women who are insufficiently reticent). Women themselves may actively try to conform to prevailing ideals of feminine behavior, though the effort and calculation this often demands makes clear that the behavior in question is not simply "natural."

As Sherzer also points out, while the assumption that women's language proceeds from women's nature is culturally very widespread, there is considerable cross-cultural variation in precisely what "women's nature," and therefore women's language, is taken to consist of. Jespersen thought women more "refined" than men, and claimed that this was reflected in women's instinctive avoidance of coarse, vulgar, and abusive language. In the Papua New Guinea village of Gapun, however, a distinctive genre of speech called a *kros* in Tok Pisin, which is a tirade of obscene verbal abuse delivered in monologue, is represented by villagers as a primarily female genre (Kulick 1993). Women in this community are not regarded as more reticent, delicate, or verbally cooperative than men. Among the Malagasy of Madagascar, a highly valued traditional style of speech known as *kabary*, which is characterized by a high degree of indirectness, is associated with men, on the grounds that women are by nature direct speakers (Keenan 1974). Among Western anglophones, by contrast, the opposite belief prevails: men are supposed to be more direct speakers than women.

It is also the case that cultural representations of gendered speech may change over time. The ideal most frequently criticized by feminists – that of the modest, deferential, and publicly silent woman – is sometimes presented

as if it had prevailed throughout recorded history, but in some times and places, the ideal woman speaker was represented very differently. In a discussion of the “conduct books” which instructed readers in proper behavior from the medieval period onward, Ann Rosalind Jones (1987) observes that texts of this genre addressed to upper-class women in the royal courts of Renaissance Europe were very far from exhorting women to be silent and deferential. On the contrary, the court lady was expected to hold her own in verbal duels and witty exchanges which took place in public and in mixed company. The “silent woman” ideal with which we are now more familiar emerged, Jones argues, with the rise to prominence of the European bourgeoisie. Especially where they espoused puritan religious beliefs, the bourgeois class had different notions of the proper relationship between women and men. Conduct literature written for a bourgeois readership emphasized the subordination of wives to husbands, and the confinement of women to the domestic sphere. The specifically linguistic corollary of this can be seen in the following extract from a 1614 conduct book entitled *A Godly Forme of Household Governmente* (quoted in Armstrong and Tennenhouse 1987: 8). The respective linguistic duties of men and women in a household are graphically laid out in two columns:

Husband

Deal with many men
Be “entertaining”
Be skillfull in talk

Wife

Talk with few
Be solitary and withdrawn
Boast of silence

Jones also points out that bourgeois conduct literature was often intended as an implicit or explicit critique of the “decadent” aristocracy. The license of aristocratic women to speak freely in public was represented in bourgeois texts as a sign of the immorality of the upper classes. Discourse on the ideal of the silent woman, then, was not just part of an ideology of gender, but also played a part in an ideological conflict between social classes. In this particular conflict, the bourgeoisie were the eventual victors. Over time, Jones observes, gender norms which were once specifically bourgeois would be adopted by the upper class as well, becoming an ideal to which women in general were exhorted to aspire. In later eras, the withdrawn and reticent middle-class woman would be favorably contrasted not with the articulate but immoral aristocrat, but with the vulgar and undisciplined working-class woman. Even today, in British English at least, a loose and vulgar female tongue is still sometimes figured in the person of the “fishwife,” though few people have ever encountered a real member of that traditional occupational category.

The examples just given remind us that there is *intra-* as well as *inter-*cultural variation in the representation of language and gender. From outside a culture this variation may not be salient or even visible, but inside, the representation of differences *between* women, or between men, does ideological work. The “fishwife,” for example, represents a supposedly general (not

just gendered) characteristic of low-status speakers – their lack of refinement compared to higher-status speakers. The effect of the interaction of class and gender representations is to define low-status women as “unfeminine.” Or, we could consider the commonplace representation (which is not confined to a single culture¹) of Asian speakers – of both sexes – as more reticent and polite than Western speakers. The interaction between ethnic and gendered representations in this case leads to the stereotypical perception of Asian women as “superfeminine.” Though this stereotype can be exploited for its positive value (in parts of the sex industry, for instance, and by the Asian airlines who use the subservience of their female cabin crew as a selling point), it can also prompt more negative evaluations of Asian women as *excessively* feminine. The work done by representations like these is to establish a norm of desirable feminine behavior which is identified with a particular *kind* of femininity – in the cases I have used as examples here, the norm is White, Western, and middle-class. Of course, the norm is not necessarily an accurate description of the way White middle-class women in a given community really behave: rather, it is a representation incorporating the characteristics ideologically ascribed to them as female members of a favored social group. But the way “other” women are represented foregrounds the idea that they are *different* from the norm – just as women-in-general are typically represented as different from the “human” norm, that is, from men.

Ideologies of language and gender, then, are specific to their time and place: they vary across cultures and historical periods, and they are inflected by representations of other social characteristics such as class and ethnicity. What is constant is the insistence that in any identifiable social group, women and men are *different*. Gender differences are frequently represented as complementarities, that is, whatever men’s language is, women’s language is not. But as the examples in the above discussion illustrate, there may be great variation in the actual substance of claims about how men and women speakers differ from or complement one another.

Whatever their substance, though, these representations of gender and language are part of a society’s apparatus for maintaining gender distinctions in general – they help to naturalize the notion of the sexes as “opposite,” with differing aptitudes and social responsibilities (see Talbot, this volume). In many cases they also help to naturalize gender *hierarchies*. Jespersen may praise the “refinement” he attributes to women speakers, but this quality is readily invoked to exclude women from certain spheres of activity on the grounds they are too refined to cope with the linguistic demands of, say, military service. Among the Malagasy and in Gapun, the qualities attributed to men’s speech are also ones the society accords particular respect to. In these communities too, we find women being excluded or marginalized from certain important public forums, in part because it is supposed they cannot master the appropriate public language.

Here it may be as well to remind ourselves that ideological representations do not, in and of themselves, accomplish the exclusion, marginalization, or

subordination of women. Their particular role in those processes is to make the relationship of women and men in a given society appear natural and legitimate rather than merely arbitrary and unjust. Conversely, attacks on particular representations (such as feminist criticisms of the idea that women are “naturally” silent/modest/delicate) do not in and of themselves produce changes in the position of a subordinate group. Rather, they help to undermine the legitimacy of the present order, the sense that the way things are is desirable, natural, and immutable. If enough people can be induced to doubt that the status quo is natural or legitimate, a climate is created in which demands for change are much harder for their opponents to resist.

Feminist demands for change have often included demands that restrictions on women’s linguistic behavior be removed, and those demands have often been supported by criticism of the ideological representations which justified the restrictions. The 1848 Seneca Falls Convention, a landmark event in nineteenth-century American feminism, demanded for instance that women be accepted as speakers at mixed public gatherings such as political meetings, attacking the argument that public speaking was incompatible with respectable femininity. Christian religious women have challenged the idea that women cannot be effective preachers (an argument often deployed by opponents of women’s ordination to the priesthood). These challenges have been successful: while for a variety of reasons it remains true that discourse in many public forums is dominated by men, the argument that women should not be permitted to speak publicly because it is indecent, or because they are incompetent to do so, have been fairly decisively discredited. When these arguments are heard today, they are widely perceived as eccentric and reactionary; and when instances from the past are cited (such as the solemn debate within the BBC during the 1970s on whether a woman television newsreader would so inflame male viewers’ passions as to render them incapable of concentrating on current events) they are received with incredulity. In the matter of women’s public speech, at least, mainstream ideologies of language and gender have changed dramatically in recent decades.

In the very last decade of the twentieth century, another shift in representations of language and gender began to become apparent. In the following sections I will examine this shift, exploring what it might tell us about changing concepts of both gender and language.

3 Shifting Ideological Landscapes: The Fall and Rise of “Women’s Language”

Much of the feminist criticism produced on the subject of language ideologies since the mid-1970s has addressed itself in particular to the idea, implied if not stated in most mainstream representations of “women’s language,” that women are linguistically *inferior* to men. The tradition of commentary that

1970s feminists inherited portrayed women's language by and large as a deviation from the (implicitly masculine) norm, and this deviance tended to be evaluated in negative terms. Despite Jespersen's overt championing of male/female complementarity, it is difficult not to read his account of male/female differences as sexist – not merely stereotypical but biased in favor of men's alleged vigor, creativity, and more complex sentence structure. Early feminist commentators, most notably Robin Lakoff (1975), also made use of what would now be labeled a "deficit model," according to which women's characteristic way of speaking was, indeed, a factor making women unsuitable candidates for positions of public authority and responsibility. Feminists, however, differed from prefeminists like Jespersen in pointing out that women were not "naturally" weak and deferential speakers: rather they were socialized into "feminine" ways of behaving, in a sexist society which systematically strove to keep women in their (subordinate) place. Nevertheless, the solution proposed by many feminists was for women to adopt alternative and "better" ways of speaking. This was the idea behind, for example, "assertiveness training" for women (Cameron 1995; Crawford 1995; Gervasio and Crawford 1989). The late twentieth-century equivalents of conduct literature (self-help books, radio and TV talkshows, and articles in women's magazines, for example) often advised women in a more piecemeal manner on how to be taken more seriously by deliberately eschewing such "women's language" features as high pitch, "swoopy" intonation, expansive body language, allowing oneself to be interrupted, phrasing commands in the form of questions, adding question tags to statements, and producing declaratives with rising intonation. As I have argued elsewhere (Cameron 1995), a good deal of this advice implicitly boils down to "talk [more] like a man" – or more exactly, perhaps, since we are dealing here with representations rather than empirical realities, "try to approximate the popular linguistic stereotype of a man."

This kind of guidance still circulates, but the climate in which it now exists is no longer one in which it is generally assumed that women are "deficient" as language users. On the contrary, more and more mainstream discourse on language and gender stresses the opposite proposition – that women are actually *superior* to men. The problem of the unassertive or insecure woman speaker may not have disappeared entirely, but it is increasingly being eclipsed by anxiety about a quite different phenomenon, namely the problem of the inarticulate, linguistically unskilled man. In the new deficit model, it is men who are represented as deficient, and women whose ways of speaking are frequently recommended as a model for them to emulate. To illustrate this point, I will reproduce a number of texts in which the proposition "women are superior language users" is explicitly or implicitly asserted.

Example (1) comes from an advertisement, part of an extended multimedia advertising campaign run by British Telecom (the UK's largest provider of telephone services) in the late 1990s. The idea that men should emulate women's styles of speaking was central to this campaign, a primary goal of which

(according to a spokesperson for the advertising agency) was to encourage men to make more extended telephone calls, after market research had found significant differences in men's and women's attitudes to talking on the phone. Here I reproduce part of the text of a print advertisement, which provides a particularly striking example of the strategy BT's advertisers adopted (in fact it is the first part of a text whose second part is quoted by Talbot, this volume; see also Talbot 2000). It should be acknowledged, by the way, that this strategy includes some degree of irony: it is not clear that the claims made about gender difference (e.g. "men make phone calls standing up") are meant to be taken at face value. However, even if these claims are made entirely in jest (which is not clear either), the joke depends on readers' familiarity with the more "serious" discourse they allude to. Serious or not, then, this text affirms certain generalizations about language and gender as "common knowledge."

- (1): *British Telecom advertisement*
(*Radio Times* magazine, December 1994)

Men and women communicate differently. Have you noticed? Women like to sit down to make phone calls. They know that getting in touch is much more important than what you actually say. Men adopt another position. They stand up. Their body language says this message will be short, sharp and to the point. "Meet you down the pub, all right?" That's a man's call. Women can't understand why men are so abrupt. Why can't they share the simple joys of talking as other men have? "Conversation is one of the greatest pleasures of life. But it wants leisure." W. Somerset Maugham. Or, as another writer said, "The conversation of women is like the straw around china. Without it, everything would be broken."

Example (2) comes from an interview conducted by two sociologists with the manager of a call center in the northeast of England. Call centers are workplaces where employees sell products and/or provide customer services by telephone: they are a rapidly growing sector of the "new" hi-tech service economy. In this extract from the interview transcript, the manager is explaining why the call center operators he recruits are predominantly women, even though his center is in an area of high unemployment where any job attracts numerous applicants of both sexes.

- (2): *Interview with a call center manager*
(Tyler and Taylor 1997: 10)

... We are looking for people who can chat to people, interact, build rapport. What we find is that women can do this more, they're definitely more natural when they do it anyway. It doesn't sound as forced, perhaps they're used to doing it all the time anyway... women are naturally good at that sort of thing. I think they have a higher tolerance level than men... I suppose we do, yes, if we're honest about it, select women sometimes because they are women rather than because of anything they've particularly shown at the interview.

Example (3) comes from an advice booklet with the subtitle *How To Get More Out of Life Through Better Conversations* (BT 1997). Like example (1), this was produced on behalf of British Telecom, but for a different purpose. It was part of a community service project undertaken by BT under the heading "TalkWorks," which involved producing and distributing learning materials on the theme of "better communication." This particular text was written by an external consultant, with the assistance of a qualified psychologist and counsellor. It was available at no charge to any UK household requesting it (i.e. not just customers of BT), and more than two million copies were distributed in the 18 months following its appearance.

- (3): *Advice booklet*
(British Telecom 1997: 17–18)

Just as we can only get to know about another person's "real self" through their words, we can only become familiar with our own real self by communicating openly and fully with other people. Conversation, it turns out, is the best way we have of exploring the full range and diversity of our own thoughts, memories and emotions . . . talking candidly about ourselves not only helps other people get to know us, it also helps us to get to know ourselves and be more genuine. . . . Some people actively struggle to avoid becoming known by other people. We now know that this struggle can lead to a form of stress which is capable of producing a whole set of physical and emotional problems . . . As a rule, women are more comfortable with talking about their real selves than men. Women also live longer than men. This may not be a coincidence.

Example (4) comes from a document entitled *Boys and English*, produced by a British government agency, the Office for Standards in Education, in 1993. The function of Ofsted is to assess and monitor the standards achieved by schools in England and Wales; it also issues guidance to schools on improving standards. This text is addressing a subject that has featured prominently in discussions of education in Britain since the late 1990s, namely the academic "underachievement" of boys relative to girls. It summarizes recent research findings and offers guidance on how boys could be helped to do better in English, a subject where the gender gap in achievement is particularly striking.

- (4): *Ofsted Report on Boys and English*
(1993: 16, emphasis in original)

[Boys] were more likely [than girls] to interrupt one another, to argue openly and to voice opinions strongly. They were also less likely to listen carefully to and build upon one another's contributions . . . *It is particularly important for boys to develop a clearer understanding of the importance of sympathetic listening as a central feature of successful group and class discussion.*

These texts show how pervasive a particular representation of language and gender has become in recent years, at least in the UK where all four examples were produced. The texts are drawn from different genres, including both

“popular” ones like advertising and advice literature, and “expert” ones like the Ofsted report. They represent language and gender differences in a range of contexts: personal relationships (examples (1) and (3)), work (example (2)) and education (example (4)). But what they say about language and gender is essentially similar: each one represents the verbal behavior of men as in some way problematic, and contrasts it unfavorably with the behavior of women in the same situation. In all four texts the “problem” is defined explicitly or implicitly as a lack of skill in using language for the purpose of creating and maintaining rapport with other people. Males in these texts do not spend sufficient time interacting with friends and relatives, do not share their feelings and problems openly, cannot chat to customers in a “natural” manner, and are unable to listen “sympathetically” in group discussions designed to promote learning. These deficiencies are represented as having serious consequences for men, including educational underachievement (example (4)), unemployment (example (2)), personal unhappiness and even premature death (example (3)).

The consistent focus on men’s communicational shortcomings in these texts (and many others which I do not have space to reproduce) marks a real shift in public discourse on men, women, and language. For most of the 1970s and 1980s, representations of language and gender – both popular and expert – focused either on women’s alleged shortcomings as language users (e.g. their lack of skill in public speaking and performance genres such as comedy or political debate) or else, where discussion was informed by feminist ideas, on the relationship between women’s speech styles and their subordinate position in society. Even those feminists who valued women’s language positively were apt to represent it as an obstacle to women’s advancement because of the widespread prejudice it inspired. Today, by contrast, women are regularly represented as model language users: their verbal skills are seen, moreover, as central to what is portrayed as the fulfillment of that old prophecy, “the future is female.” Compared to their male peers, today’s women and girls are said to be doing better in education, gaining employment more easily, living happier as well as longer lives – and it is suggested that they owe this good fortune at least partly to their linguistic accomplishments.

What accounts for this shift, and how should it be interpreted? A number of possibilities suggest themselves. One might be that the new representations reflect real gains made by feminism since the 1970s. The value of women’s ways of doing things has been recognized, and women are finally getting the (material and symbolic) rewards they deserved all along. Another possibility is that on the contrary, all this discourse about women’s superiority is intended to distract attention from factual evidence suggesting that in material reality, women are still “the second sex.” It is evident, for instance, that women’s superior educational qualifications have not translated into higher-status and better-paid jobs: one Australian study found that boys leaving school with low levels of literacy were soon out-earning not only girls with similar qualifications, but also girls who had left school with high or very high levels of literacy

(Gilbert 1998). There is still a significant gender gap in earnings, and women remain more likely than men to end their lives in poverty.

In the following section, however, I will argue that the shift toward a language ideology of female superiority and male deficit is neither a simple case of successful feminist intervention in a tradition of sexist representations, nor straightforwardly part of a “backlash” discourse in which feminism has “gone too far,” leaving men as the new victims of sexist oppression. I would agree that these are both elements in the new discourse of female verbal superiority. But that discourse, in my view, is more fundamentally a product of changing ideals concerning language itself – what it is for, and what constitutes skill in using it. In contemporary Western societies, recent social changes have given new value to linguistic genres and styles that were and are symbolically associated with femininity. It is this development, more than any radical change in gender relations as such, that underlies the new discourse of female verbal superiority.

4 “Communication”: The Language Ideology of Late Modernity?

In the foregoing section I have referred to the “female verbal superiority” discourse as instantiating a *change* in the way gendered language is represented. Yet readers might well ask themselves how much has really changed. The idea that women are better than men at sharing their feelings or listening sympathetically to others is hardly novel: on the contrary, it is a hoary old stereotype. Complaints about men’s taciturnity, insensitivity, and lack of emotional openness are not new either. And the idea that women are more inclined to use talk as a means for maintaining close relationships, and are more skilled at doing so than men, was emphasized in a number of spectacularly successful self-help and advice texts published in the early 1990s, notably Deborah Tannen’s *You Just Don’t Understand* (1990) and John Gray’s *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* (1992). However, neither Tannen nor Gray overtly argued for the superiority of women. Rather, both took the line that the sexes are “different but equal” and need to understand and accept one another’s differences in order to avoid misunderstandings. Nevertheless, their texts seem to have been read by many people as implicitly suggesting that women are superior and that men would do well to emulate them. Subsequent works of advice literature (example (3), for instance) have drawn that conclusion more explicitly. What has changed, then, is not the dominant stereotypes of men’s and women’s linguistic behavior, but the value judgments made on that behavior. And the obvious question is, why?

To put briefly what I have argued at greater length elsewhere (Cameron 2000), the conditions obtaining in late modern societies have given rise to a new linguistic ideal: the skilled interpersonal communicator who excels in such verbal activities as cooperative problem-solving, rapport-building, emotional

self-reflexivity and self-disclosure, "active" listening, and the expression of empathy. If we ask what it is about contemporary life that brings this ideal to the fore, two important considerations immediately suggest themselves. One is the changing nature of work in the global economy, especially in post-industrial societies where most work is no longer about manufacturing objects, but rather involves selling services. Service sector workers are required to engage intensively in interaction with other people. And this interaction is not purely instrumental in nature, but foregrounds the interpersonal functions of language. A good server does not just provide efficient service, s/he creates rapport with customers, making them feel that they are individually valued and cared for, and that their needs are more important than the server's own. It is a role that has elements of both nurturance and low status or powerlessness – qualities which also figure in many familiar representations of "women's language." Hence the assertion by the call center manager quoted in example (2) above that women are more "naturally" suited than men to customer service work.

The other relevant consideration is the changing nature of *personal* life in late modern societies, some key features of which are described by the sociologist Anthony Giddens (1991). Late modern subjects, Giddens asserts, live in a more complex, mobile, rapidly changing, and individualistically oriented society than their ancestors did, and their sense of identity depends on being able to order the various fragments of their life-experience into a coherent, ongoing autobiographical narrative. This requires a high degree of self-reflexivity, the ability and willingness to reflect on one's experience. As Giddens puts it, the self in late modern society becomes a "reflexive project," something subjects must think about and work on rather than simply taking for granted. Another thing late modern subjects have to work at is the creation of intimate relationships with others. The individualism and mobility of contemporary societies weaken social networks, making it more difficult to become close to others while at the same time raising our expectations of the few people to whom we *are* close (modern marriages, for instance, are no longer economic and social alliances between extended families, but are ideally supposed to be unions between "soul mates" who will meet one another's needs for friendship as well as sex, romance, and domesticity). Under these conditions, intimacy has to be created and sustained through mutual self-disclosure, the open and honest sharing of experiences and feelings. The reflexively constructed self cannot remain a private creation, then, but must be *communicated* continuously to significant others. In that context it becomes easier to understand why such skills as emotional expressiveness and empathetic listening are so idealized in many present-day representations of language.

In a study of what the term "communication" meant to mainstream Americans, Katriel and Phillipson (1981) found that their informants differentiated it from mere "talk" or "chat." "Communication" for them meant honest, serious, problem-solving talk within significant relationships, where it functioned as a means for overcoming the otherwise invincible isolation of the individual. They also represented "communication" as a kind of "work," worthwhile but

also difficult and requiring continuous effort. As Katriel and Phillipson note (1981: 304), from the perspective on the world which their informants adopted, communication is "both vitally important and highly problematic. If people are unique, the kind of mutual disclosure and acknowledgement entailed in communication provide a necessary bridge from self to others. But if people are unique, they also lack the mutuality necessary for achieving interpersonal meaning and co-ordination." This problem can only be overcome by working hard to develop the skills "communication" demands.

It is because "communication" has come to be conceived in this way, as a means to greater self-knowledge and more satisfying intimate relationships (or in the service economy, more convincingly *simulated* intimate relationships), that contemporary advice literature on speech is so different from the advice literature of the past.² Victorian authorities, or the denizens of eighteenth-century salons who wrote treatises on the art of conversation, would scarcely recognize British Telecom's late twentieth-century account of what constitutes "better conversation." Nor would the authors of early modern conduct books like the one quoted earlier in this chapter. The advice writers of the past emphasized qualities such as wit, taste, propriety, politeness, and modesty. Invariably, for example, they dwelt on the vulgarity of talking about oneself and recommended that "delicate" topics be avoided in polite company. Today's authorities are equally insistent that talking about oneself (self-disclosure or "sharing") is a crucial skill for communicators to master, and that personal problems of every kind can and should be addressed by talking about them. In the past, advice writers about conversation were usually literary and cultural luminaries, or else high-ranking members of polite society who took it upon themselves to share their knowledge of that milieu with others who aspired to join. By contrast, today's authorities are psychologists and therapists – their expertise is in the area of human behavior and relationships, and many of the linguistic strategies they recommend (e.g. "being assertive," "sharing your feelings," "listening without judging") originated as rules specifically for various kinds of therapeutic discourse.

In the last few paragraphs I have been discussing what I take to be a pervasive and powerful ideology of language in late modern societies, the ideology of "communication" as a set of skills which are needed to sustain both personal identity and interpersonal relationships. One effect of the rise of this "communication" ideology has been to alter prevailing definitions of linguistic "skill," so that the interpersonal skills of, for instance, self-disclosure and empathetic listening are foregrounded while traditionally admired skills of a more forensic or rhetorical kind – such as the ability to engage in formal debate or public oratory – recede into the background.³ The shift could also be analyzed as a foregrounding of "private" linguistic genres relative to "public" ones, illustrating a phenomenon discussed by a number of analysts of language and social change (notably Fairclough 1992), namely the growing "informalization" or "conversationalization" of Western public discourse. Service encounters, for instance, increasingly simulate personal conversations between acquainted parties;

addresses by politicians and even monarchs, influenced strongly by the demands of the television medium for which most of them are now primarily designed, are less "oratorical" and more "personal" (Montgomery 1999); institutional written documents such as job specifications and health education materials adopt a more informal and direct mode of address than they did in the past.

What does all this have to do with *gender*, and more specifically with the recent tendency to represent women as linguistically superior to men? My answer would be that the representation of women as model language users is a logical consequence of defining "skill" in communication as primarily skill in using language to maintain good interpersonal relationships, and of emphasizing traditionally "private" speech genres (e.g. conversations about personal feelings and problems) rather than "public" ones. The management of feelings and of personal relationships are culturally coded as female domains, and have been throughout the modern era in the West. Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse, discussing early modern conduct books, point out that this literature helped to establish a division of the social world into "public and private, economic and domestic, labor and leisure, according to a principle of gender that placed the household and sexual relations under *female* authority" (Armstrong and Tennenhouse 1987: 12, my emphasis).

In late modern societies, however, the public/private boundary is increasingly blurred. Ways of speaking traditionally associated with the private sphere (e.g. emotionally expressive ones) are now equally favored in public contexts and economic transactions (e.g. service encounters), while the conduct of domestic, sexual, and other intimate relations is no longer just a matter for private contemplation, but a major preoccupation of the popular media. By the gendered logic that has prevailed in the West for several centuries, these changes are bound to be perceived as *feminizing* the values and the language of public discourse, and consequently as advantaging women while simultaneously marginalizing men.

What kind of ideological work is done by the representations of language and gender I have been examining in this discussion? To begin with, they do the usual work of affirming the existence of fundamental differences between women and men. The differences are represented variously as biologically based (e.g. Skuse et al. 1997, a widely publicized study suggesting that there is a gene on the X chromosome controlling certain social and verbal skills), as "facts of life" which are "natural" in some unspecified way (cf. the comments of the call center manager in example (2) above), as socially constructed but too "deep" to be amenable to change (this is Deborah Tannen's (1990) position), or as constructed and alterable with effort (probably the commonest position, exemplified by examples (1), (3), and (4) above). In all cases, however, one effect of the representations is to reproduce the proposition that gender difference or complementarity is part of the normal order of things.

In discussions of globalization and the new economy, representations of female verbal superiority and male deficit do particular ideological work. As example (2) demonstrates, common-sense ideas about women as "naturally"

skilled communicators help to naturalize the way women are channeled into low-paid and low-status service occupations – as if the issue were all about women’s aptitude for the work and not at all about their greater willingness (born of historical necessity rather than choice) to accept the low pay, insecurity, and casualization which were endemic to “women’s work” in the past and are now becoming the lot of many more workers. Example (2) also shows that ideas about “natural” gender difference can license discrimination in the workplace: the call center manager admits that he sometimes hires women “because they are women rather than because of anything they’ve particularly shown at the interview.” Here representation (what women are said to be “good at”) takes precedence over reality (how the woman in front of you actually performs).

A corollary of employers selecting women for certain occupations “because they are women” is, presumably, *not* selecting men because they are men. Another kind of ideological work done by current representations of language and gender is, in fact, to scapegoat men (or more exactly, certain groups of them, especially young working-class men) for misfortunes not of their making. Economic globalization has particularly affected the life-chances of non-elite male workers in Western societies by exporting the jobs they would once have expected to do to parts of the world where labor is cheaper, thus leaving many Western working-class men chronically un- or under-employed. A good deal of discourse on boys’ educational underachievement arises from anxiety about this development (for a feminist critique, see Epstein et al. 1998; Mahony 1998). Some of this discourse blames young men for being unable or unwilling to develop the communication skills that would make them employable in new conditions. It is implied, and sometimes said, that if boys and young men made more effort to improve their communication skills, they would not be unemployed, poor, socially marginalized, and disaffected – though arguably it is a naive oversimplification of the economic realities to suggest that young men by their own efforts could avoid the inevitable systemic problems associated with the transition to a post-industrial order. Men’s alleged poor verbal and social skills are also sometimes invoked in a “pathologizing” way, to explain the involvement of lower-class males in disruptive classroom behavior, violence, and criminal activity. Some commentators propose remedial instruction in communication and “emotional literacy” skills as a solution (e.g. Goleman 1995; Phillips 1998). Others suggest that anti-social males may be suffering from various clinical syndromes which could be controlled by medication (see Mariani 1995). Once again, this approach obscures the impact on certain men of systemic factors, particularly economic deprivation and inequality.

I will close this discussion by pointing out, however, that the “communication ideology” with which new representations of gendered language are strongly linked does ideological work of a broader kind – it is not concerned only or even primarily with gender, but is engaged in constructing a new model of the “good person.” It presents, for the contemplation of women and men alike, a new ideal which, symbolically speaking, has both masculine and feminine elements: the enterprising, self-aware, interpersonally skilled

individual who will flourish rather than flounder in the demanding conditions of twenty-first-century life. Despite the emphasis currently given to the “feminine” qualities of the good communicator, the individuals who most closely approximate the new ideal in the real world are often men: men who combine the traditionally “masculine” qualities of authority, enterprise, and leadership with a command of the more “feminine” language of emotional expressiveness and rapport. Outstanding examples of this type include the former US president Bill Clinton and the British Prime Minister Tony Blair. That both are male only underlines the point that valuing “feminine” characteristics need not threaten the dominant position of men in a society. On the contrary, a man who has some of these characteristics – always provided he remains clearly a man – will often be particularly applauded for his “sensitivity,” whereas the same qualities in a woman attract no special approbation, since after all, they are “only natural” (which is to say, they are normative) for women. At the same time, women receive less credit for adopting characteristics that are admired when displayed by men, such as competitiveness, decisiveness, and strength of will. Nobody ever said approvingly of Margaret Thatcher that she was “in touch with her masculine side.”

5 Representations and Realities

The comments just made bring us back to one of the questions posed in the introduction to this chapter: what is the relationship between language ideologies, the representations of language that circulate within a culture, and the actual linguistic behavior of that culture’s members? Overall there is something rather contradictory about feminist discussions of this question. On one hand feminists have been at pains to stress the gulf that exists between representations and reality. Many empirical studies have been undertaken in an effort to disprove common gender stereotypes, such as that women don’t swear and men don’t gossip. The claim here is that actual gendered behavior is typically remote from cultural representations of it. On the other hand, sexist representations are sometimes criticized as pernicious, precisely because it is supposed that regular exposure to them may cause people to take them as models for their own behavior. Here, there is an implicit claim that representations *do* affect behavior. Ideological statements such as “women’s language lacks forcefulness” can become self-fulfilling prophecies; that is why it is important to challenge them so vigorously. In which case, it might well be asked why so many common stereotypes find little support in empirical studies of naturally occurring language use.

In my view, the way out of this contradiction is to bear in mind that human beings do not “behave,” they *act*. They are not just passive imitators of whatever they see and hear around them: they must actively produce their own ways of behaving – albeit not always in a fully conscious and deliberate way

and never, as Marx said in another context, “under conditions of their own choosing.” Since human beings are social beings, their identities and practices are produced from social (which is to say, collective rather than purely individual) resources. And the representations that circulate in a culture are among those collective resources. They do not determine our behavior in the way the laws of physics determine the behavior of matter, but neither are they entirely irrelevant to it. Occasionally we may learn ways of acting from them directly (as when people claim they learned to kiss or to smoke from scenes in movies), but more usually we integrate them into the broader understandings of the world on which we base our own actions.

That this process is both active and selective is illustrated by reception studies carried out with readers of self-help books (e.g. Lichterman 1992; Simonds 1992). No genre could be more overtly didactic than self-help, and one might suppose that no group of readers would be more susceptible to the ideological norms embedded in representations than self-help readers. Yet both the researchers cited above found that their informants claimed not to read self-help books for the advice they offered – indeed they often could not remember, when questioned, what a recently enjoyed text had recommended readers to do. Rather, the informants said they read self-help for the pleasure of “recognizing” themselves. They said that the texts helped them to understand themselves better, and that far from being inspired by this to change themselves, they usually felt “reassured” that their own ways of acting were normal, even if they were also problematic.

What these readers described doing with self-help texts can be readily linked to what Anthony Giddens calls “the reflexive project of the self,” the process whereby people ongoingly construct autobiographical narratives in an effort to understand themselves in relation to the world. It could be argued that representations are particularly powerful in shaping this kind of understanding, precisely because they are *not* accurate reproductions of the complexity of lived experience. Compared to an actual life, for example, a life *story* is simpler, more condensed, and far more orderly. It is private and personal experience ordered by public generic (in this case, narrative) conventions, and as such it provides the reader with a template s/he can use to order and reflect on his/her own experience.

If representations are resources for the work of producing identities and actions, then the interesting question about them becomes less “what does this representation say about language and gender – is it accurate or misleading, sexist or anti-sexist?” than “what do people *do* with this representation of language and gender?” – always bearing in mind, of course, that different people may do different things with it. It is by investigating what people do with representations *in* reality that we will discover the relationship *between* representations and reality.

Language and gender scholars are not excluded from the category of “people who do things with representations of language and gender.” Just as those representations are resources for the production of gender in everyday

life, so they are also resources for the production of theoretical understandings of gender. A simple illustration is the way empirical research on language and gender has often begun from folklinguistic stereotypes (e.g. “women talk incessantly”). Researchers may be motivated by a wish to explode the stereotype, but still the stereotype has set the agenda – and the researcher cannot avoid recirculating it, even if she presents it critically. Of course, popular representations do not always set research agendas, but there is no escaping the influence of prior “expert” representations: it is a strict rule of academic discourse that one *must* refer to (and so recirculate) the discourse of one’s predecessors in the same field of inquiry. Nor is this necessarily an undesirable limitation. Even if one *could* think without reference to prior understandings of the phenomenon one is trying to think about, the resulting ideas would be difficult or impossible for others to integrate into their own understandings of the world, and therefore useless as a contribution to public discourse. (This is a particularly salient point for feminists who view their scholarship as a contribution to a movement for social *change*.)

It is impossible to “transcend” ideology, but it is not impossible for 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. This, too, is an argument for the serious study of language ideologies. Cultural representations of language and gender are part of our inheritance, as social beings and also as linguists. Arguably, the better we understand them – where they “come from” and how they work – the more control we will have over what we do with them.

NOTES

- 1 This is an “orientalist” representation, i.e. it portrays Asia from a Western standpoint, but I hesitate to call it simply “Western” because the idea of Asian speakers as more polite and reticent is often found in Asian *self*-representations too. On the appropriation and internalization of others’ stereotypes by members of the group they stereotype, see Talbot, this volume.
- 2 On the history of advice literature about conversation, see Burke 1993; Zeldin 1998.
- 3 In a sample of recent “communication skills” texts and training materials I examined, most of which were produced for professional rather than personal self-improvement purposes, there was virtually no reference – in some texts, none at all – to any speech event that necessitated addressing an audience or using formal generic conventions. Even such routine responsibilities as chairing a business meeting often went unmentioned. By contrast, a sample of comparable materials from the 1930s and 1950s placed emphasis on such rhetorical performances as “making a presentation” or “proposing a toast.” (See further Cameron 2000.)

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