

20 Gender Stereotypes: Reproduction and Challenge

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*Oh
Bossy Women Gossip
Girlish Women giggle
Women natter, women nag
Women niggle-niggle-niggle
Men Talk*

(From Liz Lochhead, *Dreaming Frankenstein*)

1 Introduction

For an individual to be assigned to the category of male or female has far-reaching consequences. Gender is often thought of in terms of bipolar categories, sometimes even as mutually exclusive opposites – as in “the opposite sex.” People are perceived through a “lens” of gender polarization (Bem 1993) and assigned to apparently natural categories accordingly. On the basis of this gender assignment, naturalized norms and expectations about verbal behavior are imposed upon people. There is a strong tendency for gender stereotyping to set in. Stereotyping involves a reductive tendency: to “stereotype someone is to interpret their behaviour, personality and so on in terms of a set of common-sense attributions which are applied to whole groups (e.g. ‘Italians are excitable’; ‘Black people are good at sport’)” (Cameron 1988: 8). Like caricatures, they focus obsessively on certain characteristics, real or imagined, and exaggerate them.

Early work in the field that we now know as language and gender was highly speculative and certainly did not reflect on the category of gender itself. Instead, it simply accepted and used the commonsensical categories of female and male. As a consequence, it tended to reproduce sexist stereotypes. Indeed,

early pre-feminist scholarship was profoundly androcentric. In 1922, Otto Jespersen wrote on *Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin* including a single chapter on "The Woman." He presents various alleged characteristics of women as speakers, including softspokenness, irrational topic shift, and, not least, volubility and vacuity; in other words, talking a lot but making no sense. The "evidence" (other than his own opinion) that he refers to for his claim about women's voluble vacuity consists of proverbs, witticisms, and the views of authors and fictional characters:

The volubility of women has been the subject of innumerable jests; it has given rise to popular proverbs in many countries; as well as to Aurora Leigh's resigned "A woman's function plainly is – to talk" and Oscar Wilde's sneer, "Women are a decorative sex. They never have anything to say, but they say it charmingly". A woman's thought is no sooner formed than uttered. Says Rosalind, "Do you not know I am a woman! When I think, I must speak" (*As You Like It*, III. 2. 264). (Jespersen 1922: 250)

The stereotype of the empty-headed chatterer represented in this passage is still very much with us. As Deborah Cameron observes, "Jespersen is caught between his fantasies (soft-spoken, retiring child-women) and his prejudices (loquacious but illogical bird-brains) to produce a sexist stereotype which is still recognizable sixty years on" (1985: 33). Several years later this is still true. Other variations or inflections on this caricature are, of course, the gossip and the nagging wife or scold. A notable feature of stereotypes of women as language users is how negative they are. Women are, as Graddol and Swann put it, "consistently portrayed as chatterboxes, endless gossips or strident nags patiently endured or kept in check by strong and silent men" (1989: 2). The English language has a remarkable variety of words for vocal, particularly verbally aggressive, women. Here are some of them: *scold*, *gossip*, *nag*, *termagant*, *virago*, *harpy*, *harridan*, *dragon*, *battleaxe*, (*castrating*) *bitch*, *fishwife*, *magpie*, *jay*, *parrot*, and *poll*. They are all highly pejorative, though some of them have fortunately fallen out of use.

Stereotypical representations of women as language users are never far away. Women's verbal excess is treated as a legitimate source of laughter in television situation comedies, newspaper cartoons, and so on. In situation comedy centered on female characters, the comedy very often rests on their speech spiralling into excess, because it is either abusive or simply relentless and never-ending (Macdonald 1995: 56). In a typical episode of the BBC's comedy *Birds of a Feather*, as Myra Macdonald notes, "Tracey's attempts to improve Sharon's table manners and housekeeping skills are met with the charge: 'you're turning into a right nag, you are, Trace', while Sharon's humour at Tracey's expense leads Tracey to dub her sister a 'sarkie cow' (BBC1, 11 October 1990)" (Macdonald 1995: 56). In other words, their verbal behavior was frequently represented as either "nagging" or "bitching." In sitcoms centered on male characters (here Macdonald cites the BBC's *Steptoe and Son* and ITV's *Home to*

Roost), their slanging matches and other verbal confrontations, while capable of being every bit as vituperative and excessive, are not perceived in terms of nagging and bitching. As far as sitcom writers are concerned, then, it seems that vituperation among men is neither nagging nor bitching, and is not gendered.

Sexist stereotypes are not always articulated for humorous ends. The horror writer James Herbert draws in women's empty chatter as part of his scene-setting in the novel *The Survivor*. After an account of bizarre and grisly deaths in the locality following a plane crash, we are informed that:

The women met in shops and in the High Street, infecting each other with their own personal fear; the men discussed the peculiar happenings at their desks or work benches, many scornful of the suggestion that some evil was afoot in the town, but admittedly perplexed by the sequence of events. (Herbert 1976: 110)

The men discuss the situation intelligently and in public. They respond to suggestions; they admit to being perplexed by the bizarre events that have taken place, or are scornful of supernatural explanations put forward to account for them. The women, on the other hand, are just making trouble: they respond emotionally, "infecting" one another with "their own personal fear." Their talk is trivial, personal, and lacks content. (The occupational stereotyping is also notable: women shop, while men work.)

This chapter begins with some preliminary theoretical observations about the phenomenon of stereotyping in general, and its function. I then briefly overview shifts in the use of the category of gender by language and gender practitioners, from early unreflective use to more recent recognition that gender is a problematic category which is susceptible to stereotyping. I then consider recent fruitful applications of the concept of stereotyping itself. Particular attention is given to the argument that a stereotypical "women's language" operates as a powerful hegemonic construct of preferred feminine behavior, for which I draw upon some coverage of recent explorations of it as a resource for constructing cross-gendered and sexualized personas. The chapter also considers how gender stereotypes are contested in a range of contexts, and concludes with attention to the resilience of the gossip. (See Besnier, this volume; Sidnell, this volume.)

2 Stereotyping

As a representational practice, stereotyping involves simplification, reduction, and naturalization. Some theorists are careful to distinguish it from the more general process of *social typing* (e.g. Dyer 1977; Hall 1997). In order to make sense of the world – and the events, objects, and people in it – we need to impose schemes of classification. We *type* people according to the complexes

of classificatory schemes in our culture, in terms of the social positions they inhabit, their group membership, personality traits, and so on. Our understanding of who a particular person is is built up from the accumulation of such classificatory detail. Stereotyping, by contrast, reduces and simplifies. Both social typing and stereotyping are practices in the maintenance of the social and symbolic order; both involve a strategy of "splitting," whereby the normal and acceptable are separated from the abnormal and unacceptable, resulting in the exclusion of the latter. Stereotyping differs from more general social typing in its rigidity; it "reduces, essentializes, naturalizes and fixes 'difference' . . . facilitates the 'binding' or bonding together of all of Us who are 'normal' into one 'imagined community'; and it sends into symbolic exile all of Them" (Hall 1997: 258).

Power is clearly a key consideration here. Stereotypes tend to be directed at subordinate groups (e.g. ethnic minorities, women) and they play an important part in hegemonic struggle. As Richard Dyer explains:

The establishment of normalcy (i.e. what is accepted as "normal") through social- and stereo-types is one aspect of the habit of ruling groups . . . to attempt to fashion the whole of society according to their own world view, value system, sensibility and ideology. So right is this world view for the ruling groups that they make it appear (as it does appear to them) as "natural" and "inevitable" – and for everyone – and, in so far as they succeed, they establish their hegemony. (Dyer 1977: 30)

Hegemony involves control by consent, rather than by force. The representational practice of stereotyping plays a central role in it, by endlessly reiterating what amount to caricatures of subordinate groups.

Stereotypes are (re)produced in a wide range of practices of representation, including scholarship, literature, television situation comedy, and both "high" and "low" art (including particularly newspaper cartoons). What I have presented above is a cultural studies perspective; the stereotypes that Dyer and Hall investigated were predominantly pictorial representations of gay and Black people respectively. Hall elaborates on the ambivalence of stereotyping and the possible co-existence of conflicting – "good" and "bad" – stereotypes of Black men: "blacks are both 'childlike' and 'oversexed', just as black youth are 'Sambo simpletons' and/or 'wily, dangerous savages'; and older men both 'barbarians' and/or 'noble savages' – Uncle Toms" (Hall 1997: 263).

Returning to the pre-feminist linguistics that I referred to in my opening section, Jespersen's single chapter on "The Woman" clearly marks out the boundaries of Us and Them (another chapter in the same section of the book deals with "The Foreigner"). My quotation from the chapter on "The Woman" provides an example of a "bad" stereotype of women as speakers. Cameron's comment about Jespersen being caught between "his fantasies (soft-spoken, retiring child-women) and his prejudices (loquacious but illogical bird-brains)" hints at just how closely the good and the bad may co-exist.

Stereotyping as a representational practice is at the center of the notion of folklinguistics. Folklinguistics is a term linguists sometimes use to refer to (generally) non-linguists' beliefs about language; for example, the belief about women's verbal incontinence that has been the staple of misogynist newspaper cartoons for decades, if not centuries. Indeed, folklinguistics is the basis of Cameron's glossary entry for "stereotype" in her reader: "in linguistics, a folklinguistic characterization of some group's speech" (1985: 189–90).

Within the field of language and gender, the term "stereotype" is often used to refer to prescriptions or unstated expectations of behavior, rather than specifically to representational practices. A study of a mixed group of American engineering students provides a good example of this usage. Victoria Bergvall (1996) conducted a study of verbal interaction among a group of students studying in the traditionally masculine area of engineering. The academic domain of engineering is still highly androcentric and, simultaneously, traditional expectations about gender behavior and identity prevail. This places women who want to become engineers in a predicament. Conflicting demands are made upon them. On the one hand, if they want to take part in heterosexual social and sexual relationships, they need to behave in stereotypically "feminine" ways: presenting their own views tentatively, displaying supportiveness of men, and generally exhibiting cooperative behavior. On the other hand, if they are to succeed in their studies, they have to behave in ways perceived as "masculine": asserting themselves and their views, thereby putting themselves in competition with other students. Bergvall's study shows these women striving and contriving to comply with both sets of expectations, with some degree of success:

In the course of examining the linguistic actions of these engineering students, it becomes clear that the women display speech behaviours that transcend easy boundaries: they are assertive, forceful, facilitative, apologetic and hesitant by turns. It appears at times to be a double-bind, no-win situation: when the women are assertive, they are resisted by their peers; when they are facilitative, their work may be taken for granted and not acknowledged. These interactions suggest that these women are subject to the forces of traditional stereotypes, even though, in interviews, they assert that the classroom is gender-neutral territory with equal opportunities for women and men. (Bergvall 1996: 192)

Gender stereotypes are closely linked with and support gender ideologies. If we view them as ideological prescriptions for behavior, then actual individuals have to respond to the stereotypical roles expected of them.

Gender stereotypes linked to gender ideology reproduce naturalized gender differences. In doing so, they function to sustain hegemonic male dominance and female subordination. A study of British adolescents' experience and expectations of talk in the classroom provides a second example. Michelle Stanworth (1983) found that boys were encouraged by teachers to be assertive in classroom interaction and that the girls admired most those boys who demonstrated most ability to do so. Girls demonstrating the same abilities, however, were not

admired at all. On the contrary, vocal girls had scorn heaped on them by other girls. In evaluating their behavior differently, one could say that the non-vocal girls colluded in their own oppression, since they supported the view that it is only right that boys should dominate, and deplorable that girls should try to make themselves heard in the same way. In this way, hegemonic male dominance and female subordination are sustained.

To draw out what the gender stereotypes are, one could say that the American engineering students *should be* apologetic, hesitant, and supportive; the British schoolgirls *should be* silent and subordinate. These are ideological prescriptions or norms of behavior that weigh heavily on them: they are under the pressure, if you like, of “good” stereotypes, highly reductive and simplifying ones. The representational “bad” stereotypes of the verbal incontinent and the scold can be seen as punitive responses or “correctives” to the “problem” of women trying to control, dominate or, at worst, even contribute to talk. It has been suggested (e.g. Spender 1985) that women are perceived as too talkative because how much they talk is measured not against how much men talk, but against an ideal of female silence. Ideally women should be saying nothing at all. The “good” stereotypes, then, present how to behave, and the “bad” how not to. In his investigation of the stereotyping of Black people, Hall remarks on the way the double-sided nature of representation and stereotyping traps men in a no-win situation. Referring to the work of Staples (1982) and Mercer and Julien (1994), he observes the following:

black men sometimes respond to . . . infantilization by adopting a sort of caricature-in-reverse of the hyper-masculinity and super-sexuality with which they had been stereotyped. Treated as “childish”, some blacks in reaction adopted a “macho”, aggressive-masculine style. But this only served to confirm the fantasy amongst whites of the ungovernable and excessive sexual nature . . . Thus, “victims” can be trapped by the stereotype, unconsciously confirming it by the very terms in which they try to oppose it and resist it. (Hall 1997: 263)

Similarly, sexist stereotypes lie in wait for women and girls who dare to transgress. Of course, in the research referred to above, one can only speculate about the actual use of stereotypes by the people involved, but we do know that they are available as a resource for teenage girls to pillory fellow school-girls and for male engineering students to ridicule and ostracize their female counterparts.

3 Reproduction of Gender Stereotypes in Feminist Linguistics

I want to turn now from practitioners’ productive use of the notion of stereotype to their unintentional reproduction (see also Romaine, this volume;

Kiesling, this volume). I began with an example of a “bad” stereotype in early pre-feminist work on gender and language: Jespersen on the alleged volubility of women. With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that early feminist scholarship tended to reproduce some of the androcentrism of pre-feminist work, and hence some of the stereotypes. In *Language and Woman’s Place*, the first exploration of language and the socialization of women as subordinates, Robin Lakoff (1975) presented women as disadvantaged language users. This early, introspective work speculated that women used, or were expected to use, language which presented them as uncertain, weak, and empty-headed. Its androcentrism lay principally in the fact that she accounted for women’s language (henceforth WL) in terms of its deficiencies – its deviation when measured against a norm, which was assumed to be male – and thereby, curiously for feminist scholarship, marked out the boundaries of Us and Them with women on the outside. Lakoff certainly did not set out to reproduce sexist stereotypes; indeed she was a robust challenger of sexism (and apparently a force to be reckoned with among her colleagues in the Linguistics department at Berkeley in the 1970s). However, some of her speculations about how women’s alleged deficiency manifested itself are equally curious echoes of Jespersen; for example, her attention to indirectness, use of euphemism, avoidance of swearing, and so-called “empty” or meaningless lexical choices echoes Jespersen’s earlier speculations. Lakoff’s claim that WL is weak and uncertain was probably heavily influenced by stereotypical expectations. For example, she claims that, when women use tag questions, they indicate hesitancy inappropriately, though she concedes that she has no “precise statistical evidence” (1975: 16) for this claim (actually she has no *evidence* at all, precise or otherwise, other than her own introspection). It seems that when she reflected on men and women using tag questions, she “interpreted” them according to the sex of the person producing them: seeing tentativeness in women’s use of the linguistic feature, but not in men’s use of exactly the same. As Janet Holmes has observed, one person’s feeble hedging is another’s perspicacious qualification (Holmes 1984: 169). In other words, it may be that what was perceived as an inadequacy in women, in men was seen otherwise. In fact, in Lakoff’s early ideas about WL, she shifts between interest in women’s *actual* behavior and interest in restrictive *cultural expectations* about appropriate behavior for women; in other words, stereotypes. I will return to this point later.

It is possible to identify three frameworks or “models” shaping early feminist research into language and gender: “deficit,” “dominance,” and “difference.” This is a considerable oversimplification, but convenient here. The early “deficit” framework was briefly considered above. Later researchers were careful not to approach their subject in terms of male norm and female deficiency. In the “dominance” framework, language patterns are interpreted as manifestations of a patriarchal social order. In this view, asymmetries in the language use of women and men are enactments of male privilege. The “difference” framework rests on assumptions about distinct male and female sub-cultures into which boys and girls are said to be socialized. The argument goes that, by

the time they reach adulthood, men and women have acquired distinct male and female interactional styles. The idea that women and men have distinct styles has proved popular, but it is problematic. While there is extensive research to support such a view, including research on politeness (e.g. Brown 1980, 1993; Holmes 1995) and on physical alignment and eye contact in conversations (e.g. Tannen 1990), it needs extensive contextual grounding, as ethnographic studies of women in specific speech communities emphasize (e.g. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992). "Women" and "men" are not homogeneous groups. Overall, there is support for the view that women in many speech communities and settings tend to be less competitive conversationalists than men, but there is a tendency to overgeneralize and disregard contextual differences. This is basically a problem of allowing gender to override other considerations. A prominent feature of work within the difference framework is its positive reassessment of forms of talk that women are supposed to engage in, such as gossip. As Cameron has remarked, the two frameworks can be seen as distinct "moments" in feminist linguistics: "dominance was the moment of feminist outrage, of bearing witness to oppression in all aspects of women's lives, while difference was the moment of feminist celebration, reclaiming and revaluing women's distinctive cultural traditions" (1996: 41).

Difference-and-dominance have often been used together. Over two decades of language and gender research has been overwhelmingly preoccupied with gender *differences*. This has sometimes been inflected with a view of those differences embodying, at the level of individual interaction, male dominance over women in the wider social order. Both dominance and difference approaches rest on a dichotomous conception of gender; neither problematizes the category of gender itself.

The reification of gender *as* difference in this enormous body of research has inevitably led, again, to the reproduction of gender stereotypes. Gender is reified as difference when the agenda is set solely in terms of identifying male and female differences. It has "fixed" difference. As Barrie Thorne remarks, such "static and exaggerated dualisms" can only lead to a "conceptual dead end" (1993: 91). Various critics (e.g. Cameron 1992; Talbot 1998) have pointed out that the male and female interactional styles, as described, would equip them perfectly for traditional roles. After all, the nurturant, supportive verbal behavior characteristic of the female interactional style is just what is needed to be a good mother. Binary oppositions like these are supposed to characterize women's and men's different styles of talk:

Sympathy	Problem-solving
Rapport	Report
Listening	Lecturing
Private	Public
Connection	Status
Supportive	Oppositional
Intimacy	Independence

The left-hand column reminds us that women are nurturers. It could be a celebration of maternal qualities; indeed, it could be used to support a traditional idealization of the mother and womanhood in general. The right-hand column could be used in defense of male power and privilege.

The views of feminist linguists have had their influence on other areas, sometimes leading to further reproduction of stereotypes about women's language use. The familiar features of WL are often listed in introductory texts of the kind students appreciate for their uncomplicated clarity. The reductiveness of such books is made worse by their lack of scholarly referencing; this seems a high price to pay for student-friendliness. In the 1980s, Cameron argued that non-academic feminist workshops and discussion groups had developed a feminist folklinguistics which might have come "straight from the pages of Jespersen" (Cameron 1985: 34). She characterizes feminist folklinguistic beliefs about women's language use as follows:

- 1 Disfluency (because women find it hard to communicate in a male language).
- 2 Unfinished sentences.
- 3 Speech not ordered according to the norms of logic.
- 4 Statements couched as questions (approval seeking).
- 5 Speaking less than men in mixed groups.
- 6 Using co-operative strategies in conversation, whereas men use competitive strategies. (1985: 35)

It seems clear that the alleged male and female styles are highly stereotypical. Interestingly, one group of experimental researchers reports on having inadvertently elicited features of an allegedly "feminine" interactional style from a group of both women and men (Freed 1996). By asking them to engage in collaborative activities viewed as female, they unintentionally set up a "feminine" experimental space where everyone "did" woman talk. They conclude that the task engaged in was all-important in the language choices made; and the task was stereotypically feminine. Others have cautioned against the unreflective use of gender stereotypes, as preconceptions limiting a researcher's perception of their data (e.g. Cameron 1997: 25). As Cameron has incisively observed, "*gender is a problem, not a solution. 'Men do this, women do that' is not only overgeneralized and stereotypical, it fails utterly to address the question of where 'men' and 'women' come from*" (1995: 42).

4 WL: A Stereotype in Operation

More recently, questions such as these – where the categories of men and women come from – are starting to be addressed by feminist linguists. In a recent volume of research, for example, many of the contributors directly or indirectly interrogate categories such as masculine, feminine, heterosexual,

White, and middle-class (Bucholtz, Liang, and Sutton 1999). It is notable that all are conscious of theoretical shortcomings in earlier work by feminist linguists. Running through the volume is a careful avoidance of bipolar categories of gender, and the comparative approach that goes with them. Indeed, a striking feature of the book is its repeated rejection of gender identity as a static category altogether. Interestingly, Lakoff's early speculative work on WL has recently been revisited and reinterpreted in terms of stereotypes in operation. For example, Rusty Barrett returns to Lakoff's speculations about a stereotypical "women's language" in a study of African American drag queens' performances of an "uptown white woman" style (Barrett 1999). He points out that WL is a hegemonic notion of gendered speech that, he argues, is used by African American drag queens in the cultivation of an exaggerated "feminine" persona which is ultimately neither gendered nor ethnic, but *classed* (Barrett 1999: 321). Barrett's study illuminates the insight that WL is a potent ideological construct (Bucholtz and Hall 1995; Cameron 1997; Gal 1995).

Other research referring back to the early notion of WL is a study of fantasy-line operators offering telephone sex services (Hall 1995). Hall found that in order to "sell to a male market, women's pre-recorded messages and live conversational exchange must cater to hegemonic male perceptions of the ideal woman" (Hall 1995: 190). In catering for their customers' expectations, telephone sex workers pander to sexist and racist assumptions by vocalizing the stereotypes they assume their customers and "dial-a-porn" clients want to hear ("dial-a-porn" is the colloquial term used for pre-recorded messages containing erotic fantasies). In interviewing phone-sex operators about their occupation, Hall did not specify her intention to focus on language use until the end of the interview. Nevertheless, the interviewees were very much aware of the linguistic nature of their job. This is hardly surprising, since their livelihoods depended on their verbal ability; the sexual personas they performed over the telephone are entirely verbal. So it is not really a surprise that some of them volunteered a good deal of linguistic detail about what made their voices marketable commodities; for instance, they described their selection of what they regarded as "feminine" words (including precise color terms), high pitch, whispering, and a wide-ranging "feminine, lilting" pattern of intonation. One operator reported describing the appearance of her fantasy persona using "words that are very feminine":

I always wear peach, or apricot, or black lace- or charcoal-colored lace, not just black. I'll talk about how my hair feels, how curly it is. Yeah, I probably use more feminine words. Sometimes they'll ask me, "What do you call it [female genitalia]?" And I'll say, well my favorite is *the snuggery* . . . And then they crack up, because it's such a feminine, funny word. (Hall 1995: 199–200)

In reflecting on her language use, one interviewee makes a link between WL and sexual submissiveness, describing her customers' perception of it as indicating a sexually submissive position (Hall 1995: 206). Another of the phone-sex

operators Hall interviewed was a Mexican American bisexual man who posed as a woman for his male callers. Like the drag queens in Barrett's study, this sex worker performs a Euro-American woman over the telephone for the benefit of his clients. In projecting this WL stereotype, he is not so much cross-dressing as "cross-expressing" (Hall 1995: 202). For these sex workers, WL is a lucrative commodity in the phone-sex marketplace.

WL, then, operates as a powerful hegemonic construct of preferred feminine speech patterns. As a symbolic resource, it is not only available to women. Its first description – Lakoff's *Language and Woman's Place* – is used by cross-dressers as an instructional text, whether directly or indirectly. For example, it is referred to in a booklet entitled *Speaking as a Woman: A Guide for Those Who Desire to Communicate in a More Feminine Manner* (Liang 1989) catering for men who want to "pass" as women. This booklet contains simple descriptions of such WL features as "feminine" lexis, high pitch, and wide-ranging intonation patterns, along with advice on how to achieve them. Deborah Tannen's popularizing books are put to similar use. It is perhaps ironic that research founded on a dichotomous view of gendered verbal behavior is being used by male-to-female cross-dressers to subvert the binary division of male and female. While the obsession with difference and the unreflective reproduction of bipolar categories are now seen as a conceptual dead-end and pose problems for feminist linguists in the academic world, it seems they have helped to develop a rich symbolic resource for "gender-benders." As academic feminists are beginning to theorize the fluidity of gender identities, non-academics are appropriating earlier feminist research to help them engage in the practice of making their own gender identities more fluid. Not all appropriations can be viewed so positively.

5 Challenging Sexist Stereotypes

WL, then, is a hegemonic construct of preferred feminine speech patterns that is a resource for the construction of cross-gendered and sexualized personas. Cross-dressers, drag artists, and phone-sex workers have appropriated it for their own purposes. Gays' exploitation of the stereotypes enshrined in WL no doubt impacts on the stereotypes themselves in some way, possibly subversively. Livia and Hall remark on the knock-on effect that drag has on all other gender performances: "Drag, in its deliberate misappropriation of gender attributes, serves to queer not only the gender performance of the speaker but, by implication, all the other terms in the gender paradigm, according none the innocence of the natural or the merely descriptive" (1997: 12). But the queering of stereotypes does not eliminate them. What it does begin to do is undermine the naturalization of gender categories and destabilize the link between them and particular attributes and patterns of behavior. WL is clearly not only the province of women.

For sex workers on the fantasy lines, WL is lucrative; it is an asset enabling access to economic power and relative social freedom. Several of Hall's interviewees commented on their freedom from the sorts of constraint that employment in corporate America imposes. But this freedom they enjoy comes at the cost of perpetuating sexist stereotypes in the phone-sex marketplace. The situation is an interesting one for feminist linguists: a powerless speech style is a source of economic power for both women and men. As Hall observes, "this high-tech mode of linguistic exchange complicates traditional notions of power in language, because the women working within the industry consciously produce a language stereotypically associated with women's powerlessness in order to gain economic power and social flexibility" (1995: 183). Hall refers to a training manual produced by a phone-sex company that explicitly recommends striving to be "the ideal woman" (as though this were unproblematic) before going on to try "bimbo, nymphomaniac, mistress, slave, transvestite, lesbian, foreigner, or virgin." The phone-sex workers themselves argue that they cannot afford the luxury of quibbling over representations, though they identify themselves with feminism; they are, understandably, more concerned about improving working conditions and securing health-care benefits. But, be this as it may, they are actively involved in the perpetuation of reductive, ultimately denigrating representations of women and in the naturalization of potentially abusive kinds of relationship between women and men (it seems appropriate here to recall the link made between WL and a submissive sexual position in the context of "phone sex").

So, while such appropriations of stereotypes are interesting, they are not in themselves overt contestations of the reductive sexist assumptions embodied in them. This is not to say that stereotypes go uncontested, however. On the contrary, struggles in and over language and representation are taking place all the time and in different modes. Whenever we complain about sexist practices, such as the use of reductive stereotypes about women's language use, we are contesting them. Elsewhere I have suggested shouting at the television as a bottom line in thinking about resistance and contestation – not a bit effective in bringing about change, but better than nothing and a good way of letting off steam (Talbot 1998: 219). A more public, and hence perhaps rather more influential, mode of contestation by an individual might be writing letters of complaint, or indeed graffiti on the wall. Collective forms of contestation include stickering activities and related guerrilla-like practices. A stickering campaign on the London Underground was particularly effective. The Underground was once notorious for the sexist advertising images flanking the escalators in stations; strategically placed stickers announcing that "this poster degrades women" eventually had the desired effect of their removal.

In the academic domain, research countering the stereotype of the verbal incontinent has provided vast amounts of quantitative evidence that men talk more than women, in public places at least. Feminist research has produced extensive evidence of public talk being dominated by men (it must be noted,

however, that some of this research has tended to treat women and men as if they were homogeneous groups, and none of it problematizes gender itself). It has shown schoolboys dominating classrooms, with the encouragement of their teachers, men doing most of the talking in university seminars and academic conferences, men dominating management meetings, and so on. However, mere empirical evidence such as this is unlikely to undermine the deeply held belief that women talk more than men, a belief entrenched in the gossip stereotype. It is unlikely that such research has reduced the number of newspaper cartoons using women's verbal incontinence as the butt of their humor. It certainly did not deter the *Daily Telegraph* from producing the headline: "It's official: women really do talk more than men" (February 24, 1997) for some science coverage (a report of some neurological research indicating that, in a sample of eleven women and ten men, the women had proportionately larger language areas). The fact that there was no mention of amount of talk at all in the report itself did not appear to matter. Headlines, like advertising slogans, are about gaining the reader's attention, not striving for accuracy. For the sub-editor writing the headline, the opportunity to resurrect the attention-grabbing gossip stereotype was presumably irresistible.

Direct interventions are another way of challenging sexist practices such as the use of reductive stereotypes about women's language use. Some guidelines produced by the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) in Britain take issue with stereotypical representations of women and men in the press:

There is no reason why girls and women should be generally characterized as emotional, sentimental, dependent, vulnerable, passive, alluring, mysterious, fickle, weak, inferior, neurotic, gentle, muddled, vain, intuitive . . . Nor is there any reason why boys and men should be assumed to be dominant, strong, aggressive, sensible, superior, randy, decisive, courageous, ambitious, unemotional, logical, independent, ruthless. (1982: 6)

In the late 1980s, it was suggested that, as the profession employs increasing numbers of women, their presence would disturb "the 'men-only' vacuum" in the newsroom and bring about change (Searle 1988: 257). However, scrutiny of contemporary tabloid newspapers in Britain suggests that the guidelines have not been very influential at all. The NUJ's ethics council, which provides a channel for the views of the general public, has done very little with complaints about sexism (though it has fared less badly in dealing with press misrepresentation of gays, lesbians, disabled people, and ethnic minorities). Anti-sexist guidelines tend to be perceived as a form of censorship by men working in journalism. Codes of conduct are difficult to impose by union members because to implement them they would have to tackle their own immediate superior, the newspaper editor.

The trouble is that traditional sexist stereotypes are so resilient and so well entrenched that they may be contested repeatedly without undermining their commonsensical status. Even a chorus of dissenting voices is unlikely to

dislodge them. Moreover, as I have argued elsewhere with specific regard to the gossip stereotype, it is possible for them to be contested and reasserted in the same text (Talbot 2000). I return to this point in the next section.

6 The Resilience of the Gossip

Of late we have borne witness to the apparent undermining and reversal of the perception of women as deficient language users; now it is *men* who are deficient (see Cameron, this volume). New gender stereotypes about language use seem to be emerging, just as essentializing and reductive as the older ones, but placing men and women rather differently. In her recent studies of “communication skills” discourse, Cameron has identified a discourse about men’s communicative deficiencies which has evolved from popularized notions of distinct male and female interactional styles (Cameron 1998, 2000).

This relatively new view of women as expert communicators has been taken up with enthusiasm by “management gurus” and advertisers. I will go through one example of each. Allan and Barbara Pease, owners of an Australian management training empire, draw on it in a best-selling book aimed at a general audience, *Why Men Don’t Listen and Women Can’t Read Maps*. The back cover offers the following motley list of “revelations” about the behavioral characteristics of women and men:

Why men really can’t do more than one thing at a time
Why women make such a mess of parallel parking
Why men should never lie to women
Why women talk so much and men so little
Why men love erotic images and women aren’t impressed
Why women prefer to simply talk it through
Why men offer solutions, but hate advice
Why women despair about men’s silences
Why men want sex and women need love

Cruder by far than Tannen’s popularizing work on gender differences, this book claims to be based on (and indeed gives references to) scientific sex differences research. Notwithstanding its claims to scientific founding, what it actually espouses is an extreme, and very crude, form of biological essentialism. As one might expect, it completely disregards any research findings that might interfere with its simple, endlessly repeated claims: such as that women, among other things, talk more than men. The result is a volume unselfconsciously reproducing a raft of weary clichés and tired jokes, rigged up with an illusion of “scientificity.” For example, their chapter on “Talking and Listening” contains a section headed “Women Talk, Men Feel Nagged.” It opens as follows:

The building of relationships through talk is a priority in the brain-wiring of women. A woman can effortlessly speak an average of 6,000–8,000 words a day. She uses an additional 2,000–3,000 vocal sounds to communicate, as well as 8,000–10,000 body language signals. This gives her a daily average of more than 20,000 communication “words” to relate her message. That explains just why the British Medical Association recently reported that women are four times more likely to suffer with jaw problems.

“Once I didn’t talk to my wife for six months,” said the comedian. “I didn’t want to interrupt.”

Contrast a woman’s daily “chatter” to that of a man. He utters just 2,000–4,000 words and 1,000–2,000 vocal sounds, and makes a mere 2,000–3,000 body language signals. His daily average adds up to around 7,000 communication “words” – just over a third the output of a woman. (Pease and Pease 1999: 89–90)

The stereotype of the over-talkative woman is given factual status, with the help of some spurious figures and a reference to the British Medical Association. A shaded box between the two paragraphs reinforces the point with an old familiar joke. While communication skills discourse may appear to undermine traditional stereotypes of women as language users, it seems that such stereotypes are readily resurrected and may be with us for some time yet. In 2000 Allan Pease addressed a personnel conference at Harrogate in England; the event was covered in *The Times* in an article referring to his most recent publication – the article was headed “Women rule as a matter of fact.” Stereotypes, it would appear, rule ok.

An advertisement in a British Telecom (the UK’s main provider of phone services) campaign in the 1990s criticized men for making women feel guilty about running up phone bills. “Why can’t men be more like women?” we were asked, this being the slogan in a banner across the advertisement (another part of the text of this advertisement is discussed in Cameron, this volume). The slogan was a reversal of the talk-song “Why can’t a woman be more like a man?” from the musical *My Fair Lady*. The appeal of this banner headline lies in its ironic reversal of the familiar folklinguistic negative assessment of women’s talk. In this recent reversal, women are held up as model communicators. As Cameron has pointed out, its use in an advertising campaign shows the extent to which a proposition such as “women are better at talking” has moved from expert discourse into popular common-sense; advertisers, after all, must make their appeals to the familiar and recognizable (Cameron 1998).

The advertisement, and indeed the whole campaign, draws a sharp contrast between men’s instrumental use of the telephone with women’s interpersonal, and specifically phatic, use of it. Drawing on the familiar distinction between men’s report-talk and women’s rapport-talk, the campaign drew fathers’ attention to their wives’ superior ability in keeping in contact with their daughters

at university. This was a stark contrast with British Telecom's preceding advertising campaign which, while promoting the value of the phone for keeping families in touch with one another, worked with the gossip stereotype (this earlier advertising campaign featured the actor Maureen Lipman as a mother endlessly phoning her family in Australia). However, the very advertisement that ironically reversed *My Fair Lady's* talk-song and held women up as model communicators was curiously ambivalent about the value of phatic talk. The same text contains some aphorisms on the theme of conversation; oddly chosen ones, since they are not particularly positive about phatic talk at all. One anonymous aphorism, for example, compares women's conversation to "the straw around china. Without it everything would be broken." The simile of empty packaging material is hardly complimentary. Elsewhere in the advertising copy, the subject of domestic budgeting (comparing unlike things in terms of their relative cost) reduces women's talk to a commodity. The text of the advertising copy concludes with the implications that women's gossip is acceptable both because it is cheap and because licensing it is a way of avoiding domestic disputes:

This difference between the sexes becomes rather more than academic when the phone bill hits the mat.
Some men have a way of making women feel guilty about it.
Would it help, gentlemen, if you knew the true costs?
That a half hour chat at local cheap rate costs less than half a pint, for example?
Or that a five minute local call at daytime rate costs about the price of a small bar of chocolate?
Not so much when you think about it.
Particularly compared with the cost of not talking at all.

In her investigation of other British Telecom material, Cameron has remarked on the continued presence of the gossipy woman, not to mention the nagging wife and hen-pecked husband, despite all the overt claims about the superiority of women as communicators (2000: 174). It seems that the evolving stereotypes involving female fluency and male inarticulacy slide back into their older versions very readily indeed.

7 Conclusion

So, in recent years we have seen an apparent turnabout in the perception of women's verbal abilities. Women are no longer the deficient communicators, but the superior ones. But this view is predicated on a "differences" framework which, as I have indicated above, is highly problematic. It tends to shore up gender stereotypes rather than undermine them. It is a view that is shot through with problems (dealt with in detail in Cameron 2000), and anyway even as it is presented it is undermined. To be rather more positive, it may be

that widespread perception of communication skills as feminine will have lasting impact on one of the “good stereotypes” considered earlier: it seems that, sometimes at least, women’s talk is no longer being judged against an ideal of female silence. What is less sure, however, is that holding aloft the nurturant, supportive verbal behavior supposedly characteristic of the female interactional style as superior “communication” actually does anything to disturb hegemonic male dominance and female subordination.

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