

WOMEN, SEXUAL IDENTITY AND LANGUAGE. INTRODUCTION

MUJERES, IDENTIDAD SEXUAL Y LENGUAJE. INTRODUCCIÓN

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The earliest studies which were concerned with the relationship between language and women's social status can be traced back to the nineteenth century women's movement (on this see, for example, Beauvoir, 1952; Stannard, 1977), and also to linguistics and to feminist theories in the earlier twentieth century. Those publications established and led to a debate on the fact that language reflected gender differences, socially associated with women and men, but they are also said to have contributed to maintaining negative attitudes towards women and to perpetuating their secondary social status. Thus, the relationship between gender and language or linguistic variation, that is, gender differences in language use (see Coates, 1986; Jespersen, 1922; Key, 1975), on the one hand, and the significance of

the relation between gender and language for sexism and patriarchy, on the other, developed into two prolific and interrelated fields, coinciding with the second wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s.

The relation between language, sexism and patriarchy is dealt with in «The subjugation of women through lexical innovation in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*», one of the articles in this volume, where Paula López-Rúa addresses the importance of novel formations or rather, morphosemantic and semantic neologisms that occur in the feminist dystopia *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985): word forms and meanings are manipulated to enhance power relations and gender inequality, among other issues. Unlike the rest of articles in this book which deal with current and more updated circumstances concerning women, López-Rúa's focuses on women who are subordinate to men not only physically or socially but also linguistically: the male military elite has the power to name and categorize women, silence women by controlling their interactional exchanges and their access to writings, etc. This article clearly demonstrates that, unlike what former feminist language researchers thought, power is not outside language. Power is in language users but also power cannot be separated from language: language is imbued with power.

During the already mentioned 1960s and 1970s, a good number of contributions were published which dealt with either the nature and importance of gender difference in language use and gender bias or dominance in language. These two alternative perspectives to language and gender were the so-called the «difference» and the «dominance» approaches. Such approaches argued that women's style of speech was not deficient or subordinate but simply different (the «difference» approach), and that language perpetuated asymmetrical gender relations (the «dominance» approach). Amongst the most prominent works were Lakoff's (1973, 1975). Lakoff's theories suggested that women use a polite language style that also reflects shyness, low self-confidence, lack of commitment or lack of strong opinion, therefore, assuming women's (social) inferiority and their relative lack of power. However, research into the relationship between language and gender has evolved considerably since the 1970s. Thus, for example, the general politeness mentioned by Lakoff, amongst others, as a feminine feature which includes the use of euphemisms instead of swearwords or profanity, is not corroborated

in this volume. Virginia Acuña Ferreira, far from an essentialist view, in her article entitled «Gender and expletives as discourse markers: Some uses of *joder* in young women's interactions in Spanish and Galician» shows and explores how the expletive *joder*, which in some contexts may correspond to English *fuck*, is employed in interactions in Spanish and Galician among young females. The discursive approach adopted (as we shall see below) and the analysis suggest that this expletive fulfils an important sociolinguistic function as a marker of 'young femininities' in contrast to traditional gender rules and broader descriptions of 'women's talk' in language and gender studies, challenging adult norms and traditional rules on femininity.

Furthermore, while Lakoff argued that «the marginality and powerlessness of women is reflected in both the ways men and women are expected to speak and the ways in which women are spoken of» (1973, p. 45), Silvia Molina-Plaza in her «Blogs for women engineers: a multimodal study» shows how women engineers work towards sexual equality and how they attempt to achieve or ensure a dominant position as professional engineers in a still male-dominated industry. Her article (this volume) focuses on the mechanisms women engineers use for expressing their identities in blogs. Molina-Plaza reveals practices used by women engineers to overcome the limitations that they face in engineering by showcasing opportunities, change the perception of women engineers in society, «redress the gender imbalance in engineering companies» and, as she argues, «continue the true essence of feminism— achieving gender equality step by a step in diverse engineering fields». Studying computer mediated communication (CMC) can provide many insights into the ways males and females present themselves and interact with others in online settings (cf. also Herring, 2000, 2003; Miller & Arnold, 2000; Tannen, 1995). With this article, Molina-Plaza clearly overcomes early feminist concerns with difference and dominance as well as, amongst others, Spender's arguments (1980) that men encoded sexism into language because they had control over language and so they consolidated their supremacy or even Tannen's (1990). Tannen (1990) argued that the language women were taught to use was effective in developing relationships and rapport, while men were socialised into using more competitive or technical, 'report-oriented' communicative styles. In Molina-Plaza's article, women engineers not only use the power of language to promote their beliefs

and knowledge but also use language as a source of power. This goes in line with Spender's (1995) more recent work on gender issues and the internet. Spender argued that women must be involved as users and innovators of the world wide web to avoid the internet promotion of men's interests over women's.

In the the 1980s and 1990s, research on male/female differences in conversational interaction emerged. Scholars confirmed that men and women's communication styles were different but they also claimed women's superiority and positive qualities in discourse. This was popularized by Tannen (1990) or Coates (1986, 1996, 1997a, 1997b, 2004, 2013), but also widely criticized for its neglect of power and dominance relations by others such as Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992). Related to this, in «Colour and gender: language nuances», Isabel Espinosa Zaragoza reflects on colour vocabulary elicitation performed by university students. She concludes that females outperform males in production and richness in colour vocabulary, although differences are not as striking as in the past. Technological advantages which allow colour term exposure thanks to the Internet, as well as age, appear to be important factors in the reduction in colour production differences and a more equal and balanced colour specific terminology in young males and females. However, some differences are maintained, like female predilection for MCTs and more colour-related hobbies which may provide them with a much richer colour vocabulary.

In addition to the analysis of how women speak or write, this volume also includes other articles which study how women are spoken of from different linguistic or discursive perspectives. Mykytka and Balteiro in their article «Painting with words: describing women in photography» identify and explore the linguistic devices, especially descriptive adjectives, used to describe women in texts (titles, descriptions, comments or tags) accompanying professionals' digital photographs, and the similarities and differences between women and men's descriptions. Their results show many similarities in the use of the descriptive adjectives for women and men's images, but they also seem to suggest that men and women's appearance or beauty in particular are described from the male perspective and their stereotypes in our society. The question here is whether these descriptions by male professional photographers help to perpetuate sexism. Quite similarly, in «Gender

stereotyping and retro-sexism in advertising discourse: a case study of the luxury brand 'IWC' from a postfeminist perspective», Antonia Montes, by adopting a postfeminist critical discourse approach, analyzes a luxury-brand watches advertising campaign and concludes that, unfortunately, advertising seem to perpetuate misbeliefs about women's roles in society and reinforces demeaning female stereotypes in the collective imaginary about the understanding of gender equality.

Apart from the preceding, feminists following the discursive turn in psychology investigate language as a complex and dynamic system that produces meaning about social categories such as gender (see Crawford, 1995, or Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1995, for a social constructionist perspective). Awareness of the problem of sexism as well as promoting non-sexist language uses is important, an idea or premise which lies behind the articles in this volume. Research on gender differences in discourse apparently mirrors that on sex differences outside language. In fact, despite the prolific research on women and men's language, an exclusive women or men's linguistic feature is still to be discovered. In our opinion, talking about women's speech styles or discourses may be used to either maintain, resist or challenge conventional stereotypes, but, as seen in this volume, women's language uses and their speech and discourses depend on a variety of factors which include context and personality. In fact, as in Acuña Ferreira's and Molina-Plaza's articles, women's linguistic uses and discourses seem to be changing or rather, probably the notion of gender difference in discourse or speech styles should no longer be maintained. Nowadays women are empowering themselves through their discourses, which sometimes do not correspond with stereotypes or cultural beliefs about language styles (see Molina-Plaza's, this volume). As Acuña Ferreira does, following a constructionist perspective, we should pay attention and analyse spontaneous and ordinary language use (on this see also Stokoe, 1998, 2000).

In this new social constructionist view, women's language can be understood as a symbolic cultural construct that is potentially constitutive of a feminine identity (see Gal, 1995). That is, there has been a shift from an essentialist to a constructionist theory of gender which not only has brought to light new ideas on problems pointed out in previous research on gender differences in speech but rather, it abandons the study of gender as if it were

contained in discrete linguistic items to focus on the discourse level. As Acuña Ferreira shows in her article, «the individual engages with others and is defined and changed by that engagement and contributes to the changes taking place within the community of practice» (Mills, 2003, p. 30). In this case, the women's linguistic behaviours and uses are not in line with gender stereotypes, as explained above.

Within the third wave of Feminism, gender is seen as performative. Identity is constructed or achieved in the process of interacting with others and dependent on context and behaviour (Butler, 1990; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003; Mills, 2003); in other words, gender is neither something that we are nor aspects of the self, but something that we do. According to Butler (1990), the concept of 'performativity' demonstrates that gender is produced via cultural acts, including language, dress and other forms of self-presentation. This postmodern approach is found in Carmen Santamaría-García's article, where the author discusses the concepts of identity, face, rapport and (im)politeness from a discursive approach (Van der Bom & Mills, 2015) and analyses the construction of different male gender identities in academic contexts, drawing on data from a corpus of naturally occurring interaction compiled by the author. In «Gender identity in interaction: overcoming heteronormativity» Santamaría-García provides a theoretical framework that can facilitate the analysis of gender identity construction in interaction, moving beyond heteronormativity and gender binarism. Furthermore, she argues that gender identity face builds on attributes of both respectability and identity faces with differing strengths or saliency depending on the individuals and the context. Gay males seem to differ in their choice of resources for doing face-enhancing positive politeness and rapport with their female colleagues. Thus, «[w]hile hetero males are seen to use different gender identity patterns in a continuum of power, [...] gay males show a tendency to enhance rapport and to use face-enhancing positive politeness for bonding with their female colleagues, freer from suspicions of flirtatious behaviour» (Santamaría-García, this volume). This study contributes to research within third-wave sociolinguistics, with gender examined as constructed in interaction and considering «the gendered significance of ongoing discourse» (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003, p. 4). Despite research within this third wave is growing, studies portraying speakers who do not conform

to heteronormativity and gender binarism are still rare, which gives special relevance to this article.

As in Santamaría-García's, postmodern approaches to language and gender consider the interaction between gender, sexuality and language, continuing with the debate of language and femininity but with special reference to gender identities, and more particularly, to non-mainstream or non-heteronormative identities. Still, research into women's language, gender and identities revolves around women's professional roles and leadership, as in Molina-Plaza's article (this volume, as explained above), where women are successful and assertive (cf. Baxter, 2008, 2009; Mullany, 2011), but research may also evidence the perpetuation of inequalities. This and the idea that language is power or that there is power in language use are present in Martínez-Delgado Veiga's article, «'It doesn't meet the requirements of violence or intimidation'. A discursive study of judgments of sexual assault» (this volume). This study analyzes the way rape cases are treated discursively in court from a feminist perspective. The dominant discourses found have been those of sexuality, inaction of the survivor, and lack of violence and/or intimidation. Martínez-Delgado Veiga reveals hidden ideologies and power relationships to denounce the dominant ideas surrounding violence against women. The critical discourse approach in this article is also found in others such as Benwell and Stokoe (2006) or Lazar (2005), which combine such an approach with feminist theory and consider how texts support either maintenance or resistance to structural ideologies as regards heteronormativity or gender order, as in this latter case.

To conclude this Introduction, we encourage specialists and non-specialists to have a read of the articles contained in this issue in order to be aware of the remainders of inequality, the development and progress, and also of the enormous changes in the field of language and gender since the first feminist linguists in the 1970s until the postmodern approaches.

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