LANGUAGE AND GENDER: A brief Literature Review

Here is an example of a **Literature review**, on the subject of *Language & Gender.* It was written by Alastair Pennycook, as an example for his students.

Task
1. Work out:
- the **comparison** the writer establishes in the review
- the **sequence** to his review (why that sequence?)
- what the writer's **own perspective** is

2. Note:
- the use the writer makes of *each* of the **sources** he refers to
- how, in his language particularly, he **avoids** a "black and white", right/wrong type of judgement of the positions he reviews

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With the general growth of feminist work in many academic fields, it is hardly surprising that the relationship between language and gender has attracted considerable attention in recent years. In an attempt to go beyond "folklinguistic" assumptions about how men and women use language (the assumption that women are "talkative", for example), studies have focused on anything from different syntactical, phonological or lexical uses of language to aspects of conversation analysis, such as topic nomination and control, interruptions and other interactional features. While some research has focused only on the description of differences, other work has sought to show how linguistic differences both reflect and reproduce social difference. Accordingly, Coates (1988) suggests that research on language and gender can be divided into studies that focus on dominance and those that focus on difference.

Much of the earlier work emphasized dominance. Lakoff's (1975) pioneering work suggested that women's speech typically displayed a range of features, such as tag questions, which marked it as inferior and weak. Thus, she argued that the type of subordinate speech learned by a young girl "will later be an excuse others use to keep her in a demeaning position, to refuse to treat her seriously as a human being" (1975, p.5). While there are clearly some problems with Lakoff's work - her analysis was not based on empirical research, for example, and the automatic equation of subordinate with 'weak' is problematic - the emphasis on dominance has understandably remained at the Centre of much of this work. Research has shown how men nominated topics more, interrupted more often, held the floor for longer, and so on (see, for example, Zimmerman and West, 1975). The chief focus of this approach, then, has been to show how patterns of interaction between men and women reflect the dominant position of men in society.

Some studies, however, have taken a different approach by looking not so much at power in mixed-sex interactions as at how same-sex groups produce certain types of interaction. In a typical study of this type, Maltz and Borker (1982) developed lists of what they described as men's and women's features of language. They argued that these norms of interaction were acquired in same-sex groups rather than mixed-sex groups and that the issue is therefore one of (sub-)cultural miscommunication rather

than social inequality. Much of this research has focused on comparisons between, for example, the competitive conversational style of men and the cooperative conversational style of women.

While some of the more popular work of this type, such as Tannen (1987), lacks a critical dimension, the emphasis on difference has nevertheless been valuable in fostering research into gender subgroup interactions and in emphasizing the need to see women's language use not only as "subordinate" but also as a significant subcultural domain.

Although Coates' (1988) distinction is clearly a useful one, it also seems evident that these two approaches are by no means mutually exclusive. While it is important on the one hand, therefore, not to operate with a simplistic version of power and to consider language and gender only in mixed-group dynamics, it is also important not to treat women's linguistic behaviour as if it existed outside social relations of power. As Cameron, McAlinden and O'Leary (1988) ask, "Can it be coincidence that men are aggressive and hierarchically-organized conversationalists, whereas women are expected to provide conversational support?" (p.80). Clearly, there is scope here for a great deal more research that

- is based on empirical data of men's and women's speech;
- operates with a complex understanding of power and gender relationships (so that women's silence, for example, can be seen both as a site of oppression and as a site of possible resistance);
- looks specifically at the contexts of language use, rather than assuming broad gendered differences;
- involves more work by men on language and gender, since attempts to understand male uses of language in terms of difference have been few (thus running the danger of constructing men's speech as the 'norm' and women's speech as 'different');
- aims not only to describe and explain but also to change language and social relationships.

References
Cameron, D., F. McAlinden and K. O'Leary (1988). "Lakoff in context: the social and linguistic function of tag questions." In J. Coates and D. Cameron (op. cit.). pp. 74-93.
Coates, J. and D. Cameron (Eds.) (1988) *Women in their speech communities*. Harlow: Longman.
Coates, J. (1988). Chapter 6: "Introduction." In J. Coates and D. Cameron (op. cit.) pp. 63-73.
Lakoff, R. (1975) *Language and Woman's Place*. New York: Harper and Row
Maltz, D.N. and R.A. Borker (1982). "A cultural approach to male-female miscommunication."
In J. Gumperz (Ed.), *Language and social identity.* Cambridge: Cambridge U.P.
Tannen, D. (1987). *That's not what I meant*. London: Dent.
Zimmerman, D. & C. West (1975) "Sex roles, interruptions and silences in conversation"
In B. Thorne & N. Henley (Eds.) *Language and sex: difference and dominance*. Rowley, Mass: Newbury House.

Commentary on "Language & gender: a brief literature review"
Interpreting an author's style and stance

This text shows different aspects of **how the writer (P.) uses language**. We use three devices to comment on these features:

- underlining marks expressions which seem to take more of a ***tentative*** line of speculation or question-posing, rather than asserting more *definite* positions.
- **bold face** indicates the author's use of \`**stance**' markers (i.e. more overtly suggesting his own perspective or position)
- *italicised* text marks the commentary on all aspects of what the writer is ***doing*** (including the significance of (some of) the **bolded** or underlined features).

Task: In addition to the above, consider:

- What function each of the citations has in the writer's review,
- How the writer achieves *balance* between perspectives by, e.g., conceding a point in order to make a stronger point (using '**while**' & '**although**')
- Other ways the writer avoids making black & white statements about the different views

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LANGUAGE AND GENDER: A brief critical review
With the general growth of feminist work in many academic fields, it is hardly surprising that the relationship between language and gender has attracted considerable attention in recent years *[P. starts by linking the significance of the subject to wide interest and attention - leading into a review of that "literature").* In an attempt to go beyond "folklinguistic" assumptions about how men and women use language (the assumption that women are "talkative", for example), studies have focused on anything from grammar and vocabulary to aspects of conversation analysis, such as topic naming and control, interruptions and other interactional features *(This introduces the detailed object of study, before going on to talk about perspective or theory).* **While some research has focused only** on the description of differences, **other work has sought to show how linguistic differences** both reflect and reproduce social difference *["While" is typically used to concede a point, before making the point the author favours - which focus do you think the author favours ?].* Accordingly, Coates (1988) suggests that research on language and gender can be divided into studies that focus on *dominance* and those that focus on *difference [Notice: 1. P. is not saying that the subject can be divided, but that "research" on the subject can be divided; 2. it's not his division, but Coates' division - we'll see this becomes important later on, 3. Why P. has placed dominance & difference in that order].*

Much of the earlier work emphasized dominance *[The language here points to the reason for dominance being discussed first ("earlier work") - always have a good reason for sequencing any classification you make - usually either by time sequence or importance].* Lakoff's (1975) **pioneering work** *[adjective of approval, also implying it's among the earliest work]* suggested that women's speech typically displayed a range of features, such as tag questions *[e.g. "isn't it ?"],* which marked it as inferior and weak. Thus, she argued that the type of subordinate speech learned by a young girl "will later

be an excuse others use to keep her in a demeaning position, to refuse to treat her seriously as a human being" (1975, p.5). While there are **clearly some problems** with Lakoff's work - her analysis **was not based on empirical research** *[this is a negative feature, suggesting lack of direct observation of language behaviour, & largely speculation],* for example, and the **automatic equation** *[suggests over-generalisation]* of subordinate with 'weak' **is problematic** *[this is a useful expression, signalling you will now follow up with a statement of <u>why</u> you find it problematic]*- the emphasis on dominance has **understandably** *[approving]* remained at the centre of much of this work *[again, the 'while' clause admits problems, but the main clause - P.'s view - suggests that, on balance, the work has been valuable].* Research has shown how men nominated topics more, interrupted more often, held the floor for longer, and so on (see, for example, Zimmerman and West, 1975) *[P. balances Lakoff's theoretical generalisations with reference to some empirical studies].* The chief focus of this approach, then, *[this device (… , then,…)signals a summing up]* has been to show how patterns of interaction between men and women reflect the dominant position of men in society.

<u>Some studies, however, have taken a different approach</u> *[this stresses the approach or perspective rather than a black and white disagreement]* by looking not so much at power in mixed-sex interactions as at how same-sex groups produce certain types of interaction. In a typical study of this type *[a useful way of taking one reference to represent many others],* Maltz and Borker (1982) developed lists of what they described as men's and women's features of language. <u>They argued that</u> these norms of interaction were acquired in same-sex groups rather than mixed-sex groups and that the issue is therefore one of (sub-)cultural miscommunication rather than social inequality. Much of this research has focused on comparisons between, for example, the <u>competitive</u> conversational style of men and the <u>cooperative</u> conversational style of women. **While** some of the more popular work of this type, such as Tannen's (1987), **lacks a critical dimension, the emphasis on difference has nevertheless been valuable** *[this parallels the concession made in the previous paragraph about Lakoff's work]* before in fostering research into gender subgroup interactions and in emphasizing the need to see women's language use not only as `subordinate' but also as a significant subcultural domain.

Although Coates' (1988) distinction is clearly a useful one *[more concession, but at a broader level - the whole division suggested by Coates is given the same treatment - "while it's useful, it has its limitations"],* it also seems evident that these two approaches are by no means mutually exclusive *[this is the key point P. makes - criticising simplistic & "dichotomous" black and white arguments].* **While** it is important on the one hand, therefore, not to operate with a simplistic version of power and to consider language and gender only in mixed-group dynamics, **it is also important not to treat women's linguistic behaviour as if it existed outside social relations of power** *[this is the key to the whole literature review - THIS is the writer's position. The 'While clause balances the main clause, which cautions the more recent 'difference' movement against committing the same fault as the 'dominance' theorists].* Cameron, McAlinden and O'Leary (1988) **ask** *[authority often evoked in this manner to reinforce writer's favoured stance],* "Can it be coincidence that men are aggressive and hierarchically-organized conversationalists, whereas women are expected to provide conversational support?" (p.80). **Clearly, there is scope here for a great deal more research** [by pointing to the need for *more research' plus offering a 5-point set of recommendations, P. argues for change & turns this into a truly "critical" review in the sense of arguing for change]* that

1. Is based on empirical data of men's and women's speech; *[arguing against broad generalisations that are not grounded on observation]*
2. Operates with a complex understanding of power and gender relationships (so that women's silence, for example, can be seen both as a site of

oppression and as a site of possible resistance); *[arguing against over-simplification & "black & white" arguments]*

3. Looks specifically at the contexts of language use, rather than assuming broad gendered differences; *[cautioning against making universal statements, holding that sociological or linguistic observations are invariably specific to particular contexts or cultures*]

4. Involves more work by men on language and gender, since attempts to understand male uses of language in terms of difference have been few (thus running the danger of constructing men's speech as the 'norm' and women's speech as 'different'); [suggesting difference not be seen as "deviance" from a norm]

5. **Aims not only to describe and explain but also to <u>change</u> language and social relationships.** *[this is what makes this review "critical" in social theoretical terms - suggesting how we can promote change in our academic and social practices].*

For a more sustained and in-depth exploration of stance and perspective in this author's work, see his book:

Pennycook, A. (1994) *The cultural politics of English as an international language*. London: Longman.