

## Book Review: Language and Gender

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# Book Review

## LANGUAGE AND GENDER

Lia Litosseliti

*Gender and Language: Theory and Practice*

London: Hodder Arnold, 2006, 192 pp., ISBN 0-340-80959-0

*Language and discourse* are increasingly recognized as important for the social sciences in general, and women's and gender studies in particular. The 'language and gender' field has in turn moved way beyond questions of sexist language and alleged differences in the talk of women and men (these issues are still relevant, but now intensely problematized). Outside academia, too, you do not have to look far to see the significance of language in relation to gender. My local chemist recently displayed an advert for what was described as 'Mums' choice for head lice removal'. The proverbial visiting alien would be forgiven for thinking that Dads might have different opinions – but because 'Mother as main parent' is such a dominant discourse, most earthly mortals do not think this, and the ad does not seem odd. As another example, a prominent gendered discourse was evident in the recent media furore about two British women who received huge sums as divorce settlements from their extremely wealthy husbands (actually, small fractions of the husbands' wealth), with the phrase 'gold-digger' being bandied about – and levelled mechanically also at Heather Mills, soon to be divorced from Paul McCartney. All this is only possible given those discourses, manifested in language, which assume that men are the natural high earners (it is rarely asked why men tend to be richer than women in the first place), that women are natural 'gold-diggers', and given the largely *absent* discourse of women's contribution to men's earning potential, in a myriad of ways.

Any book on gender and language has to take these complexities, and developments of the field, on board, and work with them. In *Gender and Language: Theory and Practice*, Lia Litosseliti has managed to do this in a manner appropriate for upper undergraduates, and also, I would suggest, postgraduate students who need an introduction to the field. Litosseliti manages to tell the gender and language story in a steady, clear and accessible, but at the same time scholarly, way and never patronizes her readers. There are useful summaries at the end of each chapter, with 'Further Reading', as well as 'While-Reading' questions within the chapters, and useful cross-referencing throughout. The book is as up-to-date as it is possible to be in this fast-moving field, with a rich bibliography, making it a valuable resource for teachers and students.

*Gender and Language: Theory and Practice* would work well either for independent study or as a core text for a 'Language and Gender' module. Previous core texts include *Gender Voices* (Graddol and Swann, 1989), *Language and Gender* (Talbot, 1998), *Language and Gender* (Goddard and Meân Patterson, 2000), *Language and Gender* (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003), and, more recently, *Language and Gender: An Advanced Resource Book* (Sunderland, 2006). In terms of accessibility and being up-to-date, however, Litosseliti's book would now seem the best choice for anyone teaching 'Language and Gender' to upper undergraduates.

The book is structured into three main parts, and neither the 'theory' nor the 'practice' of the title is neglected. Part I covers the background to the field. Litosseliti explains the early focus of the field on 'gender differences' in the way women and men talk, but then swiftly moves on. This is no easy task, given the popular assumption that language and gender is all about such differences – an assumption bolstered in the early 1990s by Deborah Tannen's (1991) *You Just Don't Understand! Men and Women in Conversation*, John Gray's *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* series, and Alan Pease and Barbara Pease's series with illuminating titles like *Why Men Don't Listen and Women Can't Read Maps*, *Why Men Lie and Women Cry* and *Why Men Can Only Do One Thing at a Time and Women Never Stop Talking*.

This dominant 'gender differences' discourse – whether it is supposed to be a question of biological or social essentialism is rarely discussed – is also exemplified in most magazines written for women and girls. These often go one step further: assuming this gulf between women and men, they go on to assume mutual incomprehension, and helpfully try to enlighten the female reader about what her boyfriend, (male) partner or husband really thinks, wants and enjoys. But the real problem (for teachers of language and gender, but of course more widely – at least from many feminist perspectives), may be that such 'differences' are seen as natural and inevitable in part because they are often *enjoyed* by many (including our own students), whether or not this enjoyment is articulated through explicit linguistic traces of a *Vive la difference!* discourse.

Chapter 2 of Part I, then, is titled 'The Language of Women', but the latter part of this chapter is a section called 'Beyond Difference'. Litosseliti notes that differences found in empirical studies are often overreported, that difference 'is often reinterpreted as deficiency' (p. 42), and, most importantly, that gender polarization 'perpetuate[s] strongly held ideologies that, in a circular manner, find their way into curricula, legislation and social policy – both informing them and being invoked by them' (p. 42). The idea that gender is only *in part* about differences (better, tendencies) between women and men – and is *also* very much about differences *within* women and within men (i.e. diversity), similarities *between* women and men, how women and men are talked and written *about* and indeed how 'differences' are written about – poses a real challenge for the teacher of gender and language. It is however a challenge that Litosseliti rises to early on: Chapter 3 is titled 'The Shift to Discourse: The Discursive Construction of Gender Identities'. Here, she shows clearly that gender is currently understood largely as a construction of language and discourse, rather than one's language use somehow being a reflection of whether one is female or male.

Titled 'Gender in Context', Part II of the book (Chapters 4–6) deals with three well-chosen sites: education, the media and the workplace. This is 'practice' in the sense of gender and language being 'at work and in play' through a range of

context-related social and discursual practices. These chapters do not address empirical questions of actual analysis, but do demonstrate the *importance* of language and discourse in different sites.

Assuming social construction (in discourse) throughout, in these three chapters Litosseliti covers public talk (neglected in the early phases of gender and language study), private talk and representation. Chapter 4, on education, is co-written, and rather dense in the number of studies reviewed. This chapter would have benefited from more 'story' as well as more critical reflection (in particular, as regards the reported findings of 'gender difference'). There are also minor cases of misreferencing and misrepresentation. Chapter 5, on the media, is much better: this is Litosseliti's own area of expertise, and it shows. Included in this chapter, which focuses on magazines and advertisements, is an insightful and substantial section on men's 'lifestyle' magazines, and their characteristic (claims of) irony, which have challenged traditional 'modernist' feminist linguistic critique. In Chapter 6, on the workplace, also co-written, Litosseliti makes the point that much current work on *colleagues* has overtaken that on *professional-layperson* interaction (e.g. doctor-patient talk). She draws appropriately on the notion of community of practice, though this could perhaps have been interrogated a little more in terms of what this notion offers in the way of *linguistic* analysis. The analysis of a few of the extracts comes across as somewhat simplistic. On the whole, however, this is a substantial, informative and insightful chapter, and well argued.

Part III, 'Researching Gender and Language', consists of one chapter – and here we have 'practice' in the 'research practitioner' sense. Given that many upper undergraduate students (in the UK, at least) have to write dissertations based on empirical research, and MA students certainly have to, this is appropriate – and indeed it is a pity that this section is not longer and more substantial. Litosseliti provides activities in the form of questions about particular gendered texts, involving for example the identification of gender and language *issues*, and the analysis of linguistic resources and gendered discourses. These will undoubtedly be useful for teachers. Missing, however, is a proper consideration of data selection, the collection of naturally occurring data and the generation of elicited data (for example, interviews and questionnaires). The 'study questions' with which the chapter concludes (several in relation to each of Chapters 1–6) are largely discursive rather than empirical, but provide good *topics* for research projects (as well as useful material for seminar work).

Importantly, the book takes a firm feminist stance – rightly so, given the extent to which gender and language study has been informed by feminism, and, more recently, what some might call 'post-feminist' (or 'third-wave feminist') understandings. Chapter 1 includes sections on 'Pre-feminist' linguistics and 'The Emergence of Feminist Linguistics'; in Chapter 3, there is a substantial section on 'Feminist Linguistics: Current Trends'. Here, referring to magazines and advertising, Litosseliti aptly observes: 'women may respond in a range of ways to the femininities available . . . recognize, embrace, perpetuate, resist, criticize, or exploit them in their own gender performances' (p. 64). Chapter 7, the 'research' chapter of Part III, starts off boldly with 'Principles of Feminist Research'. These include self-reflection, self-reflexivity, locating the researcher 'within' the research topic, awareness of power relations between the researcher and the researched, and the contribution of feminist politics. My concern here is that many young undergraduate students are

unlikely to embrace an approach closely identified with feminism with enthusiasm. My own young female undergraduates (and those of my colleagues) tend to combine a view of their position as just fine (hence no more need for feminism) with a widespread rejection of 'Ms' (in the UK), and a perception of gender-inclusive language as 'just political correctness'. Together with the prevalence of 'raunch culture' and 'ladettism', these render feminism *as it is perceived* either problematic for or irrelevant to our young female students. This is of course a challenge for all writers of gender and language texts aimed at undergraduate students.

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