**Discourse and Gender**

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Introduction

Since the 1950s, an increasing use of the term gender has been seen in the academic literature and the public discourse for distinguishing gender identity from biological sex. Money and Hampson (1955) defined the term gender as what a person says or does to reveal that he or she has the status of being boy or girl, man or woman (masculinity or femininity of a person). Gender is a complex issue, constituents of which encompass styles of dressing, patterns of moving as well as ways of talking rather than just being limited to biological sex. Over the years, the perception of the issue ‘gender’ has been changing and developing from essentialism to social constructionism. Essentialism suggests that gender is a biological sex, by contrast, social constructionism suggests that gender is constructed within a social and cultural discourse. Due to its complex nature, gender intrigues numerous debates over the extent to which gender is a biological construct or a social construct.

**Approaches to gender research**

Over the last thirty years, there have been three main approaches to language and gender research:

1. The dominance approach, research that takes a dominance perspective interprets the differences between women’s and men’s linguistic usage as reflexes of the dominant–subordinate relationship holding between women and men.
2. The difference approach, research that takes a difference perspective, by contrast, sees the differences between women’s linguistic usage and men’s linguistic usage as arising from the different subcultures in which, it claims, women and men are socialized (this approach is sometimes called the subcultural or two-cultures approach).
3. The social constructionist approach, research taking a social constructionist perspective sees language use as constitutive of social reality and gender not as a given but as accomplished through talk.

**Discourse and Gender**

Early work in the analysis of gender and discourse looked at the relationship between the use of language and the biological category of sex. This has now moved to an examination of the ways language is used in relation to the social category, or rather the socially constructed category, of gender. Thus, from the moment a female child is born and someone says ‘It’s a girl!’ that child learns how to *do* being a girl in the particular society and culture, from the way she talks through to the way she walks, smiles, dresses and combs her hair (Butler 1993, Livia and Hall 1997).

Gender, then, is not just a natural and inevitable consequence of one’s biological sex. It is, rather, ‘part of the routine, ongoing work of everyday, mundane, social interaction’; that is, ‘the product of social practice’ (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003: 5).

Swann (2002:47) has pointed out that, Gender has come to be seen as highly fluid, or less well-defined than it once appeared. In line with gender theory more generally, researchers interested in language and gender have focused increasingly on plurality and diversity amongst female and male language users, and on gender as performativity – something that is ‘done’ in context, rather than a fixed attribute.

Discourse in terms of gender refers to “a whole range of different symbolic activities, including the style of dress, patterns of consumption, ways of moving, as well as talking” (Edley, 2001:191). Gender identity is constructed and reproduced through these symbolic activities in a very broad sense. For example, within modern Chinese culture, masculinity is considered as something like being tough, drinking alcohol, smoking, having a good sense of direction, having power and money. All these things are accepted and naturalized characteristics of the male within the culture

Many of the conversations in the TV show Sex and the City are examples of the way the lead characters, through their use of language, do gender. In the following extract, “Miranda asks Carrie why she accepted her boyfriend’s proposal of marriage. In her response, Carrie both enacts and affirms, through her use of language, her gendered identity, that of a woman who, because she loves her boyfriend, has to accept his proposal of marriage”:

*Miranda: I’m going to ask you an unpleasant question now. Why did you ever say yes?*

*Carrie: Because I love him . . . a man you love kneels in the street, and offers you a ring. You say yes. That is what you do.* (King 2002)

The discussion of how men and women speak, and what they do as they speak, has also been extended to how people speak about men and women. Holmes (2004), for example, compared the use of the terms woman and lady and found that the social significance of these terms has changed over the last 30 years. She found ‘*woman’*, for example, has moved from being marked as impolite to a situation where this is no longer the case (although ‘*woman’* is more frequently used in written British English than in spoken British English). She also found that while ‘*lady/ladies’* may be used as a politeness marker in formal settings nowadays, however, in informal settings it is also used to trivialize and patronize As Holmes (2004 : 156) argues, language choices are often enactments of who’s in charge and ‘whose values will prevail’.

Simone de Beauvoir famously said ‘one is not born, but rather becomes a woman’. Performativity is based on the view that in saying something, we do, or ‘become’ it. A person learns, for example, how to do and, in turn ‘display’, being a woman in a particular social setting, of a particular social class.

People perform particular identities through their use of language and other ways of expressing themselves in their interactions with each other. Mostly, this is done unconsciously as we ‘repeat acts’ such as gestures, movement and ways of using language that signify, or index a particular identity. These acts are not, however, natural nor are they part of the essential attributes of a person. They are part of what people acquire in their interactions with each other

Gender, is ‘not something a person “has”, but something that a person does’ (Cameron 2005a : 49). Gender (and in turn other identities) is not a result of what people (already) are but a result of, among other things, the way they talk and what they do.

**Gender Identity**

Identity is, equally, conveyed through writing as well as through speech. Richardson’s (2000) study of the use of disparaging language and sexually humiliating formulae by male members of a cricket club in their newsletter to talk about women provides an example of this. Richardson found that the men in her study used their language and the traditional ‘women only’ discourse of gossip to create solidarity as a group, and to construct their heterosexual masculinity, as did Cameron (1999) in her study of talk between fraternity brothers in the United States. The students writing in Richardson’s cricket club newsletter used a language they called ‘Dross’ as a way of creating an in-group identity as members of the club. One of the members she interviewed said ‘It’s the one thing that really does set [the Club] apart from other Clubs’.

The members also gossiped about women, sex and alcohol in the newsletter as a way of creating solidarity among themselves. This was often done through the use of formulaic language such as *Rumour has it that* . . . to indicate that what was about to be said was gossip, and may not necessarily be true. Richardson argues that the members’ identities presented in the newsletter are constructed through differentiation. That is, the members of the cricket club defined themselves ‘by that which they are not. They wrote, they said, in ways that are different from members of other cricket clubs.

As Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003:4) argue: “gender doesn’t just exist but is continually produced, reproduced, and indeed changed through people’s performance of gendered acts, as they project their own claimed gender identities, ratify or challenge other’s identities, and in various ways support or challenge systems of gender relations and privilege”.

Sex and the City provides many examples of the lead characters doing gender identity of a certain kind (among other things, independent successful professional New York City women of a certain age and certain social class) not only in the way they talk but also in the way they dress, and the way they behave as they speak to each other, their lovers and their friends. What to some people, then, may seem natural in their interactions is a result of what Butler (1990:33) calls ‘a set of repeated acts’ and a ‘repeated stylization of the body’.

These gendered identities are then ‘reaffirmed and publicly displayed by repeatedly performing particular acts’ (Cameron 1999:444) in accordance with historically and socially constructed cultural norms which define (this particular view of) femininity.

Gender identity then is a complex construction. All levels of language and discourse, as well as aspects of nonverbal and other kinds of behaviour are involved in doing gender (Butler 2004). Gender, further, interacts with other factors such as social class and ethnicity.

As Holmes observes: “gender is only one part of a person’s social identity, and it is an aspect, which will be more or less salient in different contexts. In some contexts, for example, it may be more important to emphasise one’s professional expertise, one’s ethnic identity, or one’s age than one’s gender” (1997: 9)

As Cameron and Kulick (2003:57) argue, ‘the relationship between language and gender is almost always indirect, mediated by something else’. The ways that people speak are, in the first instance, associated with particular roles, activities and personality traits, such as being a mother, gossiping and being modest (Cameron and Kulick 2003).

The extent to which these roles, activities and personality traits become associated in a particular culture with being gendered lead to these ways of speaking pointing to, or indexing a particular gender in the same way that particular ways of speaking may point to, or index, a person’s social class or ethnic identity (Litosseliti 2006 , Baker 2008 ). The features of language use which do this are not at a single level such as a particular vowel quality, choice of vocabulary item, grammatical structure or language variety. This occurs, rather, at multiple levels, all at the same time.

The use of language may be, in part, intentional and it may, in part, be habitual. Identity, further, is not something that is pre-assigned in fixed social categories. It, rather, is something that emerges in practice, through the use of discourse (Bucholtz 1999 , Bucholtz and Hall 2005 ).