

Language, Gender, and Sexuality: Current Issues and New Directions

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Sociolinguistic (and some applied linguistic) research dealing with questions of gender and sexuality has undergone significant change in the past 10–15 years, as a paradigm organized around the concept of binary *difference* has been superseded by one that is concerned with the *diversity* of gendered and sexual identities and practices. Here the theoretical foundations for the shift in approach—provisionally characterized as a kind of ‘postmodern turn’—are discussed, along with the motivations for it; three areas of empirical research illustrating its practical consequences are then examined in more detail. Some present and future challenges facing researchers in this field of inquiry are also identified and assessed.

INTRODUCTION

Many non-specialists still think of language and gender research primarily as an inquiry into the characteristic differences between men’s and women’s uses of language. Since the first half of the 1990s, however, a paradigm organized around the concept of binary gender *difference* has been superseded, for the most part, by one that is concerned with the *diversity* of gender identities and gendered practices.¹ The reasons for the shift are both theoretical (to do with changes in the kinds of stories scholars tell about the world they study) and material (to do with changes in the world itself). One of its effects, signalled in my title and discussed further below, has been to give greater prominence to questions of *sexuality* and its relationship to gender.

The discussion that follows will focus, first, on the theoretical dimension of the shift, and second, on what it has meant for empirical research. I will not be reviewing *all* recent linguistic research that touches on gender and/or sexuality. There are areas of inquiry (for instance, neuro- and psycholinguistics, experimental phonetics, stylistics, corpus linguistics), where the variable of gender is regularly considered, but the approach is typically a traditional one that looks for male–female differences. This work does not fall within the scope of the present discussion because it does not exemplify the shift which is my central concern. That shift has had most impact on sociolinguistic research which investigates the linguistic construction of identities and social relations, and it will be illustrated here largely with reference to work in that paradigm. Some reference will also be made to

recent research in conversation analysis (CA) and discursive psychology (an approach in which CA is applied to the investigation of phenomena such as attitudes and identities). It should also be noted that while traditional approaches to gender remain dominant in much SLA research, the theoretical shift discussed in this article is evident in some recent work on language learning, which makes a distinctive and valuable contribution to our understanding of the relationship between language and gender (see, e.g. Norton 2000; Pavlenko *et al.* 2002).

(RE)CONCEPTUALIZING GENDER: THE 'POSTMODERN' TURN

I have summarized in Table 1 what I take to be the key elements differentiating 'older' from 'newer' approaches to language and gender research—or, to use the labels I have preferred in the table, 'modern' from 'postmodern' feminist approaches. I should acknowledge that these labels are not unproblematic. 'Modern' and 'postmodern' are terms that notoriously mean different things to different people and in different fields of inquiry: for that reason I have placed them in scare-quotes, signalling 'contested term: approach with care'. While I think few scholars in the field would dispute that there has been a shift along the lines set out in Table 1, there is some variation in the terminology used to talk about it.

Some commentators refer to what I am calling the 'postmodern' approach as 'social constructionism', opposing this to the 'essentialism' of earlier approaches. To this terminology it may, however, be objected that all feminist theory since Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (first published in French in 1949) has been committed to the proposition that gender is socially constructed; while recent theorists may have interpreted that proposition in more radical ways than their predecessors, it is inaccurate to suggest that feminist social constructionism did not exist before the 1990s. Other commentators discuss the shift using a terminology of 'waves', in which what I am calling 'modern' feminism represents the 'second wave', and what I am calling 'postmodern' the 'third wave'. These terms carry less baggage, but arguably they also convey less information. Nor do they avoid all the problems associated with 'modern/postmodern'. One problem that arises with virtually all terminologies—not only 'modern/postmodern' or 'second/third wave' but also 'traditional', 'older', 'newer', etc.—is that they tend to imply a linear process whereby one paradigm succeeds another in chronological time. In the case we are considering, however, there was never a moment before which everyone subscribed to the precepts in the first column of Table 1 and after which they all subscribed to the precepts in the second column. The two approaches are better seen as representing tendencies in feminist thought which have historically overlapped and coexisted. What has recently happened is not that one approach has been discarded and another has been created to take its place, but that the balance

Table 1: Approaches to language and gender

| 'Modern' feminist approach | 'Postmodern' feminist approach |
|--|---|
| Gender is built on the foundation of sex: <i>'One is not born, but becomes a woman'</i> [Simone de Beauvoir, 1949] Gender (socially constructed) is distinguished from sex (biologically based), but the latter is implicitly assumed to provide a grounding for the former. | The foundational status of sex is disputed: <i>'Are there women, really?'</i> [Simone de Beauvoir, 1949] The sex/gender distinction is questioned on the grounds that sex itself is not 'natural', but constructed; so-called 'biological facts' are always filtered through social pre-conceptions about gender. |
| Socialization: gender identities and gendered linguistic behaviours are acquired early in life; gender is something you 'have'. | Performativity: ^a gender identities and gendered behaviours are produced ongoingly; gender is something you do or perform. |
| Difference: research presupposes the existence of two internally homogeneous groups, 'men' and 'women', and looks for differences between them. | Diversity: research assumes an array of possible gender identities or positions, inflecting or inflected by other dimensions of social identity; intra-group differences and inter-group similarities are as significant as differences between groups. |
| Big stories: linguistic gender differences are explained in terms of overarching social structures, e.g. male dominance or separate gendered subcultures; some researchers interested in discovering cultural universals. | Local explanations: masculinities and femininities are produced in specific contexts or 'communities of practice', in relation to local social arrangements. No assumption that the same patterns will be found universally. |
| Mainstream focus: subjects conceived as generic 'men' and 'women'—implicitly or explicitly often white, straight, middle-class, monolingual. | 'Liminal' focus: more interest in non-mainstream and 'queer' gender identities, and in relation of gender to sexual identities and to heteronormativity. |

^a 'Performativity' is a term taken from the philosophical work of J. L. Austin. Austin (1962) identified as 'performative' a class of utterances which do not simply describe pre-existing states of affairs but actually bring states of affairs into being, e.g. 'I apologize', 'I promise', 'I bet'. Uttered in appropriate conditions, 'I apologize' *performs* the act of apologizing. Butler, similarly, argues that gender is brought into being by the performance of certain acts which are culturally understood as gendered.

between the two has altered. Beginning shortly after 1990, the consensus among language and gender scholars began to shift in favour of what I am calling a 'postmodern' view of gender; by the end of the decade this had become the dominant position.

Another reason to prefer 'modern/postmodern' over, say, 'second/third wave' is that for anyone who has encountered it in other contexts, the term 'postmodern' is likely to evoke a number of the theoretical stances I would point to as characteristic of the approaches under discussion here. These include, for instance, an emphasis on diversity, a sceptical attitude to 'grand

narratives', an urge to deconstruct binary oppositions and a tendency to treat apparently fixed and natural categories as constructs whose ontological reality may be called into question. For the purposes of the present discussion, these associations of the term 'postmodern' are useful rather than misleading. Certain other associations of the term are less helpful: for instance, few language and gender researchers are deeply indebted to the ideas of canonical 'postmodern' theorists like Baudrillard and Derrida (though as we will see, Judith Butler does have some followers). I should also point out that what is represented in each of the columns of Table 1 is a sort of ideal-typical version of the relevant approach: language and gender studies is an empirically-oriented area of inquiry, and as we will see later on when I consider how new approaches have been applied in specific cases, real (empirical) research may not conform perfectly to any 'pure' theoretical template.

Let us begin by considering the left-hand, 'modern' column. The first row calls attention to what is often hailed as the founding statement of twentieth-century feminist theory generally: Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that there is a difference between the innate biological condition of being female and the achieved sociocultural status of being a woman. In English, though not in Beauvoir's original French, this distinction between what is born and what is made is lexicalized in the terms 'sex' and 'gender'.

For the feminist linguists who pioneered research on language and gender in the early 1970s, the issue was to show how language-using was implicated in the process of becoming a woman, or a man. The linguistic gender differences these researchers sought to identify and explain were not treated as expressions of the innate dispositions of men and women, but as the results of a patriarchal socialization which produced the two groups as different and unequal. Thus for instance Robin Lakoff (1975) famously characterized what she called 'women's language', a marked register indexing feminine gender, as a display of the subordinate status to which women in patriarchal societies were condemned: its hallmarks were powerlessness, insecurity, and triviality.

Lakoff's was a version of the so-called 'dominance' approach to language and gender, in which the emphasis was placed on the effects of gender inequality: male dominance and female subordination were considered to be reproduced as well as reflected in gender-differentiated linguistic behaviour. Later on, the so-called 'cultural difference' researchers, the best known of whom is Deborah Tannen (1990), would argue that linguistic gender differences were produced not by the subordination of women as such, but by the social arrangements which separate the genders in the formative period of childhood and adolescence. Boys and girls, it was argued, learn different ways of speaking in the same-sex peer groups where their main socialization takes place. They belong to different subcultures, and communication between them is analogous to intercultural communication, entailing many of the same problems.

Although dominance and difference researchers offered contrasting accounts, which by the early 1990s were the subject of intense and sometimes acrimonious debate, with hindsight it is equally striking how much they had in common. On some of the most fundamental points there was no dispute between them. Adherents of both approaches looked for differences between women and men, groups they implicitly considered to be well-defined and internally homogeneous. Both regarded linguistic differences as a matter of gender rather than sex, and both often described them as the product of early socialization. Each had a 'big story'—the 'dominance' story or the '[cultural] difference' story—to explain why the differences existed and what they meant. And both concentrated on what might be called a mainstream prototype of femininity or masculinity—in practice, most often that of speakers who were white, straight, middle class, and monolingual.

It is these fundamentals that the 'postmodern' turn has called into question. Again, Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* provides an important inspiration, in the form of the question 'are there women, really?', which some would say is an example of feminist postmodernism *avant la lettre*. The question is not, of course, whether there are people in the world who identify and are identified as women, for plainly there are. It is whether that identification has, in the jargon, any 'ontological status', any basic grounding, for instance in the brute facts of biology. The postmodernist answer, associated in particular with the philosopher Judith Butler, is 'no': for Butler there are no brute facts of biology. We know 'sex' only through the ideological filter of discourse about gender. One is no more natural than the other, both are cultural constructs, and the distinction between them thus collapses. Butler defines gender as a phenomenon brought into being when it is performed. In her now famous words, 'Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a "natural" kind of being' (1990: 32). Gender is therefore not something you acquire once and for all at an early stage of life, but an ongoing accomplishment produced by your repeated actions.

The idea of gender as an 'accomplishment' is also found in CA and discursive psychology, where the construction of gender in and through talk has been a key preoccupation for many researchers (Edley and Wetherell 1997; Stokoe and Weatherall 2002; West and Zimmerman 1987; Wilkinson and Kitzinger 1995). The theoretical antecedents of this paradigm are not however in feminist theory—'postmodern' or otherwise—but in the pioneering work of the ethnomethodologist Harold Garfinkel. Ethnomethodology rejected orthodox sociological models (e.g. functionalist and marxist ones) positing that social behaviour is determined by overarching structures, and argued instead that the orderliness of everyday life is produced by social actors managing their activities locally. CA, developed out of Garfinkel's

work by Harvey Sacks and others, located that process more specifically in the minutiae of verbal interaction.

In CA, the object of analysis is social actors' own procedures for rendering interaction orderly and meaningful: analysts must not impose their own perceptions of what is going on in data, but must work with categories whose relevance for participants is attested in their talk. 'Global' constructs such as gender or power are thus relevant only to the extent that participants in interaction *make* them relevant through their own words and actions. Although it comes from a different intellectual tradition, this principle aligns recent CA research on gender with the kind of sociolinguistic research that is more explicitly influenced by postmodernist ideas. CA too emphasizes (albeit using different terminology) that gender has no 'ontological status': it is not a fixed attribute of persons whose global influence on behaviour can be assumed *a priori* in every case, but rather something that may (or may not) be 'made relevant' and that has in any case to be 'accomplished' by participants in specific interactions. Arguably, the recent growth of interest in using CA for avowedly feminist purposes is not unrelated to the 'postmodern turn' in feminist research more generally. In the past CA was viewed with suspicion by feminists (and many other politically engaged researchers) because of its refusal to grant explanatory force to 'global' structural factors such as gender inequality; but this objection has lost some of its force with the advent of a 'postmodern' feminism that is similarly suspicious of global generalizations. So while debate on the issue continues, it is no longer just a debate between feminists and others, but as much an internal argument among feminists themselves.²

It is probably true to say, however, that only a minority of contemporary language and gender researchers have been directly engaged in theoretical debates about the ontological status of gender, and many are sceptical about the extreme gender relativism (that is, the denial that gender divisions have 'global' significance or relevance) found in some recent theoretical writings. A far more pervasive feature of the 'postmodern turn', in the sense that it is a matter of consensus rather than controversy, is the shift from thinking in terms of binary gender *difference* to thinking in terms of gender *diversity*.

In a gender difference framework, the fundamental question is, 'how are women different from men?' In a diversity framework, that question will immediately be met with another question: 'which women and which men do you mean?' Instead of looking for linguistic features that distinguish generic masculinity from generic femininity, researchers today tend to assume that there is no such thing as a generic man or woman. Masculinities and femininities come in multiple varieties, inflecting and inflected by all the other dimensions of someone's social identity—their age, ethnicity, class, occupation, and so forth. A further key insight is that gender identities may be constituted less by the contrast with the *other* gender and more by contrast with other versions of the *same* gender. For instance, a group of women constructing themselves linguistically as 'middle-class' might be far

more concerned to distinguish themselves from working-class women than from middle-class men; and a group of young women might define their femininity primarily by contrast with the femininity of their mothers' generation. Or, to take an example with obvious relevance for applied linguists, a group of Korean women in an English language classroom might perceive a sharp contrast between their own feminine gender identities and those displayed by other women students from Latin America or Eastern Europe or the Arab world; that cultural contrast might well be far more salient to them than anything they share simply by virtue of being women. Some strands of SLA research are much given to dividing groups of learners into two gender groups and looking for patterns linked to that division; but in a diversity framework the question arises, especially with culturally mixed groups of learners, 'on what basis can we assume that all the women or all the men form a single category?' For generalizations about the impact of gender on language learning to be meaningful, you would need to establish that the women or the men in your sample have relevant things in common rather than simply reading that off from their membership of the global categories 'women' and 'men'.

Of course, one thing all the women or all the men in a language class might turn out to have in common might be that they are positioned as a single gender group by the practices of the language classroom itself. A researcher might ask, for instance, whether the teacher constructs the class as divided axiomatically into women/girls and men/boys ('let's hear what the boys think about X'), or what gendered identifications are solicited by teaching materials (e.g. games and role-play scenarios that require or foreground gender difference), or to what extent gender duality is built into the organization of classroom tasks (e.g. by deliberately pairing male with female students or deliberately not doing so, or by instituting competitions between the male and the female students). This line of investigation is in keeping with the postmodern view that identities of all kinds are not fixed and stable attributes of individuals, but are constructed in particular contexts through particular practices. As well as prompting researchers to attend to the diversity of masculinities and femininities, that view leads them to emphasize the principle of 'looking locally'—in other words, relating performances of gender to the particularities of the context, rather than treating them all as expressions of some overarching global opposition (e.g. male power/female powerlessness, or male competition/female co-operation).

The injunction to 'look locally' is particularly associated with a currently influential research paradigm centred on the concept of the 'community of practice' (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1999). The CoP is a social grouping which is constituted by engagement in some joint endeavour: a language class would be an example. Although adherents of the CoP approach do not necessarily employ Judith Butler's concept of gender as performative, they too view gender as something that emerges from practice, from what people

do rather than what they intrinsically are. The relationship of language to gender is conceived in terms of the local practices women and men participate in and the terms on which they participate. If women and men in a given community typically participate in a different range of CoPs, or participate in the same ones on different terms, their ways of using language will be related to the different things they are doing, and to that extent will tend to differ. For instance, in British society it is probably the case that more men than women belong to competitive sports teams, while more women than men are active in slimming clubs and reading groups. On the assumption that a CoP's habitual style of discourse will be related to the topics, goals, and social relations that are associated with its joint enterprise, such gender-differentiated patterns of CoP membership may result in women and men developing non-identical discourse repertoires. (Consider, for instance, the different kinds of talk that would tend to be produced at a Weight Watchers meeting and during a game of football.) Even where women and men belong to a single CoP, they may nevertheless be positioned differently in it, in ways that are consequential for their linguistic behaviour (this point is explored further below, in the section on language and gender in public contexts). Again, however, one cannot just assume differences will be found in every CoP, nor extrapolate findings from one CoP to all of them: the constraints and possibilities available to women and men are localized, context-dependent, and as such always a matter for local investigation.

The last row of the table points to a different kind of shift, from research that concentrates on the linguistic realization of what might be called 'mainstream' forms of gender to research that investigates the more peripheral or non-mainstream varieties. Partly, the growth of interest in studying, for instance, men and women in non-traditional occupations, gay and lesbian speakers, or transgendered speakers (developments I return to below), reflects the shift from difference to diversity. For some researchers, a primary aim is to put alternative forms of gender on the sociolinguistic map: it is part of the politics of identity, visibility, and recognition. But this trend arguably also reflects something else: the idea that mainstream gender norms may be illuminated most strikingly by focusing not on people who seem to embody them but on people who in some way deviate from them. This idea has been developed particularly in queer theory, a critical inquiry into 'heteronormativity', the system which prescribes, enjoins, rewards, and naturalizes a particular kind of heterosexuality—monogamous, reproductive, and based on conventionally complementary gender roles—as the norm on which social arrangements should be based. This concept of heteronormativity has had a significant impact on the study of language and gender: it is in large part for that reason that the word 'sexuality' appears alongside 'gender' in the title of this article, whereas ten years ago it probably would not have done.

At the beginning of this discussion I observed in passing that the trends summarized in Table 1 do not just reflect changes in theoretical fashion, but are also linked to real-world changes in the social relations of gender and sexuality. The adoption of new theoretical approaches has been motivated, at least in part, by researchers' awareness that they are now dealing with a different configuration of social forces from the one that prevailed when language and gender studies first emerged as a coherent field of inquiry in the early 1970s. It is worth pointing out here that any kind of politically committed approach to social scientific research must build in the kind of reflexivity that can lead to paradigm shifts. The goal of political activity (including politically committed research) is to change the world: to the extent that goal is achieved, it will be bound to change the research agenda too, as changed social conditions present new political challenges. It is obvious that feminist activity over the past three decades has been a major factor (albeit not the only one) in bringing about social change; new approaches to gender in linguistic and other social scientific research can be seen in many cases as responding to the realities and ramifications of change.

For instance, one reason why the 1970s-style 'dominance' approach to language and gender now seems unsatisfactory is that in many contexts we are no longer confronted with the extremely overt and rigid gender hierarchies of the past. Gender hierarchy has not been eliminated by any means, but it does not manifest itself in the same ways it did in 1970, and therefore needs to be approached differently. Similarly, it is unsurprising if researchers today are more inclined than their predecessors to question the idea of gender as a simple binary difference. One legacy of feminism in those societies where its impact was significant has been a perceptible weakening of the most extreme forms of gender dualism. Young men and women growing up in the West today are more similar to each other than their grandfathers and grandmothers were, in everything from the clothes they wear to the education they receive, from the jobs they might aspire to do to their attitudes to sex, or sport.

At the same time, young western men and women today are products of a culture in which many aspects of a person's identity have come to be conceived as matters of individual choice and effort. Gender itself is no longer taken to be fixed and unalterable. One motivation for queer theory, and for the idea of gender as performative, was the increasingly visible presence in the world of people whose gender identities patently are not determined by the sex of their bodies at birth or by their early socialization—transgendered and transsexual people who move from one category to the other during the course of their lives, individuals who alternate between gendered personas, people who refuse to be defined as either men or women but claim to be something intermediate, or indeterminate. Although the phenomenon now labelled 'transgender' by westerners is not in fact new, nor exclusively western—versions of it exist, and in some cases have existed for centuries, in non-western societies, a point I will return to below—it is

now attended to, and politicized, in new ways, becoming in the process not only more visible, but visible as something that has implications for our theoretical understanding of gender. A similar point could be made about the phenomenon of 'multiculturalism'. Again, the existence of culturally diverse populations is not new (even if, in contemporary conditions, the extent of diversity is increasing in many societies), but it has become more salient as a political issue. That focuses attention, among other things, on the way cultural differences (e.g. ethnic, national, religious, linguistic) inflect the performance of masculinity and femininity.

So, what kind of research agenda has been generated by new real-world conditions and the new theoretical approaches they have encouraged many researchers to embrace? What, in concrete practical terms, are these researchers doing research about, and what are they finding when they do it? The question is too broad to be answered in a single article, but I will address it here by picking out three areas of contemporary research on language, gender, and sexuality which have been strongly influenced by the new approaches discussed above. I have labelled these: (1) the linguistic performance of gender diversity; (2) gender, sexuality, and heteronormativity; and (3) language and gender in 'public' contexts. Again, space does not permit me to attempt an exhaustive survey of recent work in these areas: rather I will choose a few indicative examples to show how new theoretical approaches to language, gender, and sexuality have been applied in empirical studies.

THE LINGUISTIC PERFORMANCE OF GENDER DIVERSITY

Since about the mid-1990s, a number of scholars have adopted Judith Butler's concept of gender as 'performative': not something a person 'has' but something a person does, by repeatedly performing acts that constitute masculinity and femininity. Butler's famous formula, quoted in full above—'gender is the repeated stylization of the body'—might seem to suggest a primary concern with physical self-presentation, but to many linguists it seemed that language-using too offered a good example of 'repeated stylization'. Researchers' attention began to focus on the range of ways in which gender could be performed using the resources of linguistic variation, from the pronunciation of particular vowels to the selection of whole codes.

Researchers influenced by queer theory have often presented case studies of speakers who in some way push the gender envelope, undercutting the idea of masculinity and femininity as natural categories. Rusty Barrett (1995), for example, investigated performances by African-American drag queens, in which a version of what Lakoff called 'women's language', typified by politeness and refinement, was creatively juxtaposed with a 'street' variety of African American Vernacular English, producing a racially and sexually ambiguous self. Kira Hall (1995) explored the verbal techniques used by telephone sex-workers in the Bay Area of California to create a

range of fantasy women, of varying ethnicities and personalities, for the benefit of their male heterosexual clients. Again, features of Lakoff's 'women's language' emerged as an important resource for constructing these fantasized feminine personae. Hall also noted that some of the most successful personae were remote from the worker's 'real' identity: black women performed white personae, white women presented themselves as Latinas, many of the workers were not heterosexual, and one was even a man. Don Kulick (1999) examined the advice given to male-to-female transsexuals on feminizing their speech behaviour, finding that experts in this area also relied heavily on advising or training their clients to produce the features of Lakoff's 'women's language'.

A slightly different take on queer linguistics is Mary Bucholtz's (1999, 2001) study of a group of self-identified nerd girls in a US high school, who used a hyper-standard, white, and formal variety of English to mark their femininity in opposition to the kind that was considered mainstream by their peers. Nerds can be considered 'queer' in the sense that they reject the heteronormative values of mainstream youth culture: for most high school students engagement in heterosexual activity is a way of displaying 'coolness' and gaining popularity, but nerd femininity is not about being cool, popular, or attractive to the opposite sex. Rather it involves displaying intelligence and educational aspirations openly, and formal standard language is one key resource for doing that.

Such examples illustrate that Butler's abstract philosophical arguments can be used to some effect in empirical social science. In these cases it is difficult or impossible to apply the common-sense idea that the way people speak just expresses the inner essence of who they are, or the identity they acquired when they were young children. Even the nerd girls, who are not literally putting on a performance in the way the drag queens and the sex workers are, have to be seen as actively styling themselves rather than merely acting out a gender template that was impressed upon them in the earliest years of life. The point is dramatized by selecting cases which stand out as unusual performances, but if it applies to those it must surely also apply to less remarkable instances. In any case, part of the aim here is to challenge the notion of a single prototype for masculinity or femininity by calling attention to the multiplicity of gender and sexual identities it is possible to perform. In their performances of femininity and sexuality, a nerd girl and a phone-sex worker are at least as different from one another as either one of them is from the men they might be compared with.

Another line of inquiry followed by several researchers (e.g. Baxter 2003; Coates 1996, 2003; Kiesling 1997, 2003; Pujolar 2000; and discursive psychologists such as Edley and Wetherell 1997 and Speer 2002) focuses on the diversity of the gendered linguistic performances produced in different local contexts by single individuals or small groups. These researchers pay close attention to the way their subjects, rather than occupying a single

consistent gendered position, appear to orient to and/or be positioned by others through a continually shifting range of 'discourses' on masculinity and femininity. For instance, Kiesling's work examines shifts in the kind of masculinity that is indexed in conversations among US college fraternity brothers. The ideal of the responsible, professionally successful 'good provider' co-exists in their talk with an ideal based on the assertion of physical strength and athletic prowess; in some contexts discussion of women is crudely objectifying, sexist and implicitly homophobic, while in other contexts the same speakers orient to a more sensitive 'new man' identity. Somewhat similarly, recent research in discursive psychology has stressed the 'identity work' done around gender and/or sexuality by subjects participating in interviews or focus groups. Rather than just artlessly displaying stable, pre-existing identities or attitudes, these informants are shown to be carefully managing their self-presentation, anticipating and working to deflect potential perceptions of them as either insufficiently or excessively masculine/feminine, or as prejudiced against women and homosexuals (Speer 2002; Speer and Potter 2000). Studies of this kind underline that gender is not just performed differently in different communities or subcultures; some range of gendered performances can be found in the repertoire of every group, and indeed every individual subject.

Some researchers have addressed themselves specifically to the educational implications of this point. Judith Baxter (2003), using an approach she labels 'feminist poststructuralist discourse analysis', gives a detailed analysis of the way boys and girls are positioned (by themselves, each other, and teachers) in school English classes developing spoken communication skills. Her analysis shows that even in a group which is not very diverse in terms of age, ethnicity, class, or culture, it is possible to observe a range of masculinities and femininities being constructed by and for individuals. Baxter also shows how teachers' judgements about particular gendered performances are affected by discourses that are salient locally, i.e. in the context of English language education, as well as by more 'global' discourses on gender itself. Although English teachers value the (symbolically 'masculine') ability to 'take command' in a group discussion, their professional ideology also gives them a strong commitment to (symbolically 'feminine') values of collaboration and sensitive listening. The most positively assessed pupils, therefore, tend to be boys whose performance combines a measure of personal authority with a degree of interpersonal sensitivity. Pupils who display extremes of either masculine dominance or feminine deference are less well-rewarded; and girls who flout gender expectations by being markedly assertive are negatively assessed—less because of sexism on the part of teachers than because of the interactional consequences of peer-group disapproval. Gender nonconformists often do not get peer support, and that limits the effectiveness of their contributions to group discussion.

GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND HETERONORMATIVITY

The second area of research I consider places particular emphasis on the significance of *sexual* identities and practices in shaping performances of gender. Two complementary developments are relevant here: one in which the focus is on non-mainstream, liminal, or 'queer' sexual identities, and one in which heterosexual identities become an explicit object of attention.

Research on the allegedly distinctive argot of (mainly) male homosexuals in Europe and North America has a history going back as far as the late 1920s (see Cameron and Kulick 2003 for a brief summary), but the current sociolinguistic concern with questions of identity and diversity has prompted a surge of interest in investigating the linguistic performances of people who identify as members of sexual minorities. These include not only the familiar modern Western categories of 'gay men' and 'lesbians', but also traditional non-western categories such as the *hijra* of India, the *yan daudu* of Nigeria, the *kathoey* of Thailand, the Filipino *batut*, Tongan *fakaleiti*, and Brazilian *travesti*, as well as more recently emergent categories such as *gay*³ in Indonesia and *tong-zhi* in Hong Kong (see, e.g. contributions to Campbell-Kibler *et al.* 2002; Leap 1995; Leap and Boellstorff 2003; Livia and Hall 1997).

This line of research can be seen as running in parallel with feminist research on language and gender, and as exemplifying the same shift from difference to diversity. Sexual identities, like gender identities, are shown to be culturally and locally variable. Yet, in fact, these are intersecting rather than parallel developments, because gender and sexual identities do not only inflect one another, they are to a considerable extent mutually constitutive. Many of the traditional non-mainstream sexual identities that have been studied in parts of the world other than North America, western Europe, Australia, etc., are locally conceived as forms of *gender* deviance as much as *sexual* deviance—the latter is understood to follow from the former. By contrast with western gay men who typically seek other gay men as sexual partners, men in many of the non-western categories listed above are attracted to 'masculine' men who would not be defined as 'homosexual'. In the west itself, gender crossing is part of many folk understandings of homosexuality, for it is only recently that scientific and political discourses have made a categorical separation between gender and sexuality. That distinction, however, is now spreading to new areas of the world, so that in some places traditional local categories co-exist and contrast with the western-influenced categories 'gay' and/or 'lesbian'. The sociolinguistic significance of all this is that the perceived relationship of gender to sexual identity in a given local context can be expected to influence the linguistic performance of both. To take a fairly obvious example, where homosexuality is strongly associated with gender-crossing, group members may exploit non-standard grammatical gender-marking to display their sexual identities (e.g. males may use feminine-gendered pronouns, adjectives, and articles

in reference to themselves and one another—see Hall and O'Donovan 1996; Kulick 1998); conversely this practice may be absent or stigmatized where gender and sexuality are separated.

The widespread and persistent association of same-sex sexual preference with gender deviance or crossing reflects the power of a heteronormative principle which naturalizes (in this case by mimicking) heterosexuality and the gender difference it requires. But an investigation of heteronormativity would be incomplete if it considered only its effects on the performance of minority or 'liminal' sexual identities. A second important development in the sociolinguistic study of sexuality and heteronormativity is a current of research which examines the linguistic performance of *heterosexuality*. At least implicitly, heterosexuality has been an issue for language and gender research since its inception, but now it is emerging as a focus of sociolinguistic interest in its own right: some recent research has highlighted its fundamental importance for the constitution of gender identities and gendered linguistic styles.

The sociolinguist Penelope Eckert (e.g. 1994) has for some years been studying the linguistic effects of the emergence of what she calls a 'heterosexual market' among pre-adolescent school children in the USA. She points out that at this life-stage there is an overriding social imperative to display one's continuous development towards maturity: when great importance is attached to age differences of even a few months, immaturity, appearing babyish or unsophisticated to one's peers, can mean unpopularity or even ostracism. And sexuality, of the heteronormative variety, is a major symbolic arena for displaying maturity, because sex is one mark of adult status. By the age of 8 or 9, children who show no sign of being interested in sex itself are contracting quasi-heterosexual relationships as a way of negotiating their status among peers of the same gender. These couplings may have no substantive content at all—the supposed partners may barely even speak to one another—but they provide the matter for a great deal of talk between girls or between boys. The need to compete successfully in the heterosexual market, not at this point because you desire the other gender but because you desire the approval of your own, also prompts pre-adolescents to reorient their performance of gender towards a heterosexual model. This is the moment at which they begin to invest in notions of masculinity and femininity as not just different, but the proverbial 'opposites that attract'.

It is instructive to compare the account Eckert gives of pre-adolescents' self-styling practices with Deborah Tannen's (1990) 'cultural difference' model of gender differentiation in language. Both would agree that boys and girls interact most intensely with peers of the same gender. But for Tannen the key point about this is that each gender acquires its habitual style in isolation from the other. Heterosexuality comes later, and gender differences which pre-date it are presented by Tannen as a serious obstacle to effective communication between heterosexual partners. In Eckert's

account by contrast, heteronormativity decisively shapes the way gender is performed from a relatively early age, because the heterosexual market is not just a market for sexual partners, it is also an arena in which individuals negotiate their relationships with same sex peers. Among pre-adolescents this mediation of homosocial (i.e. same sex, non-erotic) relationships is clearly its most important social function, but it should not be thought that this function becomes irrelevant with the onset of heterosexual activity proper. Work dealing with young adults (e.g. the groups of college fraternity brothers studied by Cameron 1997 and Kiesling 2003), and with older professional—and typically married—men (e.g. the Japanese male clients who use ‘hostess clubs’, described by Allison 1994) has found that some of their most striking linguistic performances of heterosexuality are put on not to negotiate heterosexual relationships with women, but to further homosocial relationships with other men.

LANGUAGE AND GENDER IN ‘PUBLIC’ CONTEXTS

The third area of research I want to consider looks at first glance like a much more traditional one—studying language and gender in public contexts such as work, education, and politics. When feminist language and gender research began 30 years ago, one item high on the agenda was the part played by language in the exclusion or marginalization of women in ‘public sphere’ institutions and high-status public positions. Researchers focused on the way women and girls were silenced and dominated in public contexts, or denied access to the languages, literacies, and speech styles that were needed to enter public institutions on equal terms, or undervalued because of stereotypes and prejudices about their ways of speaking and writing. The social conditions of the time gave feminist scholars every reason to be concerned with questions of this kind. In Britain in the 1970s, it was still a matter of intense debate whether a woman should be allowed to present the news on BBC television, and Margaret Thatcher, who in 1979 became Britain’s first woman prime minister, was obliged shortly thereafter to submit to a linguistic ‘makeover’, lowering her voice-pitch by almost half the normal range, flattening out her prosodic contours and slowing her delivery to sound more authoritative. Today, although these very overt forms of sexism are far less normal and acceptable than they were thirty years ago, it is clear that serious power in institutions remains largely a male preserve. In current western conditions it no longer seems plausible to explain this in terms of either simple exclusion or traditional female socialization resulting in a lack of the relevant language skills among women as a group. Some recent research has used new approaches to gender to shed light on the more complex and subtle mechanisms that might be reproducing inequality in contemporary public contexts.

One area researchers have tackled is the impact of women’s entry to institutions and professions that were previously either closed to them or else

massively male-dominated. The obvious assumption is that women in this situation will be required to assimilate to a 'masculine' norm of language-use, and that some will be professionally disadvantaged in consequence. But while some studies have found this, others have found something more complex, underlining once again the importance of acknowledging local diversity.

In a study of women who became Anglican priests when this possibility opened up in 1994, Clare Walsh (2001) found that in this community of practice, acceptance of women's presence and speech was not conditional on their assimilating to masculine norms, but on the contrary, often depended on their displaying distinctively 'feminine' qualities. Some campaigners for women's priesthood had argued that the Church should admit women in order to benefit from their difference; it had been suggested that the advent of women would change the discourse norms of the whole institution for the better, making it less hierarchical and distant from the people it served. Walsh found this had not happened. Rather, what she observed was an emerging internal division of labour between men and women priests, whereby the men specialized in those language tasks that called for authoritative public performance, like preaching and chairing parish meetings, whereas women specialized in the language tasks associated with pastoral care, like counselling bereaved or troubled parishioners. This was not because the women lacked other skills, but because they were positioned as needing to 'earn' their place in the priesthood by making a distinctively female or feminine contribution to it. Although their difference might be valued in theory, it did not advance their careers in practice.

Sylvia Shaw (2000) set out to investigate whether the influx of over 100 new women MPs into the British Parliament following the landslide Labour victory of 1997 had changed the extremely adversarial style of debate that was institutionalized in the House of Commons. Many commentators had predicted that this would be among the effects of women's presence in significant numbers. Shaw, however, found that the reality was more complex. Like Walsh's priests, many women MPs experienced contradictory pressures (from themselves as well as others): on one hand to perform their jobs competently by the existing standards of the institution, but on the other hand to use their supposed difference from men to 'civilize' what was widely seen as an aggressive and boorish style of political debate. One way in which many women resolved the contradiction was to abide punctiliously by the official rules. They displayed the same competence as their male peers in the highly competitive and self-assertive style of speaking that is required for getting and keeping the floor, but what they did not do, whereas many men did it routinely, was seek to gain additional advantage illegitimately, by interrupting, heckling, filibustering, or joking. Some disapproved of this rule-breaking as 'puerile' and hoped women's presence in greater numbers would eventually make it less

acceptable; others feared that rule-breaking by a woman would attract more notice and more severe sanctions than the same behaviour among men, thus undermining the woman's professional credibility. Consequently, on the 'real' as opposed to the 'official' floor, women's contributions occupied only two-thirds as much time in proportion to their numbers as men's.

These studies illustrate a point made by Penelope Eckert (2000), that women in mixed-gender communities of practice are often perceived, and perceive themselves, as 'interlopers'. Their linguistic behaviour reflects their understanding that to be judged as 'good' community members they must put special effort into displaying their adherence to behavioural norms that carry particular symbolic weight. In the case of MPs, for instance, these would include the arcane rules that in theory govern debates, and which Shaw found women so punctiliously attentive to. Non-interlopers can more easily depart from the rules without compromising their credentials as authentic community members.

In some workplaces, however, it is no longer a stereotypically masculine style of language-use that constitutes the norm, nor women who are seen as 'interlopers'. Researchers are increasingly looking at the way in which economic globalization is affecting workplace linguistic norms and in many cases, arguably, 'feminizing' them. In advanced and rapidly advancing economies now, an increasing proportion of the workforce is employed in providing services, where the main demands on workers are interpersonal and linguistic rather than to do with physical strength or craft skills. Often, the style of interaction required is one conventionally associated with the private sphere and its symbolically feminine qualities of co-operation, nurturance, empathy and emotional expressiveness. In my own research on the regulation of language-use in British call centres, I found abundant evidence that the preferred style of speech imposed on workers of both sexes was a symbolically 'feminized' style (Cameron 2000). One of the most highly-valued linguistic skills was the ability to project certain kinds of affect using intonation and voice quality, such as enthusiasm for the task in hand, interest in the caller and sympathy for his or her problems. The ability to suppress or conceal negative feelings like anger and boredom was also valued. Managers I interviewed believed that women were naturally good at this aspect of the work. Men who wanted to work in the sector were expected to feminize themselves in these respects. In higher-status occupations too, we find more emphasis being placed, at least in theory, on that part of the communicative repertoire that has conventionally been thought of as 'feminine'. Today's ideal senior manager, say, is not an authority figure laying down the law to others but a team-player who can listen actively, empathize, motivate, facilitate, and negotiate. What this shift in the linguistic values of the public sphere, or at least some parts of it, means for different kinds of women and men is a question currently

being investigated by a number of researchers (see, e.g. contributions to Baxter forthcoming).

Also of interest in connection with globalization is the growth of what have been called 'transidiomatic practices', whereby the export of hi-tech service work to overseas locations and the migration of workers from one place to another leads to large numbers of people conducting their workplace interactions in second languages, or indeed in more than one language. This story has a gender dimension. It used to be that most women migrants migrated to join male family members or as part of a family unit, but today women make up half of the world's estimated 120 million economic migrants, and not infrequently they are the main source of support for family members still at home. Many are third world women doing for money in the first world what was once the unpaid work of traditional wives: housework, childcare, and sex work (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003). Language is an aspect of this trade that needs to be addressed. On one hand, the transnational market for female labour may affect gendered patterns of second language learning in the regions women come from; on the other, the conditions in which these women live as migrants—conditions of particularly intimate contact with members of the host culture and often particularly severe isolation from other members of their own—may have a distinctive effect on the nature of their bilingualism and thus their position in the host culture beyond the household they work in. This is still an under-studied area, but future research on it will both depend on and further develop the theoretical shift from difference to diversity as a framework for understanding language and gender. The situation of a Filipina working as a maid in London is not the same as her female employer's situation, nor the situation of a woman who has migrated as part of a family unit. Understanding gender in a globalized world, and challenging its most unjust and oppressive effects, requires us to pay close attention to the similarities and differences among these women, crucially including what may be very marked differences in how much power, control, or choice they have.

FUTURE CHALLENGES

The current issues and new directions I have surveyed are now well-established within the relevant research community, and while most of my examples have been drawn from work done by researchers based in the UK and USA (although dealing with some range of linguistic and cultural settings), it should be noted that the community in question is now an international one. There is every reason to believe that linguistic research informed by new theoretical approaches to gender will continue to flourish in future.

However, the shift or 'postmodern turn' that I have sought to describe and illustrate is not unchallenged: there are other approaches to gender and

sexuality which take a very different 'new direction' from any discussed in this article. One notable challenge is a resurgence of biological explanations, spearheaded by the new Darwinist science of evolutionary psychology (EP). EP treats human nature and behaviour, just like human physical characteristics, as a product of natural selection over millennia, and challenges the social constructionism that has been fundamental to feminist thinking since the mid-twentieth century by proposing that many male-female differences are 'hard-wired'. Language plays a central role in this argument: women are said to have superior language and communication skills because of the survival advantage conferred on early humans if females were good at empathizing, social networking, and nurturing, whereas males had the spatial skills for hunting and the lack of empathy that would enable them to be aggressive in competing for resources (see, e.g. Baron-Cohen 2003).

This line of argument is now beginning to be addressed by feminist researchers, but engagement with Darwinism is still at a very early stage. There has not yet been much detailed critical examination of the scientific basis for the Darwinists' claims; more attention has been given to exploring the ideological reasons for the success of popularized versions of EP (e.g. Bergvall 2004). For some commentators, that success is symptomatic of another change in material reality since the 1970s: the decline of feminism as a political movement. Yet perhaps it points to a problem more specifically with 'postmodern' forms of feminism. No doubt the Darwinist approach benefits from its congruence with traditional gender stereotypes, but it is also advantaged in the popularity stakes because it has the kind of 'big story' that recent feminist approaches have abandoned. There is a paradox here: in acknowledging what they take to be the real complexity and variability of the relationships between language, gender, and sexuality, contemporary feminist researchers have become increasingly remote from the common-sense understandings with which most other people operate. I do not of course suggest that we should return to grand narratives in which most of us (for evidential as well as ideological reasons) no longer believe. But if one challenge for the future is to engage seriously with the revival of biological essentialism, another must be to find ways of telling more complicated stories in ways a wider audience will find compelling.

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NOTES

- 1 A varied selection of work exemplifying the 'diversity' approach can be found in several edited collections published since the mid-1990s, e.g. Hall and Bucholtz (1995), Bergvall *et al.* (1996), Johnson and Meinhof (1997), Bucholtz *et al.* (1999), Benor *et al.* (2002).
- 2 On the differences between 'orthodox' CA and feminist approaches, see

Schegloff (1997, 1998) and Wetherell (1998); for contrasting feminist views see Gill (1995) and Speer (2000).

- 3 *Gay* is italicized because, although it is a loan-word from English, in this context it is part of the Indonesian variety known as *bahasa gay* ('gay language').

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