two mountain chains traverse the republic roughly from north to south, forming between them a number of valleys and plateaux. Overlooking one of these valleys, which is dominated by two volcanoes, lies, six thousand feet above sea-level, the town of Quauhnahuac. It is situated well south of the Tropic of Cancer, to be exact on the nineteenth parallel, in about the same latitude as the Revillagigedo Islands to the west in the Pacific, or very much farther west, the southernmost tip of Hawaii – and as the port of Tzucox to the east on the S. Atlantic seaboard of Yucatan near the border of British Honduras, or very much farther east, the town of Juggernaut, in India, on the Bay of Bengal.

(Malcolm Lowry, *Under the Volcano* (1967))

The Brookner passage describes the landscape from a particular point of view, that is, as seen from a character's perspective rather than from an omniscient narrator's standpoint. The personalized account consists of descriptions of colours and the effect these colours have on the character. There seems to be a certain vagueness about the description; instead of facts, this account is concerned with what 'was supposed to be', what 'seemed' and what 'might be' happening. This modification or tentativeness is conventionally said to characterize a feminine style. In contrast, the Lowry passage seems far more distanced and at the same time precise; the information emanates not from an identifiable character but from a seemingly objective, omniscient narrator. In fact, the style used is reminiscent of the register (see Unit 6) of guidebooks or of geographical descriptions.

For many readers, these two passages may seem to characterize a feminine and masculine style respectively: one a personalized style, describing in detail relationships and the actions of characters; and the other more concerned with factual descriptions of the world. However, it is clear that these distinctions, although fairly easy to make, are based on stereotypical notions of gender difference (women are supposed to be vague, interested in colours and concerned with relationships, whereas men are supposed to be interested in facts and are precise). Not all male writers write like Lowry, and not all women writers write as Brookner does here. Iris Murdoch, for example, often writes in a manner more akin to Lowry's writing, and frequently uses a male narrator. And it should be noted that much of the imprecision of the Brookner passage arises from the fact that she is focusing on the impressions of a character who is unfamiliar with the landscape (the character has a 'brochure' of the area).

Thus, the idea that there is a masculine style and a feminine style appears to be based more on stereotypical notions of sexual difference than on any inevitable textual difference in the way men and women write. Although the way a person uses language (in writing as in speech) will be influenced by conventional stereotypes about gender, and although readers often apply those same stereotypes when reading literature, it is important to remember that these stereotypes are neither natural nor inevitable. If women do some-

WOMEN'S SPEECH

Much early feminist research in sociolinguistics was concerned with investigating whether women speak differently from men. Robin Lakoff (1975), for example, claimed that women choose different words than men do (e.g. *pretty* and *cute*) and different sentence structures (e.g. tag questions: *This is hard to understand, isn't it?*). She characterizes women's language as being prone to hesitation, and as being repetitive and disjointed. This sociolinguistic work has now been questioned, since it is clear that women are not a unified grouping: there are many hierarchies within the grouping 'women', such as difference of class, race, economic power, education and so on, with the consequence that women speak in very different ways. The speech patterns of the Queen or of former Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, bear greater similarities to the speech of males in similar positions of power than they do, say, to working-class women's speech.

However, there are certain elements of speech which we can classify as stereotypically 'feminine': that is, those elements which signify lack of confidence or assertiveness. These may be drawn on by both women and men in certain situations, particularly within the public sphere. O'Barr and Atkins (1982) have shown that within a courtroom setting both men and women from low-income groups are likely to adopt what they term 'powerless speech'; that is speech which bears a strong resemblance to Lakoff's definition of women's speech; hesitant, repetitive, disjointed and so on. Thus it is probable that when discussing 'women's speech', theorists have been describing 'powerless speech' (see also Unit 8: Language and society).

THE FEMALE SENTENCE: A WOMAN'S WRITING?

Work on female speech has been echoed by work on women's writing, as many theorists claim that women's writing is qualitatively different from men's writing. For example, Virginia Woolf (1979) proposed that Dorothy Richardson's work had developed a new structure, which Woolf termed 'a woman's sentence'. Woolf did not describe in detail what this psychological sentence of the feminine gender' consisted of, but if we compare the two extracts below by Anita Brookner and Malcolm Lowry, it seems quite easy to argue that Brookner is using a 'feminine' style whilst Lowry is using a 'masculine' style:

From the window all that could be seen was a receding area of grey. It was to be supposed that beyond the grey garden, which seemed to sprout nothing but the stiffish leaves of some unfamiliar plant, lay the vast grey lake, spreading like an anaesthetic towards the invisible further shore, and beyond that, in imagination only, yet verified by the brochure, the peak of the Dent d'Oche, on which snow might already be slightly and silently falling.

(Anita Brookner, *Hotel du Lac* (1984))

Montgomery et al. (eds.) Ways of Reading Routledge: London 1992

times use language differently, this is related to the way language itself derogates women and encourages them to adopt 'powerless' speech. At the same time, however, women writers (like their male counterparts) may adopt different linguistic styles for particular artistic and political ends. Feminist critics and writers often employ language in ways which challenge the gender biases embedded in language and resist the derogation and disempowering of women. On the other hand, early twentieth-century writers such as Woolf, Richardson and Rosamond Lehmann, can be seen as adopting a 'feminine' style precisely in order to subvert or question the assumptions of 'masculine' objectivity.

ACTIVITY

1 Read the text below from the 'Heartsearch' column of the *New Statesman* (May 1987), and underline the words that reveal or hint at the sex of the writer.

2 Put a circle round all uses of generic nouns (e.g. terms like *scientist* which seems to refer to all scientists, regardless of whether they are male or female).

3 Are there any differences between the way that male and female writers use generic nouns in these advertisements?

4 What other linguistic differences are there which relate either to the sex of the writer or the sex of the person being sought?

CAMBRIDGE GRADUATE: vaguely academic; likes films, opera, Europe, old things. Lithe, fit, 6', sporty. Still attractive despite thinning hair.

INCURABLE ROMANTIC, charming, uncomplicated, attractive woman, not slim, not young, feminine, wide interests seeks personable caring, retired male, sixty plus, middle brow for commitment.

GOOD-LOOKING German writer, early 30s, wishes to indulge in voyeuristic fantasy with young couple or single FORUM minded female.

LADY, ATTRACTIVE, intelligent, independent mind and means, seeks similar man 40–50. Devon Cornwall only.

Rich 1948 Claret with firm strong body sensuous flavour and adventurous bouquet, handsomely bottled, seeks younger crisp and frisky Chablis, equally well-packaged, for mulled fun, including weekends and holidays abroad with a view to durable casting. Photo appreciated.

SENSITIVE HIPPY, 24, seeks sincere and caring female for loving relationship.

READING

Cameron (1985) *Feminism and Linguistic Theory.*
—— (ed.) (1990) *The Feminist Critique of Language.*
Cameron and Coates (1989) *Women in their Speech Communities.*
Coward, Rosalind and M. Black, 'Linguistic, social and sexual relations – a review of Dale Spender's *Man Made Language*', in Cameron (ed.) (1990) *The Feminist Critique of Language*, pp. 111–33.
Daly (1978) *Gynecology.*
Kidd (1971) 'A study of the images produced through the use of the male pronoun as generic', in *Moments in Contemporary Rhetoric and Communication* 1: 25–30.
*Lakoff, R. (1975) *Language and Woman's Place.*
Miller and Swift (1979) *Words and Women.*
Mills, J. (1989) *Womanwords.*
O'Barr and Atkins (1982) 'Women's speech or powerless speech', in McConnell-Ginet (ed.) *Women and Language in Literature and Society.*
*Spender (1979) *Man Made Language.*
Woolf (1979) *Women and Writing*; also in Cameron (ed.) (1990) *The Feminist Critique of Language*, pp. 70–3.