‘What Do Women Sociolinguists Want?':
Prospects for a Research Field

In paraphrasing Freud’s notorious question, I want to call attention to a few
dilemmas of choice for those embarking on a new field with personal,
political, and scholarly implications alike. These issues were brought to my
attention, as they have been to others’, by unexpected attacks or unexpected
probing questions. Men normally gently turn on authors of papers on
effects of sex of addressee: ‘Why study this subject? How can you defend
its importance?’ or ‘There are no important theoretical issues in this area.’
In my experience, through the years, it has primarily been people in other
fields, in microbiology or physics, who have asked me: ‘Why study that?’
‘Has anything important happened in psychology since Pavlov?’ Now even
male colleagues in sociolinguistics or anthropology do this.

Those of us who have done research over the past thirty years in the
social sciences and humanities have had a great luxury. There has been
money in the universities. Nobody has forced us to ask the difficult ques-
tions of priority. And in these fields we have not agreed on what the goals
are, so we have not been in a hurry to get there first. We often think our
neighbors are going somewhere else, and we are not sure where. We have
meandered in our own byways. Yet we all evaluate. We all are capable of
saying that someone’s work is important or trivial.

Why are we studying the sociology of language of American women?
Probably many women in a wide variety of areas of women’s studies are
motivated by a sense of personal discovery, of resolving ambiguity. Where
Id is, there shall Ego be. Chicanos whose academic work separated them
from their communities are energized by finding that in studying the
language of their community, or the interaction of Anglos with Chicanos,
they can put profession and ethnic identity back together. We all know
successful academic women who have discovered new power in the study of
sex differences. Multiple sources of motivation converging on one outcome
are a safer source than medical treatment for increased productivity and
energy.

'What do Women Sociolinguists Want?'

climate of nervousness has, in fact, been directed to an issue with important social consequences.

A similar issue, in which we have all played a part, is the pronoun battle. Thorne and Henley (1975) have written their fine book with no sexist language and without stylistic awkwardness. By this adroit feat, they provide an example to those of us who wish to do the same, but they do not prod consciousness.

In everyday interaction pronoun choices can be marked and can be both preoccupying and attention-getting. On a site visit a few years ago I heard a professor say to the assembled department: 'Perhaps we need a new man in this field' and I (emboldened by being the paid visitor-evaluator) said: 'But what qualifications do we think she should have?' The next speaker, my co-visitor, said 'he or she' and then the shift was lost. I have no idea what effects this move had. It took so much of my attention I could scarcely make the sentence otherwise relevant. That is, presumably, the problem in foregrounding any linguistically backgrounded feature. Because these moves distract attention from the ostensible thread of the conversation, they may be perceived as irritating breaches of interactional etiquette, or a correctional tap on the hand. My guess is that the most effective moves of this sort are those that are embedded in enough redundancy to allow hearer recovery, and those that in the case of anaphora follow on more neutral nouns than man — say judge...she, nurse...he, and so on. It certainly is the case, as Bodine (1975) and Thorne and Henley (1975) have pointed out, that the study of linguo-political changes such as the development of spokesperson, firefighter, and pronoun usage is an excellent domain for combining action research with more general theoretical issues.

The audience for personally motivated and applied research is likely to be limited. It cannot surprise us when we hear 'What is important about that?' from those whose motives are not the same. It is immensely more demanding to try to design research which simultaneously answers a widely-appreciated theoretical question and has applied consequences. If we want our work to be attended to, if we care about durability, if we have theoretical as well as social values, this additional restriction is worth the price. Indeed, in an era of tightening of priorities there are some who think we should always try, when possible, to test theoretical questions on an applied issue.

In watching the efforts of sociolinguistics to convince sociologists that sociolinguistic research deserved study, I have been persuaded that there is another constraint on developing a new field. The easiest way to have your work defined as important is to provide a better answer to a question the
audience already has given priority. Most people are too busy to listen to anyone else's goals. You can, of course, be satisfied with your own sub-culture that shares your priorities, or, if you crave wider recognition, you need to think about what the presuppositions of the field are.

There are, of course, lucky cases when a change in a field’s focus occurs, and I do not know how one predicts those changes. Bringing them about by exhortation that women or sex role research is important, too, is likely to fail. Indeed, some of the research on how interactants get attention, get the floor, and get their topic to be the main topic may be relevant here.

I want to come back in a moment to this general question of what the issues in social science research are that we might like to see answered by research on the sociology of language of American women. Our strategic skill in relating this work to wider issues will attract a larger audience and give more professional visibility to the women who do this work.

The alternatives one chooses as to theoretical relevance, methods, and conceptual framework will affect the audience available. Many people in this field will not care about a larger audience. If we opt to take our own subgroup — which most of us do in our highly fractionated research fields — there is another risk to be addressed. Persuasion is easy with an already converted audience. In doing research, should one invest one's time in carefully and thoroughly testing point A, or move on to the next point, assuming A on the basis of slight evidence? Many of us have found — as I did in the case of 'Man and his work' — that others do not share our assumptions about sex and language. Here is another point where we have a choice. We can be persuasive to a limited audience, or we can lay a groundwork meticulously, which will allow our work to be addressed to other audiences across space, time, and differences in social beliefs. The problem of assumptions seems especially serious in an area where cherished social biases are involved.

RESEARCH ISSUES

Role ascription

It is a puzzling fact about small societies, even organizational units like restaurants and factories, that sex is a highly frequent criterion for role division. In some societies women weave, in others, men. In some restaurants, women wait on tables, in others, men. One explanation that has been suggested is that these assignments to ascribed statuses are matters of power, with women routinely being assigned the less-valued statuses. There is some truth to that, as we see in the history of the users of typewriters. Another explanation is that some roles require long socialization or require strong identification with a group, as in the socialization of warriors in Africa (Whiting 1963). Role ascription removes the need to recruit and train people explicitly into socially-needed statuses. We are now seeing the removal of some traditional sex-typing in both occupational and family responsibilities. The result is an increase in administrative talk. It now becomes necessary to talk about who will feed the baby, buy the meat, wash the car. Role recruitment and job training have had to be enlarged as activities of family and other work units. The marriage contract as recently advocated is an example of extreme explicitness. Learning what once could be accomplished by emulation from birth may be done more through explicit verbal instruction when it is unexpected.

In addition, to the extent that role ascription from birth occurs, there may be a strong relation of activity and sex which influences identity marking. For example, the assumption that girls and women will be caregivers to children leads the style used in speech to children ('baby talk') to be given the name 'motherese' (Newport, Gleitman and Gleitman 1975). One can expect that a voice ambiguous as to sex would be heard as feminine when these features are added. Role ascription is an unsolved puzzle. It may be that its relation to language is only indirect.

Language differences

A major theme in the sociology of language is what makes people talk like each other. If people are separated by space or segregation, divergence takes place. Even communication frequency is inadequate to explain speech similarity. We do not have to speak the languages we understand; in many parts of the world it is easy to find conversations in which participants speak different languages, comfortably understanding each other.

Social cohesion and identification appear to be necessary for speech similarity to arise or be maintained. Speech similarity is a sensitive index of social identification, as we can see in tracing the spread of innovations. One can study this movement in various ways, using tests of attitude (Lambert, Hodgson, Gardner and Fillenbaum 1960), studies of borrowing of forms, and loss of prior language or variety. The language of people who live together but differ in sex is an excellent laboratory for the study of speech diversification. The conjugal relationship is a prime case for the sharing of social relationships. If it is the case that language similarity
increases with frequency of social interaction under conditions of equality then conjugal pairs or unlike-sex twins should be candidates for study. Does least speech similarity occur when the social network of the partners is most dissimilar? If the major confidants are outside the pair?

What I am suggesting here is that it is not very interesting to ask whether women and men talk the same way or do not. I am sure we will find that some studies give one result, and some another. What we need to examine is the variables that are related to degree of likeness or difference and to trace those same variables in other comparisons than those across sex. A good example is a recent study on sex differences in verbal/spatial aptitudes, which showed that sex was no longer a significant variable when age at maturation was controlled (Waber 1976). It has been argued that women are more linguistically conservative than men, but both Nichols (this volume) and Gal (1975) have important evidence that linguistic innovation, regardless of sex, is a function of social network and aspirations, so that one can find conditions in which men are more conservative than women. These studies show sex difference to be a special case of a more general principle.

Many of the differences discussed in the studies fall into the domains of reflections of general social differences, reference groups or identities, and marking or monitoring. These are general phenomena, but their realization in sex differences is especially interesting and convenient in that individuals differing in sex, unlike those differing in class or ethnicity, are widely found living together in conditions of high frequency of communication.

Social differences

Some of the studies of likeness and difference concern variables which are likely to reflect contrasts in power. The proposals that women hedge more (Lakoff 1973), are interrupted more in competitive mixed groups (Zimmerman and West 1975), have higher linguistic insecurity and a steeper style shifting gradient in contrasting colloquial and formal styles (Labov 1972) — all appear to suggest the subordinate social status of women.

If it is the case that women more than men use forms that communicate subservience, then it is a necessary control to include in these studies comparisons within sex that contrast differences in power. It would be quite awkward to a theory that tag questions represent hedging and fear if, in fact, male bootlickers do not use such forms, nor do women addressing more powerful women. The hypothesis would be that the range of speech forms which signal power differences will then be realized in mixed sex communication when other indicators of power are controlled. Conversely, one could see how many of the male-female linguistic differences occur also when within-sex power difference occurs.

In the detailed studies of particular linguistic realizations of rank contrasts — such as politeness in directives (Brown and Levinson 1975; Ervin-Tripp 1976) — many variables affect formal choice: pressure of task, solidarity, age, perceived cost of goods or services. In our research, sex of speakers did not appear a strong variable, though in families fathers were addressed more often as if they were of higher rank or lower familiarity than mothers. At the least, these other variables must be disentangled if the issue is to be studied.

In addition to looking at power and dominance, we might examine other dimensions which can be expressed through language, such as solidarity, nurturance, dependence, aggression. In the cross-cultural studies of child-rearing and personality, males tended to be more aggressive and females more nurturant, though the socialization context could reduce or increase these contrasts considerably. Do women, in the same context, use more ‘nurturant’ speech styles than men? A ‘nurturant’ style would be one contrasting nurturant and non-nurturant contexts, with sex-controlled, or nurturant and non-nurturant people.

Marking and monitoring

In a study of ethnic differences, Mitchell-Kernan (1971) pointed out that speakers could ‘monitor black’, that is, use with greater frequency features considered black for personal or political purposes. Labov (1972) has considered these contrasts which both differentiate speakers and contexts within speaker as markers. He has contrasted them with stereotypes, which enter into judgments about the language of others.

The method of subjective reaction test is very much needed to identify whether the features we study are perceived as femininity/masculinity variables or as indicators of aggressiveness, shyness, dependency, insecurity, and so on. Judgments of language are notoriously context-sensitive. If it is the case that the norms for interruption at a faculty meeting are sensitive both to rank and sex (Eakins and Eakins 1976), then a shift from these norms can be heard as related to personal attributes. Is the same percentage of interruption heard as aggressive from a woman but normal (or interested and motivated) from a man of the same rank? There are not only theoretical but action implications for such research.
Some social settings may emphasize gender and others do not. In the academic or care-taking professions gender differences may be minimized since the professions (or at least occupants of the same roles in these professions) demand common attributes. One might think that the symbolic reflections of gender in speech contrasts might be minimized too. It has long been known to students of masculinity-femininity tests that differences in interests wash away in these unisex environments. Is this structural, due to the learning by all of features sometimes used as criteria of difference, or is there selection of recruits atypical in interests? At any rate, in these settings, we should not expect to find symbolic or stylistic manifestations of contrast to be minimized (Lakoff 1973; Dubois and Crouch 1975).

Are there some kinds of social systems which foster identity marking and others that do not? In the case of ethnicity or group marking, the Indian peninsula is an extreme case; in contrast in the United States during its melting pot era the garlic of home cuisine was hidden by pills and home language was readily abandoned. Are there parallel contrasting cases for marking sex identity by individuals and for maintaining gender style contrasts in the culture?

If there is a feature of 'monitoring black' so also we may expect that some situational contexts maximize gender marking. These might, for example, be courtship contexts in which highlighting sex differences would be of value. But in addition, as the reference group shifts, we can expect that individual speakers may 'monitor male' or masculinize speech, or 'monitor female' or feminize speech. An example might be the report of a marked increase in swearing among women in the student protest movements, which might symbolize toughness. I know of no formal studies of the language of social protest movements which would provide quantitative studies on such points. Do men interacting with children feminize their speech? Do men interacting with women in parallel roles feminize their speech? What I am proposing here is the examination of situational effects upon styles within the individual's repertoire.

I am mentioning style here as though it were obvious what variables to measure. We know that languages can converge at some levels and be quite distinct at others. The area of maximal distinctiveness is likely to be that of vocabulary, which is sensitive to stigma and to conscious control, but there may be others. Our work on children's role playing suggests that pitch and vocal quality may be affected (see also Sachs 1975). But the new work on contrasts between men and women in the same conditions should provide many variables for studies of situational shifting and marking. Under some conditions (e.g., role playing, narratives, characterizing others), we might even expect stereotypic features (Edelsky 1976) to appear which derive from beliefs about differences but may or may not be genuine indicators differentiating male and female speech.

Identity and reference group

Once general social differences have been removed, will we still find speech differences between men and women? I expect so. We find many other instances, of which ethnicity is the most similar case, in which social categories are reinforced by speech difference marking. Gender is used so thoroughly in society – beginning with pronominal and naming differences at birth – that it would be surprising if women did not on the average talk more like other women than like men.

The mechanism is not different from other processes of 'identification' in which emulation of a powerful or loved model occurs. In the case of speech, we can monitor our success in imitating through the same sensory channel and make direct comparisons. For similarities to arise, we need exposure to the model and a high gain in emulation. Identification theory assumes that the 'secondary reinforcement' of hearing oneself sound like the significant other maintains the style even in the absence of the model.

Evidence from other types of language similarity, within socially cohesive groups, among peers with common aspirations (Labov 1972), in social networks (Wolfram 1974; Hammer, Polgar and Salzinger 1965) suggests that frequency alone is not predictive but that the quality of the social relationship is important. Indeed, Hartford's paper at this conference implies that under conditions of high motivation face-to-face interaction frequency can be nearly absent and still emulation will occur.

What the marking features are could, in some cases be historical accidents. I proposed earlier that social biases in the occupations, tasks, power, and so on of the sexes could generate differences in frequency which can then become the basis for metaphorical extension. In this way, for instance, sports talk, army talk, may be associated with masculinity, baby talk with femininity. If these are the sources, then groups with differences in such social role allocations by sex which are not like those elsewhere should have correspondingly different gender styles. If women are the lawyers and debaters in society, then their argumentativeness may seem feminine.

It need hardly be added that the sex of the observer can potentially affect these phenomena sharply, and may in cases of interviews alter the results. Do women show sharper style gradients towards formal speech
in the presence of strange male interviewers? In some cases, it is important that the interviewer's sex be controlled not by being kept constant, but that it be the same as the subjects.

**Semantics of gender**

A number of recent studies have explored the semantics of gender-marking nouns and pronouns. Mathiot (1975) recently showed that the gender pronouns for inanimate referents shift in English, according to connotative features. For instance, machines are more likely to be 'she' when they do not run well.

In the study of semantics a critical element is the careful use of concordance or collocation, in a way that takes into account both text and extra-linguistic context. A good example is the 'lady' problem. The impeachment hearings of the Senate Judiciary Committee were livened by the effort of the chairman to address Barbara Jordan of Texas appropriately. He tried the 'Lady from Texas' and the 'gentle-lady', and finally, and to my mind appropriately, settled on 'gentlewoman' as the proper balance to gentleman.

That 'lady' is too ordinary we all sense. But why? Examination of contrastive contexts tells us well. 'Look at that man.' 'Look at that lady.' 'Hurry up lady.' 'Hurry up Mack.' 'Hey lady, you're backin' into me!' The male counterparts in these cases range from neutral to highly pejorative. The 'gentleman' contrast does exist; I have heard ski instructors use both terms, separately. So my hypothesis is that 'ladies' has a wider range than 'gentleman' and for this reason has retained only its sex and age meaning, losing the connotation of nobility or elegance which 'gentleman' still retains. But to study the phenomenon properly one would have to do a large study of collocations, either contemporary or through literature historically.

'Boys' and 'girls' present a similar set of issues. Is it the case that men become 'boys' and women become 'girls' primarily in contexts of nurturance or solidarity? Even women of seventy go to lunch with the girls, but so do men of seventy go to lunch with the boys. Allusion to strength seems to prevent this extension. My comic relief one year was to sit on a committee for intercollegiate athletics for women. It was comic because discrimination was, at last, unbelievably blatant compared to its subtler forms elsewhere on campus, and blatancy is easier to deal with. On that committee both the male and female faculty referred to girls and men. Access to nine times as much per capita funding may divide men from boys.

**What do Women Sociolinguists Want?**

Asymmetries in pejorative meanings are important to discover. Some Berkeley teachers forbid the term 'boy' in address in their classrooms — but not 'girl'. 'You guys' is now an acceptable address term to collections of females. 'You girls' to males would be an insult.

What do these asymmetries teach children and newcomers about cultural values? One could argue that such newcomers see quickly that there are differences in linguistic forms depending on the relative age and rank of speaker and addressee or referent. If those contrasts parallel those between the sexes, surely there is a clear message. Is there also a message in the connotations of pronouns, to anyone hearing of the judge in his chambers or the teacher in her class? Students of interaction claim that these patterns both arise from and generate relations of solidarity, distance, power, and so on. One can enter the cycle either at the level of language or elsewhere to effectuate change. Perhaps.

My principal message has been, today, that we are not going to find out much by looking at women alone, or even sex differences alone; unless we look elsewhere in social contrasts for parallels we are unlikely to determine either the source or significance of what we see in the case of women.

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**NOTES**


2. In a recent paper (Ervin-Tripp, in press), I have discussed the possible processes in the learning of the metaphorical extensions of biased formal distributions. While 'horridian' in the view that language can influence beliefs and therefore culture, the focus here is more on social distributions than referential categories.

3. Gozman (1967) has discussed a number of ways in which attention to background features of the interaction could be construed as 'alienation from interaction'. Because 'man...she' has to involve a conscious act, it would be seen as more voluntary and rude than 'judge...she'.

4. It is conceivable that there is an *interaction* between identity stereotypes and power-difference signals, so that among women the behavior representing power or dominance is not the same as between men. For this reason, controls should include both kinds of within-sex comparisons.

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