

*The Undergraduate Awards Submission*

Title: *Language and Women's Place* in Modern Linguistics

## Abstract

In 1975, Robin Lakoff first published *Language and Women's Place* – a work that has greatly influenced the fields of linguistics and gender studies. In this, Lakoff utilizes introspective methods to examine gendered differences in everyday language and describes a number of systematic differences between males and females. Although many of Lakoff's ideas have been widely accepted, the subjective aspect of her findings has been heavily criticized. This paper investigates the role of *Language and Women's Place* in modern gender and language studies and seeks to answer three main questions: if there really are gendered differences in language, if introspection is a valid method at examining these potential differences, and if Lakoff's broader social commentary is correct. To answer these questions, this paper considers more recent approaches, including data-driven studies and the theories of Communities of Practice, Performativity, and Difference. The paper finds that there are genuine differences in language use between men and women and that Lakoff's introspection holds an important place in modern studies; however, it also finds that the social implications Lakoff proposes cannot be established without further investigation.

*Keywords:* Lakoff; Gender and Language; Communities of Practice; Performativity; Difference

The areas of gender studies and linguistics can intersect in numerous ways and produce many different fields of study. One particularly exciting example is the potential difference in the way genders (this essay will look only at men and women) use language. What is perhaps the earliest, most influential work discussing this is Robin Lakoff's *Language and Women's Place* (2004). Despite being written forty years ago, this book is still highly relevant in modern gendered language studies, although it is often criticized for both its introspective methodology (Kiesling, 2004, p. 233), as well as the social implications Lakoff derived (Cameron, 2005, p. 485). This paper investigates the relevance and validity of *Language and Women's Place* by assessing three different concerns: first, whether Lakoff is right that different genders use language differently; second, whether introspection is a viable method; and third, whether her broader social commentary is correct. To accomplish this, various recent approaches will be analysed, including data-driven studies and the theories of Communities of Practice, Performativity, and Difference. This paper will argue that there are differences in how genders use language and that Lakoff's introspection comprises an important aspect of a multifaceted approach to this issue; however, the social implications that Lakoff propose as related to these linguistic differences cannot be established without further investigation.

In *Language and Women's Place*, Lakoff notes that she has observed several points of variation in how women and men speak. Starting with the lexical, or content differences, she posits that women often discuss topics considered to be trivial to men, such as the precise naming of colours (Lakoff, 2004, p. 43). She then moves on to the different particles and adjectives the two genders may use, noting that there is a solely feminine list of each (Lakoff, 2004, p. 44-45). For instance, she speculates that women may add weak expletives to their

sentiments, while men add stronger ones (Lakoff, 2004, p. 44); similarly, some adjectives are feminine (e.g. 'sweet' or 'divine') and are typically avoided by men (Lakoff, 2004, p. 45).

Lakoff grants that the syntax of the two genders are largely the same, but proposes that women use substantially more tag questions (2004, p. 47) – a linguistic technique in which a question is posed not as a genuine inquiry, but for the purpose of gaining consent from an interlocutor (Danesi, 2012, p. 96).

Since these differences were based on Lakoff's personal experiences, it can be difficult to determine the extent to which they generalize. One way this concern can be resolved is to look at current scientific studies. For example, some recent empirical work aims to establish whether men and women use language differently by performing computer analyses on large collections of linguistic data. This process might be thought to overcome worries about introspective methods (although, as discussed later, they too are subject to important criticisms). One such study is that of Newman, Groom, Handelman, and Pennebaker (2008) who analysed data from numerous other studies assessing language use in categories ranging from conversations, to stream of consciousness, to written novels. This study (Newman et al., 2008) demonstrates modest, but systematic differences in how men and women use language; it does reinforce some of Lakoff's (2004) observations – for example, that women use more polite forms, like hedges, than men (Newman et al., 2008, p. 231) – but fails to support others, such as the rate of tag questions (Newman et al. 2008, p. 232). Interestingly, the study reports that differences in gendered language are larger in mediums where the participants' language is less controlled (for example, casual conversation, versus published books); the authors suggest that these mediums involve speech that is more natural, which supports the idea that gendered variations are

widespread and suspended only with effort (Newman et al. 2008, p. 229). Overall, the study confirms Lakoff's (2004) proposal that men and women use language differently.

Although Lakoff's fundamental observation can be confirmed, however, there remain important methodological questions about how gendered language should be investigated. When writing *Language and Women's Place* (2004), Lakoff primarily employed introspection, and produced a subjective report based on observations of her own acquaintances. She herself noted that she never wanted her book to be an authority in this regard – she hoped it would guide and stimulate further research (Lakoff, 2004, p. 40). Even still, Lakoff has received criticism for her reliance on introspection (Kiesling, 2004, p. 233). In this respect, the Newman et al. study provides an interesting point of comparison, in that it contrasts Lakoff's work with more objective methods. An interesting question this juxtaposition raises is whether these objective methods should replace introspective ones. To address this question, two theories will be considered: Communities of Practice and Performativity, both of which hold that subjective methods like those implied by Lakoff (2004) have an important, and perhaps even indispensable, role to play in investigating the relations between language and gender.

One major objection to large, data-driven studies like Newman et al. (2008) comes from the Communities of Practice paradigm. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet argue that the study of language and gender often contains “too much abstraction” (1992, p. 1) insofar as it focuses on de-contextualized concepts like the entirety of a gender. They propose that the focus needs to be redistributed to smaller groups of women, determined by much more specific criteria like sexuality or occupation (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992, 3). Their central argument is that usage patterns in gendered language might have completely different causes and implications depending on the situation, and that to understand the relations between gender and language,

one needs to analyse it in a contextually-situated way. For example, referring to a woman by her title and surname might be a sign of respect in the workplace, and yet indicate coldness or distance in another environment. On the topic of how research in this area should be conducted, they say:

Our major aim is to encourage a view of the interaction of gender and language that roots each in the everyday social practices of particular local communities and sees them as jointly constructed in those practices: our slogan, "think practically and look locally." To think practically and look locally is to abandon several assumptions common in gender and language studies: that gender works independently of other aspects of social identity and relations, that it "means" the same across communities, and that the linguistic manifestations of that meaning are also the same across communities. (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, p. 3)

This view seemingly stands in opposition to the large-scale data analysis seen in the Newman et al. study (2008) – it suggests that the very idea that we can perform this kind of data analysis, divorced from the context in which the words were deployed, is misguided. It is interesting and important that Newman et al. (2008) were able to find statistically significant effects and this criticism does not detract from the authenticity it is able to extend to Lakoff's initial hypothesis. That said, if Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) are right, it is possible that the effects found by Newman et al. (2008) are not true of either gender in its totality, but are in fact driven by larger effects in more narrow subsets of the demographics. Newman et al. (2008) likely have found real effects, but due to their over-abstraction, the Communities of Practice approach suggests that they have overgeneralized.

This concern is especially worrying since context-dependency is a key staple of linguistic anthropology. Indeed, beyond appealing to it as a necessity for discourse analysis, Marcel Danesi (2012) references a number of studies that relate gender to language use only when mediated by other variables (specifically, Danesi cites several studies in which a significant effect on language use is found not for females as a whole, but for far more specific categories, such as young girls with assertive personalities from above average income families who were stressed (Danesi, 2012, p. 71-73)). Thus, there may be numerous factors contributing to the kind of differences Newman et al. (2008) found. The Communities of Practice approach recommends smaller studies, or at the very least, controlling for more variables than simply 'male' or 'female,' to avoid overgeneralization (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992, p. 3).

Another theoretical challenge to the kind of approach used in the Newman et al. study (2008) comes from Performativity (Cameron, 2005, 484). As Deborah Cameron says, "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" (2005, p. 491). In linguistic terms, this may refer to the fact that gendered speech is illocutionary (Danesi, 2012, p. 97) – the speaker reaffirms and maintains his or her gender by speaking in a certain way, and it is not merely a side effect of a pre-existing gender. In other words, people do not have some essential gender that causes them to talk in certain ways; rather, gender is a kind of socially-constructed performance that is achieved continually through individual speech acts. Since all speech acts are context-dependent (Danesi, 2012, p. 1010), generalizing to how gender is expressed universally is incredibly problematic.

An implication of this is that Performativity aligns very closely with Communities of Practice on the matter of methodology – they both support the notion of smaller, context-sensitive studies, like the personal observations found in *Language and Women's Place*. For example, Cameron writes in support of 'looking locally' (Cameron, 2005, p. 488), agreeing with Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992). Scott Fabius Kiesling writes directly in support of Lakoff's introspection: "the strength of the Discourses here suggests that the introspections provided by Lakoff should not be discarded as bad methodology. Rather, such subjectivities will allow us to better explain the pattern of practices we do find 'objectively'" (Kiesling, 2004, 233). In particular, a method like Lakoff's (2004) may be the best way to understand the specific performances employed in gendered discourse. This is helpful not just because it avoids the kind of overgeneralization present in studies like Newman et al. (2008), but also because this kind of method can assess not just whether there are gendered differences, but why such differences might exist. Both Communities of Practice and Performativity offer support for the notion that empirical studies, while helpful, should be smaller, and that Lakoff's (2004) introspection still contributes important information. This means that studies like that of Newman et al. (2008) have not rendered *Language and Women's Place* obsolete and that the methodology behind it is still academically relevant.

A third point of interest in Lakoff (2004) is her proposal regarding the social implications of her findings. Overall, Lakoff (2004) subscribes to the notion that women display more traditional politeness in their language than men, and she further believes that this negatively impacts women, particularly in the public sphere. She suggests that women are socialized to talk in certain ways (for example, to not be assertive, such as by using tag questions), which eventually prevents their upward mobility and, at best, forces them to toggle between two

methods of communication – a process that is confusing, requires constant effort, and produces unreliable results (Lakoff, 2004). As Lakoff says, “The ultimate effect of these discrepancies is that women are systematically denied access to power, on the grounds that they are not capable of holding it as demonstrated by their linguistic behavior along with other aspects of their behaviour” (2004, p. 42).

A significant critique of these implications comes from Deborah Tannen (1993). Together, Lakoff and Tannen are two influential writers on the debate of Dominance versus Difference (Cameron, 2005, p. 485-486). Whereas Lakoff maintains throughout her work that the discrepancies she notes are indications of, and responsible for, gender inequality (Lakoff, 2004; Cameron, 2005), Tannen proposes that, while it may be the case that there are differences between the genders in both language and relative power, the two might be completely unrelated (Tannen, 1993; Cameron, 2005). She looks at some of the most common methods through which men are said to linguistically dominate women, and explains why they may serve alternate functions: for example, being indirect may be an attempt to establish friendships, being interrupted may actually be a show of support, and silence may itself be a sign of dominating others (Tannen, 1993). She draws from a number of different resources to demonstrate these, chiefly showing that, even among friends, a linguistic technique may be perceived in the opposite manner than how it was intended, and that, cross-culturally, a linguistic technique thought to indicate subordination may be employed to indicate domination (Tannen, 1993). As Tannen says, “all linguistic strategies are potentially ambiguous. The power-solidarity dynamic is one fundamental source of ambiguity. What appear as attempts to dominate a conversation (an exercise of power) may actually be intended to establish rapport (an exercise of solidarity)”

(1993, p. 168). One of Tannen's most famous contributions is her characterization of gendered languages as serving different goals:

For most women, the language of conversation is primarily a language of rapport: a way of establishing connections and negotiating relationships [...] For most men, talk is primarily a means to preserve independence and negotiate and maintain status in a hierarchical social order. (1990, 77)

In making this distinction, Tannen (1990) is accepting Lakoff's first premise, that there are observable differences in men and women's speech. However, she offers a slightly different explanation, and says nothing of these different conversational purposes relating to social structure. Since Tannen (1993; 1990) offers a perfectly viable competing hypothesis for the differences in gendered language, Lakoff's (2004) conclusion that these linguistic differences are tied to varying social equity cannot be assumed true.

As can be seen, Lakoff (2004) was right to notice differences in manner of speaking between men and women, and her introspective methodology holds an important place in modern studies on gender and language; however, the social implications Lakoff inferred from these differences need to be supported by additional evidence if they are to be accepted, since deducing meaning from linguistic interactions is wrought with ambiguity. However, this is not to say that it could never be done. Perhaps if empirical studies became more centred on local groups, as was suggested by the Communities of Practice (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992) and Performativity (Kiesling, 2004) theories, meaningful statistics could be gathered at that level, and used to demonstrate biases more conclusively. Nevertheless, such potential studies would still be remiss to not discuss the potential motivation behind certain women speaking in specific ways, and the best method for that may always lie with Lakoff's (2004) introspection.

## References

- Cameron, D. (2005). Language, Gender, and Sexuality: Current Issues and New Directions. *Applied Linguistics*, 26, 482-502. doi:10.1093/applin/ami027
- Danesi, M. (2012). *Linguistic Anthropology: A Brief Introduction*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press Inc.
- Eckert, P. & McConnell-Ginet, S. (1992). Communities of practice: Where language, gender and power all live. In Hall, K., Buchholtz, M., & Moonwomon, B. (Eds.) *Locating power: Proceedings of the Second Berkeley Women and Language Conference*. Berkeley: Berkeley Women and Language Group, University of California: 89-99.
- Keisling, S. (2004). What Does a Focus on "Men's Language" Tell Us about Language and Women's Place? In Lakoff, R. & Bucholtz, M. (Eds.) *Language and Women's Place: Text and Commentaries* (pp. 229-236). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lakoff, R. (2004). Part 1: Language and Women's Place. In Lakoff, R. & Bucholtz, M. (Eds.) *Language and Women's Place: Text and Commentaries* (pp. 39-118). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Newman, M. L., Groom, C. J., Handelman, L. D., & Pennebaker, J. W. (2008). Gender Differences in Language Use: An Analysis of 14,000 Text Sample. *Discourse Processes*, 45, 211-236. doi: 10.1080/01638530802073712
- Tannen, D. (1990). *You Just Don't Understand*. New York: Morrow.

Tannen, D. (1993). The Relativity of Linguistic Strategies: Rethinking Power and Solidarity in Gender and Dominance. In Tannen, D. (Ed.) *Gender and Conversational Interaction* (pp. 165-188). New York: Oxford University Press.