

## Language and gender

You are probably familiar with the climactic moment in a wedding scene frequently staged in film and television dramas when a couple exchanges marriage vows. Even if you have never been to a wedding, the narrator or screenwriter expects that their audience knows something of the wedding oath and the moment we hear “I now pronounce you ...” a cultural lexicon is activated. In fact, the traditional conclusion to this pronouncement is “man and wife.” It is frequently changed to “husband and wife” or some other variation of the participants’ choosing but the variations are recognized as “redirections” from the traditional “man and wife.” Very obviously, the use of language here displays several social attitudes and assumptions, and a specifically gendered form of language. While the word “man” promotes an active state of being and identity, the word for woman, “wife”, is recognized only as a function of marital status in relation to “man” (and, of course, this is why it is frequently altered to create more equality in the terminology and, one hopes, the partnership). What is clear is that the use of language is, at the very least, being used to promote a male-oriented view of the world and a lesser status for women in society.

Today there is considerable awareness of the more overt gender biases within language such as the one illustrated above. Some of the most important linguistic changes affecting English since the 1960s have arisen from the way society has come to look differently at the practices and consequences of sexism. There is now a widespread awareness, which was lacking a generation ago, of the way in which language covertly displays social attitudes towards men and women. The relation between language and gender continues to be an issue worthy of our attention, and an important component in the continuing evolution of language.

## Biology and sociology

When speaking of language and gender, multiple questions come to mind: Do men and women *speak* differently (use languages that are different phonologically and morphologically)? Or, do men and women *use* language differently (language as practice, and as a distinct culture)? Or, is it some combination of the above? Larger questions of language and identity arise as a result of these queries and we are naturally compelled to follow up with asking whether language shapes who we are or whether it reflects who we are by nature and/or social conditioning. As yet, no absolute answers have emerged but the questions are worth exploring in any critical perspective on language.

Biologists now recognize that the language function of the brain develops differently in girls than in boys. But the repercussions of this knowledge are less certain and do not necessarily mean that women and men ultimately have different languages. Similarly, anthropologists have noted how some languages have phonological and morphological differences in women’s and men’s language (e.g. women may pronounce vowel sounds slightly differently from men or use more pronouns and intensive adverbs than men). But such sweeping conclusions about separate languages remain difficult to verify.

## Activity

### Using “Find” and “Replace”

Choose any text—a poem, a piece of prose, an excerpt from a blog—on the Internet and cut and paste it into Word. Read the piece and see if you find words or types of words that are repeated. You could even use a text mining tool from the internet to calculate word use and frequency.

Now, use the find and replace function in Microsoft Word to change the text around. What happens, for example, when you change “he” to “she”?

Sometimes these changes are more striking when we look at a document or passage with the actual changes made.

Robin Lakoff, for instance, noted differences like the above but concluded that such speech differences suggested not disparate languages but rather disparate powers in society. She argues that because men wield greater power, the language women use tends toward “powerlessness.” For example, in her book *Language and Women’s Place* (1975), she suggests that women frequently qualify opinions with phrases like “sort of” or “a little bit.” Others have attributed this less to powerlessness and more to an attempt to elicit greater involvement by their conversation partner. Still other researchers, Deborah Tannen for instance, believe differences in the use of language might suggest distinct female and male cultures. But this view, too, has been challenged by critics who worry over any attempt at essentializing as a result of gender and believe differences in language usage are preferences as opposed to fixed categories.

What is more certain is that there have been noticeable changes in social attitudes regarding gender that have impacted on how we use language, particularly in writing. Whether it is measured in terms of the significant grammatical change in English over the last 60 years or the recommended use of nonsexist language, awareness of gender has had a tremendous impact on language awareness and the subtle prejudices behind communications. Issues around gender, like race and ethnicity, significantly inform the way language helps to construct identity. In the following exercises, we will explore these ideas further.

## Read

### The language of men and women

The social linguist Deborah Tannen wrote the following article to highlight the different ways in which boys and girls express themselves on the playground and on the playing fields. Have you noticed these differences yourself? To what extent do you think that these differences relate to social pressures or the different relations to power that men and women have had throughout recent history?

#### The Talk of the Sandbox; How Johnny and Suzy’s Playground Chatter Prepares Them for Life at the Office

BOB HOOVER of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette was interviewing me when he remarked that after years of coaching boys’ softball teams, he was now coaching girls and they were very different. I immediately whipped out my yellow pad and began interviewing him—and discovered that his observations about how girls and boys play softball parallel mine about how women and men talk at work.

Hoover told me that boys’ teams always had one or two stars whom the other boys treated with deference. So when he started coaching a girls’ team, he began by looking for the leader. He couldn’t find one. “The girls who are better athletes don’t lord it over the others,” he said. “You get the feeling that everyone’s the same.” When a girl got the ball, she didn’t try to throw it all the way home as a strong-armed boy would; instead, she’d throw

it to another team member, so they all became better catchers and throwers. He went on, "If a girl makes an error, she's not in the doghouse for a long time, as a boy would be."

"But wait," I interrupted. "I've heard that when girls make a mistake at sports, they often say 'I'm sorry,' whereas boys don't."

That's true, he said, but then the girl forgets it—and so do her teammates. "For boys, sports is a performance art. They're concerned with how they look." When they make an error, they sulk because they've let their teammates down. Girls want to win, but if they lose, they're still all in it together—so the mistake isn't as dreadful for the individual or the team.

What Hoover described in these youngsters were the seeds of behavior I have observed among women and men at work.

The girls who are the best athletes don't "lord it over" the others—just the ethic I found among women in positions of authority. Women managers frequently told me they were good managers because they did not act in an authoritarian manner. They said they did not flaunt their power, or behave as though they were better than their subordinates. Similarly, linguist Elisabeth Kuhn found that women professors in her study informed students of course requirements as if they had magically appeared on the syllabus ("There are two papers. The first paper, ah, let's see, is due ... . It's back here [referring to the syllabus] at the beginning"), whereas the men professors made it clear that they had set the requirements ("I have two midterms and a final").

A woman manager might say to her secretary, "Could you do me a favor and type this letter right away?" knowing that her secretary is going to type the letter. But her male boss, on hearing this, might conclude she doesn't feel she deserves the authority she has, just as a boys' coach might think the star athlete doesn't realize how good he is if he doesn't expect his teammates to treat him with deference.

I was especially delighted by Hoover's observation that, although girls are more likely to say, "I'm sorry," they are actually far less sorry when they make a mistake than boys who don't say it, but are "in the doghouse" for a long time. This dramatizes the ritual nature of many women's apologies. How often is a woman who is "always apologizing" seen as weak and lacking in confidence? In fact, for many women, saying "I'm sorry" often doesn't mean "I apologize." It means "I'm sorry that happened."

Like many of the rituals common among women, it's a way of speaking that takes into account the other person's point of view. It can even be an automatic conversational smoother. For example, you left your pad in someone's office; you knock on the door and say, "Excuse me, I left my pad on your desk," and the person whose office it is might reply, "Oh, I'm sorry. Here it is." She knows it is not her fault that you left your pad on her desk; she's just letting you know it's okay.

Finally, I was intrigued by Hoover's remark that boys regard sports as "a performance art" and worry about "how they look." There, perhaps, is the rub, the key to why so many women feel they don't get credit for what they do. From childhood, many boys learn something that is very adaptive to the workplace: Raises and promotions are based on "performance" evaluations and these depend, in large measure, on how you appear in other people's eyes. In other words, you have to worry not only about getting your job done but also about getting credit for what you do.

Getting credit often depends on the way you talk. For example, a woman told me she was given a poor evaluation because her supervisor felt she knew less than her male peers. Her boss, it turned out, reached this conclusion because the woman asked more questions: She was seeking information without regard to how her queries would make her look.

The same principle applies to apologizing. Whereas some women seem to be taking undeserved blame by saying "I'm sorry," some men seem to evade deserved blame. I observed this when a man disconnected a conference call by accidentally elbowing the speaker-phone. When his secretary re-connected the call, I expected him to say, "I'm sorry; I knocked the phone by mistake." Instead he said, "Hey, what happened?! One minute you were there, the next minute you were gone!" Annoying as this might be, there are certainly instances in which people improve their fortunes by covering up mistakes. If Hoover's observations about girls' and boys' athletic styles are fascinating, it is even more revealing to see actual transcripts of children at play and how they mirror the adult workplace. Amy Sheldon, a linguist at the University of Minnesota who studies children talking at play in a day care center, compared the conflicts of pre-school girls and boys. She found that boys who fought with one another tended to pursue their own goal. Girls tended to balance their own interests with those of the other girls through complex verbal negotiations.

Look how different the negotiations were:

Two boys fought over a toy telephone: Tony had it; Charlie wanted it. Tony was sitting on a foam chair with the base of the phone in his lap and the receiver lying beside him. Charlie picked up the receiver, and Tony protested, "No, that's my phone!" He grabbed the telephone cord and tried to pull the receiver away from Charlie, saying, "No, that—uh, it's on MY couch. It's on MY couch, Charlie. It's on MY couch. It's on MY couch." It seems he had only one point to make, so he made it repeatedly as he used physical force to get the phone back.

Charlie ignored Tony and held onto the receiver. Tony then got off the couch, set the phone base on the floor and tried to keep possession of it by overturning the chair on top of it. Charlie managed to push the chair off, get the telephone and win the fight.

This might seem like a typical kids' fight until you compare it with a fight Sheldon videotaped among girls. Here the contested

objects were toy medical instruments: Elaine had them; Arlene wanted them. But she didn't just grab for them; she argued her case. Elaine, in turn, balanced her own desire to keep them with Arlene's desire to get them. Elaine lost ground gradually, by compromising.

Arlene began not by grabbing but by asking and giving a reason: "Can I have that, that thing? I'm going to take my baby's temperature." Elaine was agreeable, but cautious: "You can use it—you can use my temperature. Just make sure you can't use anything else unless you can ask." Arlene did just that; she asked for the toy syringe: "May I?" Elaine at first resisted, but gave a reason: "No, I'm gonna need to use the shot in a couple of minutes." Arlene reached for the syringe anyway, explaining in a "beseeching" tone, "But I—I need this though."

Elaine capitulated, but again tried to set limits: "Okay, just use it once." She even gave Arlene permission to give "just a couple of shots."

Arlene then pressed her advantage, and became possessive of her property: "Now don't touch the baby until I get back, because it IS MY BABY! I'll check her ears, okay?" (Even when being demanding, she asked for agreement: "okay?")

Elaine tried to regain some rights through compromise: "Well, let's pretend it's another day, that we have to look in her ears together." Elaine also tried another approach that would give Arlene something she wanted: "I'll have to shot her after, after, after you listen—after you look in her ears," suggested Elaine. Arlene, however, was adamant: "Now don't shot her at all!"

What happened next will sound familiar to anyone who has ever been a little girl or overheard one. Elaine could no longer abide Arlene's selfish behavior and applied the ultimate sanction: "Well, then, you can't come to my birthday!" Arlene uttered the predictable retort: "I don't want to come to your birthday!"

The boys and girls followed different rituals for fighting. Each boy went after what he wanted; they slugged it out; one won. But the girls enacted a complex negotiation, trying to get what they wanted while taking into account what the other wanted.

Here is an example of how women and men at work used comparable strategies. Maureen and Harold, two managers at a medium-size company, were assigned to hire a human-resources coordinator for their division. Each favored a different candidate, and both felt strongly about their preferences. They traded arguments for some time, neither convincing the other. Then Harold said that hiring the candidate Maureen wanted would make him so uncomfortable that he would have to consider resigning. Maureen respected Harold. What's more, she liked him and considered him a friend. So she said what seemed to her the only thing she could say under the circumstances: "Well, I certainly don't want you to feel uncomfortable here. You're one of the pillars of the place." Harold's choice was hired.

What was crucial was not Maureen's and Harold's individual styles in isolation but how they played in concert with each other's style. Harold's threat to quit ensured his triumph—when used with someone for whom it was a trump card. If he had been arguing with someone who regarded this threat as simply another move in the negotiation rather than a non-negotiable expression of deep feelings, the result might have been different. For example, had she said, "That's ridiculous; of course you're not going to quit!" or matched it ("Well, I'd be tempted to quit if we hired your guy"), the decision might well have gone the other way.

Like the girls at play, Maureen was balancing her perspective with those of her colleague and expected him to do the same. Harold was simply going for what he wanted and trusted Maureen to do likewise.

This is not to say that all women and all men, or all boys and girls, behave any one way. Many factors influence our styles, including regional and ethnic backgrounds, family experience and individual personality. But gender is a key factor, and understanding its influence can help clarify what happens when we talk.

Understanding the ritual nature of communication gives you the flexibility to consider different approaches if you're not happy with the reaction you're getting. Someone who tends to avoid expressing disagreement might learn to play "devil's advocate" without taking it as a personal attack. Someone who tends to avoid admitting fault might find it is effective to say "I'm sorry"—that the loss of face is outweighed by a gain in credibility.

There is no one way of talking that will always work best. But understanding how conversational rituals work allows individuals to have more control over their own lives.

**Source:** Tannen, Deborah. 1994. "The Talk of the Sandbox; How Johnny and Suzy's Playground Chatter Prepares Them for Life at the Office." *The Washington Post*. December 11, 1994.

Tannen brings up interesting points about the relationships between language use and the rituals of everyday life. She notes that it is important to at least be aware of the communication differences between men and women and to theorize about the possible causes. It could also be argued that it is important to think about the consequences of these different ways of expressing hopes, fears, concerns and criticisms. In society at large, or more particularly in the workplace, these differences along with gender biases, can lead to very real discrimination that translates into lack of promotion, lower salaries, and even a lack of political representation.

A related issue is the way stereotypes and differences are communicated or exploited. It is worth considering the role of the media and advertising in relation to gender roles and the ways in which media language itself communicates differences or social expectations. Consider the following advertisement that is clearly directed at a female consumer. Try to consider this advertisement from a variety of positions: how would you read this as a girl? A woman? A female athlete? A man? A male athlete?

## Discussion Point

### Advertising and gender

**MY KNEES**  
ARE TOMBOYS.  
THEY GET BRUISED AND CUT  
EVERY TIME I PLAY SOCCER.  
I'M PROUD OF THEM  
AND WEAR MY DRESSES SHORT.  
MY MOTHER WORRIES  
I WILL NEVER MARRY  
WITH KNEES LIKE THAT.  
BUT I KNOW  
THERE'S SOMEONE OUT THERE  
WHO WILL SAY TO ME:  
I LOVE YOU  
AND I LOVE YOUR KNEES.  
I WANT THE FOUR OF US  
TO GROW OLD TOGETHER.  
**JUST DO IT.**  
NIKEWOMEN.COM

Nike advertisement, created in 2005 by Wieden and Kennedy (Nike in-house advertising firm).

Look at the language, images and design components of the Nike advertisement. How does it challenge gender stereotypes? Are there aspects of the ad that paradoxically reinforce or play into these same stereotypes? Is this ad ultimately liberating? How does the text of the advertisement either complement or work against the image?

### A response to gender bias

The academic investigation of the role of women in society and the study of both production by women and the representation of women in the arts and media can broadly be allied with feminism. Feminism can be defined as a political perspective or a call to action for the recognition of the rights of women, and as a general commitment to greater social equality and opportunities for women.

In fact, any social endeavour can be investigated through a feminist lens either because it directly concerns women or purposefully neglects them, and their point of view.

Much like a study of the relationship between race and language, the study of language and gender can involve the consideration of texts ranging from an ancient work of literature in which women arguably may play secondary roles in relation to men as characters in the drama (Homer's *The Odyssey*) or a more pivotal and morally questionable role reflecting a male point of view (*Medea* by Euripedes) to contemporary works by female authors and cultural producers.

## Activity

### Feminist aesthetics

The work of early feminists was often pragmatic, pushing for women's suffrage or equal protection under the law. At the same time, in the academic and literary worlds, many feminists were closely investigating the power relationships between men and women and the different ways in which women express and position themselves in discourses like psychoanalysis and the study of classical texts.

#### Text 1

The following excerpt from "The Laugh of the Medusa" by the French literary theorist Hélène Cixous, uses as a reference point the ancient Greek and Roman myth of the medusa, one look from whom—or so the legend goes—could turn you to stone. Cixous's response to the threat of a direct gaze into the eyes of a powerful woman, was to suggest that "You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing." Tackling issues like theoretical castration and the physical aspects of the feminine body, as signs of her difference to the masculine subject, Cixous was one of a group of influential French feminists to introduce the concept of "*écriture féminine*," or a feminist aesthetic in women's writing.

I write this as a woman, towards women. When I say 'woman', I'm speaking of woman in her inevitable struggle against conventional man; and of a universal woman subject who must bring women to their senses and to their meaning in history. But first it must be said that in spite of the enormity of the repression that has kept them in the 'dark'—that dark which people have been trying to make them accept as their attribute—there is, at this time, no general woman, no one typical woman. What they have *in common* I will say. But what strikes me is the infinite richness of their individual constitutions: you can't talk about a female sexuality, uniform, homogeneous, classifiable into codes—any more than you can talk about one unconscious resembling another. Women's imaginary is inexhaustible, like music, painting, writing: their stream of phantasms is incredible....

I wished that woman would write and proclaim this unique empire so that other women, other unacknowledged sovereigns, might exclaim: I, too, overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard-of songs. Time and again I, too, have felt so full of luminous torrents that I could burst—burst with forms much more beautiful than those which are put up in frames and sold for a stinking fortune. And I, too, said nothing, showed nothing; I didn't open my mouth, I didn't repaint my half of the world. I was ashamed. I was afraid, and I



swallowed my shame and my fear. I said to myself: You are mad! What' the meaning of these waves, these floods, these outbursts? Where is the ebullient, infinite woman who, immersed as she was in her *naïveté*, kept in the dark about herself, led into self-disdain by the great arm of parental-conjugal phallocentrism, hasn't been ashamed of her strength? Who, surprised and horrified by the fantastic tumult of her drives (for she was made to believe that a well-adjusted normal woman has a ... divine composure), hasn't actually accused herself of being a monster? Who, feeling a funny desire stirring inside her (to sing, to write, to dare to speak, in short, to bring out something new), hasn't thought she was sick? Well, her shameful sickness is that she resists death, that she makes trouble.

And why don't you write? Write! Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it. I know why you haven't written. (And why I didn't write before the age of twenty-seven.) Because writing is at once too high, too great for you, it's reserved for the great—that is for 'great men'; and it's 'silly'... Besides, you've written a little, but in secret. And it wasn't good, because it was in secret, and because you punished yourself for writing, because you didn't go all the way, or because you wrote, irresistibly... Write, let no one hold you back, let nothing stop you: not man; not the imbecilic capitalist machinery, in which publishing houses are the crafty, obsequious relayers of imperatives handed down by an economy that works against us and off our backs; and not *yourself*. Smug-faced readers, managing editors, and big bosses don't like the true texts of women—female-sexed texts. That kind scares them. I write woman: woman must write woman. And man, man. So only an oblique consideration will be found here of man; it's up to him to say where his masculinity and femininity are at: this will concern us once men have opened their eyes and seen themselves clearly.

**Source:** Cixous, Hélène. (trans. by Cohen, Keith & Paula). "The Laugh of the Medusa." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. 1976. vol. 1, no. 4. pp. 875–77.

### Questions to the text

- 1 How does Cixous link the physical and social qualities of women's identity and sexuality to suggest a new approach to writing?
- 2 How could such an approach to the literary establishment help to bring about change?
- 3 How do such discourses of liberation also free up men to write differently about themselves?

### Text 2

Read the following excerpt from an interview with the artist Barbara Kruger. Note the ways in which Kruger attempts to consider the roles of culture at large, the producer of art and images, and the role of the viewer in particular. What does Kruger suggest about the forces that influence both our views of gender and our roles as consumers? What does Kruger suggest about her job as an artist?

**Mitchell** Do you think of your own art, insofar as it's engaged with the commercial public sphere—that is, with advertising, publicity, mass media, and other technologies for influencing a consumer public—that it is automatically a form of public art? Or does it stand in opposition to public art?

**Kruger** I have a question for you: what is a public sphere which is an uncommercial public sphere? I live and speak through a body which is constructed by moments which are formed by the velocity of power and money. So I don't see this division between what is commercial and what is not commercial. I see rather a broad, nonending flow of moments which are informed if not motored by exchange.

**Mitchell** But do you see yourself as "going with the flow," as they used to say, or intervening in it?

**Kruger** Again, I think that the word oppositional becomes problematized because it is binary. It has to do with anti's and pro's, or whatever, and basically I feel that there are many of us who are working to make certain displacements, certain changes, who are invested in questions rather than the surety of knowledge. And I think that those are the ways that we displace that flow a little or redirect it.

**Mitchell** When someone feels like they're either intervening or redirecting a flow like the circulation of capital or publicity, I want to ask what they have to push off against that allows them to swim upstream or to make eddies against the current. I realize we're speaking figuratively here, but you're awfully good with figures. Is it a sense of solidarity—you said others are also engaged in doing this sort of thing, trying to disrupt the flow, intervene in the circuits in some way? Is it the fact that there are others that gives you some way of having leverage?

**Kruger** Yes, in that one hopes to make a space for another kind of viewer. But I think that there are those of us who don't see ourselves as guardians of culture. We hope for a place which allows for differences and tolerances. What we are doing is trying to construct another kind of spectator who has not yet been seen or heard.

**Mitchell** You mean a kind of innocent spectator, who hasn't been seduced yet?

**Kruger** Oh, no, I didn't say anything about innocence.

**Mitchell** You said it was someone who hasn't been approached yet?

**Kruger** No, I said someone who in fact has not had control over the devices of their own representation. Now to me that doesn't have anything to do with innocence or morality or anything like that. I'm just saying that we have always been represented rather than tried to represent ourselves.

**Mitchell** Would you say the issue, then, is empowerment rather than innocence?

**Kruger** Well, the question certainly is one of the constructions of power and how they work and what perpetuates them and what trips them. Sure. Absolutely.

**Source:** Mitchell, T.J. "An Interview with Barbara Kruger." *Critical Inquiry* 17 (Winter 1991). pp. 434–36.

### Text 3

The following work of art by Barbara Kruger has been shown in art galleries and on billboards in the United States. For this work, Kruger appropriated the image of the boy and girl from a painting by the

American realist painter Norman Rockwell (1894–1978), whose illustrations often featured on magazine covers, and were popular if sentimental and idealized images of small-town American life.



Barbara Kruger, *We don't need another hero*, 1987.

### Questions to the text

- 1 Why do you think Kruger uses such old-fashioned images of gender stereotypes? How do they help to subvert or maintain the status quo?
- 2 How does Kruger's image work to displace our reading of such images and the type of representations you might expect to see on a billboard?
- 3 Do you agree with Kruger's comments about the commercialization of public space?
- 4 What responsibilities do we have as spectators and consumers? What responsibilities might we have as cultural producers?

### Reading, speaking and writing

As a final activity, read the following texts which offer perspectives on the relationship between gender roles and reading, speaking, and writing. In the first text, the storyteller, poet and essayist Gloria Anzaldua discusses her relationship to language as a young Hispanic girl living in the United States. The second text is from a collection of graphic short stories by Megan Kelso, in which the a brief exchange between a daughter and her hard-working mother is juxtaposed with the story of a squirrel mother who makes plans to abandon her children and start a new life.

#### Text 1

##### How to Tame a Wild Tongue

"We're going to have to control your tongue," the dentist says, pulling out all the metal from my mouth.

Silver bits plop and tinkle into the basin. My mouth is a motherlode.

The dentist is cleaning out my roots. I get a whiff of the stench when I gasp. "I can't cap that tooth yet, you're still draining," he says.

"We're going to have to do something about your tongue," I hear the anger rising in his voice. My tongue keeps pushing out the wads of cotton, pushing back the drills, the long thin needles. "I've never seen anything as strong or as stubborn," he says. And I think, how do you tame a wild tongue, train it to be quiet, how do you bridle and saddle it? How do you make it lie down?

*Who is to say that robbing a people of its language is less violent than war?*

Ray Gwyn Smith