Review

Gender Matters: Feminist Linguistic Analysis
Sara Mills (2012)

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Reviewed by Laura Coffey

Gender Matters is a compilation of essays by the author intended collectively to represent a ‘third wave’ feminist linguistic analysis of a range of texts. It is divided into four parts: Parts One and Two deal with the analysis of written language, and Parts Three and Four are concerned with the analysis of spoken language.

Part One comprises two chapters and provides a critique of concepts such as the ‘gendered sentence’ and that it is possible to read ‘as’ women or men. Part Two is the longest, comprising of chapters three to eight, and deals explicitly with the notion of sexism in language and how sexist ideology is constructed in examples of various different genres and text types, including poetry, advertising, song lyrics and literature. Part Three examines the notion of politeness/impoliteness as a gendered practice. Mills analyses (im)politeness strategies typically associated with women in order to question the notion of simple gender differences, warning against the simplistic interpretation of conversational strategies. Part Four proposes the notion of ‘discourse competence’ as a way of avoiding the conception of feminine/masculine speech styles, and analyses the notion of gender differences in public speaking contexts.

Part One begins by arguing against the idea that women and men write differently, as echoed in French feminist theories of language and gender. Mills demonstrates how phallocentrism has dominated work in sociolinguistics and literary studies, and compares the phallocentrism in studies
of women’s speech to that of the study of ‘the female sentence’ (p. 18). The second chapter aims to critique the notion that we read ‘as’ women or men, given that not all women or all men read in the same way, voicing the need to take into account other sociocultural information such as race, class, education, occupation and so on (p. 37). Mills asserts the importance of examining real readers’ responses to texts, as opposed to relying on the researcher’s intuitions, and she discusses ethnographic and reader-response approaches to the study of how readers interpret texts.

In Part Two, Chapter Three presents a response to a poem by John Fuller in order to demonstrate how the reader is positioned as male by the text, but how the female reader may resist this dominant reading of the text and arrive at an alternative interpretation. Mills develops Althusser’s notion of ‘interpellation’, examining both direct and indirect forms of address to show how the text ‘hails’ the reader. Chapter Four analyses collocation relations in a dating agency advertisement to show that feminist linguistics needs to look at less ‘obvious’ or indirect forms of sexism than have been carried out by previous studies, in fields of linguistics specifically concerned with the analysis of ideology construction such as Critical Discourse Analysis. Chapter Five constitutes an analysis of song lyrics from a pop song by the now defunct band, The Sugarcubes, demonstrating the inefficiency of transitivity analysis for accessing the contradictory ‘messages’ of romantic love as both pleasurable and painful.

A more theoretical paper, Chapter Six proposes that a third-wave feminist linguistic analysis should reject global notions such as the idea that all women take on passive roles, or that all men are powerful, and focus instead on analyses of the individual in relation to wider social structures and globalized gender stereotypes. Chapter Seven considers the related concepts of ‘sexism’, ‘anti-sexism’ and ‘political correctness’, and discusses research conducted on the choice of surname and title of a group of professional feminist women. Responses to a questionnaire are analysed, adopting Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of ‘habitus’ to examine the pressures and tensions felt by the participants – imagined or hypothesized judgements of their decisions in naming after marriage. Mills suggests that this kind of negotiation of individuals and their conceptions of conflicting communities of practice is a more fruitful vehicle for change than traditional feminist language reform. In Chapter Eight, Mills again argues the importance of context in interpreting the ‘meaning’ of texts in a consideration of insult terms in rap music. She asserts that although terms like ‘ho’, ‘bitch’ and ‘faggot’ may be interpreted as ostensibly sexist, factors such as authenticity of the singer’s persona mean that these can sometimes be read as a performance of ‘hypermasculinity’, and are not always, therefore, inher-
ently sexist. This is an interesting position, though an examination of insult terms in the context of the songs in which they appear would have been useful, and would help to make the argument for alternative readings more convincing.

Part Three begins its consideration of spoken interaction with an essay on ‘Gender and Politeness’, which provides a general survey of theoretical work on gender and politeness and questions the perceived notion that women are more polite than men, or that women are less powerful speakers, via an analysis of an interaction between a group of women in New Zealand. She argues that rather than indexing a subordinate position, the women use positive politeness strategies typically stereotyped as ‘feminine’ in order to achieve specific interactional aims. Chapter 10 focuses on gender and impoliteness where, as with sexist language, the concept of impoliteness is seen not as residing in particular linguistic constructs, but in the judgements of others. This part of the book concludes with an essay titled ‘Class, Gender and Politeness’, which investigates how class stereotypes affect linguistic behaviour, and reiterates the notion that politeness should be perceived as evaluations of participants’ behaviour rather than linked to particular speech acts.

Part Four concludes the book, first with a discussion of ‘discourse competence’ as a way of transcending simple feminine/masculine speech styles. Although insightful, Mills’ argument could be bolstered here by discussion of original data, rather than well-cited examples such as evaluations of Margaret Thatcher as a typically ‘masculine’ speaker. The final essay, ‘Gender and Performance Anxiety’, analyses responses to a questionnaire on public speaking by a group of female and male academics, concluding that rather than simply asserting that women can be shown to suffer from performance anxiety more than men, a more complex interpretation is needed that accounts for how stereotypical perceptions of the gendered nature of public speaking can affect levels of performance anxiety in an individual.

An important thread running through Gender Matters is the idea that a feminist linguistic analysis must be concerned with questioning global notions of ‘women’ and ‘men’, because it cannot be taken for granted that all women or all men speak, write or read in the same way. It is this questioning of global notions of sex difference that, according to Mills, posits her approach as distinctively ‘third wave’, although it could be argued that to conceive of second and third wave feminisms in terms of a simple binary distinction could be subject to similar scrutiny. Another potential critique of this collection is that while the introduction to the book argues for the necessity of feminist linguistic analysis in a ‘post-feminist’ era, all the essays
are reprints of previously published book chapters and journal articles, and half of these were originally published in the 1990s. As a result, some of the discussion could benefit from some updating. For example, in Chapter Two on ‘Gender and Reading,’ Mills provides a survey of interdisciplinary research on the role of the reader in determining meaning, but neglects to mention established work in the emerging field of cognitive stylistics, which is directly concerned with addressing questions of reader involvement. Additionally, although the synopsis describes this collection as presenting ‘a feminist linguistic analysis of texts […] and conversation’ the book itself provides eclectic analyses, examining a variety of features, as opposed to delineating a single, coherent framework. Overall, however, Gender Matters is a useful survey of some of the key debates in feminist linguistics that will be of interest to students of both linguistics and literary studies, and is a refreshing alternative to the traditional ‘dominance; difference; dynamic/diversity’ themes usually imposed on accounts of language and gender research.