Language, Sex and Social Structure: Analysing Discourses of Sexuality
Jodie Clark (2012)

Reviewed by Nigel Edley

Language, Sex and Social Structure begins with a story about its own inspiration; it’s an interesting tale about one of those awkward moments (for ethnographers at least) when one of your kindly volunteers/collaborators says something untoward. As a right- (or left-)minded social researcher, how should one deal with what, on the face of it, seems like a blatantly homophobic remark? Do you challenge them, there and then, or do you note the remark and challenge them, in print, at some point down the line? It appears that Clark refused both of these alternatives, opting, instead, for a much more conciliatory (and ambitious) solution: she writes Language, Sex and Social Structure, an extended attempt to theorise oppressive forms of discourse in such a way that deflects (much of) the blame from those who sometimes use them.

Whatever its motivation, Clark has produced here a very solid piece of scholarship. The most substantial contribution appears in the early chapters, where she endeavours to synthesise a distinctive analytical position from an array of possibilities afforded by linguistics and discourse analysis. At the heart of that project lies a familiar social theoretical conundrum: the so-called structure/agency problem. Within discourse research, how does one strike an appropriate balance between the twin poles of treating speakers as the masters and the slaves of language (cf. Barthes 1982; Billig 1991)? Over the years, many have been criticised for their handling of this issue. In this book, Clark attempts to cover both bases, by splicing the Foucauldian
elements of critical discourse analysis (selected mainly on account of its progressive politics) with a more powerful theory of agency, as found in the work of Judith Butler (1990), in which speakers are seen as not only capable of exploiting language in the course of everyday interaction, but also able to challenge, as well as reproduce, the social structures that shape the very contexts in which those affairs take place.

Now at this point I think it important to acknowledge that I approached this book not as a linguist, but as a discursive psychologist. I’ll admit to having a rather sketchy understanding of sociolinguistic research and the details of relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson 1995). But I also have to admit that, having read this volume, I was left to wonder if that myopia was reciprocated within *Language, Sex and Social Structure*. To be fair, Clark is obviously familiar with, and appreciative of, some of the work that comes from discursive psychology (DP), but, in my estimations at least, she fails to appreciate how, via its roots in ethnomethodology, it has always been concerned with the (re)production of social order - and also how it has often been deployed, over the years, in the pursuit of an emancipatory agenda (e.g. Coyle and Morgan-Sykes 1998; Edley and Wetherell 1997, 2001; Gough 1998; Kitzinger and Frith 1999; McIlvenny 2002; Seymour-Smith and Wetherell 2006; Wetherell and Potter 1992). The idea that people *imagine* structures into existence is also far from a novel insight for the discursive psychologist; indeed, it is a central tenet of its constructionist underpinnings (Speer 2005). As a consequence, in reading this book, I found myself constantly trying to figure out if the author’s approach was any better than the one to which I’ve become accustomed. Was the grass any greener on the other side of this (disciplinary) fence?

Without doubt, the results of this comparative evaluation are best seen within the context of the later, empirical chapters. To my eyes at least, there was something rather alienating about the way that Clark scoured her data for *analytic and synthetic* propositions, *individual* concepts and *sex* concepts, as well as ‘cognitive effects’ and ‘dossiers’. It all felt rather clunky. Time and again I found myself thinking that it would be more productive to pay closer attention to the interactional dynamics at play. For example, in one part of the book (extract 4.8) Clark is considering the comments, made by one of her participants, about being shocked at the news that some of her hockey team-mates had engaged in homosexual acts. ‘It was just the fact that it was coming from them,’ she says, ‘not actually what they were doing’ [that was shocking]. Clark takes these words at face value: ‘it seems clear’ she remarks, ‘that for Sullivan at least, it was not the sex concepts (“what they were doing”) that produced the cognitive effects during Sunday night’s [meeting], but the individual concepts (“the fact that it was
coming from them")’ (pp. 82–3). From a DP perspective, however, this seems to miss the subtleties of Sullivan’s identity work. That is, it ignores how she uses this anecdote to navigate a path for herself through the perilous waters of what one might call the Madonna/whore dilemma, such that she emerges as sexually respectable but without seeming prudish.

Likewise, in the following chapter, Clark is dealing with the fact that two of her participants, having just developed the idea that making it into the university’s hockey teams is ultracompetitive, go on to say that they were in ‘no doubt’ that they would get selected. Clark sets about analysing these utterances in terms of their syllogistic organisation and impact. But again, from the vantage point of DP, the ‘logic’ seems so much clearer; surely Sammy and Ally are making a case for their own sporting excellence, but in such a way that avoids appearing boastful.

In a number of respects, chapter 6 stands as the culmination of Language, Sex and Social Structure. In it, Clark returns to that initial moment of inspiration where Sammy proclaims that she ‘hates’ the way that some of the hockey players talk about the other girls that they’ve either ‘snogged’ or slept with. ‘Oh for God’s sake,’ she protests, ‘I don’t want to know!’ As before, the author embarks upon a detailed analysis of conceptual systems and cognitive effects to account for this (ostensibly) homophobic remark. Once again, it is a clever analysis; both methodically and clear. But once more I felt that it missed the broader picture of what was at stake in these discussions. How do we make sense of a young woman wanting to participate in an all-female sports team? Is it because she likes the sport and is good at it, or is it because she is looking for an opportunity to be physically close to other women? Please note, this is no flight of interpretive fancy on my part; no act of intellectual imperialism (see Schegloff 1997). Some of the hockey players allude to precisely this ‘logic’ (in extract 6.9) where they talk about a (purportedly lesbian) character who ‘does the rounds,’ moving from one sport to the next, in an attempt to get into a team.

What Clark’s data demonstrate is that her interviewees are operating within a culture (both local and more widespread) where participation in an all-female sports team is readable as a sign of lesbianism. That being the case, to construct oneself as heterosexual is to make a decisive move in that pattern of sense making. The fact that homophobic talk functions as a prime (ethno)method for constructing oneself as straight has been recognised for some while (e.g. Nayak and Kehily 1996). Used here, it serves a secondary function in underscoring the speaker’s position as a serious (and capable) sportswoman. So when Nemo declares that she wishes ‘that there didn’t have to be gay people in hockey,’ Clark is surely right in suggesting that she isn’t just exposing some deep-seated prejudice. Discourse
never simply represents. But is Nemo in the throes of some deep conceptual calculus? I’m not convinced. What does seem clear is that, via this complaint, Nemo performs a subtle discursive act: of presenting herself as a good hockey player who just happens to be straight.

References


