Words, contexts, politics

Frederick Attenborough

The aims of this introduction are twofold: first, to introduce the articles included within ‘Gender, Language and the Media’, this special issue of Gender and Language; and second, to locate them, individually and collectively, among the wider principles and practices of a certain kind of discourse analytic sensibility that I want to suggest is ‘there’, however inchoately, across each and every type of discourse analysis to be found at work within the field of gender and language studies. In order to achieve this, the following discussion is organised around three topics – words, contexts and politics – that are central to and for any understanding of how the articles comprising this special issue index that particular sensibility.

Words

Research into the many possible relationships, intersections and tensions between gender and language is diverse. It crosses disciplinary boundaries, and, as a bare minimum, could be said to encompass work notionally housed within gender studies, linguistics, feminist media studies, interactional sociolinguistics, feminist psychology, conversation analysis, media studies and cultural studies. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, this is an area of study that has evolved in the absence of – indeed, has never been structurally capable of producing – any kind of epistemological or methodological orthodoxy; there is, in other words, no single approach that could be said to ‘hold the field’. Discursive, poststructural, ethnomethodological,
phenomenological, positivist and experimental approaches can all be seen in action here, producing and reproducing what Speer (2005:7–8) describes as ‘different, and often competing, theoretical and political assumptions about the way discourse, ideology and gender identity should be conceived and understood.’ Taken together, the articles in ‘Gender, Language and the Media’ cut into a particular, discursively oriented segment of this terrain. Concentrating their attentions on media representations in which analyst and/or participant initiated categories and concepts like ‘gender’ (and ‘sexism’, ‘heteronormativity’, ‘postfeminist masculinity’, ‘rape’, ‘feminism’ and so on) become procedurally relevant, they show that and how it is the media – and, via the media, language – that allows for, initiates, constructs and then sustains that ‘procedural relevance’. But even with the epistemological and methodological focus narrowed in this way, it is still possible to identify different, sometimes even competing, understandings of discourse, text and rhetoric at play in this special issue, probing away at spoken, typed, graphic and/or written data from various angles. Attenborough, for instance, develops a broadly ethnomethodological approach to the analysis of how, and to what rhetorical, discursive and performative ends, ‘f-’ categories such as ‘feminism’ were invoked in and as part of online assessments of a controversial British television advert; Rosalind Gill pursues a sociological analysis of representations of ‘unheroic masculinity’ across a series of contemporary novels that stand in metonymically for ‘guy lit’, that burgeoning, increasingly lucrative yet hitherto largely understudied literary genre in which young men appear bumbling, unsuccessful and forever on the cusp of hypochondria or a politically incorrect erection; Tamar Holoshitz and Deborah Cameron utilise elements of van Dijk’s (1988) critical discourse studies approach to the media, journeying out into the relatively uncharted territory of media representations of sexual violence in foreign conflict settings and returning with some startling findings; Lucy Jones and Sara Mills bring recent advances in critical discourse analysis into bondage with queer theory as they examine the ways in which fans of the Fifty Shades trilogy of novels (James 2012a, 2012b, 2012c) used social media platforms to construct certain types of stance vis-à-vis the trilogy, the trilogy’s storyline, their own selves and each other; Michelle Lazar utilises feminist critical discourse analysis to explore shifting postfeminist representations of feminism and femininity in jewellery advertisements, those media texts that, traditionally, have tended to position jewellery as a gendered product to be bought for heterosexual women, and then worn by them for heterosexual men; and finally, Tanya Romaniuk adapts Bakhtin’s (1981) work on ‘intertextuality’ during her analysis of an action performed by Hillary Clinton during the 2007–8 US Democratic presidential primary.
campaign that some people might perhaps have described as ‘laughter’, but that certain sections of the mass media presented – and gendered in problematic ways – as a ‘cackle’.

Ethnomethodological and sociological approaches, van Dijk’s critical discourse studies, queer theory, critical discourse analysis, feminist critical discourse analysis, Bakhtin: clearly, there are many approaches to the study of media discourse. And yet, beyond the methodological differences suggested by these labels; beyond the fact that each of these methodologies ends up focalising its respective research object from a particular standpoint – beyond all of that, there is, nevertheless, something that unites all of these approaches. A gloss on that ‘something’ can be formulated as ‘a belief that every mediated word matters’, if we can also allow for the proviso that ‘word’ is being used here to index not just singular, isolated lexical items (à la the ‘linguistic reform’ work of the 1970s and 1980s; see Cameron 1995), but also, and at the same time, the clauses, sentential units, syntax and transitivity structures, narratives, photo captions, advertisements, page layouts, editorials, headlines, commentaries, and social media dialogues and polylogues within which they are embedded and sequentially positioned. Whatever else a discourse analysis of the media is, or whatever else it can be made to be – depending, for instance, on whether you decide to treat texts as recipient-designed analytic objects in their own right (as in, for example, discursive psychology and membership categorization analysis), or instead choose to invoke some wider (macro) social/institutional structure(s) within which they have to be situated and understood (as in, for example, critical discourse analysis and critical linguistics) – it has to start out as a general sensibility in which ‘every mediated word matters’.

Contexts

The articles included in this special issue evidence the kind of analytic gains to be had from adopting this fine-grained – or ‘bottom-up’ (Jones and Mills) – approach to gender, language and the media. Across advertisements (Lazar), novels (Gill), newspapers (Holoshitz and Cameron), news media (Romaniuk), social media platforms (Jones and Mills) and online chat forums (Attenborough), every mediated word is taken to matter because words, and the wider discursive, rhetorical and performative networks in which they are embedded, ‘shape’ and ‘renew’ (Drew and Heritage 1992:18) the contexts in which phenomenon like ‘gender’, ‘sexism’, ‘misogyny’, and so on, end up appearing to us as users, readers and consumers of the media. To understand context as something shaped and renewed in and through mediated interaction is to proceed in a very differ-
ent manner to, say, research on and around sex differences in language (e.g. Lakoff 1975; Spender 1980; Tannen 1990). The latter, whether implicitly or explicitly, tends towards treating sex/gender as a pre-discursive phenomenon; that is, ‘something either biologically determined or sociallyised from birth and trait-like’ (Speer 2005:46). This essentialist perspective effectively allows analysts to start out “knowing” the identities whose very constitution ought to be precisely the issue under investigation’ (D. Kulick cited in Speer and Stokoe 2011:4; and for a critique, see Cameron 1997). To find that men and women talk and interact differently, then, is already to know that the aetiology of those differences lies within men and women’s innate sex/gender differences. This is to assume a standard, sociological understanding of context as a ‘container’ or ‘bucket’ (Heritage 1987) in which demographic variables like ‘gender’, and the macro-social contexts, structures or institutions within which they are embedded, exist prior to, and independently of, any given interaction. As a consequence, words used in, and as part of any given ‘interaction’, are taken simply to transmit evidence of such pre-existing, pre-discursive phenomenon.

In this special issue, by contrast, phenomena like gender are not treated as the determinants of different uses of language, but the effects of words used in various, locally specific contexts (e.g. Litosseliti 2006:44). Context is thus understood to be instantiated in – rather than represented by – words, and, more generally, mediated discourse. ‘It is fundamentally through interaction’, as Heritage (2004:224) notes, summarising this position, ‘that context is built, invoked, and managed, and it is through interaction that ... imperatives originating from outside the interaction are evidenced and made real and enforceable for the participants.’ When it comes to mediated interaction, then, there is no ‘context’ before a journalist, blogger – or whatever other kind of ‘author’ or ‘set of interacting online authors’ we might be studying – literally writes ‘it’ into being, line by line or post by post. Analytically speaking, the only ‘social contexts,’ ‘structures’ or ‘institutions’ taken to exist (at least to start with) are those that participants themselves, precisely as participants, orient to in and as part of their particular, locally specific forms of interaction. This is why every mediated word matters to each of the articles included here: they focus their attentions on concrete mediated settings because it is there that people ‘bring [gender] into being’ (Smith 2002:xi). Consider, for instance, Holoshitz and Cameron’s article in this issue. Part of their analysis focuses on Western media reports of rape in the conflict setting of the Democratic Republic of Congo. While producing descriptions of these events, journalists had to make various ‘contextualising’ choices: were they dealing with ‘rape’, or ‘consensual sex’, ‘false allegations of rape’, ‘prick-teasing women’, ‘politically motivated rape’, or
what exactly? ‘Context’ – that is, our context as readers – emerges from the choices that were made, and that Holoshitz and Cameron subsequently analyse. And those choices mattered. At first sight, for instance, the topic of ‘the rape of 12- and 13-year-old girls by soldiers’ might appear to make locally relevant a set of relationally paired categories: ‘offender’ and ‘victim’ (see Sacks 1992). One way of proceeding would thus have been to develop these paired categories such that a ‘soldier’ perpetrated an offence, and a ‘young girl’ was the passive recipient, as it were, of the offence and its ill effects (Watson 1976:64). This would readable have shifted the quantum of blame for the offence towards the offender and away from the victim. But this was not quite what Holoshitz and Cameron found. In some cases, context had been shaped such that we learnt about these ‘events’ not through a language of violence and coercion, but rather, one of seduction, with all the gendered assumptions and stereotypes about women that this kind of language brings with it (also see Coates and Wade 2004; Meyer 2010). This is what it means, practically and empirically, to treat context as something shaped by words. Journalists – and bloggers, and advertisers, and so on – ‘orient to’ gender (Antaki and Widdicombe 1998:4–5), making it contextually relevant when, and only when, they choose to see certain versions of ‘it’ as significant for, or pertinent to, the thing that they are reporting/describing/writing about/selling. Beyond Holoshitz and Cameron’s research, each article in this special issue involves an analysis of how particular versions of things like gender ‘creep’ (Hopper and LeBaron 1998) into mediated texts, and how those ‘particular versions’ have consequences for the ways that we, as readers, come to understand the story and the characters being shown and told about. We see this in Attenborough’s work on the rhetorical uses of ‘feminism’ within and across various online debates and arguments; in Gill’s analysis of the ideological work performed by the patterned construction of men and women as certain kinds of ‘men’ and ‘women’ in contemporary ‘guy lit’ novels; in Jones and Mills’s finding that women tend to orient to certain versions of femininity while typing about sex and erotica online; in Lazar’s reflections on the costs and benefits of contemporary advertisements that articulate, and attempt to interpellate consumers within, hybrid postfeminist subject positions; and in Romaniuk’s research into the work of ‘en-textualisation’ that allowed for Hillary Clinton’s ‘laughter’ to become a ‘cackle’ in and across successive media reports about ‘it’.

But mediated words do not just shape contexts. They ‘renew’ them. This is perhaps most obvious in talk-in-interaction, where ‘every current utterance will itself form the immediate context for some next action in a sequence’ (Drew and Heritage 1992:18). In a setting where two interactants speak for themselves, for instance, they will formulate their talk
to and for one another, turn-by-turn, in an unfolding interaction. Context is ‘renewed’ by *them*, and for *their* own locally specific purposes. It is on the basis of what *they* say and do that an ‘immediate context’ is created and ‘some next action in the sequence’ developed. But in most forms of mediated interaction, renewal takes on an added layer of complexity. For here we find the mediating presence of a journalist, standing between the original interactants and a wider audience (of readers, internet users, whoever). Take, for example, a mediated report about the two-party interaction alluded to above. Only that which a journalist decides is relevant to understanding ‘it’ will end up getting foregrounded. And it will be on the basis of that renewal – which may, *but does not have to be*, developed and written up in a way the original interactants would have wanted – that an ‘immediate context’ is created, and a wider audience is allowed to take the relevant ‘next action in this sequence’ (i.e. something like ‘figuring out how they feel about what the original interactants did and said’). Romaniuk’s article in this issue offers an insight into the rhetorical significance of this process. Analysing the very first appearance of Clinton’s ‘cackle’ in a transcript from a television interview posted on the website of *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, Romaniuk shows that and how this transcript renews, *but does not replicate*, the context of Clinton’s initial action. We, as this transcript’s audience, have our ability to perform a relevant next action in this sequence (i.e. evaluating Clinton’s ability to fulfil the traditionally male role of president of the United States of America) constrained and regulated. Why? Because to characterise her ‘laughter’ as ‘cackling’ carries with it ‘an evaluative assessment of its quality (and, arguably, a particularly negative and gendered assessment) – as opposed to the more common and neutral practice of stating simply that she laughed’ (Romaniuk, this issue). What we see here, then, is that although people may laugh (or whatever) for any number of reasons, and although they may intend that laughter as a means for pushing their immediate interactants towards a particular kind of ‘next action’, nevertheless, in any subsequent media report about that laughter, what they did, or intended, is relatively unimportant. From its lexical, syntactical and rhetorical choices, through to the graphology of the page/screen upon which it appears, a mediated text such as a newspaper article renews the context of the thing under report, while also, *and at the same time*, shaping our understandings of the ‘thing’ in question. It is via just this kind of renewal of context that, in Toloshitz and Cameron’s work, for instance, rape is filtered through a language of seduction that invites us, its audience, to understand ‘what really happened’ in ways that rely upon, and in relying upon *reproduce*, various gendered assumptions and stereotypes about women, men and sexual relationships.
For most of us, most of the time, life is lived in a world where – to decontextualise and then crudely recontextualise Wittgenstein ([1921]1974:5.62) – the limits of our connectivity are the limits of our world. There is very little that we see, hear, look at, read, laugh or get annoyed about that has not, at some stage, been mediated in some way – even when we talk directly, face-to-face with our friends, a good deal of what we talk about turns out to have been stuff heard on the radio, watched on TV, seen on Facebook or YouTube, and so on. So when it comes to phenomena such as gender, feminism, sexism, and so on, we learn a lot – though of course not everything – about what those things are, are not, might, could or should be, and/or what they imply, hint at or presuppose about social life, via the various mundane, mediated texts that we engage with on a day-to-day basis. Every mediated word matters, then, because in shaping and renewing the contexts in which we are able to orient-to things like gender, they shape and renew our understandings of matter; that is, of women, men, bodies, ‘sluts’, ‘slags’, ‘queers’, sex, rape, misogyny, and so on. In Sacks’s terms, we could say that ‘what dominant groups [or, in this case, “the media”] basically own is how it is that we see reality’ (1992:398). And if politics, the realm of the political, can be taken to emerge in situations where various choices exist but not all of those choices can be chosen, then media texts are essentially political phenomenon: to own how it is that we see reality is to be able to make choices about what kind of realities you want to make visible, and what kind(s) you want to conceal (see Ashmore 1993; Attenborough 2012). Whatever other politics, or critical stances, the articles included here might want to endorse, or commit to, it is a feature of this kind of discourse analytic sensibility that it cannot help but be engaged with data of a fundamentally ‘political’ nature. To question, scrutinise, probe, raise awkward questions about, unpack or even unravel seemingly factual, purely descriptive, ostensibly plausible mediated versions of some event might not be to the taste of (m)any of the UK’s seven major research councils. But it is, nevertheless, to reveal the discursive rhetorical and performative choices that were not chosen along the way to creating that fact, that description, and that sense of plausibility. And, in a context where there is still ‘an impatience, and often intolerance, of close analysis’ (Schegloff 1997:180), it is worth noting that this is not at all an apolitical, pointlessly micro or even relativistic type of thing to try and achieve. To understand why, it is useful to return to the Sacks quote from above, only this time citing it in full. For having noted that ‘what [the media] basically own is how it is that we see reality’, Sacks goes on to suggest that ‘there’s an order of revolution [or contestation, or whatever] which is an attempt to change how it is that
persons see reality’ (1992:398). Each of the articles in this special issue is engaged not just in unpacking those ‘orders of reality’. In the very act of doing so – in the very act of foregrounding the choices that go into the shaping and renewal of a mediated text – they are also providing resources for the contestation of those texts, the choices they embody, and the versions of gender, and gendered phenomena, that they present to and for their respective audiences.

References


