

Language and Gender: toward a Critical Feminist Linguistics

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Abstract

This article attempts to map out the development of language and gender research and studies from its early stage to recent trend. The early language and gender research is inclined to essentialist view; and it subsequently changes its direction into a more non-essentialist perspective. Both essentialist and non-essentialist perspectives on language and gender research are not necessarily affiliated with feminist linguistics. Their research findings mostly conclude that women's language is inferior and women are not capable users of language. In a response to such "sexist" findings, various feminist scholars across the disciplines venture to rethink and redefine gender and language. Among many different approaches that they employ are two notable views, namely, the "dominance" and "difference" perspectives. One views man-woman differences in language use as a reflection of their power relation: the dominant and the subordinate. Meanwhile, the other sees this different linguistic use as a result of the different 'sub-cultures' of their social environment (Coates, 2000: 413 and also Litosseliti, 2006:27). This shift toward a critical feminist linguistics is in fact informed by the current theories in critical thinking and feminist perspectives.

Keywords: language, gender, feminist perspective

Language and Gender

Current theories in critical thinking and feminist perspectives have informed recent research and studies on language and gender, shifting from an essentialist perspective to a non-essentialist perspective that enables critical feminist linguistics to include heterogeneity, non-fixity, specificity, and reflexivity in its perspectives. Research and studies on language and gender are not necessarily affiliated with feminist linguistics such as seen in Otto Jespersen's research on language and gender. Jespersen's "The Woman," the most frequently quoted and anthologized article from his book *Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin* (1922) is considered to be one of the early and 'classic' texts in language and gender. In his study,

Jespersen reveals that men and women use language differently, for example, in terms of phonetics, grammar, diction, vocabulary, and adverbs. Women are seen as less capable language users than men: "In language we see this very clearly: the highest linguistic genius and the lowest degree of linguistic imbecility are rarely found among women" (quoted in Cameron, 1998: 240).

Women's language is also considered to be inferior to men's language, and is appropriately fit enough for their gender domestic roles. Jespersen views language from an essentialist perspective; that is, seeing men-women language difference as the result of sex and gender differences. Thus, from this perspective, people use language in particular ways because of who they are. Jespersen's essentialist view of language and

sexist judgment on women's language have been challenged by many feminist scholars, inviting various different scholars, both male and female, across the disciplines to redefine and rethink language and gender.

Feminist Perspectives on Language and Gender

There are many different responses among feminist scholars in their attempts to challenge Jespersen's sexist commentaries on women's language; and these different feminist responses are grouped into two major approaches/perspectives: the "dominance" and "difference" frameworks. The "dominance perspective" sees the man-woman differences in language use as a reflection of their power relation, the dominant and the subordinate. Meanwhile, the "difference perspective," on the contrary, sees this different linguistic usage as the result of the different "sub-cultures" of their social environment (Coates, 2000: 413 and also Litosseliti, 2006:27).

Two famous responses among feminist scholars are the works of Lakoff and Fishman; and along with Jespersen's work, their works are also "classic" texts in language and gender studies. Lakoff's *Language and Woman's Place* (1975) is considered to be the first work of feminist linguistics (Cameron, 1998: 216). Lakoff's study shows a similar result to Jespersen's conclusion that women's language was indeed "inferior/deficient" compared to men's language; but they have different interpretations of their similar findings. Jespersen sees the difference as essentially sprung from biological determinant; on the other hand, Lakoff sees women's linguistic deficiency as the result of the power-gender relation assigned to men and women in society in which men frequently dominate and are more privileged such as in the field of education. Despite her negative result on women's language in her study, Lakoff has an explicitly positive and sympathetic attitude toward women. Nonetheless, Lakoff's study has been widely criticized as lacking empirical data because she based her research on her intuition, on casual and personal observations, and on cultural

stereotypes when studying the language-gender relation.

Lakoff has re-released her book, annotating it and responding to past and current issues and debates on language and gender, and sharing her ideas with other researchers in this book (Litosseliti, 2006: 31). Lakoff's study on gendered language is usually categorized into the dominance perspective. Fishman with a similar perspective in "Conversational Insecurity" (1983) has re-examined Lakoff's research finding, arguing that women's language is not deficient and that women are competent language users and the women-men linguistic difference is not only gender-related but also a matter of hierarchy. Employing the same dominant perspective as Lakoff and Fishman, Spender in her seminal work, *Man-Made Language* (1980), criticized Lakoff for using men's language as the norm for evaluating women's language, arguing that patriarchy privileges men to dominate and to define meaning. Thus, the problem is not the "deficient" language of women but rather the deficiency of the social order (Spender, 1980 in Litosseliti, 2006: 32). The works of Lakoff, Fishman, and Spender are prominent examples of the "dominance perspective/approach" in language and gender studies.

Meanwhile, the "difference perspective/approach" can be found in the works of Tannen, Maltz and Borker, and Gumperz, attempting to see that women's language is not only different but also positive in its respect. Such a view follows the theoretical assumption that 'differences' are the product of participation and socialization of "different male and female "sub-cultures." (Litosseliti, 2006: 37). Both the "dominance" and "difference" perspectives/approaches have been criticized for their simple conceptualization of gender; however, both perspectives have a great contribution to make and a significant role to play in the development of critical feminist linguistics.

Women's Movement and Critical Feminist Linguistics

The different perspectives/approaches, choice of topic and focus in language and

gender studies show that there is no singular perspective among feminists in spite of the patriarchal oppression that they experience in society. As a result, language and gender is indeed a widely varied field of study. The visible similarity that these different feminist perspectives/approaches have in common is that all of those perspectives are informed and influenced by the development of critical theories in linguistics and feminism as well. This fact also reflects the inseparable connection between the historical development of feminism and the development of feminist linguistics although feminist linguistics emerged from within the linguistics discipline itself.

Mills has mapped three chronological waves in the history of feminism. The “first-wave feminism” is generally related to the suffragette movement in the 19th and 20th centuries. The “second-wave” feminism is linked to the women’s movement in the 1960s, resisting sex discrimination and struggling for equal opportunity and the emancipation of women. This second-wave feminist influence can also be seen in language and gender studies and research that have more focus on sexist language, issues of dominance and difference in interaction, and a positive re-evaluation of women’s language. Finally, “third-wave” feminism moves toward “more critical, constructivist, and poststructuralist theoretical paradigms” (Litosseliti, 2006: 23). Critical feminist linguistics also moves towards this “third-wave” feminist influence, taking a more interdisciplinary approach, shifting from the concern of how women and men use language differently to the concern of how language constructs both men and women in their social interaction.

The connection of feminist linguistics and the post-structural approach can be seen through Weedon’s main argument on feminist post-structural concepts in her book *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (1987) and Talbot’s concept of feminist linguistics (1998). Weedon maps different strands of poststructuralist frameworks from different theories of various scholars such as the structural linguistics of Saussure, Althusser’s theory of ideology, the psychoanalysis of Freud and Lacan, Derrida’s

theory of “difference”, and Foucault’s theory of discourse and power (Weedon, 1987). Weedon encourages feminist scholars to employ a pragmatic and eclectic approach to appropriate these widely varied post-structural theories to serve feminist needs and interests, facilitating heterogeneity, non-fixity, specificity, and reflexivity. Meanwhile, according to Talbot “Feminist linguistics is interested in identifying, demystifying, and resisting the ways in which language is used, together with other social practices, to reflect, create and sustain gender divisions and inequalities in society” (Talbot, 1998 in Litosseliti, 2006: 23).

Following the perspectives of feminist post-structuralism outlined by Cameron (1992, 1997), Luke and Gore (1992a), Weedon (1987), and Pennycook’s *Critical Inquiry in Applied Linguistics* (2001), Pavlenko defines feminist post-structuralism

as approaches to language study that strive (a) to understand the relationship between power and knowledge; (b) to theorize the role of language in production and reproduction of power, difference, and symbolic domination; and (c) to deconstruct master narratives that oppress certain groups – be it immigrants, women, or minority members – and devalue their linguistic practices (in Norton & Toohey, 2004: 53).

In essence, feminist post-structural linguistics/critical feminist linguistics attempts to investigate how women and men are constructed from a wider perspective through language, and sees gender not as a unitary category but as heterogeneous: diverse and multiple, shifting/not-fixed, and sometimes conflicting. Thus, gender as a category should be examined from a wider perspective in its specific relationship with other categories such as race, ethnicity, class, age, and sexual orientation (Weedon, 1987).

In accordance with the “third-wave” feminist influence on critical feminist linguistics, the writer of this paper attempts to show that currently, critical feminist linguistics with its critical and constructivist, post-structural approach that facilitates heterogeneity, non-fixity, specificity, and

reflexivity in language and gender studies has also penetrated EFL and ESL studies and research as seen in the works of Daly (2000), Micciche (2001), Peirce (1995), Pavlenko, Aneta (2004), Sunderland (1992 and 2004), and Lin (2004).

The feminist post-structural take on heterogeneity, non-fixity, specificity can be clearly seen in Peirce's "Social Identity, Investment, and Language Learning" that attempts to show that second language acquisition (SLA) is closely related to the motivation, gender and ethnic identity of learners in a particular/specific social-power relation. The poststructuralist feminist linguistic agenda (as identified/defined by Pavlenko) is clearly seen in Peirce's choice of subjects/topic/focus: immigrant women in Canada in their attempt to learn English and to fit to their new social environment. Peirce's focus on immigrant women also reveals her attempt to challenge the view of gender as a universal category.

The major theorization of women is undoubtedly centered on white middle class heterosexual women; and is generally deemed to be universal and applicable to all women. Peirce rejects such universality in gender categories and her work shows that specificity is crucial in doing gender studies. Her work displays how women of different ethnicity and class are constructed differently in society through language. The specificity of women's class and ethnic identity also needs to be properly situated in their specific social setting. The immigrant women in Peirce's study may experience different gender-power relationships in their attempt to master English if they are situated in different places other than Canada. The point here is that specific location or locality does matter. The concept of the "community of practice" by Lave and Wenger and also the ideas of Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, stated that it is not only a matter of location and people that is important but also day to day linguistic, social, and cultural interactions of the people within the community.

Peirce's work also reveals the feminist poststructuralist concept of heterogeneity, showing that one immigrant woman does not only have ethnic and gender identities but

also multiple, changing, and shifting/not-fixed as a woman, immigrant, mother, wife, worker, and other identities attached to this immigrant woman that influence her second language acquisition. Peirce also extends the concept of motivation to "investment" that includes larger socio-cultural-historical relationship involving the learners. Peirce's study is a critical examination of the interplay of gender, ethnicity, age, class, capital, and language in SLA.

Meanwhile, Lin's "Introducing a Critical Pedagogical Curriculum: A feminist Reflexive Account" (2004) displays the feminist post-structural attempt to be more critical and involved by continuously self-questioning and self-examining feminist practice. Lin re-examines and re-evaluates her teaching strategies and interaction with her students to better understand the problems, needs, and interests of both teacher and students and to negotiate those concerns so as to come up with a more 'successful learning teaching experience.

Self-reflexivity in terms of learning strategy, interaction, and teaching materials are also be main concerns in Pavlenko's "Gender and Sexuality in Foreign and Second Language Education: Critical and Feminist Approaches" (2004). Pavlenko's article discusses the relation of gender and second (L2) and foreign language (FL) learning inside and outside the classroom, particularly by using a feminist poststructuralist approach. Pavlenko emphasizes the various different perspectives on and responses to language and gender within feminism itself. Her decision to select a feminist poststructuralist critical linguistic perspective in her study is because this feminist poststructuralist theoretical framework not only pays attention to gender difference but also includes other differences such as gender in relation to race, ethnicity, class, and other differences. This perspective views subject as a full individual with her/his multiple social cultural identities.

Pavlenko critically examines FL/L2 education where gender plays a key role in language learning and teaching; and by applying feminist post-structuralism in this research, she analyzes (a) gendered

inequalities in access to material and symbolic resources, (b) the gendered nature of linguistic interaction, and (c) sexual harassment as a discursive and social practice. To capture this multiplicity and plurality of identities and differences in language and gender research and studies, Pavlenko also suggests the use of postcolonial theories. Similar to Micciche's study, Pavlenko's article is an interdisciplinary study on gender and language

The attempt not to isolate gender in education from a larger social perspective is seen in Daly's "Gender Differences in Achievement in English: a Sign of the Times?" (2000). Daly's article critically examines the intervention of political and economic interests, and media reports in appropriating and contextualizing gender differences. It points to the British government's campaign in the 1990s to improve literacy "standards" by focusing on gender, particularly based on the different performance between male and female students in English classrooms as deeply rooted in the political and economic discourse to maintain "male dominance within educational success."

Daly also reveals the key role of the media in reporting the different performance in English classrooms in terms of the binary opposition of gender performance in which girls perform better than boys. This media articulation polarizes a further interpretation of gender differences and gender performance and invites governmental and national initiatives to help male students achieve better literacy than female students. The article further reports that the national intervention and initiatives to improve male students' educational success have been done through the "revision" of teaching materials and strategies, and of the curriculum as well as by testing and evaluation. Those efforts have also been challenged and criticized because of the overtly intended programs to benefit only male students which will disadvantage female students.

Some research and recent studies have debunked the misperception that "girls have a greater natural aptitude for English" and reveal that "there is no essential difference in ability. The difference is in attitude." In her

conclusion, Daly invites readers to examine and rethink current gender issues more critically, and to "understand them within a history of male privilege in educational discourse, which is always politically and economically determined." In its essence, this article does indeed offer a critical perspective on the interplay of political, economical concerns, the media, education, and gender.

Meanwhile, Micciche's "Contrastive Rhetoric and the Possibility of Feminism" (2001) invites us to examine teacher-student interactions in the classroom in relation to gender and race. Micciche offers feminist principles and perspectives as a theoretical model to elaborate and expand research on the contrastive rhetoric theory (CRT). Contrastive rhetoric (CR) has its roots in the United States as a response to traditional composition teachers who tended to have the assumption that their students are monolingual and monocultural (Kaplan, 1966). CR comes into being to help learners keep up with the discourse structure of Standard American Schooled English (SASE). Thus, in its original intention, CR addressed "the need of individuals for whom English was not a first language—specifically, foreign students in U.S. tertiary institutions," not only in terms of language difference in phonological, morphological, and grammatical features but also in discourse and rhetorical features such as seen in writing and reading classes. CRT focus on culture and cultural difference and has also influenced the recent politicization of second-language teaching. According to Micciche CRT is significant for L1 and L2 classrooms, however, it has frequently been applied in the L2 classroom contexts only, and focusing on students' linguistic and cultural differences.

Micciche offers feminist perspectives to extend CRT to facilitate the concept of teaching as "a cultural phenomenon affected by social identifications and representations"; thus, teaching is also "a politics of representation and scholarship as a form of cultural work." The combination of feminist perspectives and CRT will enable researcher to see how students perceive their teachers as a "racial/gendered subject" and how teachers conduct learning/teaching strategies as well because in this view pedagogy is not

only concerned with the interaction of students and teachers in the classrooms but also with “the process of socialization that instruct teachers on how to position themselves in the classrooms” (Micciche, 2001:82). This article is a challenging invitation to undertake research on the dynamics of student/teacher linguistic and cultural backgrounds and on their gender and social identities.

Similar to the studies conducted by Micciche and Pavlenko, Sunderland’s “Gender in the EFL Classroom” (1992) also examines gender and gender construction in a prominent and salient setting: the EFL classroom. Sunderland focuses particularly on, the English language itself; on materials that include grammars, textbooks, dictionaries, and teacher’s guides; and finally on processes such as learning styles and strategies, and teacher-learner and learner-learner interaction. In addition Sunderland attempts to unveil “some implications of gender in materials and classroom interaction for language acquisition.” Sunderland’s findings are in line with Daly’s result in the attempt to show the myth and misinterpretation that females perform better in language achievement. On the contrary, both Sunderland and Daly’s studies reveal the disadvantaged position of female students in the classroom process, in materials, and within the English language itself, not to mention their further disadvantages in the social world at large outside the classrooms. Both researchers see that the assessment of language learning in terms of gender differences (superiority/inferiority) is indeed not productive at all. Instead, they urge people to examine this gender difference in a wider and more complex perspective; for Daly, it should be seen in political and economical contexts, and for Sunderland, this complex context must also include the influence of the environment, attitudes, expectations, social values and norms, and career opportunities as suggested by scholars such as Loulidi (1990). Sunderland’s applied study of gender and language is critical for scholars, teachers, and students who are interested in the subject of gender and language.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the shift of the view of language from essentialist to non-essentialist perspectives has become the current trend and issue in language and gender studies and research. Poststructuralist frameworks that emphasize heterogeneity, non-fixity, specificity, and reflexivity have also been adopted and appropriated by the critical feminist linguistics in redefining and rethinking gender and language. This perspective of poststructuralist critical feminist linguistics has also entered into EFL and ESL studies and research in terms of learning teaching strategies, interactions, motivation, teaching materials, and other aspects as seen in the works of Peirce, Pavlenko, Sunderland, Daly, Lin, and Micciche. It is evident that language and gender studies and research have moved towards a critical feminist linguistic perspective that includes heterogeneity, non-fixity, specificity, and reflexivity in the search for a better understanding of gender and language interplay.

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