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Language and Marginalized Places

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In the early 1990s, the field of language and gender began to shift to what many scholars now identify as an ideological understanding of linguistic gender. This perspective views the "women's language" and "men's language" of previous generations not as indexically bound to the sex of the speaker, but as culturally and socially produced beliefs that are available for consumption, negotiation, and contestation (Gal 1991). Just when feminist linguistics had declared the death of Robin Lakoff's (1975) "women's language"—construing it as an inherently essentialist entity that could be neither verified empirically nor observed interactively—it suddenly sprang back to life with new vitality. When reread through the lens of ideology, Lakoffian "women's language" was liberated from the taint of essentialist thinking. With "women's language" redefined as the patterns of speaking ideologically associated with women and hence femininity, the field moved its focus from sex differentiation to gender negotiation, observing how speakers incorporate the complex interplay of global and local understandings of gendered talk into everyday identity positioning.

Certainly, Lakoff did not have the benefit of the term *ideology* when she was writing *Language and Woman's Place* (*LWP*); it was only when American sociologists began to engage more directly with Marxist theory in the 1980s that the term began to gain widespread currency in the social sciences. But Lakoff's repeated characterization of "women's language" throughout her text as a stereotype—perpetuated in the media, differentially marketed to women and men, and available for consumption by both—in many ways predicts, if not predates, the poststructuralist focus on the symbolic nature of discourse. In several senses, her writings provide a gendered counterpoint to Pierre Bourdieu's (1991) work on symbolic domination, for she fleshes out the ways in which women, as a subjugated class, come to accept the inferiority of a discursively produced "women's language." This nonstandard variety—the representation of which, according to Lakoff, reached its pinnacle in the 1970s through television portrayals of characters like the self-deprecating housewife Edith Bunker—becomes symbolic of women's everyday marginalization from male workplaces and

hence potentially emblematic of women's social and economic insecurity. Socialized into the double bind of a society that expects women to use certain patterns of speaking while at the same time deeming those very patterns inferior, women are kept in their place, as it were, segregated both physically and linguistically from institutionalized power structures.

Thus, Lakoff's "women's language" is ultimately about power, not gender. Reworking for linguistics the gendered-division-of-labor arguments that became prominent in feminism and anthropology, Lakoff offers an explanation for how certain styles of speaking, through their association with institutionalized masculinity, come to be associated with power. This is undoubtedly why the political style of President George H. W. Bush caught her attention in the late 1980s. Lakoff (1990) suggests that Bush, in order to win the respect and confidence of his American audience, went through a linguistic "sex change" during his campaign for the presidency. While Bush's speech patterns at the beginning of his public career were consistent with the linguistic stereotype of women's language (replete with incomplete sentences and speech acts, lexical hedges, and even the occasional giggle), by the time of his election he had learned to project a masculine, and hence more powerful, gender. After months of training by speech writers and image consultants, Bush was finally able to turn into the nation's quintessential male, catering to cultural expectations of gender-appropriate speech and performing a linguistic masculinity. It is certainly no coincidence that the early 1990s "Drag-King-for-a-Day" workshop in New York City adopted the new President Bush as its transgendered hero (Bell 1993). Lakoff's notion of "women's language" and "men's language" as construed within relations of power also had application for my work on transgendered *hijras* in northern India. In their self-identification as neither man nor woman, *hijras* exploit ideologies of feminine and masculine speech in establishing egalitarian and hierarchical relations, respectively (Hall & O'Donovan 1996).

One of my purposes in writing this essay, then, is to question the way in which scholars have essentialized the writings of various pioneers in the field in order to pattern a neat delineation of theoretical perspectives, from "deficit" to "dominance" to "difference" to "discourse." While such categorizations are no doubt useful to an understanding of the development of a scholarly field (not to mention an indispensable teaching tool), they also work to canonize inaccurate representations of earlier scholarship, particularly when bits and pieces of much larger works are used in the service of distinguishing mutually exclusive standpoints. Deborah Cameron, for instance, who has provided us with some of the most provocative and insightful reviews of the field, has also represented Lakoff's work in a way that is not borne out by the text: "Both [Lakoff and Tannen] assume that 'women's language' is, in essence, the language characteristically used by women. A presupposition here is that the 'women' pre-exist the 'language'. 'Women's language' is the language of subjects who are already, definitively,

women" (1997: 27). But this is not the assumption that guides Lakoff's work. It is easy to misinterpret Lakoff's text in today's academic climate, rooted as it is in discourses of the early 1970s feminist movement as well as in the prevailing political and theoretical perspectives of the time (see also Bucholtz and McElhinny, both this volume). While Lakoff suggests that women, as a result of their socialization into normative femininity, are perhaps more likely to use the indirect forms of speech that have come to index powerlessness, she is quick to point out that such forms can also be appropriated by men, particularly those who wish to index disenfranchisement from male realms of power. She presents these acts of linguistic defiance together with the situation by which certain men, as a result of class positioning or other societal considerations (read: George H. W. Bush), are socialized along with women into using linguistic features consistent with "women's language." Moreover, Lakoff acknowledges not only that many women do not use stereotyped "women's language" (e.g., "It is equally true that different women speak women's language to differing extents; and interestingly enough, it seems that academic women are among the least apt to be speakers of this language" [*LWP* 82]), but also that the employment of this variety is entirely dependent on diverse contextual factors and thus cannot be tested experimentally (e.g., "one can judge whether something is 'women's language,' 'men's language,' or 'neutral' only with reference to the real-world context in which it was uttered—a complex and subtle combination of judgments that would be virtually impossible to reproduce in a natural way in an experimental situation" [*LWP* 83]).

It is the piecemeal representation of Lakoff's work by subsequent critics, reiterated and canonized for academic consumption in anthologies and field reviews, that turned *LWP* into old-school essentialism, not the text itself. In contrast to early anthropology's exoticizing representations of "women's languages" and "men's languages" as mutually exclusive entities (Trechter 1999; Hall 2003), Lakoff allowed for much more linguistic variability with respect to the relationship between the biological and social worlds, establishing a new way of conceptualizing gender, language, and marginality. Scholars who have read her work as being concerned only with women's patterns of speaking continue to ignore her rather extensive discussions of a variety of other social groups who also make use of "women's language," among them the effeminate homosexual, the anti-capitalist hippie, and the effete male professor. Because Lakoff is interested in the socializing forces that produce an asymmetry in the way women and men speak, she tests her theoretical argument with reference to the speakers who are in some way tangential to this socialization. For Lakoff, women have much in common with homosexuals, hippies, and academics: specifically, all of these identities share a marginality determined by their exclusion from institutionalized male power.

Central to Lakoff's explanation for this shared marginality is the gen-

dered division of labor, and more specifically, the divergent ways of speaking brought about by this division. This concern prompts her to devote several pages of her discussion to Lionel Tiger's *Men in Groups* (1969). Like many physical anthropologists of his era, Tiger supports the explanatory power of a "man-the-hunter" model of human evolution, which holds that the evolution of male-dominant human societies was initiated by cooperative male hunting, a sex-based behavior observed in primates and supposed to have existed in primitive human communities. For Tiger, this evolutionary argument is the key to understanding the concept for which he is most well known: male bonding in human societies. While primitive females stayed behind with their young and made decisions primarily in an individual capacity, males were forced by the circumstances of labor to develop a group mentality. Because the hunt would be successful only if hunters found ways to cooperate with one another, primitive males, unlike their female counterparts, began to develop interactive techniques to enhance group enjoyment and minimize personal friction. These interactive techniques, according to Tiger, find their modern-day realization in human male-bonding rituals.

Scores of articles written by feminist anthropologists subsequently challenged the man-the-hunter model of human evolution, including a female-focused model of human evolution often referred to as the "woman-the-gatherer" challenge (see overview in di Leonardo 1991), a perspective that allows for the possibility of some kind of group mentality for women as well. But Lakoff did not have the benefit of these critiques, writing as she was in the early 1970s, and she embraces Tiger's evolutionary discussion of male bonding as one way of explaining women's and men's differential orientations to politeness. Women, excluded from a male workplace built on "present-day reflexes of male bonding" (*LWP* 97) tend to orient themselves to politeness forms that discourage bonding, gravitating toward the first two rules of Lakoff's politeness paradigm: Formality (*Keep aloof*) and Deference (*Give options*). Men, however, as a result of their socialization within workplace situations that require them to develop techniques of working together as a group, are more likely to embrace Lakoff's third rule of politeness: Camaraderie (*Show sympathy*). The latter rule would be essential in, for example, a male-dominated corporate workplace, as group members must develop interactive measures to gloss over emotional reactions and disagreements that might hinder progress toward a common goal. These are measures women have generally not needed to develop, Lakoff suggests, since they have historically been excluded from such group-oriented work environments.

The notion of a masculine workplace, then, is fundamental to Lakoff's theoretical explanation for women's and men's differential use of linguistic phenomena. This explains why hippies, academic men, and homosexuals are central figures of Lakoff's text as problematized gender identities (*LWP* 44–47). Like women, these groups are in some way ex-

cluded from a social history of male bonding in the labor force, and as with women, this exclusion leads to language patterns disassociated from what Lakoff terms "real-world power" (*LWP* 82). Male hippies, male academics, and male homosexuals are all in some sense gender deviants—social groups who have forsaken a capitalistic power structure built on masculine ideals for pursuits considered trivial in the "real world." This would explain, suggests Lakoff, why the language patterns of hippie, academic, or homosexual so often appear to resemble those of the American middle-class housewife. That these disenfranchised groups are likely to use some of the same specialized lexical items as American middle-class women, she argues, points to a more general conclusion: "These words aren't, basically, 'feminine'; rather, they signal 'uninvolved,' or 'out of power' " (*LWP* 47). While certain patterns of speech may be considered feminine because women are, in her own terms, the " 'uninvolved,' 'out of power' group *par excellence*" (*LWP* 47), Lakoff is careful to note that any group in society may presumably use patterns associated with "women's language" (an observation that best explains her regular use of scare quotes around the term). For Lakoff, then, it is the feminine-sounding man, marginal to the world of institutionalized masculinity, who ultimately enables her to formulate the crux of her argument: "The decisive factor is less purely gender than power in the real world" (*LWP* 81).

In spite of their centrality to Lakoff's theory, these marginal figures have been frequently, if not entirely, overlooked in subsequent discussions of her work. The majority of her critics, swept up in an imperative to test her argument quantitatively, interpreted Lakoffian "women's language" to be only about women, developing study upon study to determine whether or not female speakers actually use "women's language" more than their male counterparts (e.g., Crosby & Nyquist 1977; O'Barr & Atkins 1980). What is amusing, in retrospect, is that a great number of these studies analyze the speech patterns of the very academics that Lakoff identifies as linguistically divergent (e.g., Dubois & Crouch 1975; cf. Newcombe & Arnkoff 1979). The continued misreading of Lakoff's work undoubtedly stems from her decision to name this speech variety the scare-quoted "women's language" instead of "powerless language"—the term William O'Barr and Bowman K. Atkins (1980) suggest as an alternative. But this decision, in tune with the radical feminist ideas of the time, was clearly as academically provocative as it was politically savvy, spawning three decades of impassioned uptake.

The ideological approach to language and gender has been said to offer a new understanding of the relationship between biological sex and social gender, whereby gender is not bound to sex in any precise and predictable way. As in Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity, it is in fact social gender that creates biological sex and not the other way around, for societal discourses about gender make certain aspects of biology salient in the service of differentiation and hierarchy. While Lakoff

is often held up as the naïve precursor to this perspective who blindly assumes a direct mapping of gender onto biological sex, her writings reveal something altogether different. The marginalized characters in Lakoff's book use "women's language" not so that they can be heard as women (as might be the case, for instance, with some male-to-female transsexuals whose goal is to "pass" as the other sex), but to signal various kinds of disengagement from institutionalized masculinity. Lakoff's understanding of marginality is contingent on what Elinor Ochs (1992) calls the "constitutive relation" between language and gender. For both authors, the relation between linguistic form and social meaning is not a simple or straightforward mapping; rather, linguistic forms index a variety of social meanings (disenfranchisement, formality, deference, powerlessness) which in turn constitute gender positions (e.g., femininity).

Indeed, in attending to the ways in which institutions of power promote certain types of discourse while demoting others, Lakoff predicts many of the concerns of queer linguistics (Barrett 1997; Bucholtz & Hall 2004; Livia & Hall 1997)—a field that explicitly questions the assumption that gendered ways of talking are indexically derived from the sex of the speaker (see also Barrett, this volume). In this related and still evolving field, the power-laden institution under primary examination is not masculinity but heterosexuality—an institution that maintains its integrity by excluding (and hence "queering") social subjects whose lives are not authorized by state-sanctioned structures of kinship, marriage, and family. But because heterosexuality is dependent on normative conceptualizations of both femininity and masculinity for its articulation, ideologies of "women's speech" and "men's speech" are very much at issue in both in-group and out-group expressions of queer subjectivity. Lakoff's definition of "women's language," unabashedly bound up with a variety of social groups rarely discussed in linguistic literature, set into motion a fervor of academic interest in language, power, and marginality. It is a testament to Lakoff's work that the social groups she once identified as linguistically marginalized are now being studied ethnographically in their own right, as members of localized communities whose "place" is continuously negotiated through language practice.

NOTE

Some of the ideas expressed in this essay appear in slightly different form in Hall 2003 as part of a more comprehensive discussion of the concept of marginality in language and gender research. I am grateful to Mary Bucholtz for helping me recontextualize that discussion for the current volume. I would also like to express my gratitude to my advisor and mentor Robin Lakoff, who inspired my own work in ways I can only hint at here.

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