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In a recent article on male-female communication, John Pfeiffer reports on what he discreetly calls "the conversational gap" between the sexes. The studies he reviews found that in inter-gender conversations men make 96 percent of all interruptions and almost always succeed in initiating conversations, whereas women pose 70 percent of the questions and fail to initiate conversation 64 percent of the time. Even granting a considerable margin of error, these findings indicate a serious inequity concerning the power to speak and to be heard.

Contrary to Pfeiffer's assertion that no "workable" theory exists which could account for these discrepancies, feminists understand these to be part and parcel of man's exclusion of woman from culture. In an article written five years prior to Pfeiffer's, Dorothy Smith elaborates an insightful (and, I think, workable) theory of this process of exclusion which permeates all social practices, including speech practices. According to Smith, "the concerns, interests, experiences forming "our" culture are those of men in positions of dominance whose perspectives are built on the silence of women (and of others)."

Moreover, as both sexes tend to see this distribution of power as natural, it often goes unnoticed and unquestioned. Yet of the large percentage of questions women ask, one persistently returns: Why do we maintain this silence?

While our silence is quite capable of making itself "heard" (it has a power of its own), it has no meaning when considered apart from our power to speak. Thus, with all due respect to the vast amount of energy currently devoted to the question of language theories and textual politics, I would like to consider the question of a politics of speaking. In my view, our preoccupation with the status of the subject who speaks (is it centred or decentered? conscious or unconscious? whole or split?) occludes the important question of gender. But this question of the
gender identity of the speaking subject can be no matter of indifference for anyone investigating the politics of speaking. Similarly, that which distinguishes our two genders (let us acknowledge they exist, if only problematically) cannot simply be reduced to an abstract symbolic logic whereby one is not the other. The appeal to such a logic seems to me to mask the power dynamic I would examine, given that it is always the female subject who is defined as "non-male" and never the other way around. While I believe it is essential that we question why, how and in whose interests this occurs, no amount of wishful thinking or denial is going to change it. In other words, while I do not appreciate this negative, cultural definition of my gender as non-male, I think it is crucial to recognize its implications.

One of the common beliefs contributing to the trivialization of feminist concerns is the belief that women's oppression is a "mainly psychological" phenomenon that we can somehow transcend. The advantage of this belief is that it can remain oblivious to the power which structures relations between men and women, and to the actual social practices which reinforce women to positions of inferiority. To draw an analogy, we do not say the relationship between oppressors and oppressed that the former is not the latter. Instead, we insist on the interdependency of the two terms and on the perpetuation of their qualitative difference, given the structure of an exploitative system. I raise this example of exploitation not to suggest that Marxism is the answer for feminism, but to compare capitalism and patriarchy. By patriarchy I understand a system of male domination whereby men are sexually, socially, economically and politically privileged. Gender equality is not a reality. The fact that some women exploit some men, and that some men comprehend the inequality from which they benefit does not reveal patriarchy to be fictitious, just as the worker who manipulates the system to his/her own advantage and the "enlightened" employer do not thereby challenge capitalism. I also make this comparison because often those who understand the exploitative nature of capitalism fail to recognize the equally exploitative nature of patriarchy.

What does this have to do with women's speech in an academic context? Needless to say, male academics have not been freed from blindness to privilege by virtue of having acquired a few degrees. On the contrary, the educational process has probably contributed to their myopia, as well as to that of women. The relative isolation of the university community, plus the rhetoric of equal opportunity and intellectual freedom, lead us to believe we are immune to the gender inequality which pervades "the rest of society". Thus women are granted the power to compete in the academic marketplace of "free speech" providing we speak the discourse instituted by men. Such a discourse necessarily embodies a masculine perspective and reflects a masculine experience of the world. Insofar as academic discourse institutes and valorizes a masculine perspective, it excludes and ignores a feminine perspective. Smith describes the situation as follows:

In the educational system at all levels, and in all aspects, women have access and participate so that they may be present as subordinates, as marginal. Their training and education ensure that at every level of competence and leadership there will be a place for them which is inferior and subordinate to the positions of men. What I would question here is not the relationship between patriarchy and academic discourse (academic discourse is patriarchal both in form and in substance), but the effects of such a discourse on our ability to speak. When women learn to adopt a male perspective as our own or to retreat into silence, we remain complicit with this patriarchal discourse and help to render the politics of speaking invisible. However, both of these positions are understandable given the consequences of speaking from another perspective.

It is through my own experience, and not through reading empirical studies that I have become aware of the difficulties of speaking as a woman within the university. With the help of a few examples, I would like to clarify this problem which remains obscure and unspoken. Tedium as it may appear to some readers, I employ personal examples here because this is where feminist theory begins. One does not arrive at a different politics of speaking without having developed a critical understanding of the situation which confronts us at present. The first set of examples illustrates two of the ways in which women's speech is interrupted. The second set describes how women's speech is trivialized and dismissed when it challenges a masculine, institutionalized discourse.

Last fall I was speaking in a seminar group of about 25 women when a woman barged into the room and demanded directions to a nearby office. She did not knock, nor did she wait until I had finished my sentence, she simply demanded immediate attention, interrupting not only myself, but the entire group. After expressing my sympathy for her plight, I pointed out that she was disrupting our seminar and suggested she inquire elsewhere. She left without apologizing, slamming the door behind her.

The second example of interruption is more common and has occurred on numerous occasions. Basically, it involved myself and another woman discussing our work. A third person, in this case a female, interrupted our conversation mid-sentence and without apology to convey some piece of information to one of us. I mention these examples not to point out what some would consider bad manners, but to illustrate the point that women's speech is considered (by both genders) to be ultimately interruptible. What does this second example signify if not that two women talking together cannot possibly be saying anything important, certainly nothing that cannot be disrupted?

Women's speech is often devalued, disrupted and dismissed unless it legitimizes itself by taking place within a formal, institutional framework such as the lecture. Once placed in a position of authority, the female lecturer is granted the traditional male space in which to speak. Indeed, women who occupy this position often adopt masculine patterns of speech: an authoritative tone of voice, sentences free from qualifications, texts without questions. Needless to say, the ability to speak with certainty and self-confidence does affect the reception of one's ideas (which are then written down as truth), so we should not be surprised to hear women "speaking like men" in these situations. Perhaps a crucial element of women's education involves learning to imitate masculine forms of speech and to unlearn our own. To make an unfashionable distinction, it is not only a masculine discourse we learn, each discipline has developed its own vocabulary, references and significant problems — but also a masculine mode of expressing our thoughts and ideas. Moreover,
voking a repetition of the same? Why do I sense in this tedious charade the narcissist's demand that I hold up the mirror to this truth? While I have no doubt that some men have experienced similar difficulties to those I describe, I do not believe this invalidates my argument, nor do I think it should be seen in the same light. Insofar as the experience of knowledge and concern particular to women have been excluded from the formation of discourse in every traditional discipline, our speech may be (but is not necessarily) an attempt to articulate these excluded aspects. Given a culture in which men's power to speak and to recognize each other through their speech has been founded on women's silence — our relegation to the "private" realm and our inability to achieve public recognition through our speech — the continued enforcement of this silence can be understood as a reinforcement of traditional male hegemony. Moreover, while I agree with Smith that one should not regard this as a conspiracy among men imposed upon women, I do think there is a tendency (shared by male and female academics alike) to be oblivious of the politics of speech. Just as women do not necessarily "intend" to be silent, men do not necessarily "intend" to silence us through the numerous and subtle means by which we are intimidated.

If women often refrain from assuming the position of questioner (in a public setting), we are at least good listeners. And we are better listeners than speakers because we have been limited to this role for the reasons I have been suggesting. Even though it has developed as the result of the exclusion of our speech, this ability to listen is a valuable skill: the inability to listen to others is the inability to hear and to recognize different perspectives.

For those who would dismiss my examples as merely particular, or exceptional, I will argue that they are not only important to me, but also for what they may signify for other women. When one woman's speech is denied, when her experience is denied, we are all implicated for we all live variations of that difference. The university provides no ideal speech community for us unless we deny that difference. If we deny our difference, adopting the masculine perspective as our own, we are rewarded. And what of our silence? It appears to take two forms: the silence of intimidation and a self-imposed silence. But who will hear the difference?

For those who wonder why women don't "speak up for themselves" I hope I have provided a possible answer. We have nothing to say to those who cannot or will not listen to a different voice. Yet there are spaces both within the university and without it where a different politics of speaking is emerging. What does this politics look like? The question deserves further thought. Its form and content have yet to be determined. But where women are speaking for and among themselves, the difference may be heard.

Notes
3. Dorothy Smith, "A Peculiar Euphomy: Women's Exclusion from Men's Culture", Women's Studies International, 1976. I would like to thank Dorothy Smith for bringing this paper and Pieterse's to my attention.
4. D. Smith, p. 5.

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