

THE SILENT PARADOX

THE POLITICS OF SPEAKING IN THE UNIVERSITY

Women are granted the power to compete in the academic marketplace of "free speech" providing we speak the discourse instituted by men.

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Illustrated by David Vereschagin

a recent article on male-female communication, John Pfeiffer reports on what he discreetly calls "the conversational gap" between the sexes.¹ 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.² 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.³ 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)."⁴ 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 decentred? 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 "not-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 one can remain oblivious to the power which structures relations between men and women, and to the actual social practices which relegate women to positions of inferiority. To draw an analogy, we do not say of the relation 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.⁵

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.

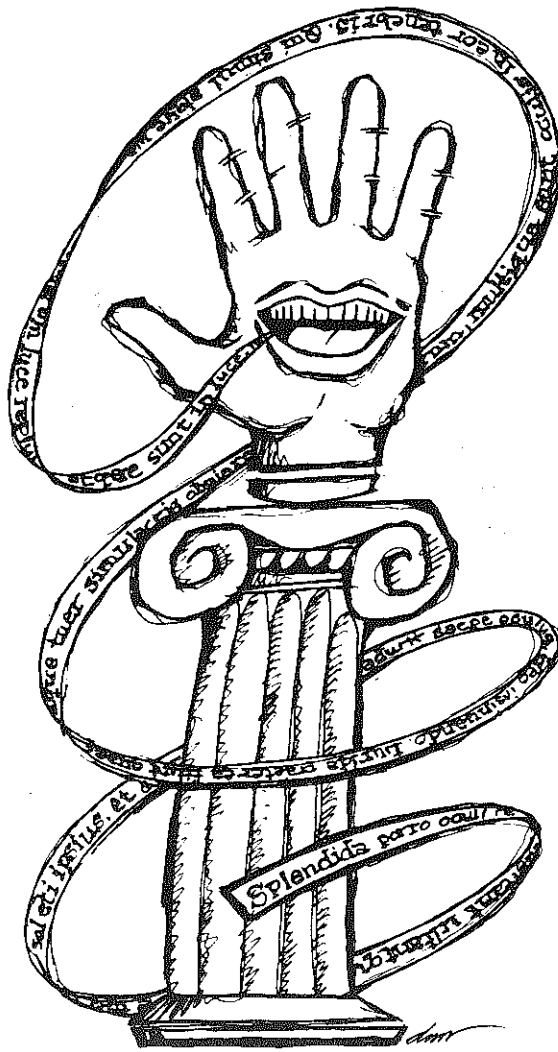
It is through my own experience, and not through reading empirical studies that I have become aware of the difficulties of speaking as a woman within the university. With the help of a few examples, I would like to clarify this problem which remains obscure and unspoken. Tedious as it may appear to some 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 apology, 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 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 legitimates 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,



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women's speech which fails to conform to the established male norm is devalued, perhaps because it challenges the academically-mandated discourse with its doubts, hesitations, qualifications and objections.

Of course, the difficulty which arises is that of distinguishing a masculine discourse from an institutional discourse in which we are all implicated. Insofar as institutional discourse is the formalization and universalization of a male perspective alone, the two are inseparable. Yet those who come to represent the power of this discourse also have the power to challenge it; women may partake of, but do not have a monopoly on, critical discourse. Nonetheless, challenging an institutionalized masculine discourse from a masculine perspective seems to me quite different from challenging that same discourse from a feminine perspective. To return to a more concrete level, I am trying to illustrate the manifestation of this difference in an important form of communication, our speech.

When women ask questions (and perhaps all our questions are, as Luce Irigaray discovered, "impertinent") they are often dismissed on the grounds of the questioner's misunderstanding or inadequate (different?) experience. In the following examples I have formalized my experience as a questioner in order to clarify the pattern so others may recognize it. The specific content was important, but I believe that gender was the decisive factor here.

Professor X had identified the centrality of factor Y to the thought of the author he was discussing. I thought factor Y was very similar to factor Z and asked him how he thought they differed. The answer involved a restatement of factor Y with the implication that I had misunderstood the first time. Not only was my question, which asked for comparison, not answered, but it was assumed that I had missed the point of the lecture. While I do not wish to imply that misunderstandings never occur, or that people understand concepts in a homogenous manner, I do think my question had already granted his point and was asking for elaboration and refinement. In retrospect, it is difficult to know whether my question was dismissed on the basis of form (woman challenges male authority) or on the basis of content (feminist perspective challenges masculine perspective). Indeed, this will remain impossible to discern as long as women's questions are not taken seriously.

Another example involved the evasion of a question because it was either not understood or because it challenged the lecturer's beliefs. In this case the speaker argued that the equation of what is historical (changeable) with what is universal (given) is oppressive. I agreed. However, he also seemed to argue that the particular historical content was irrelevant; the equation alone was important. My question, "Is the content (the historical element) not also a relevant factor?" was evaded by repeating the oppressive nature of the equation with additional examples. Clearly the content was not considered important, nor was my question. The attempt to open a space for discussion of this issue was foreclosed just as the different experiences women seek to express through, with and in spite of language are shut off, banished, silenced.

Were these two strategies of dismissing my questions — the refusal to discuss the new concept introduced, and the unwillingness to entertain a critique of one's position — symptomatic of the speakers' desire to exclude difference from their discourse? Why is it that my questions, which came from another perspective, succeeded only in pro-

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 truths?

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, knowledge and concerns particular to women have been excluded from the traditional discipline, our speech may be (but is not necessarily) an excluded aspect. 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,⁶ I do think there is a femality (shared by male and female academics alike) to be oblivious of the politics of speaking. 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 hear and to recognize different perspectives.

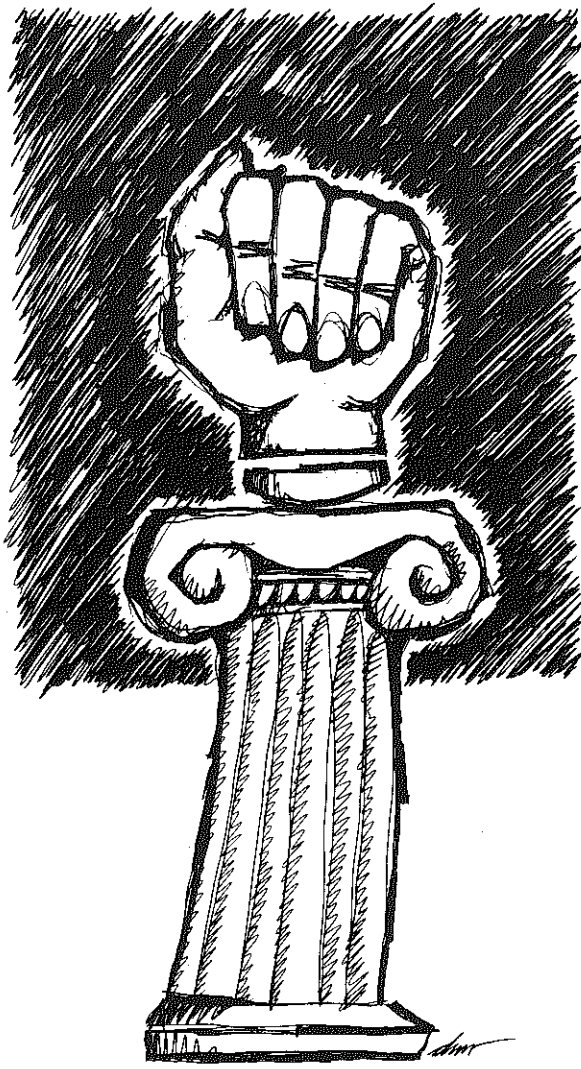
For those who would dismiss my examples as merely particular, or exceptional, I will argue that they are not only important to me, but also for what they may signify for other women. When one woman's speech is devalued, when her experience is denied, we are all implicated for we all live variations of 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

1. John Pfeiffer, "Girl Talk-Boy Talk", *Science* '85, February 1985, p.63.
2. Pfeiffer, pp.58-59.
3. Dorothy Smith, "A Peculiar Eclipsing: Women's Exclusion from Man's Culture", *Women's Studies Int. Quart.*, 1978. I would like to thank Dorothy Smith for bringing this paper and Pfeiffer's to my attention.
4. D. Smith, p.2.
5. Smith, p.13.
6. Smith, p.12.

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