A FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF SOCIOLINGUISTICS

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1. Introduction

Feminist and sociolinguistic scholarship are both very large areas of study--even if, as suggested below, the overlaps could be made considerable. Therefore, a feminist critique of sociolinguistics in short essay form may seem irresponsible, too much content for too little space. (Acknowledging this, my original title was "A Feminist Critique of Sociolinguistics: in which a woman gives an entire world view and provides a basis for understanding language in every area of our lives--political, cultural, economical, and spiritual.") However, my actual attempt here is only to outline some problems and a solution, with details to come from future studies.

Sociolinguistics--as a term and a discipline--provided a label, a home, and resources when, in the early 1970s no one discipline would take feminist language scholars in, and after we insisted we were no longer going to be taken in by traditional language studies. Sociolinguistics provided a place where we could ask questions about the attitudes toward and restrictions on women's speech, when, in the early 1970s, we could find almost no published information on that topic. Under the label of sociolinguistics, ethnography of speaking, conversational analysis, and ethnography, people were doing quite varied language studies. (See John Gumperz and Dell Hymes, eds. [1972] for an indication of that variety).

There seems to have been progress. Some researchers were most interested in linking discrete social and linguistic variables (e.g., tables of frequency use of certain phonemes from speakers of differing social-economic classes). This research, as exemplified by the work of William Labov and Joshua Fishman, was often rigorous and revealing work. Other researchers were doing analyses of short passages of conversation to reveal norms of interaction. Increasingly in the 1970s sociolinguists studied language within some setting or institution--e.g., classroom, courtroom, family.

The field was full of descriptions, and sometimes explanations of the relationship of language and social structure. Feminists were interested in descriptions, explanations and transformation of social life, which always made our work look more suspect than that of those researchers who didn't make it explicit what they wanted from the speech and lives they studied. (I say speech because there has been little attention in sociolinguistics to literacy, writing, and publishing [Muriel Schulz 1984]). However, people identifying themselves as sociolinguists seemed, at least initially, to accept, indeed welcome variation in topics and methodology. (See Barrie Thorne and Nancy Henley, eds. [1975] and the updated Barrie Thorne et al., eds. [1983]).

The field does not seem as exciting these days. While twelve years ago there was general delight about the possibilities of sociolinguistic work, now there is general gloom about its actualities. It now appears that the prevalence and problems of the taxonomical approach, which describes static features of social domains (Philip Smith et al. 1983), and the focus on technical statistical tools bring about a mismatch rather than an alignment of sociolinguistic research and the concerns of individual speakers and the many linguistic problems of our countries.

There are other problems, discussed by many people, including some of the founding mothers and fathers of sociolinguistics. Much of the criticism deals with correlational quantitative studies which set up independent codings of behavior and social class and then try to express relationships by correlation coefficients. As Roger Fowler (1985) argues, there is an illusory egalitarianism in correlation sociolinguistics; the research does not recognize that some speech varieties are associated with prestige and authority and others with relative powerlessness (62). Norbert Dittmar (1983) is one of the critics who think that sociolinguists of the 1980s "are faced with disillusionment and the ruins of original dreams" (226). Concepts which were once fundamental for the aims and methods of sociolinguistics are now called into question. For example, he and others argue that the concept of speech community needs to be replaced by concepts of social and institutional networks. (Lesley Milroy [1980] provides excellent examples of network research). The empirical and theoretical studies on diglossia have proved inadequate. While research approaches such as conversational analysis and ethnomethodology do usefully assume a reciprocal process in the production of daily interaction and social order, they seldom deal with power or social change, of interest to many sociolinguists. Criteria in language study for defining social

class are arbitrary, varying according to the ideological positions of the researchers. (Patricia Nichols [1983, 1984] and Ruth King [1985] have outlined some of the major problems with the way social variables are defined and used). While the researchers in the Ann Arbor Black English case were very conscious of the impact of their studies and statements upon school and children and their families (William Labov 1982; Geneva Smitherman, ed. 1981), too often researchers are oblivious to the questions and needs of the people they call "subjects" or "categories of speakers".

Criticism comes from also from specific fields of sociolinguistics. Writing about research on Chicano bilingualism (which has consisted primarily of "meaningless" descriptive studies of language variation and language shift), Rosaura Sanchez (1983) criticizes the fragmented sociolinguistic studies which tell us very little about linguistic variation in the life of Chicanos; she also stresses the importance of the analyst's interpretive competence. What is needed, she writes, is not more quantitative analysis of variables, but a theoretical framework which can explain the relation between verbal interaction and macrosocietal factors. This requires studies which consider the impact of a changing economy on Mexican immigration, and social mobility, as well as knowledge of interaction in intimate and informal situations, and knowledge of the attitudes of Chicanos and others toward use of the Spanish language (v, vi, 92).

It is not that sociolinguistics is in trouble and all other social studies are doing very well, thanks. (We have, of course, numerous critiques of other social sciences [e.g., Paula Treichler et al. ed. 1985; Angela Miles and Geraldine Finn, eds. 1982]). Geneva Smitherman (1983), while critical of language researchers who are content with studies of transformational deletion or copula deletions, reminds us to consider the importance of the work done with the language of disenfranchised people--Blacks, Native Americans, Chicanos, and women in all other social groups. Sociolinguistics even as it has become an established field of language study--often more interested in methodology than in social structures and inequities--has not yet locked out the more unorthodox scholars looking for a home and support. Because sociolinguists are committed to the study of speech diversity and change, sociolinguistics is at least theoretically open to evidence of cultural differences and disturbances.

Many sociolinguists would argue that the field has experienced progress. They would likely argue that we now know much more about language variety and about ways of studying language variety, that

only a fool would want to go back to the language studies of, say, 1970. I know too much about the history of women's lives to believe in progress as a general governing principle of our lives. (Dorothy Smith [1978] and Dale Spender [1982] show us that women's lives are governed by repetitions that cycle through men's "progress".) Progress implies advancement. Certainly changes are made--with differing effects on different social groups--and sometimes we seem to have very useful insights. But, if one asks for whom they are useful, and for whom they are advancements, then progress seems a much less definitive word. However, I do treasure, use, and contribute to academic openness where I can find it, in this case by discussing some of the present sociolinguistic problems, and a solution.

2. Proposal

From our thosands of studies we have thousands of scattered bits of sociolinguistic data. The proposal is that we plan for the next decade to use gender as the central, organizing focus for the study of language. Gender has, as they say, something for everyone. It has class. It has sex. It also has race, age, history, geography, variety of occupations, work experience, linguistic creativity, conversation strategies, institutions, women's studies, men's studies, theoretical frameworks, native speakers, mass movements and social significance. Discussions of gender (the social construction of males and females) don't need to exclude anyone. (Well, this takes some reconsideration for some people who think of gender as meaning female). Issues of language and gender are germinal, seminal, and ovular to everyone.

As Dell Hymes writes,

> The pursuit of the one focus [gender] could illuminate the relationships among all the various facets of linguistic diversity: ethnic, regional, occupational, and class. In the absence of a clear model of the society as a whole, the pursuit of one dimension as far as it can take us may be the best strategy for gaining a comprehension of the whole. Every ethnic and racial group, region, class, and most occupations have women members; every normal woman is a member of some ethnic or racial group, a resident of some region, of some class background, with experience of some kind of work, and so also is every normal man. Such a focus on kinds of person might

> best integrate in comprehensible fashion the attributes that measurement and models tend to separate. (Hymes 1983:198-99)

Hymes makes this suggestion in a wide-ranging critique of sociolinguistics in the U.S. and then he moves on to other concerns. But what happens if we stay here and open up this suggestion? It's a Pandora Treasury which allows the mingling of some of the problems of sociolinguists with some of the possibilities in the air.

First, all the present areas of sociolinguistic study could benefit from such a focus. For example (from a list by M.A.K. Halliday 1977:14): macrosociology of language, diglossia, language planning (a focus on gender would help us see all the unofficial language planning going on all the time--in schools and other institutions), code switching, language development in children and adults, functional theories of the linguistic system, educational sociolinguistics, ethnography of speaking. At present, there are few connections made between these study areas. If researchers focused on gender, we could see connections.

But even more importantly, many topics which are dismissed or unseen now become important theoretical and practical problems if gender is used as a focus. Here, I suggest only a few of the benefits of using this focus.

2.1 The Inequality of Languages

While most language scholars and anthropologists are fond of stating that there is no "primitive" language--that every language is of approximately equal value for the needs of its speakers--Dell Hymes has written from time to time about the issue of inequality among speakers. He wrote in 1973,

> Yet every language is an instrument shaped by its history and patterns of use, such that for a given speaker and setting it can do some things well, some clumsily, and others not intelligibly at all. (73)

And more recently, he has written,

> ...one of the central tenets of the liberalism of modern linguistics has been the essential equivalence in use of

> all languages studied by linguists, despite the abundant empirical evidence to the contrary. (1983:219)

He asks us to consider the possibility that for many speakers, much daily speech is not a satisfying, rewarding expression of experiences and identities, but a kind of verbal passing. A language, like other social constructions, becomes shaped by history and by the goals of some of its dominant speakers so that it might come to present very real handicaps for other speakers who have less control over who can speak, when and where, with what code and with what results. Hymes suggests that linguists refuse to deal with this issue, by denying that such inequality exists. Norbert Dittmar (1983) similarly writes,

> To my knowledge, there are almost no studies on the adequacy of codes or subcodes for a set of communicative needs. And I do not know of any studies concerned with the "feeling of well-being" in a language or language variety. (227)

These statements tells us a great deal about what these sociolinguists have read and count as studies. Certainly, a great deal of language study by men does present language as primarily a resource for its speakers, while avoiding issues of inequality and exploitation. (E.g.: In a review of A Feminist Dictionary the novelist Anthony Burgess, criticizing the creation and publication of a book of women's definitions, writes, "Language is arbitrary and inert, as Saussure taught us, and is probably bisexual" [The Observer 28 Nov. 1985].) But also certainly there is now a large body of information dealing with the problems that norms of English structure and use pose for women and minorities. The large bibliographies in Barrie Thorne et al., eds. (1983) and in issues of Women and Language [News] tell of the intensity and extent of the problem. Hymes says that there is no analysis of costs and benefits of different forms of communication (1983:220). Many of the people writing about this topic do not use (for some good reasons) the economic cost/reward framework he proposes, but they are writing about the many ways the English language binds them, and about ways of reducing the restrictions of the language by revising the language.

Women--Black, Hispanic, white, Native American--have spoken about the problems which standardized language poses, including inadequate lexicon for expression of experiences, sexist grammar rules, and rejection of coinages and metaphors used by women. One way the diversity of voices is hidden is through the enforcement of a

literary canon. In chronicling minority writers' struggle for authenticity and authority, Muriel Schulz (1984) writes:

> [The canon] survives not entirely on its own merits, but because an educational establishment accepts it, curries it (translating what is thought worthy, annotating what is thought obscure), and transmits it (teaching subsequent generations what it means and why it is worthy). (207)

Others point out that working-class writers may value different types of literacy than do middle-class writers and speakers in the same geographical area (Shirley Brice Heath 1983). Judy Grahn (1978) argues that working-class English is less acceptable in modern American literature than are "swearwords, class snobbery, racist and sexist portrayals of people, outright lies...[T]o express workingclass writing as workingclass people do it, that is considered: illiterate. Not-literate, not able to read and write, with an underlying implication that it also means not able to think." (9)

. Sociolinguists pride themselves on being non-judgmental, on not ruling on the superiority or inferiority of ways of speaking and writing, especially when dealing with Black English. But if they are not women nor minorities, and if they do not perceive gaps between their own reality and that of others, then they aren't likely to find those differences nor appreciate those which are pointed out to them.

Clearly, speakers' ability and freedom to alter the language they hear and read in order to further their linguistic, cognitive, and social development (and those are not, of course, exclusive categories) are important in determining to what degree language pre-exists its speakers or is open to alterations by speakers.

2.2 Developmental Studies of Speech Play

A focus on gender would also encourage developmental studies of female and male linguistic creativity. (There are some reported sex differences, in English speaking cultures and others, in the use of nursery rhymes, riddling, and games [Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1976:186]; however, I am most interested here in word creation). New words and new definitions are created all the time. Children create words. Advertising writers and headline writers create neologisms. College students create new slang expressions used, for example, to reference and to evaluate drinks,

their courses, and each other. Some writers complain about the number of words created by adults and given currency in the mass media. One critic, Willard R. Espy, writes:

> The language explosion has become ridiculous....Let us begin throwing unwanted words out into the snow to perish, as the Spartans did with their girl babies.
>
> Better still, let us carry out a verbal vasectomy on all writers. (1972:83)

This choice of words to describe the corrective surgery he wants is apt. Girls and boys, women and men, create new nouns, verbs, adverbs, and adjectives, and use the old in new ways. But the linguistic innovations of girls and boys and of women remain, for the most part, private--seldom read and heard by more than a few. If almost all the words in our dictionaries were presented as the creations of, say, engineers, others would, I hope, call attention to this phenomenon and its implications for those named by the engineers as non-engineers. What are the implications for women and men that one social group determines the words and concepts for both social groups? As we discovered when doing the research for A Feminist Dictionary (Cheris Kramarae and Paula Treichler 1985), women have been using linguistic skills to create words for their experiences and to refine definitions pushed on them. But their linguistic work has certainly not been recognized by most grammarians and lexicographers--and therefore it has not been available to most women and men. Yet etymologists of the English language use "we" and "Americans" interchangeably in their texts, ignoring the institutionalization of only men's uses of language. Until now it has been the men's contributions that become public and sometimes part of the standard language, to be learned by everyone who wants to do well on language tests--those of school and of business and social interaction. Now, there are several books available which discuss, using new terminology, the inadequacy of the English language for women speakers (e.g., Susan Griffin 1978; Mary Daly 1978; Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua, eds. 1981; and see examples in Cheris Kramarae and Paula Treichler 1985). Insofar as the words and concepts of a language impose a structure on people's thinking and on their interaction, the English language has not served equally the needs of women and men. Until now, this information has been considered more a part of women's studies than of men's studies or traditional language studies.

A focus on gender would help us understand what institutions, and whose values and style are involved in determining the shape of the language. We need a polylogue to interrupt the androcentric monologue of centuries. A general focus on gender by many researchers would teach us a lot about speakers' and writers' "feelings of well being" with the languages they use.

2.3 The Meaning of Sociolinguistic Variables

Another value of a focus on gender would be to show us how very variable traditional sociolinguistic variables are. In this paper I use gender in the currently accepted way of emphasizing the social aspects of the female/male division. Most sociolinguistic studies use the word sex and consider sex and race as set, at birth, for life. We treat race and gender as pre-cultural, natural divisions. If we focus on gender as our way into language study, we will call into question all the classic sociolinguistic variables. Gender, for example, is man- and woman-made. The divisions and their meanings are constructed through language and other organized social systems. There are, of course, biological differences at birth (often called sex differences), but the divisions (not necessarily as binary as the English language insists) and their meanings are not formed in utero. In much sociolinguistic work, sex is used as a pre-linguistic variable, rather than itself a problematic concept whose meaning is established through cultural conventions and through interaction.

Some of the work focusing on the dynamics of interaction has been done in particular settings. For example, Barrie Thorne (1982), John Edwards and Howard Giles (1984), and many others have found that focusing on language in the classroom makes it possible to study as social constructs class, sex, and race--which are too often considered as god-given features which, possessed of bodies, walk into a sociolinguistic study and later walk out to go, unchanged, into someone else's sociolinguistic study in another setting. None of the gods, nor Marx, has given us an adequate explanation of how gender is constructed. Many feminists have, however, written accessible, theoretical frameworks which can aid us in studying how language interaction in, for example, institutions of education helps construct gender. For example, working with a focus on gender we are more likely to see the connections between what happens in talk in the classroom and what happens to males and females in other situations and locations (See the bibliography in

Paula Treichler and Cheris Kramarae [1983] for a lengthy list of articles and books used in making some of these connections).

There are many references in sociolinguistic work about "everyday talk," which is evidently set aside from talk which occurs in situations or settings not very familiar to the researcher. It is very difficult to understand what language scholars mean by "everyday talk" but it often appears to mean fragments of conversations (out of context) which seem to be familiar to many, middle-class speakers. Focusing on gender (in its many forms and across situations) would change the limiting conception of a term "everyday talk", which sounds deceivingly generalized.

We have no general model of society or of everyday speech in North America cultures. Focusing on gender would help us trace some speech threads woven into and across institutions and events.

2.4 Conversation Analysis

Another advantage: Pursuing language study through a focus on gender-related differences in speech would provide benefits for conversation analysts who do micro studies of interaction passages, usually concentrating on the shared norms in seemingly private social relationships (e.g., family members, clerk and customer, etc.). This work has told us a lot about rules of conversation. Yet, it seems a mistake to study conversations as if they can be extracted (and all threads cut) from their context. Failure to deal with the social structure and power relationships in which they are embedded results in inaccurate descriptions of interaction. Power relationships are important components of the rules of conversation. Noëlle Bisseret Moreau (1984), focusing on gender and class, has shown how they are stated constantly throughout French discourse. French male and female students mention in a variety of ways--through spatial metaphors, reference to others, verb form--their class and gender status. She argues gender is a major facet of social organization in our cultures and thus is a major facet of discourse.

2.5 Tyranny in the Classroom

Another advantage: A focus on gender could encourage discussions of the androcentrism of grammar and linguistic instruction. Mention of androcentrism does not make its way into the most prestigious

publications. Yet, we know that in the analysis of language we can never get away from the meanings and pragmatic implications of who do the studies and what data they used, and we know that issues of gender are involved in who does the study and what data are used.

Julia Penelope Stanley (1978) has described the process and problem of androcentrism in 20th century language studies; she has written of the ways in which men's involvement in and women's exclusion from the development of the lexicon and the grammar have affected the direction of language theory and language change. Androcentrism is also present in the way linguistics is taught. Pat Parker, a student in one of my classes, kept track of the data used in linguistic analysis and argumentation used in the other classes she took. She heard, in linguistics classes, many sentences which spoke of human violence. One series of eleven examples began with the sample sentence pair "Professor Arid must stop assaulting coeds. Otherwise he'll be arrested." The subsequent series of example sentences all required listeners to retain the same idea of aggression in order to follow the argument. Parker writes that although the student is to pay attention to the syntactic relationships in the series of sentences, in order to do so she must attend to the meaning of the sentence. She asks us to consider an alternative sequence of examples which begin with "Professor Arid must stop castrating male students. Otherwise, she'll be arrested." Such an example might cause male students to shift a bit uneasily in their chairs, no matter what the discourse connectives being illustrated.

The androcentrism extends to whose speech is studied, with what methodology and with whose interpretation. Other problems:

2.6 Racial Supremacy, Heterosexism, Ageism

Another advantage of a focus on gender: If done well it will be critical of the racial supremacy, classism, heterosexism, ageism of much masculist and feminist language scholarship. A study of the interaction of these issues in language structure and practice is fundamental if we are truly interested in the creation of a society based on mutual respect and freedom, rather than on contempt for differences (Ann Russo 1985). These should be major issues because we need to understand racism, classism, ageism, and homophobia in order to understand social structure and the meanings of language. Many of us white women who have tried to focus on gender have been learning about how we have been doing it wrong. With women of

color we share a common interest in examining sexist assumptions in language studies. But unlike women and men of color we have not studied well the ways multiple oppressions (let's not label them "variables") of race, class, sexual preference, cultural background, and national origin affect language use. Lorraine Bethel (1979) titles a poem "WHAT CHOU MEAN WE, WHITE GIRL? or THE CULLUD LESBIAN FEMINIST DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE (DEDICATED TO THE PROPOSITION THAT ALL WOMEN ARE NOT EQUAL, I.E., IDENTICALLY OPPRESSED)."

Patricia Nichols, studying language of women and men in black and white communities, writes that "women's language" is a myth. Women "make choices in the context of particular social networks rather than as some generalized response to the universal condition of women." Her work tell us what we know if asked, but too often ignore--that the speech and writing of women and men "are always constrained by the options available to them, and these options are available always and only in the context of a group which shares rules for the use and interpretation of language" (1983: 66). Ruth King (1985), reviewing studies of language change in several cultures, shows us just how variable women's (and men's) linguistic behavior is. For example, generalizations, made in the 1960s and 1970s, about women's supposed role in the vanguard of language shift have not been supported by recent studies that pay attention to the context of women's, and men's, linguistic behavior.

Gender doesn't mean the same thing in all speech communities. Researchers of white middle-class U.S. speech communities emphasize a clear asymmetry between men's and women's relationship to language; however, in Black U.S. communities gender differences are not the same, nor as clear-cut. Marsha Stanback (1985) points out that while many white middle class women are struggling for the right to work and to salaries in the public sphere, most Black women have been required to work both in their own homes and in the homes and institutions of whites. She notes that some language scholars have written of the Black women's tendency to "verbally contend" with Black men. Stanback writes that "women who communicate as equals with men may appear contentious, dominant or even 'verbally castrating' to researchers who are accustomed to encountering more submissive female speakers." (182)

Because gender has not been considered the core of language study but, rather, to most, a marginal curiosity, the word has come too often to mean white woman/women, as race has come to mean, in my part of the U.S., Black. If gender becomes the focus of language research, we will radically transform interpretations of speech

and should be on our way to a more inclusive and thus adequate knowledge base for theory-building. At the moment, there is often discussion of which, gender or race, is the more telling, or stronger, variable for study. They are presented as competing variables. Discussion of horizontal comparison and competition has gone on, subterraneously, from relatively few researchers, while most sociolinguistic study has virtually ignored these "token" studies and discussions. Writing about the interconnections between racism, sexism, heterosexism and homophobia, James S. Tinney (1983) notes, "It does no good to compare oppressions for the purpose of proving that one group is more oppressed than another. Every oppression is like some other and unlike some other" (4). Barbara Smith (1983) points out that during the 70s and 80s, political lesbians of color have been astute about the necessity for studying the connections between oppressions and about avoiding building hierarchies. Florynce Kennedy says, "Sure there are differences in degree, but we've got to stop comparing wounds and go after the system that does the wounding" (in Gloria Steinem 1973:89). We need to understand the relationship of all kinds of oppressions, including ageism, which differs for women and men.

If we make gender the focus of language study there is the danger that most white researchers will continue to either ignore the differences among diverse groups of speakers, or to compare the speech of other social groups as deviations from the speech of whites. Yet if gender is taken as the focus of sociolinguistic work, our primary concern could be with illuminating relationship among widespread and persistent hierarchies of wealth, power and speaking rights based on race, ethnicity, region, sexual preference, religion, occupation, and class of speakers. This work should help us see and hear that gender doesn't have a constant salience across situations and social groups.

2.7 Connections of private and public

Another example of the value of focusing on gender is that this action encourages us to cross situations and settings and see linkages where divisions have been inserted.

In the illustration I offer, focusing on gender provides links between compliments, and verbal and physical violence. Theoretical and empirical studies of compliments come from researchers in several disciplines. Penelope Brown and Steven Levinson (1978) discuss compliments as politeness strategy. Nessa Wolfson (1984),

and Wolfson and Janes Manes (1980), working with hundreds of examples of reported compliments, define compliments as expressions of admiration, approval and encouragement, and note that people in positions of authority, usually males, have the right to guide and judge the behavior of subordinates, usually females. Wolfson and Manes, and Mark Knapp and his colleagues (1984), find that men are more likely than are women to receive compliments about performance--about how well they've done their job. Women receive more compliments in general, and more compliments about their appearance and attire.

Knapp et al. (who use status of the givers and receivers of the compliments as a variable in their study, but without reporting how status was defined or determined) note that women give other women many compliments on appearance, and suggest females are as responsible as males are for perpetuating a preoccupation with women's appearance and attire.

But there are other considerations here. We need to consider the content, the context, and the meaning women and men assign to the compliments. Men are more likely to have homophobia worries than are women, so men may be hesitant to offer other males compliments on their appearance and attire. Further, what the speaker might call a compliment, that is, an expression of "admiration, approval, or encouragement," might be called that or might be called an insult by the one to whom the words or noises are directed. Women walking in public areas are more likely than are men to get strange compliments (or insults--depending upon who is evaluating the remarks). Most studies of compliments are based on remarks made by acquaintances or at least by people who are talking together. These studies reveal important information about compliment giving. But if we follow a study of gender and language, and look at the types of evaluations which women and men receive from people in the office and factory and home, and those they receive when in public areas (all the while gathering information on behavior and speakers' explanations of behavior) we find the links between compliments, street remarks and physical assaults. For each, there are elements of the unexpected. They are more likely to come from males to females than vice versa. They can occur at any time in an office conversation; we cannot control or anticipate the timing. The remarks often make the receiver feel uneasy, unsure of how to respond (Cheris Kramarae in press). They can not be returned as easily, and safely, by women.

Many men and women disagree about their meanings. In a study of the meaning of the street remarks (Elizabeth Kissling and Cheris

Kramarae 1985), we found that some white women and many white men think of street remarks as compliments. But most recognized that these compliments hold the hint of physical violence. Clothing is thought by some to be a major cause of compliments at work and of street remarks. (E.g., "If you dress like a whore, expect to be treated as a whore.") Some people think street remarks an invasion of privacy, others as pragmatic action. (E.g., "Whistling at somebody can be viewed as an act of admiration. How else would you show your admiration for some magnificently gorgeous female who is a stranger to you?") Many comments point to women's fear of assault and rape. Even males who encourage women to accept whistles and street remarks as compliments offer cautions. For example, the same man who argues that men have a right to whistle also states, "If the dude does anything more than that, I say floor the guy." Another says, "If being whistled at in broad daylight makes a woman afraid then it's her problem," but later says that he would find whistling offensive if it happened when a woman could legitimately feel threatened. What makes a threat or a woman's fear "legitimate"? Is it the time of day? The location? Does it matter if it happens at a busy intersection or in a quiet park? (One woman whose words we quote in our study stated, initially, that she had learned not to let street remarks bother her. However, several months later, she was physically attacked and in her comments about that horrible experience, she clearly tied together street remarks about her appearance and the attack, adding "And before somebody asks--no, I wasn't dressed provocatively in any way, nor was I wiggling my hips to attract random strangers" [Kissling and Kramarae 1985]).

The point is that many women and some men hear street remarks as connected to other experiences in women's lives which threaten their dignity, privacy and safety. Some men mentioned, with resentment, receiving street remarks about their appearances from men they thought were gay. Heterosexuals called <u>those</u> remarks bothersome and nasty speech violations. Focusing on gender can help us understand the functions of compliments throughout society.

3. <u>A Tentative Set of Guidelines</u>

Gender in sociolinguistic work has usually meant mention of <u>white women</u>. What is proposed here for the study of sociolinguistics is a general study of <u>gender</u>, meaning the study of the speech and writing of all women and men in the culture. For my own use--to help make the kinds of revisions of methodology and questions

discussed above--I have set down a series of questions to ask of any study.

1. How do the women/men identify themselves? What are their social alliances, identities, goals?

2. What do I know about the political and economic inequalities of the women/men? What are their social, political, and economic resources? What do I know about the norms and expectations of speakers? What are the constraints for researchers, in this particular situation?

3. What are the traditional attitudes toward the speech of the women/men studied?

4. What has the feminist literature said about this or about related topics? (Feminist theory is the only theoretical tradition to consider gender a basic category of analysis). What is the applicable Black, Latin, lesbian, and gay literature?

5. How am I related to the women and/or men whose speech/writing I'm studying? Why have I chosen these speakers in this situation?

6. What are the implications of my study results for women's language use? For men's language use? (Many researchers who study Black English are already practiced in asking questions about implications of their study results. We need to do the same when we discuss other oppressed groups).

7. What sex stereotypes, and class, race and age assumptions are involved? How were the perspectives of white women and men, and women and men of color incorporated?

8. How would this project be different if it involved only women/only men, or both women and men?

I mentioned in the introduction my unease with the male concept of progress. Of course, there is change in our lives and in our studies. We have some valuable new methods and techniques for studying speech and writing. For example, the refinement of statistical techniques, the tape recorder, the video recorder, and the concern with naturally occurring speech mean our language studies can include details with more accuracy than ever before. However, we have not necessarily made great changes in what kind of speech and writing is thought worthy of attention. Men's street remarks to

women have been discussed for years, by women. (I have found discussion of this "vexation" which is "a matter of great importance to all women" in 19th and 20th century "women's magazines.") But they are not discussed, as problems, in sociolinguistic literature. (Some sociolinguists have been interested in documenting the street talk of Black males, particularly the ways they define and categorize their mothers during rap sessions, but while these researchers try to be sensitive to racist attitudes, they do not seem to be sensitive to the sexist attitudes displayed in the games).

In A Feminist Dictionary we quote several women who have discussed the concept of progress. Dale Spender (1982) writes, "If it has any meaning it applies only to men" (30). Virginia Woolf (1938) writes that our lives are governed more by repetition than by progress:

> Almost the same daughters ask almost the same brothers for almost the same privileges. Almost the same gentlemen intone almost the same refusals for almost the same reasons. It seems as if there were no progress in the human race, but only repetition. (66)

Alice Walker, sceptical of the uses made of the concept progress, writes that "'White' progress is connected to centuries of unpaid labor of slaves" (163). She also writes that "'Progress' affects few. Only revolution can affect many" (1983:371).

With the written and voiced support of many, I encourage a focused use of gender in sociolinguistic work--not for the sake of progress, but for the health of sociolinguistics. It would be a linguistic revolution which could affect many women and men.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I thank Ann Russo for her helpful comments on an earlier draft.

This paper was originally delivered as the invited address at the ninth annual meeting of the Atlantic Provinces Linguistic Association, held at Saint Mary's University, Halifax, November 8-10, 1985.

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