

REVIEW

Language, the Sexes and Society, by Philip M. Smith (Series: Language in Society, 8), Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985, paper, vi, 211 pages, \$16.25, ISBN 0 631 12735 4.

The title of this book suggests that it could have been a valuable addition to what has in the past been a somewhat neglected area of sociolinguistics. Of all the possible groups in western society, the only one to which an individual is assigned without exception, and usually without choice, is that of sex. Even if gender identity is regarded as merely a social identification, and one which may vary considerably from individual to individual, nevertheless a specific gender identity is assigned to each individual, Smith's own doubts about the physiological basis for a straightforward dichotomous division notwithstanding. The examination of sex-related language traits, and the attempt to discover whether there is any inherent differentiation between the sexes in language, is of interest not merely for its own sake but in terms of future planning in fields such as education, employment, and so on.

Unfortunately, the work scarcely lives up to the promise of its title. The limitation of most of the discussion to the results of experiments carried out in English-speaking communities, and therefore to the possible relationship between sex and the English language, rather than language in general, cannot be considered a serious flaw, since the scope of the book must obviously be limited in any case by its size. However, there are so many other problems in the text that it is difficult for the reader to decide just what the intentions of the author were in writing this book, or where, if anywhere, its conclusions are supposed to lead.

The first few chapters are largely taken up by a survey of recent research in the general field, and some discussion of the implications of this research. Such a survey is, of course, useful to the general reader, or would be, if it were actually written for such a reader. But the tone of the discourse varies from formal to informal, occasionally descending to the patronizing. More significantly, while some elementary aspects of sociolinguistic methodology are explained in detail, in other cases no explanation is given at all, and the reader is apparently presumed to possess already whatever knowledge is required for an understanding of these passages.

Yet for a reader with such knowledge, the elementary explanations appearing elsewhere are surely unnecessary. It does not seem that this is a problem merely of editorial carelessness, for much of the

evidence suggests a more fundamental weakness than inefficient copy-editing.

Not that there is any dearth of evidence indicative of poor proofreading. There are far too many errors in spelling and punctuation for the text to be acceptable as a work of scholarship. More seriously, however, necessary information is sometimes omitted from tables, and there is a general inconsistency of presentation between different sections of the book, with subdivisions being titled in different ways and data sometimes being presented in varying forms. The summary of the author's own earlier work, given in Chapter 1, is an almost immediate indication of the extent and severity of the textual problems, for while similarities of phrasing suggest that the present passage is indeed a direct summary of the earlier publication, the summary itself is so careless that it is impossible to follow it clearly without recourse to the earlier work.

The pity of all this is that the central thesis of Language, the Sexes and Society, at least in so far as it relates to the reports given in Chapter 6 of experiments conducted by the author in Bristol, England, is of considerable interest, although even here the quality of reporting leaves much to be desired. While Smith tends to generalize without much regard for the limitations of the experiments themselves--the smallness of the samples, the restriction to a particular region, social class, and even age group--and also fails to give sufficient information concerning some of the selection processes used in the experiments, these weaknesses do not necessarily invalidate the results. Indeed, the small but significant correlation found between gender identity in listeners and the extent (and nature) of their discrimination on the basis of sex may be enough to make the book worth reading despite its many faults:

the results of these analyses suggest that listeners discriminate less between male and female speakers, perceive members of their own sex as less uniform, and members of the opposite sex as more uniform, as the strength of ingroup identity increases. (p. 134)

Whether this is in itself a sufficient reason for reading this book is perhaps debatable. The advice to Smith is that he should pay a great deal more attention in the future to editing and proofreading than he has apparently done in this volume. As far as Language, the Sexes and Society is concerned, it would

perhaps have made an acceptable monograph, if confined to Smith's own experiments; as a full-length book, it is merely confused.

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