Constructing Gender:

Social Practice in *Language and Gender*

Kyoko YAKUSHI

Introduction

Approaches to language and gender research have shifted as the field has developed during the past decades. Theoretical issues of dominance, difference, and diversity in gendered language use have been discussed extensively. In *Language and Woman's Place* (1975), Robin Lakoff claims that women's language is powerless and reflects women's subordinate position in society. Lakoff's speculations were based on anecdotal and personal data as a speaker rather than on empirical research. Various studies within the dominance framework with systematic observations followed with mixed results (Zimmerman and West, 1975; Kramer, 1977; O'Barr & Atkins, 1980; Fishman, 1980). The focus of the dominance framework has been to show how interaction between women and men reveals male dominance in society. In a study of the difference framework, Maltz and Borker (1982) argue that sex-differentiated rules of interpretation account for misunderstandings in adult cross-sex communication. Drawing on their research, Tannen (1990) in *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation,* demonstrates differences between the use of language by women and men. Tannen argues that women and men should acknowledge gender differences so that they will not misunderstand each other. While the dominance approach focuses on inequality as the cause of problems in male-female interaction, the difference approach emphasizes misunderstandings (Cameron, 1995). Both theories have yielded important insights into the nature of gender differences in language. Gender differentiation in language interacts in a complex way with other kinds of characterization in society, and both language and gender develop through people's participation in everyday social practice (Coates, 1993).

Language and gender research has shifted to analysis of the gendered significance of "discourse" and "performance." Emphasizing these shifts, Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet, pioneers of social constructionism in the field, demonstrate how language use in social practice is fundamental to language and gender analysis. In the following section, *Language and Gender* (2003) by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet with focus on social practice will be overviewed.

薬師京子（やくしきょうこ）：外国語学部英米語学科教授

Overview

Eckert and McConnell-Ginet in the first chapter focus on the relation between gender and biology, and introduce the concept of gender as a social construction. The authors state that "Sex is a biological categorization based primarily on reproductive potential, whereas gender is the social elaboration of biological sex" (p. 10) and illustrate how gender is constructed and developed throughout one's life. Gender development continues as people age, and they continue to learn to be men or women in different ways along with expectations in society (p. 30). The authors point out four fundamental principles: gender is learned; it is collaborative; it is not something we have, but something we do; and finally gender is asymmetrical (pp. 31-32). In this chapter, the authors also introduce the important notion of the gender order as "a system of allocation, based on sex-class assignment, of rights and obligations, freedoms and constraints, limits and possibilities, power and subordination" (p. 34). "Social practice" is explained as the term that indicates "human activity when emphasizing the conventional aspect of activity and its relation to social structure" (p. 50). These notions provide the basic concept of the book concerning the changing gender order and the place of language in gender practices.

Chapter two deals with the analysis of language and methodological issues in language and gender research. Concepts such as the speech community, communities of practice, and face are discussed, and also basic linguistic topics including morphology and phonology are explained. In "Analytic practice," the authors discuss past well-known studies of "interruptions" that men interrupt more than women. They cite James and Clarke's finding (1993) that "there is no evidence of gender differences in speakers' general rates of interruption" in the various studies of interruptions in the 25-year period (p. 84). They point out that stereotypes are "exaggerations with a purpose" (p. 85), and that stereotypes should be carefully considered if taken as a starting point in language and gender studies.

In the third chapter, the authors focus on the organization of talk and discuss how gender affects people's ability to get their meanings into discourse. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet illustrate how the combination of persona and institutional networks puts women at a disadvantage, and that women's speech activities in "gossip" and "arguing" tend to be negatively evaluated. They point out that "gender structures not only participation in certain kinds of speech activities and genres, but also conversational dynamics" (p. 6). As the discussion about the common belief of "interruptions" in chapter two, the authors clearly state here that despite the

finding of some American studies that women provide more backchanelling than men, there is "no evidence beyond the most anecdotal that this particular gender difference really does exist" (p. 111).

In chapter four, the authors explore speech acts that are embedded in social practice, and introduce J. L. Austin's (1962) systematic study of speech acts. They describe that speech acts are "kinds of social moves that are part of larger, socially accomplished plans of action" (p. 133) and that they are strongly affected by gender. The authors provide critical analysis of various types of research on politeness and compliments including a noted study of Janet Holmes (1995). Holmes (2004) implies in her review that more attention to the analysis would have been preferred. The authors suggest that it is significant to examine ways linguistic practices such as complimenting yield gendered personae (p. 156).

The fifth chapter focuses on linguistic resources that position speakers with respect to two different kinds of positioning, idea positioning and subject positioning. The authors describe that "positioning is accomplished interactively and involves not just the aims of speakers but also the interpretations of, and effects on, other conversational participants" (p. 158). Eckert and McConnell-Ginet discuss "women's language" by Robin Lakoff (1975) and gendered positioning by examining women's "powerless" language. The authors provide examples of honorific usage and sentence-final particles in Japanese, and indicate that changing attitudes and practices in Japanese society proceed with changing gendered norms for speech positioning (p. 187). High rising terminal, also called "uptalk", associated with young women and devalued by the media, is discussed as well as address terms, profanity, and indirectness. In this chapter, the term "epistemic modal" is provided in discussing the usage of tags. As Anderson (2006) points out, the term needs more explanation for readers with no special expertise in language and gender studies.

In chapter six, "Saying and implying," the authors state how people build gendered content as they interact with each other. The notion that much of what is communicated linguistically is implied rather than strictly said is explained. They start with "Anita Hill" who testified at the US Senate hearing in 1991 and brought the issues of sexual harassment into the public eye, and demonstrate how gender figures in the content of discourse. The authors cite Ehrlich's (2001) study to show "how gender ideologies frame and help shape the constitution of gendered identities and responsibilities in a sexual assault trial" (p. 211). It is explained that men's responsible agency is often downplayed in the cases of sexual harassment or sexual assault against women. The chapter concludes with a discussion on metaphors. The

authors argue that while there is a tendency in English towards metaphors for heterosexual activity that imply men's force and violence against women, they should be carefully analyzed in actual usage (p. 220).

The seventh chapter deals with categorizing, how people map their world and how those mappings enter into gender practice. The authors point out that many U.S. college students are not comfortable labeling themselves as feminists partly because of the risks of being put in a social category characterized in negative ways (p. 230). It is also stated that poor women and women of color tend to avoid the feminist label because the movement is mostly focused on issues of middle-class white women (p. 231). They discuss how significant the power to dictate categories for the rest of society is, and how differently categories are viewed against different background fields. Categories are relational and linked to theories or schemas, and they function in discourses that connect them to other categories (p. 261). Although the place of a social category in social practice cannot be simply changed, changing labels can partly play a role in changing practice centered on the categories labeled (p. 264). In "Pronouns," the authors provide an interesting statement that "a considerable number of female Japanese high-school students have now adopted the practice of referring to themselves as *boku*" (p. 255). Suzanne Romaine (1999) in *Communicating Gender* similarly writes that "Now some women have begun to use *boku*" (p. 124). While leading scholars in the field note the new usage of Japanese pronouns, to my knowledge this phenomenon does not seem to be commonly observed in Japan today.

Chapter eight focuses on linguistic variety, "accent and grammar" which is significant in deciding people's position on the social and economic market. People learn to change linguistic variety strategically to represent what they are. "Linguistic variability is key to social mobility and the presentation of self, hence to the construction of gender" (p. 270). The authors examine language ideology in its relation to gender ideology and argue that linguistic varieties are connected to communities and ways of life and are also important ideological constructs in society (p. 277).

In the final chapter the authors review the use of linguistic resources discussed in chapters three through eight. In "Stylistic practice," they explain that people always engage in stylistic practice, and that stylistic practice is a resource for the orientation of the communities, and for constructing community members' relation to power structures (p. 315). Lastly Eckert and McConnell-Ginet list various changes in gender relations over the past fifty years, and postulate that gender and language will continue to change and be intertwined in social practice.

Summary

Language and Gender covers a broad range of language and gender studies within a social-constructionist framework. It is organized around "the practices in which language constructs and reflects the social order, just as it would be organized in a discussion of the construction of any other social categorization – race, class, ethnicity, or age" (p. 61), rather than around linguistic structures or gender theories. Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet successfully provide a thoughtful analysis of how pervasive the gender order is in people's lives and how language and gender are embedded in social practice. While the book is organized differently compared with other books on language and gender research, it gives extensive and informative topics and examples. Readers familiar with the field and also non-linguists will find it accessible, intriguing and valuable.

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