

Linguistics 156: Language and Gender

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Got Gender?

Where did you get it?

How did you get it?

Do you like it?

Do you have to work at it?

What is it?

Common questions about language and gender/sexuality

- Do men interrupt more?
- Do women use more color terms?
- Do gay men lisp more?
- Do women use more rising intonation?
- Do men swear more?
- Do girls use more *like*?
- Do men not ask for directions?
- Do gay men use more falsetto?

What's interesting about these questions?

- Each question presupposes a binary division of the human population:
male/female gay/straight
- The questions tend to be disproportionately about the “marked” category.
- The questions construct common stereotypes.
- The questions assume homogeneity within each category.

In other words ...

The questions are as interesting as their
answers

Where is gender?

The questions locate gender in the individual.
So how does it get there?

- Does gender just unfold from biology?
- Or does gender build on biology?
- Or - is gender an ideology that exploits biology?

Biology ...

- Biology certainly offers up a dimorphism
- But this dimorphism is anything but universal
- And gender ideology erases the gray areas

How much of gender actually follows from biology?

Does the maintenance of our species depend on women wearing makeup and men wearing none?

Are women biologically programmed to paint themselves?

Would we manage to reproduce if some men wore dresses? If women spat on the street and men talked babytalk to cats in public?

And what of the many women who do spit on the street and the many men who do talk babytalk to cats in public?

Gender is an accomplishment, not a given

- None of us became male or female without some struggle.
- What is “naturally male/female” is neither universal nor enduring.
- Gender is not a basic property of the individual, but an engrained way of being in the world.

Simone de Beauvoir

On ne naît pas femme, on le devient.

‘One is not born a woman, one becomes one.’



The same goes for a man ...

- But it's interesting that we tend to think of women as more 'manufactured' than men.

Think about this.

Why is sexuality included in this course?

- Gender and Sexuality are not the same.

BUT ...

- The fact that they are tied in the popular mind is in itself interesting.
- Understanding gender requires understanding its relation to sexuality.
- Our gender order is a heterosexual order. Heterosexuality is called upon to justify many aspects of the gender order and vice-versa.
- Our culture nowadays views sexuality as dimorphic: people are hetero- or homo- sexual. Like gender dimorphism, sexual dimorphism is a social construct, and the two support each other.

If we ask questions like

- Do men interrupt more?
- Do women use more color terms?
- Do gay men lisp more?
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We'll come up with some interesting stuff (once we've decided what constitutes an answer to each question).

But what will it mean? We'll know how many of the people we've chosen to study use language in a way that conforms to particular bits of gender ideology.

What we won't know is things like...

- How did these particular aspects of language get tied to gender and sexuality?
- What other hierarchies are at work in the use of these linguistic resources and how are they related to gender?
- How are these linguistic resources used (and not used) strategically?
- How do these linguistic patterns reproduce the gender order?
- And more to come ...

The bottom line is ...

- Gender is ubiquitous.
- Gender intrudes in our every act.

Why?

... so that we find it difficult to interact with someone we can't assign as male or female.

That fact alone is interesting, and points to the deep significance of dimorphism in our culture.

It also raises for us questions about what differs in our behavior towards, and expectations from, people once we assign them to the male or the female category.



Gender is a fundamental part of the social order

The Gender Order:

The institutional and informal arrangements that, together, define the complex, changing and often contradictory patterns of gender arrangements and relations in a society at a given point in time.

Gender is an ideological project

- What we see as gender difference is inseparable from class, race, ethnicity, nationalism ...
- Language is a basic tool in connecting gender to these projects.

The study of gender must begin with questions like

- How do we keep it going?
- How do we use it as a social resource?
- How do we mess with it?
- How does it change?

- ... and who benefits from it when, and how?

The study of language and gender must ask ...

- How does language support the gender order?
- How does our gender constrain the ways we talk?
- How do we use language to mess with the gender order?

This happens in many ways.

Language is ...

- Spoken
- Written
- Read
- Learned
- Taught
- Commented on
- Worried about
- Codified
- Legislated
- Engineered

And all of these activities play a role in the construction of gender.

And now to the course ...

- <http://www.stanford.edu/~eckert/linguist156/index.html>