

Gender¹, ideology and point of view²

In september, 1990, a weekly television magazine included a conversation with Brian Walden, a well-known British political interviewer and commentator at the time. Walden, popularly regarded as an astute and tenacious interviewer, provided an assortment of opinions about his job, politicians and the British political climate in general. The insights offered included the following theory about why politicians cannot always be trusted:

Anybody who wishes to have power over his fellows should be regarded with some suspicion. It's unusual. Most people don't feel like that. They want a good job, a nice wife, pleasant children, friends and a bit of fun.

(*TV Times*, 29 September 1990, p. 9)

As this little discourse unfolds, it seems that the generality suggested by 'Anybody' is not quite intended, and that Walden has a rather exclusive view of who exactly make up 'people'. The point of view which is projected in the text is one where men appear to constitute a centre of being around which other more sundry items, like fun and wives, revolve like satellites. The response of most of the women to whom this piece was presented has been a mixture of anger, incredulity and resigned amusement. Female readers in particular may care to reflect on their own immediate reactions as they were reading through the piece. It seems fair to say that the world-view projected by the quotation is not untypical of that represented by many everyday discourses. But what are the implications and consequences of these discursive practices? Do they forge sexist divisions into the structure of society, actually determining gender-biased behaviour, or are they simply innocuous 'off-the-cuff remarks which merit no serious scrutiny? Certainly, the question of 'sexist language' and the world-view it reflects now occupies a central place in feminist linguistics. Some exponents have argued that sexist language is directly responsible for the way we see the world. Others, more guardedly, see it as an important means of reinforcing sexist assumptions. Cameron sets the agenda for the 'reinforcement' theorists:

our linguistic habits often reflect and perpetuate ideas about things which are no longer embodied in law, but which continue to have covert significance in the culture. This is one reason why feminists have often paid detailed attention to language and discourse: our ways of talking about things reveal attitudes and assumptions we might consciously disown, thus testifying to the deep-rootedness of sexism.³

SEXISM⁴ IN LANGUAGE OR SEXISM *THROUGH* LANGUAGE?

This is an important controversy which has developed over the relationship between language and gender. The controversy hinges on the degree to which one can say that the system of language projects sexist bias⁵. One side of the debate views sexism in language as inherent to the system itself, and considers that by using a system which is intrinsically biased speakers and writers actively construct the inequality that exists between men and women in society. The other side proposes that sexism is encoded into language, either consciously or unconsciously, by users of language. In this way, linguistic practices will tend to re-inforce and naturalize sexist

¹ The term *gender* is used here to refer to the socially determined distinction between male and female. Gender thus encompasses the various social, cultural and psychological meanings that attach to sexual identity. The term *sex*, on the other hand, is reserved for the straightforward biological distinction between women and men. Although the term *gender* is also used elsewhere by linguists to refer to a particular grammatical category, no confusion between these uses should arise in the context of this lecture.

² The chapter is primarily based on Paul Simpson's book *Language, Ideology and Point of View*, Routledge, New York, 2003

³ Cameron, D., 1990, *The Feminist Critique of Language: A Reader*, London, Routledge, p16

⁴ Sexism – the belief that one sex, usually the male, is naturally superior to the other, and should dominate the most important areas of political, economic and social life.

⁵ Bias – a partiality that prevents objective consideration of an issue or situation

divisions in society. An underlying premise which is shared by both sides of the debate is the valid assumption that Western society is organized in terms of a *patriarchal order*. This is a symbolic order into which we are all born; a behavioural system in which men simply have power over women. Thus, patriarchy is endemic⁶ to all types of social interaction and organization, and as language is crucial to the way society is organized, it is not surprising that language has been identified as a site of struggle by many feminist linguists.

Foregrounding and demystifying the ways in which language is used to bolster⁷ the patriarchal order has now become a major concern of such work. Closely related to this concept of patriarchy is the notion of *androcentrism*⁸. Androcentrism describes a malecentred world-view wherein male activities are evaluated positively and female activities negatively. The principle extends even to explanations of language itself, so that usages which are attributed to men are regarded more favourably than those attributed to women. For instance, when language change was generally stigmatized by scholars of the eighteenth century, blame for the introduction of new constructions into the language was assigned to women. By the turn of the twentieth century, when it had become clear that linguistic change was not only inevitable but a valid object of scholarly study, the chief innovators of language were, it may come as no surprise, believed to be men. This type of asymmetry prompts Coates to formulate an 'androcentric rule' which states roughly that men's linguistic behaviour fits the view of what is admirable or desirable, while women will be blamed for whatever is considered negative or reprehensible. Even feminist critiques of language have unconsciously embraced this pervasive androcentric rule. In her famous account of 'women's language', Lakoff⁹ contends that women have a tendency to use 'empty' adjectives like *adorable*, *divine* and *cute*. Whether they actually do or not is debatable, but what is not made clear is why these adjectives are considered 'empty' in the first place. After all, greater elaboration of vocabulary is surely a positive achievement and one wonders how these words would be evaluated if they were identified as a specifically *male* usage.

One influential contribution to the debate on sexism in language is Dale Spender's book *Man Made Language* (1980, London, Routledge). Its greatest merit is that of having put the subject of women and language on the map for many people outside the women's movement. The provocative title of Spender's book captures the spirit and essence of her argument. She contends that by a straightforward act of linguistic appropriation men have constructed a supremacist social position, a position which oppresses and excludes women. Men, she argues, have literally 'made' the English language and have never relinquished control of it. Through their control of language, men are able to exercise their control over women. An especially trenchant statement of this theory of control is the following:

it has been the dominant group—in this case, males—who have created the world, invented the categories, constructed sexism and its justification and developed a language trap which is in their interest. (p142)

Spender makes a direct connection between this type of linguistic domination and the existence of the patriarchal order. The chain of reasoning involved in her argument might be set out as follows:

- 1 Men made language.
- 2 Language controls reality.

⁶ Endemic – natural to or characteristic of

⁷ To bolster – to add to, to support or uphold

⁸ See Coates, J., 1986, *Women, Men and Language*, London, Longman, p 15

⁹ Lakoff, R., 1975, *Language and Woman's Place*, New York, Harper and Row

3 Men control reality.

4 Men control women.

The examples used to support this argument are, if selective, none the less interesting. Spender contends that many everyday words reflect a kind of 'trapped' expression because their meanings have been 'fixed' by men. One item that receives extensive discussion is the word *motherhood*. Because men have appropriated the meaning of the word to signify things like 'replete with joy' (filled with joy) and 'the epitome of feminine fulfilment', women are effectively denied an experience which for many is both painful and traumatic. The same principle governs the use of the word 'frigidity'. This has become codified in dictionaries as 'failing' to become sexually aroused. However, this negative evaluation is not carried over into the male equivalent, *impotence*, which, Spender argues, is defined as not a failure but an 'inability' to become aroused. In standard androcentric terms, women 'fail' where men, through no fault of their own, are simply unable. By foregrounding linguistic asymmetries of this sort, Spender calls for a wholesale reinvention and rejuvenation of the English language¹⁰. Only through this type of linguistic overhaul¹¹ will sexism be tackled head on.

A key to understanding the theoretical foundation of Spender's argument lies in the view it takes of the relationship between language, thought and reality. Half-way through the book, the following concise statement of her theoretical position is provided:

It is language which *determines* the limits of our world, which *constructs* our reality.

(p. 139; my emphasis)

This determinist view of language is one which can be traced directly to a specific tradition of anthropological linguistics. Before going any further with our discussion of Spender we will need to digress for a moment and consider some of the basic tenets of this tradition of linguistics.

The theory of *linguistic determinism* is attributable largely to the work of anthropologists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf. Their ideas on language are collectively known as the 'Sapir-Whorf hypothesis' or more recently 'Whorfianism'. The basic principle of Whorfianism is that linguistic differences determine differences in world-view. Thus, our language delineates the boundaries of our understanding; or, put another way, the way we 'see' the world is constructed by the language we use. Taken a little further, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis specifies that the linguistic system is the 'shaper of ideas, the programme and guide for the individual's mental activity'¹²; consequently, speakers are therefore 'very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society'¹³. In this view, words precede concepts, so if you have few words, your perception of the world around you will be seriously impoverished.

The degree of linguistic determinism which the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis espouses has never been easy to pinpoint exactly, but in its raw form—the form outlined here—the hypothesis is very difficult to sustain. Words simply do *not* precede concepts. An 'anteater', as Lakoff

¹⁰ Spender is not alone in her call for a 're-invented' language. Feminists like Irigaray, Cixous and Kristeva, whose influences include Lacanian psychoanalysis, have attempted to write with explicitly 'female' voices. Their work is characterized by complex puns and word-play, interpretation of which often requires detailed knowledge of psychoanalysis, philosophy and major world languages. Specifically female innovations include 'Gyn/Ecology', 'The M(other) Tongue' and 'Herstory' (for 'History'). Not surprisingly, such coinages have been criticized for being elitist and obscure as well as being inaccurate linguistically. An excellent review of the 'female language' issue can be found in Ryder (1989).

¹¹ Overhaul – general examination and repair

¹² Whorf, quoted in Carroll, J.B. (ed.) (1956) *Language, Thought and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press, p 212

¹³ Sapir, E. (1929) 'The status of linguistics as a science', p207

astutely points out, is so named because of what it does; it is not some animal which obligingly eats ants in order to satisfy a lexical entry in the language system. Similarly, the term *skyscraper* has been coined to account for a specific modern architectural phenomenon and it is manifest nonsense to claim that people were only able to notice this phenomenon once equipped with the word. In fact, if followed through, a Whorfian solution to the problem of urban decay would not be to demolish tall ugly buildings, but simply to remove, Orwellian style, the words that refer to them. In this way, the concepts associated with them would cease to exist, and environmentalists could turn to other issues.

A more realistic alternative to Whomanism is to propose that the language system is shaped by the functions which it serves. In this sense, language reflects and to some extent reinforces the cultural and ideological practices which it describes. Concepts become *lexicalized* in language, and the system expands or contracts relative to the concepts it needs to express. This is the type of process by which *skyscraper* has entered English, or, for that matter, its calqued counterpart *gratte-ciel* has entered French. So when, in the course of their development, cultures are confronted with new concepts and objects, their respective languages make use of a range of available devices for introducing new words into the lexicon. The Spanish never had any trouble with ‘hot-dogs’ (*los perros calientes*), nor the Chinese with ‘telephone’ (*dyan-hwa-ji* (literally, ‘electric speaker apparatus’)). Furthermore, the more prominent a concept becomes in a particular culture, the more economical the linguistic means of describing it. Thus, in Colombian and Venezuelan Spanish the phrase *el traficante de drogas* (‘trafficker of drugs’) appears to be undergoing a rather telling change to a single lexical item *el narcotraficante*. By contrast, as long as icecream remains a relatively remote commodity in many southern African countries, its linguistic designation in Swahili is likely to remain *chakula kitamu kilichofanyizwa kwa maxiwa na vitu vingine na kugandishwa kwa baridi*—which can be translated roughly as ‘delicious food made from milk and all sorts of things and kept cold’!

Although it is not difficult to adduce evidence which contradicts the basic tenets of Whorfianism, the principle of linguistic determinism has been used to underpin a great deal of language-related research. In some areas, it has been appropriated as a means of denigrating nonstandard language, especially the systems used by working-class or ethnic groups. Honey¹⁴, for instance, argues that those who do not have standard English are intellectually trapped by the ‘substandard’ forms they do use. He cites the case of primitive tribespeoples who are unable to handle the complex constructs and ‘delicate nuances’ which are available to speakers of Standard English, adding that this cognitive impoverishment will become immediately apparent to anyone who has actually tried to translate a scholarly paper in physics, psychology or semantics from a major world language into the speech of a preliterate jungle tribe or into the local dialect of a remote province.

For a start, standard languages do not have a monopoly on technical vocabulary, and if, by some malevolent quirk of fate, semantics did become culturally prioritized by these tribes, then their linguistic systems would be altered accordingly. As far as the question of ‘translation’ is concerned, Honey may simply have forgotten to mention that many of the complex concepts which are lexicalized in the so-called preliterate jungle languages—such as terms for kinship, weather conditions, vegetation and types of religious ceremonies—are notoriously difficult to translate into standard English. Speakers, whatever their culture, enrich their language in order to cope with what they need to talk about; their language is not a monolithic grid through which a

¹⁴ Honey, J. (1983) *The Language Trap* (Kay-Shuttleworth Papers on Education, 3), Middlesex: Council for National Academic Standards.

restricted set of concepts is filtered. Honey's position, like many other deterministic accounts of linguistic diversity, is highly 'monocultural' in its outlook.

In the light of this short review of determinist approaches to language, we may re-assess Spender's theory of sexism in language. According to Paul Simpson¹⁵, by proposing that male control of language facilitates male control of reality, Spender is clearly arguing within the parameters of an unchallenged Whorfian model. Despite its vehemence, her argument is difficult to sustain theoretically and in many respects highlights flaws in the very model of language it seeks to espouse. Moreover, parts of the argument, if looked at more closely, are actually patronizing and critical not of the behaviour of men but of women themselves.

First, the issue of 'trapped expression'. Spender argues that men have fixed the meaning of the word *motherhood*, thereby denying many women the more unpleasant aspects of the experience. Yet if men really had appropriated the terms, how would women know about the unpleasantness in the first place and, more importantly, how have they been able to articulate this experience so clearly? In other words, if it is the positive term which determines the reality, how can we explain negative experiences of that reality? This also raises the more general questions of the language system which Spender herself uses in the book. If men genuinely do have control over language, then she is forced into one of two possible positions: either she is writing with a form of language which is as trapped as any other form of female expression or she is writing in a liberated language outside male control. If the first position is occupied, then the book is a waste of time in so far as it is only another example of male-appropriated meaning; if the second is occupied, then all men and presumably most women would be unable to understand this 'new' language in which it is written.

The practice of making selective forays into the dictionary to elicit sexist usage is also highly problematic. This etymological method assumes that dictionaries are accurate repositories of what words mean in every context. If there is to be an objection about asymmetrical definitions of *impotence and frigidity*, then it should be directed towards the dictionary makers. Spender claims as a feminist victory the now widespread use of the expressions *chauvinism* and *sexual harassment*. It is, she says, a case of women, not men, 'naming the world'. But within the terms of her position on language this is surely the last thing women should do. After all, if the word constructs the reality, women, by introducing these terms, are actively bringing about their own repression. What they should be doing is exorcising these words from the system, not introducing them into it. A more realistic explanation for this, of course, is that women have sufficiently alerted society in general to endemic sexist practices. Thus, 'sexual harassment' has come into everyday parlance, and specific manifestations of it, such as harassment in the workplace, have now been placed firmly on the agenda.

Finally, there remains the question of how exactly men made language. At what notional point in prehistory did this linguistic schism occur, this schism which was to have such far-reaching implications for gender relations in society? And what was one half of the population doing when the other half was busy making language? These questions have a serious side. Disenfranchised groups who have been excluded from dominant or mainstream cultures encounter no problems in developing languages of their own, whether they be market-traders in seventeenth-century England or members of the underworld of present-day Calcutta. These specialized languages, or 'antilanguages', are complex, rule-governed systems entirely suited to the needs of their users. Spender is asking us to believe, then, that women, as a disenfranchised group, have been both excluded from language, but been perversely incapable of developing

¹⁵ In *Language, Ideology and Point of View*, New York, Routledge, 1993, p165

even the most simple system of their own. At the very least, this is a facile interpretation of the evolution of English.

There are clearly problems, then, with a strictly determinist approach to sexism in language. Trying to remove sexual bias from society by altering the lexicon is like trying to cure a patient of measles by painting over their spots. We need to replace determinism with a more *functional* view of language; a view which explains the structure of language in terms of the functions which language serves. This does not mean that the analysis of sexism in language becomes any less radical. On the contrary, sexist assumptions and biases are reflected, perpetuated and naturalized in language use and critical linguistic analysis can bring these discursive practices into sharper focus. The point is simply that it is not the language code but the way in which the code is used that is significant. It may be that the angle of telling adopted in a text represents the world in a sexist way. Linguistic analysis can unpack the ‘angle of telling’ and the representation which it produces, thereby ‘denaturalizing’ this type of discourse. Just how such analyses might be conducted is explained in the next section, where a variety of text types are examined from a functional linguistic perspective.

ANALYSING GENDER BIAS IN LANGUAGE

Part of the concern of feminist critical linguistic analysis has been to uncover asymmetries and inconsistencies in the way language is used. These discursive practices, as Cameron¹⁶ argues, represent historically evolved ways of defining the limits of femininity and masculinity. She adds:

One attacks these discourses primarily by becoming aware of them and by developing rival discourses (ways of representing) that people will eventually incorporate into their own method of dealing with reality.

One discursive practice which has received much attention is the use of so-called ‘he/man’ language and the related category of ‘common gender’. The first of these describes the institutionally sanctioned adoption of words like *he* and *man* to refer genetically to male and female. However, evidence suggests that, despite being prescribed as ‘correct’ usage, the practice does represent a male-centred view of things. If it did not, then there would be nothing odd about the following oft-quoted example:

Man is a mammal which breastfeeds his young and experiences difficulty in giving birth.

Common-gender words encode a similar asymmetry, even though we are led to believe that they are non-sex-marked. Nouns like *people*, *teacher* and *linguist* or the *boss* can in principle have either feminine or masculine reference, yet in actual usage they often assume male reference. And when the terms are used to refer explicitly to women, specific female markers are tacked on to the basic noun (*female linguist*, *woman teacher*). To give a clearer picture of how this works, let us return briefly to the Walden quotation which opened this lecture:

Anybody who wishes to have power over his fellows should be regarded with some suspicion. It’s unusual. Most people don’t feel like that. They want a good job, a nice wife, pleasant children, friends and a bit of fun.

The text is littered with he/man language and common-gender nouns, but as it progresses it becomes clear that Walden is using what are supposed to be non-sex-marked generics to refer exclusively to men and to exclude women. The *coup-de-grâce* is delivered with the sequence which stipulates that ‘most people’ want ‘a nice wife’ in addition to their other requisites like children and a bit of fun. Throughout, Walden appropriates the terms for humanity in general (‘Anybody’; ‘people’) and attaches them exclusively to male desires. Women are delineated as somehow contingent to this middle-class male heterosexual order, in other words, the patriarchal

¹⁶ Cameron, D. (1985) *Feminism and Linguistic Theory*, London: Macmillan, p. 69

order. The mild-mannered smugness with which this world-view is projected is alarming: society can be arranged into a natural pattern where people (men) are defined in terms of a set of needs. These needs can then be identified as commodities like employment, leisure and, of course, women.

Picture, if you will, the following scenario. You are sitting in your boss's office anxiously awaiting news about your recent application for promotion. But just before announcing the outcome of your application, your boss is called away to take a phone call in another office. You sit nervously, rubbing together the palms of your hands. On the desk in front of you is an expensive-looking miniature replica Ming vase. You pick up this little cobalt-blue *objet d'art* and turn it deftly in your hands. Then, of course, catastrophe strikes: as you're turning it, it slips through your fingers and smashes into a dozen or so fragments on the varnished oak floor. You stare at it vacuously. After what seems like a lifetime, your boss returns. She stares at the pieces on the floor and then frowns at you in clear anticipation of an explanation. What do you say to her?

Let us suppose you decide to make a clean breast of it and offer the following remark by way of explanation:

(1) I broke the vase.

In this grammatically *active* sentence, the 'doer' has been placed first whereas the object affected has been positioned last. This certainly foregrounds your involvement in the incident, leaving no doubt about your responsibility for the breakage. Perhaps this 'up-front' approach is the sort of thing your boss respects. Or perhaps not. You decide therefore that (1) is a little too direct, and that the following is more appropriate:

(2) The vase was broken by me.

By converting (1) to its *passive* equivalent in this way, you have rearranged the original sequence of information. The object affected is now placed first, whilst the agent responsible for the breakage is now shifted towards the end of the sentence. Perhaps this more subtle explanation is what your boss would prefer. Then again, maybe not. You feel the passive form is basically a good idea, but it sounds a little clumsy. You also feel that the removal of the 'doer' of the process is desirable. On balance, then, (3) seems the best policy:

(3) The vase was broken.

This strategy exploits a feature of the passive in that it has been possible to remove the optional 'by—' phrase from the end of the sentence. However, although the 'by—' phrase has disappeared, your boss can still react to (3) by asking *Who by?* Maybe the safest tactic is to construct a sentence which will not support a *who by?* question. You opt therefore for the following:

(4) The vase broke.

Like all of the options you have considered, (4) is a true statement about what happened. The 'pay-off' here, as far as you are concerned, is that in (4) the 'doer' has been excised completely from the process, fending off the awkward *who by?* question. On the other hand, there is the risk that the boss may think you're being disingenuous or that you are rather spineless. Perhaps a more direct approach, like that of (1) say, is needed.

The four possibilities considered here represent different ways of encoding in language our experience of a particular event. Something has happened and circumstances dictate that we must select words to describe it. In our case the particular selections which we make are from the system of *transitivity*.¹⁷

¹⁷ See Paul Simpson, 1993, *Language, Ideology and Point of View*, Routledge, New York

One incisive application of this transitivity model is Clark's (1992) study of newspaper reports of male violence towards women. Clark examines the *Sun*'s coverage of John Steed, the notorious 'M4 Killer' who was sentenced to four life sentences for killing one woman and raping three others. (Ironically, the verdict delivered on the killing was manslaughter.) Unlike other British newspapers which covered the event, the *Sun* devoted most of its coverage to Steed's girlfriend and the part she played in shielding his crimes. In fact, the bulk of the space allocated to the story was filled with pictures of this woman in the 'sexy' poses. Again, unlike other papers, the *Sun* devoted little space to the actual crimes Steed committed, and when it did, the choices it made from the system of transitivity were highly significant. Here is an example of the pattern which the paper adopted:

(1) Two of Steed's rape-victims—aged 20 and 29—had a screwdriver held at their throats as they were forced to submit.

(the *Sun*, 11 November 1986, p. 4)

This is an odd configuration in that Steed's victims, although positioned at the head of the sentence, are represented only obliquely to their attack. The first process with which they are associated is a relational-possessive one displaying a 'X *had* Y' pattern. What they 'have', in fact, is encoded as a separate process with the following transitivity structure:

GOAL	PROCESS	CIRCUMSTANCES
a screwdriver	held	at their throats

This is the classic 'agentless passive', with the holder of the screwdriver having been removed totally from the process. The final clause of the sentence exhibits a similar format:

GOAL	PROCESS
they	were forced to submit

Again, an agentless passive is used where the 'doer' of the process remains completely unspecified.

Other parts of this news report are equally significant. Here is another example:

(2) His third victim, a 39-year-old mother of three, was attacked at gunpoint after Steed had forced her car off the M4.

Here, there is an absence of any agency from the process expressed by the first clause, although the GOAL element receives considerable elaboration:

GOAL	PROCESS	CIRCUMSTANCES
His third victim... mother of three	was attacked	at gunpoint

In fact, the agency involved in this process has to be inferred by implication from the process expressed by the second clause where Steed does now feature in the role of ACTOR/AGENT:

ACTOR/AGENT	PROCESS	GOAL	CIRCUMSTANCES
Steed	had forced	her car	off the M4

The message is constructed in such a way as to obscure the relationship between Steed and the attack. The only entity upon which Steed acts as AGENT is 'her car', while the victim of the attack, although prominent in the information structure of the report, is acted upon only by an implicit and unspecified agency. Indeed, so obscured is the relationship between attacker and victim that it allows a possible reading wherein someone else attacks the woman at gunpoint while Steed only forces her car off the road.

We see a wilful refusal to 'tell it like it is'. What, for instance, is so difficult about presenting the details of the story in the following way, where the relationship between attacker and victim is not obfuscated:

(1) a. Steed held a screwdriver at the throats of two of his victims as he forced them to submit.

(2) a. Steed attacked at gunpoint his third victim, a 39-year-old mother of three, after he had forced her car off the M4.

Of course, these 'rewrites' are no more ideologically neutral than the original version—notice, for instance, how the victim in (2a) is still referred to as a 'mother' and not simply a woman—but at least they do not use language to shield the perpetrator of the crimes. It is not the objective 'truth' of the *Sun*'s account which is at issue; rather, it is the way the 'angle of telling' is predicated upon an underlying dominant political ideology. Playing down these crimes, Clark suggests, helps to avoid awkward questions like why such acts of violence are committed against women at all. In this case, the *Sun* is unable to shift the blame for the attack onto the women themselves—a practice traditionally reserved for the murder of female prostitutes who are considered somehow 'responsible' for their own deaths. Furthermore, the position of the killer and rapist cannot be rationalized by casting him in the role of the 'monster', 'beast' or 'fiend'; in other words, in the role of a social outcast which distances him from 'normal' men. The 'mystification' which this social and psychological distancing offers is elaborated upon by Cameron and Frazer¹⁸, who comment:

the archaic formulas of tabloid journalism have just this mystifying effect: the pages of *The Sun* and *The News of the World* are apparently still stalked by motiveless 'fiends' whose 'brutal lusts' remain for ever unspecified, their connection with masculinity somehow obvious, yet unexplained.

And finally, there remains the entertainment value which is to be gained from the story. This report is different from the paper's normal strategy of reporting violence against women in that blood lust is overridden by the 'exclusive' which the paper secures by getting the killer's partner to pose in leather underwear. So sensational a 'scoop' will presumably grab more attention than more peripheral and prosaic matters such as murder and rape.

The strategies of naming and referring constitute another important facet of the discursive practices examined here. The way in which referring expressions are deployed asymmetrically to designate men and women is another index of a symbolic order in which 'male' constitutes the norm and 'female' a deviation from that norm. To illustrate this, we will concentrate initially on a short report which appeared in the *Daily Mirror* of 17 November 1983. As important as patterns of transitivity are the expressions used to refer to the participants within the story.

CRAZED DOG BITES OFF A WIFE'S EAR

A crazed bull terrier attacked a 36-year-old wife without warning and bit off half her right ear.

Ambulancemen called to [Dora Smith's] home in Denby Dale Way, Royton, found it. It was packed in ice and rushed to Withington Hospital, Manchester, where it was stitched back.

There is no need for a detailed breakdown of the transitivity structure of the headline of the story; suffice it to say, the key participant roles involved in the material process of 'biting off' are the 'dog' (ACTOR) and perversely, not the woman, but her 'ear' as the GOAL element. In the opening text the dog is further defined ('bull terrier') while the affected participant now becomes 'a 36-year-old-wife'. It becomes clear, as the report progresses, that the key players in the drama are to be the dog and the ear, resulting in an almost comic denouement where it is the ear, and not the woman, that is rushed to hospital for emergency surgery. The way the woman is referred to in the text is also significant. It hinges on an important pragmatic principle concerning the degree of *specificity* which attaches to words. Lexical specificity, as it is known, is a way of

¹⁸ Cameron, D. and E. Frazer (1987) *The Lust to Kill*, Cambridge: Polity Press., p. 44

conveying pragmatic, non-truth-conditional meanings. It describes the practice of selecting a term which exhibits a greater degree of either precision or generality than would be expected in a particular context of use. For instance, if you are on your way out to the shops and are asked where you are going, you might reply *Out!*. By being less specific than the exchange would require, you are implicating perhaps that your interlocutor should mind her own business. Similarly, an injunction on a recalcitrant family pet couched in underspecific terms like *Take that animal away* may implicate distance or dislike, if only momentary. Overspecificity may carry similar pragmatic significance. If, in response to a question like *What have you got in the case?*, you reply *A Fender Stratocaster* instead of, say, *A guitar*, you may be attempting to convey expertise, superiority or in-group knowledge. The point is that the interpretations deriving from the degree of lexical specificity employed are contextually driven, so greater or lesser specificity will not always generate the same type of meaning in every situation. Returning to our report, the term ‘wife’ forms part of a lexical scale which might be postulated thus:

In this configuration, items lower down are always instances of those immediately above. Thus, all wives are women and all women people. Put another way, the term *wife* can be said to be a *hyponym* of *woman*, and the term *woman* a *superordinate* of *wife*. This relationship does not, of course, operate downwards on the scale; not all women are wives, and not all people are women. What this highlights is the way in which the woman is identified through a more specific term taken from a lower level on the lexical scale. The same ‘markedness’ would surely not apply if the victim were a married man. Would we really expect a headline to read: *Crazed dog bites off husband’s ear*? What further entrenches this markedness is that the woman’s identity is mediated through her relationship to a man, through the fact of her being married. (Indeed, even the marriage ceremony itself encodes this asymmetry with its dictum ‘I now pronounce you *man* and *wife*’) It is only by the time we reach the second paragraph of the text that a name, in the form of FN+LN, is provided and only then is any independent status accorded to her. Finding similar examples of asymmetrical lexical specificity in public discourse is not difficult. Here is an example from *The Liverpool Echo* of 1989:

MURDER POLICE IN BEDSIDE VIGIL ON SPINSTER

A woman police officer was last night keeping a constant vigil at the hospital bedside of battered spinster, [Ethel Braithwaite].

(9 November, p. 3)

Lexical specificity in this example extends not only to the victims of the attack but to the ‘woman police officer’, where a common-gender phrase has been prefixed with an explicit gender marker. Regarding the use of ‘spinster’, we now have a woman defined through the *absence* of her relationship with a man, a tactic presumably designed to make her plight appear all the more pathetic. If the victim were an unmarried man, a transposition of relevant parts of the text to reflect a comparable degree of lexical specificity would look very strange:

MURDER POLICE IN BEDSIDE VIGIL ON BACHELOR

at the bedside of battered bachelor...

The oddity of this version reveals just how naturalized the type of language used in the original has become. Interestingly, even if *bachelor* were used, it would not carry the semantic derogation that often attaches to terms like *spinster* which designate specific female reference. Compare also the positive and negative evaluations that are ascribed to other relational opposites such as the following: master/ mistress; patron/matron; governor/governess.

The short analyses undertaken in this lecture have only been a few of a range of possible suggestions as to how the critical-linguistic analysis of gender bias in language might be undertaken.

