

Is there a separate women's language?

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The discussion about language and sex, specifically women's language and linguistic oppression, has been confused by the imprecise use of the word *language*. It has been taken to mean at least three different things in the debate, sometimes heated, about women's language and linguistic oppression. I will discuss these three different conceptions of language and their relation to language and sex under the following headings: (1) 'Shibboleth', (2) 'The bird cage', and (3) 'Did your mother serve at the palace?', and I will end up with (4) 'Longing for my better half'.

In the 1970s *parts of* the women's liberation movement in Denmark arranged a women's language contest: who could write the best women's language? They argued that it was necessary to create a women's language because the existing language was men's language and was not fit for women's way of thinking and acting. Nynne Koch has defined women's language as follows (my translation): '*women's language is fragments of the female universe of interpretation, dressed in a language which clings round the content....*' (This is written in men's language)' (Dam et al. 1985).

And Lene Sjørup has this description (my translation):

The linear process of recognition, where the aim and a set of concepts are defined, where hypotheses are put forward, where material is analyzed and a conclusion is drawn, while doubt and anxiety, paradox and complementarity, body, feelings, intuition, aesthetics and ethics are split off, is not used spontaneously by most women. When problems are investigated by women, specific problems are handled, often in a spiral form of recognition, besides the multiple tracks, described by Ulla Ryum, which perhaps belong to women's daily life (Sjørup 1985: 24).

I will try to discuss what they mean by *language and recognition* and whether their definitions are useful and adequate for the development of free and just linguistic interaction in society.

Shibboleth

According to one conception, 'language' means one among many different languages: English, Danish, Norwegian, or a dialect or a sociolect of such a language. In that sense you have learned your language in childhood, and you cannot avoid using the words and the grammatical constructions you have learned; it is the only way to express your thoughts and feelings.

Dialects and sociolects often count as a 'shibboleth' in society, that is: a means for social discrimination and oppression. The word *shibboleth* is from the Bible, Judges 12: 5-6:

And the Gileadites took the passages of Jordan before the Ephraimites: and it was so, that when those Ephraimites which were escaped said, Let me go over; that the men of Gilead said unto him, Art thou an Ephraimite? If he said, Nay;

Then said they unto him, Say now Shibboleth: and he said Sibboleth: for he could not frame to pronounce it right. Then they took him, and slew him at the passages of Jordan: and there fell at that time of the Ephraimites, forty and two thousand.

Do women in this sense of the word have a certain women's language? Two famous linguists have put forward the hypothesis that women have their own stigmatized language variant with special words and special grammatical constructions: in her article from 1973 Robin Lakoff says that there exists one grammatical construction used only by women, viz. tag questions, such as *It's cold in here, isn't it?* (Lakoff 1973).

We do not have exactly the same construction in Danish, at least not commonly used, but we have a similar construction, which I have called 'appendage negation'. It is the appending of the negative particle *ikke* 'not' to an affirmative sentence, and of the adverb *vel* to a negated sentence: *Her er koldt, ikke* 'Here is cold, not', *Vi har ikke fri på fredag, vel!* 'We have not free on Friday, surely'. It is not the same construction as the English one; it is more elliptic and can be used in cases where it is not possible to use a tag question.

It is possible to say *Jeg har hovedpine, ikke* (literal translation: 'I have a headache, not'), *Jeg vil hjem nu, ikke* ('I want to go home now, not'). In English it is usually not possible to use tag questions after 1st person expressions of feelings and modal sentences: **I have a headache, haven't I?* but in Danish appendage negations work quite well. That means that tag questions are a sort of question, while appendage negations are not. So the meaning of a tag question could be (but need not always be) asking for support or agreement from the partner: 'Do you feel cold

too?', while the appendage negation must mean something like 'Do you hear me?', 'Are you still there?'

It is obvious that tag questions and appendage negations are not examples of exclusive language variants only known and used by one group and not by the other. They are constructions expressing and communicating certain social and psychological meanings, and perhaps men and women differ with respect to the frequency of use of such constructions. But in that sense they are not, like pronunciation variants, a shibboleth that one can neither choose nor escape; they are examples of communication strategies, which will be dealt with in section 3.

But in another sense they are like shibboleths; both tag questions and appendage negations are indices by which interlocutors label each other as young, lazy, stupid, etc. So the question is whether high frequency of these constructions are stigmas of women, indications of their suppressed situation in our society and of their lack of self-confidence.

In an empirical investigation I did of 37 native Danish speakers (Tøgeby 1985), I got results for appendage negations different from Lakoff's claims about tag questions. Thus working-class men had significantly more appendage negations per 100 sentences (7.8%) than working-class women (0.6%) and middle-class men (1.5%). The middle-class women did not use appendage negations at all.

Are these results then an indication of the oppressed situation of the working-class men in our society, and of their lack of self-confidence? In my opinion: yes; in the school-like interview situation the working-class men were in fact very insecure and tried to avoid revealing their language to the academic interviewer, while the working-class women had a clearer idea of the demands of the situation. But it would be an overgeneralization to say that working-class men in general are more oppressed than working-class women; all we can say is that in this specific situation they were.

Basil Bernstein's (1972) theories about elaborated codes, universalistic meanings, and person orientation peculiar to the middle class, and restricted codes, particularistic meanings, and position orientation peculiar to the working class are another example of a shibboleth conception of language, and an example of overgeneralization from behavior in a very odd situation (the interview situation) to a whole class of people in all situations.

Language, in the sense of a dialect or sociolect, has nothing to do with our ability to think. Deep thoughts and good argumentation can be performed in the ugliest slang, and verbose academic talk can express absolutely nothing, as shown by Labov (1969).

The Danish linguist Otto Jespersen, who is so often quoted in the

literature about language and women, wrote in an article as early as 1907 (reprinted in 1941 and published in English 1922) (see Jespersen 1907, 1921): 'Woman as a rule follows the main road of language, where man is often inclined to turn aside into a narrow footpath or even to strike out a new path for himself.' He continues, but only in the Danish version (in my translation): '...Adjectives show clearly the difference between the more cold and sober character of the man and the more impulsive and emotive character of the woman. ...'

Here the shibboleth concept of language is based on biology; women speak as they do, because of their innate psychological characteristics. Like Bernstein (and Lene Sjørup) Jespersen sees a casual link between the character and the style of thinking to the style of language. In fact it is the other way around; we only know the way people think because we know how they speak. This generalization from other people's language style and introspection into one's own way of thinking to the thinking style of the other sex is in its essence sexist, and simply wrong. Both Jespersen and Sjørup cannot be right, but they can certainly both be wrong.

The bird cage

The other conception of language can be described by the metaphor about the bird in the cage; in a way your mind is captured in the vocabulary of language like a bird in a cage. According to this conception language is the lattice of our thoughts. You can only use the concepts which are offered to you by the words of language, and you cannot express feelings and sentiments for which you have no words.² If you take one single word, that is simply not correct, because you can invent a word if you need it, and that is what is done in art and science. But one word is just one little bar in the cage, it cannot prevent your thought from flying; you have to see that the bars are connected, you have to see the whole cage. Every single word represents a classification of reality, and together all the words in the vocabulary form an ideology, by means of which values, possibilities, and power are distributed among the language users in the society.

The ideology of our language is characterized by apartheid and monopoly according to Dahlerup (1973). There is a strong apartheid between the attributes and values of women and men, and men have the monopoly of being normal. In the Danish vocabulary we have *formænd* 'chairmen', *arbejdsmænd* 'workmen', and *folketingsmænd* 'parliament-men', but not

the corresponding '-women'. Of the opposite type we only have two important ones: *sygeplejerske* ('nurse') and *jordmor* 'midwife'.

This became a problem in Denmark when it was decided by law that it was illegal to use sexist terminology in job advertising. It resulted in advertisements like *Arbejdsdreng m/k søges* 'workboy male/female'. It was impossible to make a new word like *arbejdsbarn* 'workchild', and it was really ridiculous to talk about a 'female boy'. So it was not a success, and although the law is still in force no one is prosecuted for not obeying it.

When there are two names for a job, or category of person, the female word is often perjorative while the male counterpart is not: *lærer* 'teacher' is the normal word, *lærerinde* 'female teacher' is a teacher with no education for small children in the first classes; a *mand* 'man' is a man but a woman is either a *frk* 'Miss' or a *fru* 'Mrs.'; you need not know whether a man is married or not. A *ungkarl* 'bachelor' is an attractive man, while a *pebermø* 'spinster' is too old.

So in the world of language (vocabulary) there is a strong apartheid between the domain of women, where all the negative values and a small set of worthless persons and things belong, and the domain of men, inhabited by all the good, brave, and normal people.

Men also have the monopoly of being normal, especially because of the so-called generic pronoun. When anaphoric reference is made to a generic noun, such as a *teacher*, it is normal in Danish (as in other languages) to use *he*. In Danish laws no women are mentioned (except midwives and prostitutes) because the generic *he* is used consistently in the law. It gives very funny results in the law about marriage:

§24. Marriage is annulled if it is claimed by one of the spouses
1/that *he* at the time of marriage was not in possession of *his* reason,
2/that he was forced into ...

§39. One of the spouses has the right to divorce when the other spouse has sought *his* life or been cruel to *him* and the children ...

It is impossible to make a new sex-neutral pronoun, as some people try (*han* 'he', *hun* 'she', and *hon* '(s)he'), but it is possible in practice to change the usage in the law text; *he* can be changed to plural, to *he* or *she*, or to (*person*) *concerned*. Some years ago, when the law about marriage was passed, the Parliament voted on a change of the pronouns, but there was not a majority for the change.

It is very probable that this usage has great influence on the way language users think about nonspecific people. It isn't easy to study what

is going on in the head of people when they use language, but there is some evidence that generic pronouns influence our thoughts.

I once (see Togeby 1980) asked a group of people to make a drawing of 'a worker', 'a teacher' and 'a social worker'. Interestingly, most people made a drawing where it was easy to see the sex of the person drawn although this was not necessary. Even more interestingly, 49 percent of the persons drawn were men, 27 percent women, and 25 percent unisex — although there are more female teachers and social workers than male in real life; 69 percent of the persons drawn by men were men, 25 percent women and 6 percent unisex; 49 percent of the persons drawn by women were men, 28 percent women, and 32 percent unisex.

The effect of the generic *he* is highlighted very elegantly by the following story, but it is very old, so most people may know it already: one dark night a father and his son crashed their car into a tree; the father died instantaneously, but the son was brought seriously injured to the hospital, where the surgeon and all the operating theatre nurses were already prepared for an operation. But when the boy was brought into the operating room and the blanket was removed from his face, the surgeon exclaimed, 'Oh God, my son.'

Many people who have not heard the story before cannot figure out how the boy can be the son of the surgeon, because they cannot imagine that it is a woman who is the surgeon. Here is another story which is not so well known:

Who is it who says, *But he has nothing on?* If you say that it is the little boy in Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale 'The emperor's new clothes', you have committed exactly the same mistake; in the original text it is the little *child* who has the lines, and she could just as well be a little girl, or couldn't she?

So if you take 'language' as a bird cage, it is true that the meaning and use of the individual words in the vocabulary together create an ideology or a world view characterized by apartheid and male monopoly, which — like the connected bars in the grid — stops your mind from wandering where it will go.

Did your mother serve at the Palace?

But you can understand the concept 'language' in a third way: the language of the language user is not the dialect, nor the vocabulary, but the communication strategy chosen in the specific situation. It can be illustrated by the following story: a prince once traveled around visiting his country. In a village the peasants crowded round the market square

to see him, and among the people the prince saw a man who was the very image of himself. The prince went down to the man and asked him, 'Did your mother serve at the palace?' 'No', the man answered, 'but my father did'.

The prince's utterance is a put-down, that is, it is meant to humiliate the man. However, the man's answer changes the whole situation and makes himself one up, and the prince one down. So linguistic interaction can be seen as an ongoing regulation of the mutual social relation between the interlocutors, a regulation of the 'pecking order', and language can be seen as a choice of strategy in this game. (And if you had not anticipated the punch line, it is because you find it harder to imagine that the prince's mother had a lover than that his father had a paramour — perhaps a part of our ideology!)

Language as communication strategy is closely related to sex differences, and there are a lot of studies about that.³ Here I will mention only an empirical study I made myself (Togeby 1985). Thirty-seven men and women were asked to tell what they saw on a cartoon, and they were then interviewed for 20 minutes about sex roles. Their speech was taped, recorded, written down, and analyzed from various perspectives.

The most interesting results were the following: middle-class men interrupted at a frequency of 19 percent of the times they started talking in a turn-taking situation. Middle-class women only interrupted at a rate of 5 percent. Working-class men were interrupted at a frequency of 9 percent, while working-class women were interrupted at a rate of only 3 percent. The interrupting middle-class men did not interrupt women more often than they interrupted men; on the contrary they interrupted other middle-class men more often than any other group. That means that interruptions are not interpreted in terms of victim and assaulter, as claimed by Zimmerman and West (1975), but in terms of competition, a sort of cockfight.

When middle-class men were to tell the tape recorder the story of the comic strip, they avoided expressing any emotions, feelings, or evaluations of what they saw. I counted the number of evaluative speech acts (see Searle 1976) per 100 utterances, and the middle-class men had 1 percent, middle-class women 8 percent, working-class men 13 percent. I interpret these figures as showing different choices of style. All the persons were talking about the same pictures, and they had almost the same opinion about the story.

But when the middle-class men wanted to express their feelings about something, or their opinion, they expressed it in an assertive speech act, as a statement. Instead of saying about the woman in the strip, 'I think that she is talking too much', or 'She is very talkative' (which are

evaluative or emotive speech acts), one of the middle-class men said, 'The woman talks most, as all women do' (which is an assertion). (The man in the cartoon talks in four out of four pictures, while the woman only talks in one of the four pictures.)

It is easily seen from these examples of appendage negation, interruptions, and assertive speech acts that it is impossible to generalize about how men and women talk, because working-class men and middle-class men in many ways differed more from each other than men and women did, and more than working class and middle class did.

In my investigation I tried to make generalizations about the linguistic strategy of four groups defined by class as well as by sex: the middle-class women were correct and orthodox, the middle-class men were ambitious and dominating, the working-class men were obstinate and informal, and the working-class women behaved on the average on all the parameters I counted and were in this sense linguistically invisible.

Some of the stereotypes about men and women were confirmed, viz. that some men found it difficult to talk about emotions and feelings and were competitive and dominating, that some men were informal, and that some women were correct and orthodox. But it was not confirmed that all men are dominating, because working-class men did not dominate; it was not confirmed that women are talkative (always talking nonsense); and it was not confirmed that women are insecure and lack self-confidence.

What I found was that the four groups of people chose different strategies in their attempt to keep up their social relationships with the interlocutor. The differences cannot be explained by discrimination, by the horizon of thought, or by biology. The only possible explanation is the historical one: the four groups chose the strategy which they had learned in the interaction of the sphere of the society where they belong. The middle-class men chose the strategy of competition from public life, working-class men chose the strategy of solidarity from trade unions and the labor market, the middle-class women chose the strategy of authority from family life, and the working-class women chose to be invisible.

It looks as if people learn their interaction styles as early as in school. In a study about classroom interaction (Bjerrum Nielsen and Larsen 1985) four types of pupils were found: the middle-class boys, who were bright and smart and in public competed with the teacher about dominance in the class; the working-class boys, who were naughty, played cards in the most remote corner of the classroom, and in that way constituted a subculture with counter-values; the middle-class girls, who were efficient and polite but never talked if they were not asked, and who individually intrigued to form a union with the teacher or someone else;

and finally the working-class girls, who could go to school for ten years without saying a word.

The teachers exploited the situation. If they wanted entertainment they talked to the bright boys; if they wanted to keep law and order they talked to the well-behaved girls. In this way they strengthened the sex roles and reinforced the inferiority feeling of the girls.

The round human being

This clarification of the relation between language and sex can be summarized in the following way: there is no difference between the dialect or sociolect of men and women, and claims of discrimination cannot be based on such differences. It is true that the vocabulary of language is influenced by an ideology of apartheid and male monopoly, and it is true that social groups defined by sex and class choose different strategies in social interaction.

I will conclude this article with some thoughts about how these facts can give rise to a language policy. I will take as my starting point a myth which is told by Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium*. It is about who Eros is: once upon a time all people were round, with two faces, four arms, four legs, two sets of reproductive organs. There were man-men, woman-women and hermaphrodites. They could walk normally, but when they were in a hurry, they advanced by making cartwheels with their eight extremities.

In that way they were able to do everything, and Zeus felt it as a threat. He then decided to take them apart so that they were not able to do so much, and he cut them in two as you cut a boiled egg with a hair. The humans became halves, with two arms, two legs, and only one set of reproductive organs. And since that time all people have looked for their other half, longed to be united with it as in the good old days. There are men and women who love the other sex, and there are man-men and woman-women.

This myth can be interpreted as telling the story of the evolution of sex-specific psychological and social characters. Because of our upbringing we have access to only half of the psychological characteristics and behavioral strategies which are distributed in society. And our goal must be to be united with the other half, to get some of the faculties we lack. The slogan for a sex language policy must be, The whole round human language! We want to take part in all types of linguistic style and interaction strategies and we want a vocabulary which gives equal shares to all groups.

And everything has its own time. It must be possible for all of us to think and talk in straight lines when it is necessary, and to let our thoughts fly in spirals when that is what we want. We want freedom to choose. In a competition we should be competitive, in love we should be tender and sensitive, as judges we should be impartial and objective, as advocates we should be convincing and argumentative, in art and puns we should feel anxiety and paradox. Nothing should be split off. We will not be taken apart.

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Notes

1. Glosses of example sentences are literally translated.
2. I have borrowed this metaphor from Sjørup (1985) and she has taken it from Fry (1963).
3. Some of the best are: Eakins & Eakins (1978), Thorne and Henley (1975), Trömel-Plötz (1982).

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