

DIALOGUE

Short responses to items already published in the Journal, or critical commentaries on theoretical or methodological themes in sociolinguistics generally, are invited for submission to the editors or reviews editor.

Feminist linguistics: A response to Bent Preisler's Review Article: Deconstructing 'feminist linguistics' (*Journal of Sociolinguistics* 2: 281–295)

Deborah Cameron
University of Strathclyde

Bent Preisler's (1998) review article 'Deconstructing "feminist linguistics"' deals with five recent books about language and gender (Bergvall, Bing and Freed 1996; Coates 1996; Crawford 1995; Hall and Bucholtz 1995; Johnson and Meinhof 1996). I do not want to take issue with the comments Preisler makes on individual works. But some of his most critical remarks are directed less to the specific titles under review than to the enterprise they represent collectively, namely feminist linguistics. Preisler's criticisms of feminist linguistics are general enough, and serious enough, to merit a response.

Preisler detects 'a high degree of explicit theoretical and ideological uniformity' in recent feminist work (p. 281), but he also notes that 'whereas most of these works build on the same social theories, they in fact vary greatly with regard to how the theories are used in the discussion and handling of linguistic data' (p. 292). I find both parts of the last sentence problematic. On one hand, I think Preisler exaggerates the reliance of feminist linguists on deconstructionist and postmodernist theory (which at times he seems to conflate with the more generic 'social constructionism'; feminism is axiomatically social constructionist and has been since at least 1949, when Simone de Beauvoir observed that 'one is not born a woman'). He remarks that the names of fashionable theorists turn up 'on almost every page' of volumes published in the 1990s (p. 281). The five

books he is discussing do take a positive interest in what might loosely be called postmodernism (the collections more so than the monographs), but examining a wider range of recent publications would have told a rather different story: sceptical attitudes are well represented in, for instance, Wilkinson and Kitzinger (1995) and Wodak (1997), while Livia and Hall (1997) includes both enthusiasts and critics (on this theoretical debate, see further Cameron 1998).

On the other hand, why present diversity of views within feminism as a problem, rather than a sign of intellectual vitality? Most paradigms are characterised by some mixture of agreement and disagreement: but whereas no-one would question the credibility of, say, quantitative variationist linguistics or Conversation Analysis on the basis that their adherents have proposed competing analyses of data within the same theoretical framework, Preisler takes the existence of competing feminist analyses as a sign that the whole approach lacks consistency and rigour. This conclusion follows from his belief that feminist linguistics is primarily an ideological exercise. As he sees it, differences among feminists are not about intellectual matters, but reflect only whether feminists treat 'sociolinguistic findings . . . as subservient to explicit political goals' (p. 292) and 'embrace empirical research according to how well the results fit their world picture' (p. 284). Thus feminists' uniformity is at bottom ideological dogmatism, while their diversity reflects varying degrees of bias and confusion. Preisler taxes feminists with self-contradiction, claiming that 'research appearing to confirm the existence of gender differences has been embraced uncritically if the aim was to present evidence of gender inequality . . . whereas it has been ignored, or dismissed . . . by those aiming at forestalling any notions of female linguistic deviance' (p. 284).

These are serious charges, and I do not believe they will stand up. Even if one accepts the rather sweeping claim just quoted, it indicates not a contradiction but a disagreement among feminists. Furthermore, it would not necessarily be contradictory for the same feminist to 'embrace' one claim about male-female differences while 'dismissing' another: that one empirical finding of difference is well-founded does not make all of them equally well-founded, and the strictest positivist could see nothing illogical in assertions of the form 'P is true but Q is false'. Once again, though, Preisler is unwilling to grant that feminists might dispute empirical claims on intellectual grounds – because the evidence is insufficient or conflicting, for example. He assumes that if feminists reject a given claim, it must be because it does not fit our 'world picture'. He thinks our judgements, like our differences, are based on purely ideological criteria, and are therefore simply invalid.

If I insist on the intellectual *bona fides* of feminist scholarship, that is not in order to deny that it is ideological: of course it is. But so too are alternative positions on gender relations, Bent Preisler's included. The difference is that whereas feminists acknowledge their ideological standpoint explicitly, Preisler does not. The apparently disinterested position from which he sets out to deconstruct feminist linguistics will bear deconstructing itself.

Preisler's position is most evident in his concluding remarks (p. 293):

The extent to which language and gender has been 'appropriated' by 'feminist linguistics' can be seen in the continuing near-absence of male researchers in the field, which is unfortunate. It seems to me that, as a branch of sociolinguistics, it needs to be complemented by more work on language/gender as conceptualized by male researchers . . .

The charge of 'appropriating' the study of language and gender is an odd one to bring against feminists. The dictionary definition of 'appropriate' is 'take possession of, especially without authority'. But the study of language and gender as such was originally a feminist creation. Sociolinguistics has always been interested in sex as a linguistic variable, but the term gender, meaning socially-constructed masculinity and femininity as distinct from biological maleness and femaleness, encapsulates a distinctively feminist theoretical insight – one which I am happy to say that many nonfeminist linguists have 'appropriated', especially during the last ten years (the classic case for distinguishing sex from gender having been made by feminist variationist Penelope Eckert (1990)).

Since Preisler remarks five times in 15 pages on the underrepresentation of men among language and gender researchers, perhaps his real concern is that women have monopolised the field. Undeniably, they have been the majority of active researchers in it; but there has never been a policy or a practice of excluding men. Men have been underrepresented because few have taken a serious interest in the field, but those who have wished to contribute have never been denied the opportunity, and to speak of their 'near-absence' is, ironically, rather dismissive of some very influential work. For 25 years, male researchers – working alone or in collaboration with women – have consistently figured among the most frequently-cited authorities on various aspects of language and gender: witness Jack Chambers, Charles Goodwin, David Graddol, William Labov, Daniel Maltz, James Milroy, Jack Sattel, Joel Sherzer, Philip Smith, Peter Trudgill and Don Zimmerman. (Space constraints deter me from giving all the relevant references, but I would bet that readers who know this field can instantly supply them, thus proving my point.)

Male researchers are needed, Preisler argues, to 'complement' the work of women and ensure a 'balanced description of gender' (p. 293). Such a notion of 'balance' only makes sense if we subscribe to an epistemological version of the 'two cultures' model, according to which there is some profound, essential difference in men's and women's ways of knowing the world. On inspection, however, the male researchers just cited do not seem to represent any distinctively masculine approach: rather they exemplify the same range of positions as their female counterparts. Sattel (1983), for example, is in the 'men as powerful oppressors' camp whereas Sherzer (1987) aligns himself with those feminists who prefer to emphasise women's linguistic and cultural agency. Zimmerman and West (1975) contrast sharply with Maltz and Borker

(1982), these being classic examples, respectively, of the 'dominance' and 'difference' perspectives. So while men can make valuable contributions to language and gender studies, their value does not lie in 'complementing' or 'balancing' the contributions of women. Our ways of seeing and understanding may be shaped in part by our own social location and the associated experiences, but fortunately, these factors need not exhaustively determine all our ideological and intellectual commitments.

Apart from the complaint that we have excluded or marginalised men, Preisler's main criticism of feminists concerns our alleged propensity to make sociolinguistic findings 'subservient to explicit political goals' (p. 292). In play here, arguably, is a somewhat naive conception of what 'sociolinguistic findings' are. Preisler appears to think they are free-floating entities located in some Platonic realm of pure unassailable truth. But 'findings' do not simply exist, they are called into existence when a researcher asks a question and then sets out to answer it. In research, as in conversation, the question you ask has a constraining effect on the kind of answer you will get. And very often, when feminists take issue with nonfeminist scholarship, their point is not 'you have got the wrong answer' but 'you have asked the wrong question'.

Preisler wants to forestall this sort of challenge by limiting critical discussion of empirical claims about gender difference to 'the relative merits of the methods by which they were produced' (p. 284). The relative merits of different research questions are apparently not up for discussion. Both explicitly in his comments and implicitly in his judgements of the work under review, Preisler suggests that feminist contributions to the study of language and gender are legitimate only when they do not deviate from a research agenda set by others. This is not so much deconstructing feminist linguistics as simply negating it.

When Preisler says, disapprovingly, that feminist linguistics is 'a "feminist enterprise" *first*, a sociolinguistic one *second*' (p. 281, emphasis in original), he negates the possibility that it could be both in equal measure. It is precisely that possibility which animates feminist researchers, whose goal is to produce insights into both linguistic variation and gender relations. The best work by feminists pursuing that goal has changed the way certain issues are discussed by sociolinguists of all ideological persuasions (consider the impact of, e.g. Eckert 1990). To suggest that sociolinguistic goals are incompatible with feminist ones is to deny not just what sociolinguistics might gain in future from feminist insights, but the debt it already owes to them.

REFERENCES

- Bergvall, Victoria L., Janet M. Bing and Alice F. Freed (eds.). 1996. *Rethinking Language and Gender Research: Theory and Practice*. London: Longman.
- Cameron, Deborah. 1998. Gender, language and discourse: A review. *Signs: Journal of Women, Culture and Society* 23/4: 950–973.

- Coates, Jennifer. 1996. *Women Talk: Conversation Between Women Friends*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Crawford, Mary. 1995. *Talking Difference*. London: Sage.
- Eckert, Penelope. 1990. The whole woman: Sex and gender differences in variation. *Language Variation and Change* 1: 245–267.
- Hall, Kira and Mary Bucholtz (eds.). 1995. *Articulating Gender: Language and the Socially Constructed Self*. London: Routledge.
- Johnson, Sally and Ulrike Hanna Meinhof (eds.). 1996. *Language and Masculinity*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Livia, Anna and Kira Hall (eds.). 1997. *Queerly Phrased: Language, Gender and Sexuality*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Maltz, Daniel and Ruth Borker. 1982. A cultural approach to male-female miscommunication. In John J. Gumperz (ed.) *Language and Social Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 195–216.
- Preisler, Bent. 1998. Deconstructing 'feminist linguistics'. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 2: 281–295.
- Sattel, Jack. 1983. Men, inexpressiveness and power. In Barrie Thorne, Cheris Kramarae and Nancy Henley (eds.) *Language, Gender and Society*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Newbury House. 119–124.
- Sherzer, Joel. 1987. A diversity of voices: men's and women's speech in ethnographic perspective. In Susan U. Philips, Susan Steele and Christine Tanz (eds.) *Language, Gender and Sex in Comparative Perspective*. New York: Oxford University Press. 95–120.
- Wilkinson, Sue and Celia Kitzinger (eds.). 1995. *Feminism and Discourse: Psychological Perspectives*. London: Sage.
- Wodak, Ruth (ed.). 1997. *Gender and Discourse*. London: Sage.
- Zimmerman, Don and Candace West. 1975. Sex roles, interruptions and silences in conversation. In Barrie Thorne and Nancy Henley (eds.) *Language and Sex: Difference and Dominance*. Rowley, Massachusetts: Newbury House. 105–129.

Deborah Cameron
Department of English Studies
Strathclyde University
Richmond Street
Glasgow G1 1XH
Scotland
d.j.cameron@strath.ac.uk