

Introduction

Women's Liberation: The Socio-Historical Context

The rise of Women's Liberation in the past two decades reflects women's struggle to counter the extensive gender inequity which they face from birth. Much progress has been made in this short time. The book market is now flooded with historical accounts of the contributions of individual women and creative literature caters to a feminist audience.¹ Intellectually there has been a clear transformation leading to more positive images of women. A great deal of attention has focused upon self-definition and identity construction through contemporary historical and literary works.

At the institutional level, women have made less progress in reforming the social conditions and legal boundaries of inequity in which they find themselves. Some legal gains have been achieved, most notably, Affirmative Action enforcement. But for the most part women have had to recognize, albeit reluctantly, that social changes leading to gender equity have been constrained by a male-constructed and male-dominated framework held fast by centuries of tradition. How to change that framework which defines, controls, and deprecates women has thus become a central concern of Women's Liberation. To use a simple metaphor, this view of Women's Liberation suggests that women are not so much interested in how to play the game or how to improve their skill as players but rather how to change the rules of the game and to become equal, active participants in forming future rules.

Language plays a critical role in this struggle for gender equity and therefore deserves careful examination. Language is the most obvious and universal aspect of humanity. It is "the source from which intellectual, spiritual, and individual existence springs."² Yet it is both personal and social. Liberating language, making both the internal structure and external function of language gender equal, touches the most ingrained and unconscious aspects of our personal and social identities.³ Language is the system through which we are all socialized. It is a framework that inherently and traditionally comes loaded with gender inequity. The fact that it is unconsciously integrated in our daily behavior makes it resistant to planned change.

This anthology focuses on the role of language in the feminist experience

and, more especially, on the struggle of women to achieve gender equity *in* and *through* language. One hopes that the examination and analysis of language change will lead to a greater understanding of women's liberation and the struggle for equality. Language is intricately bound to the various institutions of our lives; therefore, women's struggle to transform institutionalized gender inequity can best profit from a multidisciplinary approach.

Part I of this anthology, *Liberating Language*, focuses on historical attempts to liberate English, with special attention to the means and strategies used, primarily by white women. This section reflects some of the changes in language and the political approach to achieving them which accompanied the Women's Liberation movement of the 1970s. Part II, *Identity Creation*, deals with the close relationship between identity construction and the alteration of that portion of language which serves to name women and their experiences. Part III, *Women of Color*, is concerned with the unique situation of women of color.

Women of color find themselves in a much more complicated social context than do white women. They are caught between two social systems in which they participate simultaneously: the mixed-gender majority society—with its strong pressures for acculturation—and the male-dominated structure of their own communities. Today's scholarship has yet to approximate an understanding of the complexities with which women of color must deal. An analysis of the role of language in the experiences of women of color can offer deep insights into some of these complexities. The most obvious of these experiences is bilingualism, which places women of color on the "cutting edge of change." Here women of color play two contradictory roles, that of enforcer of tradition and that of language innovator. The problems posed for women of color and the obstacles they must confront make their feminist experiences unique.

Conceptual Frame of Reference

Women's liberation has been concerned with the creation of new and equal frameworks. Historically, women have been concerned with freeing themselves from exploitation and male domination. To this extent, their struggle parallels the experiences of various ethnic or cultural groups in the world who have fought for independence and self-determination.⁴ This anthology is concerned with attempts to alter language in line with the feminist experience.

Language, here, is conceptualized in its broadest sense as "the strongest and most significant bond which unites the various cultural expressions of a people."⁵ Language is social behavior, but it is also the bridge between the

personal and social aspects of women's lives. Consequently, it is not surprising that one finds gender inequity conveyed in and through language in a society marked by gender inequity. In the past decade several excellent scholarly works have focused on various aspects of this language inequity in English.⁶ There are at least four different notions of language in which gender inequity has been examined: (1) the internal makeup of English as in vocabulary, pronominal reference, and so forth; (2) patterns of language use, as in mixed-sex discourse versus female-female discourse; (3) verbal labels and other images used to refer to women and their experiences; and (4) character images of women portrayed in creative literature. A broad conception of language necessarily entails an understanding of the social and historical context in which attempts have been made by individuals, political groups, creative artists, and institutions to make language gender equal. The author assumes that the liberation of language is directly linked to the liberation of white women and women of color, and consequently must be placed in this context. For this reason, the point of departure here is the development of the feminist movement.

In the past two decades feminists have struggled for the right of self-determination and self-definition in a male-dominated society. As I have noted, to some extent their struggle is similar to one of the strongest intellectual forces in history—the evolution of modern nationalism.⁷ In Europe, language consciousness played a prominent role in the achievement of equality and independence through nationalism. Part of this evolution in the nineteenth century meant breaking away from the intellectual and social shackles of superimposed languages as national languages began to develop.⁸ I am arguing here that there are some attributes inherent in the struggle for language self-determination present in the initial stages of nationalism which can lead to an historical understanding of the role of language in the feminist experience.

In its initial stages, nationalism has been conceived of by scholars as an ethnic and cultural process involving a group of people who speak the same language (or closely related dialects), occupy the same territory, share a common history, believe they constitute a distinct society, and have a particular manner of initiating their youth into the ways of the group.⁹ These four fundamental attributes interact to develop a unique group consciousness which the German writer Herder referred to as *Volksgeist*.¹⁰ By this he meant a common core of values and beliefs that set a group apart from all others. It is argued here that at least three of these characteristics have been fundamental to the birth of the feminist community. Because of the ideological growth in the 1970s, the feminist community now views itself as an identifiable group with a common core of values and beliefs—a fellowship of sisters who share the same past and the same future¹¹

With the emergence of Women's Liberation as a philosophy an explosion of scholarship took place which created a plethora of works by women about women. Scholarly and popular journals, such as *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, were born. Feminist newsletters served as a path to networking and consciousness-raising, as did numerous regional conferences, workshops, and sessions or committees within professional associations.¹² A considerable number of historical analyses and accounts of the contribution of individual women and groups of women have appeared. Linguistic interest in language and women focused on sex-linked differences in language, leading to the publication of several scholarly books and at least one newsletter.¹³ Within professional organizations such as the Modern Language Association (MLA), the Linguistic Society of America (LSA), and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), caucuses and sessions were formed to lobby actively for women's concerns.¹⁴ The integration of these activities helped women to see themselves as constituting a distinct community and sharing a common history. Women in the 1970s were entering the process of developing their own form of nationalism, a "feminist nationalism," that is a distinct form of cultural and ethnic nationalism rather than political or state nationalism. Feminist frameworks, values, and experiences were identified and legitimized. Along with the feminist declaration of self-determination and self-definition came the struggle for participation and power in those circles from which women had been excluded for so long. Consciousness-raising brought increasing awareness that the English language and discourse were subconscious and subtle agents of gender exclusion in which both sexes participated. Feminist research documented ways in which both male and female children acquired sexist views through language at a very young age.

Thus, early attention was focused on sexist patterns of socialization; in particular, how to reverse negative sex-role stereotyping in children. This interest led to attempts to liberate school curricula and all printed matter used by children. Feminists thus began to develop ways to initiate their youth into sex inclusive thinking, speaking, and acting.

As more and more research highlighted the extent of sexism in society, feminist activism addressed the question of when and how this behavior could and should be changed. Unlike many of the nationalist developments in modern Europe, it was a foregone conclusion that the solution to sexism did not lie in seeking a territorial separation or in developing a separate distinct language contrasting with that of the oppressors. With the exception of lesbian communities, territorial or linguistic separation from a male-dominated society was an impossibility. Women are integrated in every facet of mixed-gender society and are therefore faced with a task much different from simply withdrawing and forming a separate entity. They must work to build a new

inclusive system which incorporates the feminist experience. This has been nowhere more apparent than in the alteration of the English language.

Historically, language has played a crucial role in raising group consciousness. The struggle to make English more gender equal, which increased in the 1970s, brought a high degree of language consciousness which no doubt has in turn contributed to *Volksgeist* or group consciousness. It can be argued equally that changing English to make it conform with these newly formed aspects of group consciousness served to instill prestige and pride in women. To this extent, alterations in English by feminists symbolically parallel the formation of national languages in nineteenth-century Europe.¹⁵

Alterations were first focused on changing linguistic aspects of English, such as the pronouns and vocabulary; later, other strategies for empowerment in mixed-sex discourse were also studied (see Henley, Part I, in this volume). As feminist scholars became aware of their inability to talk about themselves and their own unique experiences in English, they began to explore linguistic strategies for creating, reviving, or extending the meaning of current language forms to conform to the feminist experience.

The rise of feminist *Volksgeist* contributed in turn to the construction of new identities among women on both a personal and collective/social level. Women began to take an active part in defining themselves both individually and collectively. One could say that they had discovered symbolic value in the adage "You are who you say you are." However, they usually encountered social and legal resistance from the inherently sexist system in attempting to define themselves linguistically. The chapter "Surname Changing: The Struggle for Identity" (Part II) illustrates this difficulty in the simple matter of naming one's self. On the other hand, Van Den Bergh (Part II) suggests how collective renaming may serve to precipitate social changes.

It is worth noting that modern nationalism was first propagated by a small group of intellectuals and then spread among the masses. Feminist scholars constitute the intellectuals who inaugurate and carry forward feminist ideology through scholarly research, women's history, and creative literature. It is important to remember the role of the individual creative artist in the propagation of nationalism—or, in our case, feminist nationalism. Henley (Part I) mentions how creative literary artists might introduce "new language" to help create new images of women.

Whereas feminist nationalism has no doubt been the work of feminist intellectuals—scholars and artists—it is the school, the church, and the press which have been responsible for spreading feminist ideology and philosophy among the masses. All three have served as important auxiliaries for the propagation of liberated language. During the 1970s, feminists reconstructed the English language to make English gender equal. Attention was also given

to transforming negative sex-role stereotyping in children's books by making them inclusive. Withers (Part I) argues that teachers and religious educators are in fact agents of change who can instill gender equity in children through more inclusive curricula and patterns of interaction. Her annotated bibliography is rich in available resources for making the curricula more gender inclusive in words, images, and actions.

Some have noted how the English pronoun system has been affected by the initial stage in planned language. In many countries of the world such changes are planned and implemented by an officially designated group or organization.¹⁶ However, the United States has no such centralized language planning body. There is no official or governmental policy-making body or group to suggest, institute, or enforce changes in language. Without central control and enforcement, it is not uncommon to witness several language alternatives emerging simultaneously for the same referent, resulting in a type of ambiguity of correctness for any given situation. Dubois and Crouch (Part I) rather humorously refer to this natural phenomenon as "linguistic disruption."

But for the most part, language planning in the United States is informally conducted by the press and broadcast media. They make decisions about the current nature and status of language norms in English and disseminate them. Since the press is sensitive to public opinion, policies are often formulated and carried out more often in line with public sentiment and political climate than with any set of rules. With the equal rights orientation and feminism of the 1970s came the introduction and enforcement of sex-fair stylistic guidelines in scholarly publications. Drawing on her experience as policy formulator and editor, Nilsen (Part I) recounts the development and implementation of sex-fair guidelines in the publications of a large professional association, suggesting some of the difficulties in implementing gender-equal or sex-fair language in writing.

Women of Color

Although white women and women of color do share a certain sisterhood, it is clear that the powerful social factors of race and ethnicity lead to somewhat different feminist experiences for the two groups. The prevalence of ethnic discrimination and racism have served to isolate women of color and to encourage group consciousness based on race, language, or ethnicity rather than on gender or nationality. It may be argued that languages *other than* Standard English have been a common defining characteristic among women of color. Any notion of nationalism or *Volksgeist* among women and men of color is no doubt tied not to nationality, region, or gender but to language

and/or ethnicity. Both of these play a crucial role in the feminist experience of women of color who must function in two worlds which are culturally and linguistically different.

Men and women of color often find themselves caught between these two worlds. The power group or majority society in the United States, backed by a tradition of suspicion of bilingualism, seeks to impose total adoption of the English language. This pressure for acculturation has its roots in the ideology of American nationalism, which emphasizes the positive aspects of assimilation and the negative effects of remaining culturally or linguistically different.¹⁷ An integral element of this ideology is the American dream, which promises economic and social mobility for all those willing to abandon their cultural and linguistic heritage and assimilate completely to Anglo-Saxon culture and the English language.

Two questions must be raised here. What role do women of color play in resisting or encouraging the process of acculturation and how are they affected by either of these processes?

Loyalty to the native language and ethnic/racial identity within minority communities has worked to resist the pressures of acculturation. The maintenance of the native language is one obvious way in which resistance occurs. Women have been noted to play a key role in this resistance as enforcers of tradition and guardians of culture (see *Medicine*, Part III in this book). This tends to reinforce the view expressed by such linguists as Robin Lakoff that women are extremely conservative when it comes to language.¹⁸ Yet, research on patterns of language used in minority communities suggests equally that women are on the cutting edge of change. They play the role of innovator and cultural broker between their own community and the majority culture. Usually, these dual roles that women play are most apparent in their pattern of bilingualism. Zentella (Part III) suggests one way in which younger Puerto Rican women act both as enforcers of tradition and as innovators.

Women of color do not exist in total isolation. Various aspects of their lives—such as child rearing, language, and their relationships with their men—are influenced by changes brought about by contact with society-at-large. Thus, a deep understanding of the socio-historical context in which minority communities find themselves is a critical factor for interpreting the feminist experience of women of color. Robins and Adenika rely heavily on this socio-historical context in their chapter in this book (Part III). They illustrate in detail how the struggle for power and equality in the Black community in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s redefined the interests and concerns of Black women.

Just as white middle-class women have struggled for the right of self-determination and equality, minority women have also been involved in the effort to define themselves. The socio-political events of the 1960s remind us

of the many successful attempts of what might be considered "liberal" nationalism in which oppressed nationalities sought to free themselves from alien domination by reviving national traditions and history, arousing popular enthusiasm for traditional figures, and giving greater prestige and loyalty to their own ways of speech. In the same sense, advances in the feminist movement have transformed the social image of women. In turn, these new patterns have given rise to changes in the social order itself, as Van Den Bergh argues in this book. In this transformation of the feminist experience, language—the visible sign of change—has also been the critical index of that change.

In conclusion, the question may be raised: Has there been progress in the women's movement in the past two decades? To ask the question is to answer it. When one compares the self-consciousness of women of two decades ago with that of today's women, one notes that the intervening years have produced vast changes in the way women identify themselves. This is reflected in the inclusive language which has become part of our society. It is also reflected in the achievements of women in the business and corporate world, in the professions, and in many other vocational areas. It is reflected in the *near* acceptance of women's right to choose the number of children they will have, in the sharing of household chores (especially the care of children), and in divorce settlements in which husbands remain partners in the care of children. Though much remains to be done, much has been achieved. The fact that the national environment of the 1980s is now threatening these achievements does not diminish the magnitude of the advances. In this context, the language changes which have preceded and accompanied the alteration in the status of women provide the *raison d'être* of this book.

Notes

1. Many presses now have a Women's Studies series, including Pergamon Press, State University of New York Press, The University of Tennessee Press, Indiana University Press, and Transaction Press. There are also several presses that publish books only on, about, and by women, such as the Feminist Press.

2. Boehm (1933:236) also refers to language as the key to the most essential traits of a people.

3. The "internal structure" refers to the structural make-up of a language system, such as sentence patterns, pronunciation, and word patterns of English. The "external function" refers to the meaning and social significance of a given internal structure and explains why the same words or pronunciation or sentence pattern may have a different meaning depending on the dynamics of the linguistic and social context. Both linguistic concepts are taken from Garvin (1972).

4. According to Hayes (1933), cultural and political nationalism became part of nineteenth century liberalism and thus created popular support for the struggle of "oppressed nationalities" to free themselves from alien domination. National traditions and national languages were then revived.

5. See Boehm (1933: 236).

6. One of the first scholarly collections in the field focused on power and language: *Language and Sex: Difference and Dominance*, edited by Barrie Thorne and Nancy Henley (1975). This work documented numerous research studies in its annotated bibliography. More recently, the bibliography has been extended, along with current articles by leaders in the field, in *Language, Gender and Society* (Thorne, Kramarae, and Henley, 1983).

To date there have been over a dozen books published on language and gender. Some have resulted from conference, such as *Communication, Language, and Sex* (Berryman and Eman, 1980) and *The Sociology of the Languages of American Women* (Dubois and Crouch, 1976). Others have offered critical insights and frameworks for analysis; these include *Women and Men Speaking: Frameworks for Analysis* (Kramarae, 1981) and *Words and Women: New Language in New Times* (Miller and Swift, 1975). At least one edited collection has dealt with language from a literary standpoint—*Women and Language in Literature and Society* (McConnell-Ginet, Borker, and Furman, 1980). A few others have offered suggestions for dealing with linguistic sexism in the school setting; for example, *Changing Words in a Changing World* (Nilsen, 1978) and *Sex Role Stereotyping in the Schools* (Weiner, 1980).

7. For a more complete discussion on the development of nationalism, see Hayes (1926 and 1931).

8. Garvin (1972) has defined a national language, using nonlinguistic criteria, as a language which "serves the entire territory of a nation rather than just some regional or ethnic subdivision" and which functions as a national symbol.

9. These four criteria were proposed by Hayes (1926) in *Essays on Nationalism*.

10. *Volksgeist* refers to the tracing of the history and culture of a people to one common root (Boehm 1933: 233).

11. It is in the initial stages of national development, when cultural nationalism is evolving, that the comparison seems most relevant. It is not so apparent in the maturer stages, when political nationalism is too often followed by the oppression of minorities. Nor is the characteristic of a separate territory of significance to a feminist community.

12. Advances have been made within professional organizations. Sessions on Language and Sex were organized by Kramarae and Schulz for the ninth and tenth World Congress on Sociology, bringing many researchers together. In addition, national organizations—e.g., MLA (Modern Language Association) and LSA (Linguistic Society of America)—organized an active Women's Caucus to lobby for women's interests and especially to further research in gender, language, and literature. The MLA has been especially active in women's concerns; they established a Commission on the Status of Women in the Profession. Some regional organizations also formed special sessions at their annual conferences, for example, NEMLA (Northeast Modern Language Association), which holds a session on Linguistics and Women's Studies.

13. *Women and Language News*, edited by Kramarae and Treichler, appears

three times per academic year with updates on continuing research. This newsletter originally began when the field of language and gender was first developing, and it served as a form of networking. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* offers a forum for scholarly papers on several topics, especially language, communication, and gender.

14. The Committee on the Role and Image of Women in the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) was active in obtaining a resolution at the 1974 NCTE convention directing the Council to create style guidelines ensuring the use of nonsexist language in NCTE publications. (For the 1985 version of the NCTE Nonsexist Style Guidelines, see Nilsen, Part I, in this book).

15. See Hayes (1926; 1933) for a more thorough discussion.

16. Language planning is a discipline applied throughout the world often with the purpose of instituting linguistic equality and the legitimization of dialects and languages through conscious, planned, deliberate change initiated by social institutions, agencies, commercial institutions, or cultural promotion societies.

17. See Conklin and Lourie (1983) for discussion.

18. Some research has noted the conservative nature of women's use of language in speech communities around the world. Nichols (1983), in her study of Black residents of a rural coastal area and a river island in South Carolina, closely links social context with language use by women. She found that women exhibited both innovative and conservative behavior, depending on the occupational and education experiences to which they had access.

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