Ann Weatherall: *Gender, Language and Discourse.* Hove: Routledge, 2002. 177pp, £16.99, ISBN 0-415-16906-2 (pbk).

A flick through the bestselling books in the popular psychology section of the local bookshop provides the following words of wisdom on gender and language:

'Most women have the brain organisation to out-talk and out-nag any man on the planet…nagging becomes a corrosive habit that causes great stress, disharmony, resentment, anger and may easily end with a violent physical reaction.' (Pease and Pease, 2002, p19-23)

'Men and women seldom mean the same things, even when they use the same words…a "literal" translation of a woman's words could easily mislead a man who is used to using speech as a means of conveying only facts and information' (Gray, 1993, p60-61)

Gray's famous book even includes a Venusian/Martian dictionary to help us translate what people of the other gender mean when they talk, since, of course, we come from different planets.

So the popular notion seems to be that, whether due to the processes of evolution or socialisation, women and men speak different languages. This is one of the key issues which Ann Weatherall tackles in her contribution to Routledge's 'Women and Psychology' series, placing the idea within its historical context and outlining psychological research that questions the common assumption of gender differences in speech. As such, 'Gender, Language and Discourse' provides a welcome counter to the proliferation of books stating that essential gender differences in communication exist and are responsible for 'relationship problems', by which what is meant, of course, is problems in heterosexual male-female relationships. Weatherall also examines the other main question that has been asked in this field of study: whether language itself can be sexist. She argues persuasively that these two issues should be considered together rather than separately, suggesting that both sexist language and gender differences in speech are aspects of the social construction of gender.

I would highly recommend Weatherall's book to anyone interested in these issues of gender and language. It gives a very readable and thorough overview of both traditional and social constructionist psychological work in this area, bringing in relevant materials from other disciplines. Beyond this, the book is a useful contribution to the literatures on both gender and language separately. It draws on, and has implications for, the overall debates about gender difference research, quantitative versus qualitative methods in feminist psychology, and the proposal that gender is something we perform rather than a stable identity. It also explores broader themes about the importance of language in human understanding, providing a clear introduction to the methods of discourse and conversation analysis which I found very useful when teaching students who were grappling with these ideas for the first time.

The book is extremely well-structured. Each chapter ends with a section that summarises its content and links it to the material to be covered next. The final chapter (2002: 146) gives an excellent overview of the rest of the book, clarifying how the various strands come together and drawing out some intriguing directions for future research. This reiteration of key points means that even the more complex ideas towards the end of the book become clear. The writing style is friendly and accessible, with extensive use of examples, meaning that it is an interesting and enjoyable read. The relevant debates are laid out in such a way that the reader is constantly challenged to address their own assumptions. For example, I found the conversation analytic critique of assertiveness training (2002:112) very thought-provoking, especially the suggestion that assertiveness privileges features commonly associated with

male speech (directness and simplicity) and that teaching people to 'say no' in this way runs counter to the hesitant, indirect way in which people of both genders usually refuse. As a feminist I found the implications this has for women rejecting men's sexual advances extremely provocative, since it seems possible to argue that a direct 'no' might understandably be read as 'yes'.

I will now provide a brief summary of the book, including my experience of using it as both a feminist psychologist and as a teacher in higher education.

Weatherall begins by briefly discussing issues of power in language to lead into her argument that representations of women and men in language and gendered ways of using language are both part of the same process – the social construction of gender – and should therefore be considered together (2002: 7). Both sexist language and explanations for gender differences in language have functioned to disadvantage women.

When I explored the issue of sexist language with students I used the poem 'Exile' by Anne Paley which relates gender inequality to language that ignores women (e.g. the generic use of 'man' or 'he'), defines them narrowly (e.g. women taking their father/husband's name), or deprecates them (e.g. the existence of ten times as many words for sexually promiscuous women as there are for men and the negative connotations of most of these) (2002: 13). My students had difficulty accepting that this sexism in language was important. This is probably due to the tendency for feminist efforts to challenge sexist language to be trivialised (2002: 31). Weatherall argues that the trouble stirred up by these efforts indicates that such language rules are not neutral, but important and deeply ideological. She supports this with evidence that use of masculine generics, which only became standard in the 1800s, impacts negatively on women's recall and self esteem (2002: 27-28). She also cites findings that sexual violence against women tends to be reported in the passive voice, hiding male agency in the crime (e.g. 'the woman was raped by the man', rather than 'the man raped the woman') (2002: 30). After covering these issues, some of my students still found them problematic. One Spanish student felt that gender was more entrenched in languages such as French and German than English, and Weatherall does touch on French feminist debates (2002: 17). The students also called for more consideration of ways in which gendered language may disadvantage men as well as women, for example in implicit assumptions that child-carers will be mothers (mother and baby rooms, etc.)

I also used Weatherall's book with students to examine gender differences in language use and the explanations that have been put forward for these. Weatherall succinctly summarises the general problems with gender difference research (2002: 34), and illustrates the lack of consensus about psychological differences between women and men with the examples of verbal ability and voice. Little evidence exists to support the commonly held notion that females have superior verbal ability to men, and physical differences between men and women have failed to account for sex differences in voice, rather voice pitch seems to be used by people as a cultural marker of gender. Japanese women use higher pitch when speaking Japanese than English since Japanese is characterised as having distinct male and female speech registers (2002: 87), and gay men and women use voice pitch to indicate gender identity (2002: 52).

In relation to speech style, Weatherall reports that there is 'a fundamental lack of agreement about the linguistic features that differentiate between women's and men's speech' (2002:149). Two conventional explanations have been put forward for this: the form-function problem and the problem of context. The former points out that most linguistic forms are not related to one straightforward communicative function. For example, the tag question (e.g. it's a lovely day *isn't it*?) was originally seen as part of women's language, signalling desire for confirmation and

lack of self-confidence. However, women and men have both been found to use tags. As well as tentativeness they can also indicate concern for the addressee or encouragement for them to take a turn. One male colleague of mine admitted to a concern that he used tags rhetorically to compel the addressee to agree with him. The problem of context points out that factors other than gender influence speech style, such as the setting and the familiarity of participants. Quantitative researchers have taken this as a cue to carry out further research taking account of all context variables. Social constructionist researchers have taken a more 'discursive turn' (2002: 75) viewing gender as something that is produced through language and discourse.

Weatherall suggests that essentialist understandings of gender differences, whether social or biological, serve to make male dominance seem natural and unquestionable. She gives two examples relevant to language: women's 'shrill' voices being used to prevent them from getting jobs in broadcasting, and women's preferred topics of conversation being belittled as merely 'gossip' (2002: 42). The two traditional explanations for alleged gender differences are the 'dominance' approach, taken by Lakoff (that women's uncertain speech originates in their powerless social position) and the 'difference' approach, taken by authors such as Tannen and Gray (that men and women develop different communication patterns: cooperative and tentative for women, competitive and direct for men). Both approaches hide the similarities between men's and women's forms of communication and the differences between different ages, ethnic or class groups within each gender category. They also both construct women's language as somehow inferior to men's. Generally research on gender differences in speech, like sexist language, supports and reproduces women's disadvantage in society (2002: 152).

The second half of Weatherall's book is devoted to exploring the 'discursive turn' in gender and language research, which includes the move towards research based on ethnomethodology, conversation analysis and discourse analysis. Weatherall provides an excellent summary of the social constructionist position which questions the taken-for-granted naturalness and inevitability of two genders. She points out the pre 1800s view that there was one sex, with women an inferior version of men, and the fact that as many as 5% of infants are born 'intersex' but are forced to fit into either the male or female category, unlike in other cultures, such as the Navaho, where they are treated separately and with great respect (Geertz, 1993). Weatherall concludes that gender is something that is 'done', for example, female telephone sex workers have been found to construct a feminine identity through their style of interaction in order to appeal to male clients, and a male sex worker who was posing as a woman was found to do the same thing. 'Gender does not reside in the psychological make-up of the individual but is produced by a complex, contradictory and fluctuating set of social norms' (2002: 84). Language and discourse are important because it is through them that gender is produced as 'an important and salient social category' (2002: 85).

In the late 1980s, following the discursive turn, discourse analysts like Gough and Gill began to investigate ways in which people constructed their masculinity or femininity through their use of language and also how sexism was reproduced through the evaluation of linguistic characteristics associated with gender. Some conversation analysts argue that researchers should restrict themselves to times when gender is clearly relevant to the speakers themselves: times when they explicitly attend to it. Otherwise, they argue, we are in danger of perpetuating essentialist notions of gender by imposing them on our participants. I found this idea challenging since I view gender as an implicit part of most interactions. Weatherall herself argues that confining analysis to times when gender is explicitly relevant could limit our understanding of gender as an omnipresent feature that structures our interactions and our lives. This argument revisits the quantitative/qualitative disputes over essentialism and researcher objectivity, and I would have

been interested in a further discussion of how issues like reflexivity are addressed by analysts on either side. However, I'm aware that this touches on a vast debate within discourse and conversation analysis which would be difficult to summarise briefly.

In the penultimate chapter of her book, Weatherall outlines Wetherell and Edley's version of discursive psychology which incorporates both the conversation analytic approach that focuses on how identities are invoked and managed to achieve certain things in interactions, and the poststructuralist discursive approach that explores the way wider systems of meaning are drawn on when people position themselves.

One of the future directions for research highlighted by Weatherall in her final chapter is the relationship between gender and sexuality, and the way in which talk about gender 'produces and supports heterosexual norms' (2002: 155). As Rubin (1989) pointed out in her influential paper, the word 'sex' in the English language means both gender identity (e.g. the female sex) and sexual activity (e.g. to have sex). This 'semantic merging' reflects and perpetuates the assumption that sexuality can be reduced to sexual intercourse between a man and a woman. There certainly seems to be scope for more exploration of how the language of gender reproduces heterosexism, how people use speech to signify sexuality (2002: 105) and further, how the language of gender relates to the language of sexuality. For example, the two-category system of gender (female/male) seems to link with a similar binary system of sexuality (gay/straight) to marginalize and render problematic those who identify as intersex, transgender or bisexual. Some non-heterosexual people use speech and language to subvert the binary gender system (e.g. 2002: 86). There is little psychological literature on such matters. From my communications with other psychologists who research sexuality from a constructionist stance, I have found that most of us have to draw on queer theory material based in sociology and cultural studies rather than psychology.

Returning to the point I made at the beginning of this review, I feel that the issues covered in Weatherall's book are extremely important and relevant in the current cultural climate that sees gender difference in communication as natural and inevitable and the two-category system of gender as unproblematic. I only wish that this material could reach beyond academic psychology to a wider audience.

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