
Joachim Grzega

"This Reader is designed to introduce students to some of the main topics in the area of Language and Gender." This is how Jennifer Coates opens her compilation of papers covering language and gender research since the mid-1970's. and I would add that the volume is not only recommendable to students, but also to researchers, since nowadays language and gender research has become so diversified that it is hard even for researchers to keep track of all developments. The authors of the articles are mostly sociolinguists, but also come from the fields of social science, anthropology, and psychology, and include important names such as Penelope Brown, Deborah Cameron, Jenny Cheshire, Susan Gal, Janet Holmes, Deborah Tannen, Peter Trudgill, and the editor herself. The articles offer an insight into a multitude of sub-topics and represent several theoretical and methodological approaches. They basically dwell on problem areas in English-speaking countries (particularly in the US), but there is also a study focussing on genderlect situations in Japanese, in Yanyuwa (an Australian aboriginal language), and in an Hungarian-German community. (Nevertheless, the preponderance of English-based articles may reflect the fact that genderlect studies are already very advanced in English-speaking countries, whereas there still remains a lot to be done in other countries). Most of the papers have been abridged by the editor, two have been especially revised by their authors, some have been left in their original forms. The articles are taken from academic sources - with one exception: In view of the tremendous success of Deborah Tannen's two books That's Not What I Meant (1986) and You Just Don't Understand (1990) (both also translated into various languages including German), Coates has included a chapter from Tannen's first popular book, "Talk in the Intimate Relationship: His and Hers" (435–445), as well as a very critical review of Tannen's approach by Selma Troemel-Ploetz, "Selling the Apolitical" (446–458). Apart from the exhaustive collection of thirty-two articles - the book contains about 500 pages of research studies and results - there are two valuable tables of transcription and an index of the most basic keywords to the variety of genderlect studies.

After a brief general introduction, where she tries to sketch out the development of language and gender studies, Coates presents a selection of articles on various branches, or approaches, of (socio)linguistic gender studies and orders these, more or less, in a chronological way. The different sub-parts are entitled "Gender
Differences in Pronunciation and Grammar” (7–76; six articles), “Gender Differences in Conversational Practice” (77–160; four articles), “Conversational Dominance in Mixed Talk” (161–210; four articles), “Same-Sex Talk” (211–294; five articles), “Women’s Talk in the Public Domain” (295–372; four articles), “Theoretical Debates (1): Gender or Power?” (373–412; three articles), “Theoretical Debates (2): Difference or Dominance?” (413–458; three articles), and “Looking to the Future” (459–510; three articles). It is a pity that Coates does not give the original sources of the articles (especially the year would be interesting), but the positive aspects of the volume clearly outnumber the negative ones. It is very commendable, for instance, that Coates has written an introduction to each part of the book, all consisting of the following components: an explanation of the relevant basic terms, a summary of the corresponding research work in general, a critical summary of the included papers, a reminder of some desiderata and a short further recommended reading section.\footnote{Coates’s introductions are generally well-drawn, except for a passage on p. 2 where she says, “We also know that in all known societies it is the way men speak that is held in high esteem, while women’s ways of talking are compared unfavourably with men’s.” I think this cannot be accepted when realizing that it is women who are responsible for child-rearing and who therefore use and teach the more prestigious, more standard-like speech.}

Due to this concept, the reader has access to both summarizing texts\footnote{As an introductory reading in sociolinguistic classes, instructors may choose the introductions by Coates, or the last article of the volume, “The Question of Questions: Beyond Binary Thinking” by Janet M. Bing and Victoria L. Bergvall (495–510), which originally appeared in Bergvall/Bing/Freed (1996: 1–30).} and original works. However, the price will turn out to be a little inconvenient for students. The hardcover edition (January 1998) is $72.95 (US); students may therefore be advised to purchase the paperback edition (December 1997) for $33.95 (US).\footnote{At the time this review was finished (April 2000), the hardcover edition was out of print anyway; for details, see Blackwell’s homepage under www.blackwellpub.com.}

References


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