Deficit, Dominance, Difference and Discursive: the changing approaches to language and gender

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In 1949 when Simone de Beauvoir made her statement regarding the ‘becoming’ of woman (The Second Sex [1949] 2009), she predicted the future of gender studies. Research into language and gender now considers how language (both what is said by people and about people) impacts upon how society informs and interprets gender. Words such as ‘female’ and ‘male’ describe sex differentiations, whilst ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ can be attached to either of those differentiations to describe gender. However, in the past language and gender has been studied in diverse ways, often reflecting the social milieu of the time. This essay examines the ‘Deficit’, ‘Dominance’, ‘Difference’ and ‘Discursive’ approaches (the four Ds) with which linguists have engaged during the last hundred years, in order to critically evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the work of their respective authors, and to offer a personal perspective on the most useful approach.

In 1922 when the grammarian Otto Jespersen published Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin, social and cultural mores meant that sex and gender were more closely contained within patriarchy than today. The ‘Deficit’ approach is attributed to Jespersen, being a retrospectively named term applied to a way of examining language and gender which ascribes normative (standard) and non-standard, or deficient, roles to feature users. In Jespersen’s work, male language is normative and the language of others (the ‘child’, the ‘foreigner’ and the ‘woman’) is considered extra to that norm and, as such, deficient. However, any document read after a ninety year lapse will deliver a new viewpoint on the original work and, although probably not considered a fault in his time, the first weakness of Jespersen’s work is the perspective from which he writes. Although aware that ‘[t]he normative way of viewing language is fraught with some great dangers’ (1922, 25), Jespersen, nevertheless, privileges ‘men’s’ language as having more ‘vigour’ and ‘vividness’, men as the ‘chief renovators of language’ and men as having a larger vocabulary (247-248). He poses the ‘male’s’ use of sentence structure as complex and adept ‘while a feminine period ... is joined together on a string of ands and similar words’ (251). A second weakness in Jespersen’s work is the data. He uses quotations from literature and, therefore, fictional examples support the view that women do not finish their sentences as a result of their not finishing their thoughts: ‘She thought in blanks, as girls do, and some women’ (Jespersen 1922, 251). Jespersen makes sweeping generalisations unsubstantiated by empirical investigation; he cites Greenough and Kittredge’s statistic-less findings and supports their assurance that ‘Nice for “fine” must have originated’ as a result of ‘feminine peculiarity’ (1922, 245). Jespersen continues to offer emphatic declaration in
place of measurable evidence: ‘There is no doubt ... that women in all countries are shy of mentioning certain parts of the body’ (1922, 245). Although Jespersen admits in his introduction that he only uses as evidence information from friends and from books, the information is anecdotal: ‘Others have told me that men will generally say ...’ (245), and the books date back as far as 1567 (243). However, sometimes Jespersen is objective; he defers the separate language argument (of men and women) to tradition: ‘linguistic differences due to custom’ (240), and also to social class: ‘The distinction ... is not one of sex really, but of rank ... Prakit is spoken by men of an inferior class’ (242). In this relative strength he foreshadows later approaches and asks, like Robin Lakoff after him, that his work be a starting point for further study (Jespersen 1922, 8).

Robin Tolmach Lakoff presented Language and Woman’s Place (1975) ‘less as the final word ... than as a goad to further research’ (Lakoff 1975, 40). In this she instigated the ‘Dominance’ approach, which ascribes language variances between men and women to the dominance of men within society. Riding on the second wave of the feminist movement in the late 1960s, Lakoff’s work viewed the field of language and gender through a new lens, inspired by ideological and revolutionary change around the Western world, which challenged traditional patriarchal values. However, some similarities to Jespersen’s ‘Deficit’ approach remained. Like Jespersen, Lakoff referred to a ‘women’s language’ and she uses largely anecdotal evidence. Her use of personal ‘introspection’ was similarly admitted in the introduction: ‘It is my impression, though I do not have precise statistical evidence’ (1975, 49), an admission which renders her work more social commentary than empirical analysis. She justifies her audacious extrapolation overtly: ‘I do feel that the majority of claims I make will hold for the majority of speakers of English; that, in fact, much may, mutatis mutandis, be universal’ (40). Yet in reality her claims are pertinent to only a privileged section of society, a society similar to her own. A further weakness in Lakoff’s work is her use of gender generalisation for both men and women, for example: ‘many men’, ‘Men tend to’, and ‘men – the devisors of euphemism’ (55). In one example she interprets language use as demonstrating how ‘women’ are ‘not expected to make decisions on important matters’ (43), further reflecting the ‘Deficit’ approach when writing, ‘little boys innovate, in their play, much more than little girls’ (41).

In 1980, Dale Spender took Lakoff’s ‘Dominance’ approach a stage further in her book Man Made Language. She begins by pointing to the problems with the ‘Deficit’ theory, then distances her own from Lakoff’s work: ‘she (Lakoff) states that women “lack” authority and seriousness, they “lack” conviction and confidence’ (Spender 1980, 8). In this she points to the ‘Disparate’ interpretations of language use, then swiftly moves towards her own agenda; with deft incorporation of a few ‘male
linguists’ aligned with Jespersen, she seizes upon her idea of ‘expos[ing] their appropriation of language’ (1980, 11). Although her theme of male dominance is strident there are echoes of the ‘Deficit’ approach within the notion of female ‘negative space’ (Julia Stanley in Spender, 1980, 20). The term reads that since males were the authors of dictionaries, they invented a male lexis which is unmarked (normative) language in a ‘positive semantic space’; the remaining space therefore, is termed ‘negative’- a tenet of deficiency to which Spender refers throughout. Spender’s book is (like those of Jespersen and Lakoff) another social document; her use of occupation titles: ‘lady doctor, a female surgeon, woman lawyer’ (1980, 20) sets the work within its own time. Spender similarly uses generalisations and cites ‘research (which) is by no means conclusive’ (46). While anecdotal and reactionary, both Lakoff’s and Spender’s texts, in their attempt to resist patriarchy within a feminist atmosphere, are important developments in the field of language and gender, which led to further linguistic investigation.

Deborah Tannen undertook this further study and so popularised the ‘Difference’ approach with You Just Don’t Understand: Women and Men in Conversation (1990). This approach develops the ‘two-culture’ model of ‘men’ and ‘women’, where children are socialised within two separate groups. A situation which Tannen suggests engenders ‘mis-communication’. Tannen distances herself from the Dominance approach by eliminating blame: ‘Taking a cross-cultural approach to male-female conversations ... without accusing anyone of being wrong or crazy’ (Tannen 1990, 47). In the preface Tannen sets out her thesis, ‘There “are” gender differences in ways of speaking’ (17); although she says she knows this through her own and others’ research, much of the book is based upon personal, anecdotal and fictional evidence, demonstrating the initial weakness within the ‘Difference’ approach. For examples she uses herself and her husband, her friends and their husbands and liberally: ‘a man I had just met at a party’ (Tannen 1990, 124), ‘most women’ (189) and ‘[a] woman [who] was telling me’ (40). A second weakness of Tannen’s work is her extrapolation of results without empiric support; she uses small scale studies and evidence from couples to make generalisations about ‘men’ and ‘women’. In a ‘small survey’ of six people Tannen cites the responses of the four men and two women as ‘evidence’ for the statement that for ‘women’ independence is not as significant as for ‘men’ (Tannen 1990, 41).

One strength of Tannen’s work, however, is provided in her attempt to offer alternatives to issues within the ‘Dominance’ approach; for example, her response to ‘women’s’ indirectness is presented not as a result of subservience but of sensitivity (1990, 225). This conversation between the approaches is alluded to by Alice Freed in her criticism of Tannen, ‘We Understand Perfectly: A
Critique of Tannen’s View of Cross-sex Communication’ (1992). Freed points to others’ praise of Tannen’s even-handedness towards attention given to ‘men’s’ language use, for example Eckert and McConnell-Ginet’s claim that: ‘[w]here much work on language and gender ignores male behaviour by treating it as a neutral norm from which women deviate, this work has the great merit of trying to account for men’s behaviour as well as for women’s’ (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1994, 436).

Freed’s (1992) major criticism of Tannen cites earlier work carried out by Goodwin on language difference in children (the two-culture situation Tannen posits) which states that the similarities between the two cultures are as important as the differences; a study which undermines Tannen’s argument entirely (Freed 1992, 3). Tannen’s ‘Difference’ approach aims to engage with and benefit from the emotional investment maintained within heterosexual relationships. The binary concept (man/woman, positive/negative, deferment/gratification) by its nature seeks answers; a problem invites a solution. Therefore, a study which highlights differences (albeit without substantial evidence) between the hetero-sexes, and moreover offers answers in order to assuage those suggested differences, will generate more attention and more revenue than one which posits parity.

Tannen’s argument within the popular science genre is about essentialist binary opposition, a notion which the ‘Discursive’ approach seeks to investigate.

In 1963 the French philosopher and poststructuralist theorist, Jacques Derrida, brought about the notion of ‘differance’ combining ideas of ‘deferment’ and of ‘difference’ (in Leitch 2001, 1818), moving away from the binary and towards multiplicity. He situated the self as constructed through discourse and in so doing contributed new ideas towards the study of language and gender. In place of polarisation, the ‘Discursive’ approach offers new possibilities of theory which could be seen as linear, spherical, and even liquid. This flexibility is the main strength of the ‘Discursive’ approach. Linguists working in the field of gender now consider how gender is ‘constructed’ in its relation to cultural variables such as race, ethnicity, geography, class and economics; and how the factors which entail a society ‘influence’ how we construct gender: ‘gender is not an attribute of individuals but a way of making sense of transactions ... it is conceptualized as a verb, not a noun’ (Crawford 1995, 12). Gender, therefore, ‘becomes’ (to use de Beauvoir’s word) more about the behaviour we adopt in order to facilitate meaning and about how we perform our various ‘transactions’.

Like garments handed down from generations before us, we wear our gender in order to signal one of the primary elements in our lives – sex. Historically we have constructed our lives around the family, which places the sexual relation of procreation as salient; unsurprising as reproduction is a survival imperative. In this situation sex differentiation at birth has been a priority. Although
approximately two percent of births have an intersex condition, this tends to be viewed as a taboo topic (Blackless et al. 2000, 161): ‘physicians recognize and emphasise to parents of intersexed children that sex as well as gender is socially constructed, but this is rarely discussed in public domains’ (Coates 1998, 501). Some cultures more readily accept biological difference, creating a three or even four gendered society; the Guevodoces who live in the Dominican Republic, the Sambia of New Guinea and the Pima (Native Americans) are examples (Coates 1998, 502). However, Western society although recently more tolerant regarding shifts in gender is still attached to the reproduction of binary gender roles through social frameworks such as capitalism and patriarchy. From the gender assigning moment of: ‘It’s a girl/boy’, we ‘genderise’; pink for girls and blue for boys; dolls and cars; dresses and trousers. Childhood turns to adulthood, and consumerism perpetuates ‘genderising’ with fashion, music, and media. How we live our lives, where and who with, all contribute to how we reflect who we are. In order to make sense of these variables we enlist stereotypes which then support beliefs.

Deborah Cameron, a linguist within the ‘Discursive’ field of language and gender studies, demonstrates (from a feminist perspective) how versions of gender stereotypes can change according to responses to shifts in the economic climate. She shows that how these shifts are interpreted and by whom influences the reproduction of patriarchal ideology. Power structures inherent within patriarchy create gender behaviours which are explained by that power; as Sattel explains: ‘[t]he starting point for understanding masculinity lies, not in its contrast with femininity, but in the asymmetrical dominance and prestige which accrues to males in this society’ (Sattel in Thorne et al. 1983, 119). Sattel’s statement reveals the ‘discursive’ element to the reading of gender; a move away from the binary and towards a broader conversation. Moreover, Cameron demonstrates how masculinity is subject to manipulation. Her essay, ‘Men are from Earth, women are from Earth’ (2006), is a reframing of the popular science book Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus (Gray 1996) and seeks to show how stereotypical myths around the subject of masculinity; for example, ‘the strong silent type’ have changed in response to economic and ideological shifts in society. As the changes occur so we develop new stereotypes to support and justify them. Due to the demise of manufacturing and the growth of the service industry, developments in the ‘human potential’ (Cameron 2006, 139) or therapy market have meant a privileging of communication skills. Cameron points out that whereby previously females were viewed as inept communicators (as in the Deficit/Dominance approach) more lately men have been ascribed this characteristic ‘not because the actual communicative behaviour of men and women is thought to have changed’ but that ‘male behaviour has been re-framed as dysfunctional and
damaging’ (2006, 138). This she asserts is damaging to feminism as it reinforces difference and re-enacts inequality. Cameron’s essay demonstrates how the ‘Discursive’ approach considers sociological factors within the study of language and gender.

The three approaches: ‘Deficit’, ‘Dominance’ and ‘Difference’, consider how gender variances expressed through language were visible within the physical manifestations of gender: of ‘men’ and of ‘women’. The more recent ‘Discursive’ approach looks at how gender is constructed through language within a cultural framework; no longer the subjects, ‘men’ and ‘women’, are the conduits through which gender becomes the subject. However, if the ‘Discursive’ approach retains group nomenclature such as ‘men’ and ‘women’, and polarised expressions of gender such as ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’, the study will remain bound within these terms and their limitations. With almost 3.5 billion of each ‘group’ in the world it is almost ludicrous to retain these categories as discrete areas of study. As Coates advises: ‘we need to be wary of perpetuating stereotypes and myths which result from the over-simplification of complex data’ (1998, 479). Herein lies the paradox of the ‘Discursive’ approach: gender is a moving target; if the terms (stereotypes) are not fixed, the study and interpretation cannot be fixed either. Any study of language and gender must remain fully aware of the ephemeral nature of that study.

To summarise, as a twenty-first century student of language and gender I am not persuaded by the ‘Deficit’, ‘Dominance’ or ‘Difference’ approaches. This is because the findings of these studies are generally explained as evidence of their supporters’ theories. Jespersen interpreted his findings as evidence of his patriarchal society, supporting his place within it. Lakoff and Spender interpreted their findings as explanation of the social system they wished to reject – patriarchy, and Tannen interpreted her findings as evidence of equally weighted difference between men and women (a controversially popular and lucrative response). However, in all three theories we have the benefit of hindsight, which provides reflections of the cultural framework in which the approaches existed. In turn, the feminist movement has, in interacting with these approaches, gained forward motion from the discussion. This demonstrates how the study of language and gender is inextricably linked with society and simultaneously how changes in cultural frameworks have impacted upon linguistic study. Therefore, I believe that the ‘Discursive’ approach is the most useful in its rejection of essentialism (man/woman) and with its recognition and exploration of stereotypes and their construction. The ‘Discursive’ approach takes the study of language and gender forward into a vast area of human psychological exploration.
References


