CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON LANGUAGE AND DISCOURSE IN THE NEW WORLD ORDER

Edited by
Faiz Sathi Abdullah,
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Critical Perspectives on Language and Discourse in the New World Order

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

WOMEN'S LANGUAGE STYLES:
STRATEGIC MANIPULATION
OF LEADERSHIP AND POWER

JARIAH MOHD JAN, UNIVERSITY OF MALAYA

This paper aims to examine the manner in which language styles reflect and affect the conception of leadership and power of women in leadership roles. The theoretical approach adopted for this study is mainly based on Conversational Analysis (CA) as provided by Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974) in which the mechanisms that determine people's use of language in an extended, open conversational setting are explored. Using this approach, the ways in which conversation works between men and women leaders can be described and explained. Holmes' (1984) work on "tentative" language and Jariah Mohd Jan's (2006) work on "women and assertiveness" will also be referred to. The findings of this study will particularly raise awareness regarding the language styles prescribed by women in power and in due process such consciousness raising could educate and initiate training processes that advance the position of women.

Introduction

General conceptions about women's roles are now changing. Patriarchal ideology that depicts men as superior to women and in control of the public domain and women as domestic care-takers who hold the family together economically, emotionally and spiritually, is being increasingly challenged. In many countries, women are no longer left out in the decision-making process. In fact, there are currently women in decision-making positions who are very successful in their careers. This brings about change in the family structure whereby there are fewer men and
women who play traditional family roles (Zweigenthal and Domhoff 1998).

In recent years, women have risen above the constraints that have been placed upon them. Their self-identity and increasing dominance change in tandem with the changes in a society. As gender stereotypes change, so has the portrayal of women in non-traditional roles that are becoming more and more acknowledged and accepted. There are specific factors that contribute to the role changes experienced by women. Those factors, as pointed out by Pinto (1998), include prolonged acute economic crisis, the breakdown of the extended family due to many husbands abandoning family home and single motherhood, a high unemployment rate among men, the migration of men or young people or of families to look for work, and the main support of non-governmental organisations for women at risk. All of these are elements that promote social and ideological change regarding the roles of women in our society.

According to Diekmann and Eagly (2002), women's roles are changing and they incorporate this social change into their personalities. In their survey of 800 adults on their gendered personality characteristics, they found that women are increasingly exhibiting personality traits that are typically associated with men. Women are beginning to express their repressed inner feelings, and are feeling more recognised, being inspired and encouraged to speak in public, holding leadership roles, and are in due course becoming prominent figures in modern-day society. In other words, the women of today are perceived as having become much more independent, assertive and competitive. They appear to have adopted characteristics that equip them to be breadwinners.

**Gendered Communication and Work Styles**

Women and men, as groups, tend to have different communication and work styles. This has been observed and documented by sociologists, psychologists, and other social observers, despite continued debate about why such differences exist (be they due to nature or nurture) and why typically masculine behaviour tends to be assigned a higher value in the workplace (Holmes 2005, Jariah Mohd Jan 2006). Coates (1986, 161) asserts the importance of both the difference and the dominance explanations of the differences observed in women's and men's conversational styles. She suggests that to explain patterns of mixed-sex interaction, a model needs to recognise patriarchal power at work.

Coates (1986, 161) also claims that it is possible to talk of "women's style" and "men's style". In the context of single-sex groups, women's
relatively high frequency of linguistic features that are supportive of other group members, and minimise conflict. Men’s speech in single-sex groups has a relatively high frequency of features which establish hierarchies within the group, are information-oriented rather than socially oriented, and can be described as competitive in function.

Coates’ position on this issue has shifted from that of her early gender and language work. In her 1986 edition of *Women, Men and Language*, she subscribes to the model of sub-cultural differences based primarily on different gender traits being encouraged in children:

> It is surely desirable that, as speakers, we all have access to as wide a range of styles as possible. The ideal, androgynous speaker would be able to switch from assertiveness to tentativeness as circumstances required, and would be as good at listening as speaking. (Coates 1986, preface)

This suggests that differences between male and female speakers are just a matter of stylistic choice. Only a slight acknowledgement is made in this preface to the relative positions of women and men in the social hierarchy in that:

> Linguistic differences are merely a reflection of social differences. And as long as society views men and women as different and – unequal – then differences in the language of men and women will persist. (ibid)

Coates has recently changed her stand on the following: 1) the extent to which power is a variable in style of speech; 2) the extent to which dominance is achieved through speech styles; and 3) the extent to which inequality is produced and maintained in language use, rather than language use merely reflecting social inequality. Hence, in her 1986 work mentioned above she says, “... while not directly responsible for their underachievement, the way girls use language is a contributory factor to their disadvantaged position” (Coates 1986, 160); the 1993 revision, however, reads “[t]he differential usage of interactional resources by teachers, girls and boys inside the classroom is a key element in sustaining male dominance” (Coates 1993, 202). This recent work rightly reveals a conviction that gender differences in language use are an important factor in producing gender-related inequalities (see Acker 1991, Antal 1993 and Holmes 2005). The existence of such gender inequalities is apparent in the workplace environment especially in the unequal encounters between men and women, and is the focus of this study.
The papers in this book explore language use in a broad range of discourse fields. They provide theoretical perspectives on global orientations to social, political and economic transformations in the "New World Order" (NWO), and extend these with studies on the impacts of such transformations at the local, national, regional and global levels. The discussions highlight current concerns among academics and political commentators about the potential social impact of representations of the NWO in language and discourse. The present work is important in raising social consciousness towards the central role that language and discourse play in the construction of shifting/multiple identities. In this way, the roles of critical discourse analysis and indeed that of the analysts themselves are emancipative and socially transformative. The value of such consciousness-raising for potential social action in language user empowerment terms cannot be overstressed, particularly given the ascendant position of the English language in the NWO. This collection is a significant contribution to the ongoing critical discussion on global order discourse.

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