

***Language, Gender and Feminism: Theory, Methodology and  
Practice***

**Sara Mills and Louise Mullany (2011)  
London: Routledge, 206pp.**

*Reviewed by Ann Weatherall*

One of the aims of this book is to offer practical ways of addressing feminist issues through an analysis of language and discourse. Feminism has long motivated and innovated gender and language studies; this book further develops that legacy by providing intelligent commentary on the multi-faceted relationships between language and gendered patterns of social disadvantage. A high level of scholarship is evident in the breadth and complexity of material covered, from historical through to contemporary work, with theoretical perspectives that vary in their epistemological and ontological commitments, and a consideration of the multicultural contexts where gender and sexuality matters differently emerge. The overarching messages are very clear: politically relevant research is important, and there is an ongoing need to maintain an open spirit of enquiry despite conflicting paradigmatic commitments.

The authors suggest that gender and language studies are currently entering a new stage of development, where insightful and critical analyses of gender and sexuality are urgently required. It is a period of postfeminism, in which some women benefit from the social and political changes in the wake of two waves of feminism, but gendered patterns of social deprivation on a global scale remain stark. Furthermore, there is currently an unprecedented (hetero)sexualisation of girls in Western media, presented in the guise of postfeminist feminine freedom and choice. The authors rightly point to feminist linguistics as being able to usefully illuminate the ways

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language enforces and naturalises a gendered and heterosexual social and moral order. This book is a good example of the important contribution feminist language research can make towards understanding and highlighting inequities associated with gender and sexuality.

The book is made up of eight chapters. The first two chapters are introductory, describing the scope of the book and soundly justifying its explicit feminist orientation. An overview of relevant scholarly perspectives runs through Chapters 3–5, which cover theories of gender, feminist linguistic concerns and methodological approaches, respectively. Chapters 6–7 review current research on topics central to gender and language studies – sexuality and sexism. The final chapter offers some future directions for research, including language variation and globalisation, and consideration of marginalised gender identities. A list of websites relevant to feminist language matters is provided at the end of the book, which will be a welcome practical resource for all readers.

An impressive aspect of this volume is its clarity, which belies the scope of theoretical and empirical work reviewed. The book will provide a sound introduction for scholars new to gender and language studies. Postgraduate students looking for research inspiration will be likely to find it in this book – particularly in the final chapter, which provides several avenues requiring further investigations. For seasoned feminist language researchers, the book offers some up-to-date examples of work being conducted in the area. One noteworthy example is the description and critical analysis, in the sexuality chapter, of the *Pocket Girlfriend* – a globally available application that brings the objectification and sexualisation of women into the digital age.

An element in the book that may have benefitted from further development is the notion of postfeminism. The idea does not only or necessarily mean, as implied by the authors, that feminism is obsolete. Rather, it can also refer to the time where feminist ways of thinking are culturally established. The overall arching feminist goal of gender equality has clearly not been achieved, so in that sense postfeminism is a misnomer. However, in the present cultural moment there is clearly a general awareness of gendered issues attributable to feminist social critique. The term postfeminism is positive in so far as it conveys the sense, founded by feminism, that gender and sexuality issues exist. Popular culture provides positive examples of postfeminism: the song ‘Kiss with a Fist’ by Florence and the Machine (2008) is a postfeminist commentary on women who stay in relationships with violent men; the lyrics of ‘Settle Down’ by Kimbra (2011) recognise and undermine a long-held cultural expectation that women should marry a man and live happily ever after.

There are widespread negative connotations associated with feminism – as anti-men, for example, and anti-femininity. Postfeminist, gendered critique may offer a way of being critical of a social and moral order that disadvantages women and at the same time avoids the kind of unwelcome moral tone that has unfortunately become coupled with feminism. An ongoing challenge for self-declared feminists – such as the authors of this book – is to communicate the continued need to highlight women's issues while avoiding moralising about the need for feminism. Postfeminist critique may offer a new and productive way of doing feminism. The kind of open spirit of inquiry advocated in this book could have been better applied in its discussion of postfeminism.

Feminist moralising aside, this book is a welcome addition to gender and language studies. It provides a thoughtful overview of feminist linguistic work. Importantly, it also charts new ground by discussing gender and language in a digital age, in an increasingly globalised world and in a new era of postfeminism. In the future this volume may be seen to bridge a feminist–postfeminist divide in gender and language studies – one that recognises diversity and the need to understand and promote awareness of the pervasively ideological nature of language and discourse in the areas of gender and sexuality.