

On Language and Sexual Politics. Deborah Cameron (2006)

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Reviewed by Carey E. Scheerer

Deborah Cameron, professor of Language and Communication at Oxford University, initiated her career before language and gender was a recognized and respected field of study. Lacking structured graduate training in her particular areas of interest, Cameron drew inspiration from French 'radical materialist' feminist theorists, critical discourse analysis, and cultural studies scholars, as well as the vibrant feminist movement of the late 1970s and early 1980s, with which she was actively involved. Through these various academic and activist experiences, Cameron developed a bold and polemical style of writing on issues of language and sexual politics. Spanning the course of two decades, Cameron's prolific writing has been an influential force in the fields of sociolinguistics and women's studies, and especially within the subfield of language and gender. Her most recent publication, *On Language and Sexual Politics* (2006), offers a collection of some of her most important works together with an illuminating overview of the larger debates and discussions regarding language, gender, and sexual politics.

Cameron offers the reader a comprehensive introduction to her life's work in the first chapter, positioning the history of her research trajectory within intellectual and political conversations. The remainder of the book consists of selected essays (e.g., previously published journal articles, conference presentations, and lectures) that are organized into four themes: 'the sexual politics of representation', 'power and difference', 'ideologies of language and gender', and 'language, gender, and sexuality'. In each thematic section, essays are organized chronologically. Although Cameron refrains from altering previously published

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pieces, she does add introductory comments that contextualize each chapter in historical, political, and intellectual terms. The strategy is effective, enabling Cameron to locate her reader in the conversation at hand.

The collection thus traces Cameron's intellectual career as well as the political and social situation of the periods in which she was writing. Most critically, Cameron's work reflects the progression of feminist thought over the decades. Although Cameron locates her initial inspiration within the 'Second Wave' feminist movement, specifically referencing 1970s feminist activism and the works of such feminist scholars as Christine Delphy and Monique Wittig, she now finds herself working within a 'Third Wave' of feminism. She describes this third wave as a 'social constructionist paradigm' which 'question[s] the assumption that gender is a simple binary opposition' (2). Yet Cameron is also critical of this 'new paradigm' (2), particularly when its preoccupation with a 'constructivist' conception of gender disables the political critique of gender relations:

I would not define research as 'feminist' primarily on the grounds that it adopts a 'constructionist' view of gender in which the categories of 'men' and 'women' are treated as unstable, variable and thus non-natural. I do not disagree with this view of gender, but proclaiming it...is neither the defining feature of a feminist approach nor the most important task for feminist scholarship. For me what defines feminism is not its theory of gender but its critique of gender relations (2).

Clearly, Cameron's interest in problematizing gender is contingent upon what such a problematization can do for the understanding of social hierarchy: 'the constructed and provisional nature of masculinity and femininity is a feminist gesture, only when it is allied to, or put in the service of, a critical view of the prevailing social arrangements between men and women' (2). Yet Cameron here provides a partial and essentialized account of the work of third wave feminists, who have done much more than trouble the boundaries of gender. Most significantly, the research that characterizes this view of feminism has challenged the universalizing assumptions of their second wave predecessors, recognizing multiple subjectivities and oppressions. The third wave emphasis on the ways in which gender intersects with a plurality of social dimensions – among them race, class, sexual orientation, ethnicity, age, and ability – suggests a concern not merely with gender theory, as Cameron describes, but also with diverse subjectivities and their relation to social inequity, even when situated within a history of feminist scholarship.

Cameron's criticism of third wave feminism may reflect her frustration with contemporary feminism in general, which she herself describes as 'waning' (8). Outlining her professional and personal development as emerging during a 'time when feminist scholarship ... derived both energy and influence from

its organic connection to a broader movement for social change,' she expresses 'nostalgia' for an activist-oriented academia (8). Cameron's introduction thus calls for a new generation of feminist scholars, grounding her readers in the historical significance of the field and provoking them to connect their scholarship to political activism.

The essays that follow demonstrate Cameron's commitment to a politically informed feminism, as she interrogates questions of power in gender relations through the study of language. Treating the relationship between language and gender 'primarily as a political issue,' her work focuses on the 'conflicts and power struggles that shape relationships between men and women' (1). Her writing is often polemical and controversial, for most of her work criticizes or questions the work of other scholars: in her own words, 'whether for reasons of personal temperament or because of the kind of education I received (or both), I am often inspired to write by disagreement with someone or something' (6). In many of her essays, Cameron situates herself in the center of major debates in the field. Over the course of her career, she has critically engaged with such prominent scholars as Robin Lakoff, Dale Spender, and Deborah Tannen, as well as mainstream writers such as John Gray, author of the best-selling *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* (1992). Many of these engagements are featured in this volume: in Chapter 1, Cameron engages with Spender and her critics; in Chapter 4, Lakoff's concept of tag questions; in Chapter 6, Tannen's 'cultural difference' approach; and in Chapter 9, bestselling self-help books.

A continued area of interest and debate for Cameron is the 'difference' versus 'dominance' approaches to language and gender. In the 'dominance' model, emerging from Lakoff's *Language and Woman's Place* (1975), 'women's behavior is seen as a reflex of their subordinate position relative to men' (Cameron 2006: 102). In the 'difference' model, which has been reinforced by Tannen (1990), 'sexes are seen as having different speech forms because of pervasive sex segregation in the formative years of childhood/adolescence' (Cameron 2006: 102). Cameron is highly critical of the difference model, faulting it for 'failing to acknowledge the extent to which power relations are 'constitutive' of gender differentiation' (75). Yet in keeping with her third wave leanings, Cameron is critical of both models, as they 'imply a static view of gender' (1).

Many of the essays in this collection have been previously published and thus may be familiar to many scholars. Chapter 2, 'Non-sexist Language: Lost in Translation,' is a feminist critique of the non-sexist language guidelines of the 1990s. Chapter 5, 'Performing Gender Identity,' offers a discussion of language and masculinity by means of conversation data drawn from college men. In Chapter 8, Cameron interrogates the relationship between gender ideology and conversation as emergent in training manuals for British Telecom employees. Chapter 10, 'Naming of Parts,' a discussion of American college students' terms

for the penis, contributes to the ongoing discussions of linguistic representation.

Aside from these works, the collection also features three previously unpublished pieces. The first of these, entitled 'Language, Sexism, and Advertising Standards', questions why language, as opposed to visual imagery, has received so little attention in critical feminist discussions of media. A revised version of a plenary presentation delivered at the 2004 conference of the International Gender and Language Association (IGALA), the article asks: 'Where *is* language, and where should it be, in scholarly and public debates about the sexual politics of mass media communication?' (28). Scores of feminist scholars have turned a critical eye on oppressive, objectified gendered images in the media, yet few have examined language. Cameron argues that a focus on imagery alone has resulted in an assumed logic that 'the *language* in which the media represent gender ... is simply less important, analytically and politically, than the *visual* codes through which gendered meanings are produced' (29).

Cameron's second new contribution, 'Men are from Earth, Women are from Earth', is a companion piece to her article 'Verbal Hygiene for Women', also published in this collection. Here, she provides a critical analysis of ideologies of language and gender that surface in self-help books, which depict women as proficient communicators and men as 'inarticulate' and 'clumsy' (144). Cameron links these ideologies to evolutionary biology's emphasis on the 'natural' differences between the genders. Consistent with the other texts that appear in this volume, the article thus challenges popular as well as academic preoccupations with 'difference', highlighting the social and political underpinnings of such perspectives: 'Difference in men's and women's ways of communicating is not natural and inevitable, but cultural and political' (145). This essay, like much of her collection, is an accessible argument directed towards an 'interdisciplinary feminist audience' (133).

Finally, Chapter 11, 'Straight Talking', is also an edited version of a previous presentation. Here, Cameron points out that sociolinguistic studies of language and sexuality have tended to focus on minority sexualities, proposing that scholars should turn their attention to the phenomenon of heterosexuality as well. In her own words, 'it is a proposal whose justification is theoretical, to do away with the way we understand the place of sexuality in a changing social landscape, as a set of discourses and practices through which gender difference, power, and subjectivity are articulated, and by that token, as an influence on linguistic behavior' (179).

Cameron's *On Language and Sexual Politics* is an essential read for anyone interested in sociolinguistics or gender studies. Although academics in these fields may be familiar with Cameron's work and may have read some of these previously published articles, the book offers an accessible collection

of Cameron's writings in a well-organized format. Most critically, the book's structure brings the reader into the dialogues and debates that have framed the field for decades, providing an excellent resource for faculty and graduate students in various disciplines who are seeking background knowledge on the intellectual genealogy of research on language and gender. Additionally, the comprehensive bibliography, composed of the most important works in the field, serves as an invaluable resource for anyone interested in further explorations. In short, *On Language and Sexual Politics* marks a milestone in Cameron's career, providing an illuminating and accessible compilation of her life's work and thought.

References

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- Tannen, Deborah. (1990) *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*. New York: William Morrow & Co.