Gendered discourse in the professional workplace.
Louise Mullany.

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Reviewed by Joanna Pawelczyk

Gendered Discourse in the Professional Workplace offers a valuable contribution to one of the most important research areas for the contemporary study of language, gender, and sexuality (Cameron 2005; cf. Holmes and Stubbe 2003, Holmes 2006, Baxter 2006). And Mullany's contribution is clearly current, as women enter into institutions and professions previously either closed to them or male-dominated. This work combines both theory and practice by presenting a comprehensive overview of the state-of-the-art research in the field of language and gender, as well as a discussion of the field's development. It also offers very practical advice on conducting research at 'restricted research sites', to which the workplace undeniably belongs.

A significant portion of the book analyzes actual workplace interactions in two companies, using a critical sociolinguistic approach. Mullany includes interviews she conducted with female and male managers in order to 'assess how gender ideologies and stereotypes affect how managers are assessed and evaluated in relation to the enactment of their identities in the workplace' (168). This is an indispensable step for creating an emerging tradition of sociolinguistic research that addresses and investigates real-world issues and problems and that is of practical relevance not only to the community under study but also to society in general. Mullany also addresses one of the most salient problems in language and gender research, namely, the fact that the scholarly findings are not accessible for use in contexts outside academia.

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The book comprises eight chapters that are quite self-contained, allowing a reader to focus on a particular subtopic in investigating language and gender.

Chapter 1 is devoted to introducing the professional workplace as a research site in order to assess 'the role language plays in the creation and maintenance of gender inequalities in the workplace' (1). Alongside the author's own arguments, examples of similar studies conducted both by linguists and non-linguists are presented to the reader. The aims of Mullany's project are discussed in the first chapter, culminating in a goal that initially seems too big to handle: 'to make suggestions to bring about social change' (16). What needs to be underscored is that Mullany frames her research not only as interdisciplinary, i.e., drawing on insights from related disciplines, e.g., sociology, organizational studies, management studies, etc., but also as aimed at resolving real-life problems. Such a perspective seems particularly valuable.

In Chapter 2, the author introduces a critical sociolinguistic approach to investigate social and political inequalities operating in the professional workplace. The approach integrates sociolinguistics with social theory as well as concepts from recent social feminist theory (Butler's theory of performativity) and social theories of learning (in particular the concept of community of practice). The author provides an excellent justification of the framework and accounts for the use of 'critical' as adopting a feminist perspective in exploring gender and social inequality. Mullany also provides a variety of critiques of earlier approaches to language and gender research. For instance, Mullany discusses a number of deficiencies of the traditional variationist sociolinguistic paradigm, with the major criticism relating to the manner in which gender was conceived, i.e., language reflecting already existing social identities rather than, as currently conceptualized, constructing them. This is followed by a detailed discussion on gender as a social construct, an indispensable tool kit for anyone interested in conducting research in the area of language and gender.

Similarly, a very solid theoretical background of the concept of *community of practice* is offered with numerous examples from scholars who have successfully applied the concept in their studies. In this largely theoretical part of the book, the author defines gendered discourse in two ways: building on Ochs's (1992) indexicality model as well as relying on Mills's (1997) and Sunderland's (2004) conceptualization as 'the boundaries of social practice through which appropriate gendered behavior is regulated' (31). In the discussion on interactional styles, social practices, power and gendered work the author not only incorporates concepts and assumptions coined or developed by other scholars in the area, but also critically refines them, in accordance with the aims of her study. For example, Mullany argues for the interrelatedness of seemingly divergent concepts used by scholars such as *covert gendered discourse* and *indirect indexicality*. This in turn evidences the author's extensive knowledge

of the field and its research findings, and more importantly, provides the reader with a more global view of the field.

However, the discussion on the maintenance of professional workplace norms as masculine norms could significantly benefit from reference to the studies conducted by Alice Eagly, who has made a considerable contribution to research on gender roles and leadership styles (cf. Eagly 2003; 2005). As well, the chapter ends on what appears to be a positive note, i.e., a comment on the re-evaluation and adoption of stereotypical feminine speech styles as effective models of communication in business contexts. Here, Cameron's note of caution is warranted, who 'observes that when men enact 'feminine' communicative styles such as 'emotional expressiveness', they are 'applauded' for it. In contrast, women are subject to the double bind, being seen as too emotional for the workplace' (47).

Chapter 3 offers a host of practical advice on collecting data at a professional research site. The author justifies her reliance on a predominately qualitative approach. This justification, however, comes across as defensive at times. Still, this chapter provides the reader with abundant advice on investigating the professional setting. One of the most valuable comments refers to the necessity of making audio and/or video recordings of workplace practices by the researcher herself/himself. Equally important are the practical guidelines on approaching and negotiating with organizations in order to receive permission for research.

Mullany then moves on to presenting the types of data to be analyzed, one of them being interviews. At this point, the author resumes her critique of variationist sociolinguistics, condemning its reliance on interview 'as the only method through which to gain data' (64). As the author states, the 'problematic' status of interviews will be avoided in her study, as this type of data will be combined with audio-taped analysis of business meetings. It needs to be underscored, however, that the interview data used by variationist sociolinguists and Mullany's interviewing data serve totally different research aims. Another reservation relates to the author's flippant rejection of the 'observer's paradox' as constituting any problem whatsoever in her research. Even the most experienced social scientist should refrain from the following comment: 'During meetings managers are often engaged in discourse which either directly or indirectly has a financial impact on the company and affects how competent they are perceived to be at their profession. I believe these considerations are far more prevalent to participants than my presence' (69). Additionally, there are a number of other tensions that may emerge in conducting fieldwork at a professional research site (cf. Sarangi 2002) which the author silenced.

In Chapter 4 the author presents the aspects of business meetings to be investigated (floor holding; speech acts: directives, expressing approval, criticisms, warnings, challenges; humor and small talk). This presentation is based on an

impressive review of the literature, with a special emphasis on their gendered dimensions. Furthermore, Mullany extends or redefines well-recognized concepts for the purpose of the current analysis (cf. the discussion on *politeness* or *small talk*). Particularly interesting is her conceptualization of politeness from the community of practice perspective. Yet, what is quite perplexing is the distinction that the author introduces and briefly discusses between simultaneous talk and overlap (not referred to in the Transcription Conventions). Such attention to interactional detail requires a more conversation analytic approach to data analysis.

Chapters 5 and 6 are devoted to analysis of verbal (and non-verbal) behavior of women and men during the company meetings. The earlier theoretical section of the book successfully prepares the reader to follow Mullany's discussion here. In both retail and manufacturing companies, three meetings were observed and recorded. The author refers to each of the meetings as a specific community of practice, underlining their unique characters and arrangements as undeniably affecting the members' linguistic behavior. Her practical analysis clearly and straightforwardly demonstrates how managers, both men and women, break from stereotypical gendered speech styles during meetings. Thus, male managers utilize stereotypically feminine talk, while female managers rely on stereotypically masculine strategies. In other words, analysis has demonstrated that workplace leaders display a wide verbal repertoire. The analysis also evidences how both women and men managers draw on stereotypically feminine speech strategies to enact their power and authority covertly. As the author states, this can signify a general move (recognized both in linguistic and organizational studies) towards a more stereotypically feminine style being utilized by managers. Needless to say, this 'managerial context' indexes power. Yet Mullany claims, and very rightly so, what is needed now are much larger scale, quantitative studies to verify this very welcome transition.

Chapter 7 reports on interviews with the female and male managers. Mullany managed to elicit very personal narratives and opinions from her interviewees. Her excellent interviewing skills (although I must admit there is very little information available in the book on the actual interviewing sessions) enable the author to unveil the predominance of discourses of gender difference, female emotionality and irrationality as well as dominant discourses of femininity in the views expressed by female and male managers. An analysis of interactional data alone would not have been able to fully generate the deeply ingrained stereotypes of gender-appropriate behavior that the interviewed female and male managers hold. The interviews reveal shocking views expressed by both female and male managers, including: communicative styles based on biological sex differences, the persistence of the dominant view of the male manager as the norm, and the decision to have children as negatively affecting one's career

progression. These findings clearly demonstrate the non-existence of scholarly findings among the general public! Yet, what is most unsettling is that these views are expressed by very educated members of society.

The interviews conducted also allow the author to discover a range of reasons why gender inequalities in the professional workplace still exist and, in the spirit of the 'practical relevance' of language and gender research, to offer extensive advice on how to make the workplace a more 'egalitarian environment in which women and men will achieve equality' (209). Her analysis of interactional data reveals that, at least in terms of male and female managers' linguistic behavior, gendered stereotypes have been broken. The conducted interviews prove, however, that ubiquitous (and *not* innocuous) stereotypical thinking guides the interpretations of their own and their colleagues' behavior. The analysis of interactional and interviewing data enables the author to present in Chapter 8 a multitude of reasons as to why gender inequalities are still in place. As the author asserts, her findings overlap with the findings from a wide range of recent research in the UK, Canada and the US. But on a slightly more positive note, she acknowledges some evidence of resistance in the form of feminist discourses displayed and equal opportunities discourses evident in both companies. Mullany also addresses the practical relevance of her findings and offers constructive steps that can be taken in order to eliminate a whole range of hegemonic gendered discourses that still operate in the workplace.

In sum, this publication has all the characteristics that a study on the intricate relationship between language and gender should possess. It combines theory and methodology within a contemporary approach to research on language and gender. In addition, it offers practical suggestions for addressing acute social problems that we still face. Mullany makes clear that the linguistic perspective really matters for addressing contemporary social issues.

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