Researching Language, Gender and Sexuality: A Student Guide

Helen Sauntson (2019)

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Reviewed by Jingna Qiu

Helen Sauntson is a distinguished scholar in the fields of education and language, gender and sexuality and co-editor of the *Palgrave Studies in Language, Gender and Sexuality* book series. With *Researching Language, Gender and Sexuality: A Student Guide* (Routledge, 2019), she aims to provide students with the knowledge and research skills required to investigate various aspects of language, gender and sexuality.

The book consists of ten chapters. Chapter 1, the general introduction, begins by elaborating on the central problem of earlier approaches focusing on 'gender difference'. The author points out that gender and sexual identities should be viewed as multiple, temporal and performative and that more attention should be diverted to 'hegemonic' identities. The chapter then defines key terms and concepts routinely used in the field, such as 'sex' and 'transgender'.

Chapters 2–4 introduce the theory, research methods and analytical frameworks commonly used in the field of language, gender and sexuality. Chapter 2 outlines current conceptual approaches, such as queer theory and queer linguistics. It introduces key elements and principles of queer theory, stating that queer theory takes 'normality' itself as its main object of investigation. Chapter 3 is skills-focused, providing a step-by-step guide for designing a language, gender and sexuality research project. Chapter 4

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provides an outline of some commonly used analytical frameworks in contemporary language, gender and sexuality research, including conversation analysis, corpus linguistics, (feminist) critical discourse analysis and other sociolinguistic frameworks.

Chapters 5–9 explore and exemplify the frameworks through illustrative studies concerning particular areas of research within language, gender and sexuality. The author examines how gender and sexual identities are linguistically constructed in institutionalized settings such as education and workplaces. Chapter 5 exemplifies the application of conversation analysis to studies focusing on gender and sexuality, particularly in the area of education. Chapter 6 delves into applications of two major analytical frameworks to the study of media: (feminist) critical discourse analysis and corpus linguistics.

Chapter 7 considers language, gender and sexuality research in legal and forensic (con)texts. It demonstrates how research focused on rape trials must consider both legal definitions and public understandings of ‘rape’ and ‘consent’. Chapter 8 investigates language phenomena among marginalized identities (such as transgender, cisgender and various forms of ‘gender variance’), with special focus on sociophonetic studies of transgender ‘voice’ and the use of discourse analysis for uncovering how language practices construct identities for transgender and gender-variant speakers. Chapter 9 focuses on structural inequalities in both language and language use and demonstrates how these inequalities function to produce discriminatory effects (including ‘covert’ and ‘overt’ sexism). Finally, Chapter 10, the concluding chapter, offers practical guidelines for how to write research projects.

Theoretically and practically, this book makes an important contribution to the study of language, gender and sexuality and stands out in at least four ways. First, the book is comprehensive and informative, covering a variety of topics in language, gender and sexuality that include the contexts of education, daily life, the workplace and legal texts. With respect to theory, it demonstrates what can be gained through the application of approaches such as feminist poststructuralist discourse analysis, conversation analysis, linguistic landscapes and multimodal discourse analysis. As for research methods, the book provides readers with studies illustrative of qualitative and quantitative methods that include questionnaires, interviews, surveys and varied forms of discourse analysis. This encyclopedia-like book can help broaden the academic horizon of all readers with respect to topics, theories and methods.

Second, the book is empirically valuable. It provides important suggestions on operability by showing how theories can be applied to individual case studies. This is seen especially in the second chapter, which

is characterized by the author as 'quite theory heavy' (15). Yet the cohesive and well-argued discussion provides a roadmap for readers to become versed in new academic frontiers and to apply these theories to their own research.

Third, the book is critical and evidence-based. It compares and contrasts studies in detail while providing cross-references to similar studies. The author points out the shortcomings of current studies and calls attention to the research gaps involved. For example, at one point she compares studies on 'role traps' (gendered subject positions) by Kanter (1993) and Baxter (2012) and proposes that the latter study excels in the inclusion of linguistic practices associated with each role trap. The book facilitates an understanding of the progress of relevant research.

Finally, the book is reader-friendly. One of its most positive aspects is that it pays attention to reader involvement and scaffolds this involvement throughout the book. In terms of structure, it is organized so that theories, rationales and frameworks are fully illustrated before presenting individual case studies. Readers do not need to read the book chapter-by-chapter in linear order. Instead, they can jump from one chapter to another according to their own research interest (this is especially the case for Chapters 5–9). A related merit of the book lies with the practical value of the recommended bibliography and research questions.

The book is insightful, but it is not free of limitations. For instance, there is more focus on the theoretical framework of critical discourse analysis than on other frameworks. In addition, the book would have better served readers if the author had included more cases involving languages other than English. With this addition, readers could gain insight on how to adapt the analytical and theoretical frameworks to a more diverse set of languages, cultures, societies and contexts. That said, the book is irreplaceable among textbooks dedicated to the study of language, gender and sexuality. It will undoubtedly be of interest to students and researchers not only in the field of language, gender and sexuality, but also in the fields of gender studies and language and education.

References

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