

## Relocating power: the feminist potency of language, gender and sexuality research

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As we began preparing this issue of *Gender and Language*, news broke of events that simultaneously show the recalcitrance of patriarchy and the resolution of contemporary forms of feminism, painting a vivid portrait of our contradictory times. In early December 2020 in Argentina, Buenos Aires's streets were thronged with hundreds of thousands of women and allies wearing green scarves. The demonstrations pressured legislators to pass a law allowing legal, safe and free abortion for any reason up to the fourteenth week of pregnancy, overturning the country's restrictive termination ban of 1921 (Pérez-Peña 2020). Despite staunch opposition from the Catholic Church and internationally funded anti-abortion groups, the legal abortion law was passed. That the feminist green tide and its allies were successful in their plight, bucking patriarchy's grip of women's sexuality in a very conservative geopolitical region, testifies to recent changes in oppressive gender orders.

However, just one month later in January 2021, Poland made its abortion legislation even stricter, criminalising the termination of pregnancies for foetal abnormalities, the only statistically significant kind of abortion performed in the country (Kwai, Pronczuk and Magdziarz 2021). Despite rampant resistance from the population after the government's October declaration that the procedure was unconstitutional (Wilczek 2020), the ruling Law and Justice Party implemented its decision to criminalise abortion in most cases. In Warsaw's streets, where huge crowds had raised their voices in protest, leaders of opposition movements brandished green scarves in a nod to Argentine activists and their successful campaign.

These events remind us of the contradictions that characterise feminist progress in the early twenty-first century. While Argentina now boasts one of the most progressive legislations in the Americas on gender identity, same-sex marriage and women's rights, Poland faces the hardening of exclusionary policies towards women and queer and trans people. In both events, despite the surge of Covid-19 infections, people took their dissatisfaction to the streets in an attempt to challenge the State control of women's bodies. Emerging in Latin America and Eastern Europe, strongholds of the Roman Catholic Church, these events limn a paradoxical scenario that showcases daunting challenges to scholars of language, gender and sexuality. Whereas the Argentine case gives us a graphic example of how gender orders may be questioned and changed from below, the Polish case demonstrates their institutional and systemic persistence. When it comes to patriarchy, disruption and continuity seem to walk hand in hand.

Writing from within the Latin American green tide movement, Argentine theoretician and activist Verónica Gago (2020a) alludes to the role language plays in this conundrum. She suggests that legislators' inarticulateness when discussing women's rights and specifically abortion – for instance, their clumsy descriptions of feminist demands and their lack of expertise in women's health – shows attempts at 'verbalizing something for which there appears to be no public language'. In many regions of the world, the absence of an adequate public register to speak about feminist, trans and queer rights may have deleterious effects. However, as Gago (2020a, 2020b) explains, the success of the Argentine movement spawned precisely from its collective capacity to forge a 'language of the streets' – a 'feminist register' that tethers together various demands for justice and 'complex diagnoses that account for the intersectionality of violence, and even more so, of the politics of desire'. The resilience of the feminist movement in Argentina and its innovative ways of organising have thrown this language and its attendant forms of semiosis into sharper public relief. The green scarf has become the harbinger of this new feminist register, crossing geographical borders much like the 2019 Chilean street demonstrations against gender violence that we discussed in a previous editorial (Borba, Hall and Hiramoto 2020). The Chileans participating in the 2019 demonstrations also wore green scarves, drawing from Argentina's earlier use of the symbol in the 2018 free abortion movement. It is in countermovements such as these, now linked across time and space through social media, that Gago locates the contemporary relevance of feminism, spotlighting the discursive spaces that are opened up by the lack of public language to describe demands for social justice. To a significant extent, the continuity of patriarchy thrives on this lack; disrupting it requires the collective use of

a language that breaks the silence (for a recent discussion of this point with respect to African American women's language, see Washington 2020).

This linguistic dilemma of patriarchy requires a nuanced understanding of the power to name, categorise and speak. Emblematised in Robin Lakoff's (1975) front-cover image of a woman with bandaged mouth, the relationship between language and power has always been central to the field. In the four issues of 2021, we revisit the role of power in the revitalisation of language, gender and sexuality research that took place in the 1990s, for which the Berkeley Women and Language Conferences provided a prime locus of intellectual debate. Extending a tradition set out by the First Berkeley Women and Language Conference in 1985 (for the proceedings, see Bremner, Caskey and Moonwomon 1985), the four biennial conferences held in the 1990s put into motion a feminist register for the field of language, gender and sexuality that gave its practitioners new ways to understand and articulate social injustice. This register is found in the voluminous proceedings published for each of the four conferences – *Locating Power* (Hall, Bucholtz and Moonwomon 1992), *Cultural Performances* (Bucholtz, Liang, Sutton and Hines 1994), *Gender and Belief Systems* (Warner, Ahlers, Bilmes, Oliver, Wertheim and Chen 1996) and *Engendering Communication* (Wertheim, Bailey and Corston-Oliver 1998) – as well as in the two edited collections that emerged from these proceedings, *Gender Articulated* (Hall and Bucholtz 1995) and *Reinventing Identities* (Bucholtz, Liang and Sutton 1999). But perhaps of most significance were the intergenerational and interdisciplinary connections made at those conferences, which led to research collaborations, professional networks and lasting friendships. These connections also led to the establishment of the International Gender and Language Association (IGALA) in 1999 and subsequently of this journal in 2007, contributing to the field's institutionalisation and its current pan-global character. The first IGALA conference was hosted by graduate students at Stanford University in 2000 (selected papers were published in Campbell-Kibler, Podesva, Roberts and Wong 2001), and the organisation has since welcomed international audiences to conferences in England, Spain, New Zealand, Tokyo, Brazil, Canada, Hong Kong and Botswana. To commemorate the vitality of these interconnections, the proceedings for all five Berkeley Women and Language Conferences (1985, 1992, 1994, 1996, 1998) will be made available on the IGALA website during 2021.<sup>1</sup>

In anticipation of the thirtieth anniversary of the 1992 Berkeley Women and Language Conference, *Gender and Language* has organised a retrospective theme series showcasing essays by luminaries who attended the conference as well as allied scholars who have taken the field in important new directions. Confronting the respective themes of Politics, Practice,

Intersections and Place, the theme series will provide a locus for cross-generational, interdisciplinary and transnational dialogues on the state of our art. As editors of the series, we are pleased to release the first collection of essays on the theme of Politics, authored by scholars whose papers at the 1992 conference were consequential to the development of the field. Robin Lakoff, Susan Gal and Alice Freed analyse the current political scenario from their feminist linguistic lenses, while Sally McConnell-Ginet and Norma Mendoza-Denton share more personal views of the politics involved in doing research on language, gender and sexuality. The theme series also pays tribute to significant scholars present at the 1992 Berkeley conference who are no longer with us; in this issue, Amy Kyratzis pays homage to the groundbreaking work of Susan Ervin-Tripp.

As we revisit the last thirty years to prepare for the challenges ahead, we note the persistence of patriarchy and the renewed feminist fights it necessitates in Argentina, Poland and elsewhere. It is therefore with a sense of urgency that we call on feminist, queer and trans linguists to *relocate* power in linguistic and social analysis, to breathe new life into the concept that inspired the 1992 conference theme 'Locating Power'. In the preface to the conference proceedings, Mary Bucholtz (1992:vii), one of the convenors of the conference, wonders: 'Can politicized gender and language research take place within linguistics as it now exists, or do we need to expand the boundaries of linguistic analysis to encompass feminist-centered approaches to language?' Since this time, scholars of language, gender and sexuality have asked important questions of linguistics and taken the study of language and power to new levels of sophistication, so much so that issues related to gender and sexuality, once sidelined in the early stages of sociolinguistics, are now a cornerstone of the field. Evidence of the field's success is marked this year by the tenth anniversary of the *Journal of Language and Sexuality* (see Leap and Motschenbacher's 2021 '10th Anniversary Issue') and the fifteenth anniversary of our own *Gender and Language*.

Since the time of the 1992 conference, feminist, queer and trans linguists have also contributed significantly to the mainstreaming of gender and sexuality, making the public aware of language as both a mechanism of hate and a tool for combating it. The successful foray of inclusive language policies into linguistically diverse institutions bears witness to this mainstreaming (Cameron 2012; Curzan 2014; Zimman 2017). Yet the strident response that these measures have provoked also reminds us that language reform from below is as political as it is potent (Borba 2019). Despite the feminist advances that have been made, patriarchy and the linguistic mediation of sexism remain relentless (see, for example, Caldas-Coulthard 2020; cf. Cameron 2020), carrying in their wake ever-evolving

discourses of misogyny, homophobia and transphobia. If we ever doubted the interdependency of these forms of hate speech, we need only look to Poland, where an organisation prominent in the radical anti-abortion campaign has been driving painted vans through the streets of Warsaw, one with graphic pictures of aborted foetuses and the other with homophobic slogans equating the ‘LGBT Lobby’ with paedophilia (Borkusewicz 2021). Poland is a country that recently created hundreds of ‘LGBT-free zones’ declared free of ‘aggressive ideology promoting homosexuality’ (Ash 2020), so the representation of gay men as paedophiles – an idea also promoted by the Catholic Church – though vile is not surprising. But the tying of abortion to this form of violence, linked intertextually by these mobile displays of hate, reminds us that normativity is achieved through gender and sexuality discourses that target all of us.

As a field situated at the intersection of disruption and continuity, the study of language, gender and sexuality must be constantly reinvented in order to survive. This requires looking back at our past, diagnosing our present and prospecting possible futures, tasks taken seriously by all authors appearing in the current issue. To this end, we believe the Argentine feminist renaissance provides inspiration. Creating a language that challenges the institutional manhandling of our demands for social justice relies on relocating the power to signify. Here, we return to the insights of Gago. In her manifesto for a ‘feminist international’, Gago (2020b) highlights the need to rethink power. She takes inspiration from the innovative ways her *hermanas* devised a public language to speak about social justice in a region lacking a public register to do so. Her assessment of the green tide’s success draws upon the semantic difference between the Spanish terms *poder* ‘power’ and *potencia* ‘potency’. The former term, she argues, is static and institutionalised, while the latter is dynamic and affective. *Poder* stands for continuity; *potencia* highlights a collective drive for change. Because the top-down language of *poder* lacks an adequate social justice vocabulary, it typically excludes vulnerable groups from political decisions, as in the Polish case. However, as demonstrated by the Argentine fight for safe, free and legal abortion, the language of *poder* may be opposed from below and have its insidiousness exposed. It is here that we find feminist *potencia*, a kind of power that gains its strength from its indeterminate potential. As Gago (2020b:2) puts it, ‘we do not know what we’re capable of until we experience the displacement of the limits that we’ve been made to believe and obey’:

[Feminist *potencia*] is not a naïve theory of power, because it does not ignore the forms of exploitation and domination that structure power; in fact, its proposals go to the heart of the subjectivities that confront existing powers. In this sense, it is an understanding of *potencia* as the deployment

of counter-power. Ultimately, it is the affirmation of another type of power: that of common invention against expropriation, collective enjoyment against privatization, and the expansion of what we desire as possible in the here and now. (Gago 2020b:2)

The bidirectional investigation of power as both top-down and bottom-up has been the central strength of language, gender and sexuality research over the past thirty years. Papers presented at the 1992 Berkeley Women and Language Conference set this into motion by understanding power not as monolithic but as multiple (e.g. as ‘both hegemonic and subversive, institutionalized and privatized, located in silence, speech, and writing’ and as ‘contradictory, fragmented, and partial’; Bucholtz 1992:vii). For researchers in language, gender and sexuality, the understanding of power as productive instead of repressive is often associated with Michel Foucault’s (1978) argument in *The History of Sexuality* that power depends on resistance. But there is something about Gago’s spotlight on the indeterminate potential of counterpower that gives us pause. The continuity of patriarchy relies on the comparatively static, top-down erasure of language that may legitimately signify demands from the streets, but its disruption is brought about by the emergent and unpredictable dynamism of *potencia*, as it innovates ways to speak back to the powers that be. Ever since Lakoff (1975) published her groundbreaking work, one of the propellers for the feminist critique of language has been the *potencia* women can find in language, a theme explored across several papers delivered at the 1992 conference. Researchers of language, gender and sexuality, trained to analyse the shifting dynamics of everyday interaction, are poised to examine power as lived experience, forged at the intersection of imposition and refusal.

This issue of *Gender and Language* offers a précis of the double binds and push-and-pull forces of patriarchy by highlighting the *poder* that undergirds its persistence alongside the ways that people on the ground garner the *potencia* to fight back and ‘potentiate’ new futures. To various extents, the articles gathered here revisit the 1992 Berkeley Women and Language Conference’s theme and pave theoretical and analytical avenues on which power can be relocated as arising at the crossroads of change and continuity. Although women and queer and trans people harvest the benefits planted by feminist activism in the last several decades, patriarchy seems to find other niches in which to thrive. To borrow a well-worn trope from Greek mythology, misogyny, homophobia and transphobia are like the heads of a monstrous Hydra: cut one of them and others – oftentimes more hideous – grow back in its place. Even if the *poder* of patriarchy remains dominant, the discourses that produce it, like the Hydra, will change their form when challenged. It is the indeterminacy of the feminist *potencia* that

enables us to anticipate, analyse and diagnose these discourses so that we may confront them in whatever form they take.

The intertwining of disruption and persistence within oppressive gender orders is shown in the lead research article by Joyhanna Yoo Garza, who examines the performance of cosmopolitan femininity in K-pop (a token of the *potencia* for change) through racialised appropriations that reiterate the *poder* of racial stereotypes (as tropes of continuity). To this end, Garza puts under scrutiny a music video by K-pop superstar CL, *Nappeun gijibae* 'The bad girl'. K-pop has become a global phenomenon thanks to its distinctive world blend of melodies, choreography, production and highly stereotypical gender performances. Yet, unlike other female artists who market their sweet and sexy femininity, CL pushes forward the Bad Bitch performance by using African American English and conventionalised hip hop tropes to embody *gijibae*, a pejorative Korean term for women. This allows CL to resignify femininity locally as assertive and sexually agentive. However, although there are signs of disruption in the challenges CL's performance poses to Korean gender norms, her embodied actions and song lyrics reproduce racist imagery on a global scale through selective appropriations of highly sedimented US Black and Chicana cultural signifiers. In the global industry of K-pop, these signifiers, lifted from other times and other spaces, function as a form of chronotopic capital that has far-reaching consequences 'for racial dynamics in a now globalised field of interpretation.' Garza's frame-by-frame analysis of the music video provides an apt illustration of how innovation and tradition are enmeshed even in the micro-details of embodied action and language use.

This entanglement of the new and the old shows that patriarchy works in insidious ways. Its close ties to other well-established regimes of legitimacy and authenticity, such as cisnormativity, make it even harder to disrupt. As trans scholars have cogently demonstrated, cissexism is so crystallised and taken for granted that it is tough to challenge (Serano 2007). The *poder* of cissexism, its intimate relations with patriarchy and sexism and its unwillingness to adopt a language that recognises the legitimacy of gender variance, strips trans people of their *potencia*. Stephen Turton addresses this conundrum in his contribution to this issue. He investigates instances of deadnaming – the act of referring to trans people by the names assigned to them in infancy in cases where they have rejected those names – as a speech act with a harmful perlocutionary force, which may be employed to denaturalise or illegitimate a trans person's acts of self-determination. In particular, Turton examines entries on the crowdsourced website *Urban Dictionary* that were posted in response to American celebrity Caitlyn Jenner's public coming out as a trans woman in 2015. Turton demonstrates how deadnaming works linguistically to maintain heterocispatriarchy.

Importantly, he argues that deliberate acts of deadnaming reveal more profound social anxieties surrounding the public visibility that trans people have recently acquired – a shift that threatens the alleged naturalness of cisnormativity (see also Zimman 2019; Calder 2020; Konnelly 2021). In other words, the disruptions provoked by trans people in the public realm and, particularly, by their forging of new ways to speak about gender (their trans *potencia*) collide with the strictures of cisnormativity and the will to maintain its continuity.

In the final research article of the issue, Maeve Eberhardt offers a multimodal analysis of the tension between women's will to act freely (their *potencia*) and the structural binds that strip oppressed groups from enjoying that freedom (an effect of the *poder* of powers that be). One of the major contributions in Eberhardt's study is her theorisation of nontraditional displays of femininity as emergent at the nexus of feminism and neoliberal ideology surrounding contemporary women. Using Comedy Central's popular drama series *Broad City*, featuring two unruly women, Eberhardt analyses a disruptive representation of modern womanhood that works to dismantle the dominant social order. She unpacks the innovative potential of the show's discursive alternatives to a neoliberal feminist agenda, seen in the ways it develops transgressive representations of female sexuality by putting unfeminine behaviours on display. The findings highlight the tension at work when it comes to relocating power at the crossroads of change and persistence – between women's agentic potential for change and the structural push-and-pulls that constrain their actions.

In sum, the three research articles appearing in this issue demonstrate with vivid empirical detail that although patriarchy may be challenged (as also seen in the recent success of Argentina's green tide), it keeps reinventing itself in new forms by building alliances with other systems of oppression, such as racism (Garza), cissexism (Turton) and neoliberalism (Eberhardt). The five retrospective essays by leading scholars in the field offer additional perspectives on these and other intersections of violence within political domains. Taken together, these contributions open our thinking to the ways language collaborates with other systems of meaning-making to rearrange the shape of patriarchy and carve out new crevices in which it can thrive. We encourage researchers in language, gender and sexuality to deploy their analytic counterpowers to examine these shifting alliances closely, producing ever more nuanced and locally sensitive accounts of language's potential in making and breaking oppression. In our view, the capacity to adapt to complex configurations of power and their linguistic dimensions is the field's *potencia*.

## Notes

- 1 The proceedings for the 1992 conference *Locating Power*, edited by the conference convenors Kira Hall, Mary Bucholtz and Birch Moonwomon, is now available for viewing and download at the IGALA website:  
<https://igalaweb.wixsite.com/igala/proceedings-of-bwlc>

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