

Language, power and gender: a tribute to Susan Ervin-Tripp (1927–2018)

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This is a tribute to Susan M. Ervin-Tripp, who would certainly be a contributor to this ‘Thirty-year retrospective on language, gender and sexuality research’ had she not passed away on 13 November 2018 at the age of 91. She was Professor Emerita of Psychology at the University of California at Berkeley. One of the contributors to the 1992 Berkeley Women and Language Conference, Sue had a central role in the establishment of three academic fields: psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics and child language. She also made major contributions to the fields of gender and language, bilingualism and second language acquisition.¹ Here, in keeping with the theme of politics uniting the essays in this special issue, I discuss Sue’s contributions to the area of language, power and gender.

A great deal of Sue’s work was on children’s language. However, in the 1960s and 1970s, with the emergence of the field known as ethnography of communication, Sue’s interests turned to sociolinguistics. Believing that the social phenomena underlying language choices were patterned and rule-governed, she published an influential paper in Dell Hymes and John Gumperz’s edited volume, *Directions in Sociolinguistics: The Ethnography of Communication* (Ervin-Tripp 1972), focusing on requests and address terminology. Sue presented two types of rules: alternation rules were concerned with the selection of forms within the speaker’s repertoire based on speech acts, topics and social factors like familiarity, rank and gender

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(i.e. situational variation), while co-occurrence rules were concerned with the stylistic coherence of linguistic features (as in style-shifting into and out of African American English). For example, Sue analysed an incident described by African American physician Dr Alvin F. Poussaint (20 August 1967) in which he was addressed as ‘boy’ and ordered to say his first – rather than last – name and title by a white policeman. Sue viewed this as due to the southern policeman accessing an address system which specifies that adults in high-status roles should be addressed with title and last name, but which contained a selector for racial categorisation and enabled condescension and the stripping of the deference the physician deserved based on his age and rank (Ervin-Tripp 1972:223). Through awareness of these rule systems and contextual patternings (Ervin-Tripp 1996), meaning could be shared across speakers, and societal systems of power could be challenged.



Susan M. Ervin-Tripp, c. 1992.
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Dr Susan Ervin-Tripp and Slobin et al. (1996).

In 1976, Sue published a seminal paper analysing spontaneously produced requests by adults in a range of social settings such as living rooms, shops, hospitals and workplaces (Ervin-Tripp 1976). Her findings pointed to the systematicity of the social distribution of such forms according to rank, familiarity, whether a duty is normally expected and the likelihood of noncompliance. The higher the rank of the addressee or the cost of the request, the less imposing the request form and the more possibility it provided for noncompliance. In another influential study, one which analysed power within the family as seen in *children's* requests, Sue found that children were sensitive to gendered roles within the family, using more deference markers with fathers than with mothers (Ervin-Tripp, O'Connor and Rosenberg 1984). Summarising across these studies, Sue concluded that '[l]inguistic realizations of rank contrasts – such as politeness in directives' were associated with many features in addition to sex of speaker, including 'pressure of task, solidarity, age, perceived cost of goods or services'; in other words, 'sex of speakers did not appear a strong variable' (Ervin-Tripp 1978:23).

Based on these findings – and also influenced by colleague Claudia Mitchell-Kernan's (1971) work showing that speakers could 'monitor black', that is, use with greater frequency features of Black English 'for personal or political purposes' (Ervin-Tripp 1978:23) – Sue began to articulate a nuanced view of gender identity that invokes ideas of 'monitoring' and 'marking' gender. In a groundbreaking paper, she argued that '[s]ome social settings may emphasize gender and others do not' (Ervin-Tripp 1978). She went on to say:

Are there some kinds of social systems which foster identity marking and others that do not? ... as the reference group shifts, we can expect that individual speakers may 'monitor male' or masculinize speech, or 'monitor female' or feminize speech. An example might be the report of a marked increase in swearing among women in the student protest movements, which might symbolize toughness ... Do men interacting with women in parallel roles feminize their speech? What I am proposing here is the examination of situational effects upon styles within the individual's repertoire. (Ervin-Tripp 1978:24)

With this nuanced view of gender and language in mind, Sue worked with Martin Lampert to examine gender politics in the naturally occurring humorous talk of college-aged students. In her co-authored paper in the 1992 Berkeley Women and Language Conference proceedings, 'Gender differences in the construction of humorous talk' (Ervin-Tripp and Lampert 1992), she reported that men and women in gender-homogeneous groups showed differences in self-directed humour, both in type (e.g. women preferred this type while men preferred out-group teasing) and

in its features, with men's self-deprecations focusing on entertaining and women's on seeking common experience; however, there was contextual variation. In gender-mixed groups, men's self-directed humour increased while women's decreased, which could be seen as a way of accommodating one another's styles and counterbalancing traditional power asymmetries in mixed-sex groups (Lampert and Ervin-Tripp 2006).

Sue's ideas covered how power could be marked and constituted through language forms like directive and address terms, how gender marking in language could be 'monitored' by speakers and influenced by cultural and contextual factors and, finally, how power marking with directives and other features may not have to do with orienting to gender at all (Ervin-Tripp 1978, 2001). These led to a more nuanced view of gender and language for the field and inspired a wide body of research on conflict talk, directives, narrative, humour and emotion talk in children's and young people's peer interactions.² I was a postdoc of Sue's in the early 1990s and am among these scholars thus inspired. My own paper in the 1992 Berkeley Women and Language Conference Proceedings, 'Gender differences in the use of persuasive justification in children's pretend play' (Kyratzis 1992), reported that 4- and 7-year-old girls and boys used persuasive justifications in markedly different ways – boys to enact an 'adversarial stance' and girls to validate and elaborate shared pretences – and these differences affected children's causal marking and grammar. In looking at children's friendship group talk, like Sue, I became interested in power marking and if/how it was related to gender. I found, for example, that in *both* girls' and boys' friendship groups, preschool children who enact a leadership role do so through issuing directives formulated as imperatives and challenging others' directives; other group members ratify the right of these leaders to issue orders by making permission and information requests of them (Kyratzis, Marx and Wade 2001). Children even draw on in-role register features (e.g. of news anchor register) in pretend play to enact such positions of relative power to one another (Kyratzis 2007). In terms of context, Jiansheng Guo and I found cross-cultural and cross-situational patterns in the linguistic conflict management strategies used by preschoolers (Kyratzis and Guo 2001). During conflicts in gender-homogeneous groups, American middle-class boys used directives formulated as imperatives, putdowns and bald rejections more than girls; in mainland China, girls used more imperatives, putdowns and bald rejections. In gender-heterogeneous groups within both cultures, however, context and topic of play determined whether girls or boys used more explicit forms of conflict management. My scholarly trajectory over subsequent years also intersected with Sue's as I examined ways that bilingual children code-switch and

collaboratively explore how languages index social identities and activities as part of their negotiations of local social organisation (Kyratzis 2018).

Throughout her lifetime, Sue also worked on social justice issues. Influenced by some of her own experiences, such as not being allowed to march at graduation at Harvard and being excluded from ‘The Great Hall’ of the Men’s Faculty Club at Berkeley, Sue became an activist for issues affecting women’s professional opportunities at the university. She contributed to a report on the status of women at Berkeley that resulted in a civil rights complaint to Caspar Weinberger, then Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare in Washington, and led to a committee in the Academic Senate at the University of California, Berkeley to deal with issues facing women and ethnic minorities. After retiring from UC Berkeley, Sue also undertook a large-scale study of letters of recommendation written for applicants to university faculty positions, examining the politics of gender in how male and female applicants were described, which she titled ‘Conquering discrimination against women in academia.’³

In sum, Sue’s influence on the field of gender and language – and sociolinguistics and pragmatics more broadly – was pervasive. Sue contributed a view of gender marking as ‘monitored’ by speakers and influenced by cultural and contextual factors. She emphasised a discourse-centred approach focusing on naturally occurring speech events such as humour and disputes (e.g. Ervin-Tripp and Mitchell-Kernan 1977). Her work on address terminology and requests revealed subtle social rule systems underlying power dynamics in schools, the family, the workplace and society and illuminated how inequalities in power, including those based on gender, can be reflected in and constituted through language (Ervin-Tripp 1972). And perhaps most significantly, Sue was a role model who stressed how these understandings of language should be applied to solve important social problems, including those affecting women as well as other historically disadvantaged groups. She will be an inspiration to generations of gender and language scholars to come.

About the author

Amy Kyratzis is Professor of Early Childhood and Language Development in the Department of Education, University of California, Santa Barbara. She uses videoethnography and microanalysis of talk to understand the linguistic and embodied practices through which children negotiate social and moral order and learn with and socialise one another in multilingual educational settings. Her articles have appeared in *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, *Journal of Pragmatics*, *Pragmatics*, *Linguistics and Education* and other journals.

Notes

- 1 For Ervin-Tripp's own reflections on her work and career, see her interview with Shanna Farrell, which is archived, along with a foreword from UC Berkeley Department of Psychology colleague Dan I. Slobin, at the Oral History Center, Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley (Ervin-Tripp 2017), https://ohc-search.lib.berkeley.edu/catalog/MASTER_2067
- 2 For a view to Ervin-Tripp's influence on other researchers, see a festschrift honouring her contributions titled *Social Context, Social Interaction, and Language* (Slobin, Gerhardt, Kyratzis and Guo 1996).
- 3 Although sadly Ervin-Tripp did not get to publish results from this project before her passing, she refers to the letters, as well as to her work for the equity of women, in her Oral History (Ervin-Tripp 2017).

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