

The Sexual (Re)Production of Meaning: A Discourse-Based Theory

Sally McConnell-Ginet

Scholarship on women and language has addressed two main topics: (1) how women (and men) speak (and write); (2) how they (and other gender-marked topics) are spoken of. In each case, feminists have argued, some kind of linguistic sexism is at work. Sexism in how we speak has many aspects. Women's favored styles of language use are often negatively evaluated by the larger community, for example, and women are frequently the victims of male oppression in discourse, suffering interruptions and inattention to their conversational contributions. In more public arenas, similar problems exist on a larger scale: women speaking from pulpits or podiums are still rare, and their writings are viewed as somehow tainted by their sex. Sexism in how women are spoken of manifests itself in a variety of ways, such as "the semantic derogation of women" in the vocabulary and the so-called generic masculines that contribute to women's relative "psychological invisibility."

Extensive annotated bibliographies in Barrie Thorne and Nancy Henley and in Thorne, Kramarae, and Henley attest to the wealth of empirical research on both issues. Later in this essay I discuss specific investigations of the first question—how women speak; Julia Penelope Stanley, in "Paradigmatic," and Muriel Schulz are among those who have studied the second question—how women are spoken of. Each topic has also been explored by many other feminist thinkers: see, for example, Mary Daly; Adrienne Rich, *On Lies*; and the many collections concerned with language from

a literary or psychoanalytic viewpoint (including Eisenstein and Jardine; McConnell-Ginet, Borker, and Furman; Abel; Garner, Kahane, and Sprengnether; and Benstock). Other recent writings are cited by Paula Treichler in both "Teaching" and "Language." Kramer, Thorne, and Henley suggest the need for investigating the interaction between language use and what they call *language structure* (our semantic resources), a subject that Kramarae develops somewhat further in "Proprietors of Language." The popular term *sexist language* is generally applied to the second topic, which I call *sexist semantics* for the sake of brevity, but it sometimes is also construed to cover the first, which I call *sexist discourse*. (Some of the papers in Vetterling-Braggin's *Sexist Language*, for example, are more directly concerned with the ways women and men act as speakers than with the ways they are spoken of, despite the book's title.)

My major aim in this essay is to give a brief theoretical account of the roots of sexist semantics in sexist discourse. This way of putting it is, of course, somewhat oversimplified. By *sexist semantics* I mean not only such phenomena as the sexualization and homogenization of words denoting women (e.g., *mistress* and *girl*) and the universalization of words originally denoting men (e.g., *guys*) but also subtler aspects of the relative absence of a "women's-eye view" in the most readily accessible linguistic resources. What I mean by *sexist discourse* also goes beyond the more blatant kinds of male oppression of women in conversation, though I include some examples of these. More generally, I am interested in how sex differences influence both communication and interpretation in discourse.

Whatever we may think of the merits of particular studies, it is relatively easy to see how sexism in a community could have implications for how its members speak and how their speech is evaluated. Because using language is a socially situated action, it is clearly embedded in the same sociocultural matrix that supports sexual bias in the work we do, the wages we receive, the expectations we have of ourselves and others, and so on. What is more difficult to understand is the connections between a sexist society and the semantics of a language; the most familiar theoretical models of linguistic meaning do not illumine the question of how particular meanings become attached to particular forms.

Stated like this, however, the question is misleading, for it suggests that meanings somehow exist independently of their articulation, as though languages merely paste linguistic labels on the

semantic furniture of the universe, tagging an independent realm of concepts with sounds (or, in the graphic medium, strings of letters). Not all the possible semantic stock is tagged by a particular language-using community, but no theoretical barrier prohibits its members from adding labels whenever they choose. Or so a common line of thinking goes, a line that I refer to as the *code view* of language (see McConnell-Ginet, "Linguistics" and "Origins"). This view finds popular expression in such comments as "Oh, that's just a question of semantics" (which implies the triviality of the connection between forms and their meanings) or in such familiar adages as "A rose by any other name would smell as sweet" (see McConnell-Ginet's "Origins" for a discussion of this Shakespearean line and its often forgotten context). What the code view fails to address is the significance of the tagging process itself and the possibility that this process shapes and gives coherence to the sometimes inchoate stuff that we seek to wrap our tags around. To understand the source of sexist semantics, the way sexism in society and culture interacts with the system of linguistic meanings, we really need to ask how meaning is produced and reproduced.

The production of meaning designates the processes through which speakers mean something by what they say (or writers by what they write) and through which hearers (or readers) interpret what is said (or written). The reproduction of meaning refers to our dependence, in producing meanings, on previous meanings or interpretations, to our dependence in particular on one another's experience with the linguistic forms being used. I argue that to understand the ways that meanings are produced and reproduced and the significance of sex and gender in these processes, we must consider the conditions of discourse. The key to explaining so-called sexist semantics and, ultimately, to reclaiming the "power of naming" (see D. Spender, *Man Made*) lies in analyzing the sexual politics of discourse. Macropolitical structures play a significant role, of course, in genderizing discourse. Who writes and who reads? Who preaches sermons to large congregations? Who publishes books? Whose speeches are beamed by satellite around the world? Although these are important questions, I will not consider them here but will focus instead on the micropolitics of daily discourse between ordinary individuals. Because most of what we say about daily discourse is more widely applicable, however, this restriction is not so severe as it might seem.

I am indebted to the work of the philosopher H. P. Grice for my basic framework, though I use his ideas in a somewhat special way.

Grice bases his account of meaning on what speakers intend to accomplish by speaking. (See the Grice studies listed under Works Cited and Lewis's and Schiffer's related theoretical analyses, which Bach and Harnish draw on in attempting to develop a general theory of linguistic communication.) The crucial feature of the Gricean account for my purposes is that meaning depends not just on the speaker but on a kind of relation between the speaker and the hearer. It is this potentially social perspective that gives insight into the (re)production of meaning.

What is involved in this account? Grice's explanation goes something like this: in saying *A*, a speaker means to express the thought *B* if the speaker intends to produce in her hearer a recognition of thought *B* by virtue of his recognizing that she is trying to produce that recognition in him by saying *A*. (Grice does not restrict his account to female speakers and male hearers, as the pronouns I have used may imply that he does. I am following many other authors in using both *she* and *he* as "generic" singular pronouns; but since I later discuss in more detail the hypothetical case of a woman talking with a man, the choice of pronouns is not entirely arbitrary.) This back-and-forth intending and recognizing and thinking is, of course, not usually a conscious process. In informal speech, coordination adequate for the purpose is generally taken for granted and not reflected on. The more complex (and the more novel) the thoughts one seeks to express, the more conscious the attention given to the meaning process. There is generally greater self-awareness in writing and reading than in speaking and hearing, because the memory and time constraints are less severe.

In linguistic communication, the speaker typically takes as common ground with the hearer certain beliefs about the language system and, in particular, about familiar connections between linguistic forms (signifiers) and thoughts and concepts (signified). It would seem safe to assume this common ground in most conversations. The assumption can certainly not be maintained, however, in linguistic transactions with very young children. How then do children come to manipulate sounds (and ultimately other means of signaling) to express thoughts? The issue of how much the development of this ability depends on the child's experience and how much it reflects the biologically controlled maturation process does not concern us here. What I do want to stress is that parents usually act as if their child intentionally behaves in certain ways to express thoughts, even though they may well know better.

Let us imagine the bizarre case of a child whose exposure to

language involved no social interaction. We might suppose that a loudspeaker intoned English sentences into the nursery and that the child's needs were attended to with no accompanying speech. This child might indeed begin to speak, matching the loudspeaker's output, but there would be no reason to assume that the child *meant* anything by articulating "I love you, Mommy." This child would be like the parrot that produces linguistic forms with no appreciation of how the wider speech community uses those forms.

In contrast, most children in English-speaking families have a radically different experience. When the child produces something like "ma" or "mama"—whether to imitate the language of others or just to attempt vocal control—the parents attach significance to the sounds: they treat the child as if the utterance meant "mama." That is, they begin to make it possible for the child to give this meaning to the sounds by showing that they have attended to those sounds, using the same or somewhat similar sounds themselves in conjunction with such actions as pointing to Mama or having Mama present herself to the child. The crucial thing is that children thus start to participate in a coordinative activity, recognizing their own and others' articulations as somehow the same. The motives they begin to attribute to others' articulations can also serve to guide their own. Let me emphasize that much of this development may well be guided by children's prewired or innate capacities and dispositions, including access to a fairly rich and highly structured conceptual system as well as a natural bent to coordinate their own speech with the articulations of their community. That is, children may have a preexisting stock of concepts waiting to have tags affixed; nonetheless, as tags are placed, some of those concepts are modified or joined with others in various ways that we do not yet clearly understand but that nonetheless result in the production of new conceptual systems. The conceptual systems that children evolve will to a considerable extent reproduce those prevalent in the community.

We cannot, in this essay, follow the child's entire linguistic development. What matters for our purposes is that the child and those around the child manage to *mean* something by what they say because (1) they jointly take the saying to be aimed at triggering a common recognition of thoughts, (2) they jointly take themselves to be relying on shared resources to achieve this coordinated recognition—a common language system plus a certain amount of shared experience. To a considerable extent, the coordination is achieved through the child's adapting to what is customary for the

community. Those in the community, however, may also adapt to the child's productions—perhaps accepting novel forms or understanding the child as giving certain standard forms nontraditional meanings. But, by and large, the child and its parents do not endow language forms with meaning by coordinating their uses of them *de novo*. Rather, the parents (and all the other language users whom the child encounters) exploit the basic consensus achieved in earlier uses, and the meanings the child manages to produce in exchanges basically reproduce those already familiar in the community.

For certain concepts—especially for talking about perceptions of the external world—the reproduction of meaning is probably almost literally that, for the simple reason that children are evidently predisposed to note certain distinctions, to attend to certain sorts of environmental stimuli, and to ignore others. Their innate conceptual systems need only be aligned with the language system in their community. Apparently, for example, children who learn the *up-down* word pair through spatial uses do not need to be taught to apply it to ascending and descending melodies: psychologists have found that even very young prelinguistic infants make this connection between the visual and auditory domains. Nonetheless, most linguistically encoded concepts are not preformed but are produced, in at least their fine detail, as children familiarize themselves with the particular perspectives, beliefs, and practices of the community.

It is by no means clear, for example, that children initially give high priority to sorting people by sex rather than by other characteristics. In languages like Finnish, where *hän* is the only singular third-person pronoun, third-person reference is not differentiated by sex. There is no evidence I know of that Finnish children start by trying to introduce a marking of sex difference here. There is evidence, however, that some English children do not find the *she-he* distinction particularly congenial. Whether or not children find it natural to genderize references to a person—to choose between *he* and *she* even where the sexual information plays no particular role in what is communicated—probably depends on how strongly genderization has figured in their experience. In a household with children of both sexes, for example, the special importance of sex sorting is likely to have established itself fairly well by the time the youngest child is working at pronouns. But some children do resist, perhaps because their rearing has been what Sandra Bem calls *gender-aschematic*. Such children, acculturated into an atypical

framework, use the same form for everyone or use the masculine and feminine pronouns in somewhat random fashion, not both-ering to attend to the distinction where it does not matter for their purposes. But even they eventually go along with the larger community, and it seems plausible that learning to make the required distinction can serve to heighten the conceptual salience of sex sorting.

The main point here, again, is that endowing linguistic forms with meaning is a socially situated process. The statement applies not just to children learning to communicate but also to more mature speakers struggling to convey increasingly complex thoughts. A major insight of the Gricean perspective is that we can manage to mean much more than what we literally say. How? By relying on what we take to be shared or readily accessible beliefs and attitudes in a particular context.

We can suggest a framework for understanding how cultural biases leave their mark on language systems and, more generally, we can begin to see why and how social inequality results in linguistic inequality. Our focus will be on discourse inequalities created by the sexual division of labor in producing situated meanings. Empirical research on conversational interaction among white middle-class Americans has convincingly demonstrated the influence of sexual stratification on discourse, and I want to extend these results to support an account of how sexual bias can affect the (re)production of meaning.

The major findings on discourse are hardly surprising. Basically, in cross-sex conversation men tend to dominate women in the following ways: (1) they actually do more of the talking; (2) they interrupt women, in the sense of seizing the floor, more often than women interrupt them; and (3) they more often succeed in focusing the conversation on topics they introduce (see, for example, Eakins and Eakins, "Verbal"; Fishman, "Interaction"; Kramarae, *Women*; Swacker; West and Zimmerman; the summary in Treichler and Kramarae; and the many other studies cited in Thorne and Henley and in Thorne, Kramarae, and Henley.) In all these respects, the conversational relation between women and men parallels that between children and adults, employees and employers, and other power-differentiated groups. Not surprisingly, matters are more complex than this thumbnail sketch implies; for example, neither interruption (of which there seem to be different kinds) nor amount of talk is always indicative of control over a conversation, and correlation with sex is affected by many contextual factors. Certainly

the proposed picture runs counter to some stereotypes—notably, that women are more talkative than men. If there is any truth to this notion, it may lie in situations other than those on which research has focused to date. For example, female groups may spend more of their time in talk than do male groups. Studies of single-sex conversation do suggest that women regard conversation more as a cooperative enterprise than as a competition, enlarging on and acknowledging one another's contributions, responding to coconversationalists' attempts to introduce topics, and signaling active listening by nods and *mmhms* during a partner's turn (see Edelsky, "Who's," and Kalčík). In contrast, men generally view conversation more individually and less socially, with each participant's contribution self-contained and the "right" to one's own turn taking priority over any "responsibility" to others during their turns.

To some extent, women and men simply operate with different expectations about how linguistic interactions ought to proceed. For example, men are far less likely than women to give signals that say "I read you loud and clear." This is true not only when they talk with women but also when they talk with one another. A man may interpret another's *mmhmm* as agreement with what's been said, whereas a woman hears another's *mmhmm* as registering comprehension. One young man in a classroom where these differences were being discussed decided he sometimes might be assuming that his girlfriend agreed with him when indeed she was merely signaling that she was still receiving his communication. He resolved to try to distinguish the genuine signals of assent from those of simple connection. When he thought he had an affirmative response, he would stop and say, "Oh, so we're agreed about that." More often than not her reply was "Of course not." (I owe this anecdote to Ruth Borker.) Still, what is involved here is more than different expectations; it is also an exercise of power, whether intentional or not.

Daniel Maltz and Ruth Borker argue that women and men have different models of friendly conversation. Their account draws on such work as Kalčík's study of women's rap groups and Marjorie Harness Goodwin's analysis of directives issued by girls and boys to each other. From a somewhat different perspective, Carole Edelsky contends that in addition to the *singly held floor* that is normative in most conversational studies, there is in some conversations a *collectively held floor* (these are my terms for her "F1" and "F2"); she observes that women participate on a more nearly equal basis with men under collective floor conditions ("Who's"). Undoubtedly, the

full account of sexual differentiation in discourse will be far more complex than our current picture. For example, the more interactive orientation that women and girls have toward conversation does not mean that men and boys have a monopoly on conflict and disagreement—a point the Goodwins make very clear in their interesting study "Children's Arguing." Nonetheless, whatever the explanation, the evidence shows that men generally aim at individual conversational control, whereas women aim at social conversational collaboration.

Male conversational control and female conversational collaboration are, of course, only tendencies: there are women who successfully interrupt men to steer the conversation in their own direction, and there are men who work at helping their female coconversationalists develop a topic by asking questions, elaborating, or simply by actively indicating their continuing engagement in the listening process. Still, a common pattern involves the man's controlling and the woman's supporting cross-sex conversation. Nor is there any reason to believe that this behavior is somehow biologically rather than culturally produced. Early on, children are identified by others as girls or boys and learn to identify themselves in the same way. Tied to this identification is a process that typically leads them to acquire roughly the practices of linguistic communication that prevail among their same-sex peers (see Goodwin). And linguistic communication, as one kind of social interaction, is embedded in more general political structures that children are, in some sense, being prepared to reproduce. Whatever the precise mechanisms, the net result is that sex is of considerable significance in the politics of talk among adults.

How does inequality in discourse affect what can be meant and by whom? First, men are more likely than women to have a chance to express their perspective on situations, not only because they have more frequent access to the floor but also because they are more actively attended to. This distinction is especially important, since comprehension goes well beyond simple recognition of the linguistic structures used. In other words, where the sexes have somewhat different perspectives on a situation, the man's view is more likely to be familiar to the woman than hers is to him. This observation leads directly to the second point: men are much more likely than women to be unaware that their own view is not universally shared. As a result, women and men may well be in quite different positions regarding what they believe to be commonly accepted (or accessible) in the speech community. This disparity in

turn can have important consequences for what each is able to "mean" when engaging in linguistic communication. Why? Because what is meant depends not just on the joint beliefs about the language system and its conventional—that is, standard or established—interpretations but also on what interlocutors take to be prevalent beliefs in the speech community about everything else besides language.

"New" or nonconventional meanings involve a speaker's intending the hearer to infer a purpose to the words beyond that of directing attention to the thought "literally" expressed. Let us take as an example the semantic development of *hussy*, a word that was once merely a synonym for *housewife*. How did it acquire its present meaning? And, once the sexual slur was produced, how was it reproduced and attached to the form so insistently that present generations do not even connect the two words? The example is not in itself important, since *hussy* hardly figures prominently in contemporary discourse, but it is useful for illustrative purposes because its historical development is well documented.

While we cannot, of course, recapture the discourse conditions in which this particular sexual insult was produced, we can sketch what may have happened and reconstruct the course of the word's shift in meaning. It seems plausible that some members of the speech community considered sexual wantonness a salient characteristic of the housewife. Such people could say *huswif* (or, perhaps, the somewhat shortened and familiar form *hussy*) and rely on their hearers to bring that characteristic to bear on interpreting the utterance. Thus they might say something like "What a hussy!" and try to mean just what such a comment conventionally means today. Of course, if they were wrong in supposing that their hearers would recognize this appeal to the negative stereotype, the attempted communication would fail. But the mere fact that the putative common belief was not universally shared would not in itself spell doom. So long as the negative stereotype of housewives was widely known, even hearers who did not accept it could recognize an appeal to it and understand that the term *hussy* was intended as an insult.

A contemporary example of semantic derogation can be found in what some younger speakers are now doing with the term *gay*. Elementary school children who do not connect the adjective with sexuality simply understand it as a word used to belittle. They will, of course, soon learn that *gay* refers to homosexuality and that the belittlement they rightly recognized in older speakers' use of the

word is based on attitudes and emotions about sexuality. Often the early connotations will persist and become associated with homosexuality, tending to reinforce the pervasive heterosexism and homophobia in mainstream social groups.

Or consider a somewhat subtler example. A man who means to insult me by saying "you think like a woman" can succeed. He succeeds not because I share his belief that women's thinking is somehow inferior but because I understand that he is likely to have such a belief and that his intention is not just to identify my thinking as an objectively characterizable sort but to suggest that it is flawed in a way endemic to women's thought. The crucial point is that I need not know his particular beliefs: I need only refer to what I recognize (and can suppose he intends me to recognize) as a common belief in the community.

In contrast, it is much more difficult for me to mean to insult him by saying "you think like a man," because to recognize my intention he would not only have to know that my opinion of men's thinking is low, he would also have to believe that I know he so knows (or that I believe he so believes); though such an understanding is not unimaginable in a conversation between old acquaintances, it is quite unlikely in more general communication. And even where the intended insult works, it is construed as something of a joke or as a special usage, unless the stereotype disparaging women's thought (or at least elevating men's) is not familiar to both interlocutors. Thus it is easy to reproduce notions with widely established currency and difficult to produce unexpected or unfamiliar ones. I need not actually believe some commonplace, or even know that my interlocutor does, in order to attribute to him (my choice of pronouns here and throughout this essay is deliberate) the intention to treat it as a view we share. Indeed, even if I explicitly deny that view, I may end up doing so by acknowledging that it is generally believed. Thus, as Finn Tschudi observes, to say "women think as well as men do" is already to acknowledge that the standard for comparison is men's thought. No matter how much I might wish to insult someone by saying that *she* or *he* thinks like a man, I could not so intend without relying on more than general linguistic and cultural knowledge.

There are complications, of course. We may each be aware that the general stereotype is under attack. Until it is decisively destroyed, however, the possibility remains that someone will purport to take it as a shared belief—and thereby succeed in relying on it to convey meaning, unless the "purporting" is exposed. As the

stereotype fades, however, the meaning it conveyed may remain but become reattached to the linguistic form as part of its literal meaning. Thus the view of housewives as hussies might not have been robust enough to sustain all the intended uses of *hussy* to insult, but so long as enough of these uses succeeded, subsequent language users could be directed immediately to the insult without a detour through the extralinguistic attitudes. In other words, when enough such insults work in situations that the speakers can take as precedent-setting, where the insult is recognized and associated with the term rather than with the negative view that initiated the term's derogatory connotation, the facilitating stereotype becomes superfluous. One can rely on earlier language experience to reproduce the meaning formerly produced by the stereotype.

This discussion leads to the related issues of what speakers take as background beliefs about the interpretations "standardly" assigned in the speech community, that is, the literal meanings that can be assumed as "defaults" in talking with others (operative unless something special in the discourse triggers alternative interpretations). One could, once upon a time, call someone a *hussy* and not intend to insult her. One can no longer do so, however, since a contemporary speaker who is familiar with the form can hardly fail to know how it is now standardly taken—and certainly cannot count on an unfamiliar interlocutor to ignore the negative evaluation. As we probably all realize, for example, it is becoming harder and harder to make *he* mean "she or he," because only incredibly isolated speakers can have missed the controversy over the so-called generic masculine, the dispute over whether users of *he* in sex-indefinite contexts indeed intend to refer to both sexes and, if they do, how well they succeed in getting their hearers to recognize that intention. (The introductory essay in this volume describes this debate at length.) Given the doubts raised, one cannot say *he* and mean "she or he," because one cannot generally expect hearers to make this identification. Humpty-Dumpty said to Alice, "When I use a word it means exactly what I choose it to mean," but that was, to a considerable extent, wishful thinking. Suppose we intend others to recognize a certain thought or concept just by understanding the linguistic forms we have used. This intention will be reasonable only if we can expect our listeners to believe with us that the speech community indeed associates that thought or concept with those linguistic forms. That is, we must get others to cooperate with us in giving our words the meaning we want. At

the very least, our listeners must recognize our intention and help us by acknowledging that recognition.

It may well be that women play a major role in reproducing meanings that do not serve their own purposes or express their own perspectives. They are fully aware that female perspectives are not viewed as commonly held (indeed, are often not recognized at all) and, in the interests of facilitating communication, they allow men to continue to believe that a distinctively male view of things is actually not particular but universal. "This is the oppressor's language," says Adrienne Rich, "yet I need it to talk to you" (*Will* 16). Indeed, some have argued that language is so little "woman's language" that women cannot even manage to mean what they say, much less achieve success in meaning more.

This view has been persuasively elaborated by the philosopher Sara Ann Ketchum. How, she asks, can a woman manage to mean no to a man's "Would you like to go to bed?" She says no with sincerity but he interprets her through a filter of beliefs that transform her direct negative into an indirect affirmative: "She is playing hard to get, but of course she really means yes." But of course she does not mean yes; assent is not what she intends to convey. I would contend that indeed she does mean no, even though she faces an extraordinary problem in trying to communicate that meaning to someone ready to hear an affirmative no matter what she says. (I am not, of course, claiming that one never means yes by *no* but only that one often does not; this is the case we are now considering.) Only if she knows that he will never take her *no* to mean no can she not intend the negation. Yet she still would not mean yes; his refusal to cooperate in her attempts to communicate no might reduce her to a desperate silence, but his unreasonableness, his unwillingness to apprehend her as someone who might mean no, can never compel her to mean yes. Even though what my words mean does not depend solely on my intentions, Humpty-Dumpty is right that it does require those intentions.

Nonetheless, Ketchum's main point certainly stands: meaning is a matter not only of individual will but of social relations embedded in political structures. A positive moral can be drawn from this observation as well: it is possible to produce new meanings in the context of a community or culture of supportive and like-thinking people. I can mean no if my intention is supported by a feminist network that recognizes the sexual double standard and articulates male myths regarding female sexual behavior: I am not a single,

isolated individual refusing to submit but, rather, part of a collectivity resisting sexism and violence against women. More generally, women are together challenging the view that "the" culture is what men have told them it is or that "the" language is what is available and what women must reproduce on pain of being condemned to a solitary silence. Rather, women are uncovering the myth of univocality and discovering new voices, their own and their sisters'.

The philosopher Naomi Scheman has illustrated how a feminist community can produce new meanings. In "Anger and the Politics of Naming," she looks at how consciousness evolves—in some sense created—in a women's rap group: using a mass of internal inchoate stuff, women can work together to form something coherent, to build conceptual structures that allow them both to interpret their own experience and to express that interpretation to others. In other words, they do not just tag preexisting concepts but generate new ones. They are able to think new thoughts, to realize, for example, that they may have been angry without recognizing what they felt. This thought is new not just in particular instances but also in its broader implications—enabling women to interpret an earlier emotion as anger when they did not do so at the time, because their language use did not then offer that possibility. This new interpretation matters because it connects past emotions to the option of purposeful current actions. Women cannot "mean" alone but they can collaborate to produce new meanings and support the reproduction of those meanings in the community.

The research contrasting women's and men's approaches to discourse suggests, in fact, that women may be especially well suited to producing significantly new meanings. Because this possibility depends on the development of a shared new outlook, it might be better promoted in the cooperative mode of discourse than in the competitive, where less attention is paid to the other (and where one extracts meaning by assuming that the speaker reproduces earlier linguistic habits and familiar modes of thinking). It is true, of course, that women will find it harder to express their distinctive perspectives to men than vice versa so long as sexist patterns and practices persist. Nonetheless, women might collectively reshape their conceptual systems, particularly the ways they think about women and men, about individuals and social relationships, and about language and its connection to the individuals and their communities.

Is this possibility what the French feminists mean when they speak of an *écriture féminine*, what English-speaking feminists like

Mary Daly mean when they talk of a "new" gynocentric language? Perhaps, though calls urging women to produce their own meanings are sometimes interpreted as implying that they must leave the old and familiar language to "him." But they cannot begin *de novo*. Just as the child must start somewhere—and presumably draws heavily on a conceptual structure that is biologically endowed—so must women. It was because the women in Scheman's rap group could assume they all had access to a common language system that they could evolve together views that differed in important ways from familiar interpretations of that system. No matter what women intend to mean by their new language, they can only convey that meaning if they can expect others to recognize the thoughts to which the language aims to direct attention. And if there are indeed new meanings to be reproduced after they are initially produced in specific contexts, then women must find a community both able and willing to apprehend those new meanings.

It is a matter not just of what women manage to mean but also of what all of us, women and men, interpret others as meaning and, ultimately, of what we help or hinder others to mean. As I pointed out earlier, feminist research has established that *he*, no matter what its user intends, is not unproblematically interpreted as generic, and the consequent shift in the community's beliefs about how *he* is interpreted has influenced what one can intend the pronoun to convey. There are now many contexts in which those who are aware of these developments cannot expect *he* to be understood as "he or she," no matter how much they might wish they could. A footnote explaining one's generic intentions does not suffice, since some readers will doubt the sincerity of that announcement and others will forget it. This is not to say that now no one ever means "he or she" by using *he*: my point is just that it is much harder to convey that meaning than it used to be, in large measure because we now know that many earlier attempts were unsuccessful and that many purported attempts were, in fact, spurious. (Martyna provides empirical evidence that the actual use and interpretation of so-called generic masculines are quite different from what grammar books prescribe; see "Beyond"; "Psychology"; and "What.")

Language matters so much precisely because so little matter is attached to it: meanings are not given but must be produced and reproduced, negotiated in situated contexts of communication. Negotiation is always problematic if an inequality of resources enables one negotiator to coerce the other. And because negotiation involves achieving consensus about beliefs and attitudes, it is not

surprising that dominant groups have an unfair advantage in working out ways of meaning that are congenial to their beliefs and attitudes. The picture is much more complex than I have indicated here, but the basic point should be clear. Meanings are produced and reproduced within the political structures that condition discourse: though a sexist politics may have helped some men to “steal the power of naming,” that power—a real one—can be reappropriated by feminist women and men building new language communities.

From Discourse to Dictionary: How Sexist Meanings Are Authorized

Paula A. Treichler

The term *dictionary* can designate a concrete lexicographic object (“Turning to my *Webster’s*, I find that *woman* is defined as an adult human female”); a more broadly institutionalized cultural authority (“As the dictionary makes clear, women are frequently viewed negatively in our culture”); or an abstract repository of linguistically coded entities available in the repertoire of individual speakers (For many English speakers the dictionary entry *woman* is coded *human*, *adult*, and *female*). All these meanings presuppose the conscious or unconscious construction of a set of “definitive” statements commonly thought to be founded on—deduced or extracted from—the study or observation of linguistic and material entities in the “real world.” In turn, a dictionary definition places a word within a particular grammatical, cognitive, and material context, thus constraining (dictating) usage, conceptualization, and perception. It is the still, fixed outcome, in other words, of a set of interpretive practices that becomes, itself, interpreted. If discourse is the text from which a dictionary is constructed, a dictionary becomes the text that, in turn, constructs discourse. In this sense a dictionary is any kind of scholarly or authoritative text on words that claims to be based—as most dictionaries do claim—on what is. This equation—provisional and problematic though it may be—is one way of understanding the process through which meanings—both sexist and nonsexist—are authorized.

In this essay I explore the relation between discourse and dic-