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by Robin Tolmach Lakoff

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ROBIN TOLMACH LAKOFF

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# LANGUAGE AND WOMAN'S PLACE

TEXT AND COMMENTARIES

REVISED AND EXPANDED EDITION

EDITED BY MARY BUCHOLTZ

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To my students, past and present,

who have been an inspiration for all my work. —RTL

And for Barbara Bucholtz,

who refused to know her place. —MB

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## PART I: CONTEXTS

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### I ■

#### Changing Places

##### Language and Woman's Place *in Context*

MARY BUCHOLTZ

Commentators on Robin Tolmach Lakoff's work on language and gender, and particularly her critics, often seem to believe that her ideas about women, language, and feminism stopped in 1975, the year when *Language and Woman's Place* (LWP) was published in book form. Yet Lakoff explicitly stated in the text that she considered that work an initial foray into language and gender issues, not a definitive statement of the ways in which language reproduces an asymmetrical gender system: "I present what follows less as the final word on the subject of sexism in language—anything but that!—than as a goad to further research" (LWP 40). In her later writings on gender, which are much less widely cited than LWP, Lakoff's ideas on these issues continued to develop, and she built on, refined, and revised her earlier discussion. In keeping with the present volume's goal of reassessing the position of LWP in language and gender scholarship, in this essay I enlarge the scope of this project to include a wider range of Lakoff's work on gender. This survey, albeit brief and partial, is intended to encourage readers to explore all of Lakoff's rich writings on gender, rather than limiting their acquaintance with Lakoff's work to her most sensationalized and misunderstood text, LWP. By situating LWP within the context of the ongoing development of Lakoff's thought, I argue, we are better able to appreciate her continuing contributions not just to feminist linguistics but to feminism more generally.

#### Lakoff's Feminist Practice

Even a cursory glance at Lakoff's extensive bibliography of publications on gender makes clear that all of her work in this area demonstrates a fundamental orientation to both feminism and linguistics as bodies of knowledge that should not be restricted to the domain of academic theory. Instead, as she shows through example, both endeavors must be recognized

as central to the concerns of daily life. Her efforts to make these ideas accessible to a wide audience are thus simultaneously political and theoretical—a feminist challenge to structures of inequity that restrict access in order to perpetuate the power of a select few. It is no accident, for example, that with the exception of her dissertation work on Latin syntax, all of her scholarship is written to be accessible to a lay readership without sacrificing conceptual or analytic sophistication. Even in her earliest research, Lakoff was writing against the grain of linguistic fashion by eschewing the unwieldy technical apparatus of linguistic theory that often obscured more than it revealed. Moreover, her publications appear in newspapers and magazines as well as academic venues. One of the reasons that Lakoff's work is readily understood by the general public is that for her, feminist theory is closely tied to feminist practice. Thus in addition to publishing a detailed feminist analysis of Freud's abuse of one of his most celebrated patients, a young woman he called Dora (Lakoff & Coyne 1993), Lakoff has also produced a client's guide to selecting an effective psychotherapist (Aftel & Lakoff 1985); both are feminist interventions into the power imbalance of the psychotherapeutic relationship, long an intellectual interest for Lakoff.

There are other reasons why Lakoff's books after *LWP* deserve greater notice within feminist linguistics. First, it is noteworthy that many of them are collaborations with scholars in other fields. Lakoff's commitment to interdisciplinary scholarship has acted as an important counterpoint to the entrenchment of linguistics as an autonomous discipline that too often stands aloof from developments in adjacent fields. While some may object that Lakoff's interdisciplinary work isn't "real linguistics," as with much innovative research, it has been a harbinger of larger intellectual trends that redefine the scope of the discipline. Psychotherapy, for example, is a practice constructed almost entirely through talk, and in recent years many scholars have come to recognize that understanding such talk is well within the domain of linguistic inquiry. Similarly, Lakoff's attention to discourses of beauty in American culture (Lakoff & Scherr 1984) is a contribution both to feminism and to linguistics that anticipates interest in bodies and embodiment within studies of language. And in forging new intellectual directions, Lakoff has not worked alone. Her commitment to sustained collaborative research and writing has long been a hallmark of feminist scholarship both within linguistics and in other fields. Viewing scholarship as a social and interactive endeavor rather than the solitary work of a heroic lone researcher, many feminists advocate dialogical methods throughout the research process. Lakoff puts these principles into practice in her own scholarship by entering into intellectual partnerships with researchers from her own and other disciplines.

Yet perhaps the most important reason why language and gender scholars should be more aware of Lakoff's complete oeuvre is that many of her writings, and especially *LWP*, are unmistakable illustrations of the

first principle of feminism: the personal is political. This slogan of 1970s radical feminism calls attention to the ways in which individual women's everyday encounters with sexism cumulatively create social structures that enforce the subordination of all women. Thus for women to speak out to other women about their own experiences of gender oppression is a revolutionary act of resistance against patriarchy. From this perspective, one of the most controversial aspects of *LWP* for later scholars, its use of an introspective methodology, may be seen as an instantiation of the same feminist tenet. Elsewhere, Kira Hall and I argue that Lakoff's methodology was influenced by the data-collection practices that predominated within linguistics in the 1970s (Bucholtz & Hall 1995). In addition, it is important to examine the role of feminist theory in Lakoff's approach. Thus, for example, Lakoff writes of her own ambivalent relationship toward stereotypes of gender as represented in the popular media:

I recall, as a child, worrying because I didn't fit the pattern for which women were being ridiculed in jokes I heard on television. . . . It frightened rather than cheered me to realize this discrepancy between the female stereotype and myself: I feared I'd never make it. True, I didn't (at least I hope I didn't) remake myself to fit the stereotype, but seeing that image there continually in a thousand variations did nothing for my self-image: first, because that was the *best* I, as a girl, could hope to aspire to; second, and maybe worse, because I couldn't even manage *that* role. (*LWP* 83–84)

Lakoff's invocation of her childhood memories in a scholarly text is a deliberate violation of academic discourse conventions. Like feminist consciousness-raising groups of the 1970s, it is a political challenge to norms of silence about uncomfortably intimate matters.<sup>1</sup>

In using her own experiences as a source of data, Lakoff—like many feminists in a variety of fields—was attacked as unempirical, unobjective, unscientific. If to speak out as a feminist was a risky move in the academy of three decades ago, to speak out as a woman was riskier still. In very few of the linguistic writings on gender at that time or afterward did an author locate herself so squarely within her text; other feminist scholars adopted an equally impassioned stance but one that was far more impersonal. Although personal experience undoubtedly informed these texts, it was not explicitly acknowledged, and for good reason. At that time, to reveal one's interest in gender as personal as well as professional could call into question one's legitimacy as a scholar. In such an environment, open acknowledgment of the force of gender ideologies in one's own life was nothing less than a quiet act of defiance of mainstream male-dominated intellectual practice.

Moreover, Lakoff's willingness to acknowledge her presence in the text, controversial at the time, participates in one of the most important

transformations of the human and social sciences in the last quarter century. Feminist, multiculturalist, and postmodernist scholars have all made the case for knowledge claims as partial and perspectival and hence for the necessity of scholarly self-reflection on the research process. From this vantage point, Lakoff's approach to the study of language and gender anticipated the shift toward reflexivity in scholarship in the academy as a whole.

In the same way that Lakoff's concern with sexism in language arose from her own experiences, so too did her inquiry into other cultural systems that control women: beauty as a sexist ideal and psychotherapy as a sexist institution. Her coauthored book on the politics of beauty opens with reflections by both authors on their individual confrontations with the ideology of beauty in American culture. Likewise, her scholarly interest in therapy arose in part from her own experience as a client. Lakoff's decision to expose her own vulnerabilities is a courageous one, designed not to put herself at the center of her analysis but to help others in similar situations to question structures of power. This explicit demonstration that the personal truly is political must certainly be seen as a feminist act.

### Lakoff's Feminist Theory

In her later research, Lakoff continued the work she began in *LWP* of identifying cultural ideologies of femininity and the practices of gender inequality that result from them. Yet many readers misunderstood Lakoff's discussion of "women's language" to be a straightforward description of women's linguistic practice rather than a characterization of ideological expectations of women's speech—expectations to which many speakers conform. Although this point was made in *LWP*, Lakoff's concern was the close connection between gender ideology and gender practice, and hence these concepts were often treated as equivalent in her early analysis. In her later work, however, "women's language" is more explicitly framed as ideology as well as practice; she writes, for example, that features of women's language represent "behavior supposedly typical of women across the majority of cultures: alleged illogic, submissiveness, sexual utility to men, secondary status" (1990: 202–203). In this and other passages, Lakoff documents the cultural power of "women's language" as ideology even as she expresses skepticism of the stereotypes that assign it exclusively to women and endow it with negative social meanings. An early theorist of the relationship between gender ideology and linguistic practice, Lakoff continues to develop her ideas about this fundamental issue.

To be sure, as she herself acknowledges, Lakoff's initial hypotheses about language and gender have in some cases been found to be incorrect by later researchers. Yet such analytic errors should be viewed with an eye toward the fact that language and gender did not yet exist as a field of scholarship: especially in the early stages of a field, the development of

testable hypotheses can help advance disciplinary knowledge. Lakoff's formulation of one possible relationship between language and gender gave necessary shape to the research that was later conducted; without the laying of such groundwork, linguistic research on gender would have continued as a set of disparate studies and would not have converged into a coherent field (compare the field of language and sexuality, which remained diffuse until the recent emergence of theoretical statements; see Bucholtz & Hall 2004). Thus the counterexamples of later research should be recognized as the necessary work of refining the ideas proposed in earlier scholarship. As Lakoff notes, such revision furthered not only the study of language and gender but linguistic theory more generally:

Until well into the 1970's we were unable to comprehend the prevalence of ambiguity in language, and if we talked about the functions of tags at all, we tried to assign all of them a single function. For example, I suggested in the early 1970's that tags represented a strategy of the conversationally less powerful. . . . But it was soon apparent, as we started to develop functional theories of grammar, that ambiguity was much more common in language than had been assumed. (2000: 135)

Scholars who object to Lakoff's early speculations about tag questions or other linguistic structures ideologically associated with women's speech tend to overlook such evidence that Lakoff continues to rethink her own earlier ideas in the light of later research.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps the most dramatic and complex way in which Lakoff's ideas about language and gender have shifted is not with respect to particular claims but more generally in relation to feminist theory itself. Always an iconoclast, Lakoff has never explicitly aligned herself with a particular feminist camp. Yet it is possible to categorize specific statements that Lakoff has made about gender as characteristic of particular forms of feminism. An exercise of this kind yields both insights and perils; my discussion of Lakoff's feminism is intended to demonstrate the richness of her thought rather than to fix her within a single feminist perspective (see also McElhinny, this volume).

Lakoff's analysis of women's language use has been characterized by some of its critics as a "deficit" approach to language and gender, a term that continues to have a remarkably wide circulation. Yet the now-familiar alliterative taxonomy that is often used to organize language and gender scholarship—*deficit*, *dominance*, *difference*, and now *discourse*—does not only oversimplify, as those who use it readily acknowledge; it also misses an opportunity to link language and gender research to larger trends within academic feminism and thus to demonstrate the intellectual underpinnings of such work. In *LWP*, Lakoff's theorizing of "women's language" as symbolic powerlessness and her proposed remedy, to move toward a more an-

drogynous or gender-neutral style, participates in the project of liberal feminism, which seeks to bring women into institutions dominated by men in part by eradicating gender differences in social practice. At the same time, her emphasis on male hegemony in that text and others makes it necessary to include her work within the "dominance" framework as well (in fact, before the label *deficit* was assigned to her research, Lakoff was cited as an example of a "dominance" theorist). Such a viewpoint is compatible with the radical feminist perspective, and indeed McElhinny (this volume) offers a possible argument for classifying Lakoff in this way.

Less recognized is Lakoff's ongoing use of concepts usually ascribed to the "difference" approach, which, in emphasizing women's distinctive practices as rooted in a distinctive culture, is characteristic of cultural feminism (see Tannen, this volume, for other links between Lakoff's work and a cultural model of language and gender). Yet unlike the liberal form of cultural feminism, which espouses a "different but equal" interpretation of language use by each gender, Lakoff's own approach is more in keeping with radical cultural feminism in that it highlights male power and celebrates women's special linguistic abilities: "Women's special contributions to discourse (as to everything else) are ignored, disparaged, or—if their value is conclusively demonstrated—co-opted and credited to men. . . . Women over the millennia have learned to use with skill what is left to them" (1990: 199). And in opposition to liberal cultural feminism, she suggests that gender difference is not rooted in different cultures, but in cultural ideologies that insist on dichotomous gender roles: "Gender differences in language use arise not because male and female speakers are isolated from each other, but precisely because they live in close contiguity, which constantly causes comparisons and reinforces the need for polarization—linguistic and otherwise" (1990: 202).

Finally, the "discourse" approach to feminism can be seen in Lakoff's work as well. This model, heavily influenced by postmodern feminism, severs any necessary connection between gender (or sex) and social practice; all gender is performance, whether normative or not (see Barrett, Kiesling, both this volume). Yet violations of cultural norms of gender are of special interest in this framework because they vividly demonstrate that gender is a social construct rather than a natural essence. Because *LWP* has often been criticized as normative, it is usually overlooked that Lakoff's work has long attended to gender transgression in language use, from her discussion of nonnormative male speech styles in *LWP* (Hall, this volume) to her more recent consideration of public figures as "gender-transgressive." Thus her observation that during his presidency, George H. W. Bush was a user of "women's language" (1990: 271–273) is in keeping with her assertion in *LWP* that upper-class men may use features of "women's language" to symbolize their deliberate withdrawal from the aggressively competitive style culturally required of less powerful men (*LWP* 47). In later research, she comments that President Bill Clinton and First Lady

Hillary Rodham Clinton were often seen by the public as having swapped gender styles and explains why (1995: 36; 2000: 172). Such analyses demonstrate that for Lakoff, as for postmodern feminists, the association between gender and specific linguistic features is far from inevitable, but neither is it immune from cultural challenge; as she shows, violations of ideologically normative gender practice are harshly sanctioned.

These disparate theoretical threads in Lakoff's scholarship are worth tracing in order to demonstrate that Lakoff is not a failed feminist thinker, as some of her critics have alleged, but a serious scholar of gender whose theoretical position defies neat classification. As Lakoff showed so powerfully with the publication of *LWP*, it is in challenging rather than conforming to intellectual fashion that scholarship can make the most profound impact.

## Conclusion

Given its foundational role and ongoing importance for language and gender research, it is no surprise that scholars have continued to cite *LWP* heavily over the years. But it is more surprising, in light of Lakoff's continuing publications in this field, that many commentators, and especially its harshest critics, have treated the book ahistorically, not as a text written in response to a specific sociohistorical context, but as a timeless characterization of the relationship between language and gender.

Although commentators have sought, determinedly but unsuccessfully, to relegate *LWP* and Lakoff herself to the margins of language and gender research, the relevance of her work has not abated. Indeed, as feminism has entered the mainstream of the academy and language and gender is increasingly legitimated within linguistics, Lakoff's long-standing concern that feminist linguistics should be directed outward, to the women and men who most need its insights, becomes ever more important. In her writings since *LWP*, Lakoff has expressed worry that feminist scholarship that adheres too closely to dominant norms, whether in linguistics or in other fields, can have little political effect (e.g., 1990: 209; 1995: 48). As she continues to contribute to both scholarly and public discussions of language, gender, and power, Lakoff's work will continue to act as a "goad" not only to research but to feminist thought and action.

## NOTES

1. Lakoff's shift in focus over the years from the private everyday speech of women and men in *LWP* to the public discourse of political and media figures in her later research is thus not as dramatic as it may seem. Now as before, Lakoff's focus is the relationship between the personal and the political, in how

women may speak and how they are spoken of within male-dominated structures of power—and how they have begun to challenge both of these aspects of “women’s language” (e.g., Lakoff 1995).

2. Although a vast number of studies have sought to test Lakoff’s assertions regarding tag questions and hedges, other characteristics of “women’s language” that Lakoff delineated, such as women’s detailed differentiation of color terms, have received very little attention. It is worth noting that the single study on this topic (Frank 1990) supports Lakoff’s hypothesis.

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## 2 ::

### “Radical Feminist” as Label, Libel, and Laudatory Chant

#### *The Politics of Theoretical Taxonomies in Feminist Linguistics*

BONNIE MCELHINNY

Robin Lakoff’s book *Language and Woman’s Place* (LWP) (1975) is one of the earliest, most influential, and most widely discussed contributions to feminist linguistics, but the question of how to place it within the larger context of feminist theory is far from straightforward. A decade ago I set out to compare existing feminist work in sociolinguistics with feminist work done in other related disciplines, using a modified form of philosopher Alison Jaggar’s (1983) influential taxonomy of liberal, Marxist, radical, and socialist feminism (McElhinny 1993). Jaggar’s taxonomy has served as the structuring framework for many introductory textbooks in women’s studies. I argued then that Lakoff’s work could be labelled *radical feminist*. In this essay, I briefly review how I made this argument and how Lakoff’s work converges with radical feminist work in other disciplines. A decade later, I have some second thoughts about the use of Jaggar’s taxonomy, and so I will also use this essay to reflect on the uses and limits of taxonomies in labelling and classifying feminist work. Indeed, feminist analyses of sexist language, like that conducted by Lakoff, can be said to have pioneered linguistic work on labelling that suggests how categories are constructed as normative. Conflicts over category content may present themselves as debates over what labels “really” mean, but the real issue is judgements about the normativity or deviance of particular practices (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1995: 479). Taxonomic approaches to feminist theory do not simply describe existing variation, but imply a unilinear evolutionary progress in ways that attempt to place certain approaches firmly in the past and thus actively obscure the rich diversity of approaches extant in the field. In the end, rather than taking the definition of *radical feminist* for granted, I ask about the political uses for which that notion can be mobilized in evaluations of work like Lakoff’s.