Language and gender identities

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Introduction

Research into the relationship between language and gender identity in applied linguistics and sociolinguistics has evolved considerably since its emergence in the 1970s, when it was primarily concerned with two things: demonstrating that power inequalities between the sexes were reflected in the language women were socialised into using, and finding evidence for – and explaining – linguistic differences between the sexes. As will be shown below, a key development in the field – largely since the 1990s – has been a greater emphasis on constructionist approaches to gender. In this chapter, gender is considered as a dimension of identity, both in terms of how gender identities are performed by speakers themselves and in terms of how gender is represented in texts. Before introducing research in this area, however, it is important to define what we mean by the term gender.

Gender concerns cultural norms about what roles and identities are considered to be appropriate for women or men, such as whether something is feminine or masculine. It is important to note that gender in this sense is not a synonym for sex difference. Gender may include the concept of femininity, for example, which may refer to a person’s appearance or their personality; they may wear soft, pastel colours in their clothing or makeup and they may be caring, polite or nurturing in their behaviour. At least some of these features are learnt as a result of a person’s socialisation as a female, yet they are often taken to be inherent or essential qualities. This essentialist view is popular and pervasive and is used to explain another cultural assumption: that there are two genders naturally attached to two sexes. Labelled by Connell (1987) as ‘the gender order’, this refers to the dominant idea that men and women are binary opposites; they are fundamentally different from one another (dichotomous) and hold certain characteristics, such as men being strong and women being emotional. Within Western societies, there has historically been no cultural recognition of people who fall outside of this binary system of gender, meaning that a person who identifies differently – the ‘effeminate’ gay man, ‘mannish’ lesbian or transsexual person, for instance – has typically been classed as deviant or ‘other’ (Foucault 1978).

The perceived existence of two clear, fixed and opposing genders is part of an ideological system. Ideologies are prevalent ideas of what is normal or natural and they vary from culture to
culture. Our experiences in a given society provide us with particular beliefs, and our position in that society (in terms of our class, gender, ethnicity and so on) informs the ways in which we relate to those beliefs; Bourdieu (1977) terms this ‘habitus’. By recognising that what is normal is defined by our habitus and the prevailing ideologies in our society, we may view concepts related to gender, such as the gender order, as socially constructed. In other words, these concepts are created via ideological norms that shape our expectations, such as those relating to the roles and behaviours of women and men. In turn, we may say that these ideologies are produced via salient discourses, or particular ‘sets of ideas’ which carry weight in society (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2013: 28). Language and gender scholars work to uncover these discourses, both in terms of how they are produced by people through the language that they use, but also in terms of how they are invoked and reinforced through the language that is used to talk about women and men. An important aspect of this, discussed below, is the way that particular gender identities are privileged in Western culture as being more (or less) normal than others.

This chapter will begin by exploring this notion of normality by outlining key concepts in relation to gender and identity. It will then provide a discussion of constructionist approaches to language and gender, including both modern and postmodern perspectives, before considering ongoing issues relevant to gender identity for applied linguistics. In particular, this discussion will consider: how gender identities are performed; issues of masculinity, femininity and transgender identities; communities of practice; and representations of gender in written texts. The chapter will conclude with a summary and some observations about key issues in the field to be addressed.

Overview

Gender as a normative system

By viewing gender as a set of ideas or ideologies about what is normal, attention is drawn to the fact that many of the beliefs we have about women and men – such as that women are naturally caring and men are naturally competitive – suit the interests of the most powerful members of society. This draws on the Gramscian (1971) notion of ‘cultural hegemony’, the theory that most people in society live by certain ideological norms because they seem natural and broadly in the interests of society as a whole, yet may in fact primarily benefit those with cultural, political or economic power. The concept of patriarchy, for instance, whereby men have historically had authority, can be seen to be reflected in many of the everyday norms that are often taken for granted; men are less likely than women to give up their jobs in order to be the primary caretaker to their children (because women are seen to be inherently more caring), and women are less likely than men to hold leadership positions (because they are seen to be less psychologically suited to such a role).

Tied into this is the notion of heteronormativity: the cultural expectation that people not only adhere to the gender order, but that they also naturally desire the ‘opposite’ sex (see Gray, this volume). Heteronormative ideologies include beliefs about the gendered roles that individuals take up within a (heterosexual) relationship, such as those regarding the family, as well as those regarding dating and sex itself. For example, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2013) refer to what they call ‘the heterosexual market’, a point in a child’s life when their social lives begin to be split according to the gender order. Important ideologies that children learn at an early stage include the idea that boys and girls are complementary and that they should eventually be paired up together; children often play out dating games, where ‘relationships’ will last anything from a few hours to a few days, long before any sort of sexual desire has emerged (ibid.). By engaging in these activities, children are repeating what they see in broader society,
and are reproducing and reinforcing fundamentally heteronormative discourses. They are also performing a gender identity.

When thinking about the notion of gender as a performance, language and gender scholars tend to draw on the important work of Butler (1990), who frames femininity and masculinity as identities that are achieved, rather than as aspects of the self which are essential. Butler’s concept of ‘performativity’ demonstrates that gender is produced via cultural acts, including language, dress and other forms of self-presentation. Butler argues that we perform our gender, albeit often unconsciously, through mundane and everyday acts. We engage in these acts – such as putting on makeup or a dress – again and again, until we no longer view them as a performance; they seem to be natural. Scholars of language and gender have made much use of the concept of performativity, as will be discussed later, as it helps to explain the importance of language for reinforcing and projecting gendered identities.

Approaches to studying language and gender identities

Although the prevalent position of sociolinguists and applied linguists who currently study language and gender is to take a constructionist approach, early research in the field was focused less on deconstructing and challenging heteronormative ideologies associated with the gender order and more with the feminist activist concern of highlighting social differences between the language used by women and men. Three main approaches to understanding the relationship between language and gender emerged from the 1970s onwards, now recognised as the ‘deficit’, ‘difference’ and ‘dominance’ approaches. Cameron (2005) refers to research taking these approaches as modern, as opposed to postmodern, the latter term indicating the emphasis on deconstructing binary gender that developed largely from the 1990s, and the former reflecting the research that laid the foundations for this. These approaches to language and gender are outlined in more detail below.

Modern approaches to language and gender

Lakoff’s (1975) account of women’s and men’s language is typically heralded as the beginning of scholarly work into differentiating linguistic styles on the basis of gender, and is widely referred to as the deficit approach. Her work had the explicitly feminist aim of drawing attention to the ways that women were expected to use language. Lakoff argued that women had a subordinate position in a patriarchal society and that one way in which this was perpetuated was by socialising girls into language considered to be ‘ladylike’. The features Lakoff identified as part of what she called ‘Women’s Language’, which included the use of tag questions and intensifiers, were thought to be culturally deficient because they indicated, among other qualities, hesitancy and uncertainty; Lakoff argued that this put women at a cultural and social disadvantage to men.

Lakoff’s claims led to two alternative approaches to language and gender: difference and dominance. Approaches based on difference argued that women’s style of communication was not deficient, but simply different. Women’s speech styles were claimed to be valuable and effective for conversation in ways that ‘men’s language’ was not (Bergvall 1999: 277). For example, Tannen (1990) argued that the language women were taught to use was effective in developing relationships and rapport, while men were socialised into using more competitive or technical, ‘report-oriented’ communicative styles. In order to make such claims, scholars taking a difference approach, such as Maltz and Borker (1982), drew on Gumperz’s (1982)
work on miscommunication in ethnically diverse cultures by arguing that men and women interact differently due to their socialisation into distinct gender subcultures. Approaches based on dominance, on the other hand, continued to argue that language perpetuated asymmetrical gender relations. Instead of seeing women’s language as lacking, however, men’s speech styles were seen to be problematic. For example, through an analysis of interruptions and overlaps in spoken interaction in mixed-sex talk, West and Zimmerman (1977) concluded that women’s speaking rights were on a par with children. Fishman’s (1980) study of spoken interaction among heterosexual couples reached similar conclusions, with Fishman famously coining the phrase ‘interactional shitwork’ to describe the conversational strategies that women employed to keep the conversation going with their male partners.

In order to make generalisable claims, research taking these approaches relied on certain assumptions of homogeneity. Cameron (2005) argues that much of the work from this time concerned itself with white, straight, middle-class, monolingual speakers, yet it was often taken as being representative of all women or all men. However, even at that time, work that suggested that not all women and men used language in such clear-cut, delineated ways was emerging. In a famous study of courtroom talk, for example, O’Barr and Atkins (1980) found that the features associated with the stereotypical ‘Women’s Language’ identified by Lakoff could reflect a powerless and inferior social position in society. This was based on the finding that men in subordinate occupational roles would also use the features that had been previously identified as feminine when in institutional settings (and vice versa). This demonstrated that language was not exclusively female or male, and was instead suggestive of how gender intersected with other identity inscriptions, such as social class and professional status, in spoken interaction.

While work taking these approaches emphasised the fact that gender was not an inherent quality and was, instead, a consequence of women’s (and men’s) gendered socialisation, it did continue to rely on the notion of men and women as homogeneous (presumably white, heterosexual) entities. In this sense, such work ran the risk of reproducing essentialist ideologies of gender. By contrast, work taking a more explicitly constructionist focus – that termed postmodern by Cameron (2005) – aimed to deconstruct the binary gender categories of ‘woman’ and ‘man’ and sought out the ways in which multiple masculinities or femininities might be constructed among a diverse range of speakers. Such approaches are outlined below.

**Postmodern approaches to language and gender**

Many studies since the 1990s have aimed to challenge the concept of binary gender and view gender identity as performed. In doing so, they often draw on postmodern critiques of gender and of heteronormativity, which aim to deconstruct seemingly fixed ideological categories. From this perspective, gender is not only learnt according to the sex category a person falls into, but is also brought into being through being performed; gender may, therefore, not always be attached in a normative or expected way to a person based on their sex. In this sense, postmodern approaches to language and gender consider the interaction between gender and sexuality more fully, and are more concerned with liminal gender identities, particularly queer identities (those that are non-normative or non-mainstream [see Gray, this volume]).

A seminal development of postmodern approaches to the study of language and gender identity has been the notion of ‘indexicality’. Indexicality concerns the semiotic process that exists within interaction, whereby speakers connect particular linguistic features with representations of the social groups that are stereotyped as using them (Irvine and Gal 2000). The term comes from the word index, meaning ‘to point to’; indexicality, then, is the process by which
particular ways of using language point towards, or indicate, culturally recognisable identities. This means that a speaker may use language that carries a particular ideological meaning associated with their gender, in turn gendering their identity performance. Ochs’s (1990) research with mothers in Samoa, who had a very specific cultural role of caregiving, illustrates this. She found that language seen to have a facilitative or caring function in Samoa was indexical of femaleness; this was because women in that community were associated primarily with nurturing roles and motherhood. Ochs classifies the indexical relationship between the language that the women in her study used and its cultural meaning (of being caring) as ‘direct’, but the relationship between a given linguistic feature and the category of woman as ‘indirect’. This is because the language itself did not directly index womanhood; rather, the language indexed caring, which in turn was something associated with women in this community. The importance of the sociocultural context in which language is being interpreted is therefore emphasised by Ochs and is strengthened by her finding that the same language features do not necessarily index femaleness in cultures where women have less of a primary caregiver role.

Indexicality has an important role to play in bridging modern and postmodern studies of language and gender. Whereas early research highlighted the linguistic features that were stereotypically associated with women or men, including those that carried functions associated with dominance or powerlessness, a postmodern focus allows us to reinterpret those associations in terms of how speakers use language to index a wider range of cultural identities. Importantly, these identities need not be restricted to the generic categories of male and female that were studied in the past; it is possible instead to consider particular kinds of gendered self, which may exist in specific settings, or be realised in unique ways. This is considered below.

**Issues and ongoing debates**

In the preceding section, we saw how postmodern approaches to language and gender identity take a constructionist approach. This means that gender identity is understood to be formed of cultural ideologies and performed by individuals through their everyday acts, rather than something innately connected to a person’s biological sex. In this section, I outline three main issues that have emerged for the study of language and identity with regard to gender as a result of this understanding: first, ways in which speakers have been found to perform gender identities through interaction; second, the construction of community-specific gender identities; third, how gender identities are represented.

**Performances of gender identities**

‘Masculine’ identities

Contemporary research into language and gender identity often concerns speakers’ use of indexical relationships between linguistic features and cultural ideas about gender in order to perform their identity as a woman or a man. A range of gender identities is now considered but, partly as a result of the fact that women’s issues were at the forefront of feminist linguistics from the 1970s onwards, research was largely focused on women’s identities until Johnson’s (1997) edited collection on language and masculinity brought men’s identities firmly into focus.

Typically, studies of language and masculinity have shown that men’s identities are constructed via the reproduction of stereotypes and ideologies that are specific to men rather than women, and that index hegemonic, heteronormative masculinity. Coates (2003), for example,
found that the white British men in her study indexed their masculinity through talk about topics that are stereotypically male, such as sports, women or technology. Similarly, Kiesling (1997) considered the hierarchical way in which a group of fraternity men organised themselves, analysing their language styles as competitive and arguing that men were likely to draw on discourses of power in order to construct their masculinity. Kiesling’s (2002) work with the same group also shows that masculinity can be performed and displayed through claims by the young men to have ‘conquered’ many women and to be both non-committal and sexually obtainable (even if they are in a long-term relationship). Through telling ‘fuck stories’, Kiesling argues, these young men were able to index their masculinity; in this way, it is clear that heterosexuality and hegemonic masculinity are culturally intertwined. This is also evident from Cameron’s (2001) analysis of conversations between male undergraduate university students in America, whereby a male student was accused of being ‘the antithesis of man’ (ibid.: 173) due to his poor taste in clothes and women, and was ultimately branded as being gay. Hegemonic masculinity, it is shown, is at least partly based on heterosexuality.

Masculinity does not always manifest itself in this hegemonic, heteronormative way, however. Research into gay men’s speech styles, for example, has shown that culturally specific forms of language can enable speakers to index their sexual identity, including coded, metaphorical forms (Leap 1996), a falsetto voice quality to index flamboyance and campness (Podesva 2007), and the use of language ideologically associated with femininity (Graf and Lippa 1995). As outlined earlier, however, an important aspect of postmodern approaches to language and gender includes challenging and deconstructing binary gender. Barrett’s (1995) work is an important example of this; he focused on African-American drag queens in order to pick apart essentialist assumptions about sex and gender. The men in his study used language that was indexical of stereotypical white femininity, black masculinity and homosexuality, a combination of which was used to perform an entirely new drag persona. Gender identity can thus be multifaceted and achieved in myriad ways, with indexical meaning shifting and changing according to the sociocultural context.

Similarly, Hall’s (1995) research with the operators of a telephone sex line shows how speakers can index ‘fantasy’ identities that do not necessarily reflect their own sense of self, often through the use of linguistic features ideologically associated with ‘bimbos’, virgins or nymphomaniacs, depending on what the client desires. An important part of Hall’s analysis is that not all those performing these various female roles were women; one was a gay man who could pass as female through his performative language use. This shows how we cannot assume that ‘the language of men’ necessarily involves the indexing of hegemonic masculinity.

Nonetheless, the understanding of norms of gender afforded to us by this research is extremely useful when applying linguistics to real-life contexts such as the classroom. Preece (2009), for example, identifies discursive strategies used by undergraduate students in a British university, showing that one way that young men from non-traditional backgrounds in higher education (particularly ethnic minorities and those who are working class) save face in an environment in which they feel marginalised is to adopt a laddish persona that indexes an indifference to academic success. In turn, this allows them to draw on ideologies associated with working-class masculinity, such as independence and toughness. By exploring the construction of gender in such contexts, work such as Preece’s may help to explain why gendered groups of university students may appear to be less engaged, and may therefore assist practitioners in providing more targeted support.
‘Feminine’ identities

As with masculinities, there continues to be a rich discussion of language and femininities, though many of the studies taking place in the postmodern period investigate identities outside of the heteronormative gender order. For example, Bucholtz's (1999) important study of self-identified ‘nerds’ in a US high school showed that not all white, middle-class girls identify with mainstream, heteronormative ideals of femininity. Indeed, rather than reproduce what is typically perceived as ‘cool’ for high school girls (being pretty and fashionable), the ‘nerds’ consciously performed an oppositional identity that was focused on academic success. For example, they deliberately wore unfashionable clothing, avoided slang terms and employed high-culture terminology (such as Latin) to demonstrate their intelligence. This allowed them to index a version of girlhood that was salient for them and which disrupted ideals of teenage femininity.

Similarly, studies of lesbian identity construction (e.g. Queen 2005; Morrish and Sauntson 2007; Jones 2012) have typically found that gay women often actively dissociate themselves from mainstream ideas of femininity in order to perform a non-heteronormative version of woman, showing again how issues of sexuality are intrinsically tied to questions of gender.

Research into how women’s identities are produced can also highlight how social inequalities are perpetuated, such as by looking at public and political contexts. Much emphasis in this area has been placed on examining the language of women in leadership or professional roles that have traditionally been seen as suited to men. Mullany (2011), for example, shows how female managers using language which indexes assertiveness or power – attributes which would classify most male managers as successful – tend to be negatively evaluated; by failing to conform to gendered norms surrounding their speech, they are often judged to be ‘scary’ or domineering. This harks back to Lakoff’s claim that women’s speech is evaluated as ‘deficient’ in the public domain, not only when they conform to ‘ladylike’ talk, but also when they do not. In this sense, research into language and gender can reveal much about the ways in which women are prevented from being successful as leaders (see also Holmes 2006; Baxter 2009).

Work by McElhinny (1995), in contrast, finds that it is possible for women to gain respect and to ‘break the glass ceiling’, but only if they adapt their way of speaking to construct a new identity relevant to their workplace. Her study of police officers in Pittsburgh, for example, shows that female police officers who altered their voice, language and clothing to index a cool, professional identity were taken more seriously than if they conformed to overtly feminised styles. Despite demonstrating that it is possible for women to have success in what is culturally perceived to be ‘men’s work’, studies such as these also demonstrate that traditional expectations of femininity do not match cultural ideas of success, professionalism or authority.

This work reveals broader ideologies of gender normativity and the ways in which these ideologies not only constrain but also shape the identities it is possible for women to perform. As Litosseliti and Sunderland (2002: 11) outline, assumptions about what women’s (and girls’) roles will be may constrain the way in which they communicate and behave in educational contexts, by being more quiet or passive than boys. Research such as Swann’s (2009) has shown that gender is continually relevant in the classroom, as children engaged in activities that are not obviously gendered will still draw on their prior knowledge of gender norms when interacting in mixed-sex contexts, such as by making reference to heterosexual couplings in order to tease one another. This demonstrates the need for applied linguists doing language and identity studies to carefully consider the role that gender plays in educational, or other institutional, contexts. In classroom contexts, gender norms are likely to play a role in how different children learn or succeed in the classroom and in the identities that they inhabit or are ascribed even in contexts...
that do not appear to be gendered. For applied linguists, then an understanding of how gender roles are produced and drawn upon is important when trying to understand patterns of language use in real-world contexts.

Trans identities

A less explored area of language and gender research concerns trans identities. The term ‘trans’, an abbreviation of transgender, is commonly used ‘to refer to all individuals who live outside of normative sex/gender relations’ (Namaste 2000: 1). Some trans people – but by no means all – take hormones or have surgery in order that their bodies match their gender identity, and the term ‘transsexual’ is often used in a medical context to refer to these individuals. People whose gender identity matches the biological sex they were assigned at birth may be categorised as being ‘cisgender’, or simply ‘cis’. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the cultural privilege and dominance of cisgender people, the vast majority of work that has taken place so far into language and gender identity involves speakers who are cisgender, though this aspect of their identity would typically be implicitly presumed. A limited body of work has emerged to combat this, however.

One of the more established approaches to language and trans identities is the exploration of gendered grammar; Kulick (1996) considers how Brazilian transgender prostitutes use feminine gendered grammar to construct their own subjectivity as females, for instance, as does Livia (1995) in her analysis of the writings of a French trans woman. Other work aiming to explain language use outside of a binary gender system includes King’s (2015) consideration of an intersex individual and Hall and O’Donovan’s (1996) work with the Hijra community in India – eunuchs who are often categorised as ‘the third gender’.

Recent research exploring other aspects of trans people’s language use includes Zimman’s (2012) important study. Using sociophonetics, he shows that trans men do not always use the entire pitch range generally associated with masculinity (though many do); this conflicts with the heteronormative expectation that a trans person would use language to allow them to pass as cisgender. He argues that, once trans men begin to be perceived as men through more outward styles and symbols, some feel less concerned about engaging fully in – and therefore indexing – heteronormative cis masculinity; some trans men may feel more comfortable including aspects of language in their speech that might be said to index femininity. This research is particularly important because it breaks free of the binary gender system; it shows that trans men do not simply ‘switch’ from a female-sounding to a male-sounding voice. Instead, it reveals that the experiences and identities of an individual will lead to a specific form of identity construction. Again, gender is revealed to be a complex phenomenon.

Communities of practice

What has become increasingly evident in research exploring the performance of gender identities is the fact that groups of speakers, such as ‘nerd’ girls (Bucholtz 1999) or fraternity men (Kiesling 2002), develop ways of doing things that – within the context of their group – allow them to index a coherent identity specific to that group. Such analyses have been enabled partly by the development of the community of practice (CoP) approach, introduced to sociolinguistics and applied linguistics by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992, 1999). The CoP, first established by Lave and Wenger (1991) as a theory of learning through shared participation, focuses on speakers who interact and engage together in a mutual endeavour, leading to shared practices or ‘ways of doing things’ (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1999: 185), including ways
of talking and interacting. The concept of the CoP has been extensively drawn on by Eckert. For example, in her ethnographic study of an American high school, Eckert uses the CoP to examine the practices of two recognisable groups in the school: the Jocks and the Burnouts (Eckert 2000). Eckert analysed their language use in relation to the social structures within the school, most specifically in terms of gender and class. The language practices of the Jocks were intrinsically tied to their social aspirations as middle-class kids, for example, as they used more standard forms of English to index an academically oriented persona. The Burnouts, by contrast, used non-standard forms that allowed them to index an affiliation with their local, working-class roots. Eckert found that there was a clear difference between each CoP in terms of gender; girls in the Jock group used more standard language than the boys, while Burnout girls used more non-standard language than Burnout boys. In both groups, then, the girls seemed to work harder than the boys at indexing their membership of the CoP; this reflects findings in variationist sociolinguistics that women may rely more on symbolic means of articulating their identities than men, who have historically been more able to gain power and prestige through such means as employment (see Labov 1990).

The CoP approach has been used in other studies of gender, including Mendoza-Denton’s (2008) research with Chicana girl gangs in California. Through ethnographic fieldwork, Mendoza-Denton learnt that the girls valued skills associated with fighting and qualities associated with loyalty. Because she understood these values from their perspective—a fundamental aim of ethnography—Mendoza-Denton was able to explain the various linguistic and stylistic practices that the girls engaged in; they wore eyeliner in a specific way to symbolise how tough they were and tended not to wear certain items of jewellery, such as earrings, in order to show that they were always ready to fight. These girls identified with some aspects of heteronormative femininity but in specific ways; they adopted or reworked familiar practices (such as wearing makeup) depending on how they suited their needs, enabling them to index a locally salient identity as gang girls. The CoP, then, has made an important contribution to the study of gender identity in sociolinguistics and applied linguistics because it enables us to move beyond predefined structures, such as those associated with binary gender, and encourages us to consider those who do not fit squarely—or normatively—into an ideological category.

Research using the CoP also emphasises the importance of understanding the context in which an identity is produced in order to gain clear insight into the meaning of that identity; this is very important to applied linguists hoping to learn more about how and why, for example, learners of a target language are more or less successful. Norton’s (2000) theory of ‘investment’ demonstrates this; she argues that success in acquiring a new language depends on the extent to which language learners feel invested in acquiring not only the target language but also the cultural advantages that come with it. In this sense, Norton sees language learning as not simply about learning a code, but as developing a new identity; successful learners will be able to imagine themselves benefiting from their use of a new language, such as by becoming a legitimate member of a new CoP. Norton’s work with immigrant women in Canada shows the intersection of class, gender and ethnicity for second language learners, as many of the women in her study were more invested in learning English if their role as a primary caregiver meant that they needed to be proficient in the language, or if their status as a single woman meant that they needed to avoid becoming vulnerable due to language weaknesses. Through in-depth research such as this, then, applied linguists can better understand the impact that gender identity has on real-world problems such as those that impact on migrants.
Representations of gender identities

In addition to the analysis of gender identities as they are performed in everyday speech, linguists have considered how identities are represented in texts. By text, we may refer to spoken, written or multimodal forms of language. Many linguists interested in gender and sexuality use a critical discourse analysis approach (Fairclough 1989; also see Zotzmann and O’Regan, this volume) combined with feminist theory to see how texts contribute to the reproduction and maintenance, or even the resistance and transformation, of structural ideologies relating to heteronormativity and the gender order (see Lazar 2005; Benwell and Stokoe 2006). Critical discourse analysts are concerned with identifying, challenging and unpicking instantiations of discourse, with the aim of revealing how those with power and control over the production and distribution of texts push particular ideological discourses. This approach also reveals much about the identities we recognise within society, since they are legitimised through their repeated representation. In this sense, the analysis of texts in language, gender and sexuality research tends to focus on not only the text itself, but the way it has been created, why, by whom and for whom, and what consequences its creation has had (Baker 2008).

For example, by looking at media texts such as magazines, we can see how particular identity categories are represented by analysing assumptions made about a text’s audience. Talbot’s (1995) analysis of a teenage girls’ magazine tells us much about ideological femininity and the normative expectations surrounding girlhood, for instance. Talbot shows how the magazine writers create a ‘synthetic sisterhood’, using inclusive language that encourages their readers to feel as though they are being directly and personally addressed by an older sister figure, one who can advise them on the things that it is assumed will matter to them (how to wear makeup, for example). Talbot reveals the patriarchal notions present in the text (such as the idea that girls must make themselves look beautiful) but also demonstrates that the media are active in reproducing gender ideologies. These ideologies may be drawn upon by girls when attempting to index a salient feminine identity, one that allows them to fit in with their peers.

Messages that spell out the norms for how women and men should behave have long been present in such media. For instance, Mills and Mullany (2011: 146) provide an example from a British women’s magazine in the 1950s where women are advised on how best to prepare for their husband’s daily return from work (by making sure the house is tidy, clean and quiet), thus perpetuating the ideology that women’s work is domestic and principally concerned with pleasing men. Though such overtly sexist representations may now strike us as shocking, evidence exists to suggest that indirect forms of sexism prevail in media texts today, such as in the depiction of women as either nagging annoyances or sex objects in British ‘lad’ magazines (Benwell 2003; Mills 2008).

As well as analysing texts where women or men are represented in sexist or heteronormative ways, research in this area can also concern analyses of texts where particular groups are not well represented. Of particular relevance to applied linguists is research that analyses resources used by language teachers, as these may often reveal important stereotypes and ideologies relating to gender. Scholars such as Sunderland (2004), for example, have found that women are often underrepresented in language learning textbooks, with male discourse frequently presented as the norm, or men rather than women being the initiators of conversations. In part, this is because the resources used to teach students a language are expected to represent, in some way, the culture in which that language is spoken; the ideology of men being more dominant than women continues to be salient in many English-speaking contexts. However, stereotypes in textbooks also have the potential to alienate certain readers, potentially impacting on their
motivation and investment in learning the target language, and also run the risk of reinforcing negative preconceptions that learners might have about the roles of women or men. In this sense, the study of how women and men are differently represented in such texts is an extremely important aspect of research into the representation of gender identity.

**Summary**

Research into gender identities is of crucial importance to applied linguistics. Language and gender work demonstrates that there are gender inequalities regarding women and men’s experiences, opportunities and representations and can also show how these are perpetuated and reinforced. Whether we look at interactions occurring within institutional settings – workplaces where women are prevented from moving forward at the same pace as men, for instance, or schools where young children engage in a ‘heterosexual market’ – or whether we consider how ideologies of gender are reproduced in the media around us, we can both shed light on and begin to address real-world problems of structural, culturally ingrained systems of gender inequality by examining language in its context of use and noting how gender is of salience.

However, just as modern approaches to language and gender might have inadvertently reinforced binary, heteronormative notions of gender identity, through its ambition to find evidence of differences between women and men, postmodern approaches with clear feminist intentions can still run the risk of reinforcing notions of normativity by being restrictive in the identities that are researched. For example, the vast majority of studies into gender and sexual identities that have been carried out consider cisgender speakers and there has not, as yet, been a large-scale linguistic study of trans women. It is important that more research into trans identities is developed, not only to prevent a cisgender bias in the field and to further deconstruct the sex/gender binary, but also to develop a much richer and more nuanced understanding of how complex gender identities are indexed and performed in real-world contexts.

Similarly, as argued above, the speakers typically included in many of the earlier studies into language and gender were white, middle-class, heterosexual Westerners. Increasing numbers of studies are taking place in non-Western contexts, such as Milani’s (2013; also see Milani, this volume) analysis of queer identity construction in South African online spaces, Ellece’s (2011) research into gender identities during marriage ceremonies in Botswana, and Borba and Ostermann’s (2007) work with Southern Brazilian trans communities. However, there is also a need to consider gender identity construction as it intersects with other identities beyond sexuality or nation, such as ethnicity, age or social class. As Crenshaw (1989) argues, different factors of a person’s subjective experience can combine to marginalise them in a very specific way. As feminist linguists, it is therefore crucial that we explain language use not simply in terms of a speaker’s identity as a woman, for example, but as a woman of a particular age, class, ethnicity, sexuality and so on. This means not only considering speakers of a variety of backgrounds and in a range of cultural contexts (though this is extremely important), but also acknowledging that many of the speakers that have been researched to date also had identities which were informed by their race or their social status; those who are white and middle class may be privileged, but their class and ethnicity are not neutral and their gender identity does not sit in isolation from these factors. Applied linguists must take all factors of speakers’ sociocultural identities into account in order to more fully explain their linguistic behaviour (see Block and Corona, this volume).

In this chapter, I have provided an account of key issues and debates surrounding language and identity studies in which gender is under examination. This chapter has demonstrated that
language produces, as well as reflects, ideological categories associated with heteronormativity and binary notions of gender. Research into language and gender has highlighted the myriad ways in which we index and perform gender and sexual identities in given contexts and the ways in which these identities are culturally represented. This research provides evidence of a cultural reliance on a system of binary gender that assumes speakers’ heterosexuality, as well as the diversity that actually exists in terms of the gendered identities that speakers construct.

The field of language and gender has changed enormously since its foundations were laid by feminist linguists in the 1970s, with current work using increasingly varied methods and approaches to study speakers and texts in a range of contexts and communities. As the field continues to evolve, however, it is important to remember its origins: at the heart of all we do when investigating language and gender in applied contexts must be the intention to highlight inequality, raise consciousness, create change and evaluate progress. The study of language and gender identities is, after all, a fundamentally feminist endeavour.

Related topics
Positioning language and identity: poststructuralist perspectives; Identity in variationist sociolinguistics; Language and non-normative sexual identities; The significance of sexual identity to language learning and teaching; Language, gender and identities in political life: a case study from Malaysia; Straight-acting: discursive negotiations of a homom masculine identity; Intersectionality in language and identity research; The future of identity research: impact and new developments in sociolinguistics.

Further reading
Baker, P. (2008). *Sexed texts*. London: Equinox. (This book offers a very good introduction to key issues relating to language and gender, and intrinsic to this discussion is a consideration of sexual identity.)
Bucholtz, M. and Hall, K. (eds) (1995). *Gender articulated: language and the socially constructed self*. Abingdon: Routledge. (This edited volume brings together research using a wide range of methods and analytical tools, studying both gender and sexuality in a variety of cultural contexts. Despite the publication date it remains an enormously useful volume, marking a time of change in the field and reflecting the agenda of language, gender and sexuality scholars today.)
Eckert, P. and McConnell-Ginet, S. (2013). *Language and gender*. 2nd edn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (This textbook provides a very thorough and detailed account of what gender is and how it is researched by linguists, as well as chapters dealing with key areas of inquiry such as politeness, style and assertiveness.)
Mills, S. and Mullany, L. (2011). *Language, gender and feminism*. London: Routledge. (In this textbook, Mills and Mullany show how feminism has been, and must continue to be, central to the methods and approaches used to analyse gendered discourse, while offering an up-to-date account of research in the field of language, gender and sexuality.)

References


