

A Critical Analysis of *Gender Talk*

A review of



Gender Talk: Feminism, Discourse and Conversational Analysis

by Susan A. Speer

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Reviewed by

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Gender Talk: Feminism, Discourse and Conversational Analysis, written by Susan A. Speer, presents a detailed explanation of the interaction among discourse analysis, feminism, and conversational analysis. The author not only defines these terms but diagrams the relations among them. Speer outlines her personal approach to feminism and presents it as a challenge to other theoretical perspectives on language and gender issues.

The view I have adopted in this book asserts that, since there is no reliable method for accessing “the truth” about the world or the psyche from participants’ talk, and “all we ever have is access to the words: the discourse,” that we should bracket ontological questions, in favor of exploring how people construct an “external” reality of social structures, and an “inner” reality or mental life, and use and orient toward these constructions as they interact with one another. Thus, it is the gendered ontologies of members, not analysts, that is of interest. (p. 182)

One appealing aspect of the book is that the author presents the Socratic debates that are currently taking place in the field between discourse and conversational analysts and feminists. Speer critically analyzes these theories and discusses how to further develop and refine them. She presents a data-driven analysis of theory, offering a new perspective that takes a macro view of gender norms and concepts.

Speer notes the diversity in theoretical perspectives on feminism as well as perspectives used to analyze the interaction between gender and discourse. One must begin with a definition of terms, as Ayn Rand (1990) noted: "A concept is a mental integration of two or more units which are isolated according to specific characteristics and united by a specific definition" (p. 15). Given the diversity in definitions of the concept of feminism, Speer groups her research on gender and discourse into four approaches: sexist language; interactional sociolinguistics and the ethnography of communication; discursive approaches informed by critical theory, poststructuralism, and psychoanalysis; and discursive approaches informed by ethnomethodology and communication analysis.

Sexist language is a debated topic in many social science courses, particularly courses focused on gender issues. Because language is the medium of socialization, it shapes behavior and cognitions. An example is semantic derogations, a process through which a "word or term becomes associated with women; it often acquires semantic characteristics that are congruent with social stereotypes and evaluations of women as a group" (Renzetti & Curran, 1999, p. 121). Speer discusses how gender is represented in language as well as how men and women use language. Simply put, she discusses the form and function of language. She addresses the question, posed by linguist Tannen (1994), of whether women and men speak different languages.

Speer argues the function of language through the interactional sociolinguistics and the ethnography of communication paradigm. According to Speer, sociolinguists study the variations in patterns of language, in particular as occurring through conditioning by macrosocial and demographic characteristics, such as gender and class. A similar approach Speer discusses is the ethnography of communication, formerly known as the ethnography of speaking. With this approach, researchers use ethnographic methods to discern how language is used and conceptualized differently by genders and cultural groups.

The next framework presented in the book focuses on discursive approaches informed by critical, poststructuralist, and psychoanalytic theories. Critical discourse analysis is a top-down, macrolevel form of analysis of how the genders are positioned by discourses and how social structures, norms, ideas, and conventions shape and constrain people's actions with respect to language. In the study of language, the structural linguistics suggest that meaning is to be found within the structure of a whole language rather than in the analysis of individual words. According to McManus (1998), poststructuralism developed as a reaction against structuralists' claims to scientific objectivity and universality. Poststructuralism seeks to challenge or destabilize logocentrism. Additionally, it foregrounds discourse and the constructedness of all knowledge and behavior. Psychoanalytic approaches to language

center on interpretation. Poststructuralism introduces a significant approach to the *hermeneutics of suspicion*, the idea that there are motives and meanings that may be disguised by and work through other meanings. The hermeneutics of suspicion is not limited to psychoanalytic thought but is found in structural thought generally—the idea that we look, to understand action, to subtexts, not pretexts (Lye, 1996).

The last theoretical framework discussed in the book focuses on discursive approaches informed by ethnomethodology and conversational analysis. *Ethnomethodology* refers to the study of the body of common-sense knowledge and any sense-making procedure. Conversation analysis, a research tradition that grew out of ethnomethodology, has some unique methodological features. It studies the social organization of conversation, or talk in interaction, by a detailed inspection of tape recordings and transcriptions made from such recordings. Examples of these can be found in Speer's work.

In summary, the book is very well written and well researched. I gained the most from the chapter on gender and identity. One of the cases or debates that I use in my sociology courses focuses on hate speech. In this chapter, Speer critically examines the concept of language as a form of social action. According to Speer,

the sense of an utterance, and the precise meaning of a word, will depend on the manner in which it is deployed (the “mode of address,” for example). Its sense is inextricably tied to the interactional context within which it is embedded. (p. 81)

Speer notes, “Throughout this book I have dramatized my argument with data examples from both ‘naturally occurring’ and ‘social science’ sources” (p. 193). The book would be most suitable for graduate students and their instructors. It may be too overwhelming for undergraduate students, as it presents a complex body of work. Students and educators interested in social sciences, feminism, linguistics, and gender issues would benefit greatly from this text as a complement to their current texts on gender issues. Although the author states that the book is not intended as a textbook, it is structured as one, as it covers different theoretical approaches and cites current research in the field. I teach gender issues, and I highly recommend this book as a complement to the current course readings.

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