

2012

Language and gender, by Mary M. Talbot, Malden, Polity Press, 2010, 2nd ed

Constanza Rojas-Primus
Kwantlen Polytechnic University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://kora.kpu.ca/facultypub>



Part of the [Linguistics Commons](#), and the [Modern Languages Commons](#)

Original Publication Citation

Rojas-Primus, C. (2012). [Review of the book *Language and gender* by Mary M. Talbot]. *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*, 19 (3), 401-403.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Scholarship at KORA: Kwantlen Open Resource Access. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of KORA: Kwantlen Open Resource Access. For more information, please contact kora@kpu.ca.

Language and gender, by Mary M. Talbot, Malden, Polity Press, 2010, 2nd ed., 273 pp., £55.00 (hardback), ISBN978-0-7456-4604-6; £17.99 (paperback), ISBN978-0-7456-4605-3

The monolithic view of ‘men’ and ‘women’ speech is finally being contested in Mary Talbot’s book *Language and Gender*. Throughout a clear and well exemplified discussion on foundational and current research in the area of language and gender, the author succeeds in her aim to make the reader more conscious of the social category of gender and the important role language plays in establishing, sustaining, and challenging gender divisions in society. The book brings to our attention a wide range of issues within the field of language and gender, ‘from expectations about how men and women ought to speak, to restrictions on women’s access to public forms of talk, the division of conversational “labour” among couples, representations of masculinity and femininity in the mass media, and much more besides’ (Talbot 2010, 17). These issues are tackled from different approaches, including variationist sociolinguistics, feminism, conversational genre studies, poststructuralism, and critical discourse analysis (CDA), all being supported by original and pertinent data.

The first section of the book is foundational. Its three chapters explore early work on sex differences in language use and its biases about women due to a former focus on linguistic sex-exclusive differentiation. Talbot has a masterful approach unfolding the perennial tendency to conflate sex and gender in these early studies, which resulted in assumptions that differences in language use between men and women are genetically determined and therefore natural. This misconception, the author elaborates, ‘has political underpinnings: it often accompanies a reassertion of traditional family roles, or justifications for male privileges’ (Talbot 2010, 9). Hence, this preliminary section of the book considers the distinction between sex and gender as pivotal in the study of language and gender as well as the understanding of gender not as a male-female dichotomy but as a continuum where degrees of masculinity and femininity occur as a result of the many social roles men and women have in society. By considering this social dimension of gender, Talbot examines some problems of early quantitative study of sociolinguistic variation and discerns on the interest of feminists in language as a practice that can unfold with respect to gender inequalities in society.

The second part of the book looks at research on spoken interaction among men and women mostly studied within the Anglo-American theoretical framework of ‘difference-and-dominance’. In addition to examining men and women’s language grouped under a variety of speech situations and genres, the first two chapters of this section deal with

some problems when generalizing findings on how men and women engage in verbal exchanges. The author argues that gender differences in discourse production are highly culture-specific, and thus the same patterns of language interactions should not be expected across different cultures. In the last chapter of this section Talbot makes insightful observations with respect to the overwhelmingly academic preoccupation with gender as ‘difference’, which inevitably suppresses research findings about gender similarities. Talbot challenges this reification of gender as ‘difference’ by presenting research where scholars not only found gender differences but a significant amount of gender similarities in the linguistic behaviors of boys and girls. Moreover, she culminates this section by segueing into the influence of poststructuralism in the study of language and gender in disciplines other than linguistics. Within feminist criticism guided by a poststructuralist perspective, for example, ‘[p]eople’s identities are an *effect* of language. Men and women are different because language *positions* us differently’ (Talbot 2010, 110). Unlike the ‘difference-and-dominance’ study framework within the Anglo-American academic tradition, in poststructuralism-influenced work on discourse and gender identity the masculine-feminine dichotomy is absent and social identities and relationships of men and women are assumed not to be homogeneous, but rather being made by different discourse practices.

It is precisely in the last and final section of the book that the monolithic view of ‘men’ and ‘women’ speech is contested by critically looking at the role language plays in contributing to both social reproduction and social change. In six chapters, the author thoroughly examines the construction and performance of gender in discourse. Central to this section is work in CDA, an approach to the study of language in social context that aims ‘to stimulate critical awareness of...how existing discourse conventions have come about as a result of relations of power and power struggle’ (Talbot 2010, 117). The reader is enlightened with recent research on a variety of feminine and masculine identities bestowed by discourses in mass media, education, medical care, consumerism, public talk, sexuality, and sexism. Talbot’s assertion that ‘discourses are historically constituted bodies of knowledge and practice that *shape* people, giving positions of power to some but not to others’ (Talbot 2010, 121) highlights very well the critical nature of CDA and its application to gender studies. Similarly, Eckert (2005, 16) argues that ‘language is a practice that unfolds with respect to [an] institution. And it is the accumulation of practice that produces and reproduces that institution.’ Accordingly, this section’s preoccupation is on how languages, individuals and social contexts interact, and how this interaction sustains unequal gender relations. It presents language as a social practice and how individuals are placed in a broad variety of positions in society set up in discourses.

More importantly, it shows how men and women may engage in language use that involve gender oppression and exclusion and how by identifying mechanism of oppressions and exclusion language and gender studies can contribute to social change.

This book is an important contribution to the area of gender identities and its intersections with sexuality, culture, and place. It is essential for research within feminism and women's studies, and is a most-valuable literary contribution to sociolinguistics. Research on language and society is innately linked with human welfare as findings can have significant implications on the life of men and women. On this matter, Mary Talbot's book *Language and Gender* (2nd ed.) will enrich the work of students and scholars alike and make any reader more aware of how language and gender studies can positively alter social structures.

Reference

Ecker, Penelope. 2005. Variation, convention, and social meaning. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Linguistic Society of America, 7 January 2005, Oakland, CA.

Constanza Rojas-Primus, Ph.D.
Department of Modern Languages, Kwantlen Polytechnic University
Surrey BC V3W 2M8, Canada
constanza.rojas-primus@kwantlen.ca
© 2012, Constanza Rojas-Primus