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GIVING VOICE TO WOMEN IN THE BASIC WRITING AND LANGUAGE MINORITY CLASSROOM¹

ABSTRACT: *This paper is addressed to college teachers of bilingual and/or bidialectal students in basic or developmental writing classes. After briefly indicating the long linguistic record of sex discrimination and the strategems it has forced women to devise, the author focuses on this phenomenon's manifestation in basic writing and ESL/ESD classrooms. In an attempt to help teachers of bilingual and bidialectal students address the problem, the article makes four practical recommendations: 1) open-ended classroom drama scenarios designed to be completed in various ways by students, 2) sensitivity to students' (particularly women students') nonverbal communication, 3) avoidance of sexist and racist language (probably unintentional, but no less real), and 4) a brief but representative set of readings and reference texts on sexism and language (provided in the form of a select reading and usage list).*

In 1941 Edward Sapir encapsulated his understanding of the relationship between language and thought in the following statement:

We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation. (93)

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Benjamin Lee Whorf went on to expand Sapir's work. What is known today as the Sapir/Whorf hypothesis is based on two cardinal principles: 1) that all higher levels of thinking are dependent on language, and 2) that the structure of language people habitually use influences the manner in which they understand the environment (Chase, 1954).

The relation between language and thought is both synchronic and diachronic (Levi-Strauss, 1966). Language and thought are mutually reinforcing; however, because of their different functions, they often conflict. Synchronically, language influences the categories of abstract thought. We tend to think in the linguistic categories that are given to use as a consequence of cultural reproduction. Those linguistic categories embody certain unexpressed assumptions about "oughtness" or social roles. So synchronically, according to Levi-Strauss, language structures reality. Diachronically, reality makes linguistic categories problematic because thinking is more flexible than language. Levi-Strauss has provided the theoretical basis for adopting a "moderate version" (Martyna, 1976) of the Sapir/Whorf hypothesis: that language influences rather than determines thinking. Implicit in every language are presuppositions about superiority and inferiority, dominance and subordination.

It has only recently become common knowledge that sexual discrimination in human society manifests itself in the linguistic patterns of human speech. Some cultures, for example, have developed double feminine dialects, one for women addressing women and another for women addressing men. Even two distinct versions of the same language are not unknown: a public male language—used exclusively by men, both in public and in private, and a private female language—restricted to women (Trudgill 1983). The millenia-long effect that patriarchal supremacy has had on the languages of human culture is charmingly illustrated by the following bit of dialogue from Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazousae* (393 B.C.) between Praxagora and one of her women co-conspirators, who are planning to infiltrate in disguise the all-male Athenian Senate for the purpose of passing community property legislation:

Praxagora: . . . the time's running short. Try to speak worthily, let your language be truly manly, and lean on your staff with dignity.

First Woman: I had rather have seen one of your regular orators giving you wise advice; but, as that is not to be, it behooves me to break silence; I cannot, for my part in-

deed, allow the tavern-keepers to fill up their wine-pits with water. No, by the two goddesses [Demeter and Persephone] . . .

Praxagora: What? By the two goddesses! Wretched woman, where are your senses?

First Woman: Eh! What? . . . I have not asked you for a drink.

Praxagora: No, but you want to pass for a man, and you swear by the two goddesses. Otherwise you did it very well.

First Woman: Well then. By Apollo . . .

Praxagora: Stop! All these details of language must be adjusted; else it is quite useless to go to the Assembly.

(Oates & O'Neill, see also Gregersen 4)

Patriarchalism in social structure and androcentrism in language have long been contented bedfellows, as this little piece from one of Aristophanes' lesser comedies makes clear. But the passage also illustrates the lengths of subterfuge and deception to which women in male-dominated societies have been forced in order to exercise any sort of public influence. Most women, of course, simply accepted patriarchal conditions with the fatalism thrust upon their sex, while men—even men of good will—continued uncritically to enjoy their positions of professional, social, and familial privilege. Many, indeed, enjoyed their privilege quite consciously, believing their superior position to be justified by creation and/or philosophy: "Male comes first because it is the worthier gender" was a representative opinion among 16th and 17th century English grammarians, an opinion that sprouted from these gentlemen's Latin roots.² The few women who dared to dissent from such sentiments did so surreptitiously if at all.

In view of the foregoing, we should not be surprised to discover that this kind of male-to-female behavior manifests itself among male teachers and students in the basic writing college classroom: Women's comments may be taken lightly or completely ignored; in class discussions, women are often interrupted and on occasion blatantly put down; the woman student is treated condescendingly when she comes up with the "wrong" answer, and with surprise when "occasionally" she is right. Overall, women are treated by some male professors as an

exotic species in the halls of academia, especially when they dare to enter traditionally masculine fields.³

A "Medusa syndrome"⁴ is perhaps more evident in ESL/ESD (English as a Second Language or Dialect) and basic writing classrooms than in "regular" academic classes, despite academic skills instructors' declared sensitivity to their students. In fact, the ESL/ESD female student has even more "going against her" than the average woman college student: She is often a mature adult attempting to pull herself up socially and economically by acquiring an education. She is hindered, however, in not possessing the English for academic purposes (EAP) language facility that would permit her to accomplish her goals. Typically, she comes from the Far or Near East, Central or South America, the Caribbean, India, Africa, an Eastern European country, or the American inner city. Thus, the ESL and basic writing woman student and virtually all of her sisters come from environments that are thoroughly patriarchal. They then enter into a more subtly patriarchal classroom environment, one that is perpetuated to some degree by school personnel. But that is also the creation of their male classmates, with whom they often share a common culture, and who are particularly anxious to hold onto their superior male status in the light of their loss of the other privileges of which they have been stripped by becoming immigrants/refugees, or by virtue of being economically vulnerable males in a highly competitive male-dominated culture.

The behavior of some male language minority and bidialectal male students towards their female counterparts reveals an assumption of superiority in a number of ways. When their female classmates venture to participate, they may be interrupted or unfairly criticized by their male classmates. This happens consistently when the class works as a whole. However, even when students work in small groups or pairs, the tendency of some males to dominate or interrupt is present, though not as overtly as in the larger context—perhaps because the males perceive less pressure to show off before other males in the small group or paired environment.

One solution to this problem is for the teacher to place men with men and women with women in small groups. This works if there are enough male and female students with different linguistic abilities and backgrounds to provide sufficient variety. The unsatisfactory feature of this arrangement is the absence of a mixture of both male and female perspectives during

small group discussion. But even if one sacrifices this dual perspective in order to protect the rights of the women participants, there remains the problem of the whole class situation, where, it seems, some men feel a compelling need to compete with each other in suppressing women.

Another example of sexism in class is insensitive remarks from teachers (male and female), and teachers who unintentionally call predominantly on males in the class. A fascinating example of teachers doing just this is documented by the Sadker and Sadker videotapes. This project featured teachers who strongly asserted in questionnaires that they were nonsexist and always paid equal attention to all of their students. When these teachers viewed themselves and their classroom behavior on tape, they were unpleasantly surprised by their own favoritism towards their male students (who were admittedly more aggressive at getting their teachers' attention).

Yet we make a grievous error if we attempt to identify male students as the major cause of the sexism suffered by women in the ESL/ESD and basic writing classroom. As has been well known since the late sixties, most societies, including the so-called "progressive" western cultures, view women as a class in one of two basic ways: They have either been perceived and talked about as sex objects, or their identities have been defined primarily in relationship to males. In fact, the icon of woman as appendage to man is even indicated grammatically in some languages, and as such—according to the Whorfian hypothesis that language influences belief—may be a partial cause of the cultural practices that manifest female-to-male dependence. For example, in Greek the genitive of possession in a woman's surname indicates that she "belongs" to her father-lord (before marriage) or to her husband-lord (from marriage through her husband's death and until her own). A Greek man, by contrast, is his own "lord" from birth, as evidenced by the nominative case of his surname. A similar grammatical pattern is characteristic of Russian and other languages.

Almost twenty years ago, in her article "The Making of a Nonsexist Dictionary" (Thorne & Henley 1975, 57-63), Alma Graham reported some astonishing findings from her study of dictionaries and textbooks: In a society (the U.S.A.) where there were a hundred women for every ninety-five men, males—she claimed—occupied center stage in textbooks of all subjects, including home economics! In addition, every mother's first-born was male in the texts, and females were consistently ex-

cluded from certain activities on grounds of weakness and passivity. By the mid-eighties, the situation had improved only marginally if at all, with many college texts continuing to stereotype male and female roles and to exclude women from narrative and content (Sadker 1983). And the struggle for inclusive language and the elimination of sexual stereotyping in textbooks continues into the present decade.

It should hardly be surprising, therefore, to find women displaying a kind of masochistic mind-set, stemming from repressed anger over a deep and usually unconscious sense of deprivation and discrimination, both in the classroom and in other contexts. In short, a set of prescribed and proscribed expectations, based on sex at birth (a biological reality), have dictated women's gender roles later in life (a social construct, and—in languages other than English—an arbitrary grammatical category). This condition is of course suffered equally by women outside the bilingual/bidialectal classroom, but for the female ESL/ESD and basic writing student, it compounds the difficulties to which she is already heir by virtue of her economic, cultural, and linguistic situation.

It is time for teachers of basic writing and English as a Second Dialect or Language to direct their own and others' attention to the predicament of the forgotten woman in their classrooms. She urgently deserves to be acknowledged, not only because of the inequity of her condition, but also because her only forum of self-expression may well be that very classroom to which she comes to be heard and understood. I would offer four concrete suggestions for opening ourselves to the nuances of this student's problem and to enable teachers to handle her situation more expertly:

First, we can see to it that our classes provide explicit opportunities for students to vent and discuss their feelings through carefully planned exercises. I have found that the use of open-ended dramatic scenarios help students to vocalize feelings of discrimination and other problems. Such scenarios have the added virtue of providing opportunities for students to display their creativity and flair for the dramatic. The side effects of this sort of classroom activity are numerous. Not only is the student's self-image significantly improved, but also a variety of specific linguistic skills are strengthened in the process: Students are asked to read and comprehend an open-ended dialogue, for which they are then required to provide their own written ending before they even being to speak the dialogue's

lines; "in performance," some listen to the finished dialogue while others speak its lines clearly and correctly, and each group of students enacts the dialogue's ending according to the written problem-solving version they have composed.

Many years ago, in a Hunter College graduate class on Teaching Reading and Writing through Drama, I had the good fortune to work with Professors Sally Milgrim and Patricia Sternberg, using theatre techniques in the context of reading and writing activities. The class was given situations in which students had to resolve dilemmas, ranging from applying for a green card and dealing with an uncooperative and insensitive immigration bureaucrat, to immigration and naturalization citizenship courses, to being involved with the wrong crowd and pressured to experiment with drugs or shoplifting, to begging or attempting to bribe a teacher for a passing grade or cheating on an exam, to job interviews and filing for unemployment, to dating and marriage proposals, pregnancy and abortion. In each instance, students worked in teams to resolve a problematic situation and provide a resolution in dialogue form. Their scripts were then rehearsed with classmate(s) and acted out in front of the class.

Second, teachers of basic writing and language minority students (perhaps more than any other teachers) need to become conscious of the signals sent to students *via* body language, oral intonation, and other nonverbal types of communication. A judgmental sentiment is communicated verbally in a couple of seconds but with a raised eyebrow almost instantaneously. So as teachers we must try to be accepting, inclusive, and nonjudgmental. We also need to notice and understand our students' nonverbal language: Nervous smiles, pauses, and inquisitive glances all have meaning that requires our interpretation; head position and voice inflection are not only culture-specific but gender-specific as well; and certain classroom patterns (such as who interrupts whom, when, how often, and under what circumstances) speak volumes about the real lines of social and sexual power that govern our students' behavior and learning potential. As teachers, we must learn to detect and—when necessary—redirect out of harmful range such forms of student communication. One effective redirecting technique is to inform students of the value of academic culture through discussions that include everyone in the class, encouraging women in particular to speak up and offer their ideas and opinions, thereby providing them with a forum within which to vent their emotions.

Third, as our students' primary language models, we teachers must at all costs avoid the use of sexist and racist language ourselves. Unfortunately, simple "good will towards men [sic]" will not suffice here; there are specific linguistic techniques that must be learned and used if the basic writing and ESL/ESD professor is to avoid this cardinal sin. In particular, the teacher needs to avoid ethnic and sexual generalization, the use of the so-called "generics," and sex- or culture-specific stereotypical expressions (scattered throughout the very language we are trying to help students acquire!). On the second item, we should note that the English language has no unique epicene third person singular pronoun ("singular they" being, of course, also plural), that the word "man" was once *but is no longer* a gender-neutral noun, and that this particular area of inclusive language is fraught with formidable editorial—and therefore pedagogical—difficulties⁶. Of course, if "singular they" was good enough for "such eminent writers as Shakespeare, Shelly, Dickens, Thackeray, Scott, Trollope, Austen, and Woolf, among others" (Cochran's dissertation 18), why not accept it in our own students' writing? (See Dennis Baron, 1 July 1992.) Among other claims, Baron says that, upon close examination, *standard English* proves to be a myth or, at best, "an imperfect and vague set of rules of etiquette" (B2).

Fourth, and finally, teachers can only innovate comfortably in the classroom, without fear of relapsing into sexist stereotypes, if they will only take the trouble to familiarize themselves with some of the literature on the topic of sexism and language, subject to the following caveat: Sexist or *gendered* English has been a millenium in the making; *degendered* English has only recently begun its process of creation, and we are a long way from consensus on solutions to some of the problems created by our awareness of a need for language that is gender inclusive (which is what we really mean by *degendered*). In view of this, we must be careful not to preach certainty in instances where there is as yet none. Michael Newman says it just right:

It only confuses beginning writers to be told to follow a rule where none exists. Simple injunctions: "use *he*," "avoid *his* or *her*," "pluralize antecedents," or even "use *they*" do not do justice to the problem writers face. It is far better to tell them the truth. The issue of which pronoun to use is not so much governed by syntactic rule as it is by meaning, and this meaning is embedded in a social context of gender relations.

What is true for pronominal usage is no less true for inclusive language as a whole, and therefore for every teacher and writer who wishes to be gender attentive.⁷

My personal wish is for the inclusive language group to include all teachers and writers, and particularly all those who teach or learn to write in the basic writing, ESL/ESD, and EFL classroom. Whether one is comfortable with it or not, gender sensitivity is the revolutionary and truly novel linguistic development of our age. As Richard Norris once observed:

Alexander Pope could with a perfect and thoughtless innocence write: "Man never is, but always to be, blessed"; but when I read his words, I surreptitiously wonder if he meant women too. Of course he did; he just didn't mention them. But then that is precisely the point

Notes

¹Parts of this paper appeared in the September 1992 Women and Language in Education issue of *Working Papers on Language, Gender and Sexism* (see Works Cited below).

²*Masculinus genus dignus est quam faemininum et faemininus quam neutrum* ("The masculine is a worthier gender than the feminine, [just as the feminine is worthier] than the neuter.") was a common dictum in Latin grammars of the time, whence English grammarians derived the principle. Elizabeth S. Sklar discusses the matter in detail in her article in *College English* 45 (1983): 348-58, "Sexist Grammar Revisited," including the odd use of the form *dignus* (instead of the comparative *dignior*—"worthier").

³In 1982 Roberta Hall and her colleagues at the Association of American Colleges produced a carefully researched and chilling summary of the obstacles faced by women in academia. More than a decade later, despite significant progress in certain professional arenas and some advances in the academy, every one of the conditions reported by the Hall paper can still be found in today's college classrooms. Association of American Colleges' publications are available from 1818 "R" Street, NW, Washington, DC 20009, telephone (202) 387-1300.

⁴In 1985 (see Cochran 1992, 29) I coined the term "Medusa syndrome" to describe the buried anger that characterizes many men's response to the uncertainties of a transitional period in relationships between the sexes. The condition is experienced by insecure males and by males inconsolable over the loss of patriarchy, and is precipitated by women in powerful or *status*

quo threatening situations. Its chief feature (as the name suggests) is an apparent inability to function normally in the presence of strong women—in effect, petrification.

⁶It has now been documented that the lines between bilingual and bidialectal students have blurred. And in the case of American universities, especially in huge urban institutions like CUNY, we find that ESL/ESD students virtually constitute the mainstream today; they are no longer a numerical minority. For documentation and other statistics, see the *CUNY Issues and Initiatives* statement of the CUNY Language Forum (1992).

⁷In a brilliant and delightful article that one hopes will soon be snapped up by the nearest publisher (“The Rules, the Student, Her Pronouns, and Their Meaning”), Michael Newman leads his readers through the various pitfalls one encounters when trying to find appropriate pronouns for generic—or, more properly, epicene—antecedents. No solution is without its problems: “‘Permissive’ instructors who might be inclined to accept (singular) *they* must deal with the fact that many if not most of the future readers of their students’ writing will consider it to be incorrect. Yet those who support some form of pronominal ‘law and order’ are being naive if they believe it is enough to tell students that the question is simply one of avoiding pronoun-antecedent disagreements. This approach of ‘just say no to antecedent-pronoun disagreement’ leaves students at risk either of being chastised for sexism or of getting lost in the maze of alternatives to epicene *he*.”

⁸For more pedagogical tips for ESL/ESD teaching in general, see the CUNY language minority handbook, *Into the Academic Mainstream; Guidelines for Teaching Language Minority Students*, edited by the author (New York: Instructional Resource center, Office of Academic Affairs, The City University of New York, 1992).

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