

MARY M. TALBOT, *Language and Gender: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998. xi + 257 pp. \$59.95 (hbk) \$26.95 (paper)

In this three-part text, Mary Talbot writes from a feminist perspective to illuminate 'the complex part language plays ... in reflecting, creating, and sustaining gender divisions in society' (p. 15). The book is indeed a well-constructed and accessible introductory resource for thinking about gender as a dynamic, performative, and crucially linguistic achievement. Although the author excludes the highly relevant ethnomethodological perspective of gender as an ongoing, situated accomplishment (e.g. Ruggione, 1997; West and Fenstermaker, 1993) the book provides, nonetheless, an engaging entry into the topic of gender divisions as socially and linguistically constructed.

To lay the groundwork for her project, Talbot provides in Part I an introduction to the primary sociolinguistic research traditions which have both contributed to and constrained our understanding of the relationship between language and gender. The focus of the critique is on Anglo-American studies, though the author alludes to variationist studies in other language communities and provides relevant titles of empirical studies as further reading. Early in Part I and throughout the book Talbot argues that biological determinism is too easily replaced with social essentialism; she warns that using convenient everyday dichotomous gender categories as research categories obscures the dynamism of gendered activity and perpetuates stereotypes.

In Part II, 'Interaction among Men and Women', the author details empirical studies within particular genres: story-telling, everyday conversation, and interviews and internet communication. Despite her contention (in Part I) that dichotomies are to be avoided, the presentation of empirical studies in Part II reads, surprisingly, as a compendium of 'men do this, women do that' research reports. Whereas in Part I the critical review of research was well integrated into the discussion, Part II presents findings without equally careful reflection. Talbot ultimately addresses this difficulty at the end of Chapters 4 and 6 where she discusses the dangers of generalizing from the findings presented and acknowledges 'more troublesome dichotomies'. Unfortunately, by deferring her critique, the author reproduces the simplistic binary view of the world that she wishes to avoid. What is missing from Part II is an interweaving exploration of how language practices index activities or stances which have become linked with notions of femininity and masculinity (see, for example, Duranti, 1997: 209-11).

Part II concludes with a critique of the 'difference' approach to gendered language, focusing rather heavily on Tannen's popular books. Talbot has some grounds for her critique of the 'cross-cultural' paradigm, but misses the point that the approach does not necessarily treat difference and dominance as mutually exclusive. Those new to this topic should be referred to Tannen's scholarly publications which address the relationship between difference and dominance (e.g. Tannen, 1993, 1994).

Part III ('Discourse and Construction of Gender') affords a clear overview of

the poststructural approach of Critical Discourse Analysis and then examines the discursive construction of maternity, the intersection of consumerism and femininity, the construction of masculinity, and issues of struggle and resistance through language, including a discussion of 'political correctness'. The author proposes to show how women and men are 'made' by discourse practices (p. 145), but is careful to point out that people are also 'busily involved in the construction of gender identities, especially their own' (p. 157). Here (as well as in Part II) is where ethnomethodological explorations of gender as a local and interactive accomplishment may be missed by some readers. This section does provide, however, a challenging, theoretically unified examination of language and gender, contributing a lively examination of the intersection of language and social change.

In short, this introductory text affords an excellent starting point for exploring the main findings and underlying theoretical and methodological challenges of the study of language and gender. Despite the few shortcomings mentioned, or perhaps because of them, readers will be inspired to dig more deeply into this topic and will find new questions to explore.

REFERENCES

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