

Language and sexism. SARA MILLS. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
(ix, 178)

Our interest in this book lies more in what it has to say about language and discourse than in social criticism, although it is hard to fully distinguish those in this topic. It is customary for a text to offer a history and review of literature to exposit the philosophical foundations that inform developments in a discipline, but that is often absent in this field, an omission that will be made up here. Feminism, referred to also as Post-Modern Feminism to distinguish it from the Progressive Era Women's Suffrage Movement, which sought equal voting rights and accommodations for working women like limitations on the workday and how much weight women could be expected to lift, extensions of which have been achieving such ends as equality in university admissions and equal pay in the workplace since the 1920s.

Radical Feminism, as the new movement came to be called, along with *Revolutionary Feminism*, developed in the 1970s from the 1960s movement dubbed by its proponents the *Women's Liberation Movement*. This movement was revolutionary in its design, as expressed in the following passage:

The revolutionary aims of the Women's Liberation Movement are exemplified in the following remarks by Carol Hanisch¹ and Elizabeth Sutherland²: In choosing to fight for women's liberation it is not enough, either, to explain it only in general terms of "the system." For the system oppresses many groups in many ways. Women must learn that the specific methods used to keep her oppressed is [sic] to convince her that she is at all times secondary to man, and that her life is defined in terms of him. We cannot speak of liberating ourselves until we free ourselves from this myth and accept ourselves as primary.

In our role as radical women we are confronted with the problem of assuring a female revolution within the general revolution (Firestone, 1968).

¹ Hanisch, along with Firestone, was associated with the Redstockings of the Women's Liberation Movement, a radical feminist group, during the 1970s (Willis, 1992).

² Sutherland is the author of "Colonized Women: The Chicana," in *Sisterhood is Powerful*, Robin Morgan, (Ed.), Random House, New York, 1970.

This movement, informed initially by Marxist-Leninist dialectical materialism, became referred to in intellectual circles as *Second Wave Feminism* (22). Simply put, dialectical materialism inverted German Idealism, postulating that history consists of the conflict between the forces of *Progress* and the forces of *Reaction*, i.e., the Labor and Capital bases, which conflict shall be resolved by the eventual vanquishing and destruction of *Reaction* (Capital) by *Progress* (Labor).

In parallel, the dialectic of the Women's Liberation Movement recast the classical Marxist dialectic with Men in the role of *Reaction* and Women in the role of *Progress*, as the sample from Firestone quoted above demonstrates. So we read in the present text,

Language does indeed reveal to us the values of groups and institutions within our culture in the past who were instrumental in encoding their own perspectives within the language. However, the language as it is used at present and the resources available within it, reveal to us the struggles, both political and moral, over whose voices should be represented and mediated (9).

Here language is the arena of that "struggle." Classical dialectical materialism contributed the notion of social forces as masses in conflict with other masses (thus *materialism*), which conflict produces ideas and ideologies. The activities of consciousness raising and public relations undertaken during the Women's Liberation Movement during the late 1960s and early 1970s,³ in its several manifestations, are informed by this philosophical basis and seek to achieve their ends, as expressed in the following excerpt:

All women suffer oppression, even white women, particularly poor white women, and especially Indian, Mexican, Puerto Rican, Oriental and Black American women whose oppression is tripled by any of the above-mentioned. But we do have female's oppression in common. This means that we can begin to talk to other women with this common factor and start building links with them and thereby build and transform the revolutionary force we are now beginning to amass (Weathers, 1969).

Evident in this passage is an accumulation of Revolutionary dialectics, each social mass in its locus, in parallel to the classical opposition. This sample as well sets out the Radical Feminist

³ This was a feature of Revolutionary policy in the beginning. As V.I. Lenin put it, "The link between education and our policy should be the chief inducement in making people join us in our cultural and educational work" (1920).

program. Coded here is the basis for the ubiquitous Revolutionary refrain that ‘if one is oppressed, all are oppressed, a familiar principle is evoked in the subject text, “if there was potential for damage to one woman ... it was in some ways damaging to all women” (14). This also provides a framework for consciousness raising and publicity activities.⁴ Just as Lenin perceived the need for ‘permanent Revolution’, this principle provides the rationale for continuing to go over old ground, “despite this anachronistic feel to a concern with sexism, discursive structures which are available as a resource ... must still be analyzed” (10).

Again, consistent with the dialectic of the Reactionary base (males) reacting against and oppressing the Progressive base (females), Mills avers, “It is clearly not the hostility of individual men alone which is responsible” (59), since “the hostility of individual men ... is only possible ... because there are institutional supports to see this type of viewpoint as permissible” (ibid., n 23), i.e., the “struggle” is that of the “progressive” woman base rising against the reactionary man base. The discourses deployed in the Radical Feminist “struggle” count among the “more progressive discourses” (37). Similarly, *sexist language* is posited as a category of *hate speech*, which the author sees “not as an individual expression” but as “a means for a dominant group to coalesce as a group,” against the minority (99). This foundation informs Mills’ approach to (Feminist) discourse, “Discourses can be seen as the ‘rules’ and ‘guidelines’ which we produce and which are produced for us in order to construct ourselves as individuals and to interact with others” (7). Thus the Revolutionary Weltanschauung informs the language philosophy component Radical Feminism.⁵

⁴ “[C]onsciousness-raising has become one of the prime educational, organizing programs of the women's liberation movement” (Sarachild, Kathie, 1978, “*Consciousness-Raising: A Radical Weapon*,” in *Feminist Revolution*, New York: Random House, pp.144-150).

⁵ This is a point of departure from the pronouncements of J.V. Stalin, who, having insisted on exporting Russian throughout the empire to serve as its common tongue and to communicate the Revolution, saw language as neither superstructure nor base. Stalin rejected efforts to assign language to diverse social masses, to one or another base, or to superstructure; he asserted, “It cannot be otherwise. Language exists, language has been created precisely in order

Language and Sexism sets out to clarify positions staked out by the author and other writers in the movement in “responding to sexism” (14), to counter the emergence of the charge of ‘political correctness’, and to respond to what she perceives as ridicule of the Feminist language program from the public and the media. The first project involves reprising familiar examples of ‘sexist language’, e.g., *chairman* (now *chair* or *chairperson*), *waiter* or *waitress*, (now *server*), *majorette*, *actress*, and *hostess*. One has to reach quite far back into earlier stages of the language, though, to find *aviatrix* and *tailoress* (56, f).

Pointing out how terms with such Greco-Latin gender affixes call attention to sex⁶ inappropriately and to the disadvantage of women is a long-familiar theme in the literature, but a point that needs to be recognized in the context of these Greco-Latin stems and affixes is that they entered English on a very high sociolinguistic channel, i.e., the advent of the Norman French ruling and aristocratic classes, which led to the flowering of the Classics and the Renaissance in England, when all things Latin were exalted and these affixes marked high social status and the H diglossic variety. It seems simplistic and reductive to focus only on the sex marking element.

Examples of pejoration of terms for females are often selected, and a number are cited here (ibid.). Examples either way are where one finds them, however. It is true that *madame* does carry one degraded sense today, but it is also true that *Madame President* has currency in

to serve society as a whole, as a means of intercourse between people, in order to be common to the members of society and constitute the single language of society, serving members of society equally, irrespective of their class status” (Stalin, 1950).

Stalin likewise denies that language is part of the base, “and at all stages of development, language, as a means of intercourse between the people of a society, was the common and single language of that society, serving its members equally, irrespective of their social status. He does recognize, “the various social groups, the classes, are far from being indifferent to language. They strive to utilize the language in their own interests, to impose their own special lingo, their own special terms, their own special expressions upon it.” Yet he concludes that if language were to be so co-opted it would degenerate and be “doomed to disappear” (ibid.).

⁶ The author, like many writers in the Movement, continues to employ *gender* to refer to the sexes or sex distinctions; in current academic usage in the social sciences in the United States, however, *sex* refers to male-female-neuter i.e., *boy - girl - table*, and *gender* to associated behaviors and attitudes. Consistent with my community, I continue to use *sex* in the context of ‘sex distinction’.

our Faculty Association, and *Madame Prime Minister* was a frequently heard honorific in Great Britain quite recently. *Lady* (see 56) is cited as another example. I suppose the ironic *lady of the night* satisfies the claim, but *lady of the house* in our parents' generation occupied a formal politeness register, and *lady* is current (and indeed has been overgeneralized) as a moderate honorific. Its etymology from 'dough maker' (see any good dictionary) shows that the semantic associations have in fact elevated.

Furthermore, we have *gurl* 'young child' > *girl*, and *female*, a neologism using the Fr. stem *fem-* and *-elle* to create a dyad with *male*. Along those lines, one suspects that the reason the etymology of *woman* is "troubling" (89) is that *wyfman*, a compound of *wyf* + *man* 'wife person', attests that *man* historically names the species and samples of the species. To argue that *man* historically names 'male of the species', requires, in addition to ignoring the historical record, that one account for such a sample becoming a *wyfman*.

Another ubiquitous problem in the literature is the question of the third person singular *he*. Evidence from earlier stages of English shows that (in pre-Great Vowel Shift OE) *he* was used for Masc & Fem Nom Sg, *hi* for Fem Acc Sg and Neut Nom & Acc Pl, *his* for Masc and Neut Gen Sg, and *him* for Masc & Neut Dat Sg & Neut Dat Pl (Pyle & Algeo, 1993). Just as the noun paradigm reduced its affix load and case and gender marking and simplified in the number of forms, so the pronoun paradigm reduced and simplified. Highlighted in these data is the fact that *he* was used with both Masc and Fem referents, *hi* with for both Fem and Neut, *his* with both Masc and Neut Sg, and *him* with Masc and Nom referents (ibid.). In fact, *she*, very likely a palatalized outcome of *heo*, did not emerge until the twelfth century, and *its* did not make inroads on *his* as Neut Gen Sg until the seventeenth century (Milroy 2007).

Nonetheless, pains are taken to point out that a writer who objects to the prescribed delegitimizing of *he* as a non-specific, sex-inclusive pronoun by citing the historical development of *he* in his own variety is subject to a certain supercilious scorn, that he “hide[s] behind a false illusion of neutrality” (Romaine, S, quoted 95). Likewise, Norman Fairclough is pronounced guilty of “a strategy consistently used by those attacking anti-discriminatory reforms” and “a common ploy, used to discredit anti-discrimination activists” (104).

Seeing in such responses *ad hominem* attack which avoids addressing the substance of the argument misses an important point, though. All of this information is universally known by linguists (Is it imaginable that one could achieve an advanced degree in the field without having studied it?). Evidently the philosophy of language informed by the Weltanschauung of the Radical Feminist Movement simply excludes from consideration what that contradicts its dialectic.

Readers are offered the information that grammatical gender languages not only distinguish sex, but objects as well (30, n 14) and that English is a “neutral-gender language” (in its current stage, it should be pointed out), along with the prescriptive notions that *he* and *she* refer to males and females, respectively, but *it* to objects (ibid., n 15). This prescription is fallacious. In many registers, even quite formal ones, *she* refers to ships and countries, *he* and *she* to cars and airplanes, to pets, and to diverse other material objects. *Themselves/selves* is erroneously represented as a coinage of Feminist writers (48); this is in fact a form long associated with vernacular varieties of English on the Isles and was very early transplanted to the Americas. The OED records it from the fourteenth century, and the Canadian Ministry of Justice recommends supplying *themselves* with a general singular referent (but avoiding *themsel*). The

survey results cited that show that a majority of speakers use *them*, etc., in singular contexts (ibid.) reflects this history.

The author's foray into Spanish is not more fruitful. Occupation terms are cited in their *grammatical* gender, which persist, despite the efforts of feminists and some others to create a new convention which alters noun inflection according to the *sex of the person*. Ignored are such common terms as *tenista* and *pianista* (both Fem), which, arguably, on the professional level are represented by at least as many men. The language philosophy here conflates grammatical gender and sex-marking, "For those languages with a grammatical-gender system ... sexism is much more embedded" (30). That is simply erroneous, to whatever one attributes the development of the grammar. And that is the central issue. When it is noted that Arabic *qal* 'stop', as it appears on road signs, uses the Masc Sg form, which applies to females "by convention" (30), one is left with a choice: did these conventions develop in the community of (all the) speakers 'naturally', or did, as is represented here (31), the males create and coerce the females into using Masc grammatical forms to oppress them? The answer to this question is the basic premise of Radical Feminist language philosophy.

Likewise the role of spell check and dictionaries is mistaken. Dictionary compilers, in the tradition of Samuel Johnson, note the forms of words and the senses they convey according to the usage of contemporaneous writers and editors; they do not "standardize usage" (45) but reflect it. Thus definitions and even forms change from edition to edition; this reality is the opposite of the notion that they prescribe usage. And spell checking routines in software applications refer to a dictionary data base licensed to the software developer. This is the reason that not only certain forms fancied by Radical Feminist writers, but many of the current terms

and neologisms in academic fields are ‘rejected’ by spell checkers — they have not arrived in the dictionaries yet. But serious scholars use them anyway.

Kramarae and Treichler’s *Feminist Dictionary* is cited for quoting from Feminist writing, replacing, e.g., the conventional definition of *cosmetics* with “a mask used primarily by women which can be an aid for performances of various kinds” and “man-made chemicals that clog your pores and make your eyelashes fall out” (45, 46). The ideological presuppositions that guide these glosses are clear.

The question of popular usages in general and dictionaries in particular leads to the second major purpose of the book, countering the charge of ‘political correctness’. The Radical Feminist language program has suffered something of a setback from the popular notion that its prescriptions amount to *political correctness*, i.e., a prescribed set of usages, motivated by an ideology, imposed on the general society by whatever institutions that those who subscribe to the ideology control.

The notion *political correctness* has a colorful history. Early in his regime, Stalin warned of a “Right Danger” in the party, anticipating his disposal of Molotov; he subsequently admonished the Party to avoid the “Left Danger,” preceding the murder of Trotsky (1928). Astute Kremlin watchers saw in those warnings a precursor of ideological changes and shifts in political influence; they recognized that their safety, not to mention their careers, depended on a seeming consistency with the new Party line. In China, history books record the valiant struggle of Mao’s Revolutionary Army that independently defeated the forces of Imperial Japan, ending World War II, while geography books still identify the landmass adjacent to the Mediterranean, and between Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan as *Palestine*, a residual recognition of its erstwhile Soviet ally’s client, the Palestinians. After two historians traced the route of Mao’s

“Long March” and found that the legendary 12,500 kilometer route in fact extended a bit more than 6,000 kilometers, they were met with official outrage and dismissal.⁷ The political phrase for this in Russia was *politicheski gramotnyj* ‘politically educated’ i.e., one understands current political trends and behaves accordingly. This kind of ideological toeing the line has become a way of life.⁸

As is the situation with many popular conceptions, the senses in which *political correctness* is used vary, but they have in common the idea that some ideologically motivated attitudes or behavior is prescribed and imposed. The linguistic “relabeling” (157) of terms for occupations and social groups is carried out to achieve ideological ends. It is a core element of the Radical Feminist Weltanschauung that *sexism* “needs to be thoroughly challenged” (161). To bring about its objectives, the movement advances campaigns that “are not concerned simply to change language, but to draw attention to ways of thinking and behaving” (161). As an example, the author characterizes the effort to “rename ... Christmas tree a holiday tree” as “renaming something in a more inclusive way” (105). Debra Cameron is probably right when she says, “what many people dislike is the politicizing of their words against their will” (quoted 93). Members of the general society perceive the ideological basis and motives for such efforts, thus the response that the attitudes and behaviors they promote are *politically correct*.

The process of “relabeling” that is a significant element in the Radical Feminist language program are explicitly intended to “reform” the language and thus the society that uses it by changing attitudes about what is acceptable usage: “Anti-sexist language campaigns and activism ... constitute a call for change at the level of material practice” (161). This goal evokes the principle of Linguistic Relativity, although the closest the author comes to overtly

⁷ "The 25,000 li of the Red Army's Long March are a historic fact and not open to doubt." *The Beijing Daily*. In Richard Spencer, *Daily Telegraph*. March 4, 2006.

⁸ In your department, may an applicant refer to the *chair* of the search committee as *chairman*?

acknowledging that is the remark, “I do not see language as simply reflecting social structures. There is a much more complex relation between language and culture” (17, n. 9). On the one hand, the notion that “sexist language” reflects institutions which oppress women presupposes the view that language expresses culture, but the Radical Feminist response, on the other hand, as manifest in their language reform projects and prescriptions, is rooted in Whorf’s theory that language dictates cultural worldview, which it is their goal to change.

Readers should be reminded that institutions have prescribed the kind of ‘reforms’ that Feminists propose to avoid language they see as ‘sexist’. In Great Britain the Sex Discrimination Code (1975) bans the use of sex-specific terms in job advertisements. The American Philosophical Association prescribes the alternation of *she* and *he* in nonspecific contexts. Every publication organization has established standards. The *Guardian*, for example instructs writers to avoid reference to occupations with sex-specific terms (Marsh & Marshall, 2000).

The history of these types of such “reform” programs in influencing the general population, though, is not encouraging. In post-Revolution China, traditional salutations *xiao* ‘young’ and *lao* ‘elder, an honorific’, which participated in the polite register but which seemed to the Mao Revolutionaries to carry forward the ideology of traditional class distinctions, were replaced prescriptively by *tongzhi* ‘comrade’. Soon enough, though, the universal outcome in the language was *xiao tongzhi* and *lao tongzhi*. Today, three generations of Party rule later, *tongzhi* is heard only in very formal political speech. Likewise, *cripples* were relabeled *handicapped*, followed by *disabled*, by *special needs*, and even, in some contexts, *special abilities*. But at each step existing attitudes simply transferred to the newly approved term. Consider also the situation of *crapper* → *toilette* → *toilet* → *rest room*, *WC*, *plumbing*: no matter you call it, you still cannot talk about it at dinner.

In his Preface to *The History of the Adventures of Joseph Andrews and his Friend Mr. Abraham Adams*, Henry Fielding defines the Ridiculous, “The only source of the true Ridiculous (as it appears to me) is Affectation” (1742); this alone, Fields declares, merits laughter. Much attention in the present text is given to the ridicule that the Radical Feminist language policy is occasionally subject to. As in responses to political correctness, more than a little of this can be attributed to impositions that are Ridiculous.

The alternative spelling <wimmin>, complete with its traditional gemination of the <m>, to avoid the etymological associations with *wyf* and *man*, satisfies this criterion. After all, no matter how we spell the word, it remains the word, and its history is as it is. Another qualifying attempt at “relabeling” is *herstory*, on the specious grounds that *history* is a compound of *his* + *story* (but not *hers*). Whatever the realities of whatever ideological constraints operated in any particular writing of any particular history, the word is an import from French *l’histoire* (n.; Fem, by the way). The orthographic <h> represents a phone that was lost in French (and Spanish) but one realized in English at some later point, probably as a ‘reading pronunciation’; furthermore, *his* ends with /z/. The word may be cognate with *story*, but nothing to do with *his*. Examples of this kind, like the *holiday tree* above, do strike the ear as ridiculous. It is an error to blame the media for these perceptions.

Whatever the manifold ideological biases of any reporter, editor, or publisher (and supporters of every facet of every issue seem to have their complaints about this), in the end the livelihood of those in the business depend on producing a product that can be marketed to their publics. A compelling analysis was offered of an article in the *Guardian* about Foreign Secretary Margaret Becket and articles in the *Independent* about Baroness Blackstone and Paul Mackey, which focused on differences in the way the subjects were discussed and the information offered

about them. But the analysis stopped at the ideological border, without considering discourse questions of audience and their expectations, and the nature of the news business, “When a dog bites a man, that is not news, but if a man bites a dog, that is news,” i.e., the domain of the news industry is the exceptional.

A curious form of pseudo-syllogistic argumentation is employed in numerous spots, including the discussion of *loutism* and the so-called *New Lad* culture (130, f). A Sunday Supplement topic (i.e., usually a social stereotype, about a supposed social trend one reads about as a feature in the Life-Arts section of the Sunday newspaper, such as living in without being married, single or divorced mothers managing kids and work, ‘boomerang kids’, etc.) is evoked as a socio-cultural reality, and the opinions of fellow writers in the Movement are quoted to account for its causes, which provide the support for conclusions drawn about it. Entertaining male stereotypes in this way in this kind of text is disappointing.

In a world in which women have for more than 20 years constituted 60% of university admissions, and in which women’s positions in the professions and in business largely reflect these trends (more women than men have careers now (Marsh & Marshall), the opportunity exists to develop new insights about how language and discourse reflect this participation of women, such as the utilization of linguistic resources and discourse strategies to convey competence, negotiate and allocate power, and express authority, both between the sexes and among women competing and cooperating in the professional sphere. That hope was disappointed, though. Not a whisper to address any of this. What was served up amounts to a cold plate of the same old, albeit updated and redigested, refried beans.

References

Firestone, Smulamith. (1968). *Women and the radical movement*. New York: The New York Radical Women. Accessed at Scriptorium.lib.duke.edu

- Lenin, Vladimir I. (1920, 1965). Political Education Workers Of Gubernia and Uyezd. *Collected Works*, 4th English Edition, Progress Publishers, Moscow, vol. 31, 340-361. V. I. Lenin Internet Archive (www.marx.org) 2002
- Milroy, James. (2007). The history of English. David Britain, Ed. *Language in the British Isles*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, pp 9 - 33.
- Pyle, T. and Algeo, J. (1993). *History and Development of the English Language*. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers
- Stalin, Josef V. *Works*, Vol. 11, January, 1928 to March, 1929, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, 1954. Marxists Internet Archive (2008)
- Stalin Josef V. *Marxism and Problems of Linguistics*, 1950, Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House. Stalin Reference Archive (marxists.org) 2000
- Weathers, Mary Ann. *No More Fun and Games: A Journal of Female Liberation*. Cambridge, Mass: Cell 16. vol. 1, no. 2 (Feb 1969)
- Willis, Ellen (1984, 1992). Radical Feminism and Feminist Radicalism. In: Ellen Willis, *No More Nice Girls: Countercultural Essays*. Wesleyan University Press

Robert D. Angus

California State University, Fullerton