Interview with Robin Lakoff

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Themis Kaniklidou: Why do you regard the contrastive analysis of female and male language use both interesting and important?

Robin Lakoff: Firstly, I consider this topic of crucial interest and importance because there are certainly differences and variability between how men and women speak, which links closely to how gender is socially constructed. Half a century ago when I published *Language and Woman's Place*, we did not have the sophistication to understand that there is no binary distinction between the language use of men and women. Today we know that there is a continuum between female and male language use. This issue is therefore more complicated than it originally appeared to be. There are many stereotypes around what it means to be male and female and we bring up our children according to them, to understand what it is to be a little boy or a little girl. Secondly, language is a major way to identify and understand ourselves, understand who we are and how we want to be perceived and understood by other people. It therefore makes a lot of sense that we use and construct language for ourselves to enable us to identify as particular kinds of people. Women in the old days were often expected to be submissive and weak, so men can appear to be strong and powerful. It were such social expectations that guided men and women to construct their language to reflect and replicate those expectations. So, naturally, if a woman says something then she may be understood differently than a man, because there are some expectations that we draw for her. We can thus assume that language is a vehicle for both self-construction and self-identification and also, more importantly, other-identification. Research shows that even 2–3 year old children who have barely acquired language have a very good grasp of their gender and identify with that gender in the same way that they dissociate from the other gender. They also often have expectations for how others should speak: if a little girl does not sound how a little girl is expected to sound or the other way around for a little boy, they can be stigmatized by other children, especially at that age.
Themis Kaniklidou: In which areas do you feel that contrastive pragmatics needs to move in the future?

Robin Lakoff: In terms of contrastive pragmatics, I find it particularly interesting to bring gender and politics together through language. In this sense I would highlight the crucial importance of contrastive analysis of political discourse. I have studied political language: how people use language to engage in political communication. To me, language and gender and their contrastive analysis can be particularly fascinating in this context. Lots of people, including me, have argued that they do not make stereotypical gendered distinctions about female and male language use, but when you carefully study language and politics it soon becomes evident that men and women very often do resort to stereotypical gendered expressions. Funnily, what we most deny about such stereotypical language uses are possibly the most interesting things about language. As an example, when we look at gender, we find that what women are supposed to do is actually stigmatized and what women often try to achieve through language is also often stigmatized. If you are a woman you will be scrutinized more closely and understood more negatively than a man doing the same things.

As an example, let me refer to the recent Presidential elections in the US. The vice-presidential candidate of the Democratic Party, Kamala Harris, is not only female but a person of mixed race, whose parents were immigrants. There is a certain amount of stigma around each of these traits. One of the things that you will notice when you listen to the commentary about Harris is how people talked about her. Both her linguistic and extralinguistic communication were discussed in a more pronounced way than happened with any of her male counterparts. So, we can bring politics, language and gender together to tell us a lot about how power and politics work alongside gender in any country. And although Americans like to think that achieving the vice presidency is a great step for a woman in many ways it is, stereotypically, an ‘ideal position’ for women as it replicates the stereotype of women who ‘follow in the steps of men’ in politics.

To take another example, again from the US political scene: in 2016, when Hillary Clinton was running for President, public opinion could not comfortably accept a woman asking for presidential power for herself. It is acceptable for a woman to ask for power that subordinates her to a man (vice-President) but it scared many that a woman would dare to go after the more senior and prestigious position (President). Contrastively examining commentaries around female and male vice-presidential and presidential candidates then would be an area of immense interest for me in terms of evaluating the
linguistic repertoire of choices made to characterize these candidates and the stereotypes around them. In fact, we may find the same stereotypical commenting patterns in the business world, as well as in educational contexts.

Looking at the different communicative and professional settings where we can do contrastive analysis of pragmatic phenomena, focusing on male and female talk, I would particularly recommend studying the closed setting of military force. Women have been integrated in the armed forces and in this predominately male-ruled setting they tend to be stereotyped and stigmatized even more. The resistance to accept women in this setting and how this resistance is materialized and foregrounded through language choices and options is of enormous interest.

Another interesting area is the use of gender neutral language and patterns of its realization. We live in difficult times where the entire topic of gender is being torn apart and reexamined, and many use and abuse the matter of gender and political correctness to terrify us. The issue of gender neutral pronouns is half a century old. I talked about this in Language and Woman’s Place, but today we use such pronouns in a very different way. Today, we are interested in how language reflects our gendered identity. It would be interesting to see whether issues such as gender neutral pronouns can be systematically studied across languages and cultures. Such a research would also provide insight into language and social change. Essentially, language is a two way street: using new forms of language can push social change if society and time is ready for this change, and the other way around, when it is clear that social change is happening, attributing new roles of gender in society, then language can accommodate such changes. Take ‘widow’ and ‘widower’ as an example. In the past, it used to be very common to say Mary is John’s widow which evoked that Mary (woman) was the subordinate. Now, if a woman dies it makes perfect sense to say John is Mary’s widower. This happens because the women are now understood as equally important to men and our attention is drawn to them. So, this expression has become perfectly normalized today. Gendered language and social change therefore go hand in hand: you cannot have social change without language change, and vice versa, although language change tends to lag behind social change.

Interviewer:

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