Book Review


While research on language and sexism has made a significant contribution to mitigating linguistic discrimination against women, the majority of this work has been at the lexical and morphological levels. Sexism at the discursive level continues in society and requires close attention, which is exactly what Innovations and Challenges: Women, Language and Sexism by Carmen Rosa Caldas-Coulthard attempts to do. The volume is a collection of nine articles written by fifteen researchers from diverse geographic and cultural backgrounds.

As indicated by the book’s title, these articles reassess the innovations and challenges encountered in the attempt for non-sexist language reform. Readers who are well versed in the area as well as those who are new to the field will appreciate the monograph’s impressive depth and breadth of research that explores “the different and subtle ways sexism and linguistic violence against WOMEN are materialised in discursive practices” (p. xxi, original emphasis). To achieve this, the authors analyse linguistic, visual and other semiotic resources using diverse theoretical and methodological frameworks, including critical discourse analysis, multimodal analysis, interactional sociolinguistics and corpus analysis.

The book is divided into two parts, which are preceded by a preface written by the editor that provides an overview of the volume as well as reflections on advances in the field. Part 1, Language, discourse and gender violence contains five chapters. Chapter 1, “Women, language and public discourse: five decades of sexism and scrutiny” by Alice Freed, chronicles feminist linguistic activities during the last five decades. The author observes that while feminist linguists have, to some extent, been successful in reforming lexical sexism, discursive practices including offensive communicative styles that indicate underlying...
sexist beliefs continue to endure in public discourse in twenty-first-century America. She provides important insights on society’s persistent scrutiny and monitoring of women’s speech. Freed concludes by urging feminists to find the connection between old arguments and new debates in order to effectively critique sexism since it is still a real-world problem.

In Chapter 2, “The gender respect gap”, Deborah Cameron shows how language use (or non-use) contributes to the enactment and normalisation of male dominance. Drawing on naturally occurring metadiscourse, she discusses the phenomenon within the context of two main settings, namely workplace contexts and encounters with strangers in public spaces. In the first setting, Cameron shows how the interactional practices of silencing and interruption as well as “differential formality” (p. 22) – the practice of withholding professional titles and address forms – serve to perpetuate sexism against contemporary women. Here, women experience “a classic double bind” because “they cannot object to what they perceive … as the unequal and disrespectful treatment of their sex without prompting accusations of inequalitarianism, snobbery, oversensitivity, and excessive self-regard” (p. 23). In the second context, she notes that males often intrude on the privacy of women with whom they are unacquainted, not because they are genuinely interested in them, but rather, because they feel slighted when they are apparently ignored by women. Male strangers therefore intrude on the privacy of females to remind them that men are entitled to this patriarchal right of invasion to which women are required to concede. Cameron’s contribution demonstrates the need to resist and challenge insidious gendered norms through an in-depth critique of linguistic patterns which exemplify the workings of banal sexism.

Woven through the next two chapters are concerns about a dimension of sexism that has arguably received little attention – the intersection between age, sexism and institutionalised contempt. In Chapter 3, “The transgressive, the traditional: sexist discourses of grandmothering and ageing”, Carmen Rosa Caldas-Coulthard and Rosamund Moon demonstrate, through visual and verbal analyses, how stereotypes of older women as unattractive, sexually repulsive and evil lead to their invisibility, disappearance, marginalisation, trivialisation and ridicule. They note that these negative social reactions to ageism are deeply rooted in sexism and reflect the tendency of male power to “define, control values, erase, disempower and divide” (p. 38). Indeed, despite the deeply entrenched stereotypes about asexuality in older women, several studies show that neither women nor men become asexual with age (e.g., Kenny, 2013). Caldas-Coulthard and Moon’s contribution therefore provides linguistic evidence that the negative social response to ageism is a political issue and its representation in discourse can and should be contested.
In Chapter 4, “Disco divas and heroic knights: a critical multimodal analysis of gender roles in ‘create the world’ LEGO cards”, Jai Mackenzie, Laura Coffey-Glover, Sophie Payne and Mark McGlashan continue the discussion on the connection between gender, age and sexism. They analyse the naming, visual portrayal and linguistic description of minifigures in “Create the World LEGO Cards” using multimodal critical discourse methods. The study exposes the roots of sexist ideologies by illustrating how young children are introduced at a tender age to stereotypes that limit gender roles and identities. Among other issues, the authors show how women are represented as youthful with beautiful features whereas men are portrayed as older with hairy faces. Consequently, the minifigures emphasise that youth and beauty are the most valued qualities in women, and that it is more important for women to maintain a good appearance than it is for men. These chapters uncover the semiotic dimensions of sexism and illustrate how women are persistently devalued and constrained through stereotyping at both ends of the age spectrum.

The contribution by Branca Telles Ribeiro and Liliana Cabral Bastos, Chapter 5, “Sexual harassment as reported by the Brazilian press: ambivalent and contradictory framings” is the final chapter of Part I. Their investigation of the #Metoo movement in the international film industry reveals the ambivalent and contradictory framings exhibited by journalists, public intellectuals and artists in debates on the concepts of sexual harassment, sexuality, feminism and power. Their study foreshadows the contents of Chapters 8 and 9 by highlighting how women are blamed for experiencing sexual violence because of the assumption that “a woman knows a lot” and therefore “needs to behave in a way so that bad things don’t happen” (p. 84). Most significantly, the chapter offers insights on opposing cultural views (American versus French) of what constitutes gender violence as well as the role of non-serious frames (playful jocular remarks) in the perpetuation of sexism. The connection between sexism and ageism is inadvertently re-echoed here through a quote regarding an 84-year-old commentator in the author’s corpus: “it would be better for the planet – and mostly for women – that she be quiet and learned to knit” (p. 87, emphasis added). This quotation, although not the focus of the chapter, supports Caldas-Coulthard and Moon’s observation that older women experience intensified degrees of sexism – they are expected to disappear even when they still exist. Regrettably, women also sometimes exhibit this kind of sexism towards their fellow women. Overall, Ribeiro and Bastos’ contribution underlines the increasing relevance of the written press as well as digital media in Gender Studies.

Part II of the book consists of four chapters which centre on Sexism and institutional discourses. It starts with Chapter 6, “Until I got a man in, he wouldn’t listen: evidence for the gender order in New Zealand workplaces” by Janet...
Holmes. The author examines the tendency to “think leader, think male” (p. 97), and its influence on workplace interaction in New Zealand. Drawing on the database of the Language in the Workplace Project, she notes that women in senior leadership positions continue to experience gender constraints despite the increased number of females that have gained senior positions in politics and government institutions over the last two decades. Her study shows that women find themselves in precarious situations as they try to comply with socio-cultural expectations of femininity without undermining their leadership responsibilities. In order to maintain the balance between a masculine style (stereotypically authoritative) and a feminine one (stereotypically gentle and diffident), they use epistemic devices such as hedges, interactive pragmatic particles and supportive feedback. Holmes’ final observation is however optimistic: an increased appreciation of the positive traits of normatively feminine talk could help eliminate the negative aspects of the gender order which marginalise women in professional settings.

Institutional discourses concerning violence against women are crucial sites for Gender Studies and this is explored by the subsequent two chapters. In Chapter 7, “Sexism and mediatised recontextualisations: the case of a battered woman who killed”, Sibley Slinkard and Susan Ehrlich use discourse analysis techniques to probe the media reportage of the case of a woman accused of killing her abusive husband. They contend that, through the use of pseudo-quotes and the blurring of source distinctions, the media recontextualised the defendant’s police interview and portrayed her as a bad woman who had plotted to kill her husband rather than as a victim who had suffered intimate partner violence and had acted in self-defence.

The pervasiveness of the trend of ‘rape victim accusation’ is also examined by Nicci MacLeod in Chapter 8, “The discourse of (re)exploitation: female victims in the legal system”. Her analysis of police-victim interviews shows how turn designs and interactional sequencing of police interrogation patterns can lead to the discrediting of female victims’ accounts. She argues that, consequently, rape victims are blamed unjustly for having contributed to their predicament through their own (in)actions. MacLeod however makes the important observation that whereas some victims themselves report events in ways that can contribute to this, other women demonstrate a more agentive position and challenge the patriarchal constructions of gendered violence by resisting conventional representations of rape when describing their experiences.

Chapter 9, “Language-based discrimination in schools: intersections of gender and sexuality” by Helen Sauntson, scrutinises intersectional gender, sexuality identities and power relations. Using theories of heteronormativity and intersectionality as well as tools of critical discourse analysis, she examines
classroom interaction during Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) lessons at two UK schools. Sauntson rightly argues that linguistic choices function as a form of social practice, which has the potential to include and exclude certain gender and sexual identities and, consequently, perpetuate sexism and homophobia in classroom settings. However, she seems to suggest that the focus on sex as something “risky” and “dangerous” in RSE lessons should be avoided. This is a controversial view, particularly when the age of the students (13–14 years), the key aims of sex education as well as contemporary debates on Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) for minors are taken into consideration.

Caldas-Coulthard’s volume is a much welcome contribution for a number of reasons. It adds to our understanding of discursively mediated gender violence from several perspectives. Its most salient contribution is the attention paid to hitherto understudied dimensions such as the intersection between gender, sexism, ageism and sexuality. Importantly, the critique of the current focus on identity as the fundamental concern for feminist theory can be observed throughout the book. Caldas-Coulthard and Cameron note that although this new turn in feminist linguistics has its strengths, it has also inadvertently marginalised the original concerns of gender, power and patriarchy, despite the fact that women continue to experience sexism in various ways. Indeed, the contributions in this book provide ample evidence that gender unrelentingly creates a hierarchical social system in which men are dominant and women subordinate. Due to the ubiquity of gender, it enables the propagation of sexism in every aspect of our day-to-day experiences. It is for this reason that this volume foregrounds the urgency of interrogating the context-dependent sociopragmatic indices that are often “hidden” in sexist discursive practices. The chapters call for multifarious strategies to identify and combat the varying manifestations of androcentrism. The book provides a comprehensive and insightful overview of previously explored issues as well as novel challenges with corresponding solutions. It would be a worthy addition to the libraries used by students, teachers and researchers of gender across a wide range of disciplines such as linguistics, psychology, sociology, criminology, education, journalism and communication studies.

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