Great divides: sex/gender, power and public language

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In her contribution to the 2003 *Handbook of Language and Gender*, the anthropologist Susan Phillips wrote:

> Men dominate public talk, and not just in village-level politics, and not just in non-western societies. Even if this talk has been influenced backstage by women, whatever is accomplished by its production, in activities conceptualized as public ideologically, men are talking and women are not (258).

This is a strong claim, perhaps stronger than some of us would be happy with, but in context I think it has a particular rhetorical function—reminding a younger generation of scholars influenced by post-modernist and ‘third wave’ feminist ideas that however difficult it is to generalize about the public/private divide on one hand and the behaviour of men and women on the other, however careful we need to be about looking locally and not imposing a single analytic framework on all societies or situations, there is nevertheless a rather consistent pattern of male public dominance, pervasive across cultures and through time, which needs to be acknowledged, investigated and theorized. Since that pattern is part of the apparatus which maintains structurally unequal gender relations—which are also pervasive historically and cross-culturally—feminists of most varieties will probably also agree with Marx that ultimately ‘the point is to change it’.

Phillips evidently felt that the new research paradigm which emerged in language and gender studies in the late 1990s had caused us to lose sight of certain foundational feminist insights. This event is one piece of evidence that they are now back on our agenda. But even if some of our questions are the same ones feminists asked in the 1970s, the context in which we’re asking them is different. So before we hear from speakers who are actually engaged in empirical research, I’d like to say something about the current intellectual, cultural and political context for research and debate on questions of gender and public language.

The title of Phillips’s chapter is ‘The power of gender ideologies in discourse’, but gender ideologies are not only powerful in discourse. Their effects are also felt in the realm of social practice. In relation to gendered speech, one of the key functions of ideological representations is to provide people with explanatory accounts of the patterns which are said to characterise the behaviour of men and women. These accounts are important because of their power to shape the interpretation of behaviour, whatever it may happen to be in any given case, and even in fact to shape what people notice in their own and others’ behaviour.

My own moment of epiphany about this is described in my 1997 article ‘Performing gender identity’, which is the single most cited and most anthologised paper I have ever written.
What people remember about it and like about it is the data—a conversation among five male college students where they essentially gossip about various allegedly gay classmates. That conversation was recorded by one of the participants for a project on all-male conversation, and in his analysis he didn’t even mention the long stretches of talk devoted to gossip. That wasn’t because he was embarrassed by them, nor because he had realized they didn’t fit the argument he wanted to make and decided to pass over them in silence. Talking to him about it later, I realized that he literally hadn’t noticed how prominently personal talk about so-called gay men featured in his data.

Training someone to do linguistic micro-analysis is partly a matter of training them to notice what’s actually in the data instead of reading it through their discursively constructed expectations of what will be or should be in it. In this case, you could say I didn’t do a very good job. But gender is an area where it could be argued that the job is unusually difficult. The ideological discourses are particularly highly elaborated and the expectations they construct are very strong. That’s why I would question what I think has often been tacitly assumed by sociolinguists and discourse analysts, myself at times included: that the most important thing to look at if we want to understand the relationship between language and gender is the choices made by speakers, who are seen as actively engaged in performing gender as one aspect of identity. I think it’s equally important to pay attention to the larger stories about gender which provide people with a frame in which to interpret the behaviour they observe, and indeed a frame for the design of their own performances.

I also think this has become a much more central task for linguists today than it was in the 1970s, because representations of male-female linguistic differences have become much more central to our culture’s prevailing ideology of gender difference itself. Or perhaps I should say ‘sex difference’, because in the last ten years we’ve seen a marked tendency towards biologism, an ideology which presents biological traits as the ultimate explanation for all kinds of social phenomena. Male-female differences in language-use are represented more and more as biologically based, a matter of genes and hormones and the organization of the human brain.

It’s instructive to consider what Susan Phillips had to say about biologism in 2003 (p.255):

The […] patriarchal ideology that received the greatest attention in the women’s movement was the view that women are biologically inferior to men—less intelligent, physically weaker, less aggressive and more emotional. …But this was and is not the only patriarchal gender ideology…Biological differences between women and men are not always involved. Nor is women’s inferiority always asserted. Neither is necessary for a patriarchal gender ideology. What is necessary is that there be a cultural understanding that men should have power and authority over women that women should not have over themselves or men. And some would argue that the more implicit and taken for granted this assumption is, the more powerful it is.

The implication of this passage, written only about ten years ago, is that biologism in the form that confronted early second-wave feminists belongs to the historical past. But Phillips is also saying that this shouldn’t make present-day feminists complacent, because biologism is not the only form that patriarchal ideologies can take. Other forms can be even more insidious. I don’t dispute the general point Phillips is making here. But I’d want to qualify it by making
two other points. First, that biologism is far from being dead and buried. Its return to favour, in both expert and popular discourse, has been one of the most striking developments of the past decade. And second, that there’s a good reason for that. In the kind of culture 21st century westerners inhabit, which is basically secular and gives primacy to scientific knowledge, biologism is far more powerful than any other patriarchal ideology. In fact, I would argue that the form of biologism which has risen to prominence in the last decade is the perfect patriarchal ideology for a post-feminist society. It isn’t the same biologism feminists confronted in 1970, it’s a new biologism which in many respects is actually shaped by the feminism of the last 40 years, and to that extent is more insidious than its more overtly sexist or misogynist predecessors. Its portrayal of the specifically linguistic differences between men and women is particularly important, and revealing, in that respect.

When it comes to language, the new biologism certainly doesn’t say that women are inferior to men. Some versions of it imply that women are linguistically superior, but the line taken explicitly is that the two sexes have differing and complementary verbal abilities, which are expressed in their typical patterns of verbal behaviour. The fact that this is not an overtly misogynist argument, or even patronizing to women in the manner of early commentators like Otto Jespersen, makes it easy to miss the point that it is a patriarchal ideology in Susan Phillips’s sense. It naturalizes and so justifies a social arrangement in which men have power and authority. One of the most significant inequalities it naturalizes is the dominance of men in what Phillips calls ‘activities conceptualized as public ideologically’. In the case of western and western-style societies these would be activities belonging to what is classically described as the public sphere, such as work, politics and religion; in traditional societies without a western-style public/private divide they would be collective ritual and decision-making practices.

At this point I want to take a closer look at how an account of linguistic behaviour as the outcome of biological sex-differences produces an account of public language as naturally and inevitably a male domain. I’m going to focus on a book by one John Locke, called *Duels and Duets: Why Men and Women Talk So Differently*. I’ve chosen it as my central example for several reasons. I don’t want to be accused of giving myself an easy target by addressing myself to a version of the new biologism with no scientific credibility, so I’ve selected an academic book—the author is a professor at CUNY and the publisher is CUP. I also don’t want to be accused of not being up to date with the science, so I’ve chosen a recent book—it was published only last month. And most important of all, I’ve chosen a book which is specifically about language and sex differences. Language is usually an important theme in new biologist writing about sex-differences, but it isn’t often the exclusive focus. In Locke’s book it is.

The first thing to notice about *Duels and Duets* is that the subtitle, ‘why men and women talk so differently’, is a presupposition. Locke doesn’t think he needs to spend any time establishing its validity. Everything he has to say on that score is contained in his very first paragraph, which reads as follows:

Men and women talk differently. We know this because we hear them conversing, and may have witnessed their failures to connect—or experienced these difficulties in our
own relationships. Many of us have also read accounts in the popular press of ‘he-said-she-said’ types of communication breakdowns.

It was at this early stage that I started to wonder: what the hell is an academic press doing publishing this? But let’s bracket that and move on to what Locke thinks the differences are. His book-title sums it up: men do duelling and women do duetting. Men are competitive language-users, women are co-operative ones. Men define themselves against others, as individuals; women want to fit into the group. Men prefer adversarial forms of speech, women are naturally consensus-seeking. I’m sure you’ll all recognize this as more or less the same account Deborah Tannen gave in her 1990 bestseller You Just Don’t Understand. But while Locke makes no secret of his debt to Tannen, he chides her for insisting that the differences she discusses are learned by girls and boys in the course of childhood socialization. By the bottom of page one he is telling us that male-female differences

...are not the ‘gendered’ effects of modern culture but the ‘sexed’ expression of ancient biological dispositions. These dispositions are as different as they are because ancestral men and women competed for the things they needed in two fundamentally different ways. This created separate evolutionary trajectories, endowing the two sexes, in modernity, with unequal bodies and brains, developmental paths and patterns of behavior.

The things early human men and women competed for in fundamentally different ways were essentially sex and status, and the two were interlinked. John Locke, and several other evolutionary scientists who have written on this topic, hypothesize that the main evolutionary benefit of language to the human species was to do with courtship. There are other evolutionary scientists who think the main survival advantage conferred by language was connected to social networking, bonding human groups together and helping them cooperate more effectively. These scientists see courtship display as more of a secondary by-product than the primary purpose for which language evolved. But most of them do agree that language offered a particularly effective means for early human men to display their reproductive fitness, and for early human women to judge what was being displayed. In other species, male courtship displays involve things like bright plumage, large horns and fights with their rivals. But linguistic display has the advantage of showing more than just good health or brute strength. When someone speaks you can assess their intellect and their personal charm—things that matter more to human females than to antelopes and peahens.

In Locke’s argument it’s also relevant that verbal duelling is less costly than the physical variety. A physical contest may result in death or serious injury, but a verbal duel establishes the winner’s superiority without inflicting that kind of damage. The classic verbal duel is a competition for status between men, watched by women who will use what they see and hear to decide who they want to mate with. Women themselves don’t duel because there’s no reason for them to do so. Their role is to choose mates, not court them, so they’re the audience rather than the performers. The kind of linguistic behaviour that best serves their reproductive needs is not duelling but duetting—collaborative, affiliative talk with other women.
Locke and other evolutionary scientists offer several reasons why early human women needed to bond with each other to maximize their reproductive success, which you’ll remember is defined in modern Darwinian theory by the survival of an individual’s genes when they are passed on to offspring. For females, reproductive success is not primarily about how often they mate. Whereas in theory men can father an almost infinite number of children, women can only get pregnant a certain number of times no matter how much sex they have. For them, therefore reproductive success is partly about choosing the best possible mate, one who has good genes and will provide for his offspring, but it’s also about how good a job women themselves do of keeping their offspring alive through pregnancy, birth and infancy. For that, the evolutionists reason, women need help from one another.

First of all, women need each other to keep men in line. One to one conflicts between men and women will always favour the bigger, stronger guy, but if the women gang up they will have more chance of forcing rogue men to discharge their paternal responsibilities. Second, when times are hard and men are unreliable, women need strong female support networks to stop their children starving. Third, women need help from other women with childbirth itself. Thanks to the human habit of walking upright, our evolved pelvic anatomy can barely accommodate the head of a full term baby, so giving birth is more difficult and dangerous for us than for other primates. An additional point is that the same cooperative and empathetic verbal skills which enable women to bond effectively with each other also make them better at nurturing children. Some theorists think that the mother-child bond is the primary reason why women came to specialize in empathetic and cooperative speech, though it is helpful for other relationships as well. In any case, both sets of theorists agree that these skills would have been less well developed in males, whose most important roles in early human society were hunting and fighting—activities for which high levels of empathy are the opposite of an advantage.

I’m sure you’ve already spotted how this story can be used to explain men’s dominance of public language in modern conditions. Both formally and functionally, public speech is imagined as a kind of duelling, display-oriented and fundamentally adversarial. Since according to the evolutionary account that is the kind of verbal behaviour men are hard-wired for, they are bound to be the dominant exponents of it. They will choose to engage in public speech more often than women, and they will usually be better at it than women. Furthermore, this state of affairs will be accepted by most women: their under-representation in public speaking roles is not because they’re suffering from discrimination, it’s simply because duelling does not suit their natural aptitudes and preferences. As evidence for this argument, Locke considers the gender composition of entrants to the National Debate Tournament which is held each year in the US. In 1984, 85% of participants in this contest were male: the organizers thought this was unsatisfactory, and a vigorous campaign was started to get more women to participate. Ten years later, female participation had increased by less than 10%. Also, the females did less well than the males: in proportion to their numbers they lost significantly more frequently. Locke also points out that women are far more likely than men to report themselves as suffering from ‘speech anxiety’, a recognized psychological condition characterized by fear of speaking in public to strangers. One Canadian survey found that 70% of the women sampled reported speech anxiety, compared to 30% of the men.
There are, of course, a large number of possible explanations for these statistics, many of which have nothing to do with biology, but Locke is in no doubt what the best explanation is. He says (p.57):

Little in the evolutionary history of women inclines them to engage in protracted verbal disputation in a large open space before an audience. Egalitarian at heart, and free of any specific grievances, little would dispose women to sign up for an experience that involves openly adversarial behaviour in a public arena—one in which their performance will be evaluated and scored. Indeed...this is exactly the opposite of what is clearly a species-long preference of females to deal with rivals privately, indirectly and cooperatively.

So, if women today are not the world’s most celebrated preachers, political orators and inspirational business leaders, if they score lower in debating contests and are more likely than men to report a fear of public speaking, that is only to be expected: the verbal skills required by the modern public sphere were not anticipated by women’s roles in the nomadic foraging societies of the Pleistocene era, when the genetic blueprint for the species was laid down in perpetuity.

Politics aside, you might well be thinking that this is not the most scientifically convincing argument you’ve ever heard, and if you are thinking that I would agree with you. It depends on flawed logic, and ignores a great deal of relevant evidence from modern speech communities, while relying on claims about early human life and language-use which are pure speculation, unsupported by any direct evidence at all. These obvious objections make it all the more remarkable that this general line of argument is currently so influential both in science and in popular culture. Locke found it pretty easy to get the media interested in his book: I know this because I received no fewer than three invitations from the BBC to come on the radio and debate with him. I declined them all, because I’ve done this kind of thing many times in the past few years, and I’ve come to understand that the media’s frame for this kind of discussion is essentially the new biologists’ own frame. The line of questioning always presupposes that their account has the status of truth, that for feminists this is an inconvenient truth, and that what you need to explain as the token feminist critic is how you justify clinging onto your old-fashioned unscientific ideas. At an event like today’s, the frame is the opposite: we can treat arguments like Locke’s as essentially irrelevant to what we think is interesting and important. But if our work is supposed to have some purchase on the world beyond this room, it isn’t so easy to treat biologism as irrelevant.

I spend a lot of time talking about language and gender to various kinds of audiences, many of them outside the academy, and in the past four years I cannot recall a single occasion when I haven’t been asked a question along the lines of, ‘but aren’t there biological differences that we simply have to live with, because there’s nothing we can do about them?’ Often, the questioner explicitly identifies him or herself as a believer in gender equality, but what he or she is saying is exactly what people like Locke are telling us: we used to think equality was achievable, but now science has shown us that it isn’t. You may have noticed that in one of the passages I quoted earlier, Locke talks about men and women having ‘unequal bodies and brains’. He can use the word ‘unequal’ in such an unsselfconscious way, without apparently
worrying that his readers might find it offensive, because in this discourse inequality is no longer a political concept. From this perspective, it is unnecessary and pointless to worry about something like women’s participation in public speech. We should recognize male dominance in this area as a fact of nature, not a form of social injustice; and where there is no injustice, there need be no remedy.

Generally speaking, feminists since the onset of the second wave have proposed two main remedies for the perceived injustice of men’s public linguistic dominance. One was based on a combination of the deficit and dominance approaches to language and gender. It called for women to cultivate the skills and dispositions which so many of them lacked because of their socialization in and for patriarchal society. The classic expression of this argument was in feminist assertiveness training, but something like it remains quite a common approach for mainstream political and professional institutions pursuing an equalities agenda. As recently as last year I went to an event sponsored by the Camden Women Speakers’ Union with input from all the main political parties which was still giving women the message, ‘You’re not getting selected because you don’t have the right speaking skills, but don’t despair, with more training and mentoring you can learn them’. The new biologism destabilizes that message, however, by suggesting that in fact most women can’t and don’t want to learn to duel.

The other feminist remedy is based on a ‘difference’ approach which accepts that there really are profound differences between men and women, and that women do not enjoy or excel in verbal duelling. On that basis it is argued that what needs to change is not women’s behaviour, but the linguistic norms of public discourse. There is a longstanding feminist argument that you can have an effective public sphere which is not organized around adversarial verbal display; in some versions of the argument, the only reason why it has been organized in that way is because of the historical fact of male dominance. If we now find that unacceptable, we should be aiming to shift towards a more cooperative and consensual style of public language, which would be more hospitable to women’s participation. But although this view is less obviously incompatible with it, I think it is also subtly destabilized by the new biologism. The ‘difference’ remedy is based on a kind of strategic gender essentialism, an assertion of women’s collective difference from men, which some feminists, me included, have always found problematic; but arguably the rise of the new biologism makes it more problematic than it was before. In today’s ideological landscape it is hard to differentiate what used to be referred to as a feminist ‘critical difference’ position from the uncritical and reactionary biological determinism exemplified by people like John Locke.

I’m saying, then, that the resurgence of biologism has thrown up new challenges to established feminist positions on the issue of gender and public language, as well as encouraging more complacency about it among those who are not committed feminists. It offers a powerful story explaining why certain things are the way they are, will always be the way they are, and are basically OK the way they are. As I said earlier, I think it’s a story which is particularly well suited to the sensibilities of a post-feminist era: it addresses anxieties about the legacy of recent social and political change by suggesting that change has natural and insurmountable limits, but without attacking the basic feminist principles which are taken for granted now in a way they weren’t taken for granted before the second wave—for instance, that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities, and that women are not
simply inferior to men. The story may be flimsy scientifically, but ideologically it's been very effective. And the question I want to end with is whether we've got a story capable of competing with it. If the old stories no longer fit the bill, what should we be putting in their place?