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ABSTRACT

Serious and systematic exploration of the differences between the language of women and men has come only since the late 1960s, and to date little research has questioned whether and how works of literature reflect the reality described by linguists. One such informal examination was conducted in conjunction with a "Women's Language and Literature" course at the University of Tennessee where students examined the texts of two plays, "The Little Foxes" (1939) and "Another Part of the Forest" (1946). Their detailed analysis provided strong evidence that dramatic literature is a rich source of information to test the hypothesis that language shows men have power and superiority, whereas women are often defined as passive, inferior and invisible. (Contains 14 references.) (NH)

WOMEN'S LANGUAGE IN LITERATURE:

LANGUAGE AND NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION AS REFLECTORS OF POWER IN TWO PLAYS BY LILLIAN HELLMAN*

by

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with the assistance of

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We are now thankfully past the period of time when it had to be demonstrated over and over again that (1) there are differences between the language of women and the language of men, (2) those differences have little or nothing to do with biology, and (3) the implications of the differences are crucial for understanding the relations between the sexes. Most of the research and writing which put us beyond that period are relatively recent. Though interest in the topic of women's language dates back to at least 1664, the year of a report citing different women's and men's forms in the speech of the Carib people (Jesperson 1922:237 ff.), the serious and systematic exploration of the topic has come only since the late 1960s. Mary Ritchie Key has been teaching a course on

"Linguistic Behavior of Male and Female" at the University of California, Irvine, since 1969, and many other professors have taught similar ones. Three authors have been circulating material in mimeographed form since at least 1973, and as of this writing there are four books available on the subject of women's language (Henley and Thorne 1975, Key 1975, Lakoff 1975, and Thorne and Henley 1975), one book in press (Miller and Swift 1976), and one dictionary (Todasco et al. 1973).

Even within this short period of time, enough serious research has been going on that we have already seen in journal articles reports on empirical testing of some early hypotheses. The December 1975 issue of Language in Society saw, for example, the publication of Dubois and Crouch's investigation of

> Lakoff's dual claim that women use tag questions in more conversational situations than do men and that such questions signify an avoidance of commitment, causing the speaker 'to give the impression of not really being sure of himself, of looking to the addressee for confirmation, even of having no views of his own.'" (p. 289).

The result of their finding, "that in...at least one genuine social context, men did, and women did not use tag questions, both formal and informal" (p. 289) and that, therefore, Lakoff's claim is open to serious doubt," (p. 289) is less important than the fact that they conducted empirical testing of an hypothesis offered earlier. (Their entire article is sometimes regarded as a hearty corrective to what many have objected to as Lakoff's introspective investigative method coupled with "asystematic, uncontrolled, and unverifiable observation of such others as happened into her hearing" (? p. 289).)

To date, however, little research has been done on the question of whether and how works of literature reflect the reality described by linguists. This paper reports the informal results of such an examination, one conducted in conjunction with a course taught by Bethany K. Dumas at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville during the Winter quarter of 1976. Titled "Women's Language in Literature," it offered undergraduate students an opportunity to become familiar with current research on women's language, then to explore the question, "How well do works of belles lettres reflect linguistic reality where women's language is concerned?" The instructor offered the following rationale for examining the language used by and about women, as it is different from that used by and about men, and the non-verbal communication of women as it is different from that of men:

1. In order for us to deal with other human beings in any systematic and comfortable way they must behave in a predictable manner. In turn we must behave predictably if we are to comprehend ourselves much less be predictable to them. Being in some manner predictable constitutes the sine qua non of sanity and humanity. However, it must be kept in mind that, while communication is necessary for life, all people who do do not communicate precisely as we do not immediately die. As we grow up, we learn that it is possible, if not necessary, to learn how to translate those differences.

   As we grow up, we may become so sophisticated as to realize that the other man's language is just as natural as ours. If we are to live in a complex society, we must learn that even within a language, within a given communication system, people from different regions of the country and with subcultural backgrounds different from ours do not communicate exactly like us. To successfully operate we must internalize the fact that there are systematic variations in the way in which a child, or an adolescent, or an aged person engages in communication. A few even become so

sophisticated as to realize that there can be imperfect understanding between male and female. As we mature, we become socialized. This is just another way of saying that we learn that many of the differences in the way in which people communicate of respond to our communication reveal the differences between their roles, their social position and activity, and ours. (Emphasis mine.) (Birdwhistell 1969:14-15)

2. One of the most important things about human language is that it serves as the medium for literature. The literary tradition of a community, in turn, is a vital mechanism in the training of the young in culturally approved attitudes and patterns of behavior; it serves to transmit the moral fibre of the community form one generation to the next. (Hockett 1958:564-5)

Students in the course read extensively for four weeks, then developed topics for research in accord with this restriction; in order to lessen the number of variables present in the works of literature being examined, it was decided to use for analysis only prose fiction and drama written by authors from the southern United States between 1925 and 1955. This locale and period of time were chosen (1) because the area and time produced an unusually well-balanced number of excellent female and male writers, (2) because most of the student in the class were familiar with the culture of the region, and (3) because the social structure being dealt with in most of the literature permitted a comparison of members of the dominant class, white males, with members of two subordinate groups, blacks and females.

Four students--Jeff Austin, Mary Peterson, Kathleen Ward and Rita Wilder--chose to work with Lillian Hellman's two plays, "The Little Foxes" (1939) and "Another Part of the Forest" (1946). Their analysis provided strong evidence that dramatic literature is a rich source of information on the question, of how well

works of belles lettres reflect linguistic reality where women's language is concerned. Most striking was their finding that language functions to reflect power in the plays. These particular plays lent themselves well to an examination of patterns of dominance, for both are concerned with on-going power struggles within an extended family, the Hubbards of Bowden, Alabama.

In "Another Part of the Forest," written second, but set first chronologically, members of the Hubbard family in 1880 vie for control of the family money made by Marcus, the father, who sold salt at $8 a bag during the Civil War. Marcus loses control of the family when his wife Lavinia reveals to their older son Ben that Marcus inadvertently sent 27 Confederate soldiers to their deaths when he led Union troops to the camp where he was selling the salt. To cover himself, he had purchased passes proving he could not have been responsible. Once Ben has this information, he takes over the family money and his siblings, Regina and Oscar, for both of whom he arranges marriages which will benefit the family.

In "The Little Foxes," set twenty years later, we see the results of the loveless unions arranged by Ben. Oscar has been married off to Birdie Bagtry, in order that the Hubbards may acquire Lionnet, the Bagtry plantation, while Regina has been married off to Horace Giddens, an ailing and relatively unambitious banker who declines to invest his money with the Hubbards.

Students examined the texts of the plays in order the test the hypothesis that language shows that men have power and superiority, whereas women are defined as "Other," often as passive, inferior or invisible (Toth 1971). In these two plays, there are many striking differences in language use between that used

by the two men Marcus and Oscar, on the one hand, and that used by two of the women, Lavinia and Birdie, on the other. In fact, the language used by the characters mirrors their relative positions in the family power structure. Marcus and Oscar use language and nonverbal communication to control the actions of their wives. Birdie and Lavinia react to orders and threats, but exert almost no influence upon their husbands' behavior. This pattern is particularly compelling in the case of Birdie; she is the only aristocrat in the play, yet she is overruled on all points. As Ben says early in "The Little Foxes," about the Bagtry family, "Twenty years ago we took over their land, their cotton, and their daughter." Throughout the plays, Lavinia and Birdie are treated as children, belittled, or just dimply ignored, while Marcus and Oscar command, ridicule, insult, and ignore their wives.

In one scene, Birdie sends a servant to get a music album requested by the visiting Mr. Marshall. When Oscar learns that she has done this, he interrupts the conversation between Birdie and Mr. Marshall, cancels Birdie's direct order to the servant, then orders Birdie to "get herself in hand." He further accuses her of "chattering to [Mr. Marshall] like a magpie." The conversation concludes with Oscar's giving an order, "Sit down, Birdie."

One test of the degree to which language mirrors position in the power structure is suggested by changes in Lavinia's speech patterns as "Another Part of the Forest" progresses. Early in the play, Lavinia is submissive and apologetic. The change is signalled by her response to Ben's order to "call Papa." She replies, "Oh, I couldn't do that. I never have---." Ben then tells her that she can do it, that she can do a lot of things she's never done. She does "call Papa," and in the

course of the ensuing conversation speaks far more honestly and strongly to Marcus that she has done earlier in the play. At one point, when Marcus suggests that their marriage had started out well, she is even able to contradict him, saying "No, I don't really think it started out well. No, I can't say I do." Such an utterance on her part would have been unthinkable earlier in the play. But even here it is important to note that Lavinia's new strength comes not from her own efforts but from alliance with a powerful male.

A detailed examination of the language used by these four characters shows clearly that some of the hypotheses set forward by researchers are supported by the language of the characters in the two plays. Women use tag questions, qualifiers, and polite forms far more often than do men; women choose weak expletives like "Oh" over strong expletives; and women engage in these linguistic practices at times with such naive awareness of what they are doing that they seem indeed "damned if they do and damned if they don't" (Lakoff). When Birdie approaches Ben about a loan, she apologizes for disturbing him: "Oh, I said that before, It's not good manners to take up all your time, now is it? Oh, and I'm doing that again, too. Mama says I say everything in a question. Oh." (p.)

Regina shows in an obvious and vivid way the effect that power and high caste can have upon language. Regina is the most powerful woman in the plays. In "Another Part of the Forest," Regina's power derives from her relationship with her father, whose purse strings she controls. Later, in "The Little Foxes," Regina uses money belonging to another male, her husband, in order to achieve financial, hence social, superiority over her brothers. She knows the power which results

from financial independence. She steps outside the boundaries designated for the lady and competes on the same level as the males by skillfully using their own language.

Regina becomes, in patriarchal terms, the castrating bitch, "a malicious spiteful, domineering women." (???) Her actions and words are regarded by her brothers as selfish and cruel. Ben, who seeks total control for himself, characterizes her thus: "Greedy! What a greedy girl you are! You want so much of everything." (p. 195) He often tells Regina that she would go further by smiling more: "Learn to make threats when you can carry them through. For how many years have I told you a good-looking woman gets more by being soft and appealing? Mama used to tell you that." (p. 195) He tells her, in other words, to "[b]e the submissive young lady you ought to be and leave matters of importance, like business, to the men." (p.) But she can deviate from "talking like a lady" because her social position and economic power protect her from ostracism.

Regina knows how to talk like a lady when the situation calls for it. But she uses more assertive and definite language, which is used by most males, when she wants to be taken seriously. Regina appears to be an example of a women who can, according to Lakoff, switch back and forth between women's language and a "neutral language," depending upon what is appropriate.

Regina's language becomes more assertive and definite when she is talking to males. She uses few qualifiers, no apologies and strong expletives. She states her needs explicitly, especially when talking to her brothers:

Regina. You will come back in this room and sit down. I have something

more to say.
Ben (turns, comes toward her). Since when do I take orders from you?
Regina (smiles) You don't yet. (Sharply) Come back, Oscar. You too, Leo. (p. 194)

These words come from Regina when she knows that she has defeated her brothers in the financial game. At that point she is free to give direct orders.

Regina sometimes directly expresses her anger to John Bagtry, her lover.

Regina (tensely). I'm getting sick of them. They've got to know about you and me someday soon. I think I'm going to sashay right up on that sacred plantation grass and tell them the war's over, the old times are finished, and so are they. I'm going to tell them to stay out of my way-p.331

Regina appears to knows what she wants. When she is talking with males over whome she has power, financial or sexual, she uses language directly to attempt to get what she wants. Her words lack any sense of submission. In male terms, "she's pushy."

But when Regina talks to Marcus, her father, her speech resembles that of Birdie and Lavinia:

Regina (softly). Course I don't know anything about business, Papa, but could I say something, please? I've been kind of lonely here with nobody nice having much to do with us. I'd sort of like to know people of my own age, a girl my own age, I mean," (p. 349).

In contrast with her style of speaking with her brothers, Regina politely asks for permission to speak. Then she qualifies her words with "kind of" and "sort of." Like a true "lady," she feigns ignorance about the male world of business. Yet it is quite obvious from conversations with her brothers that she has a superb

understanding of business. She knows how Marcus expects her to act. Thus, she plays her part in return for money and power over her brothers.

In Regina's conversations with Bagtry, the submissive language forms are mixed up with the more assertive ones. For example, Regina "pleadingly" and "softly" says, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I give you my apology. I'm sorry darling...I'm never going to be mean again never going to talk mean-Look, honey, I was mad about last night because I wanted to tell you about my plan." (p. 331) Here she uses apologetic and non-threatening language. She even employs the typically feminine terms of address, "honey" and "darling."

Yet in the same conversation she curses what she calls Bagtry's "damn war" and demands to know why he did not meet her the preceding night. Such a mixing of submissive and assertive, even aggressive styles suggests that Regina may feel ambivalence both about the relationship and about her position in society. John Bagtry is a man who can give her affection and emotional security; therefore, he must be dealt with carefully. And his anger tells her that she must back off and use a softer, "feminine" approach.

The character in the play who most strikingly departs from stereotypical women's language is the prostitute Laurette. As a whore she has lost social status and no longer has a prestigious image to maintain. She can say what she wants because she has nothing to gain or lose. Unlike the other women in the play, she occupies a position in which her economic security does not depend upon a relationship with an individual male.

Laurette departs from "lady-like" language in at least three ways. First, she

uses non-standard vocabulary items. Her favorite expletive is the child-like, "squee." Second, she states her negative opinions of males explicitly. For instance, after Marcus insults Oscar, Laurette says to Marcus: "No animal would talk about their son that way. I heard tales about you ever since I was born, but...you old bastard." (p. 371) And she uses non-standard grammar, e.g., ain't. As a social outcast Laurette has the "freedom" to express herself honestly and aggressively. Of course, the cost to her is high--she lacks the power to make others pay attention to what she says. She may give orders, but she is not obeyed.

Further, Laurette knows women's language and uses it when it is necessary to attain her ends. At one point, she says to Oscar, "Sometimes you bring out the worst in my nature, Oskie, and make me talk foolish. Squee, it's the truth-I am a little twitchy about coming here and meeting your folks. I ain't been in a place like this before...(Pats him) All right, I'll be very good and nice. I would like to go to New Orleans." (p. 362) She apologizes for her words and actions and promises to be the "girl" he wants her to be. Interestingly, her use of women's language begins when she realizes that she must play her cards right in order to get Oscie's money and a trip to New Orleans.

In summary, Lavinia and Birdie speak as ladies must. Not only does their social code prohibit strong statements and opinions for them, but their husbands make it impossible. And because their existence and social standing depend upon their "father-husbands", they must tread softly with their heads bowed.

But Regina has the social standing and personal financial power to

manipulate the language to her advantage. To her father she is the beautiful young lady. And the language she uses with him reenforces this image. But to her brothers she is the scheming competitor who knows their language.

And Laurette has the opportunity to speak in whatever way she likes because she has no power. She is not seeking approval from one man in order to get room and board. Nor is she trying to maintain a certain prestigious social position because she is at rock bottom. Thus she can speak bluntly and decisively because no one would expect a whore to speak any other way.

Such patterns resulting from male dominance and female schizophrenia are illustrated by nonverbal behavior as well. The stage directions for laughter, for instance, as well as those for smiling, rising (usually done by husbands as a threatening gesture toward wives), and touching reveal differences in behavior which correlate with positions of power which, in turn coincide with sex role. On the basis of our examination of selected works of literature we feel that women's language can be profitably examined in works of literature.

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