

SOME REFLECTIONS ON IDEAS AND RESULTS OF FEMINIST LINGUISTICS

A. I. DORODNYKH and A. P. MARTYNIUK

University of Kharkov

The feminist trend in western linguistics is an interesting phenomenon reflecting some non-marxist interpretations of the dichotomies "language and thought" and "language and society", the most popular being the so called Sapir-Worf linguistic relativity principle and the Bernstein language deficiency hypothesis.

The feminists slightly bend Worfian ideas (Worf 1964) to prove that language was made by men and is now used as an instrument of social oppression of women. Working on the assumption that language can influence social relations (Bernstein 1962) some representatives of the more extreme fringe in the feminist movement advocate a number of sweeping measures to rework the traditional forms to create women-centred language and thereby eliminate social injustice to women (Spender 1980).

Such ideas cannot be dismissed as amateurish. They are consonant with some philosophical concepts, for instance, those of J. Habermas (1969), who believes that removal of the possibility of communication failure between members of different social groups could be a way to social harmony.

On the one hand, the feminist movement has agitated some lexicological problems. One of them is the question of desemantization of "-man", and "-woman" as elements of words like "chairman", "charwoman", etc. Until recently these elements have been treated as suffixes, but the emergence of "chairperson", "salesperson", etc. (as well as the use of "salesman" and "saleswoman") and at least one known attempt to change the name "Cooperman" to "Cooperperson" make one think again. The writers and speakers who use "chairperson", "salesperson" and the like seem to be conscious of "-man" and "-woman" as words, retaining their original meanings. Besides, the

feminists argue that subjects in experiments associate "chairman" and similar words with males and not females.

On the other hand, there might be doubts as to the prospects for the new type of word-formation with the help of the element "-person" for at least to some people it is a "barbarous neologism" (Miller and Swift 1979). The suggestion to use words like "chairperson" shows that there is a lack of agreement among feminists because many of them started by complaining about the absence of female gender counterparts for "doctor", "writer", "lawyer", etc., claimed to be predominantly associated with males (Mackay 1983:43).

There is an inconsistency here: some feminists claim that English is a patriarchal language making women socially invisible through the use of the names of professions associated with males and therefore imply that there is a need for names referring to females in these professions. Others call for a unisex language free of sex-marking words.

One gets the impression that some feminists see language as text. It is true that texts can be edited, but language is not likely to be altered by a social group, the less so within a short spell of time.

Such ideas are both utopian and pernicious as language plays a significant role in the shaping of human consciousness and the power of words is greatest on the level of common sense operating with elementary concepts and popular ideas. Therefore, moves for language reforms substitute secondary causes for major ones and may distract the people from the struggle for social change.

Let us now have a closer look at the linguistic aspect of feminists' work.

One major methodological error of the feminists is lack of discrimination between language and the use of language units in speech. Language serves all social classes equally well and cannot by itself be an instrument of social oppression. Speech may have distinct class colouring because individuals participating in a particular act of communication have social characteristics, such as the level of education, social status, social roles, etc., which are in the long run determined by the individual's relation to the means of production. The choice of language means and pragmatic connotations which individuals ascribe to them depend on their communicative intentions and goals. The goal of communication can be understood in a narrow sense as elicitation of some verbal or non-verbal reaction, or, in a broader sense, as ideological influence (Rapoport 1962). Consequently, in the broader sense communication goals can be determined by the social position of the individual. For power groups communication goals, besides many others, can be manipulation of the minds of ordinary people and the camouflaging of various forms of social oppression via language means. To illustrate the latter one can mention a case where a U.S. federal court found a major airline guilty of discrimination against its female flight attendants: by calling women 'stewardesses' and calling men

doing the identical job "pursers" the company had camouflaged unequal pay and promotion schedules (Miller and Swift 1975:161).

Despite the flaws in their methodology interactionists and feminists have uncovered a number of laws underlying verbal behaviour. For example, American feminists have traced certain differences in female and male speech behaviour patterns which often cause conversation failure. One of them is that minimal responses of American females have mainly contact functions while the similarly structured male responses signify agreement. Unaware of this difference males often think that females do not have or, perhaps, withhold their opinions while females consider their male listeners inattentive or impolite (Maltz & Borker 1982).

It should be noted that in the Soviet Union interest in sex role differentiation is rather recent and has so far been actively displayed only by social psychologists.

The Soviet experience will undoubtedly be of interest because in this country we have the longest record of constitutionally guaranteed equality of men and women. The emancipation of women has resulted in a parallel existence of the traditional sex role stereotypes and of new patterns of behaviour. According to the findings of Soviet psychologists a significant number of women display behavioural patterns characteristic of the traditional male stereotype (Kon 1982:80). It appears that the percentage of females with predominantly male stereotype characteristics is much higher than that of males with female stereotype characteristics. (Kagan 1984:111).

If one is consistent in one's simplistic approach to the relations between language and social phenomena, one should expect that the near elimination of sex-based division of labour and complete sex equality must result in the elimination of sex differentiation in verbal behaviour.

In this paper we report some results of pilot experiments in a rural western area of the Ukraine.

One experiment involved 50 Ukrainian speaking girls and 22 boys in their last year at school. They were asked to respond to 10 situations in a questionnaire designed to elicit information on some points of grammar and vocabulary.

When asked what they thought was the most prestigious and the least prestigious trade or profession the girls named 32 of the former and 29 of the latter. All the 32 prestigious professions were represented by nouns of the masculine gender and the least prestigious — by 11 nouns of the masculine and 18 of the feminine gender. When asked to name the trade or profession of their choice the girls responded with 38 nouns of the masculine gender and only 6 nouns of the feminine gender. When speaking about the most prestigious or the trades and professions of their preference the girls used the masculine gender even with nouns admitting of the feminine gender, for

instance: вчитель (teacher), телефоніст (telephone operator), художник (painter), кранівник (crane operator).

The boys used only one noun in the feminine to name an unprestigious job — прибиральниця (cleaner), the rest of the responses contained masculine nouns.

On the one hand, this is to some extent consonant with statements by western feminists that the names of prestigious trades and professions in English, for example, are associated mainly with males and the unprestigious with females. On the other hand, clearly even in Russian, which has a grammatical category of gender, feminine nouns are the marked forms, while masculine nouns can be used to refer both to men and women, and, therefore, tend to behave as unmarked forms. Another point: some nouns (most of them borrowed from other languages) in Russian can have feminine gender markers but then they acquire derogating connotations or are used only colloquially or in substandard speech. For instance, to show one's respect one would say Вона хороший лікар but not Вона хороша лікарка for "She is a good doctor" (the same holds for formal interactions). It is generally known that in the Soviet Union women are a majority in this highly prestigious profession. These and other data point to the fact that even more open areas of language such as the lexical system are not directly affected by social change.

In four situations the informants were to make requests. It should be pointed out that on average the girls used more polite forms of request which agrees with one of the feminine stereotype characteristics. Interestingly enough, both boys and girls used more polite forms when addressing a person of the opposite sex, which confirms the pragmatic observation about the distancing function of the more polite forms. On the other hand, when confronted with the situation where a person spills his or her soup onto one's uniform in the school dining room, the informants showed another pattern. Although boys on the whole used more rude expressions than the girls, they showed more politeness if the perpetrator was a girl. With the girls it was quite the opposite — they were more aggressive if the perpetrator was a boy.

In the other experiment the field worker selected 3 girls and 3 boys of school-leaving age and left them to chat while the cassette recorder was switched on. The purpose was to compare the data on interactional strategies of Ukrainian males and females with some American data (Fishman 1983).

The boys in the Ukrainian experiment used more utterances than the girls. Unlike the females in the P. Fishman experiment, the Ukrainian girls did not differ significantly from the boys in the number of questions, nor in the number and function of the minimal responses. As for topic initiation, the Ukrainian girls made 26 moves, and the boys 21, while the share of unsuccessful topic initiation moves with the girls was only slightly higher than with the boys (15% against 9.5%).

There was no difference in the relative frequency of interruptions of the conversationists of the opposite sex. Both the boys and the girls interrupted the speakers of the same sex less than the speakers of the opposite sex.

The length of recorded conversation is much smaller in our case, and the ages and degrees of intimacy of the participants are different from those in the English language experiment reported by P. Fishman, yet on the strength of these results it would not be far-fetched to say that changes in the social position of the sexes are followed by changes in their interactional behaviour.

Nevertheless, our personal interactional experience suggests that certain differences are persistent enough. Men in Russia and in the Ukraine, like men in the English speaking world, ask questions to get information and not just to start a conversation or to keep it going. Even in our experiment the boys differed from the girls in that they used more straight declarations of fact and expressed their opinion or volunteered advice more often than the girls while the girls used more expressions of emotion. We might tentatively suggest that the more persistent differences should be explained by the fact that even in case of equality of sexes there still remain certain differences in their socio-economic, hence communicative roles, which stem from the physiological and psychological differences between males and females. Due to the nature and functions of language it can respond to social changes only with a considerable lag in time. On the other hand, verbal behaviour is more susceptible to social differentiation or social change.

The principles underlying interpersonal contacts are apparently the same for all humans. The knowledge of such principles is naturally not sufficient for changing society, but dissemination of this kind of knowledge can promote better understanding between individuals of the same sex or of the opposite sexes engaged in all sorts of joint activity and facilitate interpersonal contacts between representatives of different social groups, and groups and individuals with different ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

REFERENCES

- Allen, H. B. (ed.). 1964. *Applied English linguistics*. N. Y.: Appleton Century Crofts.
- Bernstein, B. B. 1962. "Linguistic codes, hesitation phenomena and intelligence". *Language and Speech* 5. 31-46.
- Fishman, P. M. 1983. "Interaction: the work women do". In Thorne, B. et al. (eds). 1983. 89-103.
- Gumperz, J. (ed.). 1982. *Language and social identity*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Habermas, J. 1979. *Communication and the evolution of society*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Hayakawa, S. I. (ed.). 1962. *The use and misuse of language*. Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett.
- Hippenreiter, Yu. B. and Romanov, V. Ya. (eds). 1982. *Psychologia individual'nich razlichii*. Moskva: Izdatel'stvo Moskovskogo Universiteta.
- Kagan, V. 1984. "Poloviye aspekti individual'nosti". *Psychologia problemi individual'nosti* 2. 109-12.

- Kon, J. 1982. "Psychologia polovich razlichii". In Hippenreiter, Yu. B. and Romanov, V. Ya. (eds). 1982. 78-84.
- MacKay, D. 1983. "Prescriptive grammar and the pronoun problem". In Thorne, B. et al. (eds). 1983. 38-54.
- Maltz, D. N. and Borker, R. A. 1982. "A cultural approach to male-female miscommunication". In Gumperz, J. (ed.). 1982. 196-216.
- Miller, C. and Swift, K. 1975. *Words and women: language and the sexes*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Rapoport, A. 1962. "What is semantics". In Hayakawa, S. I. (ed.). 1962. 11-25.
- Spender, D. 1980. *Man made language*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Thorne, B., Kramarae, Ch. and Henley, N. (eds). 1983. *Language, gender and society*. Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House.
- Worf, B. L. 1964. "Science and Linguistics". In Allen, H. B. (ed.). 1964. 58-69.