

Keynote 1:

Beyond Sexism: Why Journalists Always Write about Women's Hair and Clothes – and Probably Always Will

Deborah Tannen, Georgetown University

It has long been observed and decried that articles about women in public life frequently lead with descriptions of their clothes and hair. The focus on appearance, so obviously irrelevant to women's public roles and professional accomplishments, is maddening. Equally maddening is that this destructive and sexist practice has persisted despite many other advances, including a significant increase in the number of journalists who are women. This practice persists not only because women continue to be judged by appearance far more than men, but also because a journalist's job is to communicate as much information about a subject as possible in as few words as possible. A woman must choose a style of clothing and hair from such a vast range of options that any choice she makes says something about her. In other words, a woman's style of dress and hair is always marked, in the linguistic sense of markedness. The one choice a woman does not have is the choice most men make: to be unmarked – that is, to choose a style that is neutral and therefore says nothing about him. When a man's choices are marked, they are also described, as when articles about the Greek finance minister Yanis Varoufakis mentioned both his hair (“a buzz-cut head”) and his clothes (for example, when he met the British chancellor of the Exchequer wearing “a leather jacket, an untucked blue shirt and black slacks”). Indeed, the tendency of Varoufakis and other Syriza officials to avoid wearing neckties made headlines, and became the basis for interpreting their politics. Drawing on examples from public figures as well as my research on mother-daughter conversations, I examine the societal dynamics that explain why these patterns persist, as well as their unfortunate consequences.

Keynote2:

Feminist Linguistics as Entertainment

Luise F. Pusch

“The more important a thing is, the more it must be treated with humor,” observed Heinrich Heine. I took this advice to heart years ago; it just seemed to make sense. After all, there is – in my opinion – no more important topic in linguistics than the feminist critique of language. It was also easy advice to follow, since the German Male Language lends itself superbly to satire. Before I began my work in this area, however, hardly anyone had noticed this fact. Unfortunately, my male colleagues were neither amused at nor appreciative of my discovery, and so it has remained to the present day.

I have been lecturing on feminist language criticism throughout German-speaking Europe for 35 years now. Because it is a very complex and challenging subject, I tried from the very beginning to keep my audiences in good humor by including short satirical pieces along with the more scholarly analyses. Many audience members have confided to me over the years that they really only attend in order to hear these “Glossen” – and some recommended that I write only such texts in the future. 35 years ago there were very few besides myself who dealt with feminist topics in satirical as well as scholarly fashion. And so I was sought out more and more frequently as stand-up comic and all-

purpose feminist by “Frauenbeauftragten” (women’s affairs officers of universities, cities, organizations, etc.) who were desperately trying to introduce their clientele to feminism without the cliché of “Verbissenheit,” or grim seriousness.

For the Symposium “Gender_Language_Politics” I’ll read a selection from my – by now around 500 – “Glossen,” half of them in German, half in English. The German ones tackle sexism in the grammar and vocabulary of the German language. The English ones critique sexist and/or homophobic structures in other symbolic systems such as sports, film, sign languages, and political discourse (as in the panel “Discursive constructions of women in leading positions and on the political stage”).

Keynote 3:

Challenging hegemonic femininities. The discourse of trailing spouses in Hong Kong

Stephanie Schnurr, The University of Warwick

Coined by Raewyn Connell (1987, 1995) the notion of hegemonic masculinity as “the form of masculinity in a given historical and society-wide setting that structures and legitimates hierarchical gender relations” (Messerschmidt 2012: 58) has received a lot of attention in recent scholarship. The notion of hegemonic femininity, on the other hand, remains largely under-developed (Schippers 2007). This paper aims to address this gap by responding to Connell and Messerschmidt’s (2005) call to analyse hegemonic femininities at the local, regional, and global level, and to explore how they are interlinked with each other.

Hegemonic femininity has been described as consisting of “the characteristics defined as womanly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to hegemonic masculinity and that, by doing so, guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.” (Schippers 2007: 94) However, what exactly is considered to be “womanly” and whether this contributes to establishing and reinforcing gendered hegemonies is context dependent and to some extent dynamically constructed throughout an interaction.

This paper reports on the discourse of trailing spouses, i.e. those women who have followed their partners on an overseas work assignment. In interviews conducted with 15 trailing spouses in Hong Kong, these women strategically draw on and sometimes vehemently reject localised hegemonic femininities in their attempts to make sense of the new situation in which they find themselves: being away from “home”, having left their career behind, and trying to find and reclaim a sense of their own identity. Throughout the interviews, these women (re)claim agency over the decision to move to Hong Kong thereby rejecting assumptions about hegemonic masculinity. They also selectively and sometimes strategically draw on some of the gendered roles traditionally available to women in the context of Hong Kong and position themselves in relation to them – thereby further challenging notions of hegemonic femininities as legitimised by hegemonic masculinity. They thereby manage to carve out a space in which they position themselves and construct their own identities in relation to gendered hegemonies.

References

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Keynote 4:

Indexing gender in mothers' stories in the context of parent-teacher-conferences

Helga Kotthoff, Freiburg i. Br.

I am going to analyze mothers' ways of talking about their children in parent-teacher-conferences in German schools. Drawing on the framework of ethnomethodology and interactional sociolinguistics, I'll investigate the staging of motherhood in "narrative fragments" (Birkner, 2013) or "small stories" that parents and teachers –especially mothers - employ to assess and characterize their children. These fragments also serve as vehicles for teachers and parents to present themselves as agents of the two institutions: school and home. Analyses reveal how – in the sequential unfolding of actual interactions – parenting is made "a work process articulated to the work process of schooling" (Baker & Keogh, 1997, 264) and how both sides display an achievement-oriented habitus (Kotthoff 2012). In Germany so far schools often end in the early afternoon and mothers are in charge for children's homework. Interestingly, mothers very often report dialogues with their child at home. They quote themselves as urging the child to study or to behave better or as suggesting competent ways to do homework tasks. The child is quoted with a voice of resistance, sometimes also of late insight. I am interested in how a specific cultural identity as a mother is staged in these talks and will discuss the indexing of gender (Ochs 1992) in these narrative fragments. The analysis is based on audio recordings of thirty parent-teacher conferences which lasted between 25 and 65 minutes. Pupils were not present in most of the talks. The conferences took place at different school types.

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