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## RESEARCH METHODS IN THE STUDY OF GENDER IN SECOND/FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION

### INTRODUCTION

Over the past three decades, the relationship between language and gender has attracted significant attention from researchers in a variety of fields, including education. Several recent monographs, volumes, special issues, and state-of-the-art reviews have specifically addressed the role of gender in second and foreign language learning and education (Chavez, 2001; Davis and Skilton-Sylvester, 2004; Langman, 2004; Norton, 2000; Norton and Pavlenko, 2004; Pavlenko, Blackledge, Piller, and Teutsch-Dwyer, 2001; Sunderland, 2000; see also Pavlenko and Piller, *Language Education and Gender*, Volume 1). What remained relatively obscured in this literature, however, is the relationship between the theoretical framework and methods selected to address one's research questions. The present chapter aims to bridge this gap, identifying methodological strengths and weaknesses of the current studies and pointing out methodological and conceptual issues that need to be addressed in future work.

### EARLY DEVELOPMENTS

Early sociolinguistic and educational research sparked by Lakoff's (1975) *Language and Woman's Place* conceptualized the relationship between language and gender through the notions of difference and dominance. In the *dominance* framework, theorized in Lakoff (1975), "women-as-a-group" were seen as linguistically oppressed and dominated by "men-as-a-group." In the study of second and foreign language education, this paradigm translated into two methodological approaches. Text and content analyses were used to examine gender representation and sexism in foreign and second language textbooks. These analyses focused on frequency counts of male versus female names, pronouns, and appearances in illustrations, on comparison of social roles and occupations assigned to men and women, and on the uses of masculine generics. Interaction analysis was used to determine who speaks how much and when in the language classroom. This analysis also focused on frequency counts, this time of turns taken by male and female students and on the mean length of all turns taken by each group.

In the *differences* framework, introduced by Maltz and Borker (1982) and developed and popularized by Tannen (1990), “women-as-a-group” and “men-as-a-group” were seen as speakers of different genderlects, developed through socialization in same-gender peer-groups. Second language acquisition researchers adopted this framework to look at classroom interaction and at language learning outcomes. Interaction analysis was conducted to see whether men and women have different goals in classroom interaction and concluded that men interact to produce output and women interact to receive input. In turn, studies of language learning strategies correlated reports of strategy use with language learning outcomes to conclude that female learners outperform male ones due to their positive attitudes and superior use of language learning strategies; these results in turn were explained through brain and socialization differences.

Both frameworks still inform some of the current work (cf., Chavez, 2001; Julé, 2004). However, since the early 1990s, they have been repeatedly criticized by feminist linguists for their essentialist assumptions about “men” and “women” as homogeneous categories, for insensitivity to diversity, and for lack of attention to the role of context and power relations (Cameron, 1992; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992). Feminist linguists also criticized the methodology of the studies of difference and dominance and in particular the unfounded causal assumptions about gender and learning outcomes. They argued that in the case of textbooks, the focus on numeric representation overshadowed the subtler ways in which stereotypes are created and reproduced, such as discursive roles assigned in dialogs (Poulou, 1997), and showed that teacher discourse around the text cannot be predicted from the text itself (Sunderland, Cowley, Abdul Rahim, Leontzakou, and Shattuck, 2002). They also argued that higher quantities of specific strategies or interaction in general do not necessarily lead to higher achievement. In effect, it is quite possible that excessive attention to boys may be prompted by their misbehavior and that students who speak most in the classroom are not necessarily the same that do best (Sunderland, 2000). Most importantly, it was argued that in their relentless focus on men-as-a-group and women-as-a-group difference and dominance frameworks ignore ethnic, racial, social, and cultural diversity that mediates gendered behaviors, performances, and outcomes.

#### MAJOR CONTRIBUTIONS AND WORKS IN PROGRESS

In the “postmodern turn” of the early 1990s, research organized around binary paradigms was superseded by the framework that focused on diversity of gender identities and gendered practices (Cameron, 1992,

2005a; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992, 2003). Studies conducted in this framework are predicated on the following assumptions, all of which have consequences for research design:

1. Gender is discursively, culturally, and socially constructed and inseparable from other facets of social identity. In this view, men-as-a-group and women-as-a-group are no longer meaningful comparison categories, because certain members of one category (e.g., middle-aged low-income heterosexual immigrant women from Southeast Asia) may have little in common with other members of the “same” category (e.g., young white middle-class Canadian lesbians) and a lot in common with some members of the “opposite” category (e.g., middle-aged low-income heterosexual immigrant men from Southeast Asia). Generic gender groupings are also problematic because they obscure oppression in terms of class and race and thus the fact that it is low-income and immigrant women who do not have access to educational resources, working-class boys who are silenced in the classroom, or young black men who do not have powerful role models in the school hierarchy. The diversity framework urges researchers to replace simplistic questions such as “Are women more likely to do X than men?” or “How do men and women differ in Y?” with more open-ended questions such as “Who is most affected by Z?” and to consider how gender functions at the intersection with race, class, age, ethnicity, sexuality, and (dis)ability. In many cases, instead of contrasting two genders, this framework encourages a comparison of different versions of the same gender to understand, for instance, how foreign language learning outcomes of upper-middle-class suburban girls with access to private schools and study abroad options may differ from outcomes of their female counterparts in low-income urban areas.
2. Linguistic strategies are relative—there is no one-to-one mapping between linguistic forms and interactional functions or social identities. Consequently, it is futile to try to associate particular linguistic features with men’s or women’s speech, as the same features and strategies are invariably used by different men and women in different contexts for different purposes. Instead the diversity framework encourages researchers to examine how normative femininities and masculinities are produced and validated by dominant discourses, what consequences the process has for various members of a particular community, and how these members use language to reproduce, challenge, and resist existing gendered practices.
3. The relationship between language and gender is mutually constitutive; in other words, with the exception of pitch, it is not the

case that individual men and women speak or learn in a particular way because they belong to a particular biological (sex) or social (gender) category. Rather, the acts of speaking and learning are constitutive of their membership in a particular gender category, it is through learning and speaking that they construct themselves as particular men and women. Consequently, the pursuit of male and female genderlects or learning strategies is by definition misguided, and so are generic explanations of particular linguistic outcomes as conditioned by nature or nurture. Instead, we can view the relationship between gender and second and foreign language learning as mutually constitutive: on the one hand, learners' motivations, investments, choices, and options may be influenced by gender as a system of social relations and discursive practices. On the other, additional languages may offer second language learners access to symbolic and material capital and resources to perform gender and sexuality differently than they would in their native language (cf. Pavlenko, 2001a). The diversity framework encourages researchers to examine how gendered power relations shape speakers' linguistic choices and how speakers use language to cross and transgress gender boundaries previously believed infallible.

4. The basic unit of analysis in the diversity framework is activity. In this view, analyses that focus on the use of a particular linguistic feature by men-as-a-group or women-as-a-group produce epiphenomena, that is, results that are easily challenged when sufficient attention is paid to additional characteristics of each group. The diversity framework encourages researchers to move away from reliance on unexplained links between linguistic features and generic gender groupings and instead consider how a particular linguistic form or feature functions in the context of discursive activities and gendered practices.

The theoretical shift that prompted increased attention to context and activity led to a methodological shift to qualitative research methods, reflected in current scholarship in the field of second and foreign language learning and education. Many current studies in the field use *ethnographic* methods of data collection, such as participant observation, audio- or videotaping, tape-recorded interviews, and collection of documents and media texts, to examine gendered language practices in particular educational contexts (cf., Davis and Skilton-Sylvester, 2004; on Toohey, *Ethnography and Language Education*, Volume 10).

Some of the same data collection methods, in particular interviews, are used to conduct *case studies* of individual learners or contexts (Kinginger and Farrell Whitworth, 2005; Norton, 2000; Teutsch-Dwyer, 2001; Vitanova, 2004). A subgroup of such studies is *teacher-research case*

*studies* that discusses implementation of curricular changes and new pedagogical approaches to promote gender equity in particular contexts (cf., Norton and Pavlenko, 2004).

In terms of analytical methods, an important new development, prompted by increased attention to discourse, is reliance on *discourse analytic approaches*, and in particular on critical discourse analysis, to either replace or at least supplement thematic and content analyses. This trend is particularly visible in the new wave of textbook studies that examine gender ideologies displayed through particular textual choices and omissions (Poulou, 1997; Shardakova and Pavlenko, 2004; Siegal and Okamoto, 1996), as well as classroom talk around the texts (Sunderland, Cowley, Abdul Rahim, Leontzakou, and Shattuck, 2002). Discourse analytic approaches have also been used to analyze gendered aspects of second language learners' oral and written narratives (Pavlenko, 2001a, b; Vitanova, 2004) and gendered ideologies and practices in classroom interaction (McMahill, 2001).

Finally, some scholars also found ways to creatively combine quantitative (phonetic analysis, analysis of temporality, analysis of test scores) and qualitative approaches (discourse analysis of ethnographic interviews) to understand language learning processes and outcomes (Kinginger and Farrell Whitworth, 2005; Ohara, 2001; Teutsch-Dwyer, 2001), whereas others combined discourse analytic and historiographic methods to examine gender in language education from a historic perspective (Pavlenko, 2005; Robinson, 2004).

## PROBLEMS AND DIFFICULTIES

An overview of recent studies in the field of second and foreign language education shows that acknowledging that gender is socially constructed is not paramount to accepting the implications of this notion for research purposes. Some recent studies claim the diversity framework as a theoretical paradigm, only to revert to either difference or dominance framework in conceptual assumptions and methodological choices. This trend is particularly visible in studies of classroom interaction that continue to focus on distribution of talking time between boys and girls or men and women (Chavez, 2001; Julé, 2004; Shehadeh, 1999). Six conceptual errors lie at the heart of the theoretical and methodological discontinuity:

1. *Lack of clear conceptualization of 'gender'*, seen in cases where researchers pay the obligatory lip service to the social and constructed nature of gender and then proceed to talk about men-as-a-group and women-as-a-group without explaining clearly what precisely is socially constructed in the case of their study participants, what aspect of gender relations or construction they are

interested in, how the categories of men and women fit in with their conceptualization, and, more generally, how their view of gender informs their research design. Alternatively, novice researchers assume that a study conducted with men or women is by definition about gender, or that gender is always a relevant analytical category, although in reality their results may be best understood in terms of other social identities and contextual features.

2. *Lack of clear conceptualization of 'language'*, seen in cases where researchers proffer tired diatribes about important links between language and social identity and then proceed to the study that may or may not illustrate any such links, offering no explanation or justification as to why particular linguistic features were singled out in the study.
3. *Lack of clear conceptualization of the language and gender interface*, seen in cases where researchers cannot offer a specific explanation for their findings and rely instead on the nature (brain) or nurture (socialization) assumptions made in the differences framework, or on the "men, by definition, are more powerful than women" assumption made in the dominance framework.
4. *Lack of clear links between theory and methodology and consequently of a clear rationale for using particular methods*, seen in cases where researchers first pay tribute to current theories of language and gender and then adopt traditional research designs that do not fit their theoretical assumptions. It is often mistakenly assumed that because the contemporary theory is "on the record," one does not need to bother with linking theory and methodology. Cameron (2005b) also points to another temptation novice researchers succumb to these days: theoretical and methodological eclecticism. She argues that such eclecticism is not self-evidently a good thing and should not be unproblematically equated with interdisciplinarity and reflexivity. While one might combine several approaches successfully for a particular purpose, in small-scale case studies such a combination may lead to theoretical incoherence. Cameron (2005b) advises that to pull such a combination off one needs "a clear rationale for putting approaches together, a sophisticated understanding of each approach, and an account of how the tensions between approaches will be handled in your study" (pp. 125–126).
5. *Lack of attention to data analysis*, seen in research design descriptions that privilege data collection methods and spend little if any time on discussion of analytic approaches. An additional problem here is the reliance of many recent case studies and ethnographies on pseudoanalytic approaches such as content or thematic analyses of "emerging themes." These approaches display

numerous weaknesses, including the lack of a systematic procedure for matching instances to categories and overemphasis on recurring patterns that may lead analysts to overlook important events or phenomena that do not occur repeatedly (for detailed discussion, see Pavlenko, in press).

6. *Overreliance on narratives and interviews* that replace, rather than supplement, language data from natural contexts; it is particularly disconcerting when researchers confuse the two and analyze language use reports from narratives or interviews as actual interaction instances. Cameron (2005b) also comments on the disturbing "trend towards case study research in which presenting the particular instance becomes an end in itself" (p. 128).

These problems and weaknesses undoubtedly have multiple sources, but the key one is graduate student training in the field of education that—at least in North American academia—often divorces theory from methodology and data collection from data analysis. Theory classes expose students to a variety of theories but do not focus on implications of particular theories for research design. Similarly, research design classes focus on issues of validity and generalizability but do not often discuss theories informing particular approaches. The only theoretical and methodological divide students are trained to think about is the patently false qualitative/quantitative dichotomy, which misleads students to think that one can be a competent researcher using only one paradigm and avoiding the other.

Two more problems of disconnect plague research design courses in education. The first is the preference for data collection methods over data analysis. Students engaged in ethnographic research may spend years collecting data and at the end not know what to do with the amassed amount of field notes and transcriptions. Their favorite approach is the laborious and ultimately meaningless color-coding of words and segments that oftentimes passes for analysis. Students taking statistical analyses courses do not necessarily fare better. In many programs, these courses teach students the 'how to' without necessarily linking the approaches to the actual designs and studies. As a result, students may know how to construct a proper experimental study and how to carry out a multivariate analysis but have no idea how to select the most appropriate statistical approach for their particular study, nor are they able to analyze why certain factors appear to influence learning processes and outcomes.

To address problems that plague some of the research in education, including but not limited to second and foreign language education, we need to begin by addressing weaknesses in graduate education and by implementing curricula that offer students meaningful links between theory and methods of data collection and analysis.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Some, if not all, of the pitfalls outlined earlier could be avoided if researchers began by asking the following questions in the studies of language and gender in education:

1. *Gender*: How do I conceptualize gender? What aspects of gendered identities, practices, and relations are particularly important for my study? What are the implications of my conceptualization for research design and the choice of study participants? Am I sure that mine is not a convenience sample but a well-selected group?
2. *Language*: How do I conceptualize language? What linguistic features, forms, and strategies are of particular interest to me and why? Am I interested in language learning, language use, learning outcomes, or perhaps in dominant discourses and narratives that normalize particular masculinities and femininities while devaluing others? What are the implications of my choices for research design and methods of data analysis? Am I familiar with all of the languages spoken by my participants and if not, what choices do I have at my disposal to overcome this weakness?
3. *Language and gender interface*: How might linguistic features or language learning processes I am interested in be connected to gendered practices and identities?

And, last but not least: Is gender truly relevant to the issues I am interested in or would my results be better explained through other factors? Asking this question is not paramount to saying that gender inequities are no longer an issue. The new economic order of the globalization era brought with it new opportunities but also new forms of oppression and exploitation, seen, for instance, in the emergence of a heavily feminized and underpaid language workforce in the tourist industry and call centers (Piller and Pavlenko, in press). The focus on gender, however, should not blind researchers to the fact that in many contexts, including education, gender inequities are exacerbated and sometimes even eclipsed by disparities created by class and race.

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## Section 3

### Language, Culture, Discourse and Education