

Jennifer Coates: Differing approaches to language and gender (2004)

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Since the publication of Lakoff's classic work, *Language and Woman's Place*, in 1975, linguists have approached language and gender from a variety of perspectives. These can be labelled the **deficit** approach, the **dominance** approach, the **difference** approach, and the **dynamic** or **social constructionist** approach. They developed in a historical sequence, but the emergence of a new approach did not mean that earlier approaches were superseded. In fact, at any one time these different approaches could be described as existing in a state of tension with each other. It is probably true to say, though, that most researchers now adopt a **dynamic** approach.

The **deficit** approach was characteristic of the earliest work in the field. Most well known is Lakoff's *Language and Woman's Place*, which claims to establish something called 'women's language' (WL), which is characterised by linguistic forms such as hedges, 'empty' adjectives like *charming*, *divine*, *nice*, and 'talking in italics' (exaggerated intonation contours). WL is described as weak and unassertive, in other words, as deficient. Implicitly, WL is deficient by comparison with the norm of male language. This approach was challenged because of the implication that there was something intrinsically wrong with women's language, and that women should learn to speak like men if they wanted to be taken seriously.

The second approach – the **dominance** approach – sees women as an oppressed group and interprets linguistic differences in women's and men's speech in terms of men's dominance and women's subordination. Researchers using this model are concerned to show how male dominance is enacted through linguistic practice. 'Doing power' is often a way of 'doing gender' too (see West and Zimmerman 1983).

Moreover, all participants in discourse, women as well as men, collude in sustaining and perpetuating male dominance and female oppression.

The third approach – the **difference** approach – emphasises the idea that women and men belong to different subcultures. The 'discovery' of distinct male and female subcultures in the 1980s seems to have been a direct result of women's growing resistance to being treated as a subordinate group. The invisibility of women in the past arose from the conflation of 'culture' with 'male culture'. But women began to assert that they had 'a different voice, a different psychology, and a different experience of love, work and the family from men' (Humm 1989: 51). The advantage of the difference model is that it allows women's talk to be examined outside a framework of oppression or powerlessness. Instead, researchers have been able to show the strengths of linguistic strategies characteristic of women, and to celebrate women's ways of talking. However, the reader should be aware that the difference approach is controversial when applied to mixed talk, as was done in *You Just Don't Understand* (1991), Deborah Tannen's best-selling book about male–female 'miscommunication'. Critics of Tannen's book (see, for example, Troemel-Ploetz 1991; Cameron 1992; Freed 1992) argue that the analysis of mixed talk cannot ignore the issue of power.

The fourth and most recent approach is sometimes called the **dynamic** approach because there is an emphasis on dynamic aspects of interaction. Researchers who adopt this approach take a **social constructionist** perspective. Gender identity is seen as a social construct rather than as a 'given' social category. As West and Zimmerman (1987) eloquently put it, speakers should be seen as 'doing gender' rather than statically 'being' a particular gender. This argument led Crawford (1995: 12) to claim that gender should be conceptualised as a verb, not a noun! The observant reader will notice that the phrase 'doing gender' was also used in the paragraph on the dominance approach. This is because the four approaches do not have rigid boundaries: researchers may be influenced by more than one theoretical perspective. What has changed is linguists' sense that gender is not a static, add-on characteristic of speakers, but is something that is *accomplished* in talk every time we speak.

The deficit approach is now seen as out-dated by researchers (but not by the general public, whose acceptance of, for example, assertiveness training for women suggests a world view where women should learn to be more like men). The other three approaches have all yielded valuable insights into the nature of gender differences in language. While it is true to say that social constructionism is now the prevailing paradigm, discussion of sociolinguistic work in subsequent chapters will demonstrate the influence of the dominance and difference approaches during the 1980s and 1990s.