Sexist Discourse

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Abstract:

Sexist discourse is “language in use,” either spoken words or written texts, which stereotypes or discriminates against a person or group of people based on their gender. Early feminist work on gender, sexism, and language began to show a connection between language and the (re)production of sexism. However much of this work is now considered out-dated by researchers because it perpetuated essentialist understandings of sexism as something inherent to particular words and utterances. As the influence of constructionism has grown, researchers across the social sciences and humanities have come to view linguistic meanings as fluid rather than fixed, and dependent on the social context in which they are embedded. A number of methodological approaches including critical discourse analysis, discursive psychology and conversation analysis are used to show how sexism is (re)produced through discourse in various contexts, either overtly or indirectly.

Main text:

Introduction and historical overview

Sexist discourse is “language in use,” either spoken words or written texts, which stereotypes or discriminates against a person or group of people based on their gender. Gender and language researchers are concerned, in part, with understanding how sexist discourse (re)produces inequalities between men and women. By uncovering the ways in which discourse is used to perpetuate sexist understandings of gender, awareness of sexist assumptions in language use can be raised and sexist discourse challenged.

During the emergence of Second Wave feminism in the 1960s the concerns of the feminist movement shifted from a focus on legal gender equality to also include different aspects of sexism, including the relationship between sexism and language. With the “linguistic turn” across the social sciences and humanities in the 1970s, researchers came to view language as central to understanding the social world. Reality was considered to be made up of symbolic systems which are given meaning through language. Research on the “gendered” nature of language at this time can be understood as comprising two strands: how men and women use language and how gender is represented in language (Speer, 2002). The
first strand focussed on men and women’s language behaviour and showed that there are quantifiable differences between the language use and speech styles of men and women. Women’s speech styles were theorised as either deficient compared to that of men, as dominated by men, or as simply different from, but of equal value to that of men (Speer, 2002). However it is the second strand of research on how gender is represented in language that is most relevant to understanding sexist discourse. This strand of work began to consider how language (re)produces sexism, paving the way for later work on sexist discourse.

In her pioneering book Language and Women’s Place the linguist Robin Lakoff (1975) considered how gender is represented in language by identifying equivalent terms that have different meanings for women and men. For example, the term “spinster” is associated with women who have been unsuccessful in being able to attract or maintain a relationship with a man, while the term “bachelor” is considered a positive status for a man who chooses to remain single. Early research on how gender is represented in language, including Lakoff’s, also considered the terms of address used for men and women. Women’s titles “Mrs” and “Miss” define them in terms of their relationship to a man, while men are simply “Mr”. Feminist language reformers suggested that we could help to eradicate sexism in language by replacing these terms with “neutral” versions such as “Ms” (Miller & Swift, 1980).

This work began to show the connection between language and the (re)production of sexism. Attempts at language reform were applauded by some feminists for demonstrating that women are not simply passive consumers of language but through critical discussion can shape and change language to non-sexist ends. However much of this early language and gender research was subsequently criticised for its essentialist orientation: Words such as “spinster” were assumed to have inherently sexist meanings, reflecting the essentialist ontological view that words and utterances have a “true” or “fixed” nature. Some feminist researchers also criticised attempts at language reform, which treat sexist talk as a linguistic rather than a contextual or social problem, and endeavour to resolve this problem by substituting “sexist” with “non-sexist” terms. However these attempts at what Cameron (1995) terms ‘verbal hygiene’ fail to take account of the social context within which the terms are used (Speer 2002, p. 349).

These critiques reflect the growth of constructionism since the 1990s, which was influenced in part by postmodernism and poststructuralism and represented a new paradigm in gender and language research. As a result of this paradigmatic shift, linguistic meanings came to be viewed as fluid rather than fixed, and dependent on the social context in which they are embedded (Ehrlich & King, 1994). For many constructionist gender and language researchers, discourse or “language in use,” is the key site for understanding how sexist meanings are socially constructed and (re)produced in context (Speer, 2002). A practical example of the social construction of language is the recent re-appropriation of the word “slut” by some feminist activists. Formerly understood to be a pejorative term used to describe a sexually active woman, this word has been reclaimed by those involved with “slutwalk” events, which highlight and protest against “rape culture” and “victim blaming.” Therefore in this context the term “slut” is not used pejoratively but reflects the socio-political empowerment of some women.

The contemporary analysis of sexist discourse

“Discourse analysis” is often used as an umbrella term to describe the qualitative study of language use. However it is important to note that there are several different types of discourse analysis, each varying radically in terms of theoretical framework and analytic approach. Three analytic approaches used by gender and language researchers include
Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Discursive Psychology (DP), and Conversation Analysis (CA).

CDA is best understood as an interdisciplinary research movement which encompasses a number of approaches, theoretical models and research methods which have a shared interest in highlighting the semiotic dimensions of power and inequality in order to challenge oppression and discrimination. Feminist linguist Mills (2008) uses CDA in her book *Language and Sexism* to analyse instances of what she calls “overt” and “indirect” sexist discourse. According to Mills (2008, p. 11), overt sexist discourse can be straightforwardly identified from the use of linguistic terms or presuppositions, which indicate that women are in some way inferior to men. However, she suggests that since overt sexism is harder to articulate these days, a more indirect, discursive type of sexism has established itself “which manages to express sexism whilst at the same time denying responsibility for it” (2008, p. 12).

Mills (2008) draws on an article about male and female tennis players in the British magazine *Radio Times* as an example of overt sexist discourse, highlighting differences in the ways male and female tennis players are represented. Whereas male players are associated with athleticism and discussed in terms of their sporting success, female players are depicted in distinctly different terms, as uncertain of their own capabilities. Mills (2008, p. 70-71) suggests that the different language and grammar used to describe male and female athletes reflects a difference between male/female representations in sport that has become institutionalised. By contrast, Mills (2008, p. 133) considers British magazines and advertising as two sites of indirect sexism. Magazines such as *loaded*, *Viz*, and *GQ* include a great deal of sexism, however this is undercut by humour and irony (Mills, 2008, p.133). A similar “ironising sexism” is used in advertising, where products such as Burger King burgers and McCoy’s crisps are associated with stereotypical masculinity. Mills (2008, p. 133-134) suggests that because these advertisements use signals to clearly indicate excessiveness, we are to assume that we should not take them seriously.

Ethnomethodological approaches including DP and CA have been increasingly used over the past two decades in order to understand how sexism is (re)produced in the context of everyday interaction. These approaches differ from CDA as ethnomethodologists study “members methods,” or the “routinized, taken-for-granted procedures individuals employ as they go about their everyday lives,” (Speer, 2005, p. 15). DP represents a counter to mainstream psychology in that instead of conceiving of sexist attitudes as inner mental constructs it treats attitudes and evaluations, like all talk, as performing actions. CA is sociological in its perspective and can be applied in order to understand how, through their interaction with one another, individuals produce and orient towards the ‘macro-social’ structural realm of gender norms, ideology and other large scale feminist issues and concepts (Speer, 2005, p. 4). Both DP and CA analyse naturally occurring interaction, and are themselves becoming increasingly hard to separate on methodological and conceptual grounds (for a discussion of the relationship between DP and CA see Speer, 2005). Early DP research showed how sexist evaluations were produced and managed by participants by constructing sexist remarks as factual descriptions which are rationally arrived at. For example, investigating male and female students’ views on employment opportunities for women, Wetherell, Stiven and Potter (1987) found that interviewees built their accounts of inequality between women and men to appear inevitable or justifiable. Speer (2002) uses a DP approach influenced by CA in her research on sexist discourse as it is produced during talk about gender and sport, across a range of social science, media and “everyday” settings. She demonstrates how sexist discourse is produced and sustained through interaction by examining how speakers use arguments about the potential injury of women to justify their non-participation in activities such as rugby and boxing. The extract shown below is taken
from a mealtime discussion in which Sue has just asked a group of young women if they would consider playing rugby. Speer uses this extract to make a point about the “malleability” of linguistic meanings, demonstrating how the women themselves exploit sexist arguments in an ironic fashion to expose and challenge sexist assumptions.

[Speer 2002 p.367, Mealtime Discussion B: 39]

1  Melanie  Ooh, I’d have no desire to play rugby.
2    (.)
3  Elizabeth  ’No’
4  Sue  Why not?’
5  Melanie  I’ve got too pretty fea[tures]=
6    [(Sue)]
7  Angie  =it’s violent.
8  Elizabeth  [Coz I’d break my nails]
9  Sue  [mhhh. Mhh hh hh]
10 (.). hhh hh. hh. hh. hh.
11 [hh. Hh. Hh]
12 (Sue)  [I don’t ] [know the rules]
13 Linda  [I couldn’t] wear [high heels!]
14    [((coughs))]
15 Melanie  Do(h)n’t(h) kno(h)w(h) the ru(h)le(h)s(h)!
16     Hah [heh]
17 Elizabeth  [heh heh hah [hah]
18 Melanie  [I] don’t know if I can
19    (move) in that gold dress
20 Elizabeth  heh [hah ( ) ]
21 Sue  [Huh HUH HUH] HUH HUH HUH HUH [.HHH]=
22 Melanie  [knee:s]=
23 Sue  =[hhh hhh (hhh)]
24 Melanie  =[stuck together] trying to [run down]
25    [hh heh hh]
26 Melanie  the [field]
27    [Mhh] huh huh huh
The speakers provide an ironic commentary on the view that women should not engage in sports such as boxing or rugby in order to justify their own non-participation (lines 5, 8, 12, 13, 15, 18-19, 24). They use irony to exaggerate and parody the sexist interpretation that their non-participation in sport is because of fear of getting hurt and concerns regarding their appearance; the device by which they construct the irony is a collaboratively produced, stereotyped version of femininity. The analysis of this talk is particularly salient to our understanding of sexist discourse as the irony allows these women to indirectly problematise the sexist view that women should not play sports such as rugby and highlights the socially constructed and constructive nature of such discourse in real-life interactions. More recently CA has been used to show how overtly sexist discourse is constructed by male speakers who objectify women through reductionist references to females’ appearance (Beach & Glenn, 2011) and to suggest that sexist assumptions are “routinely incorporated into everyday conversations without anyone noticing or responding to them as such”’ (Kitzinger, 2005, p. 224).

Future directions

Mills (2008, p. 11-12) suggests that since overt sexism is now less tolerated in the public sphere, sexism is now often done indirectly. Nonetheless, she points out that overt sexism remains a reality in many contemporary societies. A powerful example of this is The Everyday Sexism Project, a website created by British feminist writer Laura Bates, which asks women to share their experiences of sexism, in order to “take a step towards gender equality, by proving wrong those who tell women that they can’t complain because we are equal” (The Everyday Sexism Project, 2013). By April 2013 the website had collected 25,000 entries from 15 different countries, a large proportion of which are complaints about sexist language. Therefore, for researchers who wish to understand and challenge how sexism is (re)produced through discourse, be it overtly or indirectly, there remains considerable ground to cover.

Researchers have used a number of different approaches to study sexist discourse, some of which have been discussed above. The usefulness of CA to feminist researchers has been debated in the field. For example, CA’s “apparent obsession with the minutiae of talk” is considered by some to be at odds with socio-political concerns (Kitzinger, 2000, p. 163). Nonetheless, CA has been used to great effect over the last decade to make advances in the understanding of sexist discourse in context. It is therefore likely that it will become an increasingly important part of the methodological toolkit that researchers apply to understanding and challenging the (re)production of sexist discourse.

SEE ALSO: Conversation Analysis, Feminist; Critical Discourse Analysis; Discourse Analysis; Discursive Psychology; Ethnomethodology; Gender in Interaction; Language and Social Interaction

References


