PDF hosted at the Radboud Repository of the Radboud University Nijmegen

The following full text is a publisher's version.

For additional information about this publication click this link.
http://hdl.handle.net/2066/14702

Please be advised that this information was generated on 2017-07-16 and may be subject to change.

This book is part of the 'World and Word Series' and is in particular meant for students of literature and women's studies. It provides a series of texts, ranging from Virginia Woolf's 1929 essay 'Women and Fiction' and Otto Jespersen's 1922 chapter on 'The Woman' to an interview with Luce Irigaray and Suzette Haden Elgin's sampler from a U.adan dictionary. The editor has provided a lucid and informative introductory essay (pp. 1-28), brief introductions to the three main sections of the book, an annotated bibliography (pp. 251-253) and an index (pp. 254-258).

Are the texts included interesting? Here the answer is yes, on the whole. Do they form a coherent whole? Here I would give a more qualified answer, for the span from feminist literary analysis to linguistically oriented work may be too wide. In the first part of the book, named 'Speech and Silence', several themes are explored. First of all, Virginia Woolf's well-known piece, an illuminating article by Josephine Donovan and an essay by Cora Kaplan explore the limits on women fully participating in the literary tradition.

In English literature, women have primarily excelled in the art of letter writing and novels. The rise of 'plain writing' in the 17th century was linked to the gradually increasing access of women to the art of writing. According to Kaplan, women were particularly excluded from poetry, the genre in which the symbolic character of language is most concentrated. Virginia Woolf stressed both the social basis for the development of a tradition of writings by women and the features of these writings. In addition to a room of one's own a woman writer needs a voice of her own.

This voice is the focus of the last two texts in this section, excerpts of work by Annie Leclerc, who wants to develop a language to express the multiple celebrations of the body, and an interview with Luce Irigaray, who similarly is looking for a new language that 'has nothing to do with the syntax which we have used for centuries, constructed with subject, predicate; or, subject, verb, object' (p. 82).

As Cameron stresses in her introduction, then, there is an emphasis on fluid, dissociated writing, reflected sometimes even in the style of the pieces themselves. Subjectivity is stressed at the expense of rational, impersonal discourse. Some critics of this type of feminist analysis have noted that this is what is traditionally associated with women in anti-feminine views. The prejudices are taken over in a strangely transposed form.

The second pan of the book, titled 'Naming' and Representation' deals with images of women and men and how they are reflected in language. It begins with a brief excerpt of Dale Spender's 'Man Made Language', followed by the very interesting review by Maria Black and Rosalind Coward of that book, focusing on Dale Spender's determinist view. It is argued that it is not so much the semantics of English that is sexist, but rather a discursive practice that makes men perceive woman as having a specific gender and themselves as non-gendered, neutral. They call for a much more historical, integrative view of the way gender-related words have changed meanings. This is lacking in the otherwise quite interesting article by Muriel Schultz on derogative terms for women.

The book includes the introduction to Kramarae and Treichler's feminist dictionary, which is avowedly utopian, presenting 'not only what is or has been but what might be'. Utopia also in Suzette Haden Elgin's 'Encodings in U.adan, a
women's language', with entries like 'radama: to non-touch, to actively refrain from touching'. Here an emotional universe is explored and given names, supposedly the one of feminine sensibility. Ann Bodine's sociolinguistic paper returns to the question of marking gender distinctions in language raised by Dale Spender and shows that at one time the pronoun 'they' did not only have a plural referent but also could refer to a singular third person, be it masculine or feminine. Androcentric prescriptive grammarians have imposed the present-day obligatory 'she/he' distinction. The section ends with Hofstadter's satirical piece (modeled on one of William Safire's columns) in which 'man' (as a word or part of a compound) is replaced with 'white' and the supposed columnist argues that this makes no difference really, or should not.

Part three of the book, 'Dominance and Difference in Women's Linguistic Behaviour' focusses on speech differences between women and men. It starts off with Jespersen's chapter on women's speech, receptacle of traditional lore on the subject, and excerpts from Robin Lakoff's 'Language and Women's Place' (1975), which marks the beginning of modern feminist research on language differences. While Lakoff attributes specific features of women's speech to sodalization patterns, Pamela Fishman argues that the frequent use of questions and of the interjection 'you know' when women are conversing with men is not so much due to socialization as to the fact that women tend to make a greater effort to keep conversations going than men.

However, other studies just highlight differences in speech between groups of women and groups of men, as Cameron notes in her introduction. An example is Deborah Jones' rather sketchy analysis of gossip as 'women's oral culture', including 'house-talk', 'scandal', 'bitching' and 'chatting'. Thus patterns of socialization may play a rather crucial role. However, this phenomenon is not represented in this book.

In summary, the book gives a lively and varied picture of the debates on gender and language in the last two decades. The articles are well arranged, and there is enough contrast between them for them to be useful in a course. Students can then start working on more specific issues in further studies. Sometimes the excerpted fragments are taken too much out of context to be readily interpretable. Such is the case with reviews of Dorothy Richardson's work by Virginia Woolf, the extracts from Dale Spender's work, and a fragment taken from a book by Tillie Olsen.

Work resulting from the feminist critique of language raises a number of important issues: social meaning versus (?) structural meaning, linguistic usage as a given versus something that can and should be changed, the transformation of modes of speaking into literature. Deborah Cameron can be recommended for bringing these issues to the foreground again.

University of Amsterdam

PIETER MUYSKEN