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### GENDER DISCOURSE AND CHANGES IN CULTURAL CODES

Culture is often analysed in terms of semantic oppositions (e.g. right – left, self – other, body – mind, etc.) within the framework of paradigmatic analysis. It was first worked out in phonology and was then applied to other language levels in structural linguistics, which considered oppositions to be an important principle organizing the structure of language. The approach was later extended to the analysis of other semiotic systems. It is often held that oppositions enable us to sort out the complex reality around us into an order, or that oppositions are at the basis of classificatory systems underlying cultures.

Thus, cultural codes encouraged people to treat *male* and *female* as contrasting notions, more terminologically – as members of an opposition comprising two mutually exclusive terms. Although oppositions are not “found in nature”, some of them are taken so much for granted that they may be treated as “natural”, e.g. the opposition *male* – *female* was for centuries taken for granted in mainstream culture.

Any discourse relies on language, i.e. on the lore of traditional usage and the attitudes expressed by it. Discourse which sees itself as innovative can use language very creatively, but presumably cannot break out of language altogether. The category of gender found in many languages as either a grammatical or a semantic category, or both, makes the “natural” view seem all the more legitimate. People tend to see both their language and the distinctions expressed in it as “natural”, in spite of the obvious fact that natural languages differ widely in gender distinctions made in them (e.g., while Latvian and Russian have the grammatical category of gender for both animate and inanimate nouns, verbs, adjectives, and some pronouns, English has no grammatical gender at all; gender distinctions are only lexical, expressed irregularly by word-building suffixes of nouns and by patterns of pronominal substitution).

It is sometimes claimed that where gender is a formal grammatical category (determines the forms of the article and the adjective and indicates syntactic

relations), it has no relation whatever to semantics [9, 35] or, at least, “is not directly associated with sex” [ibid., 106]. On the other hand, as pointed out by R. Jakobson, grammatical gender has an impact on mythology: it determines the personification of inanimate objects in mythologies and the metaphoric meanings of inanimate nouns [8, 236].

For centuries the *male* – *female* opposition remained intact in mainstream culture at many levels, not all of them immediately obvious to the naked eye. Structuralist analysis claimed to have revealed some of its less obvious manifestations, one of the well-known examples being G. Cook’s analysis of a scene in “Romeo and Juliet” [2, 115], where the masculine and the feminine are contrasted in oppositions: question – answer; stays – goes; night – day; garden – mountain tops, death – life; sleeping – walking, etc.

However, of late the *male* – *female* opposition has come under a lot of pressure, first in feminist-oriented discourse and then in contemporary gender discourse at large (meaning here just “discourse about gender issues” in everyday communication, art, education, etc.). The overall impression is that both discourses often seek to undermine the opposition. But this goal can be achieved in various ways. The question is: how does the “natural” opposition react to this pressure? Has it been affected by the pressure at all, and if so, which of its elements and how exactly?

In our view, several options can be singled out. Examples will be drawn randomly from different domains: current everyday language usage, academic and educational discourse, advertising, the cinema, costume design, etc.

### **1. The gender opposition is acknowledged, it is stated explicitly and interpreted traditionally.**

The opposition can be formulated in several ways:

**a) in general gender terms** which either do not specify the implications they are usually loaded with (“typical male/female attitudes”, teaching “has long been defined as women’s work”), or are inclusive of both members of the opposition: “sex – appropriate behaviours/occupations”, or specify them in terms of traditional gender roles, e.g. femininity will be associated with caring, serving, conforming, nurturing and mothering.

**b) in terms of presence – absence** of something or of **possession – disposition** (power/control – lack of power/control), e.g. in linguistic studies on interactional norms in conversation: men have control over topics and themes,

women have none; men are privileged social agents, women are subordinate social agents.

c) **in terms of having more or less** of power, opportunity, control, etc.: women are “more dependent” or “less active”. All these terms may be explicitly or implicitly evaluative (all examples above are from the journal *Gender and Education*, 116–117).

It should be noted that in the feminist perspective, many studies in sex differences reproduce or even reinforce the opposition of traditional gender roles (and therefore they also belong to this group): “...they construct differences even as they purport only to describe them” [5, 72].

The traditional gender opposition may be viewed by feminists as sustained even when traditionalists claim that it has been neutralized. E.g., in feminist discourse it is often pointed out that where traditional discourse claims to be gender-neutral, it is, in fact, not: “... masculinity is so built into the culture, techniques and practices of modern management (...) that to manage is to practice a form of masculinity, even as management represents itself as gender-neutral.” [5, 117]

The use of traditional patterns of pronoun substitution (namely, of *he* as a gender-unmarked form) is sometimes seen today as an implicit attempt to sustain the traditional roles. Surprisingly, this malicious intention is sometimes read from the feminist perspective even into texts published many decades ago.

Traditional gender roles are also reaffirmed language-wise in common everyday discourse when names of particular occupations belonging to the so-called nouns “of dual gender” are re-marked in phrases like *woman-lawyer* or *male nurse*. The marked member of the opposition is inevitably seen as a deviation or as belonging to a minority group, a marginal case. This is particularly obvious, given that gender markers for their opposites (man-lawyer, female nurse) would be considered to be redundant and odd within mainstream culture.

**2. While the gender opposition as such is not contested, the reversed order (sequence) of its members is consistently used alternately with the traditional one, thus the traditional hierarchy within the opposition is challenged.**

Thus, in contemporary gender discourse in semiotics the principle “ladies first”, taken literally, seems to be very much on the agenda at the level of word order: “men and women”, “woman or man”, “signifiers of female versus male”, “male versus female” are consistently used alternately within the same

page [7, 102]. The assumption seems to be that what is named first is considered to be both unmarked and more important, while the reversed order challenges the hierarchy. The traditional "order of mention" is listed among the features of sexist language and is advised against in Guidelines for Nonsexist Usage issued in 1992 by the Linguistic Society of America: "Avoid consistently putting references to males before reference to females... this order conveys male precedence..." [3, 369].

As T. Givon has pointed out commenting on order preferences in frozen noun-conjunctions (such as *father and son, man and wife, life and death, etc.*): "...ordering hierarchies... correspond closely to the well-known markedness assignments, with the unmarked member always preceding the marked one." Some of them, he holds, are grounded in cultural perspective: "...while adults are larger than children and males larger than females, it is the cultural reality of power and social control that makes "adult" and "male" the unmarked case vis-à-vis the marked "young" and "female." [6, 66]

### **3. The opposition is acknowledged as existing, but the distribution of the gender roles of its members is completely reversed.**

The happy end of the Hollywood comedy "The Wives of Stepford" features women who are wholly in control of men, have power over them, dominate them and order them about.

An advertisement of the French female perfume *Alchimie de Rochas* features the image of a woman dominating over the male one, subordinated to female strength. "The idea of female dominance is achieved by positioning the woman above other major elements in the advertisement. The man is embraced by the woman's hands, as though he were seeking protection and patronage and is thus dependent on her power." [10, 69-70] Moreover, the image of fire related to the bottle of perfume is a masculine symbol: "Since the role of the man in the ad is... passive, it can be supposed that the power of the fire in this context has been passed over to the woman to make her the active force." [Ibid., 71]

### **4. The opposition is acknowledged as existing, gender features are redistributed, but only partly.**

For example, the male appropriates part of female identity, the male image thus incorporating some of the features traditionally attributed to females. Mary Quant, a famous designer, wrote: "Masculine fabrics should be in masculine

colours – grey, white, black, herringbone, etc. with one romantic lapse of *eau de nil* or *bois de rose*. This perversity delights me but panics the marketing experts who say that it will not sell. But it's wonderful to exaggerate femaleness" [quoted by 7, 104]. This suggestion challenged the traditional gender meanings of colours in order to create a new and "perverse" (i.e. daring and experimental) male image.

Similarly, Hodge and Kress, analyzing the text of a billboard advertisement for Marlboro cigarettes featuring a cowboy (it reads: "New. Mild. And Marlboro") suggest that *mild* "...stands in contradiction with the tough masculinity portrayed by the man and his way of life... so that mild/gentle can come to signify the "new" kind of male toughness", which creates a new cross-gender image of a "new, old-fashioned, mild, tough male" [7, 10].

These instances are sometimes referred to as "feminist deconstructions of traditional versions of masculinity" [ibid.], and they clearly have semiotic implications: this is not just a redistribution of features between the members of the opposition, but a change of its type: the opposition is no longer binary (polar), but graded: one (or maybe each) member can supposedly combine both male and female features, the difference between *male* and *female* is now only a matter of balance between more-or-less, no longer a matter of choice between either/or. The ambiguous bisexual characters of some films by Almodovar would be an obvious parallel, but it is of interest that the option is now so actively explored by commercial art.

### 5. Neutralization of the opposition

Language-wise, feminist discourse has found several ways of neutralizing the opposition. In patterns of pronoun substitution this is done by using both members together or each of the pair alternately: the use of *he* or *she*, *he/she*, *(s)he*, *him/her* etc. is a fairly accepted practice in feminist-oriented discourse, while earlier in common discourse *he* in most contexts was viewed as unmarked for gender. However, the device does not work for *his* or *him*. Besides, since personal pronouns are words of very high frequency, this often produces monotonous repetitions. In order to avoid it some books on developmental psychology now use *he* and *she* as substitutes for "child" and "baby" alternately in each successive chapter. This might seem to be a minor matter of language usage. Behind it, however, is the assumption that gender differences of male and female infants are not a relevant issue: if *he* and *she* can be used absolutely at random as substi-

tutes for *baby* or *infant* in whichever situation described, gender differences by default are not among the variables taken into consideration. In other words, the ideology of research is at stake here.

A neutral alternative for *he* or *she* in informal speech is *they/their* after *somebody*, *anyone*, etc. (Has anyone lost their hat?)

Research reveals that the frequency of such forms as *he* and *man* used in half a million words of American English between 1971 and 1979 "fell from around 12 per 5,000 words to around 4 per 5,000 words..." [3, 369].

Outside language use some instances of neutralization include new constructs lacking obvious features of either member of the opposition, or rather using something traditionally unmarked for men as now unmarked also for women, e.g. in unisex clothing (trouser suites and jeans, etc.), unisex perfume and in advertisements for these products. It is widely acknowledged that the clothing code is one of the most important codes for constructing gender: "Clothes typically distinguish men and women, and help to declare what it is to be a woman or a man for that social group." [7, 102] It was probably traditionalists who nominated Princess Stephanie of Monaco as the world's worst-dressed woman in 1986 for precisely this reason: "Her royal wardrobe entitles her to use either bathroom" [ibid., 103] Neutralization of the traditional gender opposition, therefore, can be viewed as either a positive or a negative development.

A more sophisticated and indirect way to neutralize the traditional opposition is to reinterpret it and declare it to be false claiming that at a higher level of analysis it becomes irrelevant: "... what appear to be "sex differences" in work behaviour emerge as responses to structural conditions, to one's place in the organization" [5, 117]. This is another way of saying: in fact, the opposition does not exist.

The traditional gender opposition concerns also the classification of kinds of work. Some of them have been reclassified so as to neutralize the opposition: women ordained as priests in most denominations of Protestantism is a relatively recent example. At the legislative level, the lobbying of a new law in Sweden, which would stipulate that taking "a paternity leave" is not only a right, but also an obligation for men, is another case in point.

**6. In common everyday discourse (unconcerned with political correctness) the gender opposition may be reactivated in the areas where it is usually believed not to operate with the aim at expanding its domain and, therefore, reinforcing it.**

A well-known example would be some patterns of pronoun substitution usually not described in grammars but registered in speech: *he* or *she* as an affectionate reference to a car by female and male owners respectively. Although normally gender distinctions are made in English for animate nouns only, in emotional speech for some inanimate objects *he* or *she* can be used instead of *it*, the choice depending on whether the owner is a man or a woman, the implication being of an affectionate, loving relationship.

In Australian English the suffixes *-ie* and *-o* added to names to create nicknames seem to have gender implications even when applied to inanimate objects. Thus, Hodge and Kress claim that when a tin of beer is affectionately called *tinnie*, this implies a gendered classification of drinks, in terms of which beer is a man's proper drink, a safe object of male desire. The word is not supposed to be used by women unless they are implicitly quoting males [7, 102].

To summarize, both the alternate use of traditional and reversed word order (2.) and complete reversal of gender roles within the pair (3.) involve changes which challenge the traditional hierarchies within the opposition, but not the opposition as such. "Challenging the valorization alone" implies that we accept the division, but attempt to "deconstruct the ideological assumptions built into the oppositional framework" [1, 234].

It might seem that a partial redistribution of gender features (4.) either differs from (3.) where gender roles are completely reversed in degree only, or that it is paving the way for neutralization. However, its result – the fluctuating and ambiguous bisexual image becomes the middle term and, paradoxically, also the marked term (opposed to both *male* and *female* as unmarked). It also changes the type of the opposition, making it as graded. Marked forms tend to be more restricted in the range of contexts in which they occur, so the situation is likely to remain culturally marginal.

Neutralization and reactivation of the opposition can be viewed as two contrasting instances: the opposition is either eliminated, or its domain is expanded and it is, therefore, reinforced. Neutralization is a challenge to the opposition as such and a demonstration of its instability, but it is certainly easier to reshuffle hierarchies than to abolish them or the very concept of markedness altogether. It remains to be seen what the prospects of neutralization are in the long run: "...gender systems are marked by contradiction and instability, ... they are sites of struggle in the past as well as in the present". [7, 98]

## References

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## Dzimtes diskurss un pārmaiņas kultūras kodos

### Kopsavilkums

Rakstā analizētas pārmaiņas vīriešu – sievietes opozīcijā un tās elementu hierarhijā mūsdienu dzimtes diskursā. Aplūkotas šādas iespējas: dzimtes opozīciju var interpretēt tradicionālā veidā; dzimtes lomas var mainīt pozīcijas; šīs lomas var daļēji pārklāties. Pēdējā gadījumā rodas pārmaiņas opozīcijas veidā, notiek pāreja no binārā uz graduālo, rodas provokatīva sievietes un vīriešu īpašību kombinācija, ko izmanto komerciālā māksla reklāmās un modes industrijā. Aplūkoti dažādi opozīcijas neitralizācijas veidi valodā un citās semiotiskās sistēmās, kā arī pretēja tendence – opozīcijas izplatīšanās jomās, par kurām pastāv viedoklis, ka tajās opozīcija nepastāv (angļu valodā lietvārdi, kuri apzīmē nedzīvus priekšmetus, tiek aizstāti ar vīriešu un sievietes personu vietniekvārdiem). Neitralizācija ir visnopietnākais izaicinājums opozīcijai, tās nākotne pagaidām ir neskaidra, jo ir vieglāk mainīt hierarhiju kultūras kodos, nekā no tās atteikties vispār.