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Computer-Mediated Communication
and Woman's Place

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The world is no longer as it was when Robin Lakoff first published *Language and Woman's Place* (*LWP*) (1975) nearly thirty years ago. The activist feminism of the 1970s, predicated on the premise of women's subordination through patriarchal social, political, and economic systems, has been replaced by generations X and Y, pro-sex feminism, antivictim feminism, antifeminist feminism, and the deconstruction of gender as a meaningful category. Meanwhile, technology in the form of the Internet has cast its web of communication networks across the globe, shrinking distances already reduced by earlier teletechnologies and enabling members of out-of-power groups to seek individual and political empowerment across geographical boundaries. In the current postgender "Internet Age" (as some would have it), Lakoff's classic observation that language used by and about women reflects their subordinate status may seem outmoded, even quaint. After all, although they admittedly got off to a somewhat slow start, aren't women and girls now claiming an equal place in cyberspace alongside men and boys, bonding, debating in computer-mediated chatrooms, and self-publishing on the Web, unconstrained by patriarchy and gender?

So the popular wisdom goes. But popular wisdom, especially when it concerns the Internet, is often wrong. Whether traditional patriarchal gender arrangements have ceased to be relevant on the Internet is an empirical question, one best approached with an open mind and evaluated on the basis of systematic observation. As Lakoff pointed out in 1975, spoken language constitutes an object through which feelings and values can be nailed down and examined. The Internet goes further yet: computer-mediated text is not only observable, it is persistent and self-preserving, an ideal medium in which to mine language for the insights it can provide into social structures and mental states. What, then, does computer-mediated communication (CMC) reveal about language and woman's place?

I have spent the past twelve years investigating this question, bringing methods of linguistic discourse analysis to bear on the interactions that take place in public discussion groups, chatrooms, educational Web forums, and the like. My research and observations of many online contexts have led me to conclude that gender—and gender hierarchy—is alive and well on the Internet and that indeed a number of Lakoff's observations about informal speech apply remarkably well to computer-mediated discourse. At the same time, there are differences, and it behooves us to understand their nature. Has society changed, or does the electronic medium affect gender communication in novel ways? It is also possible that where Lakoff's observations and my own agree, we are both wrong. In what follows, I consider each of these possibilities in turn.

I should state first that my research was not modeled on *LWP* nor initially motivated by it. It is possible that I had not even read Lakoff's book at the time I undertook my first study of gender and CMC, although I cannot be certain of this. Thus I approached the analysis of gender and CMC, in some respects, as a neophyte, with a lack of training but also with fresh eyes. What my eyes saw surprised me and sent me scrambling to the language and gender literature, including to Lakoff's book. But that was later.

Initially, what drew me to study online communication was my increasing dissatisfaction with the popular hype about the invisibility of gender on the Internet—"On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog," a New Yorker cartoon famously proclaimed in the early 1990s—which was belied by my personal experience and powers of direct observation. Not only could I tell perfectly well the gender of most of the contributors to the academic discussion lists to which I subscribed, but I could also see that women were participating less than men, and less than their proportional representation on the lists. I was puzzled, and troubled, by this. I noted my own reactions to certain kinds of behaviors favored by men on the lists—challenging, assertive, often ridiculing behaviors—and formulated a hypothesis that women would be less likely to engage in such behaviors and more likely to find them off-putting. I tested this hypothesis by analyzing the discourse features of female and male participants in an extended discussion on a list for academic linguists and by distributing an electronic questionnaire in which I asked list members about the discussion in question and their reactions to it.

The results of this study were positively Lakoffian. Not only did it turn out that men used measurably more assertive and less polite language than women, but women also expressed more aversion to such language, withdrawing from the discussion or observing it from the margins as a result. Moreover, they displayed features of "women's language" (in Lakoff's terms) and were sometimes trivialized and patronized when they did interact with men. They also received fewer responses to their messages overall (Herring 1992, 1993). Here were academic women and men, communicating in a supposedly gender-blind medium, displaying the

genderlects and gender asymmetries we thought we as a society had left behind years, if not decades, earlier. I concluded that societal sexism runs deep and that technology in and of itself was unlikely to change it. Lakoff said much the same thing in 1975, with reference not to technology but to language. She was reacting to the linguistic determinism favored by some feminists of the time, who maintained that by changing language, one could engineer less-sexist attitudes in speakers. Similarly, Internet studies in the early 1990s were characterized by technological determinism, the belief that technology could change what and how people communicated, leading to positive (including more gender-equitable) social outcomes. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

Or do they? Not all Internet discourse involves women standing politely on the sidelines while men hold forth; diverse contexts of CMC exist. Consider, for example, synchronous chat, typically recreational and typically populated by eighteen-to-twenty-somethings with raging hormones, or so the evidence superficially suggests. Women in chat environments, as my later research revealed, are not particularly polite, although they support one another and "laugh" more than men. Nor are they marginal; rather, they garner considerable attention, typically from men, and typically of a sexual nature (Herring 1998). While some women appear to enjoy this attention, others seek to avoid it by taking on gender-neutral or male pseudonyms in public chatrooms; conversely, men take on female pseudonyms in order to attract sexual attention (Bruckman 1993). For some feminist theorists, such "play" with gender demonstrates that gender has been effectively deconstructed in chat environments and that the playing field has been leveled. Lakoff would, I suspect, have a different interpretation, as do I. As Lakoff points out with respect to women's and men's language more generally, the rewards of choosing to take on a different gender (or "cross-expressing"; Hall 1996: 151) in an online chat are different for women and for men: women avoid unwanted attention (a negative reward), while men gain wanted attention (a positive reward). The fact that many women perceive online sexual attention as undesirable has less to do with a lack of interest in sex than with the demeaning connotations of male heterosexual come-ons in the larger societal context: when targeted indiscriminately at anyone with a female-sounding name or pseudonym, such come-ons communicate that women are only good for sex. No such connotations inhere in sexual come-ons directed toward men. Moreover, the fact that men "become" women in order to have sex and women "become" men in order to avoid it reifies the association of sexuality with women. Thus the seemingly exotic discourse of chatrooms in fact reinforces a rather traditional notion of woman's place as sexual object (see also Herring 2003).

I noted above that women in chatrooms tend to support one another and laugh more than men. That is, they display camaraderie, a feature considered by Lakoff to be more typical of male groups. Although males sometimes show camaraderie (especially in banding together to harass "out-

siders," including women; see, e.g., Herring 1999a), my research has identified a more common axis of gender differentiation involving linguistic politeness. According to this pattern, women preferentially show support and appreciation, or positive politeness (Brown & Levinson 1987), and men violate politeness of both the positive and negative varieties, favoring distancing strategies. That is, a man in a discussion list or a chatroom is more likely than a woman to set himself off from everyone else ("All of you are wrong; I'm right"), while a woman is more likely to align herself with other participants in the discussion ("I agree with X") (Herring 1994, 1996a). These patterns differ from Lakoff's observations about politeness, which associate distancing and formality with women and camaraderie with men (but see Herring 1999b and Herring & Paolillo 2001 for women's use of formal and distancing strategies).

Another difference between my observations and Lakoff's concerns "men's language." Lakoff writes that men tend to speak directly and factually, in observance of Grice's (1991) rules of conversation; women's language is represented as marked or divergent with respect to men's language. In Internet discussion groups, in contrast, women are often more informative and conversationally cooperative than men (Herring 1996b), particularly when men engage in boastfulness, sarcasm, and "flaming" (the exchange of hostile message content). This latter style is in fact highly marked in that it involves violations both of the Gricean maxims of quality, quantity, relevance, and manner and of conventional norms of politeness. Elsewhere, Lakoff refers to the "rough talk" of men and boys, from which girls and women are excluded: "Women are allowed to fuss and complain, but only a man can bellow in rage" (LWP 45). This, it seems to me, is a more apt parallel to online "men's language" than the characterization of men's speech as direct and cooperative, although of course many men are direct and cooperative online, as are many women. It is important not to naturalize "rough" male CMC as conversationally normative, for it is often used to intimidate and harass, and women are often the targets of such intimidation and harassment. This occurs, in most of the cases I have observed, not because women are using "trivial" women's language, but rather in contexts in which women are communicating straightforwardly and assertively, or among themselves (rather than orienting to men), or in a way that could be construed as critical of men (Herring, 1999a, 2002). This, of course, points back to Lakoff: women are damned if they don't (use women's language), and certain men enforce use of women's language by punishing deviance from it through harassment. However, the enforcing mechanism (men's language) is hardly linguistically or ideologically neutral.

It would seem, then, that compared to the characterization presented in LWP, women on the Internet today are more solidary and more assertive, and men are "rougher," in their typical communication styles. To what might these differences, if in fact they exist, be attributed? One possible

explanation is a technologically deterministic one: the Internet made them do it. More than a few Internet scholars have speculated that the text-based electronic medium reduces gender cues and thereby empowers users to speak out without fear of being interrupted (or silenced with a withering look): this might explain greater assertiveness in women. Moreover, these and other scholars have observed that CMC seems to make users more disinhibited and aggressive: this could be taken as an explanation of men's "roughness." What technological determinism does not explain, however, is how (if the medium reduces gender cues) women and men recognize one another's gender, which is necessary in order for women to show same-sex solidarity and men to harass women. Furthermore, a strong technologically deterministic position would predict that women and men would communicate similarly, yet gender differences persist. For these reasons, the properties of the electronic medium do not entirely account for the discrepancy between Lakoff's observations and the findings of research on gender and CMC.

Could it be, then, that society has changed? Thirty years of feminist consciousness raising (including, not insignificantly, *LWP* itself) could have fostered a greater shared awareness of women's subordinate status, accounting for an increase in solidary uses of language. Generations of girls raised in the 1970s and 1980s have inherited a world in which women can be assertive and succeed, at least some of the time. Generation X and Generation Y women, although they often shy away from the word *feminist*, may nonetheless carry less "women's language" baggage than their parents' generation into their online communication. For the sake of the present discussion, let us assume that this is indeed the case. But what of the men? Is flaming a form of antifeminist backlash? Or does the "roughness" of much male CMC simply reflect the influence of a particularly populous Internet demographic: young white males? Whatever the explanation, it appears that as women and girls have advanced into traditionally male territory, men and boys have advanced further (some might say, regressed) into a hypermasculinity characterized by ever more violent acts of linguistic aggression (see also Gilboa 1996).

In the process, however, gender difference in language use is maintained. We still find "men's language" and "women's language" on the Internet, even if the manifestations of each are not identical to those posited by Lakoff for face-to-face speech thirty years ago. Gender differentiation emerges from this historical and cross-medium comparison as a powerful social force, one that leads to the active reproduction of gendered patterns of behavior even under conditions of "bodylessness" and potential neutrality. This is a point of profound significance: the more things change, the more they stay the same. Whereas the surface manifestations of gender differentiation vary across media, the language that reproduces the differentiation still employs politeness to symbolize femininity, and assertiveness to symbolize masculinity, as Lakoff found. More profoundly yet, the same

underlying social hierarchy remains in evidence: women occupy second place in relation to men. We may hope that the surface changes signal the beginning of a move toward a more equal sharing of power and prestige between women and men and that the Internet might help to bring this about, although for now this is mostly speculation. In the meantime, Lakoff's fundamental observation—that linguistic differences reflect and reproduce gender-based status differences—stands affirmed by public CMC on the Internet.

It is also possible that Lakoff and I, each in our respective domains, are wrong. Some feminists are uncomfortable with research that focuses on gender differences and inequality, criticizing such research as reifying dangerous (and by definition, inaccurate) stereotypes. In *LWP*, Lakoff's response is to distance herself from the stereotypical elements in her observations by attributing pure "women's language" and "men's language" to mass media representations; actual communicative behaviors could, and no doubt would, vary. My response is somewhat different. Actual CMC is at times highly gender-stereotypic (see also Hall 1996); accurate description must take this into account. At the same time, women's and men's behavior is of course not uniformly stereotypical; exceptions abound. These too must be acknowledged and their significance considered. The question, it seems to me, is not "Should feminist researchers describe stereotyped behavior?" but rather, "What is the nature of online behavior, and under what circumstances does it follow or diverge from traditional gender norms?" Only then are we in a position to consider what should and can be done if the answers to those questions displease us.

That said, I do not interpret Lakoff as implying that women's secondary status is in any way natural or justifiable, or that women's language is an essential feature of the female sex that cannot be changed, nor do I subscribe to such views myself. On the contrary, by pointing out patterns of gendered behavior, especially those that make us uncomfortable because they naturalize gender inequality, I aim (as does Lakoff, I suspect) to denaturalize and problematize them, precisely so that they can be changed. It seems to me that in the nearly thirty years since its publication, *LWP* has contributed significantly toward this outcome.

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Linguistic Discrimination and Violence against Women

Discursive Practices and Material Effects

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The introduction to Robin Lakoff's *Language and Woman's Place* (*LWP*) (1975) sets out the book's primary purpose — "to provide diagnostic evidence from language use for one type of inequity that has been claimed to exist in our society: that between the roles of men and women" (*LWP* 39). While much of Lakoff's text describes instances of linguistic discrimination, her goals go beyond a description of discriminatory language use. Indeed, she ultimately poses a question about the relationship between linguistic discrimination and social realities: "Does one correct a social inequity by changing linguistic disparities?" (*LWP* 39). With this and other related comments, Lakoff foreshadows a debate that has figured prominently within the field of language and gender and in feminist studies more generally — that is, does a focus on linguistic inequities and their elimination necessarily have any bearing on the eradication of material inequities between women and men? In a variety of contemporary feminist writings, for example, a focus on discourse or discursive practices has often been counterposed with a focus on material realities. Indeed, Michèle Barrett (1992: 201) points to a central issue evident in feminist scholarship that sets the valuing of "words" against that of "things": "Many feminists have traditionally tended to see things be they low pay, rape or female foeticide as more significant than, for example, the discursive construction of marginality in a text or document." In what follows, I want to suggest that a simple dichotomizing of the discursive versus the material does little to illuminate the intersection of the two: that is, *the way that discursive practices can have material effects* or, in Lakoff's terms, the way that linguistic disparities can influence social inequities.

The idea that sexist linguistic practices can adversely influence the kinds of gendered identities women are able to produce was a major impetus behind nonsexist language reform efforts in the 1970s and 1980s. Early work on sexist language, for example, pointed to the detrimental effects, both practical and symbolic, of masculine generics such as *he* and