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"This Discussion Is Going Too Far!"

Male Resistance to Female Participation on the Internet

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A number of telling critiques have been made of the male dominance of computer culture (Kirkup 1992; Kramarae in press; Linn 1985; Turkle 1984; Wajeman 1991). It is only within the past several years, however, that researchers have started to undertake empirical investigations of gender in computer-mediated communication (CMC), the human-to-human text-based interactions that take place by means of computer networks. Although computer network technology was originally hailed as a potentially democratizing influence on human interaction (Hiltz & Turoff [1978] 1993; Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire 1984), it is already becoming apparent that men dominate computer-mediated interaction much as they dominate face-to-face interaction: by "talking" more, by taking an authoritative stance in public discourse, and by verbally harassing and intimidating women into accommodation or silence (e.g., Herring 1993a; Kramarae & Taylor 1993).

In this chapter, we explore what happens when women in mixed-sex public discussion groups on the Internet resist their muted status and attempt to speak out on a par with men. Two examples are described, both of which occurred in academic discussion groups considered to be models of appropriate discourse by their members. One group is associated with a

feminized (and feminist-influenced) academic field, English composition; the other is associated with the field of linguistics, in which feminism has had a very limited influence. In both examples, female members of the groups contributed to a female-introduced topic at a rate equivalent to that of men for a short period of time. Male members reacted in each case by employing a variety of silencing strategies: first they avoided addressing the women's concerns by dismissing them as trivial or by intellectualizing the discussion away from its original focus; then they erupted into anger and accusations when the women persisted in posting messages on the topic; and finally they co-opted and redefined the terms of the discourse as a means of regaining control. In the nonfeminist group, women fell silent in the face of the men's anger and the discussion died. In the feminist-influenced group, women persisted in voicing their concerns despite anger leveled against them, and were successful in claiming the conversational floor for a short period of time. Ultimately, however, the discussion died and the discourse returned to the status quo, with men once again controlling the floor and introducing most of the topics discussed by the group.

These examples reveal some of the mechanisms by which men may attempt to silence female participation when it temporarily challenges male control of the discourse, even in an otherwise collegial academic forum (cf. Lakoff, this volume). They also illustrate the role played by feminism in empowering women to speak up and continue speaking in the face of active discouragement. Yet neither the men's reactions nor the presence or absence of a feminist context alone is sufficient to explain women's overall mutedness in these and similar groups. Even when female participants in one group prevailed in gaining temporary control of the discourse, it had no positive effect on their subsequent participation or on the gender dynamics of the group. This larger reality, in which women retreat to the sidelines while men hold forth in displays of verbal dominance, is indicative of a deeply rooted pattern of female muting and male dominance on the Internet. According to this pattern, repeated individual acts of silencing interact with socialization forces and the male gendering of computer technology to create a larger and more oppressive silencing context.

The present essay is, as far as we know, the first to examine what happens when women participate actively in mixed-sex groups on the Internet. In contrast, much of the previous research on gender "on-line" has focused on establishing women's lack of participation in mixed-sex groups and in computer-mediated communication more generally (Herring 1992, 1993a, b; Kramarae & Taylor 1993; Taylor & Kramarae forthcoming; Wylie 1995). An initial effort was necessary to draw people's attention to this lack,

in that it flew in the face of the popular belief that computer networks, with their absence of physical cues, would make status invisible, and thus promote increased participation by women and other traditionally under-represented groups (Graddol & Swann 1989). From the very first, however, empirical studies of Internet discourse revealed a different reality. Cynthia Selfe and Paul Meyer (1991) found that men and high-status participants participated more than women and low-status participants on MBU, an informal academic discussion group, even under conditions where participants had the option of remaining anonymous. The finding that men participate more than women has since been documented for a number of mixed-sex electronic forums (Balka 1993; Herring 1992, 1993a, b, c; Herring, Johnson, & DiBenedetto 1992; Sproull 1992; Sutton 1994). Men dominate in manner of participation as well, including initiation of new topics (Selfe & Meyer 1991) and use of adversarial language (Broadhurst 1993; Herring 1992, 1993a, c, forthcoming a, b, c; Sutton 1994). Adversarial behavior on the Internet typically renders women silent. This silence, as Laurel Sutton (1994: 517) notes, "could be interpreted as the silence of disapproval, the silence of being fed up, [or] the silence women use when something offensive or threatening is said."

Unable to carry on the kinds of discussion they value, some women remain on mixed-sex lists as *lurkers*, or noncontributing observers (Broadhurst 1993). Others retreat to women-centered and women-only lists, some of which are unapologetically separatist (Hall forthcoming).¹ In these subcultures on the margins of cyberspace, it is men who may be silenced if they attempt to dominate discussion or undermine the premises of the group. Susan Herring (forthcoming a, b, c) finds that the interactive style in female-predominant forums is generally supportive and cooperative, with a high incidence of politeness behaviors such as thanks and apologies, and a low incidence of hostile exchanges, or *flaming*. In part for this reason, female-predominant groups are sometimes described as "safe" places for women on-line (Balka 1993), in comparison with the Internet at large, where flaming is ubiquitous and sexual harassment, come-ons, and even electronic stalking are not unknown (Balsamo 1993; Lewis 1994; Taylor & Kramarae forthcoming). Women-centered electronic discussion groups have also been praised for the opportunities they provide women to come together at a grassroots level to share information, create community, or organize around a cause (Korenman & Wyatt forthcoming; Smith & Balka 1988). Interestingly, while the number of women-only groups on the Internet continues to grow, groups with a men-only policy are virtually nonexistent.

Nevertheless, not all women retreat to the margins, and not all women

who remain in the "malestream" are lurkers. Women sometimes resist the dominant terms of Internet discourse by speaking out in mixed-sex groups, and it is to cases such as these that we now turn.

Two Case Studies: Women Speak Out

In the following pages, we describe two unusual but revealing cases in which women spoke out from a female perspective in mixed-sex groups, and the reactions of male participants to this. We begin by providing background about the two lists, MBU and Linguist, in which the incidents occurred; we then summarize the incidents themselves, the first of which concerned the legitimacy of offering a course on "men's literature," and the second of which concerned the sexist connotations of the word *dog* as used in a billboard advertisement. We then analyze the strategies employed by men to silence (or attempt to silence) female participants, and examine the empowerment strategies employed by women to ensure that their meaning was effectively communicated.

The Lists: MBU and Linguist

The groups in which the acts of silencing took place are in one sense unlikely settings for sexist oppression; both are academic discussion lists frequented primarily by established professionals and graduate students, and both are considered models of decorum according to the standards prevalent within their respective fields. The discussions analyzed here both took place when each list had been in existence for more than a year and a half (more than two years for MBU), and thus their norms of interaction were fairly well established.

At the time of the "men's literature" discussion, in November of 1991, MBU (an acronym for *Megabyte University*) was a relatively small electronic mailing list of around two hundred subscribers that had begun in 1989 as a forum for professionals interested in computers and the teaching of English composition. Many of the subscribers knew one another prior to joining the electronic forum (Selfe & Meyer 1991), and at the time of our observations two years later, the group still retained a somewhat cliquish feel. Nevertheless, members characterized it as friendly and welcoming to newcomers. As the list owner wrote in a posting to a new subscriber, "MBU is a guilt-free, no-fault bitnet list. Lurk or blurt, flame or blame, our electronic arms are open."

MBU is unmoderated—that is, any message sent to the group is posted directly to all subscribers—and messages are typically short, informal, and not uncommonly facetious or irreverent in tone. Topics of discussion that

stray from the group's focus of computers and writing are usually tolerated without complaint.

In November 1991 women made up 42 percent of the subscribers whose gender could be inferred from their names, and men 58 percent. Perhaps because of the feminized nature of the field of English composition, men on MBU are less given to bald disagreement and more given to attenuated and supportive messages, even among themselves, than men on other mixed-sex academic lists such as Linguist. Most participants consider themselves to be feminists or supportive of feminist goals,² and discussion of gender issues on MBU, though not a frequent occurrence, is not unknown. Because of the article on gender and status on MBU published by Selfe and Meyer (the first author being one of the original members of MBU), some male participants are aware of the tendency for men to dominate discussions, and actively encourage more women to participate.

The Linguist list, devoted to discussion of academic issues in linguistics, already had a large subscribership (around two thousand) at the time the *dog* discussion started in July of 1992.³ The forum was started in January 1991 by a wife-and-husband team of academic linguists who also serve as its moderators. Messages are previewed by the moderators and sorted into batches related by topic before being distributed to subscribers. As a consequence, exchange of messages on Linguist is less spontaneous than on MBU, in that there is typically a delay between the time a message is sent and when it is posted.

The list is more formal in other respects as well. Messages are often long and carefully crafted, in some instances more akin to academic essays (complete with glossed linguistic examples and references) than conversational interaction. The overall tone of the discourse is serious and frequently agonistic. Nevertheless, participants comment that the discourse is "reasoned and polite" compared with other electronic forums, especially those associated with the cognate fields of artificial intelligence and computer science.

Women account for 36 percent of subscribers to Linguist, and men 64 percent. Women participate less than their numerical presence would indicate, however, contributing only 20 percent of public messages and 12 percent of words on average (Herring 1993c). Although the subject of language and gender is a vital field of research with a large body of literature and many (mostly female) specialists, it is virtually never a topic of Linguist discussions; indeed the *dog* exchange analyzed here is quite possibly the only such discussion to be attempted in the history of the list to date. Discussion of topics in related disciplines in which women tend to specialize, such as

sociolinguistics (with the exception of dialectology) and discourse analysis, is also rare. Few linguists identify themselves as feminists, and there has never been any public recognition or questioning of why women participate so little on Linguist.

The Discussions: "Men's Literature" and "If Your Date's a Dog"

The discussions examined here were initially selected for analysis because they were the only extended discussions of gender issues that took place during the period we observed each list (six months for MBU; three and a half years for Linguist). Perhaps for this reason, they contain the highest percentage of messages by women of any discussions observed; gender issues, because they speak directly to women's experience as members of the "second sex," constitute one domain in which women can feel qualified to speak as experts. The discussions also initially attracted our interest because they generated uncharacteristic emotion and conflict on each list. It was only later that we realized that in both cases women had been actively silenced by men, and that despite considerable differences in the content and context of each discussion, the means used to do so were similar. To facilitate discussion of these means, the content of each discussion is summarized below.

The MBU discussion began when a tenured male professor, whom we will call Bill Cathcart,⁴ posted a message to MBU in which he described a course he was planning to offer the following semester on "men's literature," and requested additional reading suggestions from members of the group.⁵ The proposed course as he described it would look at "selected works of modern fiction," including works by Robert Bly, Ernest Hemingway, Norman Mailer, and William Burroughs, from the point of view of the men's movement.

This post generated two types of response, what we might call, following Edwin Ardener (1975) and Shirley Ardener (1975), a *dominant* and *subdominant* response. The dominant response was that members of the group obligingly began posting reading suggestions for the men's literature course; all but one of these posts were from men. The subdominant response expressed concern about the legitimacy of offering such a course; all but one member who voiced concern were women. (Later in the discussion, the gender polarization would become absolute: the woman who posted the reading suggestion joined the anti-men's-literature-course group, and the man, a vocal advocate of feminism throughout, eventually publicly supported the course.) The dissenting women pointed out that most literature courses were already effectively men's literature courses,

and expressed concern that once again time and resources would "be devoted in courses and culture at large to men, leaving less space for women's work."

Although this concern was voiced by several women in the group independently, it was initially largely ignored as men continued to post reading suggestions for the course. In frustration, a few women posted messages questioning why their posts were being met with silence, attempting once again to explain the basis for their concerns. Men responded by protesting that women wanted to deny them the opportunity to explore the social construction of their gender. Several, including Cathcart, declared themselves to have been silenced by the women on the list and by the "hegemony" of feminism in the field of English. Women vigorously denied that the field was hegemonically feminist, citing as counterevidence personal experiences of male domination and sexism in their home departments. Meanwhile, other men joined in to support Cathcart, and other women joined in to support the women concerned about the men's literature course. The conflict reached a climax when, after a period of two days in which women's participation rose to equal that of men, three men who had not participated in the discussion previously committed an act unprecedented in the history of the list: they threatened to unsubscribe in protest.

Oddly enough, the threats had the reverse of their intended effect. Most MBU members readily recognized them as a power-play, and the incident shamed a number of men on the list into expressions of contrition. Women finally succeeded in gaining the floor, and the topic of discussion became male hegemony in English departments. The women's success was mixed, however, in that many men dropped out of the discussion, and those who remained avoided responding to individual women by name, thereby diffusing the women's conversational authority. The women's success was also short-lived: when a man produced statistics about participation in the discussion several days later, he easily became the new center of attention. Female participation dropped back down to about 15 percent of the total, where it had been at the outset of the discussion, and remained at that level for the next several months.

In comparison, the discussion on Linguist was shorter and terminated less ambiguously.⁶ The episode began when a female graduate student, Roberta Whalen, posted a message about a billboard she had seen in Salt Lake City. The billboard depicted a Corvette, above which was the slogan *If your date's a dog, get a vet*. The car dealer responsible for the billboard had apparently received criticism about it and had printed a letter in the local newspaper in which he denied it was sexist; *dog*, he maintained, could refer

to either sex. Whalen suspected rather that *dog* is used to refer mainly to an unattractive woman, and was requesting examples of its usage from Linguist subscribers. Her desire, she stated, was to "present this car dealership with a huge list of examples to defeat his claim of gender-equity and show his billboard to be the woman-demeaning message I think it is."

This post can be interpreted as communicating messages on two levels: a literal text requesting assistance in determining the meaning (as reflected in common usage) of the word *dog*, and an implied subtext that assumes and solicits support for resistance to the sexism of the billboard. This distinction is crucial in understanding the gendered response the post eventually attracted.

Initially there were only two responses posted to Linguist, both from men. The men responded to the text of the question, quoting dictionary definitions of *dog* as 'an unattractive person of either sex.' The first man, a published expert on English usage, agreed, however, with Whalen's intuition that *dog* is used primarily to refer to an unattractive woman, although he modified her subtext by asserting that men as well as women would perceive the billboard as sexist. The second man, whom we will call John Bryant, upheld the dictionary definition as authoritative, denying that any sexism was involved.

There were no further postings on the topic until two months later, when Whalen posted a summary of the results of her query. She had received a number of private responses from Linguist subscribers (including, apparently, many from women), and had also conducted an informal investigation of her own into people's interpretation of the billboard. It seems that with the exception of women in their teens and early twenties, who could use the term to refer to an unattractive person of either sex, most people agreed that *dog* is used to refer primarily to women, and that the billboard could be interpreted only in that sense. Whalen's summary, although presented informally, was thorough, documenting judgments and examples provided by Linguist respondents, the expert opinion of the senior editor at Merriam-Webster (whom Whalen had telephoned), the results of Whalen's informal survey (including a discussion of generational differences in usage), the statistical results of a study of the usage of animal terms (including *dog*) conducted by another respondent, a summary of dictionary entries, and a list of bibliographic references. The summary was also long, about six printed pages—one of the longest messages ever posted on Linguist by a woman, although posts of that length or longer by men are not uncommon.

At this point, conflict ensued. Several men, including Bryant, posted messages to Linguist criticizing Whalen's conclusions and methodology,

focusing (in some cases, hyperliterally) on the text and ignoring or denying the legitimacy of the social subtext—that is, the men basically sustained the view that *dog* in the billboard was not demeaning to women. In response, two women posted messages in which they invoked the subtext of societal sexism to maintain firmly that the billboard was indeed demeaning. Other men then responded in anger, protesting that the discussion was "going too far" and accusing the women in the discussion of politically correct censorship and of lacking a sense of humor. Bryant then posted a lengthy summary of the *dog* discussion in which he represented Whalen as methodologically biased, he himself as acting in the spirit of "good empirical research," and the billboard as nonsexist. This message had a ring of finality to it, and there was no further public discussion of the topic.

Mechanisms of Silencing

The end result of both discussions is that women fell silent, even though no satisfactory resolution had been reached in either discussion; indeed, the masculine interpretation ultimately prevailed (the men's literature course was offered as originally planned; concern with the sexist usage of *dog* was delegitimized). Viewed from a broader perspective, the increased participation by women in these examples was only a temporary deviation in the larger pattern according to which women on both lists contribute on the average less than 25 percent. To understand why women do not speak out more in these and similar mixed-sex forums, in this section we evoke broad cultural arrangements involving gender, and then consider in some detail the specific mechanisms of silencing used in these discussions. Our goals in doing this are (1) to identify and name mechanisms we believe are employed widely to deny women significant influence in public discourse, both in computer-mediated discussions and face to face; and (2) to enable readers to recognize these mechanisms more easily by illustrating how they work in actual interaction.

Two broad cultural mechanisms help partially to explain women's limited participation in public discourse. The first is the muted status of women as a subdominant group. In both the men's literature and the *dog* discussions, women spoke out on a topic related to their experience as women—namely, sexism and sex discrimination. It is talk about experiences such as these, which are not shared by the dominant group, that E. Ardener (1975) and S. Ardener (1975) term *subdominant discourses*. The Ardeners observed that the free expression of subdominant discourses may be impeded by the dominant discourse, which lacks categories (such as the necessary feminist context on Linguist) for interpreting and validating such

experiences. Women as a subdominant group are consequently at a disadvantage in articulating their own meanings; they are effectively muted by the arrangements of power within the larger culture (S. Ardener 1975:xii), which in turn become encoded in norms of discourse and in language itself (Spender 1980).

The second cultural mechanism that is relevant here is the lesser speaking rights accorded women in the public domain. It is notable that in both discussions men became openly hostile only when female participation equaled and threatened to exceed male participation in amount; in the *dog* discussion, for instance, Whalen accomplished this by posting a single long message. Amount of talk is correlated with influence and status in the public domain—those who speak more are responded to more, credited with the good ideas that emerge from the discussion, and more likely to be elected group leaders (Hiltz & Turoff [1978] 1993; Wallwork 1978). Spender (1979, 1980) observed that women have a lesser entitlement to speak in public than men, such that when their contribution exceeds 30 percent, they are perceived as dominating the discourse. It stands to reason therefore that when women on MBU and Linguist contributed 50 percent or more, they considerably exceeded their entitlement, provoking the uncharacteristically extreme male reactions described above. Needless to say, such reactions make the goal of fifty-fifty participation difficult to attain, but the problem is ultimately deeper: our perception of how much others speak is biased depending on whether they are female or male.

Nevertheless, there always have been and always will be women who resist culturally imposed limitations on their means of expression—women who devise ways to articulate their meanings despite the handicap of having to speak in a “man made language” (Spender 1980), and who risk censure for inappropriately aggressive behavior by violating the unspoken “30 percent rule” in their attempts to speak out publicly on a par with men; the principal female participants in the men’s literature and *dog* discussions are of this type. In response, those who wish to preserve male discursive hegemony employ a variety of specific silencing mechanisms to ignore, discredit, or co-opt women’s speech as it occurs. In what follows, we describe some of these mechanisms as they were employed by men to silence women, with varying degrees of success, in the men’s literature and the *dog* discussions.

Avoidance

When members of a subdominant group say something that members of the dominant group do not wish to address—for example, because it challenges or is otherwise outside their system of meanings—the initial reaction of the

dominant group may be to avoid acknowledging what was communicated. They may pretend not to have heard it (*lack of response*), misconstrue it in some way so as to divert attention away from the original message (*diversion*), or dismiss it as unimportant in a patronizing or humorous way (*dismissal*).

The initial reaction to women’s attempts to speak publicly as women on the Internet is often lack of response, for example, not acknowledging that a participant or participants have posted messages. Female participants on MBU initially had a hard time getting the men in the group to acknowledge their concerns about the proposed men’s literature course. Nearly two weeks of the discussion went by in which men continued to post reading suggestions (what one woman characterized as “the men’s lit party”), seemingly unaware of the women’s protests. At that point, Pam Smythson, a full professor and one of the more outspoken women on MBU, posted a message about the “silencing” of women in the discussion.⁷

- (1) I am fascinated that my thoughtful [. . .] response on the “men’s lit” thread was met with silence [. . . M]y own fledgling analysis of MBU discourse from last summer suggests that there is a real pattern of male response to males and lack of response to females in *important* topics on MBU (Here I mean socially important). When threads initiated by women die from lack of response that’s silencing; when women do not respond on threads initiated by men for reasons to do with fear (and the fear may be fear of verbal or other reprisal, ridicule, whatever) [. . .]—that’s silencing.

Empirical analysis bears out Smythson’s observations about patterns of response on MBU. During the first third of the men’s literature discussion, messages posted by men received on average slightly more than 100 percent response (that is, there was more than one response for each message posted), compared with an average response rate of only 64 percent for messages posted by women. Moreover, both women and men directed most of their responses to men throughout the discussion: 33 percent of total responses were men to men, 21 percent women to men, 16 percent men to women, and 11 percent women to women (Herring, Johnson, & DiBenedetto 1992).⁸ Women on MBU thus had a harder time than men being recognized as conversational participants in the first place.

Once it becomes impossible to ignore the message the subdominant group is trying to express, the dominant group may deploy tactics to divert discussion away from, or otherwise subvert the communicative intent of, the message. Two types of diversion strategies were employed by men in the

discussions analyzed here: *narrow* (or literal) *focus*, and *intellectualization* (or abstraction).

When MBU women persisted and ultimately succeeded in capturing the men's attention with their messages, male responses tended to ignore the women's communicative intent, focusing literally on some aspect of the text instead. In one such case, a female professor, Ellen Siegal, had drawn a parallel between men's literature courses and King Claudius in *Hamlet*, suggesting that both capitalized on immoral situations for their own gain. In response to this, a male professor, William Bart, began discussing how Shakespeare is taught and interpreted by students in the classroom. This led a female graduate student, Shelley Maples, to complain:

- (2) it's like ellen and many of us are trying to make some points about why this men's lit issue is going to the core and eating away, and the come back is not dealing with the issue but with the text used to make the example. it's frustrating, are you (in general) listening to what's being communicated?

A narrow focus on the literal text is found in male responses in the Linguist discussion as well. Whereas all of the women in the *dog* discussion responded directly to the subtext of societal sexism in Whalen's posts, the men initially ignored or denied it, choosing to argue about dictionary definitions instead. The effect of this kind of response is to exclude the poster's communicative intent by focusing attention narrowly on some isolated (often more formal or technical) aspect of the topic. A particularly egregious example of this tactic occurred in the *dog* discussion after Whalen posted her lengthy summary message. A man posted a two-screen reply picking apart the statistics cited in one of the studies: Whalen had quoted percentages from her source calculated to a tenth of a decimal point, which he asserted was statistically insignificant, given the number of subjects involved (150); the figure should have been "about 40%" instead of 38.7 percent. The message was authoritative and judgmental in tone ("If we claim to be doing science, we should at least be doing it right"), and despite the author's disclaimer that he agreed with Whalen's conclusions, his response undermined her credibility.⁹ The literal-focus tactic avoids addressing the substance of a topic by narrowing it to only those aspects the respondent chooses to recognize, thereby effectively redefining and redirecting what is being talked about.

Intellectualizing, or abstracting away from the topic (often by invoking a theoretical paradigm), is the most space- and time-consuming avoidance tactic employed by men on academic discussion lists. Men who intellectualize tend

to post the longest messages and as a result are successful in derailing the topic of discussion sometimes for considerable stretches, especially when other participants respond in the same vein. For example, at one point in the MBU discussion the question arose as to whether people would feel different about a men's literature course if a woman were to teach it. Bart, the man who would later go off on the Shakespeare tangent, reframed this as an epistemological question: "Are there propositions whose truth depends in strict but non-trivial ways upon who says them?" This was picked up by a male graduate student as "truth vs. persuasion" in a message discussing Aristotle's notions of *logos* and *ethos*, leading a third man, a writing program administrator, to refine the issue as one of "extrinsic *ethos*." Bart then abstracted further by introducing formal logic statements: "If we say 'P is false (because X argues P), but P would be true if it were argued by Y,' we must also concede (except in trivial cases) that in making that statement we are not really concerned with the truth of P" (and so on for several paragraphs). The discussion rambles from this point to Einstein, Piaget, Wittgenstein, and the discovery of self, until finally returning to the topic of gender in a virtually incomprehensible post by an associate professor who abbreviates his name as *sal*:

- (3) Now, about feminine as *other* to masculine perceivers. The answer is yes, ALWAYS [...] UNLESS, there is a fundamental change in epistemological patterns described by Hegel, Kojève, Girard (and Kristeva among many others). How to do that? I'm not convinced that classical rhetoric is the way, although I'm studying it seriously to understand (or read into) sophistic formulations of the epistemological implications of *ethos* and *pathos* with reference to being and becoming (Gorgias) and the whole meditation on complicity (Thracymachus of Calcedon?) as articulated by Bataille and Baudrillard.

Posts such as these not only derail the discussion, but can also intimidate others into quiescence by making them feel intellectually inadequate for not being familiar with all the theories and names the authors mention. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the men here are posturing, staking out the conversational floor through dense and sometimes incoherent bursts of intellectual-sounding noise. In all, this digression generated eighteen messages, all but two of them from men, and twelve (the longest of these messages) from only two men, Bart and *sal*. Although this was a side thread to the main discussion, for a time it monopolized the floor, making it difficult for others to focus attention on the men's literature topic.

Male participants also intellectualize on Linguist, and evidence of this is found in the *dog* discussion. As mentioned above, the primary means by which men attempted to discredit Whalen's conclusion that the billboard was sexist was by focusing on her methodology, although aside from the criticism about decimal points, no concrete methodological criticisms were actually articulated. What the men appeared to object to was the fact that Whalen had an interpretation (and a feminist ideological stance) before she started her investigation, namely, that the billboard was demeaning to women. Therefore it was assumed that she hadn't conducted her investigation scientifically, independent of the procedures she had actually followed. Bryant takes the criticism to a new level of abstraction, however, when he writes:

- (4) I think this discussion is important for methodological reasons. I am troubled by the persistent methodological ambiguities in innatist or rationalist studies of grammar between the role of the linguist as native speaker, the linguist as trained professional, and the linguist as exemplifier of/ possessor of a copy of/ the universal grammar. Perhaps such attempted unities are underwritten by an innatist linguistics only within a rather narrow context of formal syntactic operations. In practice, however, this anti-empirical, example-driven methodology seems to have pervaded many studies of semantic and sociolinguistic issues.

These comments, like those in the MBU example, are so abstracted from the issues at stake that it is difficult to interpret them meaningfully in the context of the discussion. Who is "the linguist" in the *dog* debate? Is Whalen being accused of using "innatist" methodology? In what sense is "universal grammar"—or grammar at all, for that matter—involved in the *dog* discussion? The fact that passages such as these are vague and difficult to interpret makes them both more devastating as criticism and unassailable as assertions. They also divert attention away from the substance of the sexism claim, which is what the men seemed to be most uncomfortable with, as evidenced by their defensive posturing.

The last two avoidance tactics we will mention are *patronization* and *humor*, used in such a way as to dismiss women's concerns as unworthy of being taken seriously. The first men to acknowledge female criticism of the proposed men's literature course responded in a patronizing manner. One teased, "Why are people [especially you ladies—oh God!—Women] so disturbed by studying the Male?" Another suggested that the women were being "a wee bit paranoid" in imagining that men's lit courses would have any adverse effect on women's literature studies. (The women targeted by

this latter characterization firmly rejected it, and the man who offered it later apologized.) Equally dismissive, though in a more academic tone, is Bryant's characterization of Whalen's study as "non-scholarship":

- (5) I can't avoid the impression that the purpose of the *study* reported here is to impose conformity of meaning and expression in order to make an example of the car dealer that posted the billboard. I can certainly understand that—I think this sort of advocacy rather than any sort of scholarship is an important part of the self-understanding of many academics. But surely ambiguity and plurality of meaning need not be sacrificed.

Not only is Whalen engaged in "advocacy" rather than "scholarship," according to this man, but the advocacy has no external, or social, validity; rather, it is a phase she is passing through in a process of self-understanding. This implies that she is young or in any event immature.

Humor was used extensively in the men's literature discussion when it became apparent that women were seriously disagreeing with men on the list. The subject matter of most of the humor was the men's movement. sal signed a post with a spear composed of ASCII characters and the following message:

- (6) Soooo...HHEYYYahHeyaHeyaHeya.....!!!!
 /()\
 1 Grunt
 1 Sniff, sniff
 1
 1sal the spear chucker
 1
 1

Later an anonymous message was posted from "Iron John" at a made-up address: john@MYTHOS.BLY.ORG. A sample of this message is given below:

- (7) HO! Listn to Iron John! Hairy, but wily Hacker and culchur guru!
 Golden Hall not on Syllabus, golden ball in pond! I see Men and Womyn both afrade of Pond, you must dive in, you must Let John Out!!

The "Iron John" post generated a number of responses in a similar vein, including the text of a Zippy the Pinhead cartoon strip about "male bonding." During these exchanges the issue of the legitimacy of the men's literature course was not addressed, and women remained largely silent.

In keeping with the generally serious tone of *Linguist*, the *dog* discussion contained no direct attempts at humor. However, two men defended the Corvette billboard on the grounds that it was intended to be humorous, implying that the women who thought it was sexist lacked a sense of humor. Humor in both discussions was thus invoked as a means to dismiss and hence avoid addressing the serious issues of hegemony and sexism that women had raised, and only men participated in humorous exchanges, although as one man on MBU reflected, "The last few sallies make me wonder: some of us seem maybe to protest too much . . . Are we afraid of something here?"

Confrontation

Discursive strategies such as those described above are often successful in discouraging women from persisting in attempting to communicate their own meanings. Sometimes, however, women persist despite the obstacles thrown up in their path. When this happened in the men's literature and the *dog* discussions, men retreated to the next line of defense—confronting women with anger and accusations.

Consider what happened in the *dog* discussion. Two men responded critically to Whalen's summary, one focusing on the statistics as described above, and the other, Bryant, accusing Whalen of "doing violence to the data" by suppressing the implications of the billboard that "don't fit her particular political agenda." Bryant focused on one of the dictionary definitions of *dog* as 'a man of low moral character' in order to assert that the billboard was not demeaning to women:

- (8) When [people] read the billboard, they might be more likely to conclude that the *dog*, i.e., person of low character, was a male. Right?

To this, two women responded firmly that based on their understanding, such was not the case. Neither of the women's messages was angry or insulting in tone—they were simply firm in disagreeing. One of the responses came from a high-profile female professor of linguistics, Arlene Price:

- (9) wrong, as I see it. sure, _dog_ can refer to a male low-life. but i know of NO stereotype that says females will attract males of high moral character if they have a fancy sportscar. in contrast, there is a very well-entrenched stereotype that males will attract good-looking females if they have a fancy sportscar. thus which sense of this polysemous item is selected is not random—context counts.

In response, however, three men, none of whom had previously participated in the *dog* discussion, posted messages accusing the women of censorship in the name of "political correctness," and of lacking a sense of humor. One such response began with alarmed-sounding exclamations:

- (10) This discussion is going a bit too far! The goal of the original posting was apparently to gather data to pressure the car-dealer into taking his sign down because the poster found it offensive. Perhaps the next target should be t.v. shows like Miami Vice? Nobody has ever produced any evidence that you can change the way people think by suppressing the public expression of their thoughts.

Another man concludes with a rhetorical question: "So I wonder: is there humor after PC?" Although none of the men allude in their protests to the amount or nature of women's participation in the discussion, it was only when other women chimed in and supported Whalen's interpretation (pushing the number of words contributed by women up to that point to an unheard-of 77 percent of the total) that men were moved to protest the "sexism" interpretation in strong (for *Linguist*) terms.

The correlation between male protests and amount or persistence of female participation might be dismissed as a coincidence were it not for the fact that a similar pattern is evident on MBU. There were two days in a row during which women posted more messages than men in the men's literature discussion. This came about not because men on MBU posted any less, but because women's rate of posting increased, in part because new women had entered the discussion, and in part in response to a call by Smythson for more female participation. This increase in female posting activity was closely followed by two events. First, men began to complain of being silenced by women on the list and in the field of English more generally. Cathcart, the original poster on the men's literature course, articulates this position most eloquently and at greatest length. A portion of one of his posts is reproduced below:

- (11) I've been pretty circumspect about posting anything to the net on this issue without thinking it through carefully first, and I suspect many of the men have as well. I feel I am operating, both in my department and nationally in the field, in a theoretical and critical environment that is hegemonically feminist, and that I'd best be careful what I say and how I say it. [...] Look what happens when we propose to go beyond or away from feminism in any fashion: we get bashed, guilt-tripped. [...] What's at stake here is, indeed, about power relations, but what academic feminists seem not to

be able to admit is how powerful they indeed are within this discourse community. That is why men have been silent lately, and it's silencing just like the silencing women suffer outside the academy. [...] I see this, to tell the truth, at this time and place, as bullying. Ellen and Shelley, you may not feel very powerful outside this net or this discourse community, but here on the inside you've come very close to shutting all of us men up and down.

In a similar vein, other men commented that they "weigh nearly every word [they] say [...] with this kind of topic"; that they are "staying silent" because the likelihood of misinterpretation makes it "not worth talking"; or that they feel there is "a PC build-up of bias" against them. Judging by some of the messages protesting to this effect, "silencing" for men involves having to think carefully about what they say before they say it, or possibly not saying something that they otherwise would have said. No doubt these men are experiencing in small measure what most women experience as a way of life; nevertheless, in objective terms the men can hardly be said to be silent in the discussion, because they contributed 70 percent of the words overall. Moreover, the post by Cathcart quoted in part above is 1,098 words long, the longest single message in the entire discussion, and four other lengthy messages were contributed by men on the same day as well. This illustrates how subjective the notion of "silence" can be—one feels subjectively silenced anytime one is constrained from speaking to the full extent of one's assumed entitlement.

The second confrontational event followed a day later: three men threatened to cancel their membership to the group in protest over the "tone" of the men's literature debate, which they described as "contentious," characterized by "anger," "insults," "vituperation," and "vilification." One of the men, Jim Johnson, explicitly blames the contentiousness on those who criticized Cathcart's course:

- (12) In the collegial spirit of MBU, Bill asked for suggested readings in a course he wants to offer, and instead of suggestions he's received vilifications. I'll check periodically on Usenet, and when MBU becomes a collegial forum again I'll sign on.

Women are effectively accused of "vilifying" Cathcart and of being "uncollegial," despite the fact that the only direct vilification to have occurred was in messages posted by Cathcart himself, in which he accused two of the women of "bullying," "bashing," and "guilt-tripping" men on the list.

No doubt this extreme reaction is not exclusively due to the fact that women's participation rose to exceed that of men for two days in a row—

had women participated as enthusiastically in support of male views, the reaction would likely have been different. It is striking, however, that this was the only time on MBU when women participated as actively, or more actively, than men on a major topic, and it is also the only time (possibly in the history of the list) that anyone has threatened publicly to unsubscribe. Similarly, it is striking that the *dog* discussion on Linguist was one of only two times that women have (started to) participate more than men on any topic, and both times the discussion was cut off prematurely by male protests.

Expression of anger is a powerful intimidation mechanism, especially when used against women, who, in mainstream American culture, are socialized to please others and avoid conflict. Women who speak out are implicitly told: Your behavior is inappropriate and violates standards of what is socially tolerable; if you persist, you may be responsible for driving decent peace-loving people away and (by implication) ultimately destroying the harmony of the group. The effect of this strategy in the Linguist discussion was to silence any further commentary by women.

Yet, anger is a two-edged sword, for in addition to intimidating others, it reveals that one is vulnerable, that something caused one to lose some self-control. In the MBU discussion, male threats to unsubscribe from the list were perceived by the group as a sign of weakness and an admission of guilt in the charges that men were attempting to silence women in the discussion. As one of the regular female participants, Alice Cass, commented:

- (13) Sorry if I'm being dense, but I don't see anything in the exchange of messages on men's lit that I could rightly call "vilification." But I think I could accurately call Jim Johnson's farewell address a clear instance of "silencing," figuratively tossing an insult over his shoulder as he slams the door behind him.

Men were also quick to castigate the would-be unsubscribers, perhaps to clear themselves of the onus that immediately fell on that group. A successful writer and high-profile MBU participant, Mitchell James, wrote:

- (14) The calls for boycott (pun intended) take on the quality of plain old (GeorgieBoy style, Stormin' igNorin'em) powerplay, and tend to cast a naked light upon the thoughtless and clearly absurd claims that women hold disproportionate (or any substantial) power in this or any other academic discourse.

Another man described the men who boycotted as "sissies," and yet another man in referring to the incident characterized male academics as

"gonad heads." Only one of the men who threatened to unsubscribe actually did; another was simply silent; and the third remained an active participant, contritely commenting later, "I can't believe I ever considered leaving."

Suddenly men were virtually tripping over themselves to say the politically correct thing. The man who had threatened to unsubscribe but remained and the other man who actually did unsubscribe both sent messages (the latter from outside the list) assuring the group that their desire to unsubscribe "had nothing to do with the men's movement/women's movement at all"; indeed they appreciated "a lively debate on gender issues" and could "think of few more worthwhile issues than the nature of what we do and who we really are." Men suddenly agreed that "the cultural game is stacked against women. This prejudice [...] is so absurd, so stupid, so wasteful that it would be worthy of only laughter and amazement were it also not so evident, so painful, so tragic." Of course, these men themselves "do not consider anybody inherently better or worse at anything simply because they are biologically this, that or the other." One or two men even went so far as to intimate that the men's literature course might be problematic after all.

The women, it seemed, had won the day. Their persistence and, ultimately, the men's going too far in resisting them and embarrassing themselves in the process had finally won them the conversational floor and the right to control the topic, which then became the problem of male hegemony in English departments. Women even began getting more responses to their messages (up from 69 percent to 89 percent), and the rate of response to male messages dropped (from more than 100 percent to 72 percent). In the words of one woman, although it took "a small war on MBU" to raise people's consciousnesses, and although women continue to have problems in being heard generally, she was "heartened by the latest responses."

Co-optation

What happened next on MBU illustrates what is perhaps the most pervasive and subtle silencing mechanism of all: male co-optation of the terms of the discourse. Through the use of this mechanism, men take over and reformulate women's ideas as their own, in the process often putting a spin on them that is consistent with their own goals. The ultimate outcome is that men once again become the authorities and do most of the talking, and women sink back into a muted condition. There are clear examples of co-optation at work in the MBU and the Linguist discussions, both occurring after the expressions of anger directed toward female participants. These examples appear to have the function of reclaiming the terms of the discourse for men

after they had lost some ground by being forced to acknowledge women's bid for the discursive floor.

Consider first the men's literature discussion. After the climax of the "war" had passed, women moved on to a new topic, but men spent considerable time commenting on and reconstructing what had happened. The eloquent quotation from James cited above is a good example of this. In this passage, James performs two acts of co-optation: first, he interprets the male threats to unsubscribe as "calls for boycott," thereby defining them as organized, politically motivated acts of resistance, and immaturely motivated ones at that (cf. the pun on *boy*). This proved to be an influential turn of phrase, because the label *boycott* and its associated connotations were taken up by others in describing the actions of the unsubscribers in subsequent messages. Second, in evoking "the thoughtless and clearly absurd claims that women hold disproportionate (or any substantial) power in [...] any [...] academic discourse," and indeed in characterizing the "boycott" as a power play, James rewords assertions that had already been made (in the case of the former, repeatedly) by women in the discussion. However, others then respond to him and credit him rather than the women as the source of the ideas. For example, one man writes:

- (15) More disturbing is the claim that feminist politics are now dominant in the humanities. Let me be the first to second Mitchell James' reply to that [quotes James's post]:

Feminist politics are by no stretch of the imagination dominant at my institution—or any other academic institution or organization I know about.

Ironically, this exchange exemplifies a concern expressed by Maples early in the discussion about the men's literature course: "My concern is that once again the questioning process is only being validated because it is articulated by a man's voice, ... while once again, the viability of women's voices are jammed out." The basic strategy here seems to be to keep talking and articulating one's own interpretation of events. It having been determined by the outcome of the "war" that the topic of discussion was feminism, men actively started talking about feminism, sounding in some cases more feminist than the women. After the men had regained control of the discourse in this manner, they moved on to other topics.

Another exercise of co-optation occurred in response to statistics posted later by one of the men about participation in the men's literature discussion. The statistics showed that men had posted the most to the discussion, and moreover that three men—sal, Bart, and Catheart—had together

contributed one-third of all words posted by men. Bart responded by redefining *silencing*, one of the key terms in the debate, such that men can claim to be silenced even when they talk more:

- (16) [I]t doesn't necessarily follow that the one with the most words dominates the conversation or that the one with the least is silenced. I have often not felt silenced in conversations in which I said little or nothing. And I have often felt silenced in conversations in which I did a disproportionate share of the talking. (Don't we all feel silenced when a lecture goes sour, for instance?) Whether I feel silenced or not is not a function of how much I say but of whether I feel that my premises have been fairly addressed.

By redefining silencing to include how one feels "when a lecture goes sour," Bart strips the term of its sociopolitical significance and renders it banal; by reversing the association of amount of talk with power, he discursively creates a universe in which men can do a disproportionate share of the talking and not only do women have no right to feel silenced but the men can declare themselves to be silenced on other grounds. Women emerge in this conceptualization as without recourse, and men with justification for whatever they do. Fortunately, although two or three other men (including sal) supported dismissing the statistics as unimportant, there is no evidence that anyone other than its originator accepted Bart's reversed definition of silencing.

The *dog* discussion also offers an excellent example of co-optation in the final message of the discussion, which was posted by Bryant. To begin with, Bryant includes as the subject header of his post *Summary: "dog" as sexist language*, exploiting the common practice on Linguist for responses to a query to be collected and summarized in a single message. However, this is normally done by the person who posted the query, in this case Whalen. For Bryant to co-opt her position in this way is to speak "for" her, when in fact he had spoken "against" her throughout the discussion. Bryant summarizes the discussion in only three lines, then spends sixty-nine lines reiterating his criticisms of Whalen's position, in which he asserts, "So again, the [...] slogan is simply not sexist per se." He goes on to say that "[women in the discussion] seemed to adopt a traditionalist, somewhat Puritanical [sic] valuation of the billboard in question. [...] They] have not agreed on any statement of sociolinguistic value." Furthermore, he dubs Whalen's methodology "anti-empirical" and the studies she cites "marked by methodological sloppiness." In contrast, by criticizing Whalen, Bryant suggests that he is doing "good empirical research":

- (17) [A] respondent claimed that I was "bending over backwards" to find possible motives for the auto dealer. I accept and applaud this characterization of good empirical research. I claim that this type of thoroughgoing critique of a theory is the only way to avoid canonizing one's theoretical and personal prejudices.

According to this version of reality, the billboard is defined as nonsexist, Whalen and her research efforts are discredited, and the author himself is credited with doing superior research, even though in actuality he has done nothing but post messages to Linguist. This is a blatant attempt by Bryant to twist the terms of the discourse to his own ends, and it is unfortunate that it stands as the last word in the *dog* discussion.

In summary, men in both discussions responded similarly to women's active participation: they first avoided addressing the women's expressed concerns; then, when women persisted, they turned on them with anger and accusations and finished off by co-opting key terms and definitions in the discussion, thereby reclaiming control of the discourse retrospectively.

Strategies for Empowerment

There is another side to these interactions, namely, the strategies employed by women to make themselves heard. Although women were ultimately silenced, for a time they were not silent at all. Moreover, MBU women were successful in effecting a temporary reversal of power relations, determining what was talked about, and how, for both women and men. In this final section we consider the strategies employed by women in the men's literature and *dog* discussions, why they were effective, and how they might have been maximized to bring about more successful outcomes.

First, and most important, women stepped out from the sidelines and attempted to communicate women-centered meanings in mixed-sex public forums. This required them to overcome the cumulative effect of past silencings—to try again even though they might feel discouraged or pessimistic about the eventual outcome. Nearly every woman who spoke out in the men's literature discussion also wrote of feeling tired or discouraged. As Shelley Maples expressed it:

- (18) it's tiring to feel so continually on the defensive about our experience/perspective (our = women's). [...] We all—men and women—want to be heard, but it gets wearing feeling like i'm so frequently, when speaking/politicizing my voice as "a woman" speaking on the defensive. [This is] why i suspect many of the women on line reading this have been silent, have no energy, feels too much like "one more time."

Nevertheless, a number of women did speak, even though it required them to engage in conflict, which many commented they found distasteful. Furthermore, women persisted in speaking, despite the resistance they encountered. When they were ignored or misconstrued the first time, they said the same thing again, rephrasing and elaborating, committed to getting their point across. Ultimately, persistence proved to be an effective tool of subversion, for in persisting, women made it difficult for men to ignore them or carry on with the dominant status quo. Indeed, had women continued to persist when instead they fell silent, the final outcome of the discussions might well have been different.

Persistence in these discussions meant not just continuing to speak out but keeping the discussion focused and on track despite attempts to dismiss, distort, and derail it. Women in both discussions were highly consistent in communicating the same primary message throughout the discussion, whether it be why they were concerned about the men's literature course or the sexist connotations of *dog*. By and large, they were also consistent in the direct, concerned, and matter-of-fact tone of their communication, especially compared with the men, whose messages ranged in tone from self-satisfied to patronizing to defensive to angry to contrite, and who repeatedly attempted to change the topic or go off on tangents.

Related to consistency of focus through time is solidarity or consistency of perspective across individuals. Remarkably, no woman disagreed with any other woman in either discussion.¹⁰ Rather, women supported one another through their common stance in the discussion and through messages acknowledging and responding to what other women had said. An example of a supportive message of this type from each discussion is given below:

(19) to Ellen Siegal:

thank you for not speaking for but supporting and reflecting on the message i posted. i felt somewhat stunned by having it met with the response "a wee bit paranoid"

what's next? hysterical? and does not such a response reinforce the point of concern both of us are expressing?

again, many thanks.

shelley

[To Roberta Whalen:] Thanks for this interesting dialogue about yet another instance of offensive terms describing women.

The fact that women presented a unified front was no doubt responsible in part for men's accusations that they were being silenced or censored by a

"PC" force, even though in the case of the Linguist discussion only four women were involved, and three of them posted only once.

Finally, women on MBU were aware of silencing mechanisms used by men against them, and identified them when they occurred, constructing a metadiscursive commentary that proved to be a powerful form of resistance against silencing. Thus, when men initially ignored messages by women, Smythson and Maples posted messages pointing out that men were ignoring them. When men then responded patronizingly, Maples, Smythson, and others pointed this out as well and objected. When Bart intellectualized, Siegal accused him of intellectualizing. When three men threatened to unsubscribe from the list, Cass called it a power play and others (including many men) quickly followed suit; the men thus stood revealed and ultimately embarrassed by the irrefutable evidence of their attempts at suppression. Indeed the only silencing behavior the women did not name was co-optation, which was disguised in the form of agreement with feminist views, and their failure to do so ultimately led to their discursive gains being co-opted.

The presence of a feminist context facilitates the successful use of the naming strategy. MBU participants, steeped in feminism in their academic field, are sufficiently aware of the nature of discursive silencing to be able to recognize and name many of its manifestations, and most men express willingness to try to break out of traditional dominance patterns, making it possible for women and men to engage in metadiscourses about their own patterns of interaction. The situation is very different on Linguist. Few linguists understand or care about feminism, in part because mainstream linguistics has tended to marginalize discussion of language-related issues of social relevance. As a consequence, the female linguists who wish to engage with male colleagues about such issues have a difficult time; few terms are shared between them, and the women themselves may not be fully aware of how they are being silenced in Linguist interactions.¹¹ Linguist is also unusual by computer-mediated discussion-group standards in that it is virtually devoid of self-reflection or metadiscursive interaction; indeed, an attempt by a woman to respond metadiscursively in the *dog* discussion was preempted by the moderators of the list (see note 9). Yet the ability to draw attention to oppressive interactional patterns as they are taking place is a necessary prerequisite to changing such patterns.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have presented a close analysis of two computer-mediated mixed-sex discussions in which women participated actively. These

discussions are of special interest in that they serve as test cases for the assertion that computer-mediated communication equalizes patterns of interaction between the sexes. Our analysis reveals that men in the groups employed numerous mechanisms to silence the women, including resorting to threats to withdraw from the group and cries of "This is too much!" when the amount of women's contribution to the discussion exceeded 30 percent. The men's reactions reveal clearly that women in such groups are not expected to take the lead in any topic of discussion, not even temporarily, let alone participate on an equal basis with men in the discourse of the group overall.

We believe that this finding helps to explain why many women on the Internet feel more comfortable in women-centered and women-only groups, and why men have no need for men-only groups: women-centered groups are the only places in which women set the terms of the discourse; men set the terms of the discourse everywhere else. That is, in keeping with the observation made by MBU women that all literature courses (except for specially labeled women's literature) teach men's literature, we suggest that all or most computer-mediated discussion groups (except for specially labeled women-centered groups) are men-centered. This state of affairs can be attributed in part to the ongoing success that men have had in defining computers and computer networks as male domains; it is more difficult for women to obtain access to computers, and women tend to feel less confident of their technical abilities even when they have used computers the same number of years as men,¹² although this may be changing for the younger generation (Kaplan & Farrell 1994). At the same time, the gender patterns found in computer-mediated interactions are so similar to those found in face-to-face interaction and in American culture at large that one cannot escape the suspicion that the electronic medium in fact changes things very little—its principal advantage may be in allowing users (and investigators) to see more clearly the asymmetrical aspects of communication that would otherwise go by in speech too quickly to be noticed.

Finally, and most important, the results of this study reveal that mutedness is not simply a condition assigned to women through early socialization nor an inevitable consequence of women's status as members of a culturally subdominant group but, rather, is actively constructed and enforced through everyday discursive interaction (cf. Houghton, this volume). The good news is that discursive oppression can be subverted assuming participants know what to look for. By recognizing and exposing silencing mechanisms in public conversation, we take the first step toward breaking the male stranglehold on control of public discourse on the Internet and elsewhere.

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Notes

1. Examples of lists with a separatist philosophy are *Systers*, a list for female computer professionals; *Sappho*, devoted to discussion of issues of importance to lesbian and bisexual women; and *SWIP*, a discussion list for the Society for Women in Philosophy.
2. In response to an electronic survey administered to MBU subscribers and reported on in Herring, Johnson, and DiBenedetto [1992], 100 percent of respondents of both sexes said that they considered themselves to be feminists or strong supporters of feminist principles.
3. As of March 1994, the number of subscribers to both MBU and *Linguist* had more than doubled.
4. All names of MBU and *Linguist* participants that appear in this paper are pseudonyms.
5. The men's literature discussion extended from November 7 to December 15, 1991. It comprises 46,888 words contributed by 59 people in 242 messages. Broken down by gender, the proportions are as follows: words—men 70 percent, women 30 percent; participants—men 70 percent, women 30 percent; messages—men 64 percent, women 36 percent.
6. The *dog* discussion, which consists of three messages posted to *Linguist* on July 7, 1992, and eleven more between September 22 and October 19, 1992, comprises 6,322 words contributed by 10 people in 14 messages. Broken down by gender the proportions are as follows: words—men 41 percent, women 59 percent; participants—men 60 percent, women 40 percent; messages—men 57 percent, women 43 percent.
7. All messages are reproduced with the original spelling and punctuation preserved.
8. The remaining 19 percent of messages were directed to the group as a whole.
9. We later learned, through personal communication with the involved parties, that there was a suppressed sequel to this exchange. As it turns out, the woman who had supplied Whalen with the statistics was a graduate student, and the statistics were part of her master's thesis. This was her first public posting (in this case, indirectly posted) to a discussion group, and she was devastated by the mean-spirited tone of the men's responses. Her female supervising professor attempted to post a message to *Linguist* protesting the uncollegiality of the responses but was discouraged from doing so by the *Linguist* moderators, who no doubt wished to avoid provoking conflict on the list. Thus, to all public appearances women fell silent and implicitly acceded to the men's methodological criticisms, when in fact at least one protest was attempted but suppressed.

10. The only possible exception to this may be when a man and a woman were posted a short message on MBU complaining about affirmative-action policies in university hiring. Siegal maintained that such policies were still necessary. This exchange, however, was not directly related to the men's literature course.
11. For example, when Linguist subscribers were asked in an anonymous electronic questionnaire why they had not contributed to a certain lively discussion, women and men gave identical reasons (nothing to add, not enough time), and both equally said they found it interesting. Nevertheless, men contributed 92 percent of the words in the discussion, and women only 8 percent—clearly something was very different about their experiences of the discussion. In interpreting these results, Herring (1993b) suggests that women felt excluded from what they perceived to be a male-male conversation.
12. Thus in a survey of Linguist subscribers, 13 percent of women reported feeling "hesitant" in using computers, compared with 0 percent of the men, even though respondents of both sexes had used computers for eleven years on the average (Herring 1992, 1993a).

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4

The "Father Knows Best" Dynamic in Dinnertime Narratives

Elinor Ochs and Carolyn Taylor

Historical and sociological studies of gender have pursued the plethora of ways in which cultural concepts of gender impact social life, especially institutions such as the family, the church, the workplace, and the state. Of critical importance to all gender research is the idea that gender ideologies are closely linked to the management of social asymmetries. As Marie Withers Osmond and Barrie Thorne (1993:593) concisely put it, "Gender relations are basically power relations." Notions of patriarchy, male authority, male domination, and gender hierarchy have gained considerable intellectual vitality within feminist argumentation. The import of gender pervades all levels of analysis, from historical and ethnographic studies of gender ideologies, structures, and customs to interactional studies of gendered activities and actions. From a poststructuralist perspective, we need both macro- and microanalyses to illuminate continuity and change in the rights, expectations, and obligations vis-à-vis the conduct, knowledge, understandings, and feelings that constitute the lived experience of being female or male in society.

The present chapter addresses gender asymmetry in middle-class European American families through an examination of a single social activity: narrating a story or a report over family dinner. While recognizing that