

Women's Language in Eighteenth Century English Dramas*

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I

There are said to be some universal differences between men and women in their use of language. Peter Trudgill says "Language, like other forms of social activities, has to be appropriate to the speaker using it. This is why, in many communities, men and women's speech is different."¹ The English language is not exceptional in this regard.

"On the average, females have more fat and less muscle than males, are not as strong, and weigh less."² The linguistic differences are perhaps not as easy to explain as the physical ones, and we must notice that there are two tendencies in linguistic sex differentiation: sex-exclusive and sex-preferential.³ The former deals with separate male and female languages, while the latter deals with languages across both sexes. There are sex differences in word choice in various languages. The Japanese language, for example, has the sex-exclusive usage shown in word choice. About the case of the language, Ronald Wardhaugh points out:

Japanese women show they are women when they speak, for example, by the use of a sentence-final particle *ne*. In Japanese, too, a male speaker refers to himself as *wasi* or *ore* whereas a female uses *watasi* or *atasi*.⁴

Compared with the Japanese language, the English language shows less gender difference. English speaking men and women show certain tendencies in choosing words and phrases. It is said that it is hard to determine gender in English, so we find there exists such a reporting phrase as "he said" or "she said." Like English, the sex-preferred differentiation seems to be prior to the sex-exclusive differentiation in the western languages.

This study is concerned with women's language in the eighteenth century through the following dramas from the period: Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *The*

School for Scandal [hereafter cited as *SS*] (1775) and *The Rivals* [hereafter cited as *R*] (1777); Oliver Goldsmith's *The Good-Natur'd Man* [hereafter cited as *GN*] (1768) and *She Stoops to Conquer* [hereafter cited as *SC*] (1773); George Colman and David Garrick's *The Clandestine Marriage: A Comedy* [hereafter cited as *CM*] (1766).⁶ Goldsmith and Sheridan are certainly the greatest dramatists of the period, and their plays are the only ones from the eighteenth century which readers and playgoers of today still keep high in favour. In addition to Goldsmith and Sheridan's plays, there are a number of significant eighteenth century plays which can be read with pleasure for their own sake, and for their sidelights on the life and interests of the time. *The Clandestine Marriage* is also among them. Those plays used here are contemporary with one another in their composition, which leads us to expect to see a certain linguistic commonality in female speech of the time.

II

Historically speaking, the study of women's language has been promoted and developed rapidly since the 1970s in the West. In this period, the women's movement in America had seriously called into question the relation between men and women in society. Especially, sociolinguists and anthropologists "are increasingly aware of the fact that sex, like social class or subcultural group, is a variable which strongly affects speech."⁷ The recent studies of women's language indicate that syntax, intonation and pronunciation in spoken English all vary as a function of the sex of the speaker.

It was Robin Lakoff who did the most complete analysis of women's language. She argues that language gives concrete expression to implicit social norms.⁸ Actually, her argument is apt to go so far as to antagonize men. She insists that sex differences in language usage not only reflect different roles, but also reflect unequal roles or statuses. Women have been inferior and less valued in society. Dennis Baron remarks that "men sought to limit the range of women's activities to domestic sphere of housekeeping and child rearing . . . Men have also tried to limit the range of women's linguistic activity to home and hearth."⁹

Lakoff and other scholars have identified twelve tendencies suggesting female language peculiarities:

- ① Certain words (e.g. "mauve" and "pink") are used almost solely by females.
- ② Women use "empty adjectives" such as "divine" and "cute."
- ③ Women are fond of using interrogatives. Their favourite tag questions (e.g. "It's a nice day, isn't it?") allow them to make a statement without assertion. Furthermore, women often pronounce declarative statements with a rising intonation. In response to a direct question, they answer in question forms (e.g. "When will dinner be ready, honey?", "Oh, about eight o'clock, darling?").
- ④ Women use modifiers or hedges (e.g. "sort of" and "I guess . . .") which decrease assertiveness in statements.
- ⑤ Intensives (e.g. "so" and "excessively") are often used.
- ⑥ Females respect polite grammar (e.g. "Won't you please close the door?" vs "Close the door.").
- ⑦ Women use exclamations (e.g. "What a cute boy he is!").
- ⑧ Women less often utter profanities and taboo words such as "bloody" and "shit."
- ⑨ Female often use modal verbs and adverbs (e.g. "Perhaps I may be mistaken.").
- ⑩ Women finish their statements with "pull-up" sentences (e.g. "Did you ever?").
- ⑪ Females prefer paratactic structures (e.g. "I got up and I went to work.") to hypotactic one (e.g. "After I got up, I went to work.").
- ⑫ Women avoid accurate expressions of quantity (e.g. "about five or six books").¹⁰

III

The Lives of eighteenth century women were often recorded in the writings of men. Jonathan Swift was of the opinion in his "The Furniture of a Woman's Mind" (1727), that they were a kind of unintelligent and talkative:

A set of Phrases learn't by Rote;
A Passion for a Scarlet-Coat;
When at a Play to laugh, or cry,
Yet cannot tell the Reason why:
Never to hold her Tongue a Minute;
While all she prates has nothing in it. (1-6)¹¹

Women were less familiar with rhetoric. The art was necessary for them to be elegant and fashionable in society. "Speaking like a lady" helps to keep females "in their place." Evidence of this can be found in Sheridan's *The Rivals* (1.2).¹² Mrs Malaprop lays stress on the great importance of speaking and writing for girls:

but above all, Sir Anthony, she should be mistress of orthodoxy, that she might not mis-spell, and mis-pronounce words so shamefully as girls usually do; and likewise that she might reprehend the true meaning of what she is saying.

Here, we notice that women and girls' speech was spoken ill of and even made fun of by men at that time. Women's language is frequently the object both of faint praise and outright damnation. This ill estimation comes from the bias that men's speech was assumed to be the norm while women's was ignored or barely noticed.¹³ This is attributed to the fact that women had less access to literacy than men before our time. In the eighteenth century, the ephemeral nature of women's speech was criticized by an anonymous contributor to *The World* (6 May 1756):

Such is the pomp of utterance of our present women of fashion; which, though it may tend to spoil many a pretty mouth, can never recommend an indifferent one. And hence it is that there is so great a scarcity of originals, and that the ear is such a daily sufferer from an identity of phrase, whether it be *vastly, horridly, abominably, immensely, or excessively*, which, with three or four more calculated for the same swiss-like service, make up the whole scale or gamut of modern female conversation.¹⁴

This data reinforces the sociolinguistic phenomenon discussed earlier. Women develop such intensives as "vastly" and "extremely," and they are fond of the intensifying adverbs on trivial occasions. In *GN* (1), Miss Richland says "But is she seriously so handsome?" when she is told about Mr Honeywood's "professed admirer." Here "so" is a purely intensive modifying the adjective "handsome." The intensive "so" is noted for a women's favourite adverb, what is called "feminine so."¹⁵ Females' speech is often full of "so." In *R* (3.3) Lydia exclaims "I am so astonished! and so terrified! and so overjoy'd!"

Mrs Croaker: we are extremely honoured by this honour (*GN*; 2)/Garnet: she . . . was so very bad at keeping her own (*Ibid.*)/Miss Richland: Sir, I'm infinitely obliged to your intentions (*GN*; 3)/Mrs Hardcastle: you are most miraculously polite and engaging (*SC*; 4)/Maria: Such Reports are highly scandalous (*SS*; 1.1)/Lydia: I, I, I suppose you are perfectly satisfied (*R*; 4.2)

It is often said that swearing is the most remarkably different linguistic feature between men and women's speech. G. L. Brook says "words with religious associations are often maltreated when used as oaths" as "God becomes *gosh*."¹⁶ Both men and women use such mild oaths as "gosh" and "'sdeath [= God's death]". Arthur Murphy, in a article in *Gray's Inn Journal* of 29 June 1754, suggests that there should be distinct male and female swear words:

A Distinction might be made between a Kind of Sex in Words, according as they are appropriated to Men or Women; as for Instance, *D---n my Blood* is of male Extraction, and *Pshaw, Fiddlestick*, I take to be female. . . .¹⁷

In *SC* (5), Mrs Hardcastle utters "Pshaw, pshaw" to see the surprising ending of one night's accident. Women are stereotyped as having more limited use of expletives (swearing, cursing, profanities) and taboo words, which are words connected with sex, excretion, and oaths from the Christian religion. In *SC* (3), Miss Hardcastle utters "O la, Sir, you'll make one ashamed." The euphemistic oath "la" is a minced form of "lord." About the oaths, Michio Kawai notes: "Generally speaking, by far the most popular form of feminine swearing is 'lord' and its minced forms 'lud,' 'la,' 'law.'"¹⁸ In *GN* (3), Olivia utters "Dear me, I wish this journey over." The asseveration "dear me" still lingers in women's speech. Sometimes these oaths and asseverations are emotionally repeated by women. In *SC* (5), Mrs Hardcastle frighteningly utters "O lud! O lud! the most notorious spot in all the country," and Miss Hardcastle repeats "Dear me! dear me!" These repetitions show female emotionality in speech well.

Henry Cecil Wyld points out that the swearing is destined to be temporary, and says "It must be recognized, however, that swearing, from its mildest to its most outrageous forms, has its own fashions. These vary from age to age and from class to class."¹⁹ In *GN* (4), Garnet, Miss Richland's maid uses low and masculine swearing: "Odso, madam, Mr Honeywood's butler is in the next room." "Odso" is a minced form of "God-so." The *OED*²⁰ gives the life span of the word as being from 1695 to 1799.²¹ Miss Richland perhaps would not use the swearing because, even if it is minced like "Odso," "God" is too outrageous a form for ladies in good society.

Garnet: And, upon my word, madam, I don't much blame her (*GN*; 2)/Mrs Croaker: Bless me! (*Ibid.*)/Mrs Hardcastle: Good Heaven defend us! (*SC*; 5)/Lady Sneerwell: Heav'ns! how dull you are! (*SS*; 1.1)/ Lady Sneerwell: O Lud! you are going to be mortal (*Ibid.*)/Lady Teazle: O mercy, He's on the Stairs (*SS*; 4.3)/Lucy: O Gemini! (*R*; 2.2)/Lydia: for Heav'n's sake! how came you here? (*R*; 3.3)/Mrs Malaprop: O' my conscience, I believe so! (*R*; 4.2)/Betty: Bless the dear puppet! (*CM*; 1.1)/Chambermaid: Law! law! how you blaspheme! (*CM*; 5.1)

Women's language has special vocabularies. Lakoff says "Women tend to have extensive technical vocabularies of fashion, cooking, and decorating terms."²² In *CM* (1.1), we see female terms in Miss Sterling's speech: "I have

a bouquet to come home to-morrow--made of diamonds, and rubies, and emeralds, and topazes, and amethysts--jewels of all colours, green, red, blue, yellow, intermixed--." In *SC* (2), Mrs Hardcastle says "There's nothing in the world I love to talk of so much as London, and the fashions, though I was never there myself." Women are familiar with colours. In *CM* (1.1), Mrs Heidelberg ridiculously describes Fanny's face: "Bless me! Why your face is as pale, and black, and yellow--of fifty colours, I pertest."

In the eighteenth century, women usually call someone a "simpleton" as a bad name. In *R* (1.2), Lydia requests that her maid Lucy should give her "*sal volatile*" when she mistakes it for a book title:

Lydia: Very well--give me the *sal volatile*.

Lucy: Is it in a blue cover, Ma'am?

Lydia: My smelling-bottle, you simpleton!

In *R* (2.1), Mrs Malaprop also uses the name "simpleton" when she says "the girl is such a simpleton." On the other hand men seemed to have had a great variety of insult words. For example, in *SC* (2), Hardcastle calls his servants some bad names such as: "Blockhead!", "You numbskulls!", "you dunces!"

As for adjectives, the overuse of "empty adjectives" such as "dear" and "sweet" can be seen in the eighteenth century. In *GN*, Mrs Croaker says "Well, you're a dear good-natur'd creature." Susie I. Tucker mentions females' being fond of the epithet "fine":

The *Critical Review* [new arr. iv (1792), 270] rebukes a novelist for the indiscriminate use of *fine*--'the true criterion of a female pen'. The hero must be a man of *fine* sense, *fine* accomplishments, *fine* eyes, in every scrawled love-scene: 'fine passions', 'a fine sense of honour', 'fine accomplishments' should have been avoided; the 'fine sense of honour' wedged in between the passions and the accomplishments accentuates the danger of carelessness.²³

These adjectives are meaningless and mostly only serve to decorate female speech.

Garnet: the wedding ring--The sweet little thing (*GN*; 4)/Landlady: To be sure we had a sweet little couple (*GN*; 5)/Mrs Candour: Poor dear girl (*SS*; 1.1)/Lady Teazle: I want you to be in charming sweet Temper (*SS*; 3.1)/Lydia: how charming will poverty be with him! (*R*; 3.3)/Lydia: the dear delicious shifts I used to be put to (*R*; 5.1)/Mrs Malaprop: here's fine work! (*Ibid.*)

Women are said to be more verbose through the use of extra words or phrases and using repetition. Their speech is often tentative because they put such phrase as "I believe," "I dare swear," or "I suppose?" into a sentence. Lakoff explicitly links women's use of these phrases--"hedges" she calls--with unassertiveness.²⁴ In *GN*, Mrs Croaker says "For, I believe, with all his faults, she loves him" when she is told of Honeywood's low ability. In *SS* (2.2), Lady Teazle says "I dare swear you have ma'am." In addition, the tag question "--didn't she?" also decreases the strength of assertions. Female speech is filled with the epistemic adverb "perhaps" or "maybe" and the epistemic auxiliary "would" or "may," which has the same function.

On the other hand, when they want to gather others' attention, they are sometimes aggressively or excitedly garrulous. In *SC* (2), Mrs Hardcastle, angry at her son's mischievous and vulgar conduct, cries "Was ever poor woman so plagued with a dear, sweet, pretty, provoking, undutiful boy."

Lydia: you have sent to him, I suppose? (*R*; 1.2)/Mrs Hardcastle: He seemed strangely puzzled now himself, methinks. (*SC*; 4)/Landlady: There was, of my own knowledge, Miss Mackfag, that married her father's footman (*GN*; 4)/Miss Hardcastle: The ladies I should hope have employed some part of your addresses (*SC*; 2)/Mrs Malaprop: She'll be in a passion all her life--will she? (*R*; 3.3)/Lady Teazle: that's the best of the Story, isn't it--? (*SS*; 4.3)/Lady Teazle: perhaps He would be convinced (*Ibid.*)/Miss Neville: I implore, intreat you--(*SC*; 4)/Betty: I vow and protest there's more plague than pleasure (*CM*; 1.1)/Miss Sterling: you madam! my sweet, delicate, innocent, sentimental sister! (*CM*; 3.1)

Women often use repetition to express their emotions. In *SS* (1.1), Mrs Candour indignantly utters "shameful! shameful!" when she agrees to Maria's opinion of scandalous reports of others'. Women sometimes use sentence level repetition to nudge their addressees into accord with them. In *SC* (2), Mrs Hardcastle is severely complained about by her son Tony, and cries: "Wasn't it all for your good, viper? Wasn't it all for your good, viper?" Here the interrogatives are a kind of strong strategy for women. Jennifer Coates says "In interactive terms, then, questions are stronger than statements, since they give the speaker the power to elicit a response."²⁵

Betty: indeed, and indeed, ma'am (*CM*; 1)/ Lydia: who is this? who! who! Who! (*R*; 5.1)/Mrs Malaprop: Why, murder's the matter! slaughter's the matter! killing's the matter! (*Ibid.*)/Lady Teazle: O Lud! I'm ruined--I'm ruined! (*SS*; 4.3)

Women use periphrastic polite expressions in using directives. Women prefer some milder and softer imperatives to forcible ones. Especially they seem to use softer expressions in requesting men. In *SC* (2), Miss Hardcastle, talking with Marlow like a modest lady, says "there is nothing I like so much as grave conversation myself; I could hear it for ever." Here the last clause means "please keep telling me about it." The modal auxiliaries "can" and "could" are used to suggest rather than demand action. In *SS* (5.2), Miss Sneerwell says "Pray let us hear." The form "let us" includes the speaker in the proposed action.

Miss Sterling: let us retire a moment! (*CM*; 5.1)/Fanny: Softly, I beg of you! (*Ibid*)/Fanny: I shall be quite myself again, if you will oblige me (*Ibid*)/Maria: I can only say you shall not have just reason (*SS*; 3.1)/Lady Teazle: come do let's hear'em (*SS*; 2.2)/Lady Sneerwell: Come Ladies shall we sit down to Cards in the next Room--(*Ibid*)/Lady Teazle: Sir Peter would you have me out of the Fashion--? (*Ibid*)/Mrs Hardcastle: you'll bear me witness, will you? (*SC*; 3)

In *SC* (3), we see different polite styles according to social class. Miss Hardcastle, when she is mistaken for bar maid, uses female "bar cant": "Did your honour call? I should be glad to know, Sir."

Lastly women often use a variety of proverbial expressions, idioms, and similes or metaphors to emphasize, dramatize, and help their utterance. In *SC* (3), Miss Hardcastle is asked her age by Marlow, and protests "They say women and music should never be dated." This instance is listed in *The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs*.²⁶ This kind of witty proverb has always raised a laugh, too. In *CM* (1.1), Fanny is in love with Mr Lovewell, and her friend Betty urges her to acquaint Fanny's family with it: "The sooner the better, I believe: for if he does not tell it, there's a little tell-tale." Women often use the idiom "to be sure," as in *R* (5.1) Mrs Malaprop utters "O, to be sure, you are frightened!" when she sees Lydia's astonishment. In *R* (5.1), Lydia exclaims "I'll be hanged, if that Faulkland has not been tormenting you." The form "I'll be hanged if . . ." is noted, by the *OED*: "as emphatic forms of angry refusal or denial" (s.v. *hang* v.3.d).

As for similes and metaphors, we have some interesting instances. In *CM* (1.1) Betty says "I am as secret as the grave"; the meaning of which is given by the *OED* as "kept as a close secret" (s.v. *grave* sb.1.d). The comparative form is thus used as hyperbole: Betty utters "Oh la! ma'am! as sure as I'm

alive" or "There is not a more trustier creature on the face of the earth than I am." Women were very fond of fashions in Town in the eighteenth century.

Mrs Candour: Tale Bearers are as bad as the Tale makers--'tis an old observation and a very true one (SS; 1.1)/Miss Hardcastle: An observer, like you, upon life (SC; 2)/Mrs Hardcastle: Mr Hardcastle, as I am alive! (SC; 5)/Julia: O, you torture me to the heart (R; 3.3)/Mrs Heidelberg: My Spurrit to a T (CM; 3.1)/Garnet: As sure as death Mr Honeywood's rogue of a drunken butler (GN; 4)/Garnet: as sure as egg is egg (*Ibid.*)/Mrs Malaprop: He is the very Pine-apple of politeness! (R; 3.3)/Betty: I'll sooner die than peach! (CM; 3.1)/Miss Sterling: He is the mirror of complaisance! (CM; 1.1)

Thus we see women's language in the eighteenth century dramas mainly through lexis and grammar. The features of the women's language that Lakoff and Otto Jespersen observed seem to be relatively true for those in the eighteenth century, as well. In this study, however, we must issue a caveat; even though these writers are known to have taken their characters speech from daily life, to some degree we must assume that they invented some of the linguistic styles. It is possible that the authors skillfully reproduced female speech to suit the sex. Nevertheless we must regard these works as valuable sources of material for understanding gender differences in language in the eighteenth century. This study is only one step to an exhaustive study of women's language in the eighteenth century.

Notes

- * This is an expanded and revised version of the paper read at the 23rd General Meeting of the Linguistic Society of West Japan, Sept. 11, 1993. My special thanks are due to Mr Steve L. Rosen at Hiroshima Bunkyo Women's College, for reading the draft, making a number of helpful suggestions, and correcting my English.
- 1. Peter Trudgill, *Sociolinguistics* (London: Penguin Books, 1974), 100.
- 2. Ronald Wardhaugh, *Sociolinguistics*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 313.
- 3. Faye Crosby and Linda Nyquist, "The Female Register: An Empirical Study of Lakoff's Hypotheses," *Language in Society* 6 (1977), 313.
- 4. Wardhaugh, 316.
- 5. Crosby and Nyquist, 313.
- 6. The editions of these dramas used throughout this paper are as follows: *The Clandestine Marriage; A Comedy* is to *Eighteenth Century Plays*, ed. John Hampden (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1928); *The Good Natur'd Man* and *She Stoops to Conquer: Or the Mistakes of a Night* are to *Collected Works of Oliver Goldsmith V*, ed. Arthur Friedman (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1966); *The Rivals* and *The School for Scandal* are to *Sheridan's*

- Plays*, ed. Cecil Price (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Prs., 1975).
7. Crosby and Nyquist, 313.
 8. Crosby and Nyquist, 313.
 9. Dennis Baron, *Grammar and Gender* (New Heaven: Yale Univ. Prs., 1986), 1.
 10. These items are largely based on the following: Robin Lakoff's *Language and Women's Place* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975) and "Women's Language" in *Language and Style* 10, 4 (1977), 222-47, and Otto Jespersen *Language: Its Nature and Development and Origin* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1922).
 11. Jonathan Swift, *The Writings of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Robert A. Greenberg and William B. Piper (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 1973), 529.
 12. Hereafter the act and scene numbers are cited parenthetically.
 13. Baron, 2.
 14. Susie I Tucker, *English Examined* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Prs., 1961), 96.
 15. Tucker, in her *Protean Shape* (London: The Athlone Prs, 1967), 79, finds that "Mrs Piozzi [formerly Dr Johnson's great friend Mrs Thrale], says the *Critical Review* 68 (1789), 104, was possessed by those linguistic demons such, so. . . ."
 16. G. L. Brook, *Varieties of English*, 2nd ed. (1973; rpt. London: Macmillan, 1979), 75.
 17. Tucker, *English Examined*, 86.
 18. Michio Kawai, "Modes of Swearing in Eighteenth-Century Drama," in *The Study of English Language and Literature in Honour of Michio Masui's Retirement from Hiroshima University*, ed. Hiroshige Yoshida (Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1983), 195.
 19. Henry Cecil Wyld, *A History of Modern Colloquial English*, 3rd ed. (1920; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1956), 386.
 20. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. ed. J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner (Oxford: Clarendon Prs., 1989).
 21. The *OED* assumes it to be "after oaths beginning with God's " (s.v. *GOD-so*).
 22. Lakoff, "Women's Language," 225.
 23. Tucker, *Protean Shape*, 79.
 24. Lakoff, "Women's Language," 227.
 25. Jennifer Coates, *Women, Men and Language*, 2nd ed. (1986; London: Longman, 1993), 122.
 26. *The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs*, comp., William George Smith (Oxford: Clarendon, 1935).