

Language & Gender

a research update for teachers

Deborah Cameron



SPEAKING OUT

Language and gender

some reading suggestions for A Level English language teachers

Following her presentation at the first *emagazine* language Conference, Deborah Cameron recommends some key texts for teachers looking to get up-to-date with the latest research on language and gender.

Recently I spoke about language and gender at emag's conference for A Level English Language students. Drawing on my own and other people's research, I talked about the way ideas about men's and women's use of language had developed in recent years. I explained, for instance, that today's researchers are less interested in making global generalizations about male-female linguistic differences, and more interested in 'looking locally' at the many different forms gendered behaviour can take. We no longer focus mainly on the question of 'women's language', but have just as much to say about men's; and we pay serious attention to the other aspects of a person's identity which affect what being a man or a woman means to them: things like age, ethnicity, social class and sexuality.

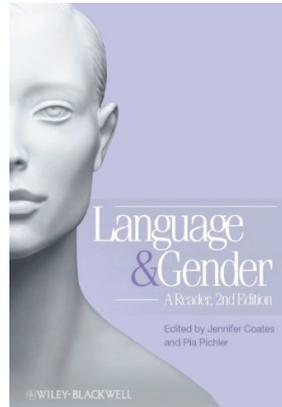
But in the question period which followed my talk, a teacher commented that these developments were not reflected in the materials he used with his students. He felt that the presentation of the subject was still most influenced by the ideas of linguists like Robin Lakoff, whose classic work on 'women's language' was done in the 1970s. He asked me what had been published more recently that I would recommend to A Level teachers. After the session had finished, I found myself thinking that this teacher probably wasn't alone: others might also welcome some reading suggestions. So I asked the editor of *emag* if I could put some up on the website.

I've chosen six books which I think teachers might find interesting and/or useful. I'm not suggesting you need to read all of them: any of the first three on my list – all books which set out to give a general overview of recent/current work on language and gender – will do a reasonable job of bringing you up to date. (If time is really short, no. 3 is the quickest read.) My other recommendations won't be of interest to everyone: each of them focuses on a specific area of work which I'm guessing that some teachers may be particularly interested in. All six are recent (published since 2005); all are easy to get hold of even if you don't have access to an academic library or bookshop (they can be purchased online, and if you go to a popular book-buying site which I won't advertise by name, you may also be able to inspect the contents pages and read an excerpt); and I think English teachers will find all of them accessible. I have listed the 'official' retail prices, but I found all of them discounted on line, and some of them are available even cheaper second-hand.

In line with the question I was asked at the conference, I've chosen these titles with teachers in mind. Some of them could also be read by A Level students, but that wasn't a criterion for including them on the list. However, I would be interested to know what your students are reading on this subject, and what you would like them to be able to read. Are you happy with what's currently available? Should authors and publishers be doing more to meet A Level students' needs? What kind of material would you find most useful? If you want to share your thoughts, please email me at deborah.cameron@worc.ox.ac.uk.

Meanwhile, here's my list of six.

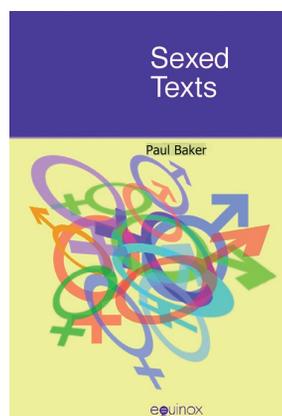
1. **Language and Gender: A Reader, 2nd edition** **edited by Jennifer Coates and Pia Pichler** **(Blackwell, 2011, £26.99)**



My first recommendation is a brand new edition of a text which has been popular with university teachers and students since it first appeared in the 1990s. It collects in one volume more than 40 previously published articles – about a dozen more than the first edition – covering a broad spectrum of language and gender research. Coates and Pichler have updated the original selection so that more than half of the content now consists of material published in the last 10-15 years. Many

chapters have been edited to make them more accessible, and they are helpfully organized into sections by theme. A couple of these sections may be too technical or too theoretical to interest most English teachers, but the majority deal with topics which are both interesting to the non-specialist and relevant to the A Level syllabus. It's a book you can dip into, picking out the chapters whose titles attract your interest, or reading the sections that fit best with your own approach to teaching. While I concede it isn't cheap (and since it only came out in March 2011, it won't yet be available second-hand), at 610 pages and 43 chapters I'd say it's good value for money.

2. **Sexed Texts: Language, Gender and Sexuality** **by Paul Baker** **(Equinox, 2008. £15.99)**

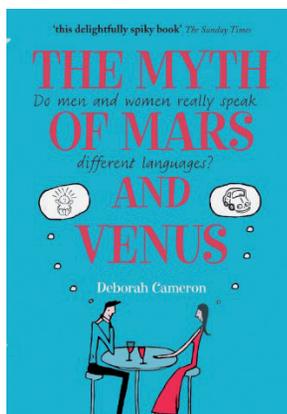


This is a textbook aimed at university students, but it differs from most textbooks on language and gender in focusing less on differences in male and female speech, and more on the representation of gender in texts – an emphasis which is very much in tune with the way many A Level teachers approach the subject. The early chapters go through all the usual textbook stuff, telling you what the field of language and gender studies is about and how

it has developed over time, but the real strength of the book lies in the examples of text analysis which Baker presents later on. His choice of material is often intriguing (e.g. an investigation of the hidden meanings of the word bachelor in news reporting, or an analysis of a 'swingers' website showing how language is used to make the practice of swinging appear comparable to any

other hobby), and what he does with it will probably give you ideas for projects that your own students could do. (Baker himself specializes in corpus linguistics, using computer software to find patterns in very large samples of language data, but you wouldn't have to know your way around a corpus to do the same kind of analysis on a smaller scale). You might not want to use this book directly with students (not because it isn't accessible, but because it contains some sexually explicit material); but I would certainly recommend it as a source of ideas for teaching.

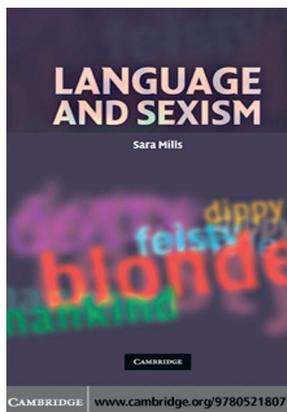
3. **The Myth of Mars and Venus: Do Men and Women Really Speak Different Languages?** by Deborah Cameron (Oxford University Press, 2007, £8.99)



This book was written to make recent work on language and gender accessible to a broad general audience. Its main aim is to debunk stereotypical beliefs about how and why the two sexes differ in their ways of using language, by setting popular wisdom against the evidence of linguistic research. Shorter and less technical than the average academic text, it could probably be read by many A Level students as well as teachers. (Incidentally, if you think it's a bit out of order for me

to suggest you should buy something I earn royalties from, quite a big chunk of the content is available from the *Guardian's* online archive, since three long extracts appeared in the newspaper when the book was first published in October 2007. You can find them by Googling 'cameron myth mars venus'.)

4. **Language and Sexism** by Sara Mills (Cambridge University Press, 2008, £18.99)

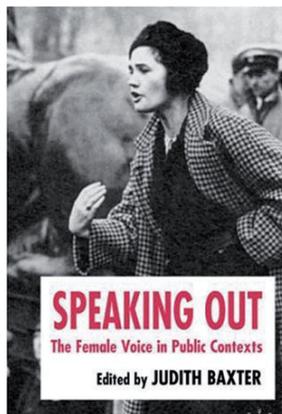


Sexist language is one of the classic topics in the study of language and gender, but material about it dates quite quickly: the classic analyses produced in the 1970s and 1980s are of limited use for teaching because they belong to a different world from the one today's students inhabit. It's not that sexist language has disappeared, but its current forms are not the same ones which were commonplace 30 years ago. Sara Mills's book is an attempt to address this problem by examining

linguistic sexism as it exists in the 21st century. I'll admit to having my disagreements with Mills – I don't always find her arguments convincing and I think there are some gaps in her coverage – but the book is still a useful guide to recent thinking about sexism in language, and a good source of up-to-date examples.

5. **Speaking Out: The Female Voice in Public Contexts** edited by Judith Baxter (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2006, £19.99)

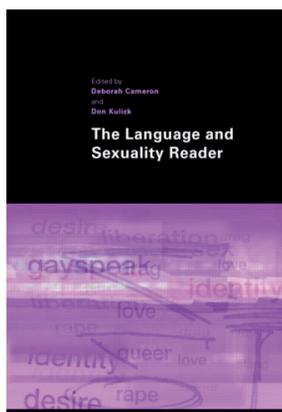
This collection could be described as a modern take on the old 'dominance' approach to language and gender, as exemplified in the work of 1970s feminists like Robin Lakoff and Pamela Fishman. The issue it deals with – the exclusion or marginalization of women's speech in 'public sphere' contexts like the workplace,



politics and religion – was somewhat neglected in the 1980s and 90s (when concerns about dominance were displaced first by the 'difference' approach, and later by a focus on the performance of gender identity), but recently it has been getting more attention from researchers, not least because, in an era of supposed equality, it has proved to be such a widespread and persistent problem. Do males continue to dominate in the public domain because women and girls

are less skilful in using public language, or less interested in playing public roles? Or are female voices still being silenced by sexist attitudes and behaviour? Contributors to this volume examine those questions using evidence from a wide range of contexts (teachers might be particularly interested in Judith Baxter's chapter analysing the gendered power dynamics of the secondary school classroom) While the book may not be as directly relevant to the A Level syllabus as some of the others on this list, I think it is worth looking at because it shows how today's researchers are dealing with questions of power and inequality – in a way which is more complex and nuanced than the old dominance approach, but which still has a political edge.

6. **The Language and Sexuality Reader** edited by Deborah Cameron and Don Kulick (Routledge, 2006, £25.99).



My last recommendation, though it may seem peripheral to the concerns of most A Level teachers, reflects one of the key developments in language and gender research over the past decade: a growing interest in integrating insights from the study of language and sexuality. For a couple of decades linguistic studies of gender and of sexuality were parallel lines of inquiry that didn't very often meet, but many researchers now take the view that in contemporary societies sexuality

(meaning not just whether a person is straight or gay, but their whole sense of themselves as a sexual being) is such an important element of gender identity, you can't study the latter without considering the former. That view is reflected in some of the sources I have already listed (especially Paul Baker's *Sexed Texts*), but if you're interested in reading something that focuses on the sexuality side of the equation, then (with apologies once again for self-promotion) this collection of articles probably provides the most comprehensive coverage you can find in a single volume. It both maps the history of language and sexuality research and offers a selection of recent pieces, some of which link sexuality with gender. (For teachers, my top recommendation would probably be Penelope Eckert's essay 'Vowels and nail-polish', an illuminating and (I think) gripping account of how pre-adolescent girls and boys re-style themselves, linguistically and in other ways, for the 'heterosexual market'.)

Deborah Cameron is Rupert Murdoch Professor of Language and Communication in the English Faculty at Oxford University and author of *The Myth of Mars and Venus*. She has also written widely on feminism, language, gender and sexuality and contributed to numerous BBC radio programmes, including *Woman's Hour*, *Word of Mouth*, *Thinking Allowed* and *Fry's English Delight*.



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