POWER PLAY AND THE CHANGING FACE OF ENGLISH

INAUGURAL LECTURE
DELIVERED AT RHODES UNIVERSITY
on 11March 1992

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BA (Hons) MA (Rhodes) HEd (Unisa) PhD (Cape Town)

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Vivian A de Klerk
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POWER PLAY AND THE CHANGING FACE OF ENGLISH

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Mr Vice Chancellor, Mr Vice Principal, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, students and friends, it is indeed a privilege and pleasure to have the opportunity to address you tonight. Traditionally there is an expectation that the speaker will, in the academic context in which she finds herself, look both back and forwards, and I would like to follow that tradition by making a few remarks concerning those to whom I owe a special debt of gratitude for various reasons.

Obviously my thanks go firstly to Rhodes University which has afforded me the particular privilege of appointment to the headship of the Department of Linguistics and English Language. But I would not have reached this point had it not been for those who inspired in me a deep and abiding love for the English language, among these my English teacher at VG, Kitty Richardson, and members of the Rhodes English and Linguistics Departments, notably Professors Branford, Aldridge and Butler. Professor Bill Branford, well known to many of us here, deserves particular mention: it was he who, in 1964, established the language section of the English Department, out of which grew the Department of Linguistics and English Language. It is thanks to his efforts and all the battles large and small (some of which are legendary) which he fought that the Department is the thriving concern which it is today and I consider it an honour to attempt to continue the tradition he established.

I would also like to make special mention of my father, Andrew Cole, who displayed a tireless interest and enthusiasm in my academic progress and who, despite never really understanding what on earth Linguistics was, accepted that that was what I loved and encouraged me to pursue this interest. To him and my mother I owe a very great deal, and I wish he could have been here with her this evening. Finally, my thanks go to my husband, Billy, and my three children, whose patience, support and encouragement have allowed me to take on the responsibility of being a Professor and Head of Department.

Having made those preliminary but very sincere remarks, I wish to embark on my central theme for this evening. I have attended a great deal of inaugural lectures recently, in an attempt to prepare myself for this awesome event, and it occurred to me that I might select as topic *The inaugural lecture: a stylistic analysis*. However a fear that this might become slightly incestuous led me to change my mind, and I opted rather for the theme of language change and its relationship to social prestige and power.

Linguistics is the science of language, and as such it is not static; theoretical perspectives and approaches are constantly developing and changing, and one has to keep abreast of these developments objectively and open-mindedly. The views I express in the year 2022 will probably not be the same as those I profess in 1992 - I certainly hope not, because Linguistics is a science which is growing, and it tries to describe language, which is also constantly shifting. With this in mind I have selected language change as my theme for

tonight, and I wish to argue that language change is inevitable, unstoppable, and intimately linked to the balance of power in society.

There is widespread conviction, indeed a fear, that English is decaying. Large numbers condemn and resent language change, seeing it as due to unnecessary sloppiness, laziness or ignorance, and regard it with deep suspicion, as is evidenced by an editorial in *The Times* (31st Dec 1983) heralding the Orwellian 1984. It alarmingly proclaimed: "As we approach 1984 nobody can ignore the fact that we are on our way both by design and default to a progressive and irrecoverable deterioration in the use of the language." That was nine years ago, and yet, despite no radical changes in English, the fear is still with us.

This fear of change in language is not new. Complaints began five centuries ago, after English had replaced French in England as the respectable vernacular and instrument of law and administration, and was competing with Latin as the medium of serious and scholarly writing. There were repeated attempts, particularly during the 17th and 18th centuries, to stop the insidious rot, and the 20th century is no different: there is still widespread anxiety about the changes occurring in English, about imprecision, jargon, and colloquial usage which, it is felt, damage English as an instrument of communication. And of course there is deep-seated alarm about whatever it is that women, or rather, feminists, are up to as far as language is concerned. It is this latter point which I shall touch upon later in my address, which should not come as a surprise: a female professor of linguistics (thank heavens we don't call them professoresses, or professorettes!) is likely to be interested in the issue of language and gender.

I'd like to start by establishing some theoretical bases. In order to understand linguistic change, we need to define what "language" is; theorists have emerged with two different views: in one sense, in the abstract, "language" consists essentially of a specifiable set of correlations between "forms" identified on various levels, on the one hand, and their "meanings" on the other. So we have the word "lady", and a mental image of its meaning, and concrete instances of the use of the word in the real world, for example you may say on one day *Please behave like a lady, my girl* and hear someone else say *Hey lady, watch out!*

These utterances or pieces of linguistic vocal behaviour are treated as concrete instances of the abstract system, the language, which is held to exist in advance and to remain unchanged across differences of various kinds between the contextual circumstances of actual speech. So I can say [leidi] tonight, you can say [laidi] tomorrow, but the language English remains essentially the same. This view of language as a theoretical entity based on the concept of the co-temporal totality of context-free verbal possibilities, is what Ferdinand de Saussure [1] (1857-1913) called "langue".

Such a view of language, emphasising the idea of <u>lack</u> of change would seem to make it perfectly justifiable to attempt to stop linguistic change: change would mess up the system. However, human language is founded on a paradox, two of its most basic characteristics diametrically opposing each other: on the one hand, language must be stable and systematic, its sounds, words and meanings must retain distinctiveness and syntactic

relations among words and sentences must remain relatively constant, i.e. basic structural stability is inherent and prerequisite, and the stable systems resulting form the primary focus of linguistics. But language is also fraught with change - it is a system constantly in a process of change.

We know this for a fact, proven convincingly by historical linguists like Sir William Jones and von Humboldt who demonstrated that modern English, Russian and German have evolved from ancient languages like Sanskrit and Hittite. Examination of the words in the table below shows a very obvious relationship between them and one must therefore admit that these languages drifted with time.

Dutch	*English*	*German*	*Greek*	*Irish*	*Latin*	*Sanskrit*
broeder	brother	bruder	phrater	brathair	frater	bhratar
vader	father	vater	pater	athair	pater	pitar
moeder	mother	mutter	mater	mathair	mater	matar

One of the main reasons for change in language is the fact that "the reality in which we live, - and which language is our primary means of expressing, dealing with and mitigating - is not static, but always changing. As individuals, we are evolving from birth to infancy to old age and death" (Joseph 1987:25 [2]), moving from one subculture to another. With reality perpetually in flux, we could hardly expect language to remain static.

So we have a conflict between a diachronic view of language as a system, seen in and through time, subject to constant change versus a synchronous abstract view of language as an idealised system, something that might, in principle, be known perfectly, something fixed and, at least in one sense, a finite, relatively static system (*a la* Chomsky).

Is this an unresolvable paradox? I would like to suggest that we can solve the problem by seeing language in two ways: firstly it exists in the abstract, and secondly it exists in each concrete individual that uses the language. And there is reciprocity between the two: as language users we take from the store of language, but we also put back into it, and because of the idiosyncratic nature of the linguistic "make-up" of individual speakers, change to the linguistic system is inevitable. I wish to argue that change starts with the individual, who can subsequently influence the system, which will, in turn influence individuals and that any changes whatsoever are intimately bound to the notion of power. In other words individuals are causally and agentively involved in progression and change in language.

Let us start by looking at the seeds of change, starting at the beginning, when children learn their language for the first time. A lot of guesswork and hypothesising is involved in language acquisition. In the process of acquiring language, each child, with its genetically inherited capacity for language, must learn language from scratch and depends on exposure to the speech of others in the environment in order to construct an internal grammar of the language. Linguistic knowledge is created anew by each child, and often the rules inferred by children are not the same as those used by adults. For example, children overgeneralise on the basis of analogy: they say *hisself* on the basis of the model of *myself* and *herself*,

they, (especially in Grahamstown) say *you are not allowed doing that* because we say *he loves doing that* and they say *a whole nuther one* on the basis of the phrase *a whole new one*, splitting the word *another* into a determiner and a would-be adjective. And adults fight back as hard as they can. Children say *I holded the bunnyrabbits* and adults tirelessly correct them.

Another source of change or inaccuracy comes from the fact that people misinterpret what they hear (and remember all first-language learning depends on what we hear): many a young innocent has been under the misconception that the Lord's name is Harold because of what they thought they heard in the Lord's Prayer: *Our father, who art in heaven, hallowed (Harold?) be thy name.*

Almost all of these errors made by children are eliminated by parental correction and by pressures of the education system to conform. But it is not easy! Language, then, is learned from other individuals within linguistic groups or communities, to which we aspire to belong. It is this individual and social nature of language that accounts for its changeability, for as we move through life we constantly adjust the way we use language in order to blend in with the habits of those with whom we wish to associate ourselves. Learning a language is about discovering categories of culturally relevant and valued knowledge. Often getting access to the knowledge is difficult, and we tolerate vagueness as we wait to understand words more fully. Most of us initially use words we have recently learned without being able to define them perfectly: being part of a group means using the symbols they use in the right way through constant interaction, but one doesn't have to know every symbol or word intimately in order to use it - a vague idea of a word like *progenitor* or others (like *subliminal, inchoative, proactive*) will enable most speakers to understand its use in context and even to use it themselves occasionally. Naturally an audience of your calibre is sure to be completely familiar with all of these words, but still, I wonder how many of you could stand up right now and give a perfect definition of the word *deconstruction*? Fewer, I am sure, than would happily use the word now and again.

This is also the case where dress and body decoration are concerned. Penelope Eckert, an American sociolinguist, doing research on linguistic communities asked her informants, leather-clad youths of sixteen who were shaven-headed (ears asymmetrically pierced), about the meaning of the skull and crossbones which they all had tattooed on their right forearms. The boys had a standup fight when some responded that it stood for death, others that it stood for power, and still others were under the naive misconception that it had something to do with Halloween. The point is that none of them were very sure of what that symbol stood for, but all were very sure that it was part of the way they perceived themselves as a group, separate from other groups, as much a part of their differentness as their accent and the kind of language they used. For example there is currently a slang word *arb* used by Rhodes students, derived, it would seem, from the word *arbitrary*, but meaning something like "boring" or "nondescript", though it can be a noun or adjective. Ask a student to define the word *arb* for you; my guess is they won't be able to, despite the fact that they use it all the time, in utterances such as:

This arb walks up to me and says "How's it?"
The teacher gave us this arb essay to do

Language is a social system, and like all social systems, it interacts with other systems, it is complex and it is constantly in process, in tension, open to challenge and change in time. If one remembers this, the paradoxes disappear: no single person knows all of a language, so at any one time the language has autonomy and yet in time and in use it is intermeshed with all other social systems which influence it. Language is a shared symbolic system, finely balanced between stability and change, and it is the social side of language which pulls against the force to remain stable.

I want to focus first on what maintains the stability in language. Typically it is the power of the norm, of the conventional accepted system, which controls speakers and prevents change. This central standardised core of the system controls the speakers. We are constantly exposed to and reminded of the norm, expectations are set up, resulting in habits which become self-fulfilling when the learner of a language becomes the one who teaches the next learner of the language.

This is where power enters the picture: most of the time (and I stress the word **most**, as there are exceptions which I shall discuss later) the language of the powerful is the language that has been standardised and that has acquired prestige, and so the magnetic attraction and pressure to conform linguistically to the model established by the powerful is ultimately a factor working towards standardisation of the prestigious form, and against diversification and change. Promoting this standardisation are the official "controllers" of language such as educationalists and writers. They are agents of cultural intervention against the normal development and diversification of a language and towards the inculcation of a standard through instruction, correction, imitation and assimilation.

Working towards the maintenance of this magnetically attractive static central core of language are several factors all intimately related to power and prestige.

In learning language I've already shown that we are swayed by power relations: "Children like all those with lesser power, are at a disadvantage: their classifications, even though they may be supported by better reasons, do not win. They have to fall in with the classification system of the more powerful" (Kress 1989:90 [3]) Language acquisition is not passive, it is an active, participatory reconstruction of the system, often involving active resistance from adults and a constant tension between the classifications which seem appropriate to the child at the time and those of the larger groups into which the child is growing.

The result of millions of individuals trying to learn the same language is an inevitable struggle, a tension between classifications, and so the stability of the linguistic system is jeopardised, because at any one time there will be alternative forms or variants within a linguistic community: variants in pronunciation, syntax and in the vocabulary. Variants imply a choice, because speakers must choose which one to copy, and power

inevitably enters the picture, even at trivial levels. For example, picture yourself at a committee meeting, in which the chairperson of the committee uses the word *advertisement* with the stress falling on the third syllable (rhymed with *rise*) Or *Harassment* with the stress falling on the second syllable, rhyming with *mass*. If you wish to use the same word at the meeting, will you use your preferred pronunciation, flexing a little linguistic muscle, so to speak? Will you start to doubt your own pronunciation? Will you play it safe and repeat the "wrong" pronunciation (an admission of subordination)? Or will you opt for avoidance by selecting a synonym? It all depends on the power of the person in the chair!

Whether you pronounce *tissue* as [tiʃu] or [tisju] depends on whom you choose to imitate. Interesting evidence of such imitation comes from recent observations of the way the young in South Africa pronounce the well-known two-word phrase *as well*: their stress falls on the initial word, and many of them even write this phrase as a single word; somebody with some social charisma or prestige must have started saying it like that, others followed suit, (very typical of teenagers) and now we have new alternatives available in the language. The majority of speakers will have to decide which pronunciation is more prestigious, and it is that one which will settle down as the more stable form.

An example of syntactic variation is found in the phrase *you should have gone* , which is pronounced (and actually written too) by many as *you should of gone*.

Vocabulary options abound too: many people actually think the word *aggravating* means the same as *irritating*, others confuse *transpire* and *occur*. The following sentences clear demonstrate the fluctuations of language: a survey carried out in 1969 and repeated in 1988 to test acceptability (Nunberg 1990:469 [4]) yielded significantly different responses (% indicates speaker acceptance):

It's *aggravating* to have to ask her twice whenever you want something.
1969 43% **1988** 71%
All these events *transpired* after last week's announcement.
1969 38% **1988** 58%

Slowly, unobtrusively, alternatives creep in, and these are the seeds of change in the linguistic system. They offer a threat to the stability of the system, but the existence of alternative pronunciations and forms is not sufficient in itself to cause significant change, and now we return to the question of power. "The existence of linguistic variants helps promote language to the higher level of human awareness." (Joseph 1987:16 [5]) As soon as people become conscious of the existence of such alternative forms, they evaluate them: one variant is always preferred to the other, creating hierarchies; everyone has a sense of which way is up and which way is down socially and linguistically. Variants with prestige have power.

Value judgment is something that is intrinsically human. In contradiction to Popper's (1967:155 [6]) claim that "in traditional cultures there is no developed awareness of alternatives and anxiety about threats to the system; with scientifically oriented cultures,

such awareness is highly developed", there is evidence that even the most primitive cultures apply value judgements to language: the Menomini Indians (Bloomfield 1927:433 [7]) and the Zuni (Newman 1955:64;402 [8]) being cases in point.

It is the prestige value attached to a variant, which provides the impetus towards stability. In fact we need to remind ourselves that the emergence of so-called Standard English in the eighteenth century is directly attributable to this phenomenon. The original dialect spoken in the SE midlands in the vicinity of London and Oxford became what we know today as Standard English simply because those people happened to be remarkably powerful, wealthy and prestigious and were able to direct the future course of the language: everybody wanted to copy them! The emergence of standard linguistic norms of correctness is directly related to notions of power and prestige.

Several linguists (Labov (1976:341) [9] and Giles et al. (1979) [10] and Fasold (1984: 158, 165-70) [11]) have proved that there is no doubt that linguistic variants are judged and assigned values based not on their intrinsic worth or reality, but on the power and prestige of their users. People who are prestigious for quantifiable reasons (physical, material) are emulated by the rest of the community, who, because they can't attain the same physical or material prestige, copy language, easier to imitate and acquire.

Occasionally this pull towards prestige can result in change, as is shown in the way English borrowed words from the French, who held political and religious sway in England from the time of the Battle of Hastings in 1066 till around the middle of the fourteenth century. Compare the words *request* and *ask* or *courage* and *guts*: the first in each pair are from French, and are typical of formal contexts, while the straightforward Anglo-Saxon words are not prestigious - this is a clear demonstration of the lasting attraction of the language of the powerful.

Language reinforces feelings of social superiority and inferiority; it creates insiders and outsiders; it is a prop to vanity or a source of anxiety. The result is linguistic insecurity, which drives otherwise ordinary people to watch their grammar and pronunciation, and ask anxiously how best to pronounce the word *controversy*, or whether it is acceptable to use *chairperson*. (People are very wary of that word!)

The standard language provides a codified norm that constitutes a yardstick for correctness. Individual speakers and groups of speakers are then judged by their fellows in terms of their observance of this yardstick, resulting in the tyranny of the standard. Speakers want to know, for their sense of security, how to do things properly and correctly and will simply not believe that there is not a proper way for doing everything linguistic (Pulgram 1976:28 [12]): speakers hate to be told that it is correct to spell *advertise* with a 'z' or an 's', for example, and they look to the powerful for guidance.

Thusfar I have tried to show how different linguistic styles and varieties get valued in accordance with the power and prestige of their users and how prestigious styles tend to become standardised while styles associated with out-of-power groups are not accorded high status. All this results in a push towards stability. As people become aware of the existence of the values of different variants they are attracted, and indeed pushed in the direction of prestige variants. So why do we not have conformity? All this implies that ultimately everyone would use the same variety - the one used by those with power, so why doesn't everyone speak the standard? Why do differences persist, if this is all there is to change? Surely by now we should all speak the same form of English, yet we obviously do not. Humans are provided with amazing ability to copy others, and are given the model, and encouraged by all sorts of means to conform, so what slows down this powerful impetus towards conformity to the linguistic practices of the elite? If access to the elite is through the gate of powerful language, what stops everyone from going through?

The answer is obvious: being powerful and prestigious is rather a pleasant sensation, so it is useful to maintain some control over the linguistic markers or characteristics which identify one as belonging to the in-power group. Using powerful language can be advantageous, and it is not in the interests of the elite to facilitate a blend into a great linguistic melting pot, thereby sacrificing the symbols of their distinctiveness - the evidence of their superiority and the justification for privilege. Let's face it, there is a special kind of pleasure involved in whizzing past a clapped-out old bakkie in one's brand new Mercedes (this is not something that I have personally experienced). And the pleasure comes from being among the privileged few who can afford such luxuries. Owners of Mercedes do not feel morally obliged to share them with owners of bakkies. Similarly with language, capitalism wins: it is in the interests of the linguistically advantaged to maintain and even increase linguistic differences. Just as models of Mercedes are constantly changing, forcing the wealthy to keep on selling their out-of-date models, so models of prestigious English in different subcultures shift subtly and continually, making it very difficult for the outsiders to copy accurately.

The self-appointed linguistic elite has emerged in every age to defend standards and to regulate the behaviour of others: they are the gatekeepers of language. You can only go through the gates if you know the password, but learning it is not made easy.

I would like to illustrate this point with examples from gender-linked linguistic habits where the theme of value judgements, power and prestige is particularly relevant. If we examine what we know about the linguistic behaviour of women in Westernised English mother-tongue communities, some interesting patterns emerge: until the latter half of this century, women were under patriarchal domination, and during this time English was protected (so to speak) and codified entirely by men, who, by virtue of their education and social positions, had considerable power and prestige.

Males and females were naturally socialised differently because of their different roles and relationships, and inevitably they emerged speaking slightly different varieties of English, to which value judgements were attached, judgements which have become firmly

entrenched in the minds of speakers, regardless of whether or not they are valid. Naturally linguistic habits attributable to the "powerful" were positively judged, in contrast to so-called female linguistic traits and such value judgements rapidly became entrenched. Again we look to the theme of power for an explanation, remembering that the powerful were typically male until about the 1930's, and their opinions, beliefs and writings were likely to have influence. Allow me to demonstrate how easily such value judgements became entrenched: Otto Jespersen, one of the so-called fathers of linguistics, and therefore highly influential, wrote an entire chapter on "The Woman" (1922:247 [13]) in his book Language, its nature, development and origin. With the utmost seriousness this expert on women makes the following statements:

> men will certainly with great justice object that there is a danger of the language becoming languid and insipid if we are always to content ourselves with women's expressions (248)
>
> the vocabulary of a woman as a rule is much less extensive than that of a man (248)
>
> (there is) a greater average difficulty in books written by male than by female authors (248)
>
> Women much more often than men break off without finishing their sentences, because they start talking without having thought out what they are going to say (250)
>
> a woman's thought is no sooner formed than uttered ... the superior readiness of speech in a woman is a concomitant of the fact that their vocabulary is smaller and more central than men (253)

While I am sure that the male majority in the audience heartily approves of these sentiments, at the risk of levity in a lecture of this nature, I cannot resist quoting his explanation for female verbosity:

> For thousands of years the work that especially fell to men was such as demanded an intense display of energy for a comparatively short period, mainly in war and hunting. Here ... there was not much occasion to talk, nay, in many circumstances talk might even be fraught with danger. And when that rough work was over, the man would either sleep or idle his time away, inert and torpid, more or less in silence. Women, on the other hand, had a number of domestic occupations ... which for the most part demanded no deep thought ... and could well be accompanied with lively chatter (p.254) [13]

And so today we have silent ranchers: the men, and garrulous old biddies: the women. The only accurate, though perhaps not particularly incisive thing he says in the chapter is "great social changes are going on in our times which may eventually modify even the linguistic

relations of the two sexes" (1922:254 [13]) He had absolutely no evidence for his other radical claims, apart from his intuition, and only females are supposed to have intuition. Despite this, he has been quoted assiduously by subsequent (male) linguists on the topic of so-called "women's" language, well into the 1970's and contributed to the entrenchment of inaccurate stereotypes in the minds of speakers and to beliefs about sex-appropriate linguistic behaviour.

In fact there really are differences between male and female linguistic habits, and these can be correlated with social power, but these are not in conformity with Jespersen's view that women's language is vaguer and more muddled than that of men. It is also false to say that female language is in any way simpler or impoverished in terms of syntax or lexicon - several studies have shown that in fact women generally have a linguistic advantage in terms of ability, learning to read and write sooner and more easily and suffering from fewer language-related problems (Maccoby and Jacklin 1974 [14], Gall et al. 1969 [15], Nelson 1973 [16]). Such advantages may well be attributable to sociological conventions, but women have also been shown to suffer from some disadvantages when it comes to the opportunity to speak: males typically use relatively more speech in mixed-sex conversations, take initiative in topic changeovers, interrupt, challenge and are direct (Staley 1982 [17], Zimmerman and West 1975 [18], de Klerk 1991 [19]). Linguistically they are more powerful, and other linguistic clues to power are the use of strong words, slang and expletives (Burgoon et al. 1975 [20], 1983 [21], Oliver and Rubins 1975 [22]). Zahn (1989) [23] describes stereotypical powerful language as "high intensity" language, and men are traditionally seen as using it.

Women, seen as aspiring to prestigious ladylike behaviour, have long been regarded as playing a secondary role in conversations, especially mixed-sex conversations; they ask polite questions, tolerate interruptions, and frequently lose the floor to a man (O'Barr and Atkins 1980 [24], Holmes 1984 [25], McConnell-Ginet et al. 1980 [26]). Beliefs about very talkative females are not upheld by research into mixed-sex conversations: women find it difficult to get a word in edgeways.

"The concrete and verbal practices of the dominant seem to impose an identity on the dominated that induces them to adopt specific language practices, but not arbitrarily ... certain practices of all dominated show that they might both reject and submit to power: the working class's "coarse" language, women's "frivolous" language, school children's slang are ways of taking refuge and attempting to assert oneself, ways that at the same time lock one into the definition imposed by the dominant. Dominant ideology acts as the principle ordering differentiated linguistic "choices" (Moreau 1984:60 [27]). It would seem that those with no power have little choice with regard to their linguistic usage, and they conform to the socially approved norms.

Thus it is that females model their linguistic behaviour on the females they see and hear: their modes of speech are shaped by experience, and become "natural", become the norm for women; new speakers grow into a system in which the code already exists as the "proper" way for women to talk. In this way a code is established by individuals acting as social agents in time, whose actions are still nevertheless socially conditioned. Men

typically adopt the position constructed for them in social discourse: assertive, confident, blunt, and women adopt very different speech habits. But it is the habits of the males which carry social prestige and power.

Now we return to the tension between a stable system and the existence of variants: "Why, if men are powerful, don't women try to talk like they do?" Because despite the natural pull towards the speech of the powerful, as we saw earlier during the discussion on standard English, there are social barriers preventing conformity between the linguistic habits of males and females: there is overt disapproval of females who "talk like men", especially if they swear; assertive bluntness is not regarded as particularly feminine.

As I said earlier, the self-appointed linguistic elite regulate who joins the ranks of the powerful. You can only go through the gates if you know the password, but learning it is not made easy.

Now I wish to extend my argument a step further. I have argued that language is based on the paradox of forces working both for and against stability and conformity. We have seen that one of the reasons why we don't have conformity is that it is not always permitted by the powerful. But this begs the question of whether those exposed to the socially desirable forms always really wish to use and imitate them. Just to complicate matters, ironically there is more to it than not being admitted into the portals of the elite: granted, not everyone is given admission, and not everyone knows the password, but in addition not everyone wants admission and some are drawn away from wanting to go through the gates.

Evolution is a matter of fate, adaptation is a matter of choice (Bailey 1990:86 [28]), and many have consciously chosen not to conform to prestigious norms and not to try to slip through the gates into the world of the elite. Again the point applies both to Standard English more generally, and to gender-linked linguistic habits. Who are those, for example, who do not want entrance tickets to Standard English? One of them is Njabulo Ndebele, who says "There are many reasons why English cannot be considered an innocent language. The problems of society will also be the problems of the predominant language of that society. It is the carrier of its perceptions, its attitudes and its goals, for through it, the speakers absorb entrenched attitudes. The guilt of English then must be recognised and appreciated before its continued use can be advocated". (1986:14 [29])

Other prominent African writers (e.g. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Emeka Okeke-Ezigbo) share this view and reject standard English, advocating rather the use of Africanised forms of English. Perhaps more powerful than this conscious rejection is the covert attraction to non-standard varieties, especially evident in tight-knit subcultures, for example adolescents: in other words the pull to stay outside the gates is stronger than the pull to go through. It applies to areas beyond language: think of the dress of Rhodes students and lecturers. Summer garb among most students (regardless of sex) is multicoloured shorts or baggies, a T-shirt (preferably ragged and off-the-shoulder) and tackies if you're lucky. Lecturers generally adopt a more conservative attire. Students may well aspire to lecturer status, but woe betide any young eighteen year old who comes to lectures in a suit and tie at Rhodes,

or high heels and stockings (sex-appropriate of course). Their social lives would suffer acutely, and, while being rejected by their peers, they would not necessarily find themselves more accepted among the lecturers. There must be many Rhodes students who would love to wear something other than the standard jeans and tackies, and who could afford to, but who dare not. Wearing a suit does not make you a professor - I certainly hope not, because the University guidelines for inaugural lectures actually instructed me to wear a dinner jacket and tie tonight, but I couldn't find one to fit me. I hope I am still a professor ... but to return to the point ...

Think of a speaker who belongs to a tight-knit community of speakers who all say *He aint here*, and think of the consequences to such an individual if she were to start using the prestigious form *He isn't here* with them - what would they think of her? Non-standard variants and group loyalties provide a powerful counter-tug to the natural attractions towards standard or prestigious language.

A similar phenomenon is observed in the realm of second language learning: often adult learners prove to be particularly resistant to some adjustments, especially in accent. While there are good phonetic reasons why an African learner of English may battle with some of the vowels, many students have told me that they do not want to speak English too well, some because they wish to retain some evidence of their true identity, of being different, others for fear of ridicule among their own people, who might interpret their expertise as one-upmanship. One therefore treads the tightrope of linguistic change with considerable circumspection, and, despite being given access through the gate, one is often not free to go through even if one wishes to!

Think of the dilemma in these terms: do you say *to whom did you give it* or *who did you give it to*? If you knock at the door and are asked who it is, do you say *It is I* or *It is me*? If you say *It is I* you might be interpreted as taking on airs and graces; or if you say *It is me*, you run the risk of being judged unaware or ignorant of the prestige form. The use of *Ms*, that hot little word, is another case in point: to use it would be, in my opinion, to adjust in an openminded way to social changes, but perhaps also to align oneself with feminists (dread thought), and possibly risk rejection by other powerful alignments. So the pull of value judgements can influence linguistic change, and in fact the persistence of low-prestige forms can be explained in terms of this framework. They have solidarity value, and are important symbols of group membership, and this often outweighs considerations of prestige, status or social advancement. The covert prestige of non-standard linguistic forms (Labov:1966 [30], Trudgill:1972 [31]) is consistent with the assumption of a conflict of ideologies between the dominated and the dominant. The result is diversity in the face of the impetus towards conformity.

We return to the same old tension between systematic stability versus change. Dissimilarities between language practices are meaningful only in the light of the social background and power structures. But society has changed, and language will keep pace with these changes. One such change is the emergence of women as a social and economic force to be reckoned with, resulting in the challenge of many preconceived ideas. There are

two notable effects of this challenge: firstly, awareness of linguistic sexism has increased, resulting in conscious campaigns against bias in English, and secondly, accompanying the steady drive towards power equilibrium in the workplace, we find adjustments which are emerging in the speech habits of women, which have been shown by recent research to be modeled increasingly on the speech of men, despite negative judgments about women who speak like men. I shall talk first about these changes in the speech patterns of women.

There is some interesting evidence that women do want to go through the gates, and to use powerful language. For example, interesting results from a number of studies (de Klerk 1990 [32], Staley 1978 [33], Risch 1987 [36], Baroni and d'Urso 1984 [35]) demand that comfortable theories about the stereotypical nice non-swearing female are long overdue for reconsideration. Because slang typically implies high levels of confidence, most writers attribute usage of slang to males, with their larger peer groups. But perceptions of these words are obviously changing, and middle class well educated females are becoming less inhibited in their use of taboo words. Shifts in the social power of women, bringing increased confidence, have brought attendant shifts in language usage.

But, as we saw in the case of trends towards standardisation, although there are forces attracting speakers to emulate those in power, there are alternative choices: instead of conforming to the practices of the powerful, one can, like Ndebele and Ngugi, reject certain aspects of the underlying system, and actually try to change it.

The battle to eliminate sexism from English is a case in point. It was perhaps inevitable that the shift towards greater equality at work should lead to a demand for greater equality generally, and recently there has been considerable turmoil within the mother-tongue countries, especially USA, as a result of heightened consciousness that English is biased against women, causing heated debate about the use of words like "chairperson" and "Ms", and of the generic androcentric pronoun "he" (the use of the masculine pronoun to refer to both sexes). Speakers are highly resistant to changes which disturb the internal stability of the structure and grammar of a language and attempts to engineer change arouse heated emotions, but such attempts persist, underlining the tension between the static nature of language and the drive towards change.

Theoretical analyses of feminist writers have heightened awareness and change is creeping in, as is shown in a recent survey of American usage (Cooper 1989 [36]) which reports a dramatic reduction of the rate of androcentric generics. Interesting evidence that change is under way also comes from a survey (Nunberg 1990 [37]) of the usage panel for Websters International Dictionary. This panel was 64% male, with an average age of 61 years, - not wildly youthful, in fact likely to be conservative, yet the majority clearly avoided the forms opposed by feminists, as can be seen below:

A taxpayer who conceals the source of ... income can be prosecuted
his: 46%, other singular: 53%, their: 1%
A patient who misreports ... sexual history to a doctor is at fault
his: 37%, other singular: 61%, their: 2%
A child wanting to be a doctor should be encouraged by ... parents
his:36%, other singular: 60%, their: 2%

Is it important to try to eliminate sexist vocabulary? If one follows de Saussure's structuralist argument that language is an arbitrary system of differences in which elements gain their meanings only from their relation to all other elements, and that the link between sound and meaning is totally arbitrary, then one will fight for the continued use of *he* as the conventionally accepted way we refer to males always, and all people sometimes. For structuralists it is the linguistic system itself that guarantees the meaning of signs. People come to accept the prestige forms of language as an indisputable fact, whose authority it is difficult to challenge.

But there is another view: Terdiman (1985:36-38 [38]) says "a sign is invested with the competing meanings of social groups and refuses to remain static as an immediate consequence of such conflict inscribed in its use. Conflict is thus as characteristic of the semiotic realm as of the social ... Engaged with the realities of power, human communities use words not in contemplation but in competition."

What we choose to call something, the act of naming, is all related to power. Witness the angst-ridden changes which we have seen in words referring to groups of colour in South Africa. Resistance to the powerful has had its effect, and official designations have switched with time and political climate, showing that the act of naming is a political act, constituted in language and by language. Speakers are so self-conscious now, as they tiptoe through this minefield, that most use the prefix **so-called**, as a palliative for the sensitive word which follows. Groups have different interests, and the struggle to name concepts and entities is an attempt to situate them in a framework that will legitimate some views, invalidate others.

The Whorfian notion that language determines thought is obviously too simplistic, but post-structuralism extends it. The issue of sexist language needs to be taken seriously for the signifying practices that are available in a society influence the way a society makes sense of the world, and every society has different investments in these signifying practices, all linked to unequal power relations. Linguistic communities are not homogeneous consensual spaces in which language use is predictable and conventional; they are heterogeneous and language is implicated in the struggle over meaning, access and power. The term "People's English" in SA is evidence of just such a struggle: a political act as a challenge to the current status of English as entrenched in apartheid structures. The term "Ms" is evidence of the same power struggle against male bias.

Names bring actions into consciousness. Once in existence a name can exert power and can be used to exert power. Often one learns modes of behaviour and modes of being first through their names before encountering the concept or social practice. Words like "deconstruction", for example are typically first encountered in language before they are understood in reality. It is not unusual for the linguistic to precede the social mode in learning, with language having a role in constructing the social world. Once established, linguistic forms seem to exert power autonomously. Witness the controversy over *Ms*: *Miss* and *Mrs* are entrenched, taken as given, and huge numbers of speakers, women included, object to the use of Ms. When one considers the balance of power at work, this is hardly surprising.

All speakers of English are implicated in the continual growth and influence of the English language - a language which is caught up in many competing and conflicting discourses. As Terdiman argues, signs are invested with competing meanings and refuse to remain static within the hurly-burly of social discourse. "Meaning is not "owned" by the speaker/writer, by the linguistic system, or by the hearer/reader; it is a product of the speaker, sign and hearer, all of which are enmeshed in time, place and society." (Norton Pierce 1989:111 [39])

Language change is typically motivated by efforts to secure and maintain interests, and is unlikely to succeed without the support of the elites. Thus it is that while many speakers are currently fighting for the right to use *Ms* in English instead of *Mrs* or *Miss*, others vigorously oppose them. The battle over these controversial words nicely illustrates my theme this evening: change can be seen as the normal result of competing interests and values of different subgroups in society as each contends for power, the "haves" trying to maintain or finetune the existing system and the "have-nots" trying to change it and increase their own power. "Language is entwined in social power in a number of ways: it indexes power, expresses power and language is involved wherever there is contention over and challenge to power. Power does not derive from language, but it may be used to challenge power, to subvert it, and to alter distributions of power in the short and in the longer term." (Kress 1989:52 [40])

In the case of the *Ms* controversy the powerless have rejected an aspect of the standardised system which was directly beneficial to the powerful. While it is natural for the <u>powerful</u> to resist the threat to their convenient stable system, it is also natural for many of the powerless who are linguistically less aware to side with the powerful in support of the status quo, simply because it has assumed the status of an ideal, and indeed become tyrannical.

We need to remind ourselves that we are not under a moral obligation to preserve linguistic traditions for the sake of tradition. In the future the remarkable changes in the social position of women, and the rise of multilingualism and ever-diminishing proportions of mother-tongue English speakers <u>will</u> have a profound influence on the course of English. Change may be viewed as evolutionary and transitory or as cyclical, but the fact remains that it cannot be prevented.

Ironically, it was Jespersen, my favourite linguist, who said in 1905 [41] that English is like an English park, laid out seemingly without any definite plan, and in which you are allowed to walk everywhere according to your own fancy without having to fear a stern keeper enforcing rigorous regulations. Hardly surprisingly, he was probably wrong on this point, because each of us does fear being judged deficient linguistically, we are ruled by the tyranny of the standard, and the wishes of the powerful.

But change will continue. "Language, like society, is stable (only) in so far as it continues to be recognisable as itself. No sirens sounded when Old English became Middle English or when Middle English became Modern English. Their transformations were as seamless and continuous as the changes from hue to hue in a rainbow. The language is English still." (Cooper 1989:177 [42]) Change is inevitable in a living language and is responsible for much of the vitality of English: it has prospered and grown because it was able to accept and absorb change. As people evolve and do new things, assume new roles and undertake new responsibilities, their language will evolve too. They will find new ways to describe things and their changed perspective will give them new ways to talk about old things.

Viva la difference!

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