

## Book review

*The Myths of Mars and Venus: Do men and women really speak different languages?*  
Deborah Cameron. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008, vii + 196 pages  
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In this book, the renowned scholar and author of many texts on the topic of gender differences in language use, Deborah Cameron, presents and challenges some of the most known and spread gendered ‘myths’ such as that women are by nature more cooperative, talkative and polite than the opposite sex (p. 11). Her particular interest is language interaction so she skilfully examines data gathered from public and private settings including home, work, and urban schools. The clear, simple writing style makes this volume accessible to both general audiences and professional readership of linguists and sociologists. Since a number of chapters refer to psychological elements and evolutionary psychology, with language and words as primary data sources, one can imagine this book also being of interest to those involved in psychoanalysis and counselling.

Cameron’s volume is comprised of nine chapters. The reader is first introduced to the widespread myth of Mars and Venus discussing some possibly harmful effects it can have on forming public perceptions of genders. The author posits that the touted differences in gender talk are only part of the problem; other social and psychological issues are to blame, too. Among the listed culprits for the perpetuation of the myth of Mars and Venus are, among others, the self-help books, ‘popular science’, the media, and widespread false beliefs about how men and women interact. Also seen as responsible are authors such as John Gray and his ‘whimsical’ book, *Men are From Mars and Women are from Venus*, that exploits ‘people’s tendency to rely on stereotypes when processing information’, and takes ‘shortcuts when dealing with new situations and difficulties, thus reducing human behaviour to manageable proportions’ (Cameron, p. 14). Also challenged is the so-called ‘soundbite science’ on male/female brains (p. 18) that reports such items as the average number of words men and women produce (7,000 and 20,000 respectively). The first chapter ends with three basic questions that drive Cameron’s volume: (1) What is the evidence for the claims about men, women and language? (2) What consequences does it have in the real world if large numbers of people believe these claims? and (3) Why are the claims being made? While Cameron focuses on questions one and three, question number two is somewhat under-explored.

From there, the chapters seem to follow a thematic arrangement, from history to anthropology and evolutionary psychology, brain research, human rearing, identity forming and workplace. In Chapter Two, “A Time and Place: Putting Myths in Context” Cameron charts the gender myth historically, quoting for example Lord Chesterfield’s ‘assessment’ of female language abilities made in 1777 as a precursor for the notion that women talk too much (in Cameron, quoted in Bailey, 1992): “Language is indisputably

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the more immediate province of the fair sex...The torrents of their eloquence, especially in the vituperative way, stun all opposition” (p. 25). Moving on to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Cameron turns to Jespersen’s entry on ‘The Woman’: “[women] shrink from coarse and gross expressions and [have] preference for refined... veiled and indirect expressions” (p. 27). Implicit in these comments is the view of ‘innate’ female chattiness and natural tendency to use language more politely. The historical references that are used in this chapter are less known or shared in public discourse thus readers may find them interesting. The same, though, might not be said about hinting to the innateness of the behaviour discussed.

In Chapter Three, “Partial Truths: Why Difference is not the Whole Story” the centrepiece is the data collected by a psychologist Janet Hyde. In the article “Gender Similarities Hypothesis” Hyde uses ‘meta-analysis’, a statistical technique allowing the analyst to collate many different research findings (in this case words) and draw overall conclusions from them. Hyde reviewed a large number of studies concerned with all kinds of ‘putative male and female differences’ (p. 42) based on language behaviour and found that the actual overall difference, expressed by the value ‘*d*’ was close to zero (where ‘*d*’ value can be very large, large, moderate, small or close to zero). It is noteworthy that Cameron quotes studies from journals of psychology, but she stops short of engaging their relevance beyond the purely socio-cultural one. Here, if linguistics and psychoanalysis could interact and collaborate, one can see potential for information and data sharing that clearly can benefit both professional groups and their goals.

Chapter Four, “Worlds Apart? Mars and Venus in Childhood and Adolescence” is particularly notable for its relevance to linguistic and counselling work because it engages the questions of growing up differently in boy/girl camps, so to speak. The starting premise is Tannen’s book *You Just Don’t Understand* (1990), which showcases dialogues from boy and girl distinct worlds that are being blamed for different communicative competences. Tannen, well-known for her gender research, discusses upbringing styles but also notes ‘natural’ interactional tendencies towards ‘competition and cooperation’ (in males and females respectively) (p. 61). Skilfully juxtaposed is Judith Baxter’s study that shows no such natural tendencies towards cooperation or competition: she concludes that men and women can be both cooperative and competitive depending on the situation and personal style (p. 64). Cameron uses more recent gender work by Baxter to help explain the gender dynamic. According to Baxter, “popular girls tend to attract resentment from their peers when they assume leadership”, and because boys don’t like it girls go about things in “a covert way...so not to transgress the norms of femininity and ...be punished for it” [by not being liked or by being rejected]. In other words, girls are not ‘more polite’ naturally, or more cooperative either, but they are forced by social norms to appear to be so. This work can cross-pollinate with advancements in psychodynamic therapy where behaviour is an important variable. In Baxter’s data, girls could be seen through Freudian prism, meaning the urges and needs of individuals versus what is socially acceptable behaviour (of girls in this case) and how it is mitigated. In other words, it is reflected through ‘ego’ versus ‘super-ego’ struggles (Wright, 1984), so one would see this chapter be of interest to those working with, or helping, adolescents and the maintenance of girl/boy relationships.

Chapter Five “Cross-purposes: the Myth of Male-Female Misunderstandings” moves the discussion to the ‘alleged lack of assertiveness and confidence’ (p. 85) women are thought to exhibit, and self-help books that seem to have ‘hijacked’ those myths and

profited from them. Here the reader is taken back to Gray's book on genders being natives from different planets, particularly when couples need to decide who takes the garbage out – another 'myth' of how men cannot naturally process indirect requests from women. One can imagine that a lot of language reported in this chapter is also heard in couple's sessions as 'telling is indeed the key activity in all psychotherapies' (Peräkylä, 2013). Perhaps a lot more such data collected by analysts working in critical or feminist discourse might find a useful application in consultation work. In the same chapter, the sub-heading "Just Say No" has eerie relevance to rape victims and those working on their psychological rehabilitation. Without a doubt, this chapter could be a valuable resource for anyone interested in the psychological aspects of language, and what psychological states a linguistic method, such as for example conversation analysis (CA), can help reveal hidden in language interaction.

Chapter Six, "Back to Nature: Brains, Genes and Evolution" re-evaluates the evolutionary psychologists' explanations that "many behaviour-patterns which we might assume to be products of culture are actually the results of biological evolution: they reflect the ways in which our earliest ancestors adapted to the conditions of life" (p. 101). This view allows the genes passed on to us to be accountable for differences not just physical but also in the working of our minds (p. 101). Also cited is *The Essential Differences* by Simon Baron-Cohen who offers explanations about male and female brains, the former built to systemize, the latter to empathize. To Cameron 'things that interest evolutionary psychologists (human emotions, their sexual behaviour) cannot be deduced from fossils and artefacts (p. 101). Language is central to such understanding as it is to linguistics and, one may add, psychoanalysts, but when looking at emotions their effects on language use are often short-changed (Peräkylä, 2013), though they should be considered more holistically. The chapter concludes pointing to the need to consider cross-cultural and historical differences when discussing male/female speaking styles, such as status, setting, subject and purpose of conversation (p. 119).

In Chapter Seven, "Public Speaking: Mars and Venus in Politics, and the Workplace" Cameron takes up gender politics and is very effective in her selection of pertinent examples. She quotes from a large New Zealand study, the Wellington Language in the Workplace project, to examine the claim that women are expected to be 'nice and cooperative' and when they are not being so, male co-workers refer to them in unusual ways, not common for male interaction. For instance, Holmes cites the case of "Queen Clara" a female boss who is teased by the male co-worker by being addressed as 'mum' when giving directions to her co-workers (thus being referred to as the British Queen Mother or Mum). Clara operates effectively by combining her authority with self-deprecating humour, but this may suggest that men have trouble taking orders from women so women have to be less direct (Grujicic-Alatriste, 2008). Or as this chapter concludes, "A woman who displays authority as unabashedly as Clara still makes a lot of people (here possibly implying men) feel uncomfortable or threatened" (p. 135). All examples from this data pool are very strong and effective, albeit interpretative. Such data is a goldmine for other disciplines that work with gender-based issues and treatment, and might be very relevant and useful to work place counselling.

The role of gender in identity forming and its effects on speech styles is taken up in Chapter 8, "Doing What Comes Culturally: Gender, Identity and Style". It supports the premise that all identity is culturally and socially constructed and exploited for personal or power gains. The work of Mary Bucholtz, a linguist, is used to illustrate what it means

to be 'cool' and how adolescents copy the 'coolest style of speech' wanting to be perceived as 'cool'. Also cited is Penelope Eckert, a sociolinguist studying male and female students in a suburban high school in Detroit, who concluded that both gender groups consist of 'jocks and burnouts' (p. 146). However, male jocks are socially allowed to demonstrate individual accomplishments to gain status, whereas female jocks are not, thus they are "driven to assert their status and commitment to the group through other means such as personality and appearance or language" (p. 147). A lot of gender identity is expressed through language and style, but it is related to group membership, upbringing and socio-economic class. Some linguistic domains such as Conversation Analysis have made strides towards examining place-based interaction such as schools or street groups, or the homeless, and have built successful collaboration and intervention with other disciplines, particularly social and medical fields (e.g., Sidnell & Stivers, 2011). Already highlighted in psychodynamic psychiatry is the view that all factors from biologic, social, to cultural shape mental health and illness and should be considered and evaluated (Frosch, 1990), making this chapter a must read for audiences interested in the relationship between personality and the circumstances that surround and shape them.

In the final Chapter Nine, Cameron concludes that there is too much in-group and intra-group overlap and variation for any general conclusions to be made about all men or all women: "To deal with the problems and the opportunities facing men and women now, we must look beyond the myth of Mars and Venus" (p. 181). Nothing seems truer! Perhaps the looking should be done by multiple disciplines, considering human biological and psychological aspects and needs. It should be a concerted effort aimed to allow for cross-pollinations of different fields that have language as a base for their analysis.

## **Biographical Note**

Lubie Grujicic-Alatraste is doctor of applied linguistics with training in discourse analysis including conversation and text analysis. Her work explores language and its place in cross-disciplinary collaborations, valuing multi-methods, reflexivity and praxis. Her latest publication, *Linking Discourse Studies to Professional Practice* (Multilingual Matters, August 2015), advocates for interdisciplinary approaches to real life settings and language use.

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