

Our Mother tongue - designed for father's voice

Pat Smyth

In a very short time, like many women of my generation, my youthful optimism was dimmed by the realization that the "world" also had "fathers and brothers" who sent slightly obscure messages whose meaning remained the same - "shut up".

Neither my "jailers" nor I had suspected that there might be other malcontents who would quietly agree with my private suspicions of the existence of a plot to silence all girls and women. Any efforts to liberate my mother, my friends, aunts, brother, became snagged by my "father's" tongue or more precisely its use by writers and speakers (including myself) to maintain a "man's world" while defining and enclosing "a woman's place".

When I stopped to listen, the words that were curling from their lips were the SAME words that I used to refer to myself and were in fact quite "proper" usage, except "they" spoke it differently. Good, plain, English words such as "girl", "woman" and "lady" obviously had other meanings. This realization found me rushing to the nearest dictionary only to have my suspicions confirmed - there had been a plot all along to silence me. Even Webster's "new World" defined me as:

Wo.man = an adult female, women as a group, a female servant, a wife, a sweetheart, a mistress. "It's the woman in her."

Let's begin by examining a few examples of words used to describe women, their meanings and their histories. With the passage of time "madam" and "mistress" took on new sex related meanings, while "Sir" and "Master" did not have to endure such double entendres. Likewise, many of the most insulting words began life as terms of endearment and evolved into sexual slurs. For example, "tart" was in the same category as "sweetiepie", but came to mean a sexually desirable woman and then a prostitute, while "broad" originally meant a young woman. "Whore", which has the same root as latin "carus" for dear, referred at first to a lover of either sex, then only to females, and finally come to mean prostitute. Almost all the words for female relatives - "Mother, aunt, "daughter" etc - have at one time or another been euphemisms for prostitute.

Both the word "lady" and "whore" by definition, are supposed to give men what they want in the way they want it. A woman is put into one category or the other depending on the male's perception of his own need and comfort. Four broad types of stereotypes that appeared often in my research were woman as: (1) homemaker; (2) servant; (3) sex object; and (4) emotional unintelligent creatures. Each in it's own way can serve only to cloud women's vision and that of males of what she can be-

come.

There are numerous animal metaphors used to insult both men and women, but here too the terms used against women far outweigh her male counterparts. "Cow" has been used as an abusive term since the mid 1600's side by side with "dog" which has the ever popular derivation "bitch". Neither I nor the numerous volumes consulted could find any "animal terms" which are limited to men. In another area, there is the large group of terms used to label and address women as objects to be consumed; "tomato, honey, cookie, sweetiepie and peach" are just a few (Frank, 76)

Stanley analyzed 220 terms to describe sexually promiscuous women but found relatively few to describe sexually promiscuous men. Those that were found differ in the following manner:

1. There are not as many.
2. Milder epithets that question someone's intelligence or integrity, like "blockhead" and "fink" are directed at women too.

3. Terms for male animals like bull and buck usually carry the "positive" implication of sexual prowess whereas "cow", "vixen" and "bitch" imply passivity or bad temper and "negative promiscuity".

4. "Womanizer" and "Don Juan" and 'stud' can be taken as compliments (at women's expense) and the cutting edge of "pimp", "panderer and "procurer" comes from association with female prostitutes. To imply that a man lives off the earnings of women is a special insult in men's eyes. Beast, brute and lecher are mild, almost Victorian in tone if not in implication. Ironically, the word "rapist" is not considered an obscenity. It appears that the worst fate that can befall a man is to be like a woman.

Attitudes towards women reflected in the usage of English speakers are depressing indeed. As well as being insulted, women have been belittled and treated as "Girls"; they have been excluded and ignored; they have been defined as sex objects and insulted or placed on pedestals, desexed, and treated with deference, as "ladies". Since they are accepted and used within the culture, these everyday words carry a burden of the culture's preconception and prejudices.

Consider now another area of our language - the phenomenon of "women's language." In a study by Angrist the highest frequency of women's language content focused on describing feelings and interpersonal relationships while men stressed action and achievement. One author theorizes that women, aware of the traditional judgements and expectations concerning femininity, consciously and subconsciously alter their communication strategies when

trying to appeal to men in order to be less threatening and more "feminine." (Yerby; 30). Politeness and the avoidance of dirty words and the use of good grammar are, presumably, desirable traits in our culture because women have been found to be slightly more status conscious than men in our society. Women are often judged on the basis of their social status and their adherence to prescriptive social norms; accordingly they are socialized to exhibit "better" social behaviour than men (Frank, 34) Society, of course, still censures women more harshly than men for using "improper" language and probably many more women than men continue to shy away from words they would identify as 'vulgar'. "Now that the question is out in the open - it can be looked at for what it is - the degradation of human beings" (Swift, 103)

Women's speech has been described as polite, emotional, enthusiastic, gossipy, talkative, uncertain, dull and chatty; men's speech, in contrast, as capable, direct, rational illustrating a sense of humour, unfeeling, strong and blunt (Kramarae, 58). This author goes on to explain that because men have largely controlled the norms of use, and this control, in turn, has shaped the language system available for use by both sexes, it has influenced the judgements made about the speech of men and women. Men have determined what is labelled, have defined the ordering and classifying system, and have in most cases created the words which appear in dictionaries and which are the medium of our every-day speech (Kramarae, 59). There is rather convincing evidence that



you use the word "man" generically, people do tend to think male, and tend not to think female (Frank, 19).

My experience as the silenced child/woman was more eloquently defined for me by Kramarae in another of her books on linguistics entitled "Women and Men Speaking" in which she referred to that experience as the "muted group theory" which is as follows:

The language of a particular culture does not serve all its speakers equally, for not all speakers contribute in an equal fashion to its formulation. Women (and members of other subordinate groups) are not as free or as able as men to say what they wish, when and where they wish, because the words and the norms for their use have been formulated by the dominant group, men. So women cannot be easily or as directly articulate their experiences as men can. The words and norms for speaking are not generated from or fitted to women's experiences. Women are thus "muted". Their talk is often not considered of much value by men - who are, or appear to be, deaf and blind to much of women's experiences. Words constantly ignored may eventually come to be unspoken and perhaps even unthought."

The muted group theory would

indicate that often what women want to say and can say best cannot be said easily because the "template" is not of their making; it does not allow women to reveal some of their perceptions and experiences. Men can and do perhaps, take their language for granted in a way women evidently cannot.

Nearing the end of my quest, at least for now, I take heart from the words of Cheris Kramarae when she says, "Women are taking steps to change the language structure and their own use of language and they are in fact, acting to change their status in society; they are fiercely challenging the legitimacy of the dominant group. We still often perceive males in terms of human qualities, females in terms of qualities which are often negative and assigned to them for no other reason than being born "female". We often do not question what the words are communicating.

Author Helen Rowland appealed to my penchant for one-liners when she wrote "Woman is the peg on which the wit hangs his jest, the preacher his text, the cynic his grouch and the sinner his justification."

Where is a woman's voice

Colleen Coyle

For the 1988 Massay Lectures presented by CBC Radio, Noam Chomsky, world-renowned gave a series of lectures titled "Manufacturing Assent."

In one lecture Chomsky quoted John Locke, commonly considered to be the "Father of who, in 1695, said: "...day laborers and tradesmen, the spinsters and the dairymaids must believe ... the greatest part cannot know and therefore they must believe"

In 1991, in Canada, every morning, a government committee of "senior officials from the same as are represented in the cabinet war committee" meets "to massage and co-ordinate all political, diplomatic messages to the public about Canada's participation in the war" (Hugh Winsor, P Bureau, 25 Jan.)

We are the Canadian equivalent of Locke's laborers, tradesmen, spinsters and dairy maids: we "c what information about this war is suppressed; what is altered, so that we may believe in it.

Just how all-encompassing and how critically important the notion of censorship is in a democracy illustrated by one small example. On "Inside Washington" (MPBN, 27 Jan) one panelist, the "odd opposition to three other panelists speaking with essentially one voice, managed to interject into the discussion Brother" reality as exemplified by a tidbit of U.S. censorship: a U.S. correspondent's line "our pilots came was censored to read "our pilots came back proud".

(As an aside - the moderator of the panel, just after the question of the above censorship was introduced, topic to the Soviet Union, and the next comment made by one of the "three-voices-in-one" was a den Gorbachev, berating, among other things, Gorbachev's "censorship of the press").

The title of this article questions "Where is a Women's Voice ...? Clearly enough to all of us, there is and to be, a dominant voice "speaking for us" in this crisis. For those who are comfortable with this, things are straight. An individual Canadian, stopped on the street by a news crew and asked to comment on some enormous question repeat a few of the phrases she has been amply supplied with by the censored media.

But there are voices which are not comfortable with the dominant line. And, as a woman, I find I am searching and hopefully, for the voice or voices of women in the midst of the jargonistic and tailored responses to the crisis. And in the midst is exactly where I find women's voices (and women's tears).

Reading a brief press release about (NDP MP) Lynn Hunter and (Liberal MP) Sheila Finestone being each of speaking on the floor of the Commons when (Hunter) the U.S. attack on Iraq was announced, and when (Fin of the Iraq attack on Israel came through, I felt pride that, whatever the reactions of these two women (I have knowledge of their reactions), women were on the floor of the Commons, and the first historical Canadian r thus necessarily reactions from women's perspectives.

On Friday, 18 January, debate on the war in the House of Commons was to run through the night. On Friday Shelia Copps (Liberal) rose and stated that she wanted to address the "gender gap" of war. Her expression parliamentarians being unified as women in their response to Canada's involvement in a war of aggression

Listed below are the Studies classes in throughout: the need to share the develop out of These are the voices

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