

Power & Domination

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The European Conference on Ethics, Religion and Philosophy
Official Conference Proceedings 2015

Abstract

Although our very language promotes the use of the pronoun "he" to designate all people, it psychologically signifies only one sex. With reference to Merleau-Ponty's (1968) *The Visible and the Invisible*, I seek to address the exclusion of the feminine voice in language and its implications for feminist thought through a series of questions to open up the subject of language and its nature:

- Can language be corrupt?
- How can "corruption" of language be recognized?
- Once recognized, how can we change the "corruption" of language?
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Our language contains the possibility for corruption in euphemism, racism, and sexism but does not *become* those facets of itself when used in a euphemistic, racial, or sexist way. "Corruption" of language can be recognized by the halt or lack of discourse, hence achieving domination by definition over the other, or using the bad dialectic. If we desire true understanding and openness upon being, then it must be sought by establishing previously nonexistent dialogue—by employing the hyperdialectic. In the case of sexist language, we must challenge this limiting usage and state through discourse that this language is not acceptable; we must strive for a hyperdialectic.

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Introduction

The Earth is our mother who gave us our bodies. After our Earth-Walk our bodies will return to the Earth. Our spirits are from the wind as is our breath. Our words are our breath and therefore are sacred.
(Sams, 1990, p. 1)

Women are traditionally treated as the ignored, the invisible, while the standard of humanity is male. For example, our very language in its structure promotes the use of the pronoun "he," supposed to designate all people yet psychologically signifying only one sex. Feminist discourse seeks to expose the phenomenon of the exclusion of the feminine voice in our language in order to allow her to *be* in her own eyes, in her own way; to define herself, rather than to be defined by the male or only in relation to the male; and, most importantly, to allow her the space to speak in her own voice, from wherever that voice may speak or to wherever it may lead. Merleau-Ponty (1968) provided a bridge in this seeking, this journey. With reference to *The Visible and the Invisible*, I will seek to unpack and criticize the phenomenon of the exclusion of the feminine voice in language and the implications of this fact for feminist thought. To facilitate this process, I have designed a series of questions to open up the subject of language and its nature.

Can language be corrupt?

I do not believe that language itself can be corrupted. Users of language can be corrupt: just as a shovel used for corrupt actions does not become corrupted in itself, but is only a tool for corrupt actions. Therefore, our language contains the possibility for corruption in euphemism, racism, and sexism but does not *become* those facets of itself when used in a euphemistic, racial, or sexist way. "Language reflects sexism in society. Language itself is not sexist, just as it is not obscene; but it can connote sexist attitudes." (Fromkin & Rodman, 1988, p. 282). These attitudes are our dangerous quicksand—our "corruption"—not our language itself. For example, in the case of sexist language, the question has been traditionally whether sexist language is primary and produces sexist thought, or whether sexist thought is primary and produces sexist language. The notion that the English language contains sex bias, particularly in usages such as "he" and "man" to refer to everyone, is central to this issue.

The primary rationale for denying the impact of linguistic sex bias seems to be that sexist language is an epiphenomenon of sexist culture, rather than the reverse (Briers & Lanktree, 1983, pp. 625-632). According to this argument, modifying any sex discrimination implicit in current language usage would have little or no effect on sexism at the sociocultural level. This perspective suggests that terms like "man" and "he," when used in the generic sense, are inaccurate but not sexist. The use of the generic "he" is widely accepted to refer to males more often than to females, but the long-range consequences cannot be measured. MacKay (1980) reported that college students who read sentences containing the word "he" used in the generic sense were far more likely to assume that men—and not women—are being described, and added that possible alternative pronouns such as *E*, *e*, and *tey* slow reading speed but are better understood to be gender neutral.

Alternately, the generic "he" is believed to create and reinforce existing stereotypes.

This perspective argues that generic phrasings (i.e., "he" to describe everyone) are not only inaccurate, but also sexist: they reinforce negative and discriminatory attitudes toward women. Few empirical studies have attempted to relate sexist language to sex bias. Bem and Bem (cited in MacKay, 1980) presented two studies in which sex-biased wording of "help wanted" newspaper advertisements decreased both male and female interest in "opposite sex" jobs. These findings indicate that "he" is not neutral in a psychological sense. The use of generic masculine nouns and pronouns may selectively proscribe female interest, and the use of female nouns and pronouns may selectively proscribe male interest in subjects both might otherwise seek out.

Demands for nonsexist language are supportable based on a genuine relationship between sexist language and the maintenance of sex-biased perceptions. The question of whether sexist language or sexist culture prefigures the other has not been empirically answered. However, Briere and Lanktree's (1983) study and others cited by them provide irrefutable evidence that sexist language tends to contribute to the perception of gender bias.

With reference to Bem and Bem's (MacKay, 1980) example above, I have emphasized the importance of proper definition in the successful communication of job availability. Thucydides, in describing the events surrounding the Peloponnesian War, emphasized the importance of remaining aware of how the way we use language defines our world and being. He wrote, "Words, too, had to change their usual meanings." He went on to cite the changes that manifested themselves within language. Things became the opposite of what they were previously: "What used to be described as a thoughtless act of aggression was now regarded as the courage one would expect to find in a party member." When things change their meanings, then the common bond of language—and therefore, understanding—is severed. Without this common bond of meaning, there is no common ground within which to conduct dialogue. Thucydides later posited, "Love of power, operating through greed and through personal ambition, was the cause of all these evils." In short, the new definition of words dominated the *being* of the people of Peloponnesia and arrested the challenging by discourse of existing, entrenched beliefs.

Aside from wartime, proper definition in general language use is of importance in the day-to-day world also, in that it may genuinely define one's life:

The struggle for definition is veritably the struggle for life itself. In the typical Western, two men fight for the possession of a gun that has been thrown to the ground: whoever reaches the weapon first, shoots and lives; his adversary is shot and dies. In ordinary life, the struggle is not for guns but for words: whoever first defines the situation is the victor; [her]his adversary, the victim. For example, in the family, husband and wife, mother and child do not get along; who first defines whom as troublesome or mentally sick? Or, in the apocryphal story about Emerson visiting Thoreau in jail; Emerson asks: "Henry, what are you doing over there?" Thoreau replies: "Ralph, what are you doing over there?" In short, [she]he who first seizes the word thus dominates and lives; and [she]he who is defined is subjugated and may be killed. (Eschholtz, Rosa, & Clark, 1986, p. 337)

Likewise, in using sexist language, women are subjugated, defined and thereby are dominated.

In that our bodies are our focal points of lived meaning—as in this quote from *The Visible and the Invisible*, "language is itself a world, itself a being" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 96). Merleau-Ponty held that this domination by definition is an exclusion of the totality of our being, and is "the bad dialectic [which] is that which thinks it recomposes being by a thetic thought, by an assemblage of statements, by thesis, anti thesis, and synthesis" (p. 94). In other words, it is that which seeks to hold and capture being, rather than allowing being the space within which to truly, wholly be; the domination of being by definition, or, when "the meaning of the dialectical movement is defined apart from the concrete constellation" (p. 94). The bad dialectic is that which seeks to ignore the significations that surround the term and wishes only to hold the term to its "proper" definition. The implications of this kind of definition in our language are evident, but the implications of this exclusionary definition for our being are less obvious and need to be acknowledged.

Jessica Benjamin (1988, p. 52) wrote of Hegel:

In Hegel's notion of recognition, the self requires the opportunity to act and have an effect on the other to affirm [her]his existence. In order to exist for oneself, one has to exist for another. It would seem there is no way out of this dependency. If the other denies me recognition, my acts have no meaning; if [she]he is so far above me that nothing I do can alter [her]his attitude toward me, I can only submit. My desire and agency can find no outlet, except in the form of obedience.

We might call this the dialectic of control: If I completely control the other, then the other ceases to exist, and if the other completely controls me, then I cease to exist. A condition of our own independent existence is recognizing the other. True independence means sustaining the essential tension of these contradictory impulses; that is, both asserting the self and recognizing the other. Domination is the consequence of refusing this condition.

The tension between asserting the self and recognizing the other is compatible with Merleau-Ponty's notion of the good or the hyper-dialectic; that which takes into account its own effect upon the language being spoken, the questions being asked, the very desire to ask the particular questions chosen, and the effect that our questioning has on the questioned. If we ignore the tension and employ the bad dialectic, then the implications for our being, as we are the defined, the dominated, are far reaching.

How can "corruption" of language be recognized?

Perhaps the "corruption" of language can be recognized by the halt or lack of discourse, hence achieving domination by definition over the other, or using the bad dialectic. When one dominates another, one does not take them seriously. Conversations between the dominator and the dominated (traditionally, males and females, respectively) are not meant to include the dominated in consideration. Any set of dialogues that are *stated* to include but *actually* exclude, as seen above in the case of sexist language usage that excludes women psychologically, are not dialogue.

Once recognized, how can we change the "corruption" of language?

If the "corruption" of words and language as a whole can be recognized by the lack of discourse or by definition and, therefore, domination using the bad dialectic, as posited above, and if true understanding and an openness upon being are desired, then it must be sought by establishing previously nonexistent dialogue—by employing the hyperdialectic. In the case of sexist language usage, we must challenge this limiting usage and state through discourse that this language usage is not acceptable; we must strive for a hyperdialectic.

Gadamer (1990, p. 446), similarly to Merleau-Ponty (1968), posited, "Language has its true being only in dialogue, in coming to an understanding." Our true being in language is in dialogue, and, for Merleau-Ponty, the hyperdialectic is essential to the full openness upon that being. If we truly wish to communicate our ideas to another, being open to dialogue and therefore to a challenging of our ideas, is essential. Without being open to dialogue, Gadamer held, there is no human bond. "Without such openness to one another there is no genuine human bond. Belonging together always also means being able to listen to one another" (p. 361). Listening to one who is speaking is essential to understand that person. If we have no openness to dialogue, we have no bond. We must listen while the other speaks to us. We must be open to a plurivocal experience of language and being rather than limiting our language and being to a univocal experience or the bad dialectic and, therefore, domination by definition. If, as Gadamer said, all persons are moral in nature, then it follows that we have a "responsibility for and toward words [which] is a task which is intrinsically ethical" (Havel, 1990). We, as human beings, have a moral responsibility for the things we say. Discourse that limits, constrains, dominates, or has no common ground, such as in the examples of sexist language usage and bad dialectic, is not dialogue, not even reciprocal, not the hyperdialectic; and if we use Gadamer and Merleau-Ponty's criteria, respectively, understanding and wholly expressive being cannot be attained.

Conclusion

It is our responsibility, then, if we truly seek to achieve the openness upon being, of being that is our right as humans, to establish dialogue of a nonlimiting nature and to question the existing dialogue. Our view of the world is at stake:

"Rather, what the world is is not different from the views in which it presents itself," (Havel, 1990) and therefore effects even our very being in the world. Our views and world-being are present within the language we use. If we wish for a world that is not expressed within our existing language, we must create the space for discourse, for the hyperdialectic with which we will be able to express it, to open upon it. The growing body of literature from feminists is an example of this emerging dialogue challenging the previously existing domination by definition structure.

I wish to close with the following words from Havel (1990), urging us to strive to "emulate Cassandra: to listen carefully to the words of the powerful, to be watchful of them, to forewarn of their danger, and to proclaim their dire implications or the evil they might invoke."

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