

# **UCLA**

## **Issues in Applied Linguistics**

### **Title**

Language and Gender by Penelope Eckert & Sally McConnell-Ginet. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, xii+366 pp.

### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0pv944rk>

### **Journal**

Issues in Applied Linguistics, 14(2)

### **ISSN**

1050-4273

### **Author**

Mikesell, Lisa

### **Publication Date**

2004

### **DOI**

10.5070/L4142005069

Peer reviewed

***Language and Gender*** by Penelope Eckert & Sally McConnell-Ginet. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, xii+366 pp.

Reviewed by Lisa Mikesell  
University of California, Los Angeles

Eckert and McConnell-Ginet have successfully outlined the issues and questions about how language is used to socially construct gender and how one's socialization into a particular gender influences language use. Their task is to show that language and gender are both socially and contextually used and produced within local constraints of interaction and according to shared community norms. The introduction situates the book both historically and ideologically. The authors write that they support a predominantly feminist position and reflect on the series of debates over the difference-dominance dichotomy. This debate was strong until the mid 1980s, at which point researchers argued for a more thorough account of context and a more social view of language, one which reflects that language is intricately tied to its use, what they refer to as *the discourse turn*. Coinciding with this shift in language studies was a shift in gender studies, *the performance turn*, which viewed gender as something enacted and produced by individuals rather than a fixed or given characteristic. The discourse and performance turns are taken up throughout the book, connecting the themes and chapters, as does the feminist ideology within which these turns are embedded.

Chapters 1 and 2 introduce the reader to gender as a social and dynamic construct and to language as a social and evolving practice. It is these two chapters that provide the basics of both gender (for instance, the sex/biology distinction, how children are raised and socialized into a particular gender, etc.) and language (how all levels such as syntax, phonology, and the lexicon are consequential to the way we practice and conceive of gender relations). Chapter 3 discusses the importance of access and ratification of talk in order for one to be heard and taken seriously and reviews how talk is organized through interruptions, amount of talk, backchanneling, and silence. Chapter 4 emphasizes that people have intentions and goals in interacting with each other, which are mediated by practices directly linked to one's (gender) identification.

Chapter 5 shows how speakers use linguistic resources to portray their changing stance or position (similar to Goffman's footing) in interaction. The authors note that speakers position themselves with respect to the ideas that they are trying to communicate as well as to other participants as can be seen, for example, through the use of honorifics. Chapter 6 focuses on the "content of what people communicate as they engage with one another" (p. 192) and the role of gender in influencing how people discuss and linguistically express such content. Chapter 7

discusses how we flexibly use language and gender to categorize (*boy, chauvinist, girl, woman, feminist*), which may reflect both differences and “inequalities.”

Chapters 8 and 9 focus on dialects and how, despite one’s conscious or unconscious attempts to use linguistic features not part of the “backdrop of [one’s] overall dialect,” one’s language variety still plays a powerful role in understanding who one is and the places tied to them. Chapter 9 re-emphasizes gender as “achievement” which is managed in local and often ordinary moments of interaction. The authors note that each chapter presents the reader with a resource for understanding how gender is constructed and how gender identities are forged, part of what they call the “toolbox for constructing gender identities and relations” (p. 303). Chapter 9 highlights how individuals use these linguistic tools, to portray themselves (via a linguistic style) within these local and otherwise ordinary interactions. As can be seen from these chapter summaries, the issues under discussion are all presented as dynamic and flexible and dependent on their use and negotiation in various contexts. Language and gender are presented as practices that cannot be disconnected from the people who use and interpret them.

*Language and Gender* is written as an introductory text and achieves the objectives of such a resource; it provides concrete examples and an accessible paraphrasing of previous research. Additionally, the basic elements of both gender studies and linguistics covered within the first two chapters allow those who may not be fluent in one or either area of study to get their bearings. This text, perhaps along with some supplemental reading touching on less socially situated research, would make for an interesting introductory course, one that is both stimulating, socially bound, and sure to appeal to undergraduate students. Although written as an introductory text, this book can still be useful to both students and scholars in the field of gender linguistics given that it presents, rather than a neutral overview, a socially constructed and feminist view of the language and gender relationship that may provide new approaches to one already in the field. The textbook may therefore be useful for students and professors of courses on gender linguistics or gender studies more generally as well as discourse analysis classes that may include a unit on gender construction and how it is “achieved” through practices in talk.

While the book covers a lot of ground and has many benefits, there are some shortcomings. For instance, categorizing an individual as male or female in interaction when it is not evident that the participants themselves are oriented to these categories has been viewed as problematic in some lines of interaction research, particularly Conversation Analysis, perhaps the most recognized area investigating talk-in-interaction. Because this book presents a discourse approach to gender and language, it might have been useful to state this earlier since many of the studies they cite take these categories for granted. Additionally, although the authors are attempting to include a large review of gender studies, it may be beneficial to include transcripts along with an analysis of some of the studies that examined practices being employed in interaction. Showing how researchers create transcripts, use them as tools, and sort through data will certainly be useful for

students interested in interaction and in the local contingencies of accomplishing gender through talk. Lastly, the authors note their own limitation: The book does not provide any detailed discussion of non-verbal discourse, such as texts or images. They justify this limitation by noting that face-to-face communication is primary in terms of how we are socialized into language and gender norms. Despite these shortcomings, the book is certainly a useful introductory resource that fulfills its purpose and, with supplemental materials, could be a welcome addition to any course on gender and language.