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Revised and Expanded Edition

by Robin Tolmach Lakoff

Edited by Mary Bucholtz

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ROBIN TOLMACH LAKOFF

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WOMAN'S PLACE

TEXT AND COMMENTARIES

REVISED AND EXPANDED EDITION

EDITED BY MARY BUCHOLTZ

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To my students, past and present,

who have been an inspiration for all my work. —RTL

And for Barbara Bucholtz,

who refused to know her place. —MB



## Editor's Introduction

MARY BUCHOLTZ

The publication of Robin Tolmach Lakoff's groundbreaking book *Language and Woman's Place (LWP)* by Harper & Row in 1975 has long been heralded as the beginning of the linguistic subfield of language and gender studies, as well as ushering in the study of language and gender in related disciplines such as anthropology, communication studies, education, psychology, and sociology. First published in shorter form in the journal *Language in Society* in 1973, the book has been widely read, reviewed, and discussed since its appearance, as well as inspiring a vast body of research on a variety of fundamental questions first laid out in its pages:

- What linguistic practices and ideologies are associated with women's speech?
- How are gender ideologies made manifest in the ways women are spoken of?
- What is the role of gender-based power inequity in these socio-linguistic processes?
- What is the role of cultural institutions, including socialization in the nuclear family and into heterosexuality, representations in the media, and other large-scale social structures?
- How do linguistically based cultural systems, such as politeness, reproduce unequal gendered arrangements?

Lakoff's incisive questions and her insightful answers to them did not merely inaugurate but in fact anticipated over two decades of research on language and gender. The volume's continuing relevance—indeed, centrality—to the field is due to its almost prescient perceptiveness, while the clarity and wit with which Lakoff presented her ideas has made *LWP* as enjoyable as it is indispensable. It is a testament to the book's canonical status in linguistics that it has remained in print continuously for over twenty-five years.

The idea for this new and expanded edition of *LWP* was born of necessity: I was preparing to teach an undergraduate class in language and gender and discovered to my dismay that the text had recently gone out of

print despite ongoing reader demand. I approached Robin with the idea of a second edition. It was obvious that the book had to be reissued, but it was equally clear that the text should be placed in context for a new generation of readers. We decided that, in addition to the complete original text, the volume would include annotations of the text by Robin and an introductory essay in which she reflects on the book's origins and impact, and brief essays by a wide range of prominent scholars of language and gender commenting on the diverse ways in which *LWP* has advanced scholarship in the field.

Due to the efforts of many feminists, Robin Lakoff among them, American society—and especially woman's place within it—has changed dramatically and for the better since the book was first published in 1975. Yet *LWP* continues to resonate powerfully with today's readers. This is not only an indication of how much further we have to go to achieve the feminist goal of gender equality but also a testament to Lakoff's astute and far-seeing analysis. A number of commentators in this volume remark on the changes in gendered language since Lakoff's initial observations, yet they also point to the many ways in which the issues Lakoff identified are with us still. The text continues to be widely cited by scholars and remains required reading in undergraduate and graduate courses on language and gender and related topics.

Like any pioneering text, *LWP* has been critiqued, by both feminist and antifeminist scholars, yet the fact that it persists as the single most influential work in language and gender indicates that its foundational role in the field is substantive rather than symbolic. A reassessment of Lakoff's book in the past decade has led scholars to read the text with greater sensitivity to the intellectual and political climate in which it was written and to express renewed appreciation for the valuable contributions it makes not only to the history of language and gender research but also to its present and future development. The commentaries by language and gender scholars in this second edition therefore consider the book from the dual standpoint of its historical context and its current relevance. The purpose is not to rehash tired critiques but to consider afresh the ways in which *LWP* has shaped our knowledge of gender and the ways in which it resonates with contemporary issues in the field.

Part 1, "Contexts," locates *LWP* within historical context both within language and gender research and within feminist scholarship more generally. The section opens with my own examination of the feminist roots of *LWP* and the ongoing development of Lakoff's ideas about gender from 1973 to the present. Responding to the tendency for contemporary critics of Lakoff's work to read the text ahistorically, as though her thinking about gender and language ended in 1975, I argue for a consideration of the full range of her research. My own reading of *LWP* alongside Lakoff's later scholarship demonstrates both significant continuities and important changes in her approach to feminist linguistics over the years.

Bonnie McElhinny then turns to the complex question of Lakoff's relationship to radical feminism. McElhinny points out that although Lakoff has never claimed this label for herself, her work is compatible with many of the principles of radical feminism, the form of feminist theory that predominated politically and intellectually during the time Lakoff was writing *LWP*. Yet McElhinny also notes the dangers in assigning Lakoff's or any other scholar's work a particular label, a practice that often serves to promote a single form of feminist thought as normative and "up-to-date."

In the next essay, Sally McConnell-Ginet revisits her own early critique of *LWP* in light of recent research on how gender ideologies are constructed through language. McConnell-Ginet observes that her differences with Lakoff over the best way to understand language and gender were based in a more general theoretical disagreement about the best way to understand language itself, due to the two scholars' association with different theories of the relationship between semantics, grammar, and context. Surveying research that responded to Lakoff's characterization of "women's language," she concludes that one of the most significant contributions of *LWP* was long overlooked and has only been rearticulated within feminist linguistic theory in the last decade: the fundamental relationship between subjectivity, stance, and language.

In the last essay in this section, Anna Livia reflects on the ways the world and its language users have changed since *LWP* first appeared in print. She shows how the gender asymmetry in titles and pronouns discussed by Lakoff has become less acute. Yet she also demonstrates that the gendered linguistic ideologies that Lakoff described continue to circulate in popular culture. In her own research on French lesbian personal ads, Livia uncovers the complex interplay of gender and class addressed in Lakoff's work, an indication of the unexpected ways that *LWP* continues to be relevant in new sociohistorical contexts.

Part 2, "Concepts," explores some of the key analytic tools Lakoff drew on in *Language and Woman's Place* and how her work helped develop new frameworks for the analysis of language and gender. The issue of gender in powerful, polite, and patronizing language is the topic of the first commentary in this section. Janet Holmes notes Lakoff's central role in the development of politeness theory within linguistics, a role often overlooked by scholars who missed the connection between the gendered linguistic features she identified, politeness, and power. Holmes also observes that Lakoff's little-discussed predictions about language used about, rather than by, women were often quite accurate: drawing on several linguistic corpora, she shows that the word *lady* has acquired a connotation of patronizing or trivializing women, an association Lakoff described for this word in 1975.

In the next essay, Deborah Tannen discusses the importance of cultural difference in the theoretical underpinnings of *LWP*. Tracing the development of her own work on cross-gender communication as cross-

cultural communication, Tannen shows how Lakoff's theory of politeness was built on ideas about cultural variation and in turn contributed to a cultural understanding of gender. Tannen argues that both for her and for Lakoff, gender is fundamentally a component of conversational style, along with ethnicity, region, age, class, and other factors.

In the next contribution, Penelope Eckert examines how the insights of *LWP* intersect with the issue of gendered symbolic capital, a central tool in the analysis of language and gender. Eckert demonstrates that the "good woman" stereotype that underlies Lakoff's concept of "women's language" is a key figure to which girls and women must orient in shaping their own gender identities, whether "good" or not. Eckert builds on Lakoff's ideas by showing how both "good women" and those who choose to be "bad" face the same gender-based constraints on access to real-world power and hence must use the symbolic realm of language and other tools of self-presentation to construct authoritative identities.

The final essay in this section, by Kira Hall, considers how *LWP* advances gender theory within linguistics by focusing on exceptional speakers in addition to those who conform to gender ideologies. Although many researchers have wrongly claimed that Lakoff characterized "women's language" as exclusively used by female speakers, Hall shows that Lakoff's entire theory of "women's language" hinges on the insight that men who elect for various reasons to remove themselves from structures of power may also use these linguistic practices (hippies, gays, and academics are Lakoff's examples). Thus "women's language" is not fundamentally about gender but more basically about the displayed lack of power.

Part 3, "Femininities," investigates in more detail the question of "women's language" as a gender norm, examining the ways that "ladylike" language is used by female speakers in a variety of contexts. One of the clearest examples of this phenomenon is described in Sachiko Ide's commentary on how *LWP* contributed to her understanding of "Japanese women's language," a widely discussed linguistic phenomenon in Japan. Ide shows how cultural differences between the United States and Japan required her to rework Lakoff's theory when she introduced it into linguistic scholarship in Japan. Whereas in the United States, "women's language" marks the speaker's subordination, Ide argues, in Japan it is an index of prestige and even power.

The second commentary in this section likewise explores how "women's language" may be put to use for strategic purposes in the construction of a powerful feminine identity. Catherine Evans Davies examines how media icon and "lifestyle entrepreneur" Martha Stewart draws on numerous elements of "women's language" to construct a powerful and authoritative persona based on the domestic sphere traditionally associated with women. Davies shows that "women's language" may, in this corporate context, be synonymous with powerful language.

A somewhat different relationship between gender and power is fur-

ther explored in the final two commentaries on language socialization. The first, by Jenny Cook-Gumperz, demonstrates the ways in which preschool girls experiment with and against powerful language: in enacting the role of mother in imaginative play, in interaction with other girls, and in confronting the powerful language and action of intrusive boys. Drawing on Lakoff's ideas about politeness and gender, Cook-Gumperz shows how girls use politeness to control and persuade others; thus as a little girl learns to become a "lady" she also learns how to use language strategically, though not always successfully.

The place of mothers in gendered language socialization is addressed by Shari Kendall. Kendall observes that the role of mothers is an unspoken presence in *LWP*, and she shows how Lakoff's description of politeness and "women's language" aids in understanding the difference between the roles that a mother and father assume in interacting with their daughter at dinnertime. Kendall notes that while the father exclusively takes up a joking position, the mother fills a variety of socializing roles, all of which involve the modeling of or explicit instruction in "ladylike" language.

In Part 4, "Power," the consequences of such gender inequity in normative language use are made visible. Miriam Meyerhoff's contribution addresses *LWP*'s insights on silence, a pivotal concept in feminist theory since the 1970s, yet one that, as Meyerhoff notes, is often not discussed in treatments of Lakoff's work. Meyerhoff identifies two kinds of silencing effects described in *LWP*: one in which women may not speak at all and one in which women's speech is misunderstood because it is evaluated according to biased norms. Using tools from feminist philosophy of language and social psychology, Meyerhoff points to the mechanisms and motivations underlying the silencing of women as characterized by Lakoff.

In Susan C. Herring's essay, the silencing effects discussed by Meyerhoff are examined in a specific discursive context: online interaction. Contrary to the "technological determinism" of some feminists, which holds that cyberspace renders gender invisible and hence irrelevant, Herring, summarizing her extensive research on gender and computer-mediated communication, reports sharp gender inequities in cyberspace. Many of the gendered linguistic practices she found in her own research correspond to those identified by Lakoff; and those that are different, Herring observes, nevertheless reinforce Lakoff's larger point: the gender hierarchy consistently subordinates women to men.

A particularly vivid example of such a gender hierarchy is put forward in Susan Ehrlich's contribution, which focuses on sexual harassment and assault. Challenging the traditional feminist notion that words are wholly symbolic and have no material effects, Ehrlich posits a fundamental relationship between linguistic and material inequities. She shows that restrictive definitions of *rape* lead to the underreporting of rape when it involves acquaintances or family members, as well as the linguistic positioning of victims of such rapes as inadequate in their resistance. Ehrlich argues for

undermining the dichotomy between words and their material consequences for women's lives and bodies. *LWP* contributes to this project, she suggests, by raising the question of whether correcting linguistic inequities can correct the social inequities that underlie them.

In this section's final essay, Scott Kiesling considers how a focus on men and masculinity illuminates *LWP* and shows how these issues are central to the book. Kiesling observes that Lakoff's implicit separation of gendered norms from real speakers means that multiple forms of femininity and masculinity are available to both women and men. He goes on to examine men's relationship to power and how this sheds light on Lakoff's own treatment of power as differential across genders. Finally, he describes how attention to mainstream masculinity makes visible Lakoff's early understanding of the now fashionable view of gender identities, both mainstream and marginalized, as performative.

The final sets of commentaries raise issues that were not yet, or not fully, on the horizon of linguistic research when *LWP* was published. They therefore trace the newest developments in scholarship on language, gender, and sexuality, noting the ways in which Lakoff's work helped make such research possible.

Part 5, "Women's Places," considers the diversity of ways that women use language, especially speakers who do not match the white, middle-class American demographic of Lakoff's book. Judith Mattson Bean and Barbara Johnstone consider how one Texas woman negotiates gendered expectations with her public role as the state leader of a powerful labor union, a traditionally male and working-class group. They describe how, in keeping with Lakoff's characterization of "women's language" and "men's language," this powerful woman reports her use of profanity to express authority and strong emotion but mitigates her self-descriptions using hedges and laughter. While arguing for a theory of identity as flexible and creative, Bean and Johnstone also draw on Lakoff's insights on how gender identities are culturally constrained.

As the second commentary by Yoshiko Matsumoto indicates, just as "women's language" is not the only linguistic style available to women in the United States, women in Japan do not only use "Japanese women's language." Matsumoto points out how, in a discussion of a Western male scholar's analysis of "Japanese women's language," Lakoff challenges both the sexism and the exoticism of much Western scholarship on this topic. Matsumoto traces recent changes in gender norms in Japanese society and language use, showing that even middle-aged, middle-class women use language stereotypically associated with men, yet she notes, following Lakoff, that shifts away from "women's language" in Japan as in the United States do not inevitably ensure gender equality.

In the next essay, Marcyliena Morgan demonstrates that the place for women that *LWP* opened up can serve as a model for a language and gender theory that makes African American women central rather than an

afterthought. Morgan notes that the significant gaps in our knowledge of African American language and gender practice, such as the absence of work on ordinary interactions between women and men, are largely due to racist stereotypes about African American gender roles. Morgan demonstrates how features of "women's language" as described by Lakoff also characterized the racial subordination demanded of African Americans under slavery and shows how African American women today variously exploit and reject elements of white "women's language" in indexing their identities.

Norma Mendoza-Denton's contribution to the volume likewise examines a group of speakers who must negotiate both racist ideologies and gender stereotypes: Latinas and Latinos in the United States. Surveying the research on gender and language among Latinas and Latinos, Mendoza-Denton notes that despite the cultural expectation that Latina girls and women should conform to the "ladylike" norms identified by Lakoff, many speakers transgress normative gender expectations. Mendoza-Denton points to her own research on class, gender, and ethnicity, focusing on how recent-immigrant, working-class Mexican girls confront the stereotype of linguistic and cultural conservatism that Lakoff describes.

In the last essay in this section, Sara Trechter considers Lakoff's political and cultural approach to language as a model for descriptive linguists working with endangered languages. She notes that even the small amount of linguistic work on gender in Native American communities may unwittingly promote or prescribe gender norms—especially because as fluent speakers are disappearing, linguistic descriptions take on authoritative roles for those seeking to revitalize their language. Trechter suggests that dialogic fieldwork methods, long a staple of feminist research, may help ensure that indigenous women have a central place in linguistic scholarship.

The final section of the book turns to issues that have, since *Language and Woman's Place* was published, transformed the study of language and gender into the study of language, gender, and sexuality. The first contribution, by William L. Leap, traces the conceptual and political parallels between the linguistic variety that Lakoff calls "women's language" and a similarly stable set of norms for some gay men. Leap observes that Lakoff's approach to language and gender is both theoretically and methodologically consonant with parallel trends in cultural studies in the 1970s, especially in her use of personal experience as a central method. In his own work on gay men's linguistic practices, Leap also draws on these theories and methods. He notes that although both his research and Lakoff's have been critiqued for their focus on white, middle-class speakers, both offered a description of one sociocultural context for language use that could be compared with others in later scholarship.

The question of the place of gay men in Lakoff's book is addressed in the next commentary by Rudolf P. Gaudio. Drawing on his own experiences as a gay academic man, Gaudio recalls the resistance of his younger

self to Lakoff's invocation of the stereotype that gay men talk like (straight) women and notes that neither gay men nor male academics are as oppositional to hegemonic masculinity as Lakoff, writing in Berkeley in its radical heyday, might have hoped. He concludes that critics of Lakoff's handling of gender and sexuality fail to read her work in the political context of leftist activism of the 1960s and 1970s as well as in the historical context of linguists' theoretical practice in the same period.

In the following essay, Robin Queen addresses the relationship between stereotypes and sexual identity in greater detail by focusing on lesbian identity. Queen points out that Lakoff's emphasis on stereotypes of the language use of white, heterosexual, middle-class women may actually help call attention to other stances toward the category of women. In her own research on lesbian language use, she similarly examines cultural representations to demonstrate how media images of lesbians aimed at mainstream and lesbian audiences offer widely divergent perspectives on the diversity of lesbian identities and their relationship to both femininity and masculinity.

The section—and the book—concludes with Rusty Barrett's examination of the central role of social norms in Lakoff's theory of language and gender, particularly in the context of reactions to the term *queer* in the field of language and sexuality. Barrett contrasts Lakoff's emphasis on the role of the listener in assigning social meaning to language with gender theorist Judith Butler's position that previously negative words such as *queer* can be assigned new, positive meanings. The widespread rejection of *queer* as an identity label, Barrett argues, would be predicted by Lakoff given her attention to social constraints on language change, even as the goals of queer theory and queer linguistics continue to be both viable and necessary. As Barrett and other authors in the volume point out, Lakoff's initial salvo in *LWP*—"Language uses us as much as we use language" (this volume, 39)—continues to offer a rich theoretical basis for new work on the relationship of language, gender, and sexuality in social life.

The range and diversity of the essays in this volume hint at how much work remains to understand fully Lakoff's contribution to feminist linguistics. In light of the breadth of topics they address, it is striking that so many common themes emerge. And in many cases the authors have zeroed in on issues in *LWP* that have long been overlooked in the extensive commentaries on the book within feminist linguistics and related fields, or that have been misinterpreted by Lakoff's critics. Among the themes that are repeatedly addressed in these pages are the following.

### 1. "Women's Language" as Ideology

As many of the authors in this volume observe (e.g., Eckert, Kiesling, McConnell-Ginet, Queen), Lakoff's formulation of "women's language" is

at least as much a characterization of a widespread cultural ideology (or, in Lakoff's terms, a stereotype) of how women ought to speak as it is a description of the actual linguistic practices of real women. Yet this obvious fact was overlooked for many years, and only recently have scholars, made newly aware of the importance of ideology in language, recognized this crucial component of Lakoff's framework. The centrality of cultural members' beliefs about gender and language has become pivotal in research in the field, opening up new theoretical vistas that take ideology as an issue to be explored in its own right, as Lakoff did, rather than, as many of her critics would have it, as an obstacle to the correct empirical description of gendered language use.

### 2. Lakoff's Theorizing of "Women's Language" as an Index of Powerlessness

Whereas critics have often charged that Lakoff considers gender the most basic factor in her description of "women's language," several of the contributors point out that it is clear that Lakoff views power as the fundamental issue (e.g., Hall, Holmes, McElhinny, Meyerhoff). Moreover, as Lakoff (1990) makes explicit in her more recent writings addressing this critique, as long as gender inequality exists power and gender are inseparable concepts. This simple fact is demonstrated by a variety of contributions to this volume (e.g., Ehrlich, Herring, Kendall). However, authors also show that elements of "women's language" may be put to powerful ends (e.g., Cook-Gumperz, Davies, Ide), thereby demonstrating that, as Lakoff suggested early on, the displayed lack of power need not inevitably correlate with real-world powerlessness.

### 3. Lakoff's Attention to Masculinity and Men's Use of Language

*LWP* is most often characterized as an examination of "women's language," yet as a number of authors note, it also includes an analysis of "men's language" (e.g., Gaudio, Kiesling, Livia). Lakoff's description of "men's language" suggested that gendered linguistic norms for men functioned as ways of displaying an engagement with power. She addressed this issue with respect not only to men of diverse social classes but also to men whose political or occupational identities separated them from masculine norms. Lakoff's work thus presaged the increasing attention to men and masculinity in studies of language, gender, and sexuality and opened the door for a consideration of those men who may choose to resist mainstream masculinity.



#### 4. Lakoff's Focus on Linguistic Practices That Violate Linguistic Norms

Despite the frequent charge that *LWP* takes a nonnormative approach to language and gender, Lakoff was also attentive to the ways in which speakers might challenge gender norms of language use. This issue is explored most fully with respect to men, who for Lakoff, writing in the 1970s, were granted more cultural agency to opt out of traditional gendered practices. Thus Lakoff identified the speech of hippies, gay men, male academics, and upper-class men as nonnormative in the use of elements of "women's language" (Hall). But as several essays in this volume demonstrate, as cultural norms have shifted, women have likewise taken up some of the resources associated with "men's language" (Bean and Johnstone, Matsumoto, Mendoza-Denton), a linguistic change that Lakoff anticipated would come in the wake of social changes in gender arrangements.

#### 5. Lakoff's Interest in the Interaction of Gender and Social Class

A number of commentators remark on Lakoff's attention to the relationship between social class and gendered linguistic behavior (e.g., Livia, Morgan), a relationship that for many years within language and gender studies was restricted almost entirely to quantitative studies of phonological variation. Lakoff's work on this issue is thus an important early contribution to the qualitative analysis of speech and social class. Her approach is particularly significant in that she takes the upper classes, rather than the lower, as those whose linguistic behavior is most in need of explanation, a perspective that runs counter to most sociolinguistic research. By analyzing upper-class men's use of "women's language" as a way of symbolizing their distance from the concerns of middle-class corporate masculinity, Lakoff implies that such speakers do not conform to dominant gender ideologies and should not be considered the prestige norm to which members of other social classes orient their own speech. She thus also indicates that gendered identities might differ for people of different social classes, an issue that continues to require exploration within language and gender research.

#### 6. Lakoff's Use of an Introspective Methodology

Perhaps the most frequent target of critics of Lakoff's book is her decision to use introspection as a central source of data for her study. Several essays in this volume emphasize, however, that this approach was in keeping with mainstream linguistics of the day (e.g., Gaudio), and others offer an even more forceful objection to this complaint: introspection can be an important political and intellectual tool. Such a method can signal a rejection

of rigidly positivistic approaches in favor of more interpretive perspectives (Leap). It may, in foregrounding dominant gender stereotypes, paradoxically highlight alternatives to normative gender (Queen), and it can demonstrate the 1970s-era feminist principle "the personal is political" (Bucholtz). Indeed, many contributors directly demonstrate the intimate connection between personal experience and scholarly activity by framing their discussion of Lakoff in relation to issues of gender and sexuality in their own lives (e.g., Barrett, Eckert, Gaudio, Kendall, Queen, Tannen).

#### 7. Lakoff's Commitment to Social Justice

Early critiques of Lakoff acknowledged her position as a feminist but framed her as misguided in her approach. This dismissal of Lakoff's engagement with political issues, however, misses the crucial fact that *LWP* offers a radical challenge to mainstream scholarship as well as to mainstream society. Lakoff's text was one of the earliest and most forceful calls for linguists to use their professional knowledge and abilities to effect political change. What is more, it emerged in an academic climate in which political and intellectual endeavors remained largely separated and in which feminism in particular was regularly trivialized or ignored. It is an indication of how much has changed in the academy in the intervening years that so many authors in this volume bring this vital but underexplored dimension of Lakoff's work to the center of their discussion (e.g., Ehrlich, Morgan, Tannen, Trechter).

The foregoing brief description cannot do justice to the wealth of ideas in the following pages, both those proposed by Lakoff and those that respond to her work. This volume makes considerable progress toward addressing the omissions and errors in previous treatments of Lakoff's work and toward demonstrating the book's utility for contemporary scholarship. Yet it is far from exhausting either issue; much still remains to be mined in *LWP*. As Lakoff herself wrote regarding her pioneering work (this volume, 40), the present book is intended not as "the final word" but as "a goad to further research" that considers the role of the field's inaugural text in the study of language, gender, and sexuality.

#### NOTE

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## Author's Introduction

Language and Woman's Place *Revisited*

ROBIN TOLMACH LAKOFF

1975

It is hard to remember just how different the world was when *Language and Woman's Place (LWP)* was first published in 1975 and harder still to return (even in imagination) to that world. Rereading the book, I am struck equally by how much has changed and how much remains essentially the same. While the knowledge available to me (as a linguist and a feminist) back then was much sparser than what we have at our disposal today, work done then still has bearing on the ways we think now.

The original essay was situated at a revolutionary moment, in both linguistics and women's history (not to mention American history). There was the youth revolution against the Vietnam War and the pieties of the "Establishment." There was women's liberation, born out of the civil rights and antiwar movements, but by about 1968 taking off on its own. The third (and most obscure) revolution occurred within transformational linguistics, the creation of generative semantics. Each of these contributed to *LWP*.

I entered linguistics as transformational generative grammar (TGG) was being developed at MIT by Noam Chomsky and his students and collaborators. It is difficult now to remember what linguistics was like prior to the advent of TGG: an obscure field, hyperspecialized, hardly capable of providing Big Answers or even asking Pretty Big Questions. American structural linguistics, the dominant paradigm in the United States until the mid-1960s, discouraged questions that could be explored through the medium of the investigator's intuitions. Language had to be analyzed as an astrophysicist might examine a distant galaxy. There were good historical reasons for this stance; but by the 1960s it had made linguistics a sterile discipline.

Besides being a powerfully charismatic figure in linguistics (and other fields), Chomsky played an active role in the antiwar movement. It was impossible to do linguistics at MIT and remain neutral about events in the