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Queering Language, Denaturalizing Gender

Mona Gérardin-Laverge

This article explores the question of the political power of certain feminist linguistic practices, such as using non-sexist language and queering language. After presenting different avenues taken by research on gender and language that offer a way of breaking away from a purely referential approach to language and of conceptualizing its role in the construction of gender relations, the article explores how certain linguistic practices can contribute to naturalizing gender. It then examines the transformative power of feminist and queer language practices by exploring their capacity to denaturalize gender.

In the French-speaking context, non-sexist language refers to a set of diverse practices.¹ These can range from wanting to increase or improve women's representation in language (e.g., by using feminine marked nouns for occupations, such as *autrice* for 'author' rather than the masculine term *auteur*, and challenging the grammatical rule according to which 'the

¹ In the original French, the author employed several different forms of *écriture inclusive*. Many of these choices are no longer visible in the English translation, which draws on different techniques to eliminate sexist language. When, in order to understand an example or follow the argument, it is important for the reader to know whether a part of speech was marked in the feminine, the masculine, or both, but the English equivalent does not make this clear, 'F', 'M', or 'FM' has been added to the word in subscript. The abbreviation 'pl', also in subscript, indicates plural agreements when this information is necessary. This notation system was inspired by the following article: Heather Burnett and Céline Pozniak. 'Political dimensions of gender inclusive writing in Parisian universities.' *Journal of Sociolinguistics* (May 2021), doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/josl.12489>. It has not been used every time the author used an inclusive term because to do so would overload the text and, by marking gender in a language without grammatical genders, misrepresent how inclusive writing functions and is received in French. (Translator's note)

masculine prevails over the feminine')² to moving beyond the gender binary by queering language (reconfiguring it from a gender queer approach, for example using experimental forms such as the pronouns *yel*, *illes*, or *toustes* not in order to represent men and women equally, but rather to call into question the binary categorization 'man/woman' and so to use linguistic gender marking to subvert the gender binary).

These various practices are based on the idea that language shapes our representations and contributes to maintaining gender, viewed as a relation of dominance and a tool for establishing binary categories and hierarchies. While it seems self-evident that words inform our representations and trivial to state that linguistic categories play an important role in how we perceive the world, some of the debates prompted in recent years by non-sexist language show that, in fact, there is no consensus about the role language plays in constructing gender relations. Setting aside opposition based on antifeminist principles or on an essentialist and naturalizing view of gender, one of the main criticisms levelled against non-sexist language relates to its allegedly secondary or symbolic nature: the argument is that in defending such language, feminists are losing sight of the real struggles for equality between women and men, which are economic and material. While fighting for language alone is clearly insufficient—particularly when non-sexist language is used by institutions, big business, or the advertising industry as a low-cost communication strategy—the fact remains that this sort of criticism relies on a questionable view of language as the expression or mirror of social relations, simply reflecting pre-existing inequalities. Conversely, the various feminist and queer initiatives mentioned above all consider language to be a lever for social change. To what extent, then, can language play this role? What

² '*Le masculin l'emporte sur le féminin*', a grammatical rule that requires parts of speech to agree with the masculine by default. According to this rule, when parts of speech agree with two nouns, one feminine and one masculine, they take the masculine plural. This same rule means that when referring to a group of people made up of twenty women and one man, for example, all pronouns, determiners, and adjectives take the masculine plural. (Translator's note).

exactly is the transformative power of feminist and queer language practices?

In this article, after outlining why it seems necessary to me to break away from a view of language as simply reflecting social relations, I summarize the different avenues taken by research on gender and language that offer a way of conceptualizing the structuring power of language and its role in constructing gender relations. I then go on to examine the transformative power of feminist and queer language practices by exploring their capacity to denaturalize gender.

Linguistic Performativity and Gender Performativity

The Role of Language in Gender Performativity

The conception of language as simply reflecting reality, which it merely ‘expresses’ and puts into words, has been refuted from different perspectives: first, as many linguists, anthropologists, and philosophers have shown, the categories of the language we speak play a role in the formation of our thinking and our perception of reality: colour nouns, for example, create dividing lines within a continuous spectrum of light and inform how we perceive colour by leading us to see differences or similarities between proximate shades. On another level, rhetoric—the art of giving speech a particular form to produce a specific desired effect on an audience—is based on the fact that language does not simply put the world into words, but acts upon that world by producing effects on others. Pragmatics, which explores the power of language to act, shows that it does not only do so through effects, especially psychological ones, upon others, but also because certain utterances are acts in and of themselves. As John L. Austin has underlined, apparently descriptive utterances such as ‘I give and bequeath my watch to my brother’ in a will or ‘I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth’, uttered during a ceremony whilst smashing a bottle of champagne against the stern, are not descriptions of actions but are themselves the act of bequeathing a watch or baptizing a ship. These speech acts do what they say, providing certain conditions are satisfied, and

particularly providing the speaker has the required status allowing them to carry out the act in question: Austin (1962) refers to these utterances as ‘performatives’ as opposed to utterances that are purely ‘constative’.

This perspective has been used in gender studies to explore the role of discourse in the production of gender and in the construction of gender itself. Judith Butler has drawn on Austin’s ‘performative’ utterance, through the lens of Jacques Derrida’s reading of the concept, to analyse what she labels ‘gender performativity’: gender is not an essence revealed through enactment, it is the enactment itself. Gender is something we ‘do’ more than something that we ‘are’. If gender appears to be an essence rather than an activity, this is because it is something that we regularly enact through speech, behaviour, and how we address others (every day, we repeat behaviour that conforms to gender norms and non-conforming behaviour may well be made to appear invisible or violently sanctioned) and because it is caught up in a process of confirming expectations (because we assume gender is an identity that precedes its enactment, we expect it to be visible in our behaviour, which thus seems to confirm gender as an underlying identity whereas it is in fact through the behaviour that gender exists).

In defining ‘gender performativity’ in this way, Butler uses Austin’s concept outside the sphere of linguistics. However, the role of language in the production of gender remains essential to her conception of gender performativity. Her paradigmatic example of the performative production of gender is a discursive act: when a child is born, the doctor assigns that child a sex by declaring ‘it’s a boy’ or ‘it’s a girl’ – a statement that claims to be simply describing an observed biological fact but that in reality assigns that child a gendered social identity that will prove determining for the rest of their life. In answer to the question, ‘how, then, does a performative theory of speech acts become a performative theory of gender?’ Butler writes:

My wager is that most of us have had our genders established by virtue of someone checking a box and sending it in [...]. [T]here was doubtless a graphic event that inaugurated gender for the

vast majority of us, or perhaps someone simply exclaimed into the air, 'it's a boy' or 'it's a girl' [...]. In some ways, these all remain discursive moments at the inception of our gendered lives. (Butler 2015, p. 28-29)

In *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, she asks: 'Why would people be interested in this relatively obscure theory of speech acts?' and answers this question in several stages. She first emphasizes the linguistic dimension of performativity so as to explain how Austin's theory allowed her to name 'a power language has to bring about a new situation or to set into motion a set of effects', that is to say the fact that language acts and 'acts powerfully' (p. 28). Further on, she states that the notion of 'performativity' has above all allowed her to conceptualize gender as 'a certain kind of enactment' and of reproduction, by the body, of obligatory norms, that 'demand that we become one gender or the other' (p. 32). In *Bodies that Matter*, she explores the interaction between discourses, norms, and bodies in gender performativity in order to respond to the criticisms levelled against *Gender Trouble* that she had neglected the material aspect of the body and developed a voluntarist conception of gender.

Consequently, while it is important to underscore the way in which Butler departs from a purely linguistic conception of performativity, the role of discourse nonetheless remains important for conceptualizing gender performativity. The idea is not to reduce reality to a discursive production, as though discourse constituted the outside world, but rather to consider that discourse acts within the world insofar as it is part of it. The role of discourse in the production of gender has been examined in many linguistic studies on gender that are part of what has been described as the 'performance turn' inspired by Austin and Butler (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003, p. 4) and that have reconceptualized language and gender in combination with each other.

Different paradigms through which to analyse the relationship between gender and language

Analysing the performative production of gender in our discursive practices means not limiting ourselves to the most obvious examples (such as a doctor assigning a sex at birth) which might give the impression that the production is a one-off event rather than something that occurs repeatedly. For example, we can study the different modes in which gender exists in language (phonology, morphology, grammar, lexicon, syntax) in order to reveal its ubiquity in our everyday linguistic practice. As Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet emphasize, it is difficult to speak without using and perpetuating the binary categorization of gender (2003, p. 251). But as demonstrated by the examples they cite, it is not so much the components of language themselves that bring gender into existence as it is the uses made of these components in context. It therefore seems important not to analyse gender in language without looking at real usage, discourse, and interaction.

In this respect, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet have highlighted the structuring role gender plays in verbal interactions and conversational dynamics. While gender structures interactions, it also develops in interaction: in terms of its general content (the meaning we give to gender norms) and as the gender identity of the people participating in the interaction. This assertion opens up different research avenues: we can study how people's gender informs an interaction, for example how a conversation unfolds, interruptions, the respective discursive strategies used by men and women, marks of respect, forms of address, the use of modals, etc. In all these cases, analysis focuses on how gender is manifested in the interaction. Or we can seek to understand how gender (as content and as an identity attributed to oneself and to others) is constructed through interactions. This second approach does not view gender as an identity of the participants that is expressed in the interaction, but rather seeks to see how discourse brings gender into existence. The value of this perspective, explicitly inherited from Butler, is that it does not turn gender into a subject's substantive identity as manifested in their discourse and that it

does not give fixed content to gender, but instead analyses its construction and content in context.

The following example can allow us to differentiate between the two perspectives: Eckert and McConnell-Ginet note that parents use more diminutives and inner state words (sad, happy) when speaking to girls and more direct or emphatic prohibitives (don't do that! No! no! No!) (2003, p. 17) when talking to boys. This phenomenon can be analysed in several ways: either we assume that children 'are' boys and girls and look at the differences in how we address them because they are what they are (in which case we will condemn the inequality of their treatment). Or we analyse how children's gender is constructed on the basis of assumptions about what it is, and so look at how it is 'done' performatively in interactions (I am spoken to as a little girl, I learn to react accordingly, my reactions seem to confirm the identity I have been assigned, which is then read as being the cause of my behaviour).

These different perspectives correspond to different paradigms for analysing gender in language. As Alexandre Duchêne and Claudine Moïse (2011, p. 10) remind us, this question was first raised in France in the 1970s by studies on sexism in language and variationist studies that analysed the different ways in which men and women spoke. These differences were in particular examined in studies on minority and regional languages exploring the role of men and women in maintaining and transmitting these languages within the family, according to which women's speech was characterized by greater linguistic insecurity and greater efforts to master the dominant language. For Duchêne and Moïse, these studies defined female speech 'in light of male speech' by building out from the hypothesis of a 'differentiation of the sexes according to an a priori hierarchy' (12).³

In the Anglophone space, studies on gender and language also emerged from within the variationist paradigm, taking a feminist perspective with the publication of Robin Lakoff's article (1973) on women's language as forged by patriarchy and

³ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from secondary sources in French are my own. (Translator's note).

male domination. In his overview of linguistic studies on gender, Luca Greco (2014, p. 16) contends that Lakoff's perspective corresponds to the first of three paradigms around which these studies have become structured: the 'paradigm of domination'. The paradigm builds out from the idea that women are dominated by men and that this domination is reflected in the language used by women and the language used to speak about them. In this perspective, social relations prevail over language, which generally speaking simply reflects them (even though it can, in a second stage, contribute to reinforcing them). For Greco, this paradigm poses several problems: it takes a purely referential view of the relationships between language and the world, and an overly essentialist conception of gender, considered as a given that is univocally manifested in ways of speaking⁴ (p. 17).

In parallel, a 'paradigm of difference' was developed by linguists building out from the idea that girls and boys have different interactional styles and linguistic resources because they have been socialized differently. Deborah Tannen, who is the main representative of this approach, concluded that there is therefore an 'eternal misunderstanding' between men and women. This perspective has been criticized insofar as it homogenizes and reifies categories, is based on unchallenged stereotypes, and develops an essentialist and binary conception of gender (p. 20). For Duchêne and Moïse (2011, p. 13), studies situated in this perspective are grounded in stereotypical presuppositions (for example, women's politeness or chattiness) which have consequences on the scientificity and relevance of the results obtained: because they presuppose what they seem to demonstrate (the difference between men and women's speech, for example), this is what they automatically find, without developing any critical distance from their results. As Lorenza Mondada neatly summarizes, these analyses assume that the categories of 'man' and 'woman' are relevant rather than seeking to determine whether or not this is the case (p. 120).

⁴ According to Greco, this paradigm of domination progressed in three 'waves', the last of which adopted a critical perspective on Lakoff's essentialism.

A third ‘paradigm of performance’ challenges these presuppositions and looks not at how gender identities are manifested in ways of speaking but rather how they are developed and constructed in a dynamic, non-uniform way through discourse and interaction. Participants’ identities are conceptualized as the ‘result of polyphonic language practices’ and emphasis is placed on the heterogeneity of gender, particularly according to age, race, class, etc. Discourse is not considered as a simple reflection of reality: reality has an ‘irreducibly discursive dimension’ and language is a performative activity during which gender identities and categories are produced, imposed, negotiated, and interactively developed (Greco 2014, p. 21). As Duchêne and Moïse write:

Our assumption is that gender and sexual identity do not exist as such, that they are above all social and ideological, finding a form of materiality in discourse and language practices, among other things. We believe that these language processes contribute to the construction of differences and inequalities – although they are not their sole cause – and contribute to reifying and negotiating categories just as they allow the creation of new categories. Moreover, we seek to show that discursive struggles around the links between gender, sexuality, and language are not strictly speaking debates about language but in fact societal debates materialized in the field of language (Duchêne and Moïse 2011, p. 18).

Through this perspective, it is possible to analyse the performative construction of gender in discursive practices. With its emphasis on the interaction between discourse and the social order, this approach opens up the possibility for destabilizing the gender order through discursive practices and offers a way of thinking about the role of the feminist and queer practices I referred to in my introduction. Having laid out this analytical framework for the relationships between gender and language, let us now look at the capacity of these practices to denaturalize gender with a view to exploring further their transformative power.

The Naturalization of Gender in Language

What is the naturalization of gender?

Nature is regularly used as an argument to justify patriarchal oppression, the gender binary, and heteronormativity. Stating that a phenomenon is ‘natural’ means it is possible to consider that phenomenon as anterior to, and independent of, our social and political organization: it may form the basis or foundation of that organization, but we cannot transform it. In many cases, equating certain phenomena or certain social groups with nature is an operation that ‘naturalizes’ the social, that is to say presents certain social facts as natural in order to frame them as eternal and necessary. For example, Julien-Joseph Virey, one of the authors of the *Dictionnaire des sciences médicales* [Dictionary of medical science] wrote in 1802:

If woman is weak by her very constitution, it must be because Nature wished to render her submissive and dependent within the sexual union; she is therefore born to be gentle, tender, and even patient or docile; she must therefore bear without a murmur the yoke of her constraint in order to preserve harmony within the family by her submissiveness and her example.

In this passage, woman’s supposed nature (her essence) determines her social role and the relationships she must have with the rest of society. The description of this ‘natural’ fact is in fact prescriptive: ‘Nature’ is considered to be a founding principle of the social order, from which that order cannot and must not deviate.

The ideologically and scientifically erroneous nature of this sort of discourse has been abundantly demonstrated by many feminist theorists, for example Colette Guillaumin (1992) who has analysed how nature is used in more contemporary discourse. These types of discourse distinguish themselves by their incoherency: for example, women are considered to be more ‘natural’ than men (reduced to their reproductive function, their exclusion from politics was long justified by the fact they were supposedly irrational because more in thrall to their bodies, their urges, and their instincts [Dorlin 2009; Gardey and Löwy 2000]). Yet when it comes to explaining sexual assaults, men are often considered to have more ‘sexual needs’ than

women and ‘uncontrollable urges’ that can lead them to rape a woman. This incoherence can be used to show that recourse to nature is an argument intended to legitimate violence and the inegalitarian social order.

As I have shown elsewhere (Gérardin-Laverge 2018), it is important to critique both the recourse to nature as a political argument and the notion of nature that is constructed by these types of discourse (that is to say, nature as an eternal and necessary order that is radically separate from the social, but that nevertheless must be its foundation) in order to hold together two propositions:

(1) Phenomena such as patriarchal oppression and the gender binary are not natural (in the sense of ahistorical and eternal) but rather socially constructed; they are the result of political choices and a particular social organization; they are therefore historical and contingent and can be acted upon in order to change them.

(2) Nature itself must be rethought in terms of its historicity and its interactions with the social world: countering the strict nature/culture binary, it can be argued that there are ‘naturecultures’ in order to emphasize the constitutive relationships between humans and their environment, other living beings, and animal cultures and histories (Haraway 2003).

I also emphasized that these two propositions are inextricably linked and that it is valuable for constructivist feminism to not simply state that certain phenomena are not natural but rather to denaturalize the notion of ‘nature’ itself by developing an alternative conception of it.

Language and Constructivism

In order to counter justifications of the social order based on nature, taken to be a necessary and eternal order, many feminists have developed a ‘constructivist’ position consisting in demonstrating that identity and gender relations are socially constructed. This is the meaning of Simone de Beauvoir’s famous quote ‘One is not born but rather becomes a woman’ ([1949] 1953, p. 273). This does not mean that the body or

biology do not exist, but rather that they are not a natural given that pre-exists society and has no relationship or link to it, quite the contrary: social norms work upon our bodies from within (we incorporate them in our very bearing and our very gestures) and from without (during sex reassignment operations carried out at birth, for example, doctors transform sexes in order to make them conform to gender norms). ‘Men’ and ‘women’, the sexual binary itself, are social constructs.

It is interesting to underline that, historically, social constructivism was part of the ‘social criticism’ tradition and emphasized phenomena that were marginalized by Marxist theory: firstly, gender and racial oppression; secondly, the role of language. Razmig Keucheyan, who proposes an interesting presentation of the constructivist paradigm (its genealogy, its different forms, and its difficulties), contends that ‘the question of race, along with that of gender, is one of the areas that has placed constructivism centre stage in the past half century, contributing to making it one of the main sociological paradigms’ (Keucheyan 2007, p. 68). He also reminds us of the importance that constructivism gives to the structuring power of our words, concepts, and social and juridical categories: in his view, the first ‘constructivist’ book in the strict sense of the term (Berger and Luckmann 1966) was based on an analysis of how language ‘realizes a world, in the dual sense of understanding and producing it’ (Keucheyan 2007, p. 112). But how is showing the power of our linguistic categories useful for defending the constructed nature of gender? How do these categories ‘naturalize’ the social? Is it not self-evident that these categories are constructions given that they vary according to languages and to the ‘world views’ that they convey?

In order to answer these questions, I first show that naturalization can involve a certain representation of language as a simple tool for describing reality. Then I emphasize the importance of analysing discursive practices themselves, in all their heterogeneity, in order to observe how different processes of naturalization might be at work in our discourse.

Representation of Language

Emile Benveniste considers that ‘For the speaker there is a complete equivalence between language and reality. The sign overlies and commands reality; even better it is that reality’ (Benveniste [1966] 1971, p. 46). This description accounts for the intimate relationship we have with our language, which explains our surprise when we learn that other languages do not divide up reality in the same way. However, this description must be complicated somewhat: although, when we speak, we assume that there is a certain equivalence between the sign and reality, we can be aware of the fact that our categories are specific to our language, whilst nevertheless thinking they have some relevance, that they correspond to reality in some way: our categories and our words have meaning because they express the world, considered as a set of phenomena that lie beyond language and pre-exist it. Language influences our representations, but is still a more or less faithful reflection of the extra-linguistic world.

In order to illustrate this representation of language, we can take the example of the work done by Luca Greco (2011) with the ‘Association of gay and lesbian parents and future parents’ on parental naming practices, in a support group. The group participants discussed how their children could, or would, be able to refer to their parents and the difficulties they might have when it came to talking about their two ‘mummies’ and ‘daddies’. These terms are supposed not only to denote the filial relationship but also to distinguish between the child’s mother and father in the dominant heterosexual family model. How, then, can the child name and distinguish between their two fathers or two mothers?

Greco analysed the suggestions made by some of the group members (re-signifying terms such as *marraine* [godmother] or *parrain* [godfather], for example).⁵ He noted that the difficulties were always envisaged in terms of an imagined audience to which the child would have to adapt in order to be understood

⁵ The French terms for godmother and godfather do not explicitly reference religion and are often used more broadly in non-religious contexts, e.g. to talk about mentoring or sponsoring. (Translator’s note).

and accepted. He also observed that ‘the ontological impossibility of having two fathers is experienced as a linguistic impossibility’ and that the speakers have ‘an image of language as something that must “map out” the world and social ties’ (p. 157) as though language were a map representing the world, the aim of which would be to offer a faithful reflection of pre-existing dividing lines.

This analysis shows that dominant linguistic practice contributes to naturalizing the heterosexual norm by relegating any family structures that depart from it to the realms of the inexpressible and the impossible, something that is manifested in real interactions with the rest of the language community. This naturalization is reinforced by a representation of the common shared language as a referential tool that maps out extra-linguistic realities.

Naturalization processes at work in discourse

The naturalization of gender is not solely based on a representation of language as a purely descriptive tool: it is also at work in our discursive practices themselves and in some of our uses of language.

Naturalization can take several forms (equating with nature or explaining by nature) and can be applied to different phenomena (social groups, social relations, social practices). Regarding social groups (1), naturalization can consist in considering that they are found in nature as they are (a) or that some groups are closer to nature than others which are closer to culture (b). Regarding social relations (2), they can be considered natural in the sense that they exist in nature as they are (a) or viewed as the social expression of natural relations (b). Regarding social practices (3), they can be considered as existing in nature (a) or as the social expression of natural practices (b).⁶

⁶ For a more detailed and illustrated presentation of this typology, see my article ‘Dénaturaliser ne suffit pas : critique de la “nature” et perspectives de lutte’ in ‘Retour vers la nature ?’ *Questions féministes*, edited by Katia Genel, Jean-Baptiste Vuillerod and Lucie Wezel (Lormont: Le Bord de l'eau, 2020), p. 41-58.

These various operations of naturalization can be seen at work in a diverse range of discursive practices. For example, naturalization (1a), according to which social groups exist naturally, corresponds to the way in which, in certain contexts, nouns function when referring to social categories that we suppose to be natural. When a dictionary defines a 'woman' as an 'individual of the female sex',⁷ unless the dictionary is taking a constructivist stance towards sex itself, it is presenting the noun 'woman' as a word that designates a being that exists by nature. This form of naturalization is perpetuated by the way in which we learn to use gendered pronouns in languages that possess them. In French, speaking about a person involves assigning them a gender by referring to them as *il* (he) or *elle* (she) and in the vast majority of cases this is done without first asking the person if they recognize themselves in one of these two genders and if so, which. Gender is naturalized by the difficulty of referring to a person in any other way and by the supposedly self-evident nature of the gender that should be assigned to a person (the idea that gender proceeds from sex, which is manifested by specific features that can be identified in people, and that therefore the work of categorization performed by speakers is a self-evident, easy operation dictated by nature).

Naturalization can also consist in equating certain groups with nature (1b). According to the ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood (1993, p. 48), this involves negating both their agency and their cultural and historical role. From a linguistic perspective, the way individuals' agency is expressed can

⁷ This can be illustrated, for example, by the first entry for the word 'femme' [woman] in a few dictionaries: '*Être humain défini par ses caractères sexuels, qui lui permettent de concevoir et de mettre au monde des enfants*' [Human being defined by her sexual characteristics which allow her to conceive and give birth to children] (*Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, 9th édition, <https://academie.atilf.fr/consulter/femme?page=1>); '*Femme, nom féminin. Être humain du sexe féminin.*' [Woman, feminine noun. Human being of the female sex] (*Larousse*, <http://www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais/femme/33217?q=femme#33141>).

contribute to this form of naturalization. This has been demonstrated by the feminist linguists Claire Michard and Claudine Ribery (1982), for example: they analysed in detail articles by anthropologists and sociologists (Pierre Clastres, Maurice Godelier, and Pierre Bourdieu) and revealed a substantial disparity in the way they referred to women and men in the societies they studied. For example, the authors compare the following two passages from an article by Clastres entitled 'L'Arc et le Panier' [The Bow and the Basket]:

Outre que leur revient la fonction, décisive pour des nomades, du transport des biens familiaux, les épouses des chasseurs fabriquent la vannerie, la poterie, les cordes des arcs, elles font la cuisine, s'occupent des enfants

[E]n raison du type d'économie à quoi est suspendue l'existence de la tribu, les vrais maîtres de la forêt sont les chasseurs : ils l'investissent effectivement, obligés qu'ils sont de l'explorer avec minutie pour en exploiter systématiquement toutes les ressources. (Clastres 1966, p. 15)

Apart from their task of carrying the family possessions, a crucial one for nomads, the hunters' wives weave baskets, make pots and bow strings, cook, look after the children, etc.

[B]ecause of the type of economy on which the life of the tribe hangs, the real masters of the forest are the hunters; they effectively 'take it over' obliged as they are to explore it minutely in order to exploit all its resources systematically (Clastres [1966] 1969, p. 147)

Clastres refers to the women in relation to the men ('the hunters' wives) and presents their activities using nouns (in the French syntax, there is an additional noun not present in the English translation: 'do the cooking') whereas he describes the men's activities using action verbs reinforced by meliorative adjectives. These linguistic processes diminish the women's agency and emphasize that of the men. Moreover, the women are excluded from the generic terms used to refer to the human group under study. Clastres writes for example: 'Il faut en effet souligner que, pour les Indiens, l'obligation de donner le gibier n'est nullement vécue comme telle, tandis que celle de partager l'épouse est éprouvée comme aliénation' (Clastres 1966, p. 26). (Indeed we must stress that for the IndiansMpl the obligation to

give their game away is in no way experienced as such while the obligation to share a wife is felt to be a form of alienation' [Clastres [1966] 1969, p. 158], gender marker added). The *IndiansMpl* – a supposedly generic term intended to refer to all the members of the society being studied – in fact only refers to the men. For Michard and Ribéry, these discursive processes turn women into 'problematic humans' and minimize, or even eliminate, their agency. Such processes reserve for men the privilege of fully representing humanity's agency in relation to nature. The notion of man is 'fully determined as human' whereas the notion of woman is positioned 'on the side of animality and inanimate objects' (Michard 2000, p. 138). This type of discourse naturalizes a social group in the sense of (1b), that is to say it equates women with nature.

Some discursive practices can contribute to naturalizing not social groups but social relations themselves. As Eliane Viennot's work on the history of the French language shows, the masculine plural agreement and the generic masculine were championed because language was supposed to follow (2a) or reflect (2b) the natural inequality between men and women.

Viennot (2017, p. 24) has shown that the *Querelle des Femmes*, which was essentially political until the end of the seventeenth century, took on a linguistic dimension from the eighteenth century onwards, in order to delegitimize women's political power and intellectual and social role by masculinizing language. Until then, while linguistic choices could indicate ideological stances,⁸ the phenomenon had not been theorized as such and language was considered a 'medium' which had not yet been subject to deliberate intervention. The feminine nouns for occupations, and noble titles and functions were not attacked and people still referred to: *autrice*, *possesseuse*, *apprentisse*, *doyenne*, *emperière*, *financière*, *officière*, *mareschale*, *prevoste*, *clergesse*, *avocate*, *dompteresse*, *inventrice*, *procuratrice*, *poétesse*, *philosophesse* [feminine nouns for: author, owner, apprentice, dean, emperor, financier, officer, marshal, provost,

⁸ As Viennot points out, the *clercs* were very often misogynist and 'were apt to use masculinist language frequently', going so far as to use the plural masculine pronoun (*ils*) to refer to women.

cleric, lawyer, tamer, inventor, procurator, poet, philosopher]. There was no single rule governing agreement and proximity agreement was the most frequently used ('le Soleil et la Lune sont belles' [the SunM and the MoonF are beautifulFpl], as opposed to le Soleil et la lune sont beaux [the SunM and the MoonF are beautifulMpl] when following the rule where the 'masculine prevails over the feminine').

These habits were only challenged at the beginning of the eighteenth century, when a veritable masculinization of the language began, driven by social and political arguments. According to Viennot, it was above all the presence of women in positions of power that disturbed the men of the ruling classes and particularly the class of clerics [scholars] which appeared with universities and soon acquired a monopoly over France's political and administrative corps. The Querelle des Femmes thus extended from politics to knowledge and language.

It is first and foremost in the area of prestigious roles that language was attacked: women had to be excluded from power and culture by removing the possibility of referring to valued roles in the feminine. While some feminine forms did persist, an increasing number of books targeted their elimination and many of them disappeared rapidly. The terms that generated the most debate, and the arguments used to abolish the feminine noun, illustrate the political dimension of the masculinization of language. *Autrice* (author) is one of the most striking examples, considered to be a 'barbarism' because it was neither normal nor natural that a woman should write: there was an 'order' presiding over women's tastes and activities, which defined their place naturally and there was a linguistic order that corresponded to this natural order (p. 57).

The attempt to masculinize French was largely successful, to the extent that, by the nineteenth century, it was already possible to reverse the linguistic argument: for example, Sylvain Maréchal (2007 [1801], p. 98) wrote in his *Projet d'une loi portant défense d'apprendre à lire aux femmes* [Bill prohibiting teaching women to read] 'reason has no more wish than the French language that a woman should become an

authorM. This title, in all its acceptations, belongs to man alone.’ Language was presented as the fixed reflection of the natural order of things, its history was erased, and it became an argument testifying to the fact that it was extraordinary and against nature for women to hold positions of power and prestige: if it had been in the natural order for woman to write, then there would have been a word for it.

The question of agreements shows that the allegedly natural order of things is not egalitarian but hierarchical: proximity agreement was replaced by masculine plural agreement because the masculine was considered ‘more noble’ (Viennot 2017, p. 77).

Proponents of the masculinization of French therefore used the language as a political tool, but by championing the idea that it should reflect nature faithfully, that is to say that it should express sexual difference, mark the specificity of women as opposed to the universality of men, and indicate that certain occupations, functions, and activities were naturally reserved for men. In this perspective, removing certain words meant removing certain possibilities for women in terms of their lives and actions; and imposing the generic masculine meant imposing the idea that men embodied human nature. Language was expected to reflect nature and serve as a ‘safeguard’ against those who would wish to go against nature. Language was conceived of as a social product but one that should conform to nature whilst at the same time being its guarantor: it was the tool through which men made themselves into the gatekeepers of the natural order, viewed as the foundation of the social order.

Finally, certain uses of language contribute to naturalizing certain social practices (3). This is what the well-known ‘doctor riddle’ shows: ‘A child and his father are in a car. They have an accident. The father dies in the ambulance. The child is taken to hospital. The bestM doctorM in the hospital enters the operating theatre, sees the child, and exclaims: “But I can’t operate on him, he’s my son!” How is this possible?’ In 2013, the Institut

EgaliGone asked people on the street to solve the riddle⁹ and most of them were unable to, whereas the doctor could be the child's mother (or his second father) and they all know very well that a woman can be a doctor. This riddle shows that masculine terms do not really play a generic or universal role and do in fact refer solely to men. The phenomenon has been frequently studied with regard to the nouns for occupations, titles, and functions (Houdebine 1998): the fact that no feminine marked form exists to refer to certain occupations (for example, *médecin* [doctor]) and, conversely, the incongruity of the masculine form to refer to others (*homme de ménage* [cleaning man]) conveys the idea that certain practices (the most prestigious) are reserved for men. This contributes to naturalizing some practices and stigmatizing others by considering them as contrary to nature.

These different examples show that various processes naturalizing gender are at work in various linguistic practices. How can we fight against these processes? While analysing the power of language is a first step, showing that a phenomenon is not 'natural' but rather 'socially constructed' does not suffice to weaken its structuring power. Deconstructing oppression requires developing counter practices. Here I will focus on various forms of non-sexist language and of queering language.

Denaturalization Practices

Destabilizing Gender

Different feminist linguistic strategies exist to counter the naturalization of the gender binary and of oppression. One strategy consists in fighting linguistic sexism on the grammatical, lexical, semantic, and discursive levels. From an institutional point of view, the questions of feminine nouns for occupations, titles, and functions, as well as of using non-sexist writing in official texts, have been discussed in the French-

⁹ 'Microtrottoir EgaliGone - L'énigme du chirurgien', video uploaded 6 March 2013 by EgaliGone <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YebfaWkng9s> (accessed 30/11/2020).

speaking world, with a noteworthy lead being taken in Quebec, where the French Language Office published a guide to non-sexist writing as early as 1985. In France, feminization, advocated by linguists such as Anne-Marie Houdebine (who was a member of the terminology commission presided by Benoîte Groult which produced a Circular on the feminization of nouns for occupations, titles, and functions on 11 March 1986; see Houdebine 1998) sparked particularly virulent debate (in particular from the Académie française: see Candea, Chevalier and Duverger 2015) and the question of ‘inclusive language’ is still controversial today even though it is now present beyond activist circles (in public poster campaigns, certain institutions, etc.)

If we turn our attention away from the official debates and attempts to regulate language and look instead at speakers’ practices, we can see a diversity that extends far beyond the question of feminizing nouns for occupations and an inventiveness that is not limited simply to ‘inclusive language’. For several decades now, many feminist groups have been using non-sexist or queer forms in texts, brochures, fanzines, posters, tracts, and slogans or even in the names of these organizations (for example, ‘8 mars pour tou·te·s’ [8 March for allFM] created in 2012 in Paris to organize a more inclusive demonstration on 8 March than those run by institutional feminist associations, in a context where the latter were calling into question the participation of women who wear the veil and women sex workers in the feminist movement). In her thesis on linguistic anti-sexism in anarchist brochures, Julie Abbou (2011, p. 105) notes that feminization was a very rare practice before 1990 and that it developed in the 1990s before becoming pervasive in the 2000s. She underlines the variety of forms found in the brochures:

The feminization that emerges within this experimental, unmonitored writing space is not standard: there is more feminization and it is done differently, new linguistic practices are tested and justified (sometimes in brochures devoted to the question). Women are thus brought to the fore, but above all, gender categories are questioned, whilst addressing not only the in-group but also a broader anonymous readership (p. 103-104).

The varied range and non-homogeneous nature of these forms is particularly visible in activist ‘infokiosques’.¹⁰ On the platform www.infokiosques.net, for example, one brochure ran the headline: ‘Nous sommes touTEs en devenir’ [We are allMF in the process of evolving; the masculine form of ‘all’ is ‘tous’, the feminine form ‘toutes’]¹¹ while another read ‘Soutenir un-e survivant-e d’agression sexuelle [Support aMF survivorMF of sexual assault].¹²

Crossover with the academic world occurs via groups of activist students and researchers who explore, for example, how to use inclusive language, and the feminization or queering of language, in academic work (and how to obtain acceptance of this usage). Workshops are organized at certain universities for reflecting upon or practising this form of writing (for example during the Mœurs Attaque festival¹³ at Paris 8 university or at Sciences Po Paris’s Queer Week) and some editorial spaces, such as the journal GLAD! *Revue sur le genre, le langage et les sexualités* [GLAD! Journal on gender, language and sexualities], defend and promote linguistic exploration of plural forms aimed at challenging and denaturalizing gender.¹⁴

Within these varied initiatives, we can note the heterogeneous, plural forms used and political effects sought.

¹⁰ An *infokiosque* (neologism based on the terms ‘information’ and ‘kiosque’ in the sense of a newsstand) is a space, sometimes online (e.g. www.infokiosques.net), for disseminating fanzines and political pamphlets. These are very common in activist circles, particularly anarchist, queer, and feminist ones (for example at festivals). The pamphlets are often anonymous or signed by groups, but can also offer excerpts or translations of books where the language or price is a barrier to access. Readers are invited to spread and copy these texts as widely as possible, with a view to disseminating knowledge and taking it up as a tool in real-world struggles.

¹¹ <https://infokiosques.net/spip.php?article724> (accessed 30/11/2020)

¹² <https://infokiosques.net/spip.php?article793> ((accessed 30/11/2020)

¹³ The organizers had chosen to refer to the festival (usually a masculine noun, ‘le festival’) in the feminine, ‘la festival’.

¹⁴ See the section entitled ‘marquage de genre’ (gender marking) in the journal’s editorial policy: <https://www.revue-glad.org/78#tocto3n7> (accessed 30/11/2020)

There are, for example, various linguistic forms that seek to fight against the erasure of women and the masculinization of language so as to represent both genders equally:

- adding or juxtaposing the two forms (Bonjour à toutes et tous, Bonjour à tous/toutes [Hello to allF and allM; Hello to allM/allF]) ;

- alternating between using the generic masculine and the generic feminine;

- using both genders simultaneously for determiners, nouns, and adjectives, which can take different forms according to the speakers' personal preferences (what they consider most legible, for example), to what they are familiar with, and to the political meaning they wish to give to the practice ('Bonjour à tou(te)s', 'Bonjour à tou·te·s', 'Bonjour à tou·tes', 'Bonjour à tou-te-s' [Hello to allFM]) ;

- visually emphasizing the feminine to counter its erasure ('Bonjour à touTEs' [Hello to allFM, with the 'TE' that feminizes the word set in capitals]), or choosing to use the generic feminine alone. These choices have a more antagonist dimension than those above.

In the same vein, the choice can be made to use majority agreement (Trois femmes et un homme sont venues [Three women and one man cameFpl] or proximity agreement (Le Soleil et la Lune sont belles [The Sun and the Moon are beautifulFpl]) rather than following the universal masculine rule, whereby in both examples the presence of one masculine term would condition the agreement (cameMpl, beautifulMpl).

However, it can also be considered that the problem is not so much the non-representation of women in language as the very existence of gender. From this perspective, the previous approach is insufficient insofar as it maintains the gender binary as well as a representation of language as something that reflects a prediscursive reality. Strategies are thus developed that aim to abolish gender or to queer it through a proliferation of forms.

In order to abolish gender, discursive strategies of avoidance can be deployed, for example using individual or collective

epicene terms (une personne, ‘a person’; le public, ‘the public’) and impersonal forms that do not require the use of a pronoun (Il faut partir, ‘it is necessary to leave’ or C’est le moment de partir, ‘it is time to leave’) rather than Il/elle doit partir, ‘he/she has to leave’; Les élèves à qui je donne cours, ‘The pupils whom [epicene] I teach’ rather than Les élèves auquel·le·s je donne cours, ‘The pupils whomFMpl I teach, etc.) (N.B. the word pupils is epicene in French).

In addition to these strategies, neutral forms can also be created. The example of the creation of a gender-neutral pronoun in Sweden (‘hen’) is often cited when suggestions are made to create one in French (ul, ol, ols). Some people also adopt a neutral agreement (toux rather than tousMpl or toutesFpl), inspired by practices in other languages (especially Spanish and Italian, where gender is marked by a letter, for example ‘a’ or ‘o’ that speakers replace or delete: amic@, amic*, or amicx).

Another possible direction consists in using linguistic gender marks to subvert and challenge the gender binary, that is to say to develop a queer approach to gender in and through the use of language. Examples include the creation of hybrid forms for pronouns (ille, ielle, yel rather than il or elle [he or she]), nouns (lecteurice, rather than lecteur or lectrice [readerM or readerF]), determiners (toustes, rather than tous or toutes [allM or allF]) and adjectives (heureuxses rather than heureux or heureuses [happyMpl or happyFpl]).

Transformative Power

While these different strategies are pulling in different directions (making both genders equally visible, abolishing with gender, or producing a proliferation of genders), in reality they are often mixed in speakers’ practices and, in usage, hybrid use of these discursive forms can often be observed. These practices are ways of destabilizing the gender binary: they make visible the process through which gender is constructed, imposed and even naturalized through language. They challenge both the self-evidence of nature and the need to rely on the gender binary in order to speak, communicate, and be understood. Their advocates emphasize the fact that their texts are

understood by readers, contradicting the arguments raised by opponents who suggest that they are illegible and unintelligible. They also demonstrate that, in everyday practice, usage is more fluid than grammar prescribes.

Moreover, these practices highlight the current social conflict as opposed to claims that a consensus has been reached, as well as the productiveness of this conflict as opposed to the very attempt to reach a consensus. Whereas the need to achieve some measure of agreement is often assumed to be a prerequisite for the use of language, these practices bring to light cases where alleged agreement is no more than a precarious balance of competing powers or the result of a violent and prescriptive set of impositions, and so highlight the productiveness of these conflicts and of the invention of alternative forms.

Charles Goodwin and Don Kulick have shown that considering conflict as exceptional and dysfunctional is a preconception that hinders our understanding of many linguistic phenomena (quoted in Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2013, p. 119). This preconception also poses a problem on a political level (denying the existence and fruitfulness of conflict does not suppress actual conflict and existing power relations, but rather imposes a status quo in favour of the dominant order). As Sara Ahmed has emphasized (2010), feminists are often presented as ‘killjoys’ ‘by exposing how happiness is sustained by erasing the signs of not getting along’. The feminist linguistic and discursive practices presented above constitute this sort of revelation of conflict about language (contrary to the argument that the latter is simply a neutral tool of reference and communication) and the social order.

Finally, these practices destabilize the gender binary in a range of manners. They highlight the things that lie beyond it and that resist it already, and they open up new possibilities for speaking to one another and new ways of envisaging our selves and our lives. Mariel Acosta, who has worked on gender inclusive morphemes in anarchist texts in Spanish, shows that these changes to language aim to challenge and abolish the gender binary by removing it from our language, and by already beginning to speak against or without it. In this sense, they are

‘politics of prefiguration’, an expression that Acosta (2018) takes up from the anarchist activist repertoire and that refers to a form of intervention consisting in bringing the utopia to which one aspires into existence in a certain localized place:

Key principle: show, don't tell. [...] After all, we can't create a world we haven't yet imagined. Better if we've already tasted it. [...] The idea is not to paint a pretty picture full of rainbows and unicorns, but to put forward a fragment of something visionary, desirable, and just beyond the realm of the possible and in such a way that your action calls out the vested interests making it impossible. (Boyd and Mitchell 2012, p. 83-84)

These linguistic practices target the habits that tie us down to the existing order of things by showing us that something else is possible, realizable, and desirable. They do not simply criticize oppression, they allow us to experience something else in the here and now.

Their transformative power thus lies in the way they contribute to destabilizing the naturalization of gender in language, to highlighting the fact that there are conflicts in the social and language community, and to bringing new possibilities into existence.

Translated by Lucy Garnier

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