Verbal Hygiene for Women: Linguistics Misapplied?

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In recent years, practices of language and communication training have developed whose rationale is to enhance the effectiveness of women's communicative style in public and professional settings. The underlying assumption, drawn in part from scholarly research on gender differences in the use of language, is that women as a group experience problems in certain linguistic domains, and that these should be addressed as part of a strategy to achieve equal opportunities. This paper examines communication training aimed at women as an example of linguistics applied to real-world problems and argues that, in this case, both the problem and the proposed solution are sociolinguistically and politically misconceived.

INTRODUCTION

The study of language and gender is more often placed under the heading of sociolinguistics than applied linguistics. Nevertheless, it has affinities with the latter, insofar as its concepts and findings may be applied to 'real-world' problems. Researchers have studied, for instance, male–female miscommunication (Maltz and Borker 1982; Tannen 1990), differential participation and attainment of girls and boys in the classroom (Swann 1992; Sunderland 1994), and the reproduction of sexism and discrimination in institutional discourse (Ehrlich and King 1992). These concerns are not just of academic interest, but have practical implications outside the academy.

One way in which research findings on gender-related patterns of interaction have entered the public domain and public consciousness is by being incorporated into programmes of communication skills training. Such programmes appear under a variety of headings, including 'assertiveness', 'management', 'leadership', and 'personal effectiveness', as well as simply 'communication'; and while they may target both sexes as trainees, there is a tendency for them to target women ('leadership skills for women', 'women in management', 'women's assertiveness'), on the assumption that women have distinctive, and perhaps more pressing, training needs. Courses of this type are delivered within a range of contexts, the main ones being workplace training (often under the rubric of an equal opportunities policy) and post-16 (i.e. further, higher, adult, and continuing) education, where they are especially prominent in courses for women 'returners' to study or to the labour market. Voluntary organizations and commercial consultancy firms are also significant contributors.

Practices of language education and training are one category of the type of
linguistic or metalinguistic practice I call verbal hygiene (Cameron forthcoming). This term is intended to encompass a diverse set of activities linked by the idea that some ways of using language are functionally, aesthetically, or morally preferable to others. It is deliberately broader than what we usually call 'prescriptivism', the conservative promotion of elite language varieties as norms of correctness: prescriptivism is one type of verbal hygiene, but other types may be anti-elitist (e.g. the Plain English Campaign) and non-conservative (e.g. campaigns against sexist and racist language). I do not intend to question here whether applied linguists should in principle be involved in verbal hygiene—my position is that it depends on the nature and purpose of the enterprise. Rather, I wish to discuss the use that has been made of linguists' work in one particular type of verbal hygiene, namely communication training for women.

Language and gender researchers have had little to say about the theory, methodology, or effectiveness of this kind of training (exceptions include Henley (1978) and Crawford (forthcoming)). Here, I will attempt to review its major goals and underlying assumptions, and present a critique reflecting my concerns both as a linguist involved in language and gender research and as a feminist committed to gender equality.

A NOTE ON METHOD
The analysis that follows draws on two kinds of data. First, it reflects a reading of textual sources: training manuals and materials which are used by participants in training, popularized versions of these materials (e.g. in women's magazines and self-help books), and where available, scholarly literature describing and evaluating training practices. Second, it draws on data from informal interviews with 16 women about their experience of training. A few informants were trainers, while the rest were or had been trainees; most had undergone some form of assertiveness training (AT), in either a workplace or an educational context. All this material is dealt with more fully in Cameron (forthcoming); here, my primary purpose is less to document its content exhaustively than to discuss the theoretical issues it raises, especially issues concerning the interface between linguistic research and its application in real-world practice.

VERBAL HYGIENE FOR WOMEN: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND
Ever since the field of language and gender studies emerged during the 1970s, there has been scholarly interest not only in the actual verbal behaviour of women and men but also in the norms prescribed to them in specialist and popular advice texts. Research has uncovered a long tradition of advice to women on speech going back to the middle ages (see Armstrong and Tennenhouse 1987). By the eighteenth century, women of all classes were being advised that they should confine their speech to the private domestic sphere, cultivate the art of listening and drawing out male interlocutors, and avoid any display of wit, erudition, coarseness, or aggression. We do not, of course, know whether women followed this advice, but the stereotype of 'feminine' speech contained in it was still going strong in the 1950s.
During the past twenty-five years, social changes have made it desirable to modify the traditional advice. Large numbers of middle-class women have entered the labour market, including professional sectors previously monopolized by men; and there has been a resurgence of feminism, one reflex of which has been the widespread public acceptance of an ideology of 'equal opportunities'. Governments, public institutions, captains of industry, and educational policymakers are under pressure to pay at least lip-service to the principle that all individuals should have similar opportunities to rise on their merits. Where inequities persist after the removal of obvious structural barriers such as hiring bars or quotas, the ideology of equal opportunities suggests their causes must be identified and addressed.

One cause of persistent female 'underachievement' has been perceived to lie in the way women have been socialized to conduct themselves. In a world of equal opportunities, traditional advice to women is not merely irrelevant but counterproductive. From the 1970s on, therefore, we have seen the emergence of a new 'problem': the woman whose communicational strategies are ineffective because they are too feminine, lacking the necessary air of competence, seriousness, and authority.

This alleged problem is addressed through regimes of training, aimed not only at élite professional women—though women managers have been particular targets—but increasingly at women across the social spectrum (witness the routine inclusion of assertiveness training in courses for women returners). The provision of such training rests on an assumption that women as a group, regardless of social class, occupational status, education, age, or individual personality, are likely to lack confidence and skill in the communicative tasks of public and professional life.

Two questions arise here. One is political: how far is women's own behaviour the root cause of their continuing inequality in many social domains, and how far is changing that behaviour likely to advance the cause of equality? Clearly, it is cheaper and less disruptive for institutions to tackle gender inequity at the level of individual behaviour than to change either the whole corporate culture or the structural determinants of women's position in it (e.g. the hours people work, the availability of child-care, the 'old boy network', etc.). But it might be argued that such an approach is both inequitable and ineffectual, because it puts the onus to change on the already-disadvantaged party while failing to address the deeper causes of inequality.

The second question, or set of questions, is theoretical and empirical. What is the evidence for women's much-discussed communicational inadequacy in professional contexts? Do all women, or any women, speak in the ways they are widely assumed to do? If so, why is this such a problem? Further, what is the evidence that the strategies taught in, say, AT are to be preferred, or that they will work in the way they are supposed to work? At this point, it becomes necessary to examine the relationship between scholarly research on language and gender and programmes of training currently offered to or required of women. Linguistic research has clearly provided part of the rationale for
training, and underlies many of the specific concerns about communication which are addressed in training programmes. In the following section, I will try to show that the outcome is problematic, arguing that the problems arise both from trainers' selective and uninformed appropriation of linguistic research, and from the shortcomings of the theoretical frameworks used by some researchers themselves.

A RATIONALE FOR TRAINING: 'WOMEN'S LANGUAGE' AS INEFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Many initiatives in communication training for women rest, as I have noted, on an assumption that women as a group have been socialized to use a kind of language that is not maximally appropriate to public and professional contexts. Women are likely to encounter difficulty, it is thought, with speaking out in public (e.g. making speeches and presentations, contributing at meetings), asserting authority with colleagues and subordinates, and generally projecting the sort of confidence necessary for success. This assumption gains support from two 'scientific' sources: one is the concept of 'assertiveness' elaborated within clinical psychology and subsequently taken up by feminists as a self-help practice, while the other is early writing on gender differences in language use carried out within what I will refer to as a 'deficit model' (e.g. Lakoff 1975).

Assertiveness

Assertiveness training (AT) is strongly associated today with feminist efforts to enhance the confidence and personal effectiveness of women. It was developed, however, by social learning theorists in the 1950s and 1960s for clinical or therapeutic purposes, and continues to be used in the treatment of a very wide range of problems (for a survey, see Rakos 1991). Based on a 'rights' model in which social competence entails both asserting one's own rights and respecting the rights of others, AT teaches strategies for communicating needs, wants, and feelings clearly and directly, thus enabling trainees to avoid both passivity and aggression in their interactions with other people. Among the specific communicational tasks it focuses on, usually by way of structured role-play exercises, are saying 'no' without providing justification, making requests and complaints directly, stating positive and negative feelings clearly, and dealing with uncooperative interlocutors by simply repeating messages firmly until they are 'heard'.

AT became associated with feminism because as the Women's Liberation Movement gained momentum from the late 1960s, interest focused not only on the structural causes of women's inequality but also on the part played in maintaining that inequality by sex-role socialization. It was suggested that 'feminine' behaviour bore a strong resemblance to the sort of passive and manipulative behaviour psychologists categorized as unassertive: women were socialized not to insist on their own rights, and therefore often gave in to others or resorted to manipulating them in order to get what they wanted. It followed
therefore that AT might benefit many women, even though by prevailing standards they were neither clinically ill nor socially incompetent.

From around the mid-1970s, assertiveness training for women flourished in a variety of non-clinical institutions, and today there is a veritable AT industry centred in education and workplace training. Although it is no longer as strongly associated as it was with an active women's movement, AT has retained its focus on women as particularly suitable cases for treatment. The idea that sex-role socialization makes women unassertive, so that they have more to gain than most men from AT, has passed into received wisdom (for a detailed historical survey see Crawford (forthcoming)).

_Gender differences in language: the 'deficit' model_

A somewhat similar account of women's communicational disadvantage underlies the pioneering work of Robin Lakoff, whose _Language and Woman's Place_ (1975) introduced the subject of language and gender to a wide audience. Lakoff postulated two styles of speech, which she called 'neutral language' (used by men, and by some women sometimes) and 'women's language' (WL), a 'marked' register used by women. The overall difference between the two styles is that WL is less forceful and direct. Among the specific linguistic features identified by Lakoff as WL hallmarks are frequent use of hedging forms such as intensifiers, qualifiers, tag questions, and rising intonation on declaratives; the use of exaggerated politeness and the avoidance of impolite forms like coarse expletives; and the use of a gender-marked vocabulary including 'empty' adjectives (_lovely, divine_) and 'trivial' lexical elaboration (e.g. colour terminology).

Lakoff presented this style as the outcome of normative pressure on women and girls to be 'ladylike' and not to talk 'rough'. In other words, she held social arrangements responsible for the use of WL. However, she was in no doubt that the style was objectively inferior for most purposes to neutral language. Women who used it would rightly be judged tentative, indecisive, and lacking in authority—though Lakoff did point out that if women _avoid_ WL they risk being branded 'unfeminine', and therefore they are caught in a double bind by the coexistence of the two styles. In summary, while Lakoff's is a _feminist_ analysis, placing emphasis on the normative pressures and value-judgements underlying 'feminine' behaviour, it nevertheless makes use of a _deficit model_ according to which WL is deficient in important ways. Forced on women by their subordinate position, WL becomes a further source of disadvantage.

Few language and gender researchers today accept either Lakoff's description of WL or the deficit model in virtue of which she judges it problematic. As we will see below, however, her account remains very popular with the designers and providers of communication skills training for women, and offers trainers a clearly-defined set of linguistic features or strategies to concentrate on.

Although it seems that the discourses of 'assertiveness' and 'women's language' developed in isolation from one another, they are strikingly similar in
their assessment of what kinds of language are desirable or deficient, and of what kinds of people use those kinds of language. In order to show the indebtedness of training programmes to the tradition of AT, to Lakoff's work, and to other feminist work which is then filtered through a deficit model, I will now move on to a more detailed examination of the content of sample training and self-help materials, focusing in particular on the insistence that women need to be taught how to 'speak directly'.

SPEAKING DIRECTLY
In all the training literature I have surveyed, both 'expert' and popular, the single most frequently recurring piece of advice women are given is to speak directly; to stop hedging, avoid disguising requests or commands as questions or hints, and perform acts like complaining and refusing without mitigation. Options magazine, in a 1992 article sweepingly entitled 'Ten Classic Career Mistakes All Women Make' very typically includes 'tentative language' as one of the top ten, and rhetorically inquires:

How many times have we heard someone say things like 'I'm not really sure if I'm right, but perhaps...'?... Too often we make statements as if they were questions, such as 'We'll bring the deadline forward, OK?'

Lakoff is not cited as a source, but anyone familiar with Language and Woman's Place will recognize this hypothetical utterance as an amalgam of WL features (tags, hedging, declaratives with question intonation). Nor is Options alone in singling out 'tentative language' for special attention. A training manual titled Leadership Skills for Women: Achieving Impact as a Manager (Manning and Haddock 1989:15) counsels:

speak directly to men, and stand firm when you are interrupted. Statistics show that women allow themselves to be interrupted 50% more often than men. Don't contribute to those statistics.

Glamour magazine advises women to 'make requests directly... men find [indirectness] manipulative and confusing'; while Anne Dickson, author of what is probably the most influential British text on assertiveness for women, A Woman in Your Own Right (1982), devotes a section to what she calls 'padding'—in linguists' terms, hedging—in which readers are told to strip the extraneous material from requests like 'I'm terribly sorry to trouble you, but I'd like you to change this for a clean cup', substituting 'I'd like you to change this for a clean cup' (Dickson 1982: 23).

Where justifications are offered for preferring direct to indirect communication, they are:

1. that indirectness makes women sound tentative and unsure of what they really want to say;
2. that indirectness is easily misunderstood because it detracts from the clarity of the message;
3. that indirectness is, as *Glamour* puts it, not only confusing but manipulative: the speaker refuses actually to say what she wants and expects the addressee to make inferences which may then be denied.

This may sound plausible, but there are three major criticisms to be made of it. First, the assumptions it makes about how women actually speak—that is, in a markedly indirect style—are problematic and rest, at least for the moment, on inadequate empirical foundations: training materials almost certainly overestimate both the degree of homogeneity among women and the extent of their difference from men.

Second, even granting for the sake of argument that there is some tendency for women's speech habits to resemble the description given by Lakoff and by the authors of training materials, there is still a need for caution in identifying the implications. Advice to speak directly at all times is sociolinguistically bizarre, and rests on a very naïve model of how face-to-face communication actually works.

Third, even if we discount this problem and accept that directness has become (however illogically) a norm of effective communication in certain contexts, it may nevertheless be argued that this norm is both androcentric and ethnocentric. If so, it is problematic whether or not we have any principled objection to prescribing male or majority norms for female and minority speakers; for the speech of the two groups is unlikely in practice to be judged by the same criteria.

*Gender and generalization*

Many familiar generalizations about the speech of men and women, which are endlessly repeated in training manuals and their popular offshoots, owe more to stereotype and anecdote than to the available empirical data, or else have been extrapolated from small, unrepresentative, or irrelevant samples. A particular problem is the simplistic presentation of men and women as homogeneous groups: *Options* is not untypical in referring to 'mistakes *all* women make' (my italics). Recent research suggests, in contrast, that the degree of variation within gender groupings is as significant as the degree of variation between them.

It is emerging that a great deal of the significant variation that has been found both between and within gender groupings is associated with the different demands made by the communicative practices women, or men, participate in (cf. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992). Variation results not from the mere fact of gender division, but from the association of one gender (or one subgroup of one gender) with particular social settings and linguistic practices like 'gossip' or 'verbal duelling'. It will never be the case, however, that anyone's communicative competence is limited to a single practice or genre of talk; and in the workplace context, men and women are often engaged in the same communicative practices.

It is therefore contentious to use findings about female friendship groups (which is where the idea of women as markedly 'co-operative' conversationalists
has mainly come from) to support a description of the problems women are alleged to have in formal and public contexts—as if women did not possess a repertoire of communicative practices, nor varied their speech styles in response to the demands of particular situations. There is, furthermore, a bias in the literature on women speaking in professional contexts toward certain professions, typically the 'caring' professions such as medicine, nursing, teaching, social work, and therapy. It does not necessarily make sense to extrapolate findings even from one professional context to another (e.g. from teaching children to selling insurance), and here there is an urgent need for more primary research.

Overall the picture of 'women's speech' and its alleged shortcomings which we get from most training materials (e.g. those quoted above) is a crude and over-generalized one. Conversely, the picture we get of the 'ideal' speech style which is the goal of communicational training is a sociolinguistically questionable one.

The sociolinguistics of directness

Advice to women that they should speak directly amounts, in the terms of Brown and Levinson (1987), to a recommendation that all speech acts be done 'bald on record'. What this appears to totally overlook is the fact that indirectness markers like hedging are not mere extraneous padding but are overwhelmingly used for reasons of politeness. Since all face-to-face interaction has an affective or interpersonal dimension as well as an informational one, politeness cannot be avoided without giving serious offence; the style recommended in training manuals is both peculiar in principle and remote from what competent speakers routinely produce in practice. (It is relevant to point out here that probably the strongest evidence for the idea that indirection is perceived as 'powerless' or ineffective comes from O'Barr and Atkins (1980), a study of stylistic variation in courtroom testimony—arguably a highly atypical speech genre in that interpersonal concerns are so markedly subordinated to informational ones. Since the job of a witness is to testify to facts, it is hardly surprising if the investigators found hedging undermines credibility, but that does not mean it is reasonable to extrapolate this finding to all other contexts.)

According to Brown and Levinson, 'politeness' does not consist only of a few markers like please, thank you, excuse me, and so on, but is a multidimensional system for displaying awareness of people's 'face': their desire for esteem (positive face), and their desire not to be imposed on (negative face). Many of the things people do in talk are potentially 'face-threatening acts' (FTAs): asking others to do things they may not wish to do, refusing their requests, criticizing their behaviour. In such cases, it is usual to mitigate the threat by performing the act in a deliberately indirect manner.

How much mitigation is required depends on a number of variables. One is the degree of threat inherent in the act you are performing: a trivial request like 'pass the salt' requires less mitigation than a major imposition like 'lend me a large sum of money' or a request implying previous negligence like 'get me a
Another factor is the degree of intimacy or social distance between speaker and addressee (I might say to a close friend 'lend me a fiver till tomorrow', but if forced to approach a stranger or distant acquaintance I would be much more tentative, e.g. 'I don't suppose you've any spare cash on you, but I've come out without my purse and I'd really appreciate it if you could lend me some money'). Finally, the relative status of speaker and addressee is important. If some noisy children are disrupting my work I can say 'shut up'; to a group of colleagues I might say 'could you keep the noise down a bit, please?'; to my boss I would probably say nothing.

To suppose that even the most elaborately 'padded' of these hypothetical utterances is 'manipulative and confusing' is an error. The rules of politeness are part of speakers' communicative competence—which is why, when I ask someone in the street if they've got the time they are more likely to answer 'half past three' than 'yes' or 'stop beating about the bush'. The assertive speaker who does everything baldly on-record and does not take refuge in politeness to mitigate FTAs is sociolinguistically incompetent.

There is, however, one complicating factor. While Brown and Levinson claim that politeness is a universal, they also point out that the precise rules that govern its realization are culturally variable. What is taken as ordinary politeness in one society may seem like excessive sycophancy in another, and like intolerable rudeness in a third. By analogy it has been claimed that there are different norms for politeness, and indeed for interaction generally, among men and women of the same society (Maltz and Borker 1982; Tannen 1990). That claim, if correct, might bear on the idea that women's indirectness is seen by men as 'manipulative and confusing'.

The sexual politics of directness: dominance and difference

A number of well-known studies on language and gender do report women across a range of speech communities using more markers of indirectness and politeness (e.g. hedging, mitigated directives) than their male counterparts (cf. Brown 1980; Goodwin 1980; Holmes 1984; Coates 1989; Fishman 1990). The reasons for this are debated, though none of the researchers cited above would explain it as indecision and lack of confidence. Most recent research is underpinned not by a deficit model but by either a 'dominance' model (women's behaviour is seen as a reflex of their subordinate position relative to men) or a 'difference/subcultural' model (the sexes are seen as having different speech norms because of pervasive sex-segregation in the formative years of childhood and adolescence).

A classic discussion of women and politeness is Penelope Brown's (1980) study of a Tzeltal-speaking community in Tenejapa, Mexico. Here, the women were found to use significantly more of a particular kind of particle whose function is to mitigate the force of an utterance. Brown relates this finding to women's low status and their vulnerability to male violence. This degree of subordination has two effects. First, it ensures that interaction with men is clearly marked as interaction with superordinates—which predicts high levels of
politeness on the part of subordinate speakers. Second, it means that women will tend to perceive a higher degree of potential face threat in their interactions with men, and will take care to avoid the serious consequences of failing to attend to men's face—which again would predict women in cross-gender interaction as the more polite group.

Brown, then, is placing less emphasis than Lakoff on socialization *per se* and more on women's negotiation of their social positioning in the course of ongoing interaction; she is also suggesting that the women's strategy, while it reflects their inequality of status, does not imply a lesser degree of communicative competence: on the contrary, this way of speaking is highly functional for the situation in which the women find themselves. A similar argument is made by Pamela Fishman about the alleged 'conversational insecurity' of American women in heterosexual relationships (Fishman 1990). They too are deploying their supportive conversational skills to make the best of a situation in which men's social privilege allows them to avoid the work of facilitating interaction.

Janet Holmes (1984) and Jennifer Coates (1989) similarly stress the skill with which women support co-conversationalists in order to keep talk flowing smoothly. Both find women, in anglophone New Zealand and England respectively, making frequent use of hedging forms (e.g. tag questions, *you know, sort of*) for reasons connected with their sensitivity to the face-needs of other speakers. They reject Lakoff's view that such forms connote tentativeness or lack of confidence, but they also disagree with Brown's and Fishman's emphasis on subordinate status as the reason for women's orientation to others.

Coates, for example, discusses an instance from her data on female friends' talk where one speaker describes a woman who is not present but is known to those present by saying 'she looked very sort of um (—) kind of matronly really' (Coates 1989: 114). In Lakoff's terms, or Anne Dickson's, the multiple hedging is lamentably unassertive and uncalled for: the speaker is stating an opinion and has no need to express uncertainty. Coates points out, however, that the speaker is not unsure about her own opinion; rather she wishes to signal to the others that she knows her judgement of the absent woman's appearance is somewhat unkind, and is anxious to mitigate any offence.

Coates is working here with a version of the difference model. Where Brown relates Tenejapa women's politeness strategies primarily to their position *vis-à-vis* men, Coates does not see this as a plausible account of behaviour that is so marked in all-female, friendly casual conversation. Rather, she points to the values that regulate women's peer groups and therefore their talk: co-operation, avoidance of overt conflict, interest in people and relationships, care for others. This culture of care and co-operation is, for a difference theorist, what forges women's distinctive style; that the style may become disadvantageous in conversation with men, whose values and goals are different (more goal and topic-oriented, more hierarchical, competitive, and tolerant of conflict), is not insignificant for Coates but it is regarded as a secondary development.

By contrast with the deficit model, these alternative models of the relationship between language and gender—dominance and difference—complicate the
issues involved in providing communicational training for women. Rather than saying something is wrong with women’s characteristic speech strategies which should therefore be corrected, the dominance model says what is wrong is women’s subordinate positioning, while the difference model says there is nothing wrong with women’s speech strategy per se, instead the problem lies either in negative attitudes to feminine speech styles or in the potential for misunderstanding which pervasive gender difference entails.

Clearly there are points of serious disagreement between dominance and difference theorists. In particular, dominance theorists would reject the attempt to define conflicts between women and men in conversation as symmetrical ‘misunderstandings’ (Kramarae and Henley 1991; Troemel-Ploetz 1991). Conversely, difference theorists are more unequivocal in proclaiming the equal validity of men’s and women’s speech styles, whereas dominance theorists, while acknowledging women’s interactional skills, often argue that the reason why women develop and deploy those skills (as a strategy for coping with inequality) give no cause for celebration. Both approaches, however, would suggest that the project of making women speak more like men is in principle misguided.

It is therefore important to return to the second criticism I recorded above in relation to assertiveness training, namely that the norms of so-called assertive or effective communication are covertly andro- (and ethno-)centric. It is relevant here that the linguistic features most frequently identified as problems by communication training programmes, namely the use of indirectness in its various linguistic manifestations, are also associated by researchers with women rather than men speakers. Whether this represents a gender bias, however, as opposed to a status bias or no particular social bias, remains open to question. Is it accurate to suggest that the forms of communicational training discussed in this paper are, in fact, attempts to make women speak more like men?

The question of androcentrism in communication training
Some training materials I have surveyed are quite blatantly androcentric, i.e. they express a preference for masculine behaviour on no other grounds save its association with men. Manning and Haddock (1989: 7) for example have this to say on the subject of ‘body language’: ‘men typically use less body language than women. Watch their body language to see how they do it’. This combines a bizarre analysis of the difference itself with a wholly uncritical and unwarranted valorization of what men are said to do.

In most cases, however, the styles of speech women are urged to adopt are presented as gender neutral; they are simply the most effective ways of using language in a particular domain, regardless of the speaker’s sex. Arguably, however, this is only a subtler form of androcentrism. As in Lakoff’s deficit model, only women’s language is marked as gendered. The category of ‘neutral’ language is effectively identical to ‘men’s language’; men are taken as the universal norm.

A strong argument that the norms of effective communication which underlie
work in AT are masculine norms is made by the feminist psychologists Amy Gervasio and Mary Crawford (1989). They point out that apart from the injunction to express your feelings clearly, every other principle of assertiveness invokes qualities that are stereotypically masculine. The philosophy of AT is also highly individualistic, laying emphasis on the needs and rights of the speaker him or herself—an emphasis whose linguistic reflex is the insistence on 'I–me' language rather than 'you–we' language. As Gervasio and Crawford note, this would seem to be at odds with the more relational and other-oriented ethic that has been identified by many investigators as characteristic of women (classically by Gilligan 1982); and it is also clearly at odds, as indeed is the norm of directness, with the values and practices of many non-Anglo groups.

Gervasio and Crawford's article is a critical review of the scholarly literature on the evaluation of assertive behaviour. In evaluation studies, judges typically watch videotapes or read transcripts of actors behaving in assertive or unassertive ways, and then rate the actors on numerical scales for qualities such as 'competence', 'aggression', 'likeability', and so on. Gervasio and Crawford draw attention to two significant findings. First, evaluation studies confirm that assertive behaviour produces different reactions from non-assertive or passive behaviour. Judges do not, however, agree with experts that the assertive behaviour is necessarily to be preferred. On the contrary, participants often label researcher-defined assertion as "aggressive" (Gervasio and Crawford 1989:4). Second, there are differences in evaluation depending on the assertive actor's gender: 'both men and women view assertive women less favourably than assertive men' (ibid.).

The authors explain people's negative reaction to assertive behaviour with reference to the behaviour's sociolinguistic bizarreness, noting that on occasion recommended strategies violate not only politeness norms but the maxims of the co-operative principle that underlies conversation in general (Grice 1975). For example, the 'cracked record technique' of repeating the same point over and over violates the maxim of Quantity (give as much information as required and no more). It is not surprising if this comes across as a highly aggravated way of making a point. On why women should be less favourably evaluated than men, they suggest that assertive women are acting 'out of role', flouting specific expectations about appropriate feminine conduct. AT for women may therefore carry certain risks; by encouraging them to act 'out of role', training programmes may be setting women up for even more negative evaluations than their unassertive behaviour would provoke. Once again, it seems women are damned (for incompetence) if they act the way women are meant to act, and equally damned (for unfemininity) if they do not.

The issue raised here is complicated, and unavoidably political. If on one hand it is controversial to recommend, without comment, gender-deviant behaviours that may be negatively evaluated, it is equally so to make gender-typical behaviours normative—as, for example, in the suggestion that second language learners be taught the gender-appropriate patterns in the target language (cf. Judd 1983), which is akin to saying they must take on the
characteristic gender identities or roles of another society. At the very least, this is something learners and trainees should have the opportunity to make informed choices about. The real question is whether the roles AT prescribes are being enacted to any useful purpose, or whether they are, like the valorization of male body language quoted above, a merely contingent form of androcentrism.

There have been attempts at ‘culturally aware’ AT programmes. Rakos (1991) cites an AT course for Puerto Rican women in which the cultural norm of ‘machismo’ was taken into consideration. What this meant in practice was that women trainees were encouraged to express their feelings and make direct requests to their husbands, but discouraged from saying no to their husbands’ requests. Saying no is usually a central theme in AT for women, but in this case Rakos comments that to be effective with Hispanic women the programme had to be consistent with the norm of submission to a husband’s authority.

Here the idea of ‘assertiveness’ is contextualized to take into account women’s actual subordinate social positioning and the degree of risk that is consequentially involved in their being assertive. It is recognized that assertive behaviour is not neutral with respect to gender but flouts gender norms (more markedly so in the case of some communities than others—there is also an attempt to avoid ethnocentrism). Yet it is difficult to believe the results are advantageous to women, or that this is what feminists like Gervasio and Crawford had in mind when they criticized AT for white male bias. The logic of the Puerto Rican example taken to its extreme is that women must submit to rape out of respect for their cultural heritage. The implication is that the ‘rights’ model supposedly at the heart of AT does not in fact hold when the going gets tough: at that point, individual rights become relative to ‘cultural norms’ or are negated by the risk of social ostracism or physical violence.

The problems discussed above are not easily solved; indeed they show up the limitations of communicational training as a form of personal and social intervention. What can be achieved through training is, obviously, affected by wider social structures within which training occurs; conversely, proponents of training for women in the cause of equal opportunities should try not to lose sight of the fact that they are attempting to modify rather than simply reproduce those social structures! One concrete implication of the foregoing discussion is that training should include (as some programmes already do) explicit consideration of the potential costs and benefits involved. Trainees surely have a right to be informed that the evaluation literature does not fully support sweeping claims for AT, and to engage in discussion of the reasons why it does not.

On the question of androcentrism, it seems to me the most persuasive and useful arguments one could make are bound up with a recognition of the other main shortcoming of training programmes, their inadequate analysis of the requirements of effective face-to-face communication. If it were acknowledged that these requirements (1) are contextually variable, and (2) will always include an interpersonal, affective, or phatic element alongside the informational
element, it would be far more difficult to maintain the kind of crude deficit model that automatically devalues features associated with the verbal behaviour of women, while uncritically valorizing those associated with men. A model of effective communication based on a sociolinguistically more sophisticated analysis might logically imply a need for some change in the behaviour of many speakers, but the change would not be unidirectional, nor would it be embodied in absolute prescriptions about, for example, speaking directly at all times.

EVALUATING COMMUNICATIONAL TRAINING

Apart from the criticisms already made in detail above, i.e. that training regimes are often based on inadequate models of face-to-face interaction and on a deficit model of language and gender difference which is now widely rejected, there is another problem to which attention should be drawn: the vagueness of the objectives with which many organizations embark on the kinds of training discussed here, which makes it difficult to assess their benefits with any precision.

The question of whether training benefits its recipients can be addressed in a number of different ways. One approach is self-assessment: do trainees themselves feel they have benefited? A second approach is to attempt to assess the effect of training on subsequent outcomes: for example, by comparing the progress of groups who received training with that of comparable groups who did not. A third approach is to examine the role played by training in the discourse and culture of institutions, asking whether it has given rise to changes in attitudes and practice.

Such attempts at evaluation seem to be rare. I came across no institution providing communication training for women which attempted to monitor, separately and systematically, its effectiveness as an equal opportunities measure. This suggests that many institutions are extremely vague about what specific outcomes the training is meant to produce: they are content for it to make recipients ‘feel better’ (e.g. more confident or more valued), and pay little attention to whether those recipients perform better, or even to considering what that would mean in concrete terms.

When I interviewed women about their experience of training, the attitudes they expressed ranged from mild scepticism (often associated with having been required to take a course) to positive endorsement. This finding is complicated, however, by the fact that what trainees endorsed most positively was in no case what the sponsors presumably believed to be its most important benefit, i.e. the acquisition of certain communication skills. When my informants talked about the benefits of training they tended to focus less on the usefulness of particular techniques than on quasi-social benefits like having the opportunity to meet and talk to other women about matters of mutual concern, or feeling that their career development was being taken seriously.

Some informants were critical of the ‘simplistic’ assumption that all women are unassertive and in need of training; however, most did not deny that cross-gender communication was a salient problem in their organizations for at least
some women. On the other hand, the most frequently-cited problems were ones that training programmes for women rarely address, because they concern the habitual behaviour of men, especially men's tendency to dominate interactions through verbosity, interruption, and general inattention to and lack of support for women's contributions. Here again, women appreciated the opportunity to discuss such problems, but rarely felt they had been given any novel insight into them.

I found little indication in the interview data that assertiveness training programmes and the like either were, or were perceived as, effective interventions in trainees' linguistic practice; though it is fair to say they were often perceived as having other significant benefits. While I would not make grand claims for my own, small and mainly self-selected sample, there is a case for a more focused attempt on the part of sponsoring organizations and providers to define more explicit goals and ascertain how far they are being met.

Another aspect that merits investigation is the effect of training on institutional cultures, particularly where the rationale for training is the promotion of equal opportunities. Some researchers (e.g. Graddol and Swann 1989) regard it as a welcome symbolic demonstration of corporate commitment to gender equality. Against this, it could be argued that there are negative effects at the institutional and societal level, as new linguistic stereotypes and myths enter the repertoire of pseudo-explanations for women's continuing under-representation and low status in the public domain. This may actually reinforce the problem, in that it primes people, including employers, to view every woman as potentially deficient in vital skills.

CONCLUSION

The field of language and gender studies has been plagued from its inception with premature generalizations that have turned out on investigation to be false or simplistic. Perhaps this is because there is no subject, with the possible exception of race/ethnicity/nationality, about which people are so desperate to generalize as the differences between men and women. Communicational training for women suffers from the same flaw of over-hasty and simplistic generalization, in some cases magnified by selective and questionable readings of the available research, and by disregard for the caution with which academics are obliged to interpret their findings.

Although there is much still to be discovered about the range, spread, and concrete detail of communication training practices of the type considered above, it is clear from my own ongoing work and from surveys of published literature (e.g. Rakos (1991) and Crawford (forthcoming)) that they are extremely widespread, that their popularity in education and business has been growing steadily, that significant amounts of money are being made from them by commercial providers, and—most important of all—that thousands of individuals have been or will be exposed to them. With so much time and money, and so many personnel involved, it should not be a matter of indifference whether these forms of training actually achieve anything
worthwhile; whether they are necessary and desirable, and if so whether the theories, techniques, and materials in current use could be improved upon. The skills which applied linguists bring to the creation, investigation, and evaluation of programmes of language teaching and learning are capable of being adapted to communication training, and in my view (a view I would hope at least some providers of training might see the sense of) this would be a constructive development.

More generally, though, applied linguists have reason to be interested in the kinds of issues verbal hygiene for women raises, such as what constitutes ‘effective communication’, and how social, cultural, and political considerations affect the learning and use of language skills. The case of verbal hygiene for women should prompt us to further reflection on the perennial question of how linguistics may best be put to use in the ‘real world’.

(Revised version received April 1994)

NOTES

1 I would like to acknowledge the assistance of colleagues and others with the research on which this paper is based. I thank my interviewees for their insight and enthusiasm; I am also grateful to the various audiences to whom I have presented work in progress, and I am particularly indebted for information, references, and pertinent comments to Mary Crawford and Liz Hampson.

2 Here, it should be noted that many materials developed commercially, including many of those I have studied, have the status of protected property and may not be freely quoted or even cited. This accounts for the paucity of references to specific materials in this article, and the bias in quotations toward ‘popular’ sources like women’s magazines or mass-market self-help texts.

REFERENCES


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