# DEBATE ON SEXIST LANGUAGE

# Sexism and Semantics

## *Deborah Cameron*

In **RP34**, two articles appeared dealing with the relation between language and sexism: Alison Assiter's critique of Dale Spender's Man Made Language and a dialogue between Mike Shortland and John Fauvel on the subject of sexism and linguistic reform. Although these articles were not explicitly connected (except by proximity and subject matter) I suggest that it is revealing to read them as a single discussion. It is revealing because all three authors have in common certain assumptions and ways of looking at language which are fundamental to current feminist linguistic theory; and it seems to me that those assumptions and approaches are misguided enough to call for serious comment in the pages of Radical Philosophy.

Before embarking on a critique, however, let me briefly summarise what I take to be the main points made in the **RP34** articles.

First, Assiter on Spender. Assiter criticised Spender for asserting that women and men have different and irreconcilable meanings for linguistic expressions. She argues that on one hand this is simple minded, ignoring crucial theoretical distinctions like those between sense and reference, or the meaning of an utterance and its force; while on the other hand it is politically damaging because it leads inevitably to a separatist stalemate in which women and men inhabit separate worlds, unable to communicate and thus unable to change. For Assiter the notion of separate meanings and separate worlds is dangerously essentialist, as is the associated contention that all uses of language by men are inherently oppressive. This claim is especially pernicious because in lumping all usages together as equally sexist, it obscures the iniquity of language that is really sexist (by which Assiter means so-called 'he/man' language). This 'really sexist language', in Assiter's opinion, is damaging to women.

At this point, Shortland and Fauvel take over with a discussion that focuses on whether 'really sexist language' of the he/man variety is a suitable case for reformist treatment. The discussion is rather inconclusive, but in the course of it, linguistic reform (embodied here in the proposals of Miller and Swift 1980 (1)) is disparaged with a veritable hotch-potch of objections, for instance that reform constitutes an attack on the language, that it only disguises women's 'real' (i.e. extralinguistic) disadvantage, that it produces inaccuracy and obscurity, interferes with freedom of expression and so on.

I propose to argue that underlying all this we have several unquestioned but problematic assumptions about language, what its functions in society are and how the meanings it conveys arise. It should be emphasised from the outset, however, that failure to engage with these problems is not peculiar to Assiter et al. On the contrary, the reason why the gap is important is that it afflicts practically all present day linguistics and philosophy of language. We can hardly blame feminists for taking certain ideas on board, then, but I believe that until they deconstruct the view of language their theories presuppose, they will never understand the connection between language and oppression.

Let us now proceed to the underlying assumptions and misconceptions I am talking about. Basically, there are two connected problems which merit discussion: one concerning the status of meaning, and the other having to do with the relation between language and reality.

### 1 Meaning

The most serious flaw in the Assiter/Shortland/Fauvel discussion is the conventional view of meaning espoused by all three of them. For to assert or presuppose, as they all do, that some expressions are definitely sexist while others are not (cf. Assiter, who says that 'supposing the phenomenon is ubiquitous makes it more difficult to see where sexism in language really operates') is to conceptualise meaning as a fixed essence, determinable in principle and determinate in fact.

This notion is of course central to linguistic theory, the main aim of which is to discover the correspondences of form and meaning that constitute 'a language'. When this enterprise turns out to be difficult in practice, linguists resort to the sort of abstraction Assiter accuses Spender of ignoring: langue/parole distinctions, which allow the analyst to posit an underlying set of correspondences even if people's behaviour offers little empirical support for them, and illocutionary force, by invoking which the analyst is able to separate what the speaker intends from what her uttered sentence means qua sentence (as well as reifying what the speaker intends, a point to which I shall return).

Abstractions like these are products of desperation. Somewhere, somehow, the linguist must isolate a fixed code of form/meaning correspondences as her object of study. Because if no such set code existed, how could we transcend interactional anarchy and communicate? What would differentiate a rational speaker from Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty?

This is of course a crucial question, but anyone who confronts it must be wary of the term 'communication'. For it is clear that orthodox linguistics has pre-empted the definition of communication, and has done so in a manner that might seem remarkable if it were not so ingrained in West-

ern thought. The model of communication assumed by linguistics and philosophy alike is the one expounded by John Locke (2): through language we transfer ideas from one mind to another - that is to say, we engage in telementation (3). This hypothesis is preserved intact from Saussure to the generativists, and once you are committed to it, there is no alternative but to treat languages as fixed codes of form/meaning correspondences internalised by every speaker. Nothing less could guarantee the perfect understanding which is normative in the linguist's model.

The trouble is, of course, that linguists, particularly those working on the data of conversation, have found it impossible either to crack the fixed code or to keep faith with the telementation hypothesis of meaning and understanding. Perfect comprehension and indeed, broad agreement on what any utterance means is conspicuous by its absence in study after study (4). Thus many of us have come to believe that the orthodox paradigm is inadequate.

The same belief was forcibly expressed in 1929 by the Soviet linguist V.N. Volosinov, and has since been reiterated by Julia Kristeva (5). Both these writers point out that all meaning is in the end contextual, and that it is impossible in principle to determine once and for all the meaning of any expression. Determinacy either of form or of meaning is a myth, shored up by the pointless abstractions of structural linguistics.

It is precisely at this point that any critique of Dale Spender ought to start. Spender holds that all language is sexist because the meaning of every expression has been fixed exclusively by men (women's meanings are a potential rather than an actual category for Spender). In saying this, however, Spender entirely ignores the contextuality of meaning and its ultimate indeterminacy (which makes it impossible for any group to fix meaning or to exercise monolithic control over it). She is forced to posit a 'big bang' type theory of the origin of language, with each generation of speakers as passive inheritors of the tradition, or else an omnipresent conspiracy of men working to retain their semantic monopoly.

Given what we know of child language acquisition and of normal interaction, these two ideas are implausible to say the least. All language users construct their own meanings and are endlessly creative in their interpretations of what others say: the price they pay for such flexibility, however, is imperfect communication. Alienation from language in Spender's terms, the feeling either that others do not understand you or that your experience is not adequately expressed in words, is not just part of the feminine condition but an inescapable part of being human.

If we take it that no expression has a meaning independent of its linguistic and non-linguistic context, we can plausibly explain the sexism of language by saying that all speech events in patriarchal cultures have as part of their context the power relation that holds between women and men (and indeed many other political factors as well). This varied and heterogeneous context is what makes expressions and utterances liable to sexist interpretation. Notice, though, that the sexism we are talking about cannot be reduced to speaker intentions: if we assume a non-telementational, non-fixed code model, there is no way of being sure you know what a speaker's intentions are (the rock on which Searle founders, as Strawson has pointed out (6)). Ultimately it is the hearer in each situation who produces a meaning.

This is not to say that the hearer is not constrained, since obviously she is. But this is not a function of language alone; rather it depends on a whole cluster of culturally approved ways of making sense of the world. As far as language is concerned, a particularly important role is played by authoritarian, prescriptive institutions that regulate our use and our understanding of language. An example of such an institution is the dictionary, which fosters the illusion of determinate meaning and is thus able to inqest particular definitions with authority. When Shortland writes of his respect for 'the English language' it is these historically produced and ruling-class sponsored institutions he has in mind: for except insofar as languages are institutionalised, they cannot be said to exist outside their individual users.

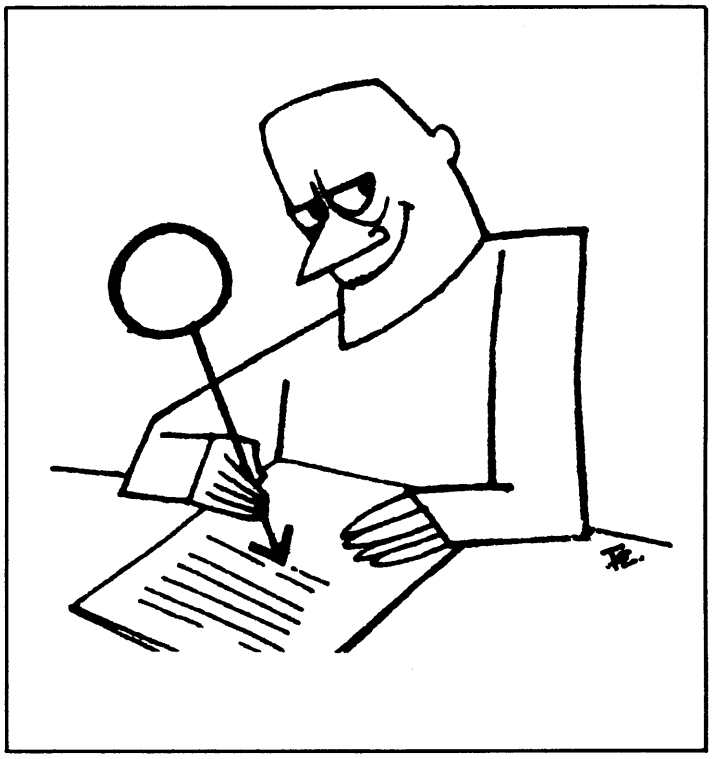
Assiter is right, then, to criticise the Whorfianism of Man Made Language. Spender has ignored the contextuality and indeterminacy of meaning to produce an account of Orwellian thought-control via malespeak which is patently false. But Assiter's own criticisms fall into the same error, because in claiming that some expressions are sexist and others are not, in wanting to emphasise the fixity of reference and restrict sexism to force (whether or not defined by speaker intentions) she too ignores context and asserts that any expression has at least some irreducible core of meaning.

**2 Language and Reality**

The second major problem in the RP discussion is connected with this essentialist and decontextualised notion of meaning. It concerns the relation of language and reality, a central issue for those who believe in sexist and non-sexist language as well as for out-and-out determinists like Spender.

Spender's view of language and reality (and here she is at one with the influential neo-Saussurean tendency) is a simple one: language determines reality. Reformists like Miller and Swift, whose proposals are discussed by Shortland and Fauvel, have just the opposite view: they believe that language exists to represent states of affairs accurately. What is wrong with sexist language is that it distorts reality - generic he, for instance, conceals the existence of women. Therefore we must embark on reform if only for the sake of clarity and accuracy. For Miller and Swift, reality should determine language and not the other way about. If language is not playing its subordinate, superstructural role properly, language must be made to pull its socks up.

A lot of sexist expressions are presented by Miller and Swift as matters of historical accident. Thus man used to mean a person of either sex, and gradually narrowed to refer exclusively to males. Conventional usage has not changed to accommodate this narrowing, and thus it is ambiguous and distorting. The use of words like spaceman and craftsman persuades English speakers that these groups consist only of males; if we all said **astronaut** and **artisan**, the problem would disappear.



Or would it? When we look at certain registers of language (newspapers, for instance) something rather odd emerges. Even the most casual glance at a newspaper reveals usages like the following:

FOURTEEN SURVIVORS, THREE OF THEM WOMEN ...
A MAN ... WENT BERSERK WITH A MACHETE AND MURDERED HIS NEXT DOOR NEIGHBOUR'S WIFE.

It seems that neighbour and survivor are being used as if they were intrinsically male in reference, even though the words themselves have no overt gender marking and are thus not on a par with spaceman and craftsman. It appears that, far from glorying in the accuracy and clarity potential of neutral items like neighbour, some language users are perversely using these items to falsify reality.

This must look bizarre to Miller and Swift, who believe that the real function of language is to represent actual states of affairs truthfully and accurately. If however one takes it that this is not the real function of language - that language is the product and vehicle of its ideological and political context - we can see what is going on, and we can draw the obvious conclusion that it is wholly idle to hive off a small area of usage (like he/man language), to label this and only this sexist, and to believe in any completely neutral alternative either actual or potential. It is obviously idle, too, to criticise feminist linguistic reforms in the way that Shortland does, by arguing that non-sexist language does not produce any gain in accuracy, if accuracy is not what language is all about.

Apart from their criticisms of it, Shortland and Fauvel seem curiously undecided as to whether non-sexist language makes any political difference (Assiter would presumably support its use, since she comes to the conclusion that sexist language is positively damaging). But once again, the entire discussion is locked into a framework dictated by false premises, for within the authors' problematic the reformist's rationale can only be determinism (change language and you change the world) or else accuracy (change language and you reflect reality better).

So it is perhaps worth pointing out in conclusion that the demand for institutional and individual changes in usage may be seen as progressive for different reasons. Specifically, to make demands around language calls into question the stability and transparency of meaning so many of us take for granted. It undermines our fundamentally conservative desire to see language as a fixed point in the otherwise ungraspable flux of experience. And this in turn makes us less likely to swallow other people's definitions at any level.

Ultimately, the way language is used does make a difference. As Trevor Pateman points out, '... the change in outward practice constitutes a restructuring of at least one aspect of one social relationship.... Every act reproduces or subverts a social institution' (7). There is nothing trivial, therefore, about developing a politics of language. But if we are to produce a truly radical linguistic theory and practice, we must question the orthodox paradigm, rejecting absolutely its rigid, authoritarian and inadequate conception of what human language is and how it works.

**Footnotes**

1 Miller and Swift, Handbook of non-sexist writing, Women's Press, 1980.
2 Locke, Essay Concerning Human Understanding.
3 I take this term from Roy Harris' book The Language Myth (Duckworth, 1981). Harris claims that linguistics is supported by two fallacies, the telementational fallacy of what communication is, and the fixed code fallacy of how it is achieved. The view presented above of meaning, context etc. is in the general framework provided by Harris.
4 Cf. especially Marga Kreckel, Shared Knowledge and Communicative Acts in Natural Discourse, 1981.
5 V.N. Volosinov, Marxism and the Philosophy of Language, 1929.
Julia Kristeva, 'The Ethics of Linguistics', Desire in Language, Blackwell, 1980.
6 Strawson, 'Intention and Convention in speech acts', The Philosophy of Language (ed.) Searle, Oxford University Press, 1971.
7 Trevor Pateman, Language, Truth & Politics, 2nd edition, J. Stroud, 1980.

# More on Man Made Language

## *Anne Beezer*

In her article on Dale Spender's book Man Made Language, Alison Assiter offers some major criticisms of Spender's thesis on language which, she says, must not be understood as making any concession 'to the opposition that there is no sexist bias in language at all'. Whilst agreeing with her that Spender's ideas on language need to be questioned, I think her alternative account of sexist bias in language does provide the space for just such 'concessions to the opposition' that she is at pains to avoid.

Assiter identifies two propositions made by Spender which she thinks are particularly problematic. The first proposition is that language 'constructs reality', the second that this language and, hence, the resulting reality are both 'man made'. Assiter argues that Spender's general conception of language is ambiguous because (a) it does not contain a clear theorisation of meaning and (b) it overrides crucial linguistic distinctions that have been made between sense and reference (Frege), or signifier and signified (Saussure). She illustrates the confusion which results from Spender's relativistic thesis by using the example of the word 'table'. Assiter suggests that if Spender's thesis about language in general, and man made language in particular, is correct then, using Frege's distinction between sense and reference, we would have to accept that the sense and reference of the term table was originally set by men so that women, when using that term, are speaking what is, in effect, a borrowed language. Assiter points to a further ambiguity in Spender namely, the idea that, besides there being a 'male' language and 'male' reality, there are also 'women's' meanings and a 'woman's' reality. Applying this to 'table', we get into the absurd situation of accepting that there is a 'masculine' and a 'feminine' sense of table and even possibly male and female referents - thus 'male' and 'female' tables.

According to Assiter, the way around this difficulty is to propose the weaker thesis that men originally did determine 'sense' of linguistic referents (perhaps that tables are sturdy, strong things), but they do not necessarily continue to do so. Again, Assiter uses an analogy to illustrate this weaker thesis of 'man made' language. If language is com-

pared to a house, then the architects who designed it were male and, in this sense, language can legitimately be called 'man made'. However, the architect no longer owns the house, although his design may have influenced (skewed) the convenience it has for subsequent owners/users. But all men today cannot beheld to blame for the design problems and biases of the original architects unless, of course, they consciously support the same architectural philosophy. I want to argue that the two examples of 'table' and 'architecture' that Assiter uses to explore gender/language relations reveal the inadequacies and difficulties involved in her alternative theorisation of language.

**1 'Unproblematic' signs and the struggle over meaning**

In many expositions of semiotics, the crucial importance of the distinction between denotation and connotation is illustrated by reference to 'unproblematic' signs such as table, roses, chairs etc. Such 'easy' illustrations are, in my view, extremely misleading. Firstly, there is the denotative level - the act of referring to something - and then, the connotative level - the social associations and evaluations of that thing. In other words, there is a staged process of attributing meaning within semiotics which is very close to the kind of distinctions that Assiter draws upon in her criticisms of Spender. Assiter argues that Spender simply ignores the difference between the locutionary act and the illocutionary and perlocutionary acts performed in making a locutionary act. The locutionary act, according to Assiter, 'deals with reality' whilst it is the illocutionary and perlocutionary acts which may 'exhibit the sexist bias'. To distinguish this way between language as a system, which is a shared reality, and language as performance, which is a disputed reality, seems to me to make the 'system' of language into an 'innocent' vehicle which is only corrupted by its 'guilty' passengers. If instead of using 'easy' signs, we turn to more 'complex' ones such as sexism, democracy, or equality, then a staged or layered interpretation of the linguistic sign becomes much more difficult to accomplish. 'Democracy' does not have a clear referent on top of which are several (hundred) competing interpretations or even a clear locutionary force but an infinitely variable illocutionary force. Rather democracy is, as Volosinov would have it, a 'multi-accented' sign, wherein competing definitions or struggles over meaning are contained. There is not, then, with the sign 'democracy' a clearly agreed-upon denotative level, but only competing connotations. We might, however, hypothesise situations which might allow 'democracy' to have more denotative force than it presently does. It could happen where either there was a near complete and totalitarian imposition of linguistic referents (in practice highly unlikely since there would always exist some 'underground' alternative to the official referent), or where the present social divisions had been overcome such that democracy was a living (socialist) practice, not a future ideal or a current rationalisation, as is the case now. My argument is that for language to have an agreed locutionary force or denotative referent, social and historical changes are paramount; agreement over meaning is not an intrinsic feature of the linguistic sign.

The conception of language implied by Assiter's use of the analogy with architecture is also problematic. It tends to reinforce a conception of language as a system, a completed edifice which may then only be subject to tinkering and minor alterations at the margin, altering the position of dining rooms here, breaking down the odd partition, there. What such a view ignores is the way in which language forms a crucial part of our overall social practice, or 'practical consciousness' as Marx expressed it. If this is the case, then language is never finished or completed, but is in a continual state of flux as it responds to changing social practices and shifting power relations. This active role of language is indicated by linguistic evidence provided by Spender, evidence which Assiter acknowledges to be 'formidable' in its support of a close connection between language and sexism. One such example is the dramatic shift in the meaning of words like 'biddy', 'slut', 'tart' and 'whore', all of which were once non-gender based, but are now confined almost entirely to one or other form of derogation of female sexuality. This historical shift in the 'meaning' of these terms can be explained in a way that would throw doubt not only on Spender's view of language as constructing 'reality', but also on Assiter's arguments that we must distinguish between language as a system (langue) and the particular usage of language (parole), if we are to arrive at a philosophically sound understanding of sexism in language.

If we take the example of the shift in the meaning of the word 'whore', one needs to ask why it is that it once referred to a 'lover of either sex', and how was it that, given the existence of sexual inequalities at the time of its usage, such sexual descriptions were available to either sex. Were there other terms, now lost, which were derogatory to female sexuality, or is that what we see, historically, is not an uninterrupted line of sexual inequality, but changing types of inequality - sexisms, not sexism? There is historical evidence to suggest that women did achieve a significant degree of independence in the 18th century, which was then systematically eroded as capitalist forms of production increasingly came to predominate, bringing with them the necessity for different forms of family control. If this is the case, then both Spender's thesis of the necessary connection between men in power and the semantic derogation, and Assiter's countering of this by proposing a distinction between languages as a system and language use, become problematic. Spender's rather unilinear thesis of male power leading to 'male' language has to be further refined by asking which men, from which social class and with what particular social intentions being paramount. The fact that a word such as 'whore' can shift its referent so completely must surely indicate that language does not have some basic, sedimented core of meaning, as Assiter's arguments imply, but is continually changing in line with changing social purposes.

Assiter provides an alternative explanation to that of Spender's concerning the grammatical ruling introduced by the infamous Mr Kirby who, when compiling the O.E.D. in the 18th century, decreed that the 'male gender is more comprehensive than the female and, thus, the pronoun 'he' should include both males and females. Assiter contends that the sexism in language engendered by this ruling should be understood as the unintentional consequence of a more general attempt 'to abbreviate the language'. Although the effect of this change is sexist, Assiter argues that 'it is ludicrous to suppose that every man who has ever used such language intended to (subjugate the female sex) by his use of it'. I think Mr Kirby's reformulation of the rules can be explained in a way that neither reduces sexism, weakly, to an unintended consequence of a more general (reasonable) rule, nor makes it part and parcel of an overarching, historically non-specific male conspiracy. Could it not equally well be the case that the change in ruling was a small, but important, part of a much larger proposal about the relative power of women vis-à-vis men? Just as 'the Falklands spirit' is as much an ideological proposal, intending to shape our responses to the nation as it is some half-conscious, popular attitude that Thatcher is articulating, so also might it not be the case that grammatical rules, as enshrined in the O.E.D. in the 18th century, were part of a larger project set, not by man as a species, but by the 18th-century ruling class (of which those with legislative power were all male) in order to establish and 'rationalise' new forms of sexism. This seems to me to be just as plausible an explanation as that provided by either Spender or Assiter and one, furthermore, that avoids the problem of reifying language or 'men' as the source of a timeless oppression of women, but rather places both in a historically particular but active form of sexual politics.

Assiter's case against Spender's formulations on gender and language is not just that it is philosophically

untidy, but also that it has politically damaging consequences for women. Assiter points to the relativist implications of Spender's thesis that language 'constructs reality', which carries with it the further implication that there are, therefore, 'male' and 'female' realities. Of this, Assiter states -

> This is damaging for women, I believe, for the following reason: if husband and wife can neither understand nor communicate with one another, then the wife cannot present criticisms of the husband's use of language which he can come to accept. She and he will continue, whatever she says, to occupy their respective universes: he his, she hers. She cannot begin to enter his, nor he hers.

Although I agree with Assiter that the relativism of Spender's thesis is politically damaging, my reasons for this differ from hers. To illustrate this disagreement, I'd like to make some substitutions to Assiter's example of the husband and wife, because I think this will help to pinpoint some of the worries I have about her general argument about language. Instead of using a lack of communication between husband and wife, we might reasonably substitute a manager and shop steward, since one could also argue that discourse between these would also be based on unequal power relations. In this case, we get -

> .... if manager and shop steward can neither understand nor communicate with one another, then the shop steward cannot present criticisms of the manager's use of language which he can come to accept. They will continue, whatever either one of them says, to occupy their respective universes...

Clearly if manager and shop steward spoke, literally, different languages, they would require the use of an interpreter, but I think this is not the point of Assiter's criticism of Spender, nor does it reveal the argument behind my substitution. I take it that Assiter's addition of use in this context is to argue that, of course, they speak the same language in the sense that there is a common set of linguistic referents, but these carry differing illocutionary or perlocutionary force for the manager and shop steward. I would counter this by arguing that, although the words spoken by manager and shop steward (in my example) are the same, there is no single and clear set of referents, so that even if the manager understood the words spoken by the shop steward, the wider political and social referents of those words might well denote not different 'realities', but a single 'contested' reality and, thus, no amount of linguistic clarification would, of itself, be any avail. Again, to use an example, let us suppose that the manager and shop steward were discussing the issue of 'a fair day's work for a fair day's pay'. It is likely that what they would be disputing is the referent of the term 'fair', with the shop steward suggesting that this should involve less hours, include reasonable rest breaks, and so on, whilst the manager would be referring to such things as the return on profit of labour, efficiency and speed of production, etc. The word 'fair' in this case does not have a clear and unambiguous referent, but is itself the site of dispute and struggle. One could easily make a similar kind of argument in relation to the husband and wife example provided by Assiter in which the substance of their communication (or lack of it) was his continual reference to her 'inadequate' management of the family budget. Their point of dispute will be what constitutes 'adequate' management, and this may not be resolved by better lines of communication, even though he agrees not to describe this as 'a feminine foible'.

Assiter's distinction between locutionary identity and perlocutionary or illocutionary differences, with only the latter carrying the sexist bias, seems to have an equally dangerous implication that apart from varying usages of language, there is an agreed upon set of verbal signs. I have argued that language is not nearly as immutable as that and can, not simply carry sexist bias, but propose and promote it precisely because the meanings of verbal signs are constructed by political and social practices. Where there are stable linguistic referents, this is because those social and political practices have found some form of resolution.

**2 Spender's Relativism: the easy language of multiple realities**

The relativism that Assiter rightly criticises in Spender's work is most clearly evident in the chapter 'Language and Reality', in Man Made Language. In that chapter, Spender refers to the sociology of knowledge of Berger and Luckman in support of her ideas on gender and language; she states that 'when there are a sexist language and sexist theories culturally available, the observation of reality is also likely to be sexist'. Spender's reliance on a sociology of knowledge that elsewhere has been strongly criticised for its politically conservative implications is, to say the least, somewhat paradoxical (1). Spender's dependence on such a relativistic theory of language leads her to make some really confusing and contradictory arguments. She states that 'it could be said that out of nowhere we invented sexism, we created arbitrary and appropriate categories of male-as-norm and female-as-deviant' - a theory of sexist language she categorically rejects, only to come up with a theory which is remarkably similar except that the culprit is not gender-indeterminate, but male. On page 142, she elaborates her view:

> I would reiterate that it has been the dominant group - in this case males - who have created the world, invented categories, constructed sexism and its justification and developed a language trap which is in their interest.

But this is not a different theorisation of language, it is exactly the same one, only this time identifying half the population as having unproblematically 'invented' categories, language and, hence, sexism. This theory also depends on a tautologous explanation of male power, which seems to be that males are powerful because they are males. These arguments, as do most forms of philosophical and sociological relativism, veer between a biological determinism (an even more politically dangerous theory for feminists, but one which Spender gets very close to in her talk of 'male' and 'female' realities) and an ahistorical phenomenology, which ignores the way in which conditions of oppression, and the possibilities of liberation are limited by the historical conditions that we inherit from our predecessors. It is this sense of history as an active social force that is missing from Spender's work and which, I think, should have been the focus of Assiter's criticisms.

I wholeheartedly concur with Assiter's rejection of the male/female 'apartheid' that is implied by Spender's notion of separate male and female 'realities'. Spender sees this as not just an unfortunate consequence of male power, but something that feminists should value. She counterposes the concept of 'multidimensional reality', emerging from the women's movement, to that of male 'multidimensional reality', which she also refers to as 'tunnel vision'. Her political justification for this is worth quoting; she says that -

> Multiple reality is a necessary condition of the experience of all individuals as equally valuable and viable. Only within a multidimensional framework is it possible for the analysis and explanation of everyone to avoid the pitfalls of being rejected, of being classified as wrong. (p.103)

Taken out of the context of a consideration of the different approaches to and understandings of the relationship between women and childrearing that Spender uses to justify this view, the above statement becomes either meaningless or wrong. Would we want to say, for example, that the 'experience' of the white South African under apartheid is as 'valuable and viable' as that of the oppressed, black

South African? Would we accept, in the case of South Africa, that separatism is a possible 'solution' to the oppression of blacks by whites? The easy language of 'multiple realities' loses its radical edge when confronted with a situation in which it is quite evident that, not only is separatism not a 'valuable' political strategy, but it is not even a 'viable' one. Oppression of whatever kind does not go away by simply shutting the door and proclaiming this room as your 'reality' into which the oppressor may not enter. All too often the oppressor holds a duplicate set of keys and the lease on the building as well.

Assiter's objection to separatism, on the grounds that it may well be the first staging post to either the use of force or the elimination of men (as S.C.U.M. proposed), misses the point in my view. A (violent) form of separatism is to be rejected, not only because it is damaging for women or nasty to men, but because it is a non-viable, collective political strategy. Of course, some women may exclude men from most of their personal lives, but they cannot avoid the effects of sexist practices in their public lives. In the provision of nursery places, in primary, secondary and tertiary education, in availability of work, in the negotiation of wage levels and, indeed, in all ways in which a politics based on gender intersects and feeds upon a politics based on class, then feminists, both men and women, have no option other than to contest and oppose the one, unequal 'reality'.

In the final paragraphs of her article, Assiter argues that, whilst a conspiratorial view of man made language is to be rejected, the evidence cited by Spender and others does support the view that language can 'reinforce' power relations between the sexes. This reinforcement is, she says, part of an ideological discourse which is powerful, precisely because it works to disguise those power relations. The semantic derogation of woman and the sexualisation of terms used to describe women suggests that sexism in language is much more thoroughgoing than mere 'reinforcement'. I would argue that language can and has been used to propose and initiate sexual inequalities, just as the reporting of the recent Falklands debacle tried to mobilise a jingoistic attitude on the part of the 'British people'. Ideology does not always work behind people's backs. If Spender's thesis on language is to be rejected, as I think it must, then it must be replaced by one that inserts the struggle over language into the forefront of sexual politics and does not confine it to some rearguard skirmish.

**Footnote**

1 See Jean Grimshaw's article 'Socialisation and the Self: Critique of Berger and Goffman', in RP25 - Summer 1980.