

ON THE PROGRESS OF WOMEN IN LINGUISTICS

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When I was first asked if I would talk about the progress of women in linguistics, I thought I'd better go to the library and see what I could find written by women in the general area. What I found, as any of you probably would have predicted, was a great paucity of work reflecting women's research as far back as I looked up to about 1965. But what I found that is, perhaps, a surprise to those of you who are not familiar with linguistics, was a great mass of work reflecting very serious women's research since 1965. The marked increase in women's contributions (or, rather, in the publication of women's contributions) to linguistics is noticeable first in the American journals—but by the 1970s is

obvious in European and Japanese journals as well.

I would like to offer for you today an analysis of why this increase occurred at precisely this time. Certainly the implications I am about to make can be challenged—I am neither a philosopher nor a political scientist. I offer the following comments as a woman committed to linguistics and, inevitably, my analysis will be somewhat personal.

While the word "linguistics" may be a bit unfamiliar to you, this unfamiliarity is perhaps due more to the intimidating formalistic aura that surrounds the field today than to any real newness. Indeed, if we take linguistics to mean the study of language in and of itself (that is, not as a tool—as one may treat language learning when one's goal is access to the literature of that language—but more of a bona fide problem per se), then it is clear that linguistics is among the oldest fields of human study. In 2000 BC people were concerned with the grammar of Sanskrit—as Panini's classical work shows

us. And throughout recorded history students of language have had their say. It is, after all, no great surprise that language should have received such continuous attention. We can all, but for the most unfortunate of us, speak—and so the fascination is to a certain extent a fascination with ourselves, a desire to know what it is that we call "humanity" and value it accordingly. And, indeed, language may be the most obvious symptom of humanity. As you sit here, you may think that you have never pondered the questions of what "language" is, how it develops, changes, functions. But I have no doubt that if a discussion about language started among your friends, most of you would join right in—quickly coming up with what seem to be plausible hypotheses. Indeed, to be a linguist is to be forever plagued at cocktail parties.

Thus the recent increase in women's contributions to linguistics cannot be attributed to any kind of new interest in that field. Rather, the interest has always been there—and undoubtedly will continue to be as long as we humans speak. Instead, this increase, I believe, is due to a series of recent innovations that conspire in a sense to give an effect similar to that of a political revolution. Let me explain that myself.

The study of language in and of itself—which is how I have broadly defined linguistics—encompasses many areas of knowledge. Linguists can study the sounds of language (like consonants and vowels), the way sounds are combined to make meaningful units (like the *less penniless*), the way meaningful units can be combined to make larger meaningful units (such as words), the way words are put together to make sentences, the way we understand sentences, the way languages change over time, the complexities of translating, the social functions and factors of language, and many more. Linguistics, by nature, is an interdisciplinary field.

But as of the past 20 years there has been a flowering in a particular area of linguistics led by Noam Chomsky that may be described in many ways, but for which I will concentrate on three adjectives: descriptive, synchronic, and generative. Let me go through these terms for you.

As long as people have been writing about language, the question has always been present as to whether to write about

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change, of that we are sure. The linguist can study the change of language over a broad span of time—which would be called a diachronic study—or she can study a language in its use in a given short time span—which would be called a synchronic study. Of course, at any given time no language is “fixed”. Rather, language is full of free variants, where often one will eventually win and “change” will take place. Both diachronic and synchronic studies have been with linguistics throughout its long history. And to a certain extent the two approaches are not discrete, but inextricably intertwined—with isolated relics of an older stage of a language surviving into a much later stage. Still, given this caveat, it makes sense to speak of a synchronic study—in which the linguist looks at the language as spoken right in a given moment. What Chomsky’s work emphasized was the study of language *today*. Focussing on today’s language means that a linguist can gather data just by frequenting the particular speech community of interest. The linguist working on a synchronic study of today’s speech may well never open a manuscript written a thousand years ago or even a hundred years ago. That means that knowledge of ancient languages and access to older manuscripts—both being typically reserved for an elite literati—primarily made of men—are not necessarily tremendously advantageous in such a study. Once more, women are more likely to be on an equal footing with men.

The final adjective was “generative”. Earlier work in this century (primarily that of Z. Harris) proposed that it was useful to look at various levels when speaking of language. Chomsky came forth with a well developed elaboration of this idea with his proposal that sentences are generated in our heads from underlying structures to surface structures by a series of rules. For example, we can start with the underlying sentence “You be home by six o’clock” and delete the “you”, yielding the typical imperative sentence “Be home by six o’clock”. That is a very simple example—the only rule involved is Imperative “you” Deletion. However, Chomsky’s proposed description of the grammar is not at all simple. His theory involves a complicated formalism; rules that move, delete, substitute, and insert items; rules that interpret semantic relationships such as coreference; rules that mark various surface structures as unacceptable, etc. The linguist in the late 1950’s faced with Chomsky’s initial

works didn’t have much in his past experience with linguistics to help him approach this new theory. He was, instead, a beginner—with very little edge over any other person who might try, without previous linguistic training, to understand Chomsky’s books and articles. *The result, of course, is that women who decided to take a look at language in the 1960’s, found that there was a new, fresh theory to dig into and at which they would be at no disadvantage.*

These three factors together were overwhelming. A woman could easily collect data in this *synchronic* approach, easily record it with no need to consider the power structure of the society in this *descriptive* approach, and as easily as anyone else analyze it in this *generative* approach. The appeal was obvious. And it coincided with the women’s movement timewise perfectly—leading to the effect in the journals that I began this talk by describing.

For the last 13 years women have excelled in linguistics. But a very interesting point is that women have recently begun to excel in all areas of linguistics—computational, historical, sociological, anthropological, etc. Areas of linguistics that barely touch at all on Chomsky’s specializations are flooded with women scholars. This is hardly surprising. Consider any community into which a new political view is introduced. While only a small section of the community may be

of the new group, the effect of their existence is felt throughout the community: it ripples into the theater, the newspapers, the novels, the schools, the dress, the moral code, etc. The same is true of any academic community. And linguistics is an exemplary instance of this. At this point I cannot imagine anything that could turn us around. We seem here to stay.

This address was delivered on April 15, 1978, Gaston Hall, Georgetown at the celebration for The First Woman in History to Receive a Doctorate Degree ... Elena Lucrezia Cornaro Piscopia.

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