

Cultural Difference or Male Dominance?: (Re)adjusting the Lens on the Maternal Image in Language Socialization Practices

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It is not uncommon for doctoral students to experience some sort of intellectual turning point in the course of our studies. At this juncture a light bulb may go off, allowing us to experience an “Aha” moment (Tannen, 1984) with regard to a particular issue. This leads us to re-examine some of our most deeply ingrained beliefs about a particular research area. We stroll down new paths, explore new territories, and find new spaces to ponder our questions. One such exploration began for me in the spring of 2005, while I was enrolled in Interactional Sociolinguistics with Dr. Leslie M. Beebe. This course not only exposed me to a discourse analytic approach that would be foundational to my future dissertation work, but it also provided me with a new and expanded perspective on discourse and gender. Course readings led me to ask new questions and to examine existing debates in language and gender research through various lenses. The course was indeed an intellectual turning point in my life that began when I examined the debate surrounding cross-gender (mis)communication, and then came full circle when I discovered an interest in family discourse and the maternal figure—an outgrowth of a Linguistic Anthropology course also taught by Dr. Beebe the following term.

Dr. Beebe encouraged me to examine cross-gender (mis)communication with two distinct lenses: cultural difference and male dominance. As my research interests grew to include family discourse, I discovered how the dichotomization of cultural difference and male dominance also presents two distinct lenses for viewing the maternal image in language accommodation practices. While one of these lenses is constructed around traditional patriarchal assumptions, the other views mothers’ accommodation practices from a cultural and socio-educational angle. I will now peer into these lenses to show how the socio-political lens of dominance and patriarchy extends beyond issues of cross-gender (mis)communication to societal perceptions of mothers and their role in language accommodation practices.

Both cross-gender (mis)communication and the depiction of the maternal figure in language socialization practices have been viewed from two opposing socio-political viewpoints. With the lens of patriarchy and social inequality, feminist scholars have repeatedly voiced their opposition to a cross-cultural model of gender differences in male-female conversation. Proponents of the difference model (cf. Maltz & Borker, 1982; Tannen, 1986, 1990) applied Gumperz’s (1982) cross-cultural perspective to (mis)communication to explain differences in male-female language use in terms of cross-cultural differences. They argued that the genesis of cross-sex miscommunication is located in early sex-differentiated socialization practices. Sex-segregated peer groups are basically different subcultures in which boys and girls learn *genderlects* (i.e., different rules for engaging and interpreting conversation). These different speaking styles are then carried into adulthood, and are the basis for male-female communication problems. For opponents of the two-cultures model, a focus solely on stylistic differences means obfuscating (or even denying) the existence of male dominance. Feminists across disciplines have thus criticized such research for ignoring the link between gender speaking styles and male dominance. In language and gender research alone, the theoretical framework of the difference/two cultures model has been

widely criticized for its essentialist and dichotomous conceptions of gender, and for disregarding the gender inequalities that pervade society (see Cameron 1997, 2005; Crawford, 1995; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1994; Freed, 1992, 2003).

Assumptions of the ubiquity of male dominance and patriarchy have also affected the lens through which we view the maternal image in language socialization practices. In traditional patriarchal Western society, mothers are both the primary caregivers and the main socializers of gender roles (Chodorow, 1978; Lakoff, 1975; Wodak & Schulz, 1986). Given these roles within the family organization, it is not surprising that American mothers are also highly instrumental in children's language acquisition process (Ochs, 1997; Wodak & Schulz, 1986). Despite the socializing force that mothers have in children's lives, white middle-class American mothers' talk to children has been commonly associated with maternal images of powerlessness, both within the private sphere (Ochs, 1992) and in the workplace (Tannen, 1994). If mothers' language socialization practices—or even the whole institution of motherhood—are viewed from a socio-political lens of patriarchy and gender asymmetries, then this claim has some validity (Chodorow & Contratto, 1992). However, if a socio-educational lens is used instead, then mothers' communicative practices may be viewed differently.

From a socio-educational lens, Wodak and Schulz (1986) argue that middle-class American mothers “pride themselves on the verbal precocity of their children” (p. 39). The authors also note the emotional and cognitive benefits of mothers' *caretaker talk* (a simplified register also known as *motherese*). Motherese has instrumental and pedagogical benefits, but in terms of affect, it also enables the mother to provide the child with *mutuality* (i.e., it allows mothers to suppress their own maternal identity in order to take on the point of view of the child) (Wodak & Schulz, 1986). Mutuality and motherese are both important in that they help forge a special linguistic rapport between mothers and infants (Wodak & Schulz, 1986).

On the other hand, refocusing the lens to a socio-political one of gender hierarchy, Ochs (1992) argues that the language accommodation practices of white middle-class American (WMCA) mothers are disempowering, since they render mothers virtually invisible in activities involving their children. Unlike the Samoan mothers she observed, WMCA mothers' child-centered practices (which include a simplified register, protoconversations, unidirectional praising, and verbal guessing of unintelligible responses) project a subordinate image of mother that clearly contrasts with the prestigious and authoritative image of the Samoan caregiver. Whereas Samoan mothers' accommodation practices maintain their high-ranking position in the traditional family structure, American mothers participate instead in the prevailing middle-class American egalitarian ideology (Brown & Gilman, 1972; Tannen, 1994). From this perspective, parents adhere to a principle of symmetrical solidarity, whereby their socialization practices seek to minimize the inherently asymmetrical parent-child relationship (Blum-Kulka, 1990, 1997; Ochs, 1992). Viewing these practices in terms of their ideological significance, one can see that women, and particularly mothers, are socialized to behave according to specific naturalized scripts aided by the gender polarizations created in a patriarchal society (Bem Lipsitz, 1993). Some of the accommodation practices that Ochs (1992) documents may truly disadvantage mothers. Failure to recognize participation in accomplishments with children is one such practice. Drawing on psychoanalytic insights, Benjamin (1988) explains how lack of mutual recognition between mother and child results in loss of maternal subjectivity. Such loss is problematic not only for the mother but also for the child, who needs to grow through a relationship with a person who perceives herself as a subject in her own right (Benjamin, 1988).

One may certainly argue that maternal socialization practices are influenced by socio-

political assumptions of gender and power. The way these practices are viewed can lead scholars to favor one interpretation, or belief, over another. I have learned, however, to (re)adjust the lens when necessary, and to evaluate research using various frames in order to grasp the whole interactional picture. Such a perspective fosters further growth and learning because it allows students to hear the voices of all scholars, to view scholars' work through different lenses, and to accept them on their own terms. These are the insightful comments given to me once by one very fine scholar, Dr. Leslie Beebe. I am very grateful that she has shared her voice, her wisdom, and the lenses by which she viewed various discursive interactions with me during all these years at Teachers College.

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