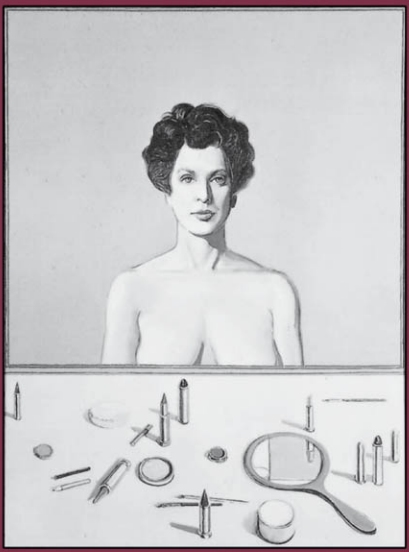
PRONOUN ENVY

LITERARY USES OF LINGUISTIC GENDER



ANNA LIVIA

STUDIES IN LANGUAGE AND GENDER

Pronoun Envy

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Mary Bucholtz, *General Editor*

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Edited by Mary Bucholtz, A. C. Liang, and Laurel A. Sutton

Pronoun Envy: Literacy Uses of Linguistic Gender
by Anna Livia

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Anna Livia

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To Jeannie, Emma, and Asher

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"Un homme sur deux est une femme"

Introduction—Pronoun Envy and Phallogocentrism

Pronoun Envy

In November 1971, women students at Harvard Divinity School protested that the masculine *He* should not be used in reference to God, nor should masculine pronouns be used to refer to people in general. Each time someone in the lecture room used the masculine pronoun or a masculine generic such as *man* or *mankind* when speaking of humanity at large, the women blew paper kazoos to express their disapproval. The matter was reported to the *Harvard Crimson* (the college in-house magazine). Calvert Watkins, chair of the Harvard linguistics department, responded with a letter cosigned by seventeen colleagues, including the departmental secretary. They assured readers that what was really at issue was not masculist tyranny, but the question of markedness. Since the masculine is the unmarked term of the masculine/feminine dyad, it has both generic and specific use. "There is," Watkins et al. informed readers, "no need for anxiety or pronoun envy" (*Harvard Crimson*, 26 November 1971, 17).[1] Yet pronoun envy there has certainly been these last twenty-five years, if we are to take the phrase to signify the desire for gender parity in language. Pronoun envy motivates more than two decades of feminist writing, writing that makes linguistic issues central to the text—experimenting with new forms, rejuvenating old and little-used forms, or simply eliminating linguistic gender for animate referents. Watkins et al.'s remark that the use of *he* as a generic is merely a question of markedness was either extraordinarily disingenuous or extraordinarily obtuse, for the hierarchy the marked/unmarked relation-

ship sets up in ideologically loaded pairs such as white/black, male/female, or old/young is deeply problematic.

Nor has reaction to pronoun envy been restricted to Anglophone communities. In an article provocatively entitled "Priez Dieu, elle vous exaucera" (Pray to God, She Will Grant Your Prayers),[2] first published in *F Magazine* in January 1978, the French feminist novelist Benoîte Groult reports on the creation of Femmes et hommes dans l'église (Women and Men in the Church) (Groult 1981, 125–28). This is an international group of Catholics and Protestants based in Brussels whose aim is to put an end to sexism in the church in all its forms. One of their projects was to rewrite the liturgy so that, for example, as the women divinity students at Harvard had demanded seven years earlier, it no longer employed falsely generic masculine pronouns. If God was not perceived as masculine, the statement "Priez Dieu, elle vous exaucera" would no longer be shocking in its use of the feminine pronoun. Groult's article opens with a slogan from the Mouvement de Libération des Femmes (MLF; French women's liberation movement), "Cinquante pour cent des hommes sont des femmes" (Fifty percent of men are women), explaining that the Christian brothers were beginning to apply this revelation to the church, where 50 percent of brothers turn out to be sisters. The quotation that heads this introduction, "Un homme sur deux est une femme" (One man in two is a woman), is another MLF slogan that was chanted at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier during an MLF march in August 1970. Could the famous unknown *soldat* (m.) turn out to be a *soldate* (f.)? Or should the epicene (common-gender) term *militaire* be used to avoid the question?

Like its precursor, penis envy, "pronoun envy" is a wonderfully dismissive label, putting an end to debate by declaring the premise ludicrous. Women do not possess a penis; in the popular perception, it is the very fact of this lack that makes us women. To envy a man his penis is foolish, fruitless, and pathological. To envy men the generic use of the masculine pronoun, then, is equally pathological and equally doomed to frustration and failure. Watkins et al. graciously observe that there is no need for female divinity students to experience this futile desire, since it is not the pronouns themselves but the Indo-European system of markedness that is at issue. This maneuver shifts the blame from one element in the language to the system itself. Far from supporting structural changes or radical realignment, however, the *Crimson* correspondents declare: "The fact that the masculine is the unmarked gender in English . . . is unlikely to be an impediment to any change in the patterns of the sexual division of labor toward which our society may wish to evolve" (*Harvard Crimson*, 16 November 1971, 17). No sociological evidence is offered to support this claim, apart from the assertion that the feminine is unmarked in the language of the Tunica Indians.[3] *Rarissimi* examples of role reversal do little to appease the injured, though they seem to satisfy their producers.

The observation that linguistic structure is biased in favor of the masculine and to the detriment of the feminine, so cavalierly dismissed among these Anglophones as motivated by "pronoun envy," is accorded, among Francophones, the title *phallogocentrisme*, which, though grander and Greeker, is equally Freudian. The term was coined by Jacques Derrida following his rereadings of the works of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan (Derrida 1975; see also Spivak 1976). Phallogocentrism indicates in philosophical outlook, if not in practical intent, that the centrality of the phallus to signifying practice is aberrant and that the system needs critical attention—critical attention implying not suggestions for reform, but a focus on the object under discussion. Derrida quotes Lacan's observation that "le phallus est le signifiant privilégié" (the phallus is the privileged signifier) ("La signification du phallus," in *Les Ecrits*, 692; quoted in Derrida 1975, 132) and recognizes "le phallogocentrisme comme androcentrisme" (phallogocentrism as androcentrism) (Derrida 1975, 132). Or, in Namascar Shaktini's more transparent prose, "[o]n peut décrire le phallogocentrisme comme la tradition qui constitue un système signifiant organisé autour du genre" (one can describe phallogocentrism as the tradition that constitutes a signifying system around gender) (Shaktini 1985, 66). The system revolves not simply around gender, I would add, but specifically around gender difference, and indeed a hierarchy of difference. Unlike the English phrase *pronoun envy*, which suggests that the protester is misguided, the term *phallogocentrism* recognizes both that gender is a central, indeed the central, component of language (as conceived by structuralist linguistics) and that it is organized around the mark of masculinity.[4]

In this work I investigate feminist and other expressions of pronoun envy, or opposition to phallogocentrism, in written texts in English and French. I concentrate on those texts that in some way problematize the traditional functioning of the linguistic gender system. The constitution of the corpus of texts under investigation may itself seem controversial to readers more used to a high level of thematic or stylistic continuity. I have assembled a body of data from the written language that demonstrates the working of gender in modern French and English, both in their canonical and in their more marked usages. I concentrate on French and English because it is in these languages that the most daring experimental works have been produced. The focus is on written texts rather than the spoken language because many morphological indicators of gender in French are only apparent in the written form. The works examined are rather different from one another in genre, ideology, and time period. In form, they include novels, prose poems, and personal testimonies. In political outlook, they variously express a militant feminist separatism, a belief in sociosexual androgyny, and a reinvestment in the traditional sex roles, as well as a parody of those roles. In time period, while most originate in the last quarter of the twentieth century, a few date from the early years of the century, and one from the nineteenth century.

Pronominal Quarrels

The pronominal system, and its workings and origins, has been a subject of fascination and some political debate among European thinkers since the sixteenth century. While most speakers, most of the time, are content to use language to convey their message, at times of social strife many turn to linguistic distinctions to provide validation for their political beliefs. During periods of political upheaval, language is often seen (erroneously) as a source of natural, timeless laws, and proponents of conservatism will quote these laws as models for a well-ordered society. More radical elements will often counter by a demand for linguistic change. Some of the earliest European examples of this ideological move come from discussions of chapters of the Bible. The biblical accounts of the creation of Eve and the tower of Babel have proved rich mines for both feminist and antifeminist arguments over the centuries as the two sides pick apart the exact wording of Genesis, in its different translations, to prove that either Eve or Adam was created first. The masculist tendency sees the origin of language as parallel to the origin of the sexes, resulting in descriptions of male and female language in which the female is subordinate to the male in all things (Baron 1986, 11–20).

The English men James Burnet (Lord Monboddo) and Rowland Jones both wrote influential accounts of the origins of language in the late eighteenth century: Monboddo's six-volume *Of the Origin and Progress of Language* was first published in 1773, Jones's *The Origin of Language and Nations* in 1764. The late eighteenth century was a period of questioning throughout Europe, a time of malaise that would culminate in the American War of Independence (1775–1783) and the French Revolution (1789). While Monboddo and Jones were discussing the origins of language in England, Diderot and his fellow *encyclopédistes* were hard at work on the seventeen volumes of the *Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonnée des sciences* (1751–72), a mammoth intellectual attempt to tame and bring order to a changing world by encoding and containing it in definition and description. At the same time, Jean-Jacques Rousseau was busy producing his own meditation on the origins of language and its relation to the social contract in *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité* (1754) and *Du Contrat social* (1762).

As concerns pronouns specifically, Jones discusses the use of the letter *i*, which is also the number *1*, to represent Adam, the first man, and the first person pronoun. "The first person pronoun signifies man as an indefinite line placed alone or by himself at the centre of things" (Baron 1986, 15). The second person pronoun is based on the creation of Eve from Adam and represented by the letter *u*, or two *i*s joined together. Other eighteenth-century writers, including Robert Baker, Michael Maittaire, and John Horne Tooke, theorize about the origin and motivation of the third person singular pronouns in English (*he*, *she*, and *it*), deriving them from various Old English sources including *he* from *haetan* (to call), and *she* from *swag* (to sway, keep). All three assume that the pronoun *he* was originally epicene

and only recently gained its masculine meaning. The supposed epicene origin of *he* is taken as justification for its use with referents whose gender is unknown. In fact, the Old English system of masculine *he*, feminine *heo*, and neuter *hit* already encoded both gender and high animacy. (According to the hierarchical ordering of noun phrases by which sentient referents like human beings are placed higher than lifeless objects like rocks or abstract ideas).

French has traditionally been considered, in the English folk-linguistic view, soft, feminine, even effeminate. It is the language of love, the language in which the serpent spoke to Eve (Baron 1986, 58) according to the seventeenth century Swedish writer Anders Kempe, who describes God speaking Swedish, Adam, Danish, and Eve, French. For the French, on the other hand, their language is based on reason and logic. "La syntaxe française est incorruptible. . . . Tout ce qui n'est pas clair, n'est pas français" (French syntax is incorruptible. . . . Whatever is not clear, is not French), as Antoine de Rivarol claimed in an oft-quoted lecture, *De l'universalité de la langue française*, in 1784. Descartes's "Je pense donc je suis" (or "Cogito ergo sum," in its original Latin) is still quoted today as proof of the national propensity for rational thought. Inherent in the view that French syntax is incorruptible is the belief that it should therefore be defended from the onslaught of modern usage. The French language represents the best of France, the quintessence of the French spirit, and must not be allowed to change, for change will lead to linguistic impurity and incomprehension, paralleled by social turbulence and depravity. The following declaration of Voltaire encapsulates the eighteenth-century French abhorrence of linguistic change:

> Il me semble que lorsqu'on a eu dans un siècle un nombre suffisant de bons écrivains devenus classiques, il n'est plus guère permis d'employer d'autres expressions que les leurs, et qu'il faut leur donner le même sens, ou bien dans peu de temps, le siècle présent n'entendrait plus le siècle passé.
>
> (It seems to me that when one has had a sufficient number of good writers in one century whose works have become classics, it is scarcely permitted to use other expressions than theirs, and that one must give them the same meaning, or else in a short time, the present century will no longer be able to understand the previous one. (quoted in Lodge 1993, 181)

Voltaire's reference to the work of "good writers," rather than, say, eloquent orators, is not casual. The championing of the rationality and purity of the French language runs parallel with the belief that the written form represents the purest form of the language. Written texts can be preserved and enshrined in a way that, before the advent of tape recorders, was impossible for the spoken language. Written language is also more conservative and slower to change.

Because of the Renaissance interest in preserving Latin texts and its passion for tracing back to Latin every element in the romance languages,

the Latin origin of the third person pronouns in French has not been obscured to the same extent as the Old English origin of English pronouns. The French subject pronouns *il* and *elle* originate in the nominative forms of the Latin demonstrative pronouns: *il* < *ILLE*, *elle* < *ILLA*. The French object pronouns *le* and *la* originate in the accusative forms of the Latin demonstrative pronouns: *le* < *ILLUM*, *la* < *ILLAM* (see also Rickard 1989, 69–70, and Harris 1978, 99–122, for an account of the history of the morphology of personal pronouns from Latin to modern French). There are, consequently, fewer early fanciful accounts of the origin of French personal pronouns. Discussion of the gender inequality built into the system does not begin until the nineteenth century. Instead, French writers as early as the sixteenth-century essayist Michel de Montaigne in his account of a trip to Italy (1580–81) play with gendered third person pronouns to express the androgyny, homosexuality, or transsexuality of the referent (this point is expanded in chapter 7). During the French Revolution, it was the second person pronoun that found itself the target of reformers. The polite *vous* was outlawed in favor of the egalitarian *tu* in the belief that linguistic change should parallel and help enforce social change. (A similar pronominal change was imposed in Italy under Mussolini: Fascist ideology required that citizens use the egalitarian *tu* form for the second person singular in place of the customary polite third person form, *lei*.)

As this discussion shows, it is particularly in times of social turbulence that different constituencies turn to language to prove their points or demand change. Indeed, as Deborah Cameron demonstrates in *Verbal Hygiene*, the urge to improve or clean up language is "as basic to the use of language as vowels are to its phonetic structure" (1995, 1). Dennis Baron has shown, with a wealth of examples, that the gender bias inherent in the use of *he* as a generic has been a hot issue since the middle of the nineteenth century (1986, 205–9). Interest increases with the rise of the movement for women's liberation and equal rights. The texts discusssed in this study mostly come from the latter half of the twentieth century, a period when feminist activity and the consequent antifeminist backlash have been at their peak.

Linguistic Analysis of Literary Texts

While text-based linguistics is by now well established, the linguistic analysis of literary works usually focuses on the micro level of text construction, leaving such "literary" concerns as plot, character, theme, and moral or ideological point to literary theorists. I do not mean to imply a strict segregation between the two realms; there are, of course, important areas of overlap, especially in the fields of narrativity and stylistics. In general, however, lower-case *discourse*, involving an examination of such textual features as tense, aspect, deictics, and focalization or information packaging (to name but a few), is considered the province of linguistics. The wider-societal upper-case *Discourse* is deemed more suited to disciplines such as history,

rhetoric, or literary criticism, which look at the interplay between texts and culture. In this work, I am concerned not only with the micro (linguistic) level, but also with the macro (ideological) level. Since, as well as having interesting linguistic realizations, gender is an important cultural phenomenon, it would seem wilfully perverse to disregard the stated intentions of the feminist and other authors studied here by confining myself to linguistic analysis proper.

Over the last twenty years (during which period the majority of the texts examined here were published) a substantial amount of research has been carried out both in the linguistic field of language and gender and in the literary field of feminist fiction. There has, however, been little overlap between the two domains of feminist research. Linguistic scholars have paid scant attention to feminist literary texts (there is of course a whole body of criticism devoted to more mainstream work). For their part, literary critics rarely use the tools of linguistics to examine feminist fiction, and as we will see in chapters 4 and 5, those literary scholars who have attempted this feat do not always manifest a robust grasp of the discipline. I therefore examine both the linguistic complexities of the texts and their effect on such features as character development and moral or ideological purpose.

As I have already noted, since the seventeenth century both the French public and the French government have assumed that the written word is the purest and most correct form of the language, the standard by which the spoken word is to be judged. Indeed, the academician Vaugelas declares *bon usage* (good usage) to be the speech of the majority of the royal court and that of the most highly esteemed authors of the day. Since France became a republic there has been no royal court, leaving the work of esteemed authors as sole arbiter of grammar and style. English has not been subject to nearly the same level of codification and protection as French. There is, after all, no Haut Comité de défense et d'expansion de la langue (High Committee for the Defense and Expansion of the Language) in England or the United States to rival the French committee created in 1966 by de Gaulle (renamed the Délégation générale à la langue française in 1989) (Judge 1993, 7–27). Nevertheless, English speakers often behave as though they too believed that the written word should dictate the grammatical and stylistic rules of the spoken language. "He speaks in full paragraphs" and "she talks like a book" are usually words of praise suggesting that the speaker in question has successfully emulated the written model.

Anyone who has transcribed even a five-minute segment of naturally occurring conversation knows that "talking like a book" is both an unachievable and a highly undesirable goal. Spoken language chunks information into easily comprehensible segments. Speakers give each other signals as to when they are about to finish their turn, when others may interrupt, and when they are about to launch into a long narrative and wish to hold the floor for an extended period. These devices, which involve intricate and sophisticated repetition, checking back, and self-correction, are unnecessary in written texts but vital to the smooth running of spoken discourse.

(See Labov and Waletsky 1967, Labov 1972, Labov and Fanshel 1977, Goodwin 1990, and Schiffrin 1994 for detailed discussions of conversation and discourse analysis). Beginning linguistics students are continually told that they need to collect spontaneously produced and attested examples from native speakers in realistic contexts and that the constructed dialogue of literary texts is invalid for any claim they might wish to make about the spoken language. For sociolinguists, at least, the distinction between written and spoken language no longer needs to be argued. It is recognized within the discipline that the two often behave like separate but related systems, each with its own syntax, semantics, lexicon, and pragmatics. Points at which the spoken language differs from the written should be treated not as mistakes but as evidence of a different set of rules.

For literary scholars, in contrast, the written word tends to take precedence over spoken interactions, and the differences between the two systems are not so salient. Many English teachers believe that reading good books will help their students speak well and, conversely, that illiterate students speak badly. While literary scholars may wonder why it is helpful to use linguistic tools to analyze written texts, sociolinguists may ask how it is useful to linguistics to study literary language. This is not, of course, the first work that is linguistic in methodology and literary in content. Deborah Tannen and Robin Lakoff often use literary examples to support and illustrate their points about spoken interactions between men and women. Their coauthored article on Bergman's *Scenes from a Marriage* (reprinted in Tannen 1994) discusses communicative competence and pragmatic structures with reference to the character's spoken interaction, for example. The characters in this fictionalized representation of reality act out scenes that are larger than life, distilled to produce intense focus on the topic at hand, with intervening material filtered out. This distillation of experience is, indeed, one of the main functions of art. (See also Romaine 1999, chapter 11, on "Writing Feminist Futures.")

In *Pronoun Envy* I examine literary texts in order to see how far the gender system can be pushed in English and French. This is not to say that claims I make about the functioning of these texts will automatically map onto the spoken idiom, nor will they necessarily prove true of other world languages. The writers studied here experiment with gender in ways that would be almost unreplicable in spoken discourse. They test the reader's comprehension, demonstrating both the flexibility and the limits of the gender system. They also test the imagination, so that what is produced is not a blueprint for linguistic change but a challenge. Can a text with these modifications continue to function on any level?

Linguistic analysis provides a set of formal procedures that are more adept at getting at how a text is woven together than are by the more traditional literary tools of theme, character, plot, and story line. Good readers develop instincts about the way a text works, about how one author's style differs from another's, and these insights are extremely valuable, but the application of linguistics, with its insistence on relationships at the micro level of noun and

pronoun, of the verb phrase and its arguments, can identify repetitive patterns that show how different devices work and, conversely, what happens to the structure of the text when literary experiments are introduced.

Linguistic Determinism and Literary Texts

As seen in the earlier discussion of the parallels forged between social change and linguistic reform, revolutionary movements tend to promote linguistic change, while the more conservative elements in society resist it in the name of preserving transcendent values. Contemporary feminist interest in the search for epicene third person pronouns and the avoidance of gender markers stems from the same basic belief that the language one speaks directly affects one's worldview. Since many of the writers whose work is considered here were strongly influenced by the hypothesis of linguistic determinism, it will be useful to look briefly at the axiom or ideology known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.[5]

In its strong version, linguistic determinism, this hypothesis posits that the language one speaks determines one's perceptions of reality. In its weak version, linguistic relativity, it asserts that one's native language exerts a powerful influence over one's perceptions of reality. The difference is one of degree. The concept of linguistic relativity is most clearly formulated in Sapir's statements repudiating earlier beliefs in a correlation between linguistic morphology and cultural development:

> It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means for solving specific problems of communication and reflection. The fact of the matter is that the "real world" is to a large extent unconsciously built on the language habits of the group. (Sapir 1929; quoted in Mülhäusler and Harré 1990, 3).

If one accepts any version of the hypothesis that the possibilities and exigencies of a language necessarily have an impact on the way speakers of that language perceive the world, then one must accept that linguistic structure is a central part of the formation of consciousness. In Edward Sapir's words, "Such categories as . . . gender . . . are systematically elaborated in language and are not so much discovered in experience as imposed upon it because of the tyrannical hold that linguistic form has upon our orientation in the world" ([1929] 1970, 68–9). We are born into a linguistic community whose language we learn as infants, inheriting the categories it uses, perceiving the distinctions it makes, and placing greater value on those distinctions because they are encoded in language than on others for which we have no words, or that are unimportant in the grammatical system. Language is constantly under construction, and this construction is of necessity a community event, though the community may not always be a community of equals.

The most widespread, popularized interpretation of the hypothesis of linguistic determinism is the belief that Eskimos (apparently meaning the

Inuit, Yupik, or indeed Athabascan peoples) have 100 words for snow. This statement is intended to indicate that they are able to make distinctions among the many different types of snow that speakers of other languages cannot make or even perceive. This idea is, of course, related to the French belief in phallogocentrism, or the centrality to the signifying practice of the word and the power of naming (see note 4). Fortunately, the "great Eskimo vocabulary hoax" has received both academic and popular rebuttal, the former by Laura Martin (in an *American Anthropologist* research note 1986), the latter by Geoffrey Pullum (1991). This rebuttal centers around two points, one purely linguistic, the other cognitive and psychological. The linguistic rebuttal goes as follows: Eskimo languages in general have rich, highly productive derivational morphology by which one stem may accrete large numbers of suffixes and prefixes; it is therefore more accurate to say that the morphology of Eskimo languages enables speakers to include many details about the snow in one construction, where English or French would use discrete lexical items. The cognitive-psychological rebuttal goes as follows: it is natural for communities to be concerned with and have a rich vocabulary for significant items in their immediate environment; the lack of such a rich vocabulary does not prevent members of other communities from perceiving the same distinctions, however.

The Danish novelist Peter Høeg's best-selling mystery *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow* (1992; made into a movie with the title under which it was published in the United States, *Smilla's Sense of Snow*) revolves around its heroine's ability to read the snow in its many different forms, a talent she has inherited from her Inuit mother and perfected during her childhood in Greenland. Attempts have been made by the English translator to preserve both the Inuit words and the English versions—for instance, *it kangirluarhuq*, big blocks of freshwater ice (300), and *it qanik*, fine powder snow (102)—presumably to demonstrate that aided by the syntax of one's native tongue, one can perceive distinctions in water density and formation that remain invisible to nonnative speakers.

While we might not accept that it is Smilla's command of Inuit, rather than her keen eye and familiarity with ice, that allows her to interpet snowy footprints and walk across Copenhagen harbor on almost submerged ice floes, we would probably agree that her language emphasizes distinctions that mostly seem irrelevant to other linguistic communities. This concept of linguistic relativism is also useful in looking at gender. "The world is presented in a kaleidoscope flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds—this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds" (Whorf 1956b, 213). This interpretation allows for the influence of other, nonlinguistic, semiotic factors, while attributing an important place to language and the categories it sets up. Essential to this hypothesis is the belief that because different languages have different structures that create different sets of oppositions, members of one linguistic community will not experience the world in the same way as members of another. It follows that we cannot examine power relations, and the creation of individual,

gendered subjects, without knowing what positions are constructed by a language and what other roles the same linguistic devices may fill. This is the philosophical outlook of most of the authors whose work is studied here.

It should be noted that because most contemporary language scholars subscribe to versions of linguistic relativity, discussions of linguistic determinism are becoming obsolete among linguists. This does not mean that notions of linguistic determinism have disappeared entirely from the popular realm. Authors such as George Orwell have been very influential in popularizing the notion that language can control its users. In the less popular, more academic realm, feminist debates about identity politics versus constructionism frequently border on determinism. While proponents of identity politics are often dismissed as essentialist—that is, as believing that sexual identity is an essential part of one's makeup, independent of social environment—social constructionists may be criticized for overemphasizing the role of language in forming identity. Any suggestion that language is in some way more active or agentive than its users smacks of linguistic determinism. Judith Butler, for example, writes of discourse that it "inserts itself in . . . linguistic life," while individual language users (or, to use her terms, "culturally intelligible subjects") are "the resulting effects of . . . discourse" (1990, 145). If speaking subjects are reduced to the role of patient, or effect, while language takes the role of agent, then we must imagine language as creating the speaker.

Are we to assume that Butler's statement is intended paradoxically, suggesting an agonistic relation, as in "slavery creates freedom" and "heterosexuality creates homosexuality" (i.e., the terms "slavery" and "heterosexuality" can only be fully understood in contradistinction to their semantic opposites, "freedom" and "homosexuality"); or a metonymic relation, as in "guns create shooters" (i.e., although people manufacture guns and shoot them, without guns there would be no shooters)? Or must we assume a return to a structuralist concept of the constitutive and defining power of the institution? Butler herself clarifies this point: "[a]s a process, signification harbors within itself . . . agency" (1990, 145). If agency is located within the process of signification—that is, the process by which signifiers refer to signifieds—then it is divorced from the speaker who activates the system. As one reads *Gender Trouble*, Butler's pioneering work on gender, with its provocative subtitle *The Subversion of Identity*, one carries with one a picture of Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times*, disappearing into the enormous cogs and wheels of an out-of-control conveyor belt he has inadvertently activated. Language, as conceived by Butler, is such a piece of machinery. "All signification takes place within the orbit of the compulsion to repeat," she argues, adding that "agency is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition" (1990, 145). One of the projects of this book is to look at the "variations on repetition" provided by a range of authors in a corpus of experimental texts that use the cogs and wheels of language to go beyond the pathetic vision of the little tramp caught in the machine to discover speakers who consciously position themselves along the masculine-

feminine continuum, using the possibilities offered by the gender system to their own ends.

Formal and Semantic Gender

The term "gender" has cultural, sexual, biological, and morphological meanings. Butler is primarily concerned with cultural gender, or the social rules associated with women and men. Greville Corbett (1991) describes gender as a linguistic category affecting the noun. He distinguishes between two major types of gender systems: semantic and formal. Semantic gender systems are understood to reflect "natural gender" as an extralinguistic feature related to bodily anatomy or sex. Semantic gender systems classify nouns referring to male humans and animals under the masculine gender, while nouns referring to female humans and animals are classified under the female gender. Inanimate referents may be felt to have "metaphorical" gender, or they may be assigned to a neuter gender category. Formal gender systems, in contrast, depend not on referential categories such as sex, but on the morphology (form) or phonology (sound) of the noun itself. Latin, for example, has grammatical gender formalized in its declension system. Nouns ending in *-a* (*mensa*, table; *puella*, girl; *agricola*, farmer) are typically feminine, while nouns ending in *-us* (*populus*, people; *senatus*, senate; *virus*, slime) are typically masculine, independent of their meaning.

English has only semantic gender. Thus masculine pronouns *he*, *him*, and *his* anaphorize (refer back to) semantically masculine nouns, that is, humans and animals perceived as culturally male. The feminine pronouns *she*, *her*, and *hers* anaphorize semantically feminine nouns. French, in contrast, has both semantic and formal gender. The masculine pronoun *il* anaphorizes a grammatically masculine noun. *Il arrive* may refer to the arrival of Uncle Eric (both formally and semantically masculine); *le vent* (the wind—formally masculine and semantically neutral); or, indeed, *Madame le capitaine* (a woman military captain—formally masculine but semantically feminine). *Elle arrive* may refer to the arrival of Aunt Florence (both formally and semantically feminine), *la bourrasque* (the gust of wind—formally feminine and semantically neutral), or *la sentinelle* (the sentryman—formally feminine but semantically masculine). This difference between English and French is particularly remarkable when we consider the possessive adjectives *his*, *her* and *son*, *sa*. *His* and *her* take the same semantic gender as the possessor. *His aunt* refers to the aunt of a semantically masculine relation (Eric's aunt, Stephen's aunt). *Her father* refers to the father of a semantically feminine relation (Florence's aunt, Julie's aunt). In contrast, *sa tante* tells us nothing whatever of the cultural gender of the relation; the feminine *sa* is used because the noun *tante* has grammatically feminine gender. Similarly, in the expression *son père* the masculine adjective is used because *père* is grammatically masculine; we cannot tell what cultural gender the father's relation has, and it could equally well be a son or a daughter. (See Pauwels 1998, 36–43, for further discussion of semantic and formal gender in European languages.)