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Book Review for Mary Talbot's Language and Gender, 2nd ed. (2010)

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Peer reviewed

***Language and Gender 2nd Ed.*** by Mary Talbot. Malden, MA:  
Polity Press, 2010

Reviewed by Jeremy Kelley  
University of California, Los Angeles

Using a feminist perspective, *Language and Gender 2nd ed.* offers a fresh, current look at gender linguistic thought. From stereotypically gendered linguistic features associated with one or the other sex, to poststructuralist conceptions of identity revealed through linguistic practices, Mary Talbot creates a tone that is inviting and engaging to both male and female readers, framing her argumentation in a common-sense manner, while also logically presenting the hard issues through evidentiary support. As such, *Language and Gender 2nd ed.* addresses all of the major theoretical frameworks, while leaving ample room for exploration and expansion.

This second edition's overall structure, which has been revised and enhanced, consists of three cohesively strong, themed parts. Part I addresses language and gender stereotypes, as well as the early dichotomous models that predominated the field. Part II transitions from these earlier perspectives into an examination of gender contextualized within unfolding interactive practices. And in Part III, which comprises one-half of the entire work, the author moves beyond interactive practices, incorporating current research perspectives in which gender is no longer seen as a simple byproduct of essentialist characteristics, but rather as a performative display that challenges traditional gendered binaries. Further, the major changes to this edition consist of a more appropriate repositioning of the chapter on Public Talk, the addition of an added subsection within the chapter titled Difference-and-Dominance and Beyond, and a completely new chapter that addresses the interface between language, gender, and sexuality.

Part I, *Preliminaries: Airing Stereotypes and Early Models*, begins with common stereotypical perceptions within language and gender research, and culminates in theoretical benchmark studies that have helped to reveal the origins of such stereotypical notions. As a foundation to her analyses, Talbot first distinguishes between biological sex and non-biological gender. She then specifically addresses studies that have argued for women and men as showing preference for certain linguistic forms (e.g., standard form vs. colloquial form, respectively), and demonstrates that such characterizations do not inflexibly hold true, given that sociocultural analyses offer counterintuitive explanations which often undermine such claims. She then goes on to show how several key theoretical studies (Lakoff, 1975; Spender 1985)

have resulted in a progressive awareness of the power variables resulting from such dichotomous characterizations, and concludes the section with the assertion that a better understanding of gendered linguistic patterns and preferences is in order if changes in power dynamics are to become a viable reality.

In Part II of the book, *Interaction Among Women and Men*, the author discusses the interactive practices of men and women, focusing primarily on issues of dominance and difference. She begins with storytelling in dinnertime narratives, and introduces the notion that power differentials in language are not only the product of men, but also of women, in that women sometimes play an active role in the reproduction of dominant male practices; however, such reproductions are also shown to be culturally grounded. The author then looks at conversation as a gendered practice, specifically addressing research premised upon an “equal but different” linguistic framework in which different styles result in miscommunications between the sexes (i.e., the Difference Framework). Addressing this framework, Talbot shows how such characterizations of gendered expression, as intrinsically linked to one or the other sex, counterproductively serve to excuse the oppressive nature of men’s linguistic practices. She then takes a firm stance against such claims by critiquing difference-centered work, showing how such research has led to misrepresentations in the power differentials of gendered linguistic practices, which serves to undermine the seriousness of these practices by dismissing men’s dominant style as natural and inevitable. As a result, Talbot asserts that asymmetrical power dynamics that further relegate women to less powerful positions are perpetuated through the reification of gendered practices as innate.

Part III, *Discourse and Gender: Construction and Performance*, transitions into current poststructuralist conceptions of gender identity. Unlike the preceding two parts, which culminated in theoretical explorations, this section begins with theory, strategically placed to help the reader interpret the complex contemporary ideas addressed within. First, the author introduces Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a means of exploring gender identities. This approach is then applied through an analysis of consumerism, in which Talbot demonstrates how various media outlets serve to reproduce both less powerful gendered identities (i.e., feminine) and more powerful gendered identities (i.e., masculine). Talbot then devotes an entire chapter to the linguistic construction of masculinity, demonstrating how male linguistic practices are ever adapting to feminist assertions in order to maintain power. She then supports her claims through an examination of public speech practices, showing how traditionally male institutionalized speech communities constrain women’s voices, exerting power over them through the continued use of communication styles stereotypically associated with men’s talk, which in turn serves to stack the odds against female claims to power. Talbot then expands her assertions on power differentials through an exploration of sexualities. Drawing

upon a range of diverse research, she first shows how women's less-powerful, more polite linguistic practices may indeed render them victims of hegemonic violence and oppression, as demonstrated through an exploration of rape in which women are partially blamed for violence committed against them for not having used more direct language in protesting sexual advances. She also demonstrates how traditionally marginalized identities (i.e., African American Drag Queens) have the potential to linguistically undermine heteronormativity's claims to hegemonic social power through subversive acts. To conclude this section, Talbot examines the often touched-upon theme of sexism in language, and demonstrates how attention to sexism has resulted in a male backlash against PC linguistic prescriptivism, which has itself resulted in a new discourse type, anti-PC discourse, which poses a new threat to the progress being made in today's poststructuralist movements toward gender equality.

Though the author does not indicate whether the text should be used for undergraduate or graduate students, its logical construction, complemented by systematic and visually appealing sectioning, allows it to be adapted in both domains, but not without modification. As an undergraduate text, more foregrounding of specific concepts might be in order. For example, a better explanation of the concept of CDA, and its underpinnings in the domain of social justice, might aid students' reception and interpretation of the arguments under examination. As a graduate text, the book would need to be supplemented by additional readings that critically address some of the specific themes and issues offered by Talbot, particularly if students are planning to conduct in-depth analyses within the field.

*Language and Gender* also offers some noteworthy benefits. First, it is visually stimulating in that it is divided into short, direct chapters with images/graphs included where necessary, but not in excess. This serves to break up the dense content into a much more digestible format that renders the argumentation accessible to learners. Second, each chapter ends with a *Further Reading* section in which the author offers supplemental readings that expand upon the content of each individual chapter. This is particularly important for those who will teach the subject, as well as graduate students who are conducting research in the field and who might require supplemental information for expanding on the topics and themes discussed within.

Also worthy of mention are the book's drawbacks. First, the final section on PC language does seem to conclude the book, but it is not positioned as a proper conclusion that summarizes the entirety of the presented argumentation. This results in an abrupt closing that fails to truly perform the act of closing. As such, a more extensive conclusion that adequately recaps the contents of the entire text might better help students to conceptualize both the theoretical and practical stances being taken, particularly if the text is to be adopted for an undergraduate readership. For

instructors considering using this text, they should be aware of this fact because it might entail more materials development in order to ensure that student learning outcomes are achieved. Second, the book is one of the higher-priced language and gender textbooks on the market, which could pose problems for the cost-conscious. However, it should also be noted that, given the book's comprehensive nature and general academic accessibility, the extra cost is offset by its overall quality.

All things considered, *Language and Gender 2nd ed.* represents a great choice for serious teachers who want to ensure that their students leave with a broad yet comprehensive understanding of contemporary language and gender research. As such, I would definitely recommend this text for both undergraduate and graduate level courses, as long as the suggested modifications are made to ensure the text is appropriate for the respective target populations.

### **BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH**

Jeremy C. Kelley is a doctoral candidate in applied linguistics at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). His ethnographic research on the spoken discourse of American gay male friendship groups explores the role of subcultural aesthetics within interactive practices, specifically focusing on the articulated constructions of gendered and sexual identities through aesthetic orientations. In addition to teaching various English language courses, he has taught a range of applied linguistics undergraduate courses at UCLA. Currently he teaches within the MA TESOL program at California State University, Los Angeles. His core interests include second language learning and teaching, LGBT studies, social interaction, and the discursive construction of identity within communication.