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Gender, Identity, and “Strong Language” in a Professional Woman’s Talk

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One of the most striking illustrations in Language and Woman's Place (LWP) (1975) of the potential effect of having to choose a “weaker” way of talking over a “stronger” one is this hypothetical example: “Oh, fudge, my hair is on fire” (44). Lakoff suggests that, in general, “the ‘stronger’ expletives are reserved for men, and the ‘weaker’ ones [like fudge] for women” (44). In this essay, we explore this suggestion, examining the links between gender and “strong language” as they are represented in how one woman talks about and simultaneously performs her uses of language in professional life. We pay particular attention to how she represents her uses of profanity, using excerpts from her talk to show that she claims profanity and other aspects of strong language as resources associated with professional power and working-class identification, while at the same time weakening the expletives she refers to and mitigating her performance in other gendered ways.

For Lakoff, people who are required to choose euphemisms like fudge over stronger forms risk having their identity obscured: “‘Women’s language’...submerges a woman’s personal identity, by denying her the means of expressing herself strongly...and encouraging expressions that suggest triviality in subject matter and uncertainty about it” (LWP 42). Although Lakoff does not discuss what she means by “personal identity,” she seems to be drawing here on one of the two most common ways of thinking of identity in the Western intellectual tradition (Johnstone 1996, 2000, 2002). In this approach, identity is seen from the phenomenological perspective of the individual, experiencing the environment from in a uniquely “emplaced” way in a particular body with a particular set of memories and projecting the uniqueness of that experience into discourse via “self-expression” for various communicative purposes. If having an identity, in the eyes of others, requires self-expression, then any restrictions on the range of a speaker’s linguistic resources—including resources associated with “strong language”—could obscure her identity.
If, however, we think of a person’s identity from the outside inward rather than from the inside outward, as a set of social roles and expectations, a different hypothesis about the connection between identity and “strong language” emerges. In this view, identities can be changeable, flexible constructs by drawing on linguistic and other semiotic resources that they associate with social categories defined by roles or persons. A particular set of resources can be utilized to different degrees in different situations and for different purposes. In this view (Bergvall, Bing, & Freed 1996; Bucholtz, Liang & Sutton 1999; Butler 1990; Cameron 1996; Hall & Bucholtz 1995), “doing gender” means casting one’s talk (and other activity) in such a way as to display characteristics that are associated, in the social world at hand, with one or another gender category. There are competing (or overlapping) ways of “doing” femininity (Coates 1997), however, associated with competing “cultural discourses”: the discourse of repression casts women as helpless and identityless, but there are also gendered ways of being professional or being political. Gender norms can also be challenged, resisted, and played with, and gender can sometimes matter and sometimes not. Lakoff sometimes talks this way about identity, too, when she describes men who adopt “women’s language” (for example, academics and upper-class Britons; see LWP 47) and the increasing tendency for women to adopt “men’s language” (44).

Linda Chavez-Thompson is one of nine women who participated in a series of case studies of Texas women who use language in public settings (Johnstone 1995, 1998, 1999, 2002, Johnstone & Bean 1997). The daughter of a Mexican-American sharecropper from west Texas, Chavez-Thompson (born in 1945) became a secretary for the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) in San Antonio in the 1960s and moved up through the ranks. As executive vice president of the AFL-CIO, a federation of labor and trade unions representing over 13 million U.S. workers, she is now one of the few women in the top echelon of the U.S. labor movement. Her struggle for acceptance as a professional and a woman, as well as the particular work she pursues, create a complex orientation to dominant ideas of gender and gendered speech, which she expresses both in her talk and in answers to questions we asked her about how she uses language (cf. Davies, this volume). With our colleague Delma McLeod-Porter, we talked to her in her San Antonio AFSCME headquarters in 1993.

In our interviews, we asked women to talk about the sources of their sense of self and interactional styles. At the same time, we tried to elicit a range of speaking styles, so that the transcripts would be rich both ethnographically and linguistically. Here Chavez-Thompson contrasts Southern femininity with her own style. (Excerpts are transcribed for maximum readability. Italic type indicates emphatic stress; material in boldface is the focus of discussion in the text. Double parentheses surround paralinguistic material.)

Delma McLeod-Porter: Do you ever think of yourself as a Southern woman?
Linda Chavez-Thompson: No. I don’t know why. I know I am, but, no, not really.
McLeod-Porter: Do you have a notion of what that means? Southern woman?
Judith Mattson Bean: Would you know a Southern woman if you met one?
Chavez-Thompson: I’ve got a picture of one: someone who doesn’t cuss (laughter); uh, someone who’s not a union leader (laughter); uh, someone who uh, is in the background and does social events and is interested in in those kinds of things. And, and that certainly doesn’t fit me. So, even though I am a Southern woman, I never, I’ve never really, I’ve never had time for that.

Chavez-Thompson is aware of linguistic expectations for Southern women and of her distance from that model. She thinks of the Southern lady as someone who stays “in the background” and “doesn’t cuss,” but she disassociates herself from that image, implicitly distancing herself from indirectness and genteel politeness and aligning herself with people who use language in strong ways.

Chavez-Thompson repeatedly represented her work as crossing boundaries. In contrast with the conventional “background” role of the Southern woman, she often describes the realm of her work and political activism as “out there.” In the following passage, Chavez-Thompson elaborates on her sense of having crossed gender boundaries to work actively in politics and in the union movement, contrasting this with the enforced passivity she felt as a secretary:

Chavez-Thompson: I always have bumper stickers on my cars for this candidate or that candidate. And I’m always on phone banks. And I’m always out there, you know, passing out hand bills, or supporting this or supporting that. And then, of course, once I got into the, to the, to the union business, you know, once, once I started in on that, ah, I mean, hey! I was having a field day, because it was just my line of of work, because I love to be cut there just, you know, doing this.

And really it started, it started back in 1970, […] and maybe before that I, I wasn’t as active because I was, a, a secretary, for a labor union, and there’s only so much you can do. And then you have to keep your mouth shut and type the letters, and that’s it. But in 1970, we had a tornado in Lubbock, and […] they needed someone who was bilingual; they needed someone that that knew the community, to do tornado relief work for the Texas AFL-CIO. So they said,
"Well, who'll we put in there?" [...] So I said, "I'll do it," you know. Again, I've done some things, uh, in, in retrospect saying, "Why did I even volunteer for this, or why did I raise my hand, or why did I open my mouth?" But I said, I think I can do it. So, I went out there and worked in the community [...] getting relief to people, uh making sure that that insurance companies weren't gouging [...] And half of the stuff, I didn't know, what to do, I just knew that it was wrong, and I went out there to try to get it corrected. And so, once I was out in the field, for those three months, I just, I couldn't go back. I couldn't go back to an 8 to 5 job.

Chavez-Thompson associates being "out there," both in a concrete sense (the disaster-relief job took her out of the office) and in a symbolic one, with "opening your mouth": crossing gendered boundaries requires using stronger language (see also Mendoza-Denton, this volume).

As it is actually displayed in her interaction with us and her reports of interactions with others, however, Chavez-Thompson's orientation to "strong language" is complex. In the ways she refers to and uses profanity, it is clear that gender expectations (that women don't swear) intersect in complicated ways with her sense of her idiosyncratic desires and drives (loving to be "out there," being compelled to open her mouth) and with her rhetorical purposes. In the passage below, she talks about strong language as a strategic resource: "I don't often have to use the strong language that I...am sometimes prone to do." With reference to "cussing," she makes a point of saying that she "know[s] some words."

Johnstone: Now you were saying this morning... that [some men she was working with] were thinking that you just would uh kind of be their "mom," kind of solve their problems.

Chavez-Thompson: But, but, in fact, in fact, in fact, they st- they call me "Mom."

Johnstone: Oh, yeah?

Chavez-Thompson: Yeah. Now they call me "Mom," but every once in a se-in a, in a while, I ask them, "What kind of "mother are you calling me?" ([laughter]), uh, because—((laughing)) Honest! They're bad sometimes! But the question here for them—and, and for me—is that occasionally, a city manager or occasionally a department head, ah, that because I'm a woman they're going to be able to walk all over me, or because I'm a woman I don't know how to take them on. And then once in a while, ah I have to show them, that they're going to deal with me at the same level as they would a man. And uh I don't often have to use the strong language that I, I, I am sometimes prone to do, ah, I know

some words ([(laughter)]), but I and, and, and I am prone to do that.

The reference to profanity (mother is potential shorthand for a familiar curse word) was clear to all of us, as our laughter indicates. Yet Chavez-Thompson's performance of profanity here, both as she represents it to us as having happened for the original audience and in her recounting with us as audience, is indirect, not an instance of cursing but an indirect reference to it. Her use of "some words" to reference profanity is also indirect, a way of pointing at profanity and claiming it as a rhetorical resource without using it or even directly referring to it.

Continuing with the same answer, Chavez-Thompson elaborates by narrating an anecdote involving the firing of workers who protested the firing of a supervisor. In a televised confrontation, she reports having used a (mild) profanity and an abbreviation for another:

I, when I get excited and angry—it wasn't until I heard the tape on radio—because they played that tape, and they had me on TV for about three days in a row—I called one of the board members a "damned liar." In public. I was so angry at the way the people were being treated. I'm, I have gone, to the city manager and told him he was an SOB. I have gone to department heads and told them that their supervisors were SOBs, and I will not, mince the words. Ah, I try not to make them a part of my everyday language, uh but th—, sometimes that has shown: they mess with me, they mess with the union, they mess with the folks ((tapping table when she says "mess")). And they don't do that anymore.

While calling someone a "damned liar" on camera may have been a slip, Chavez-Thompson's conclusion ("they don't do that anymore") indicates that she finds profanity and other forms of strong language effective and necessary in representing her constituents. She recreates (probably in idealized form) the emphatic, assertive speech of the style she is representing via parallelism, repetition, vocal stress, and intonation. But while her forceful linguistic alignment of herself with the union and the working class ("[If] they mess with me, they mess with the union, they mess with the folks") displays rhetorical strength directly, profanity is once again referred to somewhat indirectly: in claiming to illustrate how she doesn't "mince the words," Chavez-Thompson minces son of a bitch to a conventional abbreviation (SOB) that is hardly profanity at all.

As this excerpt demonstrates, Chavez-Thompson claims to have an assertive, confrontational style she employs in union business. While she does not frame it as a masculine style, she does frame it in contrast to the
expected style of a Southern woman, who stays in the background and does not curse. As a public speaker, she acknowledges the need to “be controversial.” Power as a speaker, in her account, can be established when the audience recognizes the speaker’s authenticity of emotion and commitment to a cause. As Lakoff pointed out (LWP 41), profanity serves as a condensed symbol of the expression of emotion in talk, and the right to “cuss” is a sign of the right to express emotion. Chavez-Thompson draws strategically and self-expressively on this association of profanity and emotionality. Her use of profanity in the context of her work in the labor movement, strongly linked to class and masculinity, illustrates Lakoff’s claim that “the decisive factor is less purely gender than power in the real world” (LWP 81).

Yet she is also clearly constrained by the range of available social identities and the linguistic resources associated with them. Being a woman is one of these (and being a man is not). The constraining influence of expectations associated with “women’s language” are also visible in the interview. For one thing, Chavez-Thompson’s style is mitigated in the interview, and probably in the interactions she reports on in the interview, by humor. In the one-hour interview there were thirty instances of laughter, most of them initiated by Chavez-Thompson. Most of her laughter is self-deprecating, mitigating her success or acknowledging (and mitigating) the violation of gender standards for the use of profanity. She also draws on traditional gender identity through physical presentation—willingness to smile and the adopting of “feminine” apparel, jewelry, hairstyle, and other aspects of grooming. And, as her actual performances of profanity in our interview suggest, even her “strong language” gets mitigated in gendered ways that reflect how she is socially categorized by others.

Lakoff’s sketch, in LWP, of the links between gender, identity, and strong language is mirrored in a complex way in Chavez-Thompson’s presentation of her professional identity. The expectation that she not use profanity does not, contra Lakoff, appear to “submerge” Chavez-Thompson’s identity; she does not seem to have to choose whether to be “less than a woman or less than a person” (LWP 41). Rather, this expectation is worked into her self-presentation in two ways. On the one hand, it is a source of rhetorical power and creativity: Chavez-Thompson defines herself against the Southern woman who “doesn’t cuss” and is proud of her ability to use “some words” when necessary. Here, newer theories of identity that stress its flexibility and inventiveness seem to provide the best fit. On the other hand, the expectation that women do not swear is also a source of constraint, making it necessary for Chavez-Thompson to work to show that she is still being feminine even when she curses or talks about cursing. Identity here seems more fixed, more a matter of social attribution and less a matter of choice. That gender is one of the less avoidable aspects of identity is the insight on which LWP is based, and this insight continues to be relevant.