

Review

Jule, Allyson, 2018. *Speaking up: Understanding Language and Gender*. Blue Ridge Summit, PA: Multilingual Matter.

By Mark Naylor, DTh

Language is never neutral, never merely description. We reinforce values by what we say, how we say it and even by what we avoid saying. Gender is a necessary part of language because a fundamental part of our identity as humans is our complementary sexual nature. Gender stability in culture is promoted through roles and arenas of power and influence that are constantly being renegotiated, but do not quickly change, especially if the narrative of change threatens societal values considered essential for a society's survival or thriving. Gendered language is a human way of creating order and stability in society; it maintains and affirms male/female distinctions, but it comes at a cost. As women seek equitable participation in cultural roles traditionally dominated by men, they are at a disadvantage since they face gendered communications that are privileged towards males.

In her impressive and well researched book, *Speaking up: Understanding Language and Gender*, Allyson Jule provides an introduction to the “complex” relationship between language and gender. She summarizes over 50 years of research into how language is used to establish and maintain gender distinctions in western societies. She focuses on the power of language to construct social categories and “norms,” and describes how “frames/discourse” in language define “power relations and gendered roles” (p. 30).

The book introduces feminist concerns with a brief history of western dialogue around sex and gender, including feminist and LGBTQ+ narratives. The author describes the power of “gendered language” to shape perspectives and behavior resulting in “power games,” “gender bias” and “stereotypes of females and males.” She examines how gendered language impacts the major cultural arenas of media, education, the workplace, religion, and relationships with examples of how females are marginalized, disadvantaged and treated unjustly.

Jule's definitions and glossary orient the reader to key terminology. A primary distinction is made between the biological reality of *sexual* differences and *gender* that refers to the “socially constructed” (p. 9) expressions of maleness and femaleness that pervade all cultures, although her concern is primarily modern English based western societies. Culturally defined “gender identity shapes beliefs and attitudes and, language use (*sic*)” (p. x). I would add one caution to this distinction. Although gender is, “socially constructed,” it should not be interpreted as

arbitrary or illegitimate. Such language is created to make sense of, value and navigate reality and so should be read with that intent in mind. Gender as a social construct is necessary to reflect and live out the reality of sexual differences.

Jule describes her approach as “coming from a liberal feminist position” because her primary goal is to “comment on society’s portrayal of gender” (p. 5). No position is neutral, and Jule intentionally exposes the negative communication of language that females “count less” and that “may well reinforce a negative self-image and lead to withdrawal from participation on the part of female students” (p. 60-61), as she notes when examining research in education.

One stated goal of the book is to increase awareness of the ubiquitous use of gendered language. She cites a study of teachers who, despite their claim to treat boys and girls equally, demonstrate routine patterns of favoritism towards boys (p. 57-58). I found this insight impacting as I consider how gendered language I am using could advance or inhibit a belief, behavior, or perspective that I value. Jule encourages us to be more attentive to how our speech patterns shape the environment in gendered ways, particularly in light of how females are often disadvantaged.

Some of the language used by Jule lacked clarity or was based on unexpressed assumptions. The phrase “gender stereotypes” is often used as if it is equivalent to “gender categories” or “gender differences.” However, “stereotype” suggests an inappropriate and harmful reductionism, while “category” recognizes that there are appropriate gender distinctions.

In the glossary “gendered” is defined by a neutral “feminine or masculine ways of being.” However, the negative use of “gendered language” in the text seems to imply that any gendered language is inappropriate. For example, in citing some teachers’ unawareness of gendered speech, Jule states, “With blinkers on their eyes, gendered or outright sexist comments and attitudes persist. As a result, genderedness is constantly a key ingredient for participating in school life” (p. 58) and “...there is a systemic and stubborn perpetuation of genderedness” (p. 61). In discussing a study in which boys “dominate classroom talk” and girls remain proportionally more silent within that “linguistic space,” Jule concludes that, “it is both the quality of language as well as the quantity that seem to reinforce gender divisions” (p. 65). Are “gendered language” and “gender divisions” inappropriate *per se*, or is the issue one of inappropriate and marginalizing language, that is, *biased* gendered language and *damaging* gender divisions? Gendered behavior and language are cultural attempts to categorize, define and express the reality of sexual diversity as a key component of human identity. Since the male/female distinction is an essential part of what it means to be human, biologically, psychologically, spiritually and theologically, some linguistic and social/cultural patterns of distinction would seem to be an essential part of human flourishing.

Jule's research and explanations call us to be sensitive to the negative, unjust narratives that undermine healthy relationships between the sexes. In her conclusion she confesses that she is "troubled by the way our gender marks us and limits our possibilities" (p. 101). This is a valid concern and something which should shape our sensitivity to the gender categories and assumptions we have when we speak. On the other hand, her focus on the negative impact begs the question concerning parameters for positive language that *promote* masculine and feminine dimensions of life so that stable distinctions and healthy affirmations are established. All cultures distinguish males from females in a myriad of ways that are passed on from generation to generation. Such distinctions have positive and negative elements. How can we be attentive to both the positive and the negative elements and learn to speak constructively to empower women?

One could conclude from the book that a good solution to the observed gender imbalance is the eradication of gendered speech and the removal of gendered identity in, at least some, social interactions. For example, there is now much less reference to "woman doctors" as if that is a sub-set of the male norm of "doctor." It is obvious within western cultural environments that such linguistic movements and sensitivities have healthy and empowering benefits for all, not just women. At the same time, are there any current examples or research of gendered language that provides a *positive* affirmation to this essential aspect of our human identity? What is the downside of *not* recognizing a distinction between a masculine and feminine approach to being a doctor, teacher or CEO? Are there examples of gendered language that neither promotes competition between the sexes nor mutes the differences of male/female approaches to life, relationships, professions, and education? Can we have gendered language that does not disempower women and simultaneously affirms the complementary nature of our human sexuality? The roles and expressions of gender are being negotiated in our western societies and culture. Some of that is destabilizing and can diminish human thriving. Some of it is empowering and can increase justice within a stable environment. What can gendered language look like that affirms complementary male/female ways of being without the experience or even expression of competition, oppression or domination?¹

Some feminist rhetoric is couched in competitive language, male versus female. Although Jule states that, "[t]he zero-sum game of gender and achievement (that is, that one gender must win and one must lose) is on the wane" (p. 58), the research Jule cites, and some of her language in the book, reflects this tension. Gendered language promotes differences which exacerbate the imbalance of power and influence and thereby causes injustice and marginalization. This is not how we

¹ This is not to be confused with the complementarian theological position Jule describes in Chapter 6.

have been created to live. Jule has done well to alert us to the power of language that results in injustice for women, which is an important step towards an empowering solution.

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