

Language and Gender As a social phenomenon, as a social grouping, or as an aspect of social identity, Gender has been of considerable interest in sociolinguistics and related areas (e.g. linguistic anthropology and social psychology). The term sex is found in earlier (1960s, 1970s) studies, but gender has been preferred since around the 1980s, reflecting a common distinction made in the social sciences between 'sex' as a biological attribute and 'gender' as a social attribute. The relationship between language and gender has long been of interest within sociolinguistics and related disciplines. Early twentieth-century studies in linguistic anthropology looked at differences between women's and men's speech across a range of languages, in many cases identifying distinct female and male language forms (although at this point language and gender did not exist as a distinct research area). Gender has also been a social variable in studies of language variation carried out since the 1960s, a frequent finding in this case being that, among speakers from similar social class backgrounds, women tend to use more standard or prestige language features and men more vernacular language features. There has been an interest, within interactional sociolinguistics, in female and male interactional styles. Some studies have suggested that women tend to use more supportive or co-operative styles and men more competitive styles, leading to male dominance of mixed-gender talk. Feminist researchers, in particular, have also been interested in sexism, or sexist bias, in language. Studies that focus simply on gender differences have been criticised by feminist researchers for emphasising difference (rather than similarity); seeing male speech as the norm and female speech as deviant; providing inadequate and often stereotypical interpretations of women's language; and ignoring differences in power between female and male speakers. Feminism has had diverse and changing relationships to (socio)linguistic research and theory. The terms feminist linguistics or feminist sociolinguistics may be used for research that takes an explicitly feminist approach. More recently (and particularly in studies carried out since the late 1980s and 1990s) gender has been reconceptualised to a significant extent. It is seen as a less 'fixed' and unitary phenomenon than hitherto, with studies emphasising, or at least acknowledging, considerable diversity among female and male speakers, as well as the importance of context in determining how people use language. Within this approach, gender is also seen less as an attribute that affects language use and more as something that is performed (or negotiated and perhaps contested) in interactions. Sexism in language is sometimes found to refer to discriminatory language practices, for example, trivialising or demeaning references to women; or to sexist bias in the language system, for example, generic masculine forms, lexical gaps (an absence of words referring to women's experiences), negative or sexual associations in words referring to women, historical pejoration in words referring to women. Studies of linguistic sexism have been motivated by a concern that inequalities in language reflect and contribute to the reproduction of broader social inequalities. These concerns have also led to feminist interventions designed to challenge sexism, ranging from guidelines to encourage non-sexist or anti-sexist language (e.g. the avoidance of 'generic he') to more radical attempts to subvert sexist practices. It has been argued that sexism results from male control of language, a contention that is disputed because it depends upon a homogeneous model of the language system; and it neglects actual language practices, including the role of female speakers.