

Feminism and Humanism – Issues and Concerns

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Abstract

Language is the basic means of communication. The paper focuses on gender differences in talk to discourse and the social/textual/linguistic construction of gender. Several studies identified sex-exclusive linguistic features that are features used only by women or only by men, within a given speech community. Sex-exclusive' uses of language occur rarely and contrast with the common sex-preferential uses. These refer to differential tendencies in which women and men tend to talk differently from each other in a given context. Sex-preferential' phonetic, intonation, lexical, syntactic and wider interactional tendencies have been identified.

Different phases of Feminism can be seen as the driving force behind the male dominance and cultural difference approaches to the study of gender and talk. Feminism in general and feminist theory in particular also drove the subsequent critique of dominance and difference as a single approach. The word humanism has been freely applied to a variety of beliefs, methods, and philosophies that place central emphasis on what it means to be human. Frequently, the term is used with reference to a system of education and mode of inquiry that developed in northern Italy during the 14th century and later spread through Europe and England. Alternately known as renaissance humanism, this program was so broadly and profoundly influential that it is one of the chief reasons why the Renaissance is viewed as a distinct historical period. The humanistic approach has its roots in phenomenological and existentialist thought. Eastern philosophy and psychology also play a central role in humanistic psychology, as well as Judeo-Christian philosophies of personalism, as each of these approaches shares similar concerns about the nature of human existence and consciousness. It is also sometimes understood within the context of the three different forces of psychology: behaviourism, psychoanalysis and humanism. Behaviorism grew out of Ivan Pavlov's work with the conditioned reflex and laid the foundations for academic psychology in the United States associated with the names of John B. Watson and B.F. Skinner. This school was later called the science of behavior. Abraham Maslow later gave behaviourism the name "the second force". The first force came out of Freud's research of psychoanalysis, and the psychologies of Alfred Adler, Erik Erikson, Carl Jung, Erich Fromm, Karen Horney, Otto Rank, Melanie Klein, Harry Stack Sullivan, and others. These theorists and practitioners, although basing their observations on extensive clinical data, primarily focused on the depth or unconscious aspects of human existence.

Introduction

Patriarchy literally means rule of the father in a male-dominated family. It is a social and ideological construct which considers men (who are the patriarchs) as superior to women. Sylvia Walby in *Theorising Patriarchy* calls it a system of social structures and practices, in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women (Walby 1990). Patriarchy is based on a system of power relations which are hierarchical and unequal where men control women's production, reproduction and sexuality. It imposes masculinity and femininity character stereotypes in society which strengthen the iniquitous power relations between men and women. While subordination of women may differ in terms of its nature, certain characteristics such as control over women's sexuality and her reproductive

power cuts across class, caste, ethnicity, religions and regions and is common to all patriarchies. This control has developed historically and is institutionalized and legitimized by several ideologies, social practices and institutions such as family, religion, caste, education, media, law, state and society. Thus feminist historiography made radical breakthroughs in redefining gender and patriarchies in the context of hierarchies of caste, class, community and ethnicity. Therefore, it is pertinent to underline several perspectives of feminism for a comprehensive understanding of patriarchy in terms of its origin, characteristics, nature, structures and persistence.

The Idea of Feminism

Feminism is an awareness of patriarchal control, exploitation and oppression at the material and ideological levels of women's labour, fertility and sexuality, in the family, at the place of work and in society in general, and conscious action by women and men to transform the present situation (Bhasin and Khan, 1999). The history of this struggle is often described as in the context of waves. The following is a very brief sense of the key elements in these waves of activism –

- a. **First Wave Feminists** focused their struggles primarily on gaining legal rights such as the right to vote (women's suffrage) and property rights. The first known publications by women that referred to a demand for equality between men and women were published in the 15th century, but what is referred to as first wave feminism really began in earnest in the late 1800's and early 1900's. This wave of feminism ended when women made some legal gains in North America (rights to have a say with regards to their children, the right to own property and inherit property) and when some women won the right to vote between 1917 and 1920. In Canada, Aboriginal women living on reserves would not win the right to vote until 1960.
- b. **Second Wave Feminists** focused on a broad range of issues in the 1960's, 70's and early 80's including discrimination in workplaces and in broader society. Some of the key struggles were around affirmative action, pay equity, rape, domestic violence, pornography and sexism in the media, and reproductive choice. The fight for reproductive choice included a fight to have information about, and access to, birth control (selling or promoting birth control was illegal in Canada until 1969) as well as the struggle to decriminalize abortion. In 1988 the Supreme Court of Canada struck down Canada's abortion law noting that it fundamentally violated a women's right to 'liberty and personal autonomy' as guaranteed in Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms.
- c. **Third Wave Feminism** emerged in the 1990's in part as a response to the backlash from the gains 2nd wave feminists had made in the 1970's and 80's. While women made significant gains during the second wave of feminism, equality was still a distant dream. Race and Class became important issues for reflection and action within the movement – a movement that had been dominated by white, mostly middle-class, women. This wave of feminism is not galvanized around one or two key struggles, such as the right to vote or reproductive choice, as was the case in both the 1st and 2nd wave.

Feministic Philosophy of Language

Much of feminist philosophy of language so far can be described as critical—critical either of language itself or of philosophy of language and calling for change on the basis of these criticisms. Those making these criticisms suggest that the changes are needed for the sake of feminist goals — either to better allow for feminist work to be done or, more frequently, to bring an end to certain key ways that women are disadvantaged. In this entry, I examine these criticisms.

Language Male Bias

Some feminists have argued that philosophy of language is problematic from a feminist point of view. One sort of criticism is that philosophy of language, like English, displays a male bias. Another is simply that philosophy of language is ill-equipped to further feminist aims. Those making these criticisms do not suggest that philosophy of language be abandoned, but rather that it should be reformed — purged of male bias and turned into a discipline that can help in the attainment of feminist ends.

Existentialism

Existentialism owes its name to its emphasis on existence. For all the thinkers mentioned above, regardless of their differences, existence indicates the special way in which human beings are in the world, in contrast with other beings. For the existentialists, the human being is more than what it is: not only does the human being know *that* it is but, on the basis of this fundamental knowledge, this being can choose how it will use its own being, and thus how it will relate to the world.

Phenomenology and Ontology

For the 20th century existentialists, a decisive philosophical inspiration was phenomenology, the philosophical method devised by the German philosopher, Edmund Husserl, during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and which his famous student, Martin Heidegger, developed into a combination of existential analysis and deep ontology. Artistic communication also has a certain capacity to transcend the ages and cut across languages. In existentialist aesthetics, artistic activity and its products have external aims: to reveal the world to others, both in a metaphysical and political sense. As noted, this aesthetic theory therefore conflicts with the notion that the artwork is an end in itself, or that style and form are self-justified. Furthermore, the existentialist definitions of meaning as negativity, and of expression as ‘coherent distortion’, mean that stylistic achievement (the ability to let new sense be revealed) relies as much on the choice of words and syntax as on the ‘silences’ and omissions that define an expressive gesture Poetry.

Poetry and Existentialists

With their emphasis on action in situations, the existentialists have an uneasy relationship to poetry. Only Camus, following the example of Nietzsche, wrote a number of poems (in his youth writings and his notebooks, Camus 1933, 1935–1941). In many passages in Camus, poetry has a positive connotation. This connotation, however, refers to a specific quality of language, viz., the use of vivid images that manage to convey some truth about the human condition, rather than to the merits of poetry as a specific literary form. The existentialists made, however, some notable exceptions.

Francis Ponge

Camus, for example, wrote a vibrant review of the work of René Char (Camus 1935–1936), and saw in the work of Francis Ponge an eminent illustration of the task of literature in the absurd situation of post-war France (Camus 1943). Sartre also dedicated a long and largely positive review to the work of Francis Ponge, seeing in it a kind of profane phenomenology (Sartre 1944 in 1947a). This positive assessment might well have rested on a misunderstanding, since Ponge seemed to have had the exact opposite view of language as Sartre and regarded poetry precisely as the form that would best be able to “name the world” and make human freedom face its responsibility.

Metaphysical Aspects of Existentialist Aesthetics

The metaphysical aspects of existentialist aesthetics imply a certain theory of the audience. An essential ambiguity characterises also the experience of the audience. On the one hand, the genuine artist creates a new virtual world that expresses a coherent, idiosyncratic perspective on the world

shared by all. When the audience meets the artwork successfully, the spectators suddenly change their own mode of perception and have to adopt a new perspective. To use a linguistic metaphor, the tired, instituted language of everyday communication (spoken or sedimented language) is rejuvenated by a speaking language, a true expression that imposes itself on the audience (be it the reader or the spectator).

Existential Self and Feminist Philosophy

The existential self has long been salient in feminist philosophy, for it is pivotal to questions about personhood, identity, the body, and agency that feminism must address. Since women have been cast as lesser forms of the masculine individual, the paradigm of the self that has gained ascendancy in U.S. popular culture and in Western philosophy is derived from the experience of the predominantly white and heterosexual, mostly economically advantaged men who have wielded social, economic, and political power and who have dominated the arts, literature, the media, and scholarship. Whether the self is identified with pure abstract reason or with the instrumental rationality of the marketplace, though, these conceptions of the self isolate the individual from personal relationships and larger social forces. For the Kantian ethical subject, emotional bonds and social conventions imperil objectivity and undermine commitment to duty. But their decontextualized individualism and their privileging of reason over other capacities trouble many feminist philosophers.

Feminist critics point out, furthermore, that this misogynist heritage cannot be remedied simply by condemning these traditional constraints and advocating equal rights for women, for these conceptions of the self are themselves gendered. In western culture, the mind and reason are coded masculine, whereas the body and emotion are coded feminine (Lloyd 1992).

To identify the self with the rational mind is, then, to masculinize the self. If selfhood is not impossible for women, it is only because they resemble men in certain essential respects—they are not altogether devoid of rational will. Yet, feminine selves are necessarily deficient, for they only mimic and approximate the masculine ideal.

Humanist Approach

The humanistic approach has its roots in phenomenological and existentialist thought Eastern philosophy and psychology also play a central role in humanistic psychology, as well as Judao-Christian philosophies of personalism, as each of these shares similar concerns about the nature of human existence and consciousness. It is also sometimes understood within the context of the three different forces of psychology: behaviourism, psychoanalysis and humanism. Feminist perspectives also carry messages of empowerment that challenge the encircling of knowledge claims by those who occupy privileged positions. Feminist thinking, and practice require taking steps from the margins to the center while eliminating boundaries that privilege dominant forms of knowledge building, boundaries that mark who can be a knower and what can be known. For Virginia Woolf, it is the demarcation between the turf and the path; for Simone de Beauvoir, it is the line between the inessential and the essential; and for Dorothy Smith, it is the path that encircles dominant knowledge, where women's lived experiences lie outside its circumference or huddled at the margins.

Conclusion

Feminism is an outgrowth of, closely allied with, and supportive of humanism. That is, feminism is an application of the precepts of humanism specifically to women as a class of people. Although feminism is generally consistent with humanism, feminism actually gives priority to females rather than to males. Whereas in humanism mankind is believed to be the measure of all things, in feminism woman is believed to be the measure of all things. Whereas in humanism man makes himself

God, in feminism woman makes herself God. Whereas in humanism mankind rejects the authority of God and Christ, in feminism woman rejects also the authority of man. Feminism is the belief that women have equal rights with men in all things. It is also the belief that natural differences do not exist in either the authority or in the sexual roles of men and women. Feminism is therefore primarily concerned with equality, authority, and gender roles. Because feminism is basically a humanistic philosophy and world view, it must be understood in terms of humanistic ideals. Much Study hasn't been attempted towards the response of feminism towards the political aspects of Language. Therefore, studies should be conducted in this aspect.

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