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“Women’s Studies”: A Note on the Perils of Markedness

Judith Shapiro

Much debate about women’s studies has revolved around whether the study of women should be a separate academic pursuit or should be carried on within existing disciplines, transforming each, so that a greater recognition of women’s roles and achievements comes to characterize scholarship in general. A related issue is whether it is desirable or even possible to study women as a self-contained group or category, or whether the genders must be studied in relation to one another.

It is not my purpose to review the various theoretical, strategic, and political arguments that have been brought to bear on the question of women’s studies. Rather, I suggest that the issue can be brought into sharper focus if we view it in terms of what linguists and semioticians refer to as “markedness.” My point here is that by defining our area of inquiry as the study of women rather than the study of gender, we perpetuate the very kind of asymmetry between gender categories that has been cause for concern among feminists.

An earlier version of the argument I am presenting here was included in a lecture on “Anthropology and the Study of Gender” given at Vanderbilt University on November 14, 1980, as part of a series entitled “Studying Women: The Impact on the Social Sciences and Humanities.” A version of this lecture will be published in the Vanderbilt University publication *Soundings*. I am grateful to Michael Silverstein for his editorial suggestions and for the Oneida reference in n. 3 below. He is not responsible for whatever idiosyncracies there may be in my discussion of markedness.

The term “markedness,” as used by linguists, designates a hierarchical relationship between members of a pair of opposing categories. The categories appear as complementary opposites within a larger class, yet one functions to subsume the other at a higher level of contrast.¹ The more inclusive member of an opposing pair of categories is referred to as the “unmarked” member; the other, more restricted in its meaning, is the “marked” member of the pair.

This type of markedness is characteristic of gender categories: the terms “man” and “woman” serve to contrast the two sexes within the wider class of human beings; at the same time the term “man” can be used to refer to the wider class as a whole. This relationship also holds between male and female pronouns, the former being unmarked and the latter marked. The use of the pronoun “his” in “Everyone will please hand in his paper on time” is an appropriate singular possessive form not only when the subject is male but also when the subject is either male or female. The pronoun “her” in “Everyone will please hand in her paper on time” is, however, a relatively marked form that restricts the class of appropriate subjects as necessarily female.

Feminist linguists have argued with more conservative grammarians about whether the generic use of masculine forms is indicative of sexual inequality or is a mere convention devoid of semantic discrimination.² Research on this question indicates that the so-called unmarked forms in fact connote masculinity to varying degrees and in varying contexts, even when ostensibly used in a generic sense. They set up an identification between general norms and maleness and operate to make women feel excluded. The argument that gender marking in language is semantically motivated rather than purely formal and arbitrary is also supported by cross-linguistic investigation, which reveals a regular association between masculine and generic forms. That is, in those languages where forms referring to one gender can also refer to both, the masculine, rather than the feminine, serves as the unmarked form.³ Feminists should thus take note that the usages they criticize are by no

1. Discussions of markedness should be found in any good standard reference work in linguistics or semiotics; see, e.g., John Lyons, *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968).

2. See, e.g., the general discussions and research findings presented by Dale Spender, *Man Made Language* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), pp. 144–62; and by Wendy Martyna, “Beyond the ‘He/Man’ Approach: The Case for Nonsexist Language,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5, no. 3 (1980): 482–93.

3. The only exceptions I am aware of are found in Tunica, an extinct North American Indian language, in which the female form is used as an unmarked plural in some grammatical contexts (see Mary R. Haas, “Tunica,” in *Handbook of American Indian Languages*, ed. F. Boas [New York: J. J. Augustin, (1941?)], vol. 4); and perhaps such Iroquoian languages as Oneida (see Floyd Lounsbury, *Oneida Verb Morphology*, Yale University Publications in Anthropology, no. 48 [New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1953]).

means peculiar to English and the more familiar European languages. If the point is not merely to understand gender markedness but to change it, we must first recognize how deeply rooted and pervasive this pattern is.⁴

The concept of markedness has other uses relevant to the question of gender asymmetry in language. Though discussing these uses in detail is beyond the scope of this paper, I will briefly note the common and expectable pattern of ordering gender terms in pairs with the masculine term first: "man and woman," "male and female," "his and hers." Linguists characterize these normal constructions as unmarked forms—a marked form would constitute a departure from ordinary patterns and would jolt the addressee or reader with unanticipated information. Thus, the phrase "female and male" is marked, relatively unexpected. Feminists have made a point of using it in order to expose a long unquestioned habit and also to reverse priorities. Another tactic is to vary the order of the terms randomly within a single piece of writing. Unmarked pronouns may be dealt with by alternating "she" and "her" with "he" and "him."⁵

The relatively unmarked quality of maleness (and the tendency to equate masculinity with humanity in general) has been documented in the field of psychology. In an often-cited study carried out some years ago, Inge Broverman and her associates found that when sex was not specified profiles of the mentally healthy person drawn up by psychologists corresponded to profiles of the healthy man. Profiles by psychologists of the healthy or normal woman were different; they not only diverged from the general standard but included features that indicated relatively poor mental health in a context not marked for gender.⁶

Feminists in different fields have pointed out ways in which their disciplines treat male activities and experience as representing humanity in general. An example from my own field, cultural anthropology, is an account of a northern Australian aboriginal society by two male anthropologists who relied on male informants and presented analyses of such institutions as marriage entirely from a male point of view. Subsequently the same society was studied by a woman anthropologist who analyzed the marriage system from the women's point of view. Her book

4. Interestingly enough, language reverses the markedness relations of biology: A human embryo will tend to develop into a female unless additional genetic information is supplied. Woman, we may say, is born unmarked but is everywhere in the chains of markedness.

5. An example of this solution can be found in Michael Agar, *The Professional Stranger: An Informal Introduction to Ethnography* (New York: Academic Press, 1980). This approach, while interesting, seems less than successful since it calls too much attention to markedness and is an unlikely pattern of language use.

6. Inge K. Broverman et al., "Sex Role Stereotypes and Clinical Judgments of Mental Health," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, vol. 34 (February 1970).

was titled *Tiwi Wives*. The male-oriented ethnography, on the other hand, was called simply *The Tiwi of North Australia*.⁷

Feminism has helped us see how far the presumably unmarked academic disciplines are de facto men's studies programs. One way of responding to this situation is to carry out research and teaching that focus exclusively on women. This corrective response brings those who have been in darkness into the light and is more than merely additive in that scholars in women's studies see their work as part of a basic rethinking of relations between the sexes. Most of the actual work, however, has been focused on women alone. This may appear a necessary short-term tactic, more urgent in some fields than in others. In the long run, though, it is self-defeating, for it perpetuates the same structure of gender markedness that feminists have been at pains to eradicate. On one side we have women's studies, on the other side the traditional fields of study—male-oriented to varying degrees but still ostensibly unmarked. Take again the example of anthropology: the goal must be not only to have books like *Tiwi Wives* but to make it impossible for a book that should be called *Tiwi Men* to be accepted as the ethnography of a whole people.

Women's studies fall too easily into the convenient mold that makes women a special problem requiring special attention. Men are more or less taken for granted or, at least, not focused on in a comparably explicit way. But men should not be seen as any less a problem than women. It should be a contribution of feminism to point out that men have been too little studied *as men*—that is, with a particular focus on gender, free of the uncritical assumption that what men do is more interesting or important than what women do. Why should women not be major contributors to such study? After all, the description, examination, and analysis of women has long been men's business. This asymmetrical appropriative pattern will not change as long as women scholars devote their attention exclusively to the study of women.

Note that our subject is not women (or men) as sets of individuals but, rather, gender as an aspect of an individual's social and personal being. We are dealing with analytic categories, not with sets of individual objects. To speak of "studying women" obscures this distinction and has the unfortunate effect of reducing identity to gender, a reduction that feminism has itself struggled to overcome.

The problem to be addressed in the various disciplines is not only that women have been relatively ignored (though indeed they have been) but that gender has not been adequately addressed as a social fact. We are beginning to understand that sex, which has generally been viewed in biological terms and relegated to the infrasocial domain, must

7. Jane Goodale, *Tiwi Wives* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1971); and C. W. M. Hart and Arnold R. Pilling, *The Tiwi of North Australia* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1960).

be viewed from the perspectives of economics, politics, religion, philosophy, art. In brief, sex differences take on meaning and function within wider cultural systems and play an important role in the structure and maintenance of those systems.

As a final point, consider the name of this journal: *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. In line with the foregoing remarks, the subtitle may someday be changed to something like *Journal of Gender Studies*. *Signs* can realize more clearly the semiotic implications of the title itself insofar as the journal defines its purpose as the investigation of the symbolic construction of gender—of the way societies, taking physical differences between female and male as the point of departure, construct cultural categories the specific features of which cannot be inferred in any natural or logical manner from the biology of sex.

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Comment on Women's Studies in France

Hélène Cixous

In July 1980 the Women's Studies Program at the University of Paris VIII—the only official women's studies program in France—was suppressed by the minister of the universities, Mme. Saunier-Séité. This action was taken despite the fact that the Women's Studies Program had received a favorable recommendation from the Centre national d'enseignement supérieur et de recherche, which evaluates and coordinates research and higher education.

First of all, this was an abusive, arbitrary, and repressive move. Moreover, the suppression of the Women's Studies Program was part of the overall liquidation of everything that is considered to be new and modern in the field of thought and in the field of humanities in France, and therefore dangerous to the French political regime.

But the government went further yet: In a state address about the universities in September 1980, the prime minister, M. Barre, took it upon himself to attack not only the Women's Studies Program but also the very person who was responsible for the program and who animated it. The attack—formulated in shamefully sexist, discriminatory, and defamatory words¹—was even more significant because it inaugurated simultaneously the school year, the Year of Research, and the electoral

1. Literally: "Un professeur d'anglais du sexe féminin prétend encadrer trois étudiants sur des problèmes généraux de sexualité." Translated: "A professor of English of the female sex claims to enlist three students [masculine in the French!] on general problems of sexuality."