Communities of practice:

Where language, gender, and power all live[1]

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1. Introduction: Too much abstraction spoils the broth.

Studies of language and gender in the past twenty years have looked at many different dimensions of language use and have offered a rich variety of hypotheses about the interaction between gender and language and especially about the connection of power to that interaction. On the one hand, language has been seen as supporting male dominance; on the other, it has been seen as a resource for women resisting oppression or pursuing their own projects and interests. We have all learned a lot by thinking about such proposals, most of which have been supported by interesting and often illuminating observations. But their explanatory force has been weakened by the absence of a coherent theoretical framework within which to refine and further explore them as part of an ongoing research community.

The problem is not an absence of generalizations. Our diagnosis is that gender and language studies suffer from the same problem confronting sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics more generally: too much abstraction. Abstracting gender and language from the social practices that produce their particular forms in given communities often obscures and sometimes distorts the ways they connect and how those connections are implicated in power relations, in social conflict, in

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[1]Many of the ideas expressed in this paper have appearedalso in
Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet, (1992) Think practically
and look locally:Language and gender as community-based practice.
Annual Review of Anthropology. Palo Alto: Annual Reviews.

the production and reproduction of values and plans. Too much abstraction is often symptomatic of too little theorizing: abstraction should not substitute for theorizing but be informed by and responsive to it. Theoretical insight into how language and gender interact requires a close look at social practices in which they are jointly produced. We have heard during this conference about work headed in exactly this direction. What we want to do in this talk is sketch the main outlines of a theoretical perspective on language, gender, and power that can help us continue to make progress toward a productive community of language-gender scholars who hold themselves accountable both to one another's work and to relevant developments in linguistics, social theory, and gender studies.

Why is abstraction so tempting and yet so dangerous? It is tempting because at some level and in some form it is irresistible, an inevitable part of theoretical inquiry. People and their activities, including their use of language, are never viewed in completely "concrete" or particularistic terms. With no access to abstract constructs like linguistic systems and social categories and relations like class and race and gender, we could not hope to engage in any kind of illuminating investigation into how and why language and gender interact. The danger, however, is that the real force and import of their interaction is erased when we abstract each uncritically from the social practices in which they are jointly produced and in which they intermingle with other symbolic and social phenomena. In particular, if we view language and gender as self-contained and independent phenomena, we miss the social and cognitive significance of interactions between them. Abstraction that severs the concrete links between language and gender in the social practices of communities kills the power that resides in and derives from those links.

The notions of "women" and "men", for example, are typically just taken for granted in sociolinguistics. Suppose we were to take all the characterizations of gender that have been advanced to explain putatively gender-differentiated linguistic behavior. Women's language has been said to reflect their (our) conservatism, prestige consciousness, upward mobility, insecurity, deference, nurturance, emotional expressivity, connectedness, sensitivity to others, solidarity. And men's language is heard as evincing their toughness, lack of affect, competitiveness, independence, competence, hierarchy, control. Linguists are not, of course, inventing such accounts of gender identities and gender relations out of whole cloth. Not only commonplace stereotypes but also social scientific studies offer support for the kinds of characterizations linguists offer in explanation of language use. But the social science literature must be approached critically: the observations on which such claims about women and men are based have been made at different times and in different circumstances with different populations from those whose linguistic behavior they are being used to explain.

The problem is too much or at least too crude abstraction. Gender is abstracted whole from other aspects of social identity, the linguistic system is abstracted from linguistic practice, language is abstracted from social action, interactions and events are abstracted from community and personal history, difference and

dominance are each abstracted from wider social practice, and both linguistic and social behavior are abstracted from the communities in which they occur. When we recombine all these abstractions, we really do not know what we have. Certainly we don't seem to find real women and men as sums of the characteristics attributed to them.

What we propose is not to ignore such abstract characterizations of gender identities and relations but to take responsibility for connecting each such abstraction to a wide spectrum of social and linguistic practice in order to examine the specificities of its concrete realization in some actual communities. This can only happen if we collectively develop a community of analytic practice that holds itself responsible for language and gender writ large.

This means that we are responsible to linguistic theory and research beyond the areas of our particular specializations. Furthermore, we cannot excuse our inattention to social theory and gender studies on the grounds that we are "just linguists", not if we hope to make responsible claims about language and gender interactions. And perhaps the most important implication is that we cannot abandon social and political responsibility for how our work is understood and used, especially given what we know about sexism and racism and elitism and heterosexism in so many of the communities where our research might be disseminated.

Our major aim is to encourage a view of the interaction of gender and language that roots each in the everyday social practices of particular local communities and sees them as jointly constructed in those practices: our slogan, "think practically and look locally." To think practically and look locally is to abandon several assumptions common in gender and language studies: that gender works independently of other aspects of social identity and relations, that it "means" the same across communities, and that the linguistic manifestations of that meaning are also the same across communities. Such assumptions can be maintained only when the language-gender partnership is prematurely dissolved by abstraction of one or both partners.

2. Language, Power, and Gender Viewed Locally

We've heard many examples during this conference of what it means to view language, power, and gender in local terms. Becoming language-users and becoming gendered members of local communities both involve participating with other members in a variety of practices that often constitute linguistic, gender, and other social identities and relations at one and the same time. Many such activities have been described in the papers we've just heard presented: instigating or taking the plaintiff or defendant role in a he-said-she-said dispute, providing sexy talk on the 900 lines, participating in "Father Knows Best" dinnertime dramas, taking a police report from a bleeding woman, joining in a debate about rape and race and responsibility on the walls of a bathroom stall, smiling at thes boss's "you lazy bitch," silencing a planned anecdote during a

conference paper when you note its (male) protagonist in the audience, criticizing or defending a colleague's bestseller. Or my reminding you all in this impersonal way of the impassioned arguments we heard yesterday about Deborah Tannen's book and Alice Freed's critique of it.

In the course of engaging with others in such activity, people collaboratively construct a sense of themselves and of others as certain kinds of persons, as members of various communities with various forms of membership, authority, and privilege in those communities. In all of these, language interacts with other symbolic systems - dress, body adornment, ways of moving, gaze, touch, handwriting style, locales for hanging out, and so on. And the selves constructed are not simply (or even primarily) gendered selves: they are unemployed, Asian-American, lesbian, college-educated, post-menopausal selves in a variety of relations to other people. Language is never encountered without other symbol systems, and gender is always joined with real people's complex forms of participation in the communities to which they belong (or have belonged or expect to join).

Individuals may experience the language-gender interface differently in the different communites in which they participate at a given time or at different stages of their lives. Using "Mrs. Jones" may be important for avoiding the condescension of "Mary" when a professionally employed woman addresses the woman who cleans her house; for that professional woman, receiving address as "Mrs. Smith" (particularly from her colleagues) may seem to emphasize her subordination to a husband and to deny her individual identity as Joan Doe, who (as she sees it) simply happens to be married to John Smith. On the other hand, acquiring a new name of "Mrs. John Smith" upon marriage may have functioned thirty years ago for the young Joan Doe as a mark of her achieving fully adult status as a married woman (a possibility denied her lesbian sister rejecting marriage). And the woman who receives "Mary" with a tolerant smile from the six-year-old daughter of her employer may insist in her local residential community on "Mrs. Jones" from her own daughter's friends.

Exploring any aspect of the language-gender interface requires that we address the complexities of its construction within and across different communites: what "Mrs. Jones" means, the social work use of that title does, can only be understood by considering its place in the practices of local communities (and in the connections among those communities). Analysts not only jump too readily from local observations to global claims: they/we also too often ignore the multiple uses of particular linguistic resources in the practices of a given community. We can see the confusion that results by trying to put together some of the general claims about the social and psychological underpinnings of language use common in the variation literature with claims about gender such as those common in interaction studies.

A methodological cornerstone of variation studies is the notion that all speakers step up the use of vernacular variants when they are at their most emotional. It is also generally accepted that vernacular variants function to establish solidarity. If women are more emotional than men or more interested in promoting

solidarity, as so many interactionists have claimed, the variationists might be expected to predict that vernacular variants typify women's rather than men's language. But the general claim in variation studies has been that men's language exemplifies the vernacular whereas women's aspires toward standard or prestige variants. The explanation offered is not men's emotionality or greater interest in social connections but women's supposed prestige-consciousness and upward mobility (often accompanied by claims of women's greater conservatism). Even in situations where some vernacular variant is more frequent in women's than men's speech, analysts do not consider how their explanations relate to their own claims about the social meanings of vernaculars. There are many other tensions and potential contradictions when we try to put together all the different things said about language, gender, and power. The standard or prestige variants are associated with the speech of those who have economic and political power, the social elite; at the same time, standard speech is associated with women and "prissiness," and the vernacular is heard as tough and "macho". Once we take seriously the connections among gender characterizations and the various aspects of language we study and try to develop a coherent picture, it quickly becomes apparent that the generalizations to be found cannot be integrated as is with one another. This suggests serious difficulties in adopting as our primary goal the search for generalizations about "women" and "men" as groups with some kind of global sociolinguistic unity that transcends social practices in local communities.

Statements like "women emphasize connection in their talk whereas men seek status" may have some statistical support within a particular community. Statistics being what they are, there is, of course, no guarantee that the actual women and men whose behavior supports one such generalization will overlap very much with those supporting another, say that women prefer standard and men vernacular variants in everyday talk with their peers--and this is true even if our statistics come from a single community. The more serious problem, however, is that such generalizations are seldom understood as simple reports of statistics.

"Most" American women are under 5 feet 9 inches tall and "most" American men are over 5 feet 6 inches tall, but it would sound odd indeed to report these statistical facts by saying "women are under 5 feet 9 inches tall" or "men are over 5 feet 6 inches tall" without some explicit indicator of generalization like "most". Although unmodified claims about "women" and "men" do allow for exceptions, such claims, which we have certainly made ourselves, often seem to imply that individuals who don't satisfy the generalization are indeed exceptional "as women" or "as men", deviants from some "normative" model (perhaps deviants to admire but nonetheless outsiders in some sense). This is especially true when women and men are being characterized as "different" from one another on some particular dimension. But if gender resides in difference, what is the status of the tremendous variability we see in actual behavior within sex categories? Too often dismissed as "noise" in a basically dichotomous gender system, differences among men and among women are, in our view, themselves important aspects of gender. Tomboys and goody-goodies, homemakers and career women, body builders and fashion models, secretaries and executives, basketball coaches and

French teachers, professors and students, grandmothers and mothers and daughters - these are all categories of girls and women whose mutual differences are part of their construction of themselves and each other as gendered beings. When femaleness and maleness are differentiated from one another in terms of such attributes as power, ambition, physical coordination, rebelliousness, caring, or docility, the role of these attributes in creating and texturing important differences among very female identities and very male identities becomes invisible.

The point here is not that statistical generalizations about the females and the males in a particular community are automatically suspect. But to stop with such generalizations or to see finding such "differences" as the major goal of investigations of gender and language is problematic. Correlations simply point us toward areas where further investigation might shed light on the linguistic and other practices that enter into gender dynamics in a community. An emphasis on difference as constitutive of gender draws attention away from a more serious investigation of the relations among language, gender, and other components of social identity: it ignores the ways difference (or beliefs therein) fucntion in constructing dominance relations. Gender can be thought of as a sex-based way of experiencing other social attributes like class, ethnicity, or age (and also less obviously social qualities like ambition, athleticism, and musicality). To examine gender independently as if it were just "added on" to such other aspects of identity is to miss its significance and force. Certainly to interpret broad sex patterns in language use without considering other aspects of social identity and relations is to paint with one eye closed. Speakers are not assembled out of separate independent modules: part European American, part female, part middle-aged, part feminist, part intellectual. Abstracting gender away from other aspects of social identity also leads to premature generalization even about "normative" conceptions of femaleness and maleness. While most research focused on sex difference is not theoretically committed to a "universalizing" conception of women or of men, such research has tended to take gender identity as given at least in broad strokes at a relatively global level.

Too much abstraction and too ready generalization are encouraged by a limited view of theorizing as aimed at accounts of gender difference that apply globally to women and men. In the interests of abstraction and global generalization, Bill Labov has argued that ethnographic studies of language and society must answer to the results of survey studies - that generalized correlations reflect a kind of objective picture that must serve as the measure of any locally grounded studies.   Others cite the objectivity of controlled experimental studies.   We argue instead that ethnographic studies must answer to each other, and that survey and experimental studies in turn must answer to them. Surveys typically examine categories so abstracted from social practice that they cannot be assumed to have independent status as sociolinguistically meaningful units, and they rely heavily on interviews, a special kind of social activity.   And experimental studies also abstract in ways that can make it hard to assess their relevance to understanding naturally occurring social practice, including cognition.   To frame abstractions so that they help explain the interaction of language and social practice, we need a focus of study and analysis that allows

us to examine them each on something like an equal footing. This requires a unit of social analysis that has explanatory power for the construction of both language and gender. It is mutual engagement of human agents in a wide range of activities that creates, sustains, challenges, and sometimes changes society and its institutions, including both gender and language, and the sites of such mutual engagement are communities. How the community is defined, therefore, is of prime importance in any study of language and gender, even those such that do not use ethnographic methods (e.g., survey or experimental studies).

3. Language, Gender, and Communities of Practice

Sociolinguists have located linguistic systems, norms, and social identities within a loosely defined construct, the "speech community." Although in theory, sociolinguists embrace John Gumperz' definition of a speech community as a group of speakers who share rules and norms for the use of language, in practice community studies have defined their populations on the basis of location and/or population. Differences and relations among the speakers who people the sociolinguists' speech communities have been defined in terms of abstracted characteristics - sex, age, socioeconomic class, ethnicity. And differences in ways of speaking have been interpreted on the basis of speculative hypotheses about the relation between these characteristics and social practice. Sociolinguistic analysis, then, attempts to reconstruct the practice from which these characteristics - and the linguistic behavior in question - have been abstracted. While participation in community practice sometimes figures more directly into classification of speakers, sociolinguists still seldom recognize explicitly the crucial role of practice in delineating speech communities and more generally in mediating the relation between language, society, and consciousness.

To explore in some detail just how social practice and individual "place" in the community connect to one another, sociolinguists need some conception of a community that articulates place with practice. For this reason, we adopt Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's notion of the "community of practice"[2]. The community of practice takes us away from the community defined by a location or by a population. Instead, it focuses on a community defined by social engagement - after all, it is this engagement that language serves, not the place and not the people as a bunch of individuals.

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[2] see Etienne Wenger (1990) Toward a theory of cultural transparency. Palo Alto: Institute for Research on Learning , Etienne Wenger (in press) Communities of Practice (forthcoming at Cambridge University Press); and Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) Situated learning: legitimate peripheral participation. New York: Cambridge University Press.

A community of practice is an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in some common endeavor. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations - in short, practices - emerge in the course of their joint activity around that endeavor. A community of practice is different as a social construct from the traditional notion of community, primarily because it is defined simultaneously by its membership and by the practice in which that membership engages. Indeed, it is the practices of the community and members' differentiated participation in them that structures the community socially.

A community of practice might be people working together in a factory, regulars in a bar, a neighborhood play group, a nuclear family, police partners and their ethnographer, the Supreme Court. Communities of practice may be large or small, intensive or diffuse; they are born and they die, they may persist through many changes of membership, and they may be closely articulated with other communities. Individuals participate in multiple communities of practice, and individual identity is based in the multiplicity of this participation. Rather than seeing the individual as some disconnected entity floating around in social space, or as a location in a network, or as a member of a particular group or set of groups, or as a bundle of social characteristics, we need to focus on communities of practice. Such a focus allows us to see the individual as an actor articulating a range of forms of participation in multiple communities of practice.

Gender is produced (and often reproduced) in differential membership in communities of practice. People's access and exposure to, need for, and interest in, different communities of practice are related to such things as their class, age, ethnicity as well as sex. Working class people are more likely on the whole than middle class people to be members of unions, bowling teams, close-knit neighborhoods. Upper middle class people, on the other hand, are more likely than working class people to be members of tennis clubs, orchestras, professional organizations. Men are more likely than women to be members of football teams, armies and boards of directors. Women, on the other hand, are more likely to be members of secretarial pools, aerobics classes, and consciousness raising groups.

And associated with differences in age, class and ethnicity are differences in the extent to which the sexes belong to different communities of practice. different people - for a variety of reasons - will articulate their multiple memberships differently. A female executive living in a male dominated household will have difficulty articulating her membership in her domestic and professional communities of practice, unlike a traditional male executive "head of household." A lesbian lawyer "closeted" within the legal community may also belong to a "women's" community whose membership defines itself in opposition to the larger heterosexual world. And the woman who scrubs toilets in the household "managed" for a husband by the female executive and also in that of the lesbian lawyer and her artist lover may be a respected lay leader in her local church, facing a different set of tensions than either of her employers does in negotiating multiple memberships.

Gender is also produced and reproduced in differential forms of participation in particular communities of practice. Women tend to be subordinate to men in the

workplace, women in the military do not engage in combat, and in the academy, most theoretical disciplines are overwhelmingly male with women concentrated in descriptive and applied work that "supports" theorizing. Women and men may also have very different forms of participation available to them in single-sex communities of practice. For example, if all-women's groups do in fact tend to be more egalitarian than all-men's groups, as some current literature claims, then women's and men's forms of participation will be quite different. Such relations within same-sex groups will, of course, be related in turn to the place of such groups in the larger society.

The relations among communities of practice when they come together in overarching communities of practice also produce gender arrangements. Only recently, for example, have female competitive sports begun to receive significant recognition, and male sports continue to bring far greater visibility, power and authority both to the teams and to the individual participants in those teams. "The" final four has been the focus of attention in the NCAA basketball world these past weeks, with the "women's" final four receiving only perfunctory mention. Many a school has its Bulldogs and Lady Bulldogs, its Rangers and Rangerettes. This articulation with power and stature outside the team in turn translates into different possibilities for relations within. The relation between male varsity sports teams and cheerleading squads illustrates a more general pattern of men's organizations and women's auxiliaries. Umbrella communities of this kind do not offer neutral membership status. And when several families get together for a meal prepared by the women who then team up to do the serving and clearing away while the men watch football, gender differentiation (including differentiation in language use) is being reproduced on an institutional level.

The community of practice is where the rubber meets the road — it is where observable action and interaction do the work of producing, reproducing, and resisting the organization of power in society, and societal discourses of gender, age, race etc.

Speakers develop linguistic patterns as they engage in activity in the various communities in which they participate. Sociolinguists have tended to see this process as one of acquisition of some thing relatively "fixed" - the linguistic resources are viewed as fixed, the community is viewed as fixed, and the individual's relation to the two is viewed as fixed. The symbolic value of a linguistic form is taken as given, and the speaker simply learns it and uses it, either mechanically or strategically. But in actual practice, social meaning, social identity, community membership, forms of participation, the full range of community practices, and the symbolic value of linguistic form are being constantly and mutually constructed.

And so although the identity of both the individual and the individual community of practice is experienced as persistent, in fact they both change constantly. We continue to adopt new ways of talking and discard some old ways, to adopt new ways of being women and men, gays and lesbians and heterosexuals, even changing our ways of being feminists or being lovers or

being mothers or being sisters. In becoming police officers or psychiatrists or physicists or professors of linguistics, we may change our ways of being women and perhaps of being wives or lovers or mothers. In so doing, however, we are not negating our earlier gendered sociolinguistic identities: we are transforming them, changing and expanding forms of femininity, masculinity, and gender relations. And there are many more unnamed ways of thinking, being, relating, and doing that we adopt and adapt as we participate in different ways in the various communities of practice to which we belong.

What sociolinguists call the linguistic repertoire is a set of resources for the articulation of multiple memberships and forms of participation. And an individual's ways of speaking in a particular community of practice are not simply a function of membership or participation in that community. A way of speaking in a community does not simply constitute a turning on of a community-specific linguistic switch, or the symbolic laying of claim to membership in that community, but a complex articulation of the individual's forms of participation in that community with participation in other communities that are salient at the time. In turn, the linguistic practices of any given community of practice will be continually changing as a result of the many saliencies that come into play through its multiple members.

The overwhelming tendency in language and gender research on power has been to emphasize either speakers and their social relations (e.g., women's disadvantage in ordinary conversations with men) or the meanings and norms encoded in the linguistic systems and practices historically available to them (e.g., such sexist patterns as conflating generic human with masculine in forms like "he" or "man"). But linguistic forms have no power except as given in people's mouths and ears; to talk about meaning without talking about the people who mean and the community practices through which they give meaning to their words is at best limited.

4. Conclusion: A Scholarly Community of Practice

Sue Gal has called for the integration of the wide range of endeavors that come under the rubric of language and gender. This has come up over and over at this conference as we have rushed from talks on Japanese morphological variation to girls' verbal disputes to teenage girls' magazines to phone sex and the Thomas-Hill hearings. Are these all loosely joined together simply by a shared interest in gender? Or is there an integral and indispensable connection that we must recognize and construct in order to even begin our work?

We have here the nucleus of a community of scholarly practice within which there is the real possibility of undertaking more ambitious collaborative inquiries. Mary Talbot's paper at this conference showed us how a teen magazine attempts to create an imaginary community around the consumption of lipstick. It provides many of the requirements of a community of practice — knowledge, membership, history, practices — inviting the readers to become engaged in lipstick technology, and to form their own real communities of practice around the consumption of lipstick. Many people studying gender

dynamics in everyday conversation may not immediately see the relation between their work and studies of the discourses of gender as revealed in teen magazines. But just as gender is not given and static, it is also not constructed afresh in each interaction or each community of practice. Those of us who are examining the minutiae of linguistic form need to build detailed understanding of the construction of gender in the communities of practice that we study. But part of the characterization of a community of practice is its relation to other communities of practice and to the wider discourses of society. Thus while we do our close examination, we need to work within a conscientiously-constructed broader perspective that extends our own necessarily limited view of the communities we study.

Significant advances in the study of language and gender from now on are going to have to involve integration on a level that has not been reached so far. The integration can come only through the intensive collaboration of people in a variety of fields, developing shared ways of asking questions and of exploring and evaluating possible answers. Language and gender studies, in fact, require an interdisciplinary community of scholarly practice. Isolated individuals who try to straddle two fields can often offer insights, but real progress depends on getting people from a variety of fields to collaborate closely in building a common and broad-based understanding. We will cease to be a friendly but scattered bunch of linguists, anthropologists, literary critics etc. when we become mutually engaged in the integration of our emerging insights into the nexus between language, gender and social practice.

Sometimes our mutual engagement will lead us to controversy. And some people at this conference have been concerned about the development of controversy over the cultural difference model. It is true that argument that is not grounded in shared practice can reduce to unpleasant and *ad feminam* argument. But rich intellectual controversy both requires and enhances mutual engagement. Without sustained intellectual exchange that includes informed and detailed debate, we will remain a bunch of individuals with vaguely related interests in language and gender. With continued engagement like that begun in this conference, we may become a productive scholarly community.