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INTERPLAY OF LANGUAGE, GENDER AND POWER IN DEBORAH CAMERON'S ESSAY 'STYLING THE WORKER: GENDER AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF LANGUAGE IN THE GLOBALIZED SERVICE ECONOMY'

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Abstract

Deborah Cameron's essay, "Styling the Worker: Gender and the Commodification of Language in the Globalized Service Economy" explores the intricate relationship between gender, language, and the commodification of labor in the context of the global service economy. Cameron argues that in this era of globalisation, language skills have become highly valued as a form of labor, particularly in service-oriented industries. However, she highlights that gender stereotypes play a crucial role in the commodification of language, often perpetuating inequalities and reinforcing traditional gender norms. Her essay explores the complex interplay between gender, language, and labor in the globalised service economy, highlighting the need for a more inclusive and egalitarian approach towards language work and the recognition of its value in shaping our interconnected world. The present paper seeks to deconstruct the power dynamics of language by examining Cameron's essay. It explores how she raises questions about the commodification of language and its implications for gender equality and workplace dynamics.

Keywords: Globalisation, Language, Power dynamics, Gender equality, Working conditions, Linguistic performance.

Introduction

Deborah Cameron begins her essay 'Styling the Worker: Gender and the Commodification of Language in the Globalized Service Economy' by stating that the phenomenon of globalisation has brought a set of far-reaching economic, political, social and cultural changes. These also include changes in patterns of language-use and linguistic variation. One aspect of globalisation is the 'new work order' in which new (post-Fordist) ways of working make new demands on the linguistic abilities of workers. Emphasis is laid on the new forms of linguistic agency that workers must develop to meet the demands of the new capitalism. However, it has been argued that these new

linguistic demands on workers may use new forms of control and regulation over their linguistic behaviour. Therefore, there can be a decrease in their agency as language users.

Cameron says that the issue of control is raised explicitly by Fiona Czerniawska in her book 'Corporate Speak: The Use of Language in Business' where she explains that the adoption of new managerial approaches in a highly globalized world has increased the awareness of language as a valuable commodity. Language can be a source of competitive advantage and thus need to be managed and regulated. Growth in the service sector of the economy is an important feature of globalisation, and thus an increasing tendency for

employers to regulate even minute details of workers' in this sector is highly visible.

Further, Cameron says that standardization of speech within an organization means that the rules in the organization do not tend to target grammatical or phonological variation. Organisations are more concerned to prescribe features of interactive discourse such as prosody and voice quality, the way in which particular speech acts should be performed, the choice of salutations and the consistent use of certain politeness formulae. Standardization is promoted by the need to subordinate individuals to a corporate norm. Employees' verbal behaviour, along with bodily appearance and dress, is treated as a commodity-part of what the organisations sell to their customers. The importance given to the prescribed style of speaking by these organisations is evident from the degree of effort they put into its production via training, regulation and surveillance of employees' speech.

Style, Styling and Stylization

Cameron explains that classically, in the context of sociolinguistics, there was a mono-dimensional view of style, where it was defined along an axis of formality. An increase in the formality of the situation leads to increased self-monitoring by the speaker and therefore to rising frequencies of prestige variants in the speaker's output. Overtime, there has been a tendency to adopt a multidimensional approach; she gives an example of Allan Bell's influential theory of style as 'audience design' whereby stylistic choices are primarily motivated by the speaker's assessment of the effect certain ways of speaking will have on particular addressees.

Stylization: taking on a voice which is recognisably different from one's 'normal' voice. Style: Cameron explains it by referring to Penelope Eckert who suggests that the construction of a style is a process of bricolage: a stylistic agent appropriates resources from a broad sociolinguistic landscape recombining them to make a distinctive style.

Styling: The act of drawing on the meaning made available by linguistic variation and combining these

into a distinctive way of speaking can be seen as styling. The stylistic agent can style others as well as her/himself. Examples of self-styling are adolescents and pre-adolescents as they experiment with various possible positionings within their newly significant peer groups and social networks.

Standardizing Speech in Call Centres and Styling

The institutional regime of the call centre exemplifies the hyper-rationalizing tendency that the sociologist George Ritzer has dubbed 'McDonaldization'. This tendency is described by its drive to maximize four things: efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control.

'Women's Language' in Call Centre

Stereotypically, the speech of women is associated with linguistic features such as the use of 'weak' expletives and lexical items like charming, divine, rising intonation on declarative, tag-questions in contexts where the speaker is not checking information, etc. Doubtless, not all women use Women's Language and not all Women's Language-users are women. However, these stereotypes have filtered steadily into popular consciousness. Women are said to use an array of discourse features such as supportive simultaneous speech, precision-timed minimal responses and questions whose function is to show interest in the participation of others, hedging and indirectness used to mitigate face-threat and so on. This notion of 'women's language' provides a powerful symbolic meaning resource for stylistic agents to draw on. Women's language is appropriated and recombined in the call centre to produce a particular service style.

Call Centres are highly concerned about styling of the operator's voice. Two instructions are given on vocal performance: that the operator should smile and use an expressive intonation, both of which are symbolically feminine behaviours. Smiling signals deference or appeasement. It is understood as a gesture offered upward in the status hierarchy. Expressive intonation means that female speakers exploit a broader pitch range. It means emotionally expressive and is explicitly contrasted with intonation which is monotonous or

uninvolved. In the past, this characteristic has been used to label women as over-emotional and lacking in authority, tempting women like Margaret Thatcher to deliberately reduce the pitch range they use. The fact that vocal expressiveness is valued in service work might suggest that authority is not among the qualities workers are expected to display.

The emotional states operators are instructed to project are warmth, sincerity, excitement, confidence, etc. These are not inherently gendered qualities, but overall they produce a strongly effective service style, which is based on the expression of positive feelings towards the customer. Other discourse strategies suggested to operators are to create rapport with callers and to display empathy with them. Also, there is a recommendation to use minimal responses supportively and to ask open questions not merely to elicit information but to display interest in the customer as a person, to make the conversation a more 'genuine' dialogue. All these recommended linguistic features bear a striking resemblance to ways of speaking that are associated, in the popular imagination, with women speakers.

'Women's Language': Customer Service as Emotional Labour

Robert Reich, in his book 'The Work of Nations', has said that there are two categories of post-industrial workers, symbolic analysts and 'in-person servers'. The second group includes call centre operators. Their work tends to call for reliability, loyalty, and a pleasant demeanor so as to make the customers feel they not merely served but actively 'cared for'. This promotes loyalty to the company and thus enhances its 'competitive advantage' in the market. Hoschild says that service workers find themselves performing more and more 'emotional labour'- the management of feelings. The ability, not merely to sound polite and professional but to project positive emotions towards customers using the resources of language and voice, is highly valued. Customer care training materials draw extensively on the idea of therapy and counseling. They portray routine service work as a caring profession. Thus, the operators undergo emotional

labour involving the management of both the customer's feelings and their own.

Emotion in general is discursively constructed as a feminine domain, both 'emotional expressiveness' and 'caring' are salient symbolic meanings of women's language. These same characteristics have become the key values in new regimes of customer care. So, male operators are subject to exactly the same communicational demands and linguistic styling practices as their female colleagues. The male call centre operators in Britain did not consider their gender to be an issue. But, the operators in the U.S.A. perceived the behaviour they were required to produce in customer service contexts as 'feminizing' and for that reason problematic. It suggests that some of the risks involved in adopting a prescribed service style may be different for men and women. At least some men find aspects of the style threatening to their gender or sexual identity. For women, their feminine, easy behaviour that employees had to display were treated as signs of 'romantic interest'.

Conclusion

The essay, thus, explores the issues relating to the regulation of spoken language used by workers in contemporary service environments. It talks about the linguistic consequences of globalization. Present-day corporate verbal hygiene practices may be analysed as part of a strategic attempt by organizations to maximize their advantages in a hyper-competitive globalized economy which is increasingly dominated by the provision of services. Finally, the verbal hygiene practices are of interest for the relationship between gender and language. The regulation and commodification of language in service workplaces has resulted in the valorization of a speech style whose characteristics include expressiveness, caring, empathy, and sincerity- characteristics popularly associated with the speech of women. However, the value attached to 'women's language' in service work is not a cause for feminist celebration. Whether it benefits women in any way is open to question. Globalization has the potential to change many of the social realities among them 'class', 'ethnicity', 'nation' and indeed 'language' .

These developments are as significant for sociolinguistics as for any other social science discipline, and sociolinguistics should be prepared to follow them wherever they may lead.

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