

Gender and Interlocutor Effects in French

Dissertation Defense by Kelly Biers

**Tuesday, July 1, 2014
at 2:00pm**

**Indiana Memorial
Union,
Sassafras Room**

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Research on the relationship between language and gender has grown significantly over the last few decades, focusing mostly on the question of to what extent, if any, men and women differ in their use of language. Currently, researchers tend to conclude that speaker sex is rarely the primary source of language variation, but that it can be shown to contribute to variation when considered in combination with other social factors, such as age or socioeconomic status. Despite these advances, there remain two considerable limitations to the literature. The first is that it is largely based on studies of English, and the second is that it tends to equate gender with speaker sex, whereas gender is something that is not biological but social. Gender, in fact, is typically considered as something that is performed, so in language and gender studies we ought to be concerned not only with the identity of the speaker, but also with that of the audience, or the interlocutor.

This dissertation is thus an exploration of how language is used by men and women when speaking to men, and when speaking to women. It is based on recorded conversations of same- and mixed-sex pairs of native speakers of French (in France). In order to describe the relationship between gender and interlocutor effects, I conduct two studies at different levels of language. The first is a variationist study of vowel epithesis, and the second is a discursive analysis of conversational narratives. I show that in both cases, gender effects are detectable when taking into account both speaker and interlocutor sex. Furthermore, gender works in combination with other linguistic and social factors, thus supporting a dynamic view of the relationship between language and gender. Further studies will explore the complex role that gender plays in language variation.



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