

A Sentence Made by Men

Muted Group Theory Revisited

Celia J. Wall

MURRAY STATE UNIVERSITY, USA

Pat Gannon-Leary

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHUMBRIA AT NEWCASTLE

Before a woman can write exactly as she wishes to write, she has many difficulties to face. To begin with, there is the technical difficulty – so simple, apparently, in reality, so baffling – that the very form of the sentence does not fit her. It is a sentence made by men. (Woolf, 1979: 48)

Virginia Woolf gives insight into the problems inherent in using a medium which, over the centuries, has been dominated by men. For some feminists there is no such thing as neutral language: 'the entire system, since it belongs to and is controlled by men, is permeated by sexism through and through' (Cameron, 1985: 91). The somewhat simplistic belief that it is through language that reality is constructed accounts for the focus of much feminist literature on the 'silencing' of women through the control of language. Cameron expresses the concern, 'that language, or the lack of an authentic (non-male) language, profoundly affects women's ability to understand and change their situation' (Cameron, 1985: 92). Muted group theory, developed by anthropologists Shirley and Edwin Ardener in the late 1960s, has received a great deal of attention from feminists concerned with the nature of language.

While in the 1970s and 1980s, feminist studies established gender as a legitimate mode of historical explanation, their approach laid emphasis on the ideology of the public (male) and private (female) domains. In the 1990s feminist research has criticized this concept as overly schematic and somewhat reductionist, challenging the earlier 'monotheistic' fixation to gender as the explanatory variable. Does the view of separate spheres as an outmoded paradigm negate the Ardeners' theory?

The Ardeners contended that there were 'dominant modes of expression in any society which have been generated by the dominant structure within it' (E. Ardener, 1975b: 20). To be heard and heeded an individual must use this dominant mode of expression. The use of an alternative, 'individual' mode of expression will not be heard. To be understood, the would-be communicator must suppress her own mode of expression in favour of the dominant mode and thus she is 'muted'. Muted does not necessarily mean silent: 'the important issue is whether they are able to say all they would wish to say, where and when they wish to say it' (E. Ardener, 1975b: 21). Generally, in a situation where gender is a consideration, women are therefore the muted group.

Muted group theory was originally introduced by Edwin Ardener in a preface to his study on rituals of the Bakweri women of Cameroon (first published in LaFontaine [1972], extended in E. Ardener [1975a]). It was intended to explain the lack of anthropological data then available on women and 'to encourage anthropologists and others to pay more attention than they did at the time to spheres of communication and modes of expression' (E. Ardener, 1975b: 20) of commonly overlooked groups. Ardener noted that women as 'a human group that forms about half of any population and is even in a majority at certain ages' (E. Ardener, 1975a: 1) were neglected in social anthropological studies.

The methods of social anthropology . . . of the last forty years have purported to 'crack the code' of a vast range of societies, without any direct reference to the female group. At the level of 'observation' in fieldwork, the behaviour of women has, of course, like that of men, been exhaustively plotted. . . . When we come to that second or 'meta' level of fieldwork, the vast body of debate, discussion, question and answer, that social anthropologists really depend upon to give conviction to their interpretations, there is a real imbalance. (E. Ardener, 1975a: 1)

Even women anthropologists, 'of whom so much was hoped' (E. Ardener, 1975a: 1), had failed to redress the balance.

In analysing this situation, Ardener identified two parts to the problem. First, what he termed the technical part, was that females reportedly were more difficult to access and interview: 'Ethnographers report that women cannot be reached so easily as men: they giggle when young, snort when old, reject the question, laugh at the topic and the like' (E. Ardener, 1975a: 2). Ardener contended that ethnographers, male and female, were more inclined to see and interpret the model of a society in the same terms as the males being interviewed, consequently identifying more with the males and their views. Males would, therefore, be viewed as more articulate than the females.

Second, Ardener identified the analytical part of the problem.

If the models of a society made by most ethnographers tend to be models derived from the male portion of that society, how does the symbolic weight

of that other mass of persons – half or more of a normal human population, as we have accepted – express itself? (E. Ardener, 1975a: 3)

Ardener pointed out that it was not unusual then for ethnographers to return from a study of a particular society having talked only to men. Despite the exclusion of the women, professional criticism was unlikely because, Ardener concluded, 'models of society that women can provide are not of the kind acceptable at first sight to men or to ethnographers' (E. Ardener, 1975a: 3). The male model of society would be considered by the dominant group (men) to be accurate and true since they would see nothing lacking in the model presented. If the dominant group does not complain or criticize, who will?

The Ardeners' thesis is that women, due to their structural positions, have different models of reality from the male-dominated societal model. Women's models often take a non-verbal, inarticulate, veiled form in contrast to the male discourse, which is more verbal and explicit, matching the usual discourse of western social science. Although feminist critics of anthropology have accused androcentric ethnographers of ignoring women in the societies studied, the Ardeners' work exposes a more complex problem, claiming as it does that the fact women rarely 'speak' in social anthropological reports is due to the demands made by both male and female social scientists for articulate models. This problem was compounded because Ardener believed that 'they [women] lack the metalanguage for its discussion' (E. Ardener, 1975a: 3), and are thus unable to share their perception of society with ethnographers. Ardener blamed this inability to articulate on the male-dominated structure of society. Henley and Kramarae's (1994) discussion of cross-sex miscommunication similarly indicated an inequality in the metastructure of interpretation resulting in the accepted interpretation of an interaction being that of the more powerful person, usually the male. Men were the 'exploiting' or 'dominate' class and women the 'exploited' or 'suppressed' – in other words, the 'muted' – class. What caused a group to be 'muted'? Ardener explained, 'it is muted simply because it does not form part of the dominate communication system of the society, expressed as it must be through the dominate ideology' (E. Ardener, 1975b: 22). Ardener refers to muted not as 'dumb' but as being 'of a reduced level of perceptibility' (E. Ardener, 1975b: 22).

In *Defining Females*, Shirley Ardener provided evidence from various studies to support the muted group theory. One such study, by Carole Humphrey, detailed the complicated speech requirement of Mongolian daughters-in-law: 'Instead of thinking of a name, then saying it, these women must think of a name, then think of a rule-bounded substitute, then say that' (S. Ardener, 1978: 22). Another example of indirect speech was provided by M. Wolff, 'It seems that in China women commonly

speaking "through" their young male charges and sons, attributing their own views and needs to them' (S. Ardener, 1978: 22). Ardener concluded that the 'requirement for some categories of women to be "tongue-tied" is well illustrated' (S. Ardener, 1978: 23) by such studies.

The muted group theory has been influential in the feminist movement, being drawn upon and modified by several theorists, especially Dale Spender and Cheri Kramarae. Spender has expanded on the Ardeners' model to support her own beliefs on how men control language. According to Spender, men, through their control over meaning, are able to impose their own view of the world on everyone. Women's voices trying to express women's experiences are rarely heard because they must be expressed in a language system not designed for their interests and concerns. Unable to symbolize their experience in the male language, women take one of two routes: one path requires internalizing male reality – alienation; the other is being unable to speak at all – silence: 'The talkativeness of women has been gauged in comparison not with men but with silence. . . . When silence is the desired state for women . . . then any talk in which a woman engages can be too much' (Spender, 1980: 42). Silence is deplored in feminist writings because it symbolizes passivity and powerlessness. The muted group and female deficit theories employ descriptors implying inadequacy: women's communication is variously described as handicapped, maladaptive, in need of remediation, deviant (from the masculine norm or, more accurately, the male cultural form), silenced, inarticulate and inferior. The titles of the works of Spender and others illustrate the concern with silence as an obstacle to self-expression. Silence and 'mutedness' do not merely refer to 'inability or reluctance to create utterances in conversational exchange' but also denote 'failure to produce a separate, socially significant discourse' (Gal, 1994: 408). Unable to express their structurally generated views in the dominant masculine discourse, women are neither understood nor heeded, becoming inarticulate, 'muted' or silent. Even if they talk a lot they may not express their own, different, social reality.

Kramarae (1981) discusses several hypotheses suggested by muted theory. First she advances the hypothesis that, while females are more likely to have difficulty expressing themselves fluently within dominant (public) modes of expression, males have more difficulty in understanding what members of the other gender mean. She posits that, in both verbal conventions and non-verbal behaviour, females are liable to find ways to express themselves outside the dominant public modes of expression used by males. A further contention is the likelihood that females will state dissatisfaction with the dominant public modes of expression. Those women refusing to live by the ideas of social organizations held by the dominant group will, Kramarae suggests, change dominant public modes of expression as they consciously and verbally

reject those ideas. She further suggests that females are less likely to coin words that become widely recognized and used by both men and women. Finally she advances the hypothesis that females' sense of humour differs from that of males.

Kramarae draws upon her own previous studies and research done by other scholars for evidence to support or refute hypotheses. For example, in examining the question of the relative verbal skills of women and men, she states, 'that females will have more difficulty than males expressing themselves seems implicit in the muted group theory', however, she adds, 'most of the information available on sex differences and verbal skills does not seem to support such an hypothesis' (Kramarae, 1981: 5). Kramarae's balanced look at the tenets of muted group theory indicates areas of potential weakness. Evidence advanced by the Ardeners in support of their theory seems narrow in scope and relevance. Is the fact that a Chinese woman must 'speak' through a male relative really relevant anywhere but China? The same could be asked about the Mongolian daughters-in-law's complicated speech requirement. How does that relate to females elsewhere? The Ardeners have taken examples of isolated situations and generalized their relevance to a larger world.

The world has changed a great deal in the past two and a half decades since the Ardeners first introduced their theory. Women have found their voices and are speaking out more and more even if it is in the 'male mode of expression'. In ethnographic contexts, Gal cites an elite intellectual study group, the Men's and Women's Club of London in the 1880s. In discussions of sexuality, although the club rules asserted gender equality, rule 17 – accepted by all members – stipulated that discussion must be within a Darwinian framework, a proviso which 'both assured and hid men's dominance' according to Gal (1994: 421) since 'women members . . . lacked such scientific knowledge'. Kramarae's discussion of the muted group theory and how men have appropriated the important public use of language, leaving women with the 'trivial' private language domain, includes an account of how,

. . . some of the women in the early slavery abolition movement in the United States were encouraged to use in their writing rhetorical principles set up entirely by male British and American orators, and to sit silent on the platform while male ministers and relatives read the women's public address. (Kramarae, 1981: 29)

Puckett asserts that the muted group model 'is problematic because it fails to acknowledge the empirical fact that women do in fact speak, and in public. A brief perusal of popular and academic culture attests to this' (Puckett, 1986: 7). Cameron believes that:

What the model really fails to show is that muted groups lack a language, and that dominant groups are able to appropriate all linguistic resources.

The alternative suggestion, that women communicate adequately with each other but are institutionally constrained/negatively judged in the public (male) arena, is much more plausible. (Cameron, 1985: 107–8)

However, as stated at the outset, the private/public (female/male) arena division has recently been discredited, and acknowledgement made that separate spheres are rarely truly separate.

Despite global changes and acknowledged problems with the muted group theory, it still has relevance and its three basic tenets on how a dominant group and a subordinate group communicate have applicability beyond the gender based. First, women and men perceive the world differently because of the different experiences afforded them by the division of labour. Second, since men dominate politically, their mode of expression is dominant. The corollary of this is that alternative (e.g. women's) modes of expression are less acceptable. Finally, in order to express themselves and participate in society, women must use the dominant mode of expression in preference to their own, necessitating translation or becoming bilingual, speaking both women's and men's language.

These basic tenets may be extended to other groups and situations where a dominant entity and a subordinate one must communicate each with the other. An example of the theory's relevance and use may be found in an article by Carol Colfer, whose interest in the Ardeners' theory 'was stimulated by the problem in international development of communication between development personnel and members of the populations with whom they work' (Colfer, 1983: 263). Colfer reports on three ethnographic examples of situations in which 'unequals' had to communicate with one another. The result in each case was 'inarticulateness'. The observed cases were diverse: rural/urban dwellers in Iran; women/men in a small American village; and scientists (of both genders) from the soft/hard scientific disciplines. In fact Colfer's examples were more supportive of 'inarticulateness' than those of the Ardeners. In her conclusion Colfer comments on the fact that differential power and status have a tendency to interfere with the free expression of ideas from those of lower status. This inhibition of free expression reinforces the integrated – but incomplete – world views held by the powerful, since it denies them access not only to alternative perspectives but also to information which will not fit neatly into their cognitive models. One implication of the necessity for lower status peoples to adapt to the dominant models while retaining their counterpart models is that, in order to function adequately in life, greater cognitive complexity may be required of them than is required of elites.

Colfer's aim, in studying muted group theory, was to improve communication between development personnel and the Third World groups

with whom they worked. Having established a theoretical framework for such communication using the muted group theory, she noted that, 'An important responsibility . . . then, lies squarely with the elites, to create a supportive environment which encourages the expression of counterpart models. I see such improved communications as critical to the success of development programs' (Colfer, 1983: 279).

One tenet of muted group theory ('to express themselves and participate in society women must use the dominant mode of expression') was tested in a study by Lituchy and Wiswall, although no reference to muted group theory was made in the study, which aimed to determine if the use of feminine speech pattern affected the 'credibility and believability of women in organizations' (Lituchy and Wiswall, 1991: 453). Research has shown that women's and men's speech patterns differ in word choice, intonation and use of numerals with the consequent result that women are viewed by males and females alike as being less assertive, more uncertain and lacking power. Women adopting male speech patterns are seen as more assertive, self-confident and believable. The Lituchy and Wiswall study found that,

. . . decisions made by male and female subordinates using masculine speech patterns were more likely to be accepted by male listeners, whereas differences in speech patterns did not affect the acceptance rate by female subjects. Male listeners also had more confidence in subordinates (of either sex) with masculine speech patterns. (Lituchy and Wiswall, 1991: 460)

The above studies provide evidence in support of the muted group theory and exemplify its wider applicability both to dominate/subordinate relationship, as a source of advice on how to improve communication, and to organizations, offering insight into managers' perceptions. Muted group theory can aid understanding in the communication processes between females and males but, as the work of researchers such as Henley and Kramarae (1994) in connection with the 'feminine deficit' theory has highlighted, there is a need for a combination of disparate types of research. Henley and Kramarae included social and anthropological studies as well as psychological and linguistic ones in their discussion of male/female miscommunication. If domination and resistance are matters of interactional practice not just structure then the focus should extend beyond mutedness as a structural product to the processes by which women are rendered mute. Understanding the processes of dominance and muting requires a broader analysis of the context – political, economic and institutional – in which reality is negotiated. As communications studies researchers, the authors hope to initiate a re-evaluation of muted group theory within communication theory and to stimulate further research into – and understanding of – this concept.

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Celia J. Wall is an Associate Professor in the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication at Murray State University in Murray, Kentucky. She is currently working on her doctoral dissertation in the College of Communications and Information Science at the University of Kentucky. In her dissertation, 'Sexual Harassment and Communication in Higher Education: An Exploratory Study', Wall is looking at the effects of institution communications on the incidence of sexual harassment at institutions of higher education.

Pat Gannon-Leary is currently a Senior Research Assistant in the Department of Information and Library Management at the University of Northumbria in Newcastle, UK. She trained as a librarian and worked for many years in academic libraries including those of the Universities of Sunderland and Huddersfield in the UK and Murray State University in the USA. Gannon-Leary has an MA in film and television studies and a PhD in communication studies. Her interests include media representations of the British Royal Family (the theme of her doctoral thesis); the ethics of electronic mail; and gender differences in electronic communications.

