

LINGUISTIC INNOVATION IN FEMINIST UTOPIAN FICTION

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1.

In this paper I shall be discussing some recent feminist utopian novels and some of the more interesting implications and questions we might draw from a close study of the linguistic innovations in them. Consistently, we find that defamiliarisation of the language of the idealised world is a recurrent characteristic. I shall begin by describing four of these texts to you, in general. I shall go on to map out the types of defamiliarisation they offer the reader, linking this with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis which asserts, in its strongest form, a determining connection between a culture's language, its thought and its reality. The implications and questions I want to draw from these comparisons are two-fold. The first is socio-linguistic and concerns real life issues of whether linguistic change is a necessary part of conceptual change. I shall offer some observations about pressures for certain types of change made by various minority and oppressed groups in England and America. The second is literary-critical, in that it concerns the possibility that the language of **all** texts is best understood when viewed as markedly biased towards various sets of cultural presuppositions. The reader's difficulty, when she or he shares these presuppositions is that of seeing the language merely as an innocent mirror of an all too

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easily taken-for-granted reality. I shall suggest ways of beginning to deconstruct aspects of that so-called reality, concluding that, whilst there are inevitably features that will always remain opaque - to us, if not to future generations - (and for good epistemological reasons), there are nonetheless ways of making ourselves, and helping our students, see possibilities of alternative presentations of the worlds given to us in the language of literary texts. In doing so, I would argue, we learn more about both the text in question and our perceptions of everyday issues - both large and small.

2.1

Let me describe four texts to you.

Taken in chronological order, they are:

- (1) Charlotte Perkins Gilman's **Herland** (1915)
- (2) Ursula le Guin's **The Dispossessed** (1974)
- (3) Marge Piercy's **Woman on the Edge of Time** (1976)
- (4) Doris Lessing's **The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five** (1980)

I hope to give those of you who don't know them a sufficient understanding of these novels so that you can follow my argument, but will try my hardest not to spoil the pleasure I hope you will get when you come to read them - they are all splendidly gripping texts I can assure you.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman is a rather remarkable writer - probably most well known for her non-literary work **Woman and Economics** (1898) and a horrifyingly manic fictionalisation of her own nervous breakdown **The Yellow Wallpaper** (1892). She was a prolific writer of witty, inventive, short stories, in rather stolid prose, most of which she published in her magazine called **The Forerunner**, a periodical committed to the publication of material pertinent to the Women's Movement of the time (1909 - 1916). **Herland** is a plainly-written novel, which describes what happens when three educated and wealthy young men make an expedition into an isolated and hitherto unexplored country whose entire population is female, and has been so for two thousand years. We, like the young men, find this hard to believe, until it is revealed that all the men of this country were destroyed by war

and natural disasters - at one fell swoop so to speak - and thanks to a contingent biological development, whereby women could give birth to girl children without intervention from potential fathers, the population has grown and developed very successfully in specifically feminine ways ever since. The novel is narrated by one of these young men, thankfully the most flexible and least arrogant of the three, and charts the events and discoveries they make after a gentle but determined "capture", during enforced, rigorous, but patient "education", and during tricky, tantalising but moving "love affairs" and "marriages" with three of the woman. I have, willy-nilly moved into the inverted comma technique of the text itself, for it is in this way, more than any other, that it signals the differences between Ourland and Herland. As the book progresses, the mismatches between concepts of Ourland and concepts in Herland mount up, since it becomes clear that the women are doing intense anthropological ethnography on their prisoner-guests. Words and concepts that are dwelt upon specifically include the following: woman; man; womanly; manly; gentleman; feminine; girls; boys; motherhood; motherliness; sisterhood; wife; marriage; home; family; love; romance; birth; virgin; industry; work; poverty; competition; patriotism; religion; God; immortality; salvation; damnation; laws of nature; possession and ownership; punishment; education; psychology. That check-list maps out the major areas where the Herland culture has difficulty in understanding our heroes and **vice versa**, and, clearly the novel follows the usual Utopian pattern of stringent criticism of contemporary society, but, specifically here, it is a criticism of patriarchal attitudes. I offer some extended quotations in the appendix, but perhaps an extract here would be of use to you. It is difficult to know what to choose, when every page is rich in examples. The following seemed interesting because it represents a mid-way summary, where the narrator, relying on later experience, tries to clarify several linguistic and cultural and conceptual issues at the same time:

Two thousand years of one culture with no men. Back of that, only traditions of the harem. They had no exact analogue for our word "home", any more than they had for our Roman-based "family". They loved one another with a practically universal affection, rising to exquisite and

unbroken friendships, and broadening to a devotion to their country and people for which our word "patriotism" is no definition at all.

"Patriotism", red hot, is compatible with the existence of a neglect of national interests, a dishonesty, a cold indifference to the suffering of millions. "Patriotism" is largely pride, and very largely combativeness. "Patriotism" generally has a chip on its shoulder.

This country had no other country to measure itself by - save the few poor savages far below, with whom they had no contact.

They loved their country because it was their nursery, play-ground, and workshop - theirs and their children's. They were proud of it as a workshop, proud of their record of ever-increasing efficiency; they had made a pleasant garden of it, a very practical little heaven; but most of all they valued it - and here it is hard for us to understand them - as a cultural environment for their children.

That, of course, is the whole distinction - their children.

From those first breathlessly guarded, half-adored race mothers, all up the ascending line, they had this dominant thought of building up a great race through the children.

All the surrendering devotion our women have put into their private families, these women put into their country and race. All the loyalty and service men expect of wives, they gave, not singly to men, but collectively to one another.

And the mother instinct, with us so painfully intense, so thwarted by conditions, so concentrated in personal devotion to a few, so bitterly hurt by death, disease, or barrenness, and even by the mere growth of the children, leaving the mother alone in her empty nest - all this feeling with them flowed out in a strong, wide current, unbroken through the generations, deepening and widening through the years, including every child in all the land.

It is not insignificant, I think, that the author chooses to make such insistent use of the inverted commas - a technique that becomes more and more obtrusive as the book opens out. It is precisely the technique used by those philosophers of language who debate their varying theories or methodologies for discussing the relationships between language, truth, "truth", reality, and possible worlds (see, for example, Tarski 1943, Quine 1960, Putnam 1975, Davidson 1967, Davidson & Harman 1971).

In this text, it is a device to remind us continually that the reference for any word cannot be taken for granted once we

enter the boundaries of the fictional world. Of this more later. It is a device which not only makes strange the words encapsulated within it, but, which, by its obtrusiveness, proves extremely irritating to the unsympathetic. Of this more later too.

2.2

Ursula le Guin is probably best known "merely" as a writer of science fiction. Like several other writers in this category, however, she uses that medium to allow herself space and flexibility in the production of rather remarkable literary pieces. Unlike Herland, *The Dispossessed* is written in elegant, poetic style, and has many passages where literariness has clearly been a central concern in the composition. It is also a rather gripping story, (far less didactic than Herland) whose central characters engage our sympathies, concern, anxieties and so on, in just the manner of the classic realist novel. Interestingly, though, many of the issues about language, thought and culture are very similar to those expressed in Herland. Here, a brilliant physicist called Shevek, whose history we are given in some detail, leaves the semi-idealised world of Anraes on a mission to Urras, to learn, teach, discover, make links with that advanced, but as we discover, corrupt society, a society whose corruptions are reminiscent of our own, of course. Particular linguistic and conceptual mismatches between the two worlds are less easy to express as a checklist, however. This is probably a point in the book's favour - it is far less the simple comparison between this world and a possible idealised world. Specific **general** issues do recur however: swearing; forms of address and politeness phenomena; subject-object relationships; the means for expressing pronouns; honorifics; the means for indicating possession, ownership, sexuality, family relationships, work, play and so on. Some familiar words are brought into question as Shevek encounters them or their referents for the first time: splendour; gun; alienated labour; class; property; imprisonment; chivalry for example. Other words are used by the people of Anraes and are, so to speak "slipped into" the novel, asking us to take them for granted. By the end of the novel, sympathetic readers find them an invaluable addition to their everyday vocabulary: egoising; profiteer; propertarian and propertarianism - all of which are blatant insults in the organic

economy of Annares. Again, I have included several quotations from the text in the Appendix, but would like to offer you a couple here as clarification. My first example is taken from a nursery scene in Annares. The child, looking with delight at the sun has said "mine sun". The nurse corrects him with the culture's articulated concepts:

"It is not yours", the one-eyed nurse said with the mildness of utter certainty. "Nothing is yours. It is to use. It is to share. If you will not share it, you cannot use it".

Similarly, a child is gently criticised in the "speaking and listening group":

"Speech is sharing - a co-operative art. You're not sharing, merely egoising".

Later, Shevek, discussing physics and knowledge in the corrupt Urras, uses the strongest insult in his culture - the culture which despises the cult of personal property:

"But what's the good of this sort of understanding" Dearri said, "if it doesn't result in practical, technological applications? Just word-juggling isn't it?"

"You ask questions like a true profiteer", Shevek said, and not a soul knew that he had insulted Dearri with the most contemptuous word in his vocabulary; indeed Dearri nodded a bit, accepting the compliment with satisfaction".

The most crucial feature of Pravic as a language is precisely that of it being an artificially constructed language. We gradually learn the history of Annares, colonised in times well past by the anarchist-idealist Odo, as a breakaway escape from the already despotic authoritarianism of Urras. In building up her new society, she and her immediate companions carefully articulated both social conventions and linguistic possibilities of reference, tying the two together intricately in their choice of lexis, syntax and metaphoric possibilities. Take for example the fact that the language only has one word for both work and play (expressed as work/play until it is commented on):

The identity of the word "work" and "play" in Pravic had, of course, a strong ethical significance. Odo had seen the danger of a rigid moralism arising from the use of the word "work" in her analogic system... "the Saint is never busy", she had said, perhaps wistfully.

Similarly, consider both the expression of possession relationships and subject, object, agent relationships in this extract:

The singular forms of the possessive pronoun in Pravic were used mostly for emphasis; idiom avoided them. Little children might say "my mother", but very soon learned to say "the mother". Instead of "my hand hurts", it was "the hand hurts me", and so on. To say "this one is mine and that's yours" in Pravic are said, "I use this one and you use that". Mitis' statement "You will be his man" had a strange sound to it. Shevek looked at her blankly.

2.3

Marge Piercy's novel *Woman on the Edge of Time*, moves us even further away from straightforward didactic explanations, and offers almost all its linguistic innovations as part of an experiential reading practice. Again we are given two worlds to compare, though for the first fifty pages we are located firmly and strictly in a very brutal and harsh picture of the bad side of New York State.

Connie Ramos, a thirty seven year old impoverished Mexican-American woman, with a tragic history of violence, ill-treatment from both individuals and the state, imprisonment (where help would have been more appropriate, see the quotation about imprisonment in the *Herland* section of the Appendix) and stunningly bad experiences in long-stay mental hospitals, is trying to protect her niece, Dolly, from the brutal attacks of her pimp-boyfriend, who does not believe the child she is carrying is his. In so doing, Connie, herself, has to resort to physical violence on the boyfriend - a brave but futile attempt which results in her enforced readmission to the mental hospital. Both the description of the world outside the hospital and the world inside it make painful reading. Marge Piercy makes no attempt whatsoever to soften or mediate the hard brutality of these scenes, and rather cleverly and economically demonstrates the paradoxical traps that Connie

finds herself in. Having been classified once as violent and insane, all her subsequent actions and statements are suspect, and blatantly treated as such. One simple example will have to suffice. She has, in fact, been very badly beaten up by Geraldo, (Dolly's boyfriend). With broken teeth and ribs, she begs the social worker who comes to interview her in the hospital to get a medical doctor to examine her:

"Please Miss Ferguson, have a doctor look at me. I hurt so much. Please, I beg you. Look at my mouth".

To this, Miss Ferguson coolly replies:

"You say it hurts you. Where do you believe you feel pain?"

Let me offer you, without prior description or comment, an extract from the speech of Luciente - a mysterious visitor, who has appeared to Connie a few times in the past, in inexplicable ways - suddenly being in rooms without seeming to enter them, suddenly standing on streets where she walks alone:

Luciente beamed. "We must not chill each other. If you're patient in spite of my bumping along, we'll succeed in interseeing and comprehending each other. Alia - that's the student of blue whales - told me that after months with them, Alia can only inknow the grossest emotions or messages. Those long epic operas that are their primary pastime are still garble to per. After a whole generation of communicating with the Yif, we are merely transmitting digital code. We think of the Yif as superrational, a world of mathematicians - and maybe that's how they vision us... Anyhow if you and I suck patience, can we fail to clear our contact... Connie chuckled... "You're crazy, you know that? If I'm not".

"Crazy? No, actually I've never been able to. Jackrabbit went mad at thirteen and again at fifteen -"

"Who's this Jackrabbit?"

"I am sweet friends with Jackrabbit. Also Bee. Both are my mems too - in my family? If we work at this, I hope you'll meet them soon. Even though you laugh at this, I hope you'll meet them soon. My own work is velvet for me".

In this comfortable way, both Connie and the reader are initiated into the way of talking and thinking that Luciente and what we could call "per" people use. She is in fact female, though Connie initially perceives her as masculine, uses the masculine pronoun to describe him/her, which is nicely confusing for us. As it happens, the more we learn about Luciente's homeland (a futuristic Utopia) the less such distinctions matter - since both sexes can mother and nurture children, and, as in Herland, this job, like all others (including onerous duties) is a matter of voluntary choice. As the book develops, we have our reading time divided between the horrors of the mental hospital, and the delights of Luciente's Utopia. The point I want to stress here, though, is that, unlike the other two texts, we are hardly ever "taught" the language that Luciente and Luciente's friends use. It is very easy indeed to become an imitator (if not a native speaker) of per language. It is left to the pedantic linguist to chart out the interesting features of that language. That I shall proceed to do for you:

Vocabulary differences:

catcher (receiver of psychic messages); sender (sender of psychic messages); kenner (personal wrist-watch computer); person (a man/a woman, /he/ /she); rib (a joke); loon (a bird); mems (people in a "family" = a personal-political unit); kid binder (someone who looks after every-one's children); sweet friends (emotional lovers); pillow friends (physical lovers); hand friends (close emotional friends who are not lovers); naming (rite of passage, where an adolescent chooses per own name); end-of-mothering (same rite of passage, from the mothers' point of view); fooder (communal eating place); brooder (communal institution for artificial creation of foetuses, development of them, and birth).

to mother (to take responsibility for a baby, together with two other mothers - either male or female); to crit (ritualised act of constructive criticism); to vision (to imagine); to grasp (to understand); to be feathered (to be ready); to inknow (to know intuitively); to chill (to pour cold water); to body (to give substance to an idea); to bottom (to allow yourself to get extremely depressed not necessarily a bad thing); to guest (to

welcome).

Structural differences:

a marked decrease in objects after transitive verbs
a marked decrease in articles and markers of possession
a marked decrease in the use of pronouns, often using proper
names instead
substitution of 'person' for nominative third person pronoun
(this also means 'a man' or 'a woman')
substitution of 'per' for accusative third person pronoun.

2.4

Doris Lessing's *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five*, is clearly of this feminist Utopian tradition, and yet, linguistically, the most radical of them all, though it takes a moment's thought to see why, since as a text it seems to offer very little in the way of obtrusive linguistic innovation and challenge. Again, let me offer you an experience of reading/hearing a part of the text without prior judgement. The book opens this way:

Rumours are the begetters of gossip. Even more
are they the begetters of song. We, the Chroniclers
and song-makers of our Zone, aver that before the
partners in this exemplary marriage were awake to
what the new directives meant for both of them, the
songs were with us, and were being amplified and
developed from one end of Zone Three to the other.
And of course this was so in Zone Four.

Great to Small
High to Low
Four into Three
Cannot Go.

This was a children's counting game. I was
watching them at it from my windows the day after
I heard the news. And one of them rushed up to me
in the street with a "riddle" he had heard from
his parents: If you mate a swan and a gander, who
will ride?

What was being said and sung in the camps and
barracks of Zone Four we do not choose to record.
It is not that we are mealy-mouthed. Rather that
every chronicle has its appropriate tone.

I am saying that each despised the other? No,
we are not permitted actively to criticise the
dispensations of the Providers, but let us say

that we in Zone Three did not forget - as the doggerel chanted during those days insisted:

Three comes before Four
Our ways are peace and plenty.
Their ways - war!

It was days before anything happened.

Immediately we are thrust into a reading situation where, although we are well able to make sense of each individual word, phrase, sentence, paragraph at a simple level, we are unable to grasp the narrator's cosmology which would allow us to distinguish the taken-for-granted information from the surprising. This is a feeling which deepens and widens as the text continues:

No one had expected the marriage. It had reached even popular speculation. Zones Three and Four were doing very well, with Al.Ith for us, Ben Ata for them. Or so we thought.

Quite apart from the marriage, there were plenty of secondary questions. What could it mean that our Al.Ith was ordered to travel to the territory of Ben Ata, so that the wedding could be accomplished on his land? This was one of the things we asked ourselves.

What, in this context, was a wedding?

What, even, a marriage?

When Al. Ith first heard of the Order, she believed it to be a joke. She and her sister laughed. All of Zone Three heard how they laughed. Then arrived a message that could only be regarded as a rebuke and people came together in conferences and councils all over the Zone. They sent for us - the Chroniclers and the poets and the song-makers and the Memories. For weeks nothing was talked of but weddings and marriages, and every old tale and ballad that could be dug up was examined for information.

Messengers were even sent to Zone Five, where we believed weddings of a primitive kind did take place. But there was war all along their frontiers with Zone Four and it was not possible to get in.

We wondered if this marriage was intended to follow ancient patterns, whether Zones Three and Four should join in a festival? But the Zones could not mingle, were inimical by nature. We were not even sure where the frontier was. Our side was not guarded. The inhabitants of Zone Three, straying near the frontier, or approaching it from curiosity as children or young people sometimes did, found themselves afflicted with repugnance, or at the least by an antipathy to foreign airs and atmospheres that showed itself in a cold lethargy, like boredom.

It cannot be said that Zone Four had for us the secret attractions and fascinations of the forbidden: the most accurate thing I can say is that we forgot about it.

Ought there perhaps to be two festivals, simultaneously, and each would celebrate that our two lands, so different, could nevertheless mirror something, at least in this way? But what would be the point of that? After all, festivals and celebrations were not exactly pleasures we had to do without.

and which never, in fact, is clearly resolved. Lessing's challenge to the language-reality debate, is to deny us precisely those hints, clues, examples that allow us to become native-thinkers of these lands. When all is said and done, we have spasmodic interpretations, available for further interpretation were the novel, say, twenty pages longer. Not even the most pedantic of linguists would attempt a dictionary for you, since, in order for a lexicon to make sense, compiler and user must either share what Sperber calls "encyclopaedic knowledge" (Sperber 1975) or have access to a set of maps and descriptive networks that will explain and locate the meaning systems of the lexicon of the new language.

2.5

Let me then draw together my observations about these four tremendously interesting texts. Each of them is what I would call "an interrogative text" (see Belsey 1980, Coward & Ellis 1977). As such, they forbid a passive reading, and demand, in their various ways, that the reader participate, think, work at her or his reading and understanding. In this way they follow very clearly in the Brechtian aesthetic. You will remember how much he despised the self-indulgent emotionalism and sentimentality of traditional German theatre where "the audience may leave their brains with their hats and coats in the cloakroom", (Brecht 1937). He discusses his concept of the alienation device or effect thus:

If empathy makes something ordinary of a special event, alienation makes something special of an ordinary one. The most hackneyed, everyday incidents are stripped of their monotony when represented as quite special.

The term "defamiliarisation" that I have been using, or the term "making strange" which I could have used, as well as "alienation" all seem to me to be adequate descriptions of these texts. I hope to have indicated though, that, much as I admire them all, and appreciate the value of their interrogative qualities, they do, in fact represent a cline of sophistication in this respect. The chronological ordering also represents a progression in that sophistication, in the amount and **type** of interrogation those texts present to the reader. Charlotte Perkins Gilman offers us two worlds who have different - sharply different - evocations and associations for crucial lexical items in those worlds. These, she suggests, both mirror different social values, and help to create different perceptions of **possible** social values (two of the three men are relatively easily converted to the Herland way of life and thought). Ursula le Guin presents an altogether more complex (and problematic) comparison, where the language-reality debate is not only influenced by lexical issues, but by syntax and metaphor as well. She also does not suggest the optimistic hope of cross cultural linguistic flexibility - though, within a sympathetic culture, and between sympathetic persons, this is definitely offered as a fruitful possibility. Thus Shevek is able to explain his physicist's view of time and meaning to his non-specialist wife by altering his metaphors to suit hers (see the quotation in the Appendix, and see also Lakoff and Johnson 1980 for the linguist's nice view of this). Marge Piercy, on the whole, moves away from teaching us explicitly about the **language** of the alien culture. It is left to us, as a challenge, to get to grips with those parts of the text that seem "foreign". At first they seem difficult to grasp. Failure at first we lack vocabulary and she runs hard over too much but we know we must work to commune because we have such different frames of reading, but a catcher, a receptive, can find the door to what person is meaning. Grasp. Everybody is feathered to learn. And Doris Lessing moves us one stage further, by simply dislocating us from guide books, phrase books, encyclopaedias, history books, story books to so on, we are left in a continually questioning frame of reading.

Now, where do we go from here? Let me briefly describe for those of you unfamiliar with them, the work and ideas known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. At its most crude, and in the original formulation, it is, to say the least, unsophisticated Benjamin Lee Whorf's work (Whorf 1941a,b) on the difference he could perceive between American English, "Standard Average European" and Hopi Indian led him to assert that the **structure** of one's native language determines both ways of thinking and cultural patterns, thereby influencing one's social structure in both small details and in large issues. And by "determines" here, he means the full strength of that word. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis in its strongest (and most interesting) form suggests that one is actually heavily constrained in conceptual **potential** by the lexico-grammatical structures of one's native language or languages. Linguists have not found it difficult to criticise Whorf's assertions, making the following points, reasonably enough.

Firstly, small children clearly think (in some way) about mothers, dolls, crawling, throwing rattles out of prams for a game, and so on, before they learn to speak, whilst adults work, recognise faces, respond to complex emotional situations without recourse to speech. Secondly, it's clear that many people can, even as adults, learn a second language, and master to a significant degree whatever new conceptual divisions of the world such learning requires. Thirdly, speakers of all languages borrow lexical concepts from other languages, invent new ones of their own, and invent powerful metaphors specifically for expressing what was previously inexpressible. Fourthly, even Whorf seems to have been sufficiently free of the categorical hold of American English to understand and explain the conceptual structures of his Hopi informant.

Now, whilst at one level those are indeed reasonable criticisms, and, doubtless constitute a useful and constructive type of criticism from within the perspective of rigorous structural linguistics, when this is taken as the hermetic study of empirical phenomena, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis nonetheless remains an intriguing proposition. Recently linguists such as Bloom (1981) Bolinger (1980) Lakoff and Johnson (1980), who are

attempting to re-open interesting issues in the language-thought-reality continuum have suggested ways in which we might usefully pursue the questions suggested by Whorf's work. They do not assert his conclusions, but transform his statements interrogatively, converting them into axioms for a new - refreshingly new - theoretical approach. So, heuristically at least, they assume there **is** a relationship between one's language and one's ways of thinking. The questions they ask stem from this presupposition and we find them asking "in **what ways** are linguistic structures responsible for conceptual and cultural patterns?" A **crucial** difference for them, however, is the explicit belief (quietly held in one case, a motivating force in the others) that we are in fact able to shift our frames of reference should we want to. That is, unlike Whorf, they hold that once we are able (in a sophisticated way) to analyse and articulate the ways in which our linguistic training and cultururation **has** influenced our ways of thinking, we are able to maintain those frameworks we find enabling and to alter, adapt or transform those we find disabling! In this bold, and I should perhaps add unpopular line of argument, they lend academic linguistics support to the creative polemic of writers such as Perkins Gilman, le Guin, Piercy and Lessing. My own preference I must say, is all for the bold line of argument - particular in this case, when it links neatly with humane philosophical and political issues so well. Coupled with this, however, I would also wish to add the caveat that all bold lines of argument must listen carefully to, indeed ask for, stringent criticism from the sceptics, and wherever necessary or appropriate, modify, restrict or even jettison appealing hypotheses.

4.1

And now for some sociolinguistic implications in all this. For brevity's sake, I shall focus directly on familiar issues central to racism and sexism, and will state my opinions as boldly and contentiously as possible. I shall, therefore, necessarily oversimplify a complex case.

I am particularly interested here in the relationship between people who see themselves as oppressed minority groups in various cultures, and what they decide to do about the language of the dominant culture. Recurrently they take issue in some way.

One sweeping strategy is to opt out of that language, and speak an alternative language, dialect or argot.² Another strategy is to attempt radical re-definitions of items within the dominant discourse, whereby for example "black" is consciously upgraded to become not only a term with positive rather than negative associations, but also the preferred term (by black people) for the designation of their racial difference.³ Similarly Women's Liberationists (with whom I am not in sympathy) and Feminists (with whom I am) have attempted many linguistic changes, some of them seemingly quite trivial, much as if they were real-life equivalents of the inhabitants of the fictitious worlds we've already considered. It is precisely on the "seemingly trivial" that I want to dwell. I am thinking here of issues like: the use of Ms rather than Miss or Mrs as an honorific for all women; the use of "person" where formerly - man (or maybe - woman) was suffixed, as in "Chairperson", "craftsperson" etc; the use of she/he, him/her (or even her/him) in places where the dominant discourse would use and expect the masculine pronoun to stand for both genders. Now, I think there are many complex issues to discuss here. I want, though, to bring out a line of argument that is not generally acknowledged outside feminist-linguistics circles (or even, actually, within them, unless they are of a structural-anthropological disposition). I want to suggest that the remarkable thing about such desires for change and the attempts to impose such changes is **the reactions of those opposed to such change**. The amount of heat, anger, and trenchant conservatism that is provoked by such pressures for change deny completely the most common of the oppositional outcries, which pours scorn and derision on the **triviality** of such linguistic issues. Clearly the issues are not trivial at all if they generate such a response. Similarly the seemingly coolly rational opposition which says "we see your point, but it's so difficult to say - it makes everything sound so clumsy" is clearly off the mark. I would maintain that the clumsiness, the making strange, the defamiliarisation is **precisely** the point of such pressures for linguistic shift at this stage in the sexual political debate. Each clumsy phrase is a symbolic reminder of a far more clumsy and ill-organised social structure. It seems that the Feminist request for this small inconvenience in our everyday discursive practice is very little to ask when a substantial

proportion of the world's women are living in ways that are something considerably **more** than inconvenient. Ultimately, of course, it is not **linguistic** change that is required, but conceptual change and positive action. No one is foolish enough to believe this will happen quickly, or without difficulty for both sexes. I take it that the pressure for linguistic change is for consciousness-raising in the first instance. Linguists and lay-people who produce opposition ignoring this purpose are merely missing the point. As are Feminists and fellow-travellers who defend these changes without acknowledging this purpose, of course.

This is not to say, however, that linguistic change will **not** influence transformation in conceptual frameworks. There comes a time when these phrases stop sounding odd - though the implications of **that** would take several other papers to discuss.

4.2

I shall conclude with some implications for literary criticism, again, of necessity, stating these somewhat briefly.

It seems to be a valuable tendency in recent critical theory that it tells us we should emphasise the following; the act of reading as a process; the negotiation of meanings between text and reader; the need to articulate our reasons for prioritising any one interpretation over another; the ultimate inadequacy of any one discussion or 'closure' of a text.

Modern critical theory aligns itself with what it calls "Post-Saussurean Linguistics" (a term that's trickier than it looks). Its most enabling and forceful insights cluster around the stress made on the **non-transparency** of language, where critics demonstrate over and over again, the complexity of the relationship between linguistic expressions and the "reality" or "realities" they are helping to depict. Critical theory asks us to move away from any simple notion of that relationship, to examine and deconstruct the **linguistic** constructs that fool us into thinking we have a non-problematic grasp on the social world. In particular they praise the interrogative text - the text that, of itself, forces us to notice this problematic. Also, though, they urge us to do our deconstructive work on precisely those texts that seem least interrogative; the classic realist novel; descriptive poetry

and so on. It is with this in mind that I chose to compare the four novels above. As I hope to have shown, they are all, in their different ways open to interrogation and deconstruction. The Lessing text is the most challenging of all in that it verges on **being** the classic realist novel we all know and love - with one crucial difference. We have no easy access to background knowledge and assumptions of an **a priori** possible world **out of which** Lessing's descriptions of narrative **might appear** to have been drawn. Instead we have only her words for it. The limits of the language of her book are the limits of her fictional world. As such it should remind us that this is the case with **any** linguistic construct we encounter, however much we might like to fool ourselves otherwise. Like Brecht she reminds us to pick up our brains from the cloakrooms where we have often been encouraged to leave them. In so doing she gives responsibility back to the reader.

NOTES

¹I should perhaps clarify that I am not here referring to the massive (and theoretically unknowable) frameworks that constitute what Michel Foucault (1967, 1969), would call "the episteme". I would want to claim, with Bolinger and Bloom and Lakoff and Johnson that one may, whilst still speaking within "the same" and "the true", transform one's language, one's perceptions, one's **contributions** to the social world.

²See, for example, Michael Halliday's work on anti-languages (Halliday, 1978), or Inglehart and Woodward's work on language conflicts and the political community (1967), or various of the studies in Gumperz and Hymes (1972) and Bauman and Sherzer (1974).

³See James Baldwin (1979).

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APPENDIX

I. From Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*

(a) "We can at least give them our names", Jeff insisted.

They were very sweet about it, quite willing to do whatever we asked to please us. As to the names, Alima, frank soul that she was, asked what good it would do.

Terry, always irritating her, said it was a sign of possession. "You are going to be Mrs Nicholson", he said, "Mrs T O Nicholson. That shows everyone that you are my wife".

"What is a 'wife' exactly?" she demanded, a dangerous gleam in her eye.

"A wife is the woman who belongs to a man", he began.

But Jeff took it up eagerly: "And a husband is the man who belongs to a woman. It is because we are monogamous, you know. And marriage is the ceremony, civil and religious that joins the two together - 'until death do us part'", he finished, looking at Celis with unutterable devotion.

"What makes us all feel foolish", I told the girls, "is that here we have nothing to give you - except, of course, our names".

"Do your women have no names before they are married?" Celis suddenly demanded.

"Why, yes", Jeff explained. "They have their maiden names - their

fathers' names, that is".

"And what becomes of them?", asked Alima.

"They change them for their husbands', my dear", Terry answered her.

"Change them? Do the husbands then take the wives' 'maiden names'?"

"Oh, no", he laughed. "The man keeps his own and gives it to her, too".

"Then she just loses hers and takes a new one - how unpleasant! We won't do that!" Alima said decidedly.

(b) "Allowed?" I queried. "Allowed a mother to rear her own children?"

"Certainly not", said Somei, "unless she was fit for that supreme task".

This was rather a blow to my previous convictions.

"But I thought motherhood was for each of you -"

"Motherhood - yes, that is, maternity, to bear a child. But education is our highest art, only allowed to our highest artists".

"Education?" I was puzzled again. "I don't mean by motherhood not only child-bearing, but the care of babies".

"The care of babies involves education, and is entrusted only to the most fit", she repeated.

"Then you separate mother and child!" I cried in cold horror, something of Terry's feeling creeping over me, that there must be something wrong among these many virtues.

"Not usually", she patiently explained. "You see, almost every woman values her maternity above everything else. Each girl holds it close and dear, an exquisite joy, a crowning honor, the most intimate, most personal, most precious thing. That is, the child-rearing has come to be with us a culture so profoundly studied, practiced with such subtlety and skill, that the more we love our children the less we are willing to trust that process to unskilled hands - even our own".

"But a mother's love -" I ventured.

She studied my face, trying to work out a means of clear explanation.

"You told us about your dentists", she said, at length, "those quaintly specialised persons who spend their lives filling little holes in other persons' teeth - even in children's teeth sometimes".

"Yes?" I said, not getting her drift.

"Does mother-love urge mothers - with you - to fill their own children's teeth? Or to wish to?"

"Why no of course not", I protested. "But that is a highly specialised craft. Surely the care of babies is open to any woman - any mother!"

"We do not think so", she gently replied. "Those of us who are the most highly competent fulfil that office; and a majority of our girls eagerly try for it - I assure you we have the very best".

- (c) They had faced the problems of education and so solved them that their children grew up as naturally as young trees; learning through every sense; taught continuously - never knowing they were being educated.

In fact, they did not use the word as we do. Their idea of education was the special training they took, when half grown up, under experts. Then the eager young minds fairly flung themselves on their chosen subjects, and acquired with an ease, a breadth, a grasp, at which I never ceased to wonder.

But the babies and little children never felt the pressure of that "forcible feeding" of the mind that we call "education". Of this, more later.

- (d) "We like to keep on learning always".

"What do you study?"

"As much as we know of the different sciences. We have, within our limits, a good deal of knowledge of anatomy, physiology, nutrition - all that pertains to a full and beautiful personal life. We have our botany and chemistry, and so on - very rudimentary, but interesting; our own history, with its accumulating psychology".

"You put psychology with history - not with personal life?"

"Of course. It is ours; it is among and between us, and it changes with the succeeding and improving generations. We are at work, slowly and carefully, developing our whole people along these lines. It is glorious work - splendid! To see the thousands of babies, improving, showing stronger clearer minds, sweeter dispositions, higher capacities - don't you find it so in your country?"

This I evaded flatly. I remembered the cheerless claim that the human mind was no better than in its earliest period of savagery, only better informed - a statement I have never believed.

"We try most earnestly for two powers", Somel continued. "The two that seem to us basically necessary for all noble life: a clear, far-reaching judgement, and a strong, well-used will. We spend our best efforts, all through childhood and youth, in developing these faculties, individual judgement and will".

"As part of your system of education, you mean?"

"Exactly. As the most valuable part".

- (e) "Have you no punishments? Neither for children nor criminals - such mild criminals as you have?" I urged.

"Do you punish a person for a broken leg or a fever. We have preventive measures, and cures; sometimes we have to 'send the patient to bed', as it were; but that's not a punishment - it's only part of the treatment", she explained.

2. From Ursula le Guin's *The Dispossessed*

- (a) "Hell!" he said aloud. Pravic was not a good swearing language.

It is hard to swear when sex is not duty and blasphemy does not exist.

- (b) A small child may call any adult mamme or tadde. Guimar's tadde may have been her father, an uncle, or an unrelated adult who showed her parental or grandparental responsibility and affection. She may have called several people "tadde" or "mamme", but the word has a more specific use than "ammar" (brother/sister) which may be used to anybody.

- (c) The singular forms of the possessive pronouns in Pravic were used mostly for emphasis; idiom avoided them. Little children might say "my mother" but very soon learned to say 'the' mother. Instead of "my hand hurts", it was "the hand hurts me", and so on; to say "this is mine, and that's yours" in Pravic one said, "I use this one and you use that". Mitis' statement "you will be **his man**", had a strange sound to it. Shevek looked at her blankly.

3. From Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*

"We're all a mixed bag of genes", Luciente said. "Now I know where we'll go". She diddled with her kenner. "G'light, it's me, Luciente. Can you meet us at the brooder? I'm with Connie, the person from the past. Get White Oak to fill for you. We'll work running hard later". She turned back to Connie. "I asked Bee to meet us at the brooder. That's the yellow just-grew on the east. So much to glide over!" Luciente broke into a jog, saw that she was leaving Connie behind, and waited. "You set the pace."

"Bee is your boyfriend just out of the army? Was he drafted?"

"Crafted? Everybody takes turns. We can all use arms, we're all trained in fighting hand to hand, we can all manage facets of more complicated

operations. I can shoot a jizer".

"Women too? Did you have to go?"

"Fasure I've gone. Twice. Once at seventeen and once when we had a big mobe. I fought both times".

"Fought? And you won't go hunting?"

Luciente paused, her eyes clouding over. "A contradict. I've gone through a worming on it, yet it stays. Grasp, you never know whther you're fighting people or machines - they use mostly robots or cybernauts. You never know... Still I'd go again. At some point after naming, you decide you're ready to go".

"Ha! I bet lots of people decide never to go. Or does someone decide for you?"

"How could they? It's like being a mother. Some never mother, some never go to defend". Luciente frowned, tugging her hand through her thick black hair. "On defense your life can hang on somebody. If person didn't want to be there, person might be careless and you might suffer. If person didn't want to mother and you were a baby, you might not be loved enough to grow up loving and strong. Person must not do what person cannot do".

"Ever hear of being lazy? Suppose I just don't want to get up in the morning".

"Then I must do your work on top of my own if I'm in your base. Or in your family, I must do your defense or your childcare. I'll come to mind that. Who wants to be resented? Such people are asked to leave and they may wander from village to village sourer and more self-pitying as they go. We sadden at it". Luciente shrugged. "Sometimes a healer like my old friend Diana can help. Diana the rose. A healer can go back with you and help you grow again. It's going down and then climbing a hard path. But many heal well. Like you, Diana catches".

4. From Doris Lessing's **The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five**

The weight of discomfort on her was guilt. Although she did not know it, for she had not known of the possibility of such a state. Recognising, among the many calamitous that moved in her, taking so many different shades and weights and colours, this one that returned, and returned, seeming at last to become the ground or inner substance of all the others, she learned its taste and texture. Guilt she named, it. I, Al-Ith, am at fault. Yet whenever this thought came, she started to back away from it in dislike and mistrust. How could ~~she~~, Al-Ith, be at fault, how could ~~she~~, only she, be in the wrong... she might be in bondage to Zone Four, but she had not lost the

operations. I can shoot a jizer".

"Women too? Did you have to go?"

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knowledge, which was the base of all knowledges, that everything was entwined and mixed and mingled, all was one, that there was no such a wrong, then this must be the property of everyone, and everybody in everyone of the Zones - and doubtless beyond them, too. This thought struck Al-Ith sharply, like a reminder. She had not thought, not for very long, about what went on beyond the Zones... for that matter, she thought very little now about Zones One and Two - and Twolay just there, to the northwest, beyond a horizon that seemed to fold and unfold in blue or purple... She had not looked there for... for... she could not remember. She was on a slight eminence, in the centre of the western regions. She got off the noble Yori, and with her arm flung across his neck for comfort, allowed herself to gaze northwest, into Zone Two. What lay there? She had no idea! She had not thought! She had not wondered! Or had she, a long time ago? She could not remember ever standing as she did now, gazing there, wondering, allowing her eyes to be drawn into those long, blue, deceiving distances... her eyes seemed to be drawn and follow, and become dissolved in blue, blue, blue,... a mingling, changing, rippling blue... Al-Ith came to herself after a lapse into the deepest region of herself, with a knowledge born that she knew would hatch out. Not yet, but soon. ... "It's there", she was whispering to herself. "There... if I could only grasp it..."



Doris Lessing