Women's language: a struggle to overcome inequality*

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Abstract

This paper attempts to show that the intellectual construct *women's language* is entirely justified on a political, ideological, and economic basis that stresses the fact that women have historically been victims of overt (and covert) discrimination and exploitation in our society. Linguistically speaking, however, a women's language seems not to exist in traditional strict terms, but rather as a rhetorical term used in the form of a synecdoche. Despite their incompleteness, two attempts of characterizing truly women languages, Nu Shu and Láadan, are discussed, underlining and recognizing their legitimate symbolic value as equalizing manoeuvres. Women have resorted to more subtle linguistic means to emerge as visible agents in our society. Linguistic resources go from a passive acceptance of the traditional all-inclusive generic masculine forms, through the equalizing use of both masculine and feminine markers, to the most progressive, liberal and controversial strategies of using feminizing forms, i.e. all-inclusive generic feminine forms. Women's struggle to overcome inequity and inequality is a legitimate endeavour which is leaving visible linguistic traces in our languages. Women are changing languages around the world.

***Key words**:* Women's language, Nu Shu, Láadan, inclusive linguistic masculine forms, masculine and feminine linguistic forms, inclusive feminine linguistic forms.

1. Women's language

Robin Lakoff's seminal book *Language and Women's Place* (1975) opened a new strand in linguistic studies when she called the attention to a traditionally

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forgotten issue: the differences in language used by men and women. Lakoff's work was not an aseptic academic contribution to linguistics, but rather it portrayed a clear situation of inequality in society and how it was reinforced by the use of language by men and women. In Lakoff's own words:

> This book, then, is an attempt to provide diagnostic evidence from language use for one type of inequity that has been claimed to exist in our society: that between the roles of men and women. I will attempt to discover what language use can tell us about the nature and extent of inequity; and finally to ask whether anything can be done, from the linguistic end of the problem: does one correct a social inequity by changing linguistic disparities? We will find, I think, that women experience linguistic discrimination in two ways: in the way they are taught to use language, and in the way general language use treats them. Both tend, as we shall see, to relegate women to certain subservient functions: that of sex object, or servant; and therefore lexical items mean one thing applied to men, another to women, a difference that cannot be predicted except with reference to the different roles the sexes plays in society. (P.4)

In her book, Lakoff elaborated on the hypothesis that women have traditionally been discriminated against in society, among other things, because of the way they are taught to use language: *girls don't ask questions* (they should accept things), *they are not rough* (they should be polite). This linguistic behavior is learned. Children until the age of five share a common language; then it splits up. Girls, later women, learn to talk like a lady by displaying differences at the linguistic levels, e.g. lexical (use of color names: *The wall is mauve*; particles: *Oh, dear*, vs. a man's remark with an expletive: *Shit, you've put the peanut butter in the fridge again!*). At the syntactic level, Lakoff mentions the use of tag questions. According to her, a man would say: *Is John here?*, whereas a woman would say: *John is here, isn't he?* This use of tag questions would indicate tentativeness and insecurity on the part of the woman uttering this expression. She also recorded some intonation patterns typical of women's language, e.g. *When will dinner be ready? Oh..., around six o'clock?* The woman's answer reflects her adherence to politeness as a norm of women's language. Lakoff then summarizes some other linguistic means used typically by women: empty adjectives (*charming, cute*), hedges (*well, you know*), hypercorrect grammar (inattentive pronunciation of *singin'*, or use of *ain't*), superpolite forms, and no sense of humor.

Although Lakoff acknowledges that these linguistic features typical of women's language can also be used by men, she says that women resort to their use more often because in our society men are generally listened to and taken seriously, whereas women, if they are to be *suitable females*, are not taken

seriously; they are portrayed as having *dim intelligence*, and are therefore caught in a dilemma: they are damned if show they are intelligent –because they are not supposed to be- and damned if they are dumb –because they would comply with the social stereotype. Moreover, Lakoff underlines that these linguistic features typical of women's language are general tendencies and correspond to spoken, not written language.

During the last three decades, Lakoff's ideas have been appraised, discussed, disputed, accepted and/or rejected. For instance, some authors (e.g. P. Fishmann 1980; 1983) attempted to look for different explanations from those of personality and socialization presented by Lakoff for women's insecure talk. By analyzing data of three male-female couples recorded at home, Fishmann discovered that women actually asked more questions than men and hypothesized that, based on her conversational analysis, women are not insecure but ask questions constantly as a conversational strategy in order to steer the conversation to the topics they are interested in. Thus in so doing women are actually exercising their conversational power. However, she confirmed, as predicted by Lakoff, that women have more trouble starting conversation and keeping it going when they are talking with men. Fishmann conclusion is that "women's conversational troubles reflect not their inferior social training but their inferior social position". It's not a matter of gender but of hierarchy. The author also hypothesized that male and female power relations are reflected in conversations and concluded that there is an unequal distribution of work in conversation: women tried more often to contribute to conversations e.g. by asking questions, because they also succeeded less often. Women's topics are tentative and quickly dropped in conversation due to men's lack of cooperation.

Other authors (D.Cameron, F.McAlinden & Kathy O'Leary 1988) openly criticized Lakoff's method of research because of its lack of empirical basis. (Lakoff had relied on her own introspection and the unsystematic observation of casual conversations to draw her conclusions on women's language). Cameron et al found fault with Lakoff's hypothesis for identifying *one* linguistic form (e.g. tag questions) with *one* function (speaker's insecurity), thereby neglecting the multifunctional nature of language use. They also advocated for a revision of women's language being labeled as deficient and proposed instead that men and women have different discourse norms.

M. Crawford's (1995) stance focuses on a different issue. She is interested in discussing how gender relations are enacted and maintained in talk. Her hypothesis is that the meaning of a sex difference is the product of social negotiation; it is culturally produced. She also criticizes women's language as being labeled as deficient, and advocates for a social constructionist approach,

opposed to an essentialist approach. Gender is seen as a social construct, i.e. it is not an attribute of individuals but a way of making sense transactions. It is not a noun, but a verb. It is not passive but active. Gender as a system is "what culture makes out of the raw material of already socially constructed biologically sex". Gender is also a system of power relations, where men have more public power than women. In this social constructivist view of language, "reality constructed through language forms the basis of social organization". Crawford's assessment of research on women's language as proposed by Lakoff is rather cautious: "The 'real' differences seem more elusive than ever". She also criticizes Lakoff's static view of language. In Crawford's social constructivist perspective there is a complex relationship between form and function of an utterance. She proposes to reframe women's language by introducing the concept of *doing gender*, i.e. to move from the individual's speech to the dynamic interaction by making the effects of gender visible.

On their part, J. Bing & V. Bergvall (1996) focus on *The question of questions: beyond binary thinking*. Their point of departure is that our experience does not fit into binary categories, such as males/females. Language has also been biased towards dichotomies and clear boundaries. Therefore we have problems when faced with scalar values and boundaries which are difficult to recognize and accept. Their initial question is whether the boundaries male/female are justified. And their answer is a negative one: there are actually more than two sexes/sexualities. Sex is socially constructed; it is a continuum, not a dichotomy. They criticized Lakoff's presupposition of this dichotomy because the dichotomy is imposed and reinforced by the very fact of asking in dichotomist terms: male or female. The opposition male/female is based on biological essentialism. But they ask: who does the defining? According to the authors it is in the 18th century that a shift took place from *one*- sex view of the body to *two*-sex view. Women were seen as incapable and dependent; as incomplete, underdeveloped men. According to J.Epstein –the authors say- a 1964 medical textbook read: "There is no standard, legal or medical definition of sex".

Intersexed individuals represent 1/30,000 newborns; 10% being true hermaphrodites. An intersexed child would become male or female, according to the specialist in charge of the case: if it is a paediatric endocrinologist, then the child will be operated on to become a female; if it is the urologist's say, the child will become a male. The authors claim that the medical profession enforces a binary division, suppressing diversity. As some scientists have argued for a clear differentiation between men's and women's brains, the authors quote Efron (1990) saying: "we do not at present understand the cognitive function of *any* brain area, let alone an entire hemisphere". They further wonder why linguists are so

inactive in the discussion on language-gender and answer that it is most comfortable to accept the difference (dichotomist) model. They finish by proposing "to examine the *presuppositions* underlying different *communities of practice* without preconceived ideas about language and gender."

A new trend in the studies on women's language is presented by J. Holmes & M. Meyerkoff (1999), when they proposed to integrate the concept of community of practice (also mentioned by Bing & Bergvall) into this research field. They start by analyzing the concept of community of practice as it was introduced by Eckert & McConnell-Ginet in 1992: "Aggregate of people who come together around a mutual engagement in an endeavor. It's defined by its membership and by the practice". They distinguish three dimensions that may prove useful when doing research on gender and language: mutual engagement (how participants interact regularly), joint enterprise (mutual accountability and negotiating; building its contributors), shared repertoire of joint resources. According to the authors, this concept has the potential to link macro- and micro-level analysis.

This quick review of some of the research that has evolved and revolved around the concept of women's language has gone far beyond the mono-disciplinary linguistic boundaries. In Lakoff's view a socializing process was responsible for women's characteristic tentative and superpolite use of language. Fishmann attempted to analyze some of the linguistic features mentioned by Lakoff by resorting to a conversational analysis and also mentioned the social power relations as a factor that could account for women's linguistic behaviour. Cameron et al see in women's peculiarities in language use a reflection of different discourse norms. Crawford advocates for the understanding of gender as a dynamically constructed concept through language use. Bing & Bergvall reassess the basic biological dichotomy male/female from a cultural viewpoint and question its alleged validity. And, Holmes & Meyerkoff propose to see the gender-language issue in boundary-flexible communities of practice as the unit of research analysis.

All in all we think that Lakoff's initial concern is still valid today: there is a clear inequity in the social roles men and women play in our societies. In order to make her point, Lakoff resorted to some generalizations and necessary abstractions which have also been criticized by some black women scholars.

2. Black women's language?

In an article written by Denise Troutman-Robinson[1] we read that pioneering studies of "language and woman's place" have been conducted, but these studies

[1] http://college.hmco.com/history/readerscomp/women/html/wh_004100_blackwomensl.htm

have generally not addressed language patterns representative of a cross-section of women. Rather, the work on women's speech behavior has concentrated on the language of European American, middle-class speakers, thus conveying the false impression that all women use language in the same ways, regardless of race, class, ethnicity, or age. Linguistic data on African American women "are essential if we are to understand how the community expresses its reality, because women historically have been responsible for the language development of their children and therefore their community", according to Marcia Morgan.

The first part of Troutman-Robinson's statement clearly refers to research based on Lakoff's initial characterization of women's language. Lakoff's research population -and that of most of follow-up research- was "European-American, middle class speakers". It is also evident that the black community in the United States displays some specific linguistic features that have been studied by several authors, especially by William Labov (1972), whose characterization of the English of Black Americans is well-known. The second part of Troutman-Robinson's statement is justified to the extent that the American black community has gone through a traumatic historical process of dehumanization, slavery, and discrimination, and only recently with the Civil Rights movement of the 60s and the general implementation by the United Nations of an internationally recognized policy on Human Rights, it has achieved some visibility and respect in the American society.

According to Denise Troutman-Robinson, researchers, such as Marsha Houston Stanback (1985) and Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis (1996), have characterized black women's language as having four key features: 1) signifying, 2) reading dialect, 3) culturally toned diminutives, and 4) bold speech, or "smart talk." The author summarizes the first of them as follows:

> *Signifying* refers to a form of ritualized insult in which a speaker puts down, talks about, needles—signifies on—the listener. The signifier always employs humor, which is a face-saving strategy for the person being signified on. In addition, a speaker may signify by talking about the targeted person's mother, or occasionally about relatives of the target. For example, Betty signifies on Linda in the following:
>
> *Linda*: Girl, what up with that head? [Referring to her friend's hairstyle]
> *Betty*: Ask yo momma.
> *Linda*: Oh, so you going there, huh?
>
> Instead of answering Linda's question directly, Betty chooses to inform Linda that her hairstyle is none of Linda's business by responding with "Ask yo momma." Betty's response is taken humorously by Linda and any others present. Since the

> normal expectation in a conversation is that a speaker's question will be answered honestly and sincerely, the unexpected indirection ("Ask yo momma") produces laughter. Linda clearly recognizes Betty's entry into the realm of ritualized insult, as indicated by her response, "Oh, so you going there, huh?"

It is very interesting to note that one of Lakoff's initial features of women's language was its allegedly lack of humor. As can be seen in the aforementioned feature of black women's talk, humor is a central component of conversational interaction among black women. As to the second feature of women's talk, Troutman-Robinson says:

> *Reading dialect* is a way of making a point by contrasting the Black community's two languages, Black English and Euro-American English, through the use of words, sentences, or discourse structures. Speakers select a contrasting feature in the two speaking styles to "read" a conversational partner, that is, to denigrate that person verbally, or to tell her off. Among African American women, a common way of reading dialect is through use of the expression "Miss Thang." In order to communicate dissatisfaction, one person may refer to another as "Miss Thang": "We were doing all right until Miss Thang decided she didn't want to go along with the program." The expression "Miss Thang" among African American women is a direct put-down, conveyed by use of the Black vernacular form "thang." The broader African American speech community, as well as the African American women's speech community, interprets "thang" negatively, since a thing is an object, lacking an identity or other human qualities.

We would say that the use of *thang*, a distorted pronunciation of *thing*, would be a linguistic identity marker among African American women. In contrast to Lakoff's features of women's language, e.g. tag questions which are used not only by women by also by men, this could be a truly linguistic feature of women's language, in this case, black women's talk, to the extent that members, male or female, outside this community would very seldom resort to the use of this word to tell someone off. Let's see the third feature of black women's talk:

> *Culturally toned diminutives* are a major conversational feature resonant in African American women's speech. These forms are used to show solidarity, although in other communities they might be perceived as terms that diminish a person. For generations, African American women have used diminutives, such as *girl, honey, child, baby*, and so on, to refer to someone who is likeable, loveable, or a social intimate. The diminutive "girl", for example, is a highly popular word used by African American females to show solidarity in all spheres of existence, public or private, and among all age groups. An African American five-year-old may say to her eight-year-old sister, "Girl, you bed' stop dat" or "Girl, you crazy." The same expressions can be

used by adult Black females, and the females involved do not have to be blood relatives. They may be neighbours, classmates, playmates, church members, club members, or colleagues. In contemporary times, *girl* has even expanded to *girlfriend*.

Both "girl" and "girlfriend" are words that establish solidarity and may be used to bridge social distance, even when the females engaged in a conversation are strangers. Both terms are in current and frequent use. One exception is the case of African American women over the age of sixty-five who will use "girl", but not "girlfriend." These women have a long history of saying "girl" and may not be prone to using the new term. Their reticence about using the new term is similar to the linguistic practice of older African Americans, male and female, who continue to use "Negro" (or even "Colored") rather than "Black" or "African American" as their term of racial identification.

The use of culturally toned diminutives –not grammatical diminutives- seems to fulfil a very important role among black women to the extent that it embodies and conveys the message of solidarity. Again, as in the case of *thang*, we think that the use of *girl* would be a group identity marker, and what makes it more remarkable is the fact that it can be used among black women of different age, in different contexts (private and public) and even when talking with strangers. Troutman-Robinson depicts the last feature of black women's talk as follows:

"*Smart talk*" is an overall characteristic of African American women's speech. Black women use language in an assertive, bold, outspoken manner. In a conversation among three women friends, one woman remarked, "I'm glad I don't have a man around 'cause I can do whatever the hell I want to do." Terry McMillan, in her 1992 novel *Waiting to Exhale*, creates authenticity in her women characters by the use of "smart talk." McMillan's main character, Savannah, punctuates her sentences with this style of speech from the novel's beginning: "Sheila, my baby sister, insisted on giving me his [Lionel's] phone number because he lives here in Denver and her simpleass husband played basketball with him eleven years ago at the University of Washington." This feature of Black women's discourse departs from the so-called "code of feminine politeness" characteristic of European American women. Instead of Marilyn Frye's depiction of women who "live in cages", that is, women who know their "place", African American women boldly assert their right to define their place in the world through the use of smart talk.

Interestingly enough, this last feature of black women's speech also seems to contradict Lakoff's initial stance about women's language clearly characterized as being superpolite. The question here is to try to establish whether this *smart talk* occurs only when women are present or if it is also openly used in men's presence. (My personal experience tells me that in Spanish (spoken in Colombia), during the last decade or so, the young generation of school/college girls are

gradually approximating the use of swear words, formerly an exclusive feature of male language. They curse as much as men do and not only among themselves but also when interacting with men. In this case, swearing seems to have a symbolic meaning of equalizing male and female roles in speech and, through it, in society. It is clearly an act of linguistic and social emancipation. However, the older generations of women seem to be still quite *conservative* in this respect. Here a generation gap seems to be very evident.)

In the previous two sections we have attempted to show how the notion of women's language has been gaining recognition and has become the subject of scientific research in several disciplines. But a key question is still to be answered: Is there actually *a* women's language? That is, can we conceive of a *whole* language, not only features thereof, that is exclusively used by women? Next, I'd like to present two cases which could possibly answer this question: Nu Shu (Nüshu) the *world's only women's language*, as has been labelled, and Láadan, a constructed language created by Suzette Haden Elgin.

3. Nu shu: the world's only women's language?

According to the internet site Women of China 2001[2], Nu Shu (Nüshu), the world's only women's language was discovered in China almost by chance:

> In 1982, Gong Zhebing, a teacher from the South-Central China Institute for Nationalities, accompanied his students to Jiangyong County, in Hunan Province, where they hoped to investigate local customs and culture. There they found a strange calligraphy used only by women, which men did not use or understand. It was referred to as "nüshu" (women's script) in the locality. Gong Zhebing instantly realized the importance of these characters, which despite having a long history had never been seen before.
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> With the help of Professor Yan Xuejiong, a linguist, the institute established a research group on this special language. Researchers went to Jiangyong to investigate, where they collected calligraphy samples and recordings of women reading nüshu and found evidence of a 20,000 word vocabulary. It was not long before nüshu was causing ripples of excitement both at home and abroad. Hence nüshu, which has been passed quietly from woman to woman in Jiangyong for unknown centuries, has finally left its rural home. The secret is out.

If research is further carried out it could be established with certainty whether it is actually a language used exclusively by women. It seems to be a calligraphy used *only* by women. If it were a women's language, different from the Chinese

[2] http://www.chinavoc.com/life/focus/wmbook.asp

dialect spoken in Jiangyong, then men would not understand it. However, the article tells us that despite the fact that it cannot be read by men, it *can* actually be understood by men if they *hear it aloud*:

> According to studies by the Central-South China Institute for Nationalities, nüshu has finally been defined as a written language, which contains more than 2,000 characters. The content of nüshu writings have proved to be revealing about society, history, nationality and culture. It is now listed as one of the world's most ancient languages and the only exclusively female language ever discovered. It is, however, a written language only. Women formed their own written symbols to represent the words in their local dialect. Hence men can usually understand nüshu if they hear it read aloud.

What is interesting and fascinating about this discovery of a female calligraphy in Chinese is that it allowed women to express themselves in their daily and routinely activities. It was a kind of *subversive* written language, to which men seemingly had no access or simply were not interested in it:

> They wrote their female script on fans, paper, handkerchiefs or embroidered the characters on cloth. Sometimes, they used the characters to make patterns and wove them into quilt covers and braces. When a woman got married, other women would write nüshu for the occasion. In temple fairs, they would write and chant prayers written in nüshu.
>
> Among sworn sisters, nüshu was often used to write letters. Nüshu letters reflect women's joy and sorrow. A large amount of nüshu work focuses on women's oppression and the suffering they experienced in feudal society.

It is easy to understand all efforts that are being made nowadays to keep a living record of this almost extinct *language*. Film-maker Yang Yueqing[3], who went to Joangyong, said that there were only two people left on the mainland who could write Nu Shu or "Women's Language", villagers Yang Huangyi, 89, and He Yanxin, 55, who had learned Nu Shu as girls. He made a documentary of them and presented it at the 18th Vancouver International Film Festival. Chinese scholars at the research center for the women's language of the Central-south China Institute for Nationalities[4] have also expressed their interest in protecting and studying Nu Shu. There are plans to create a protection zone in Jiangyong County, to build a museum and to collect cultural relics related to the language. Yuelu Publishing House in Hunan is also "compiling a dictionary covering the history, pronunciation, meaning and written style of the characters of the language."[5]

[3] http://china.tyfo.com/int/literature/impression/20000103impression.htm
[4] http://www.edu.cn/20020411/3024858.shtml
[5] http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2002-04/17/content_362454.htm

4. Láadan: a female constructed language

As I was doing research for this paper I came across the entry of a seemingly unknown language: Láadan. This is a constructed language created by Suzette Haden Elgin. On her homepage[6] we find a brief biography of the author:

> Suzette Haden Elgin was born in Missouri in 1936. All sorts of things happened, and in the late 60s she found herself widowed, re-married, mother of five, and a graduate student in the Linguistics Department of the University of California San Diego. Since everyone knew in those days that mothers-of-five hadn't a prayer of making it to the Ph.D., money for school was scarce; even teaching high school at night didn't cover the bills. Suzette therefore began writing science fiction novels to pay her tuition. She did survive graduade school, with the distinction of being the only student ever to have to write two dissertations (one on English, one on Navajo) for that purpose; she went on to teach linguistics at San Diego State University, and then retired in 1980 to the Arkansas Ozarks, where she can still be found. She has grandchildren (twelve of them) worldwide.

In line with science fiction stories and novels where new languages had been created, e.g. the Klingon language in Mark Okrand's *Star Trek* or Elvish in Tolkien's *The Lord of The Rings*, Haden Elgin put together Láaden for her novel *Native Tongue*, whose plot "revolved around a group of women, all linguists, engaged in constructing a language specifically designed to express the perceptions of human women." Haden Elgin elaborates even more on the reasons for creating Láaden:

> Láadan was described as a language designed to express the perceptions of women. I had to find out what that *meant*; I had to find out what design elements could plausibly be included in such a project. [Note: Here, and in the material that follows, please understand that I'm referring to English-speaking women and to American English unless I specify otherwise; I'm not qualified to talk or write about women in their roles as native speakers of other languages.]
>
> When I did teaching or "public speaking" about the problems women have with language, people would ask this question: "If women aren't satisfied with the language they have, how come they've never made up a language of their own? How come there aren't any languages constructed by women?" I was distressed by that question; I wasn't aware at that time of the language constructed by Hildegard of Bingen, for example. It seemed to me that it would be useful for me to do a language, and specifically a language designed to express female perceptions – just so that I could say that it had been *done*.

[6] http://www.sfwa.org/members/elgin/

Let's see the definitions of some Láadan words, which, according to Haden Elgin, are to reflect women's perceptions:

Ashon	love for one who is not related by blood but is heart-kin
Azháadin	to menopause uneventfully
Dólhorado	to dominate with evil intent
Eeme	love for one neither liked nor respected
Héena	sibling of the heart
Lewidan	to be pregnant for the first time
Loláad	to perceive internally, to feel
Móna	compassion for foolish reasons
Núháam	to feel oneself cherished, cared for, nurtured by someone
Radena	unfriendliness for good reasons
Wonewith	to be socially dyslexic; uncomprehending of signals of others

Now, let's see some sentences in Láadan:

1a. Bíi ada with wa. (The woman laughs.)
1b. Bíi ada ra with wa. (The woman doesn't laugh.)
1c. Báa ada with? (Does the woman laugh?)

[Literally: Bíi (I-say-to-you-as-a-statement), or Báa (I-say-to-you-as-a-question); ada (laughs); with (woman); wa (true-because-I-observed-it-with-my-own-senses.) Plus "ra", which means "no" or "not." Note: "The man" would be "withid" – "with" plus the masculine ending "-id."]

2a. Bíi lema with wa. (The woman is gentle.)
2b. Bíi lema ra with wa. (The woman isn't gentle.)
2c. Báa lema with? (Is the woman gentle?)
3a. Bíi wida with yuth wa. (The woman carries the fruit. Fruit: "yu")
3b. Bíi wida ra with yuth wa. (The woman doesn't carry the fruit.)
3c. Báa wida with yuth? (Does the woman carry the fruit?)
4a. Bíi shulin ili wa. (The water overflows.)
4b. Bíi shulin ra ili wa. (The water doesn't overflow.)
4c. Báa shulin ili? (Does the water overflow?)

Haden Elgin explains that she created a women's language because existing human languages are inadequate to express women's perceptions. So she set up the experiment that if her hypothesis were true, then in a ten-year period, women would have welcomed Láadan, and adopted it as their language. Since her novel *Native Tongue* was published in 1984, 10 years had already elapsed in 1994 and women had not adopted the new language. "It was well worth the effort" she

admits with resignation. And she adds: "Meanwhile, the Klingon language thrives –from which you are free to draw your own conclusions."

Now we can come back to our previous question: Is there actually *a* women's language? That is, can we conceive of a *whole* language, not only features thereof, that is exclusively used by women? Based on the brief description of both Nu Shu, and Láadan, we can say that these are close approximations to a women's language but cannot be considered as such. In the case of Nu Shu, all seems to point to the fact that it is not *a* different dialect/language used exclusively by women. It is calligraphy of a Chinese dialect spoken by both women and men, but that is known only to women and used to be transmitted from one generation of women to the next. Despite its importance, the writing system of a language does not constitute a language by itself. On the other hand, Láadan, the language constructed by Suzette Haden Elgin, is *a* language in the usual linguistic sense of the word, but once a language it can be used both by women and men to express not just women's perceptions but *human* perceptions. Thus it could not be said to be exclusively a women's language either. In other words, even a language created by a woman to be used by women to express more accurately their perceptions, once it is made public it could also been used by male members of the community.

We can say that the term *women's language* has been used rhetorically as a synecdoche. A part of a language has been identified with the whole language, e.g. the use of English tag questions or hedges by women does not automatically make English a women's language, even if it would be proved that only women –which seems not to be the case- make a particular use of those linguistic features of the English language. It is also evident that women have traditionally been discriminated against in our societies.

Women's struggle to overcome social and linguistic inequity has been made visible especially in language use, e.g. by pointing out certain preferred lexis or structures of their talk (both of white and black women), by forging a secret writing system as Nu Shu women did for centuries or by creating a fiction intended female language as Suzette Haden Elgin did. Next, we will analyze some examples of how women's language has gradually achieved visibility and recognition in an overall male dominated linguistic scenario.

5. Female language markers: a fight for visibility

Some languages already have a repertoire of linguistic means which are used exclusively by men and women. For instance, in Japanese women would use particles and interjections different from those used by men, and women would generally

speak with a higher degree of politeness than men. In Yana, a Native American Language spoken in northern California, men and women's speech is clearly grammatically differentiated. Men and women would use different forms of the language depending on their male or female conversation partners[7].

However, many languages studied so far seem to display a dominant male character, e.g. the names of prestigious activities and professions are expressed with grammatically generic masculine forms. Female-language raising awareness groups have been very active in calling attention to the fact that the use of a female marker in some lexical and grammatical instances of a language, especially when women are agents in the activities linguistically depicted, is justified and constitutes an emancipating act. Furthermore, women have been denied recognition of the very activities they have historically performed, especially if they threatened male predominance. As Sherry Simon (2000) reminds us, in the case of women involved in writing careers during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, they could be visible not as full-fledged writers but *only* as translators[8]:

> Translation was a particularly important writing activity for women during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, when they were otherwise excluded from public writing careers. During this long period, translation was one of the few writing activities that were socially approved for women [...] Translation offered an opportunity for women to become involved in literary culture in a way that did not openly challenge social or literary power arrangements.(p.27).

In the remaining of this paper, I will show some examples I have gathered from different sources in several languages, where women participation as active agents in society has been concealed or revealed through various linguistic means.

5.1.Masculine (inclusive generic) forms

Here we have plenty of examples. Perhaps the most common of all is the use of a singular or plural generic masculine form to convey the meaning of both male and female doing the same activities. Some languages like Spanish have tended to favour this use, especially in the press, even when texts are written by women (the relevant items are italicized):

---

[7] http://home.bluemarble.net/~langmin/miniatures/women.htm

[8] We'd like to mention here two controversial strategies that are being used nowadays by feminist translators: 'hijacking', i.e. feminizing an original unmarked text, and the use of inclusive language, i.e. erasing patriarchal traces, in biblical translations. An interesting and enlightening paper in this respect is Luise von Flotow's on-line article (2002).

Historiadores latinoamericanos impulsan cambio en la enseñanza de la materia.

> Según los *expertos*, eso no va en contravía de inculcar a *niños y jóvenes* el sentido de patria y nación; al contrario, lo desarrolla más. […]
>
> Eso significa que hay una historia escrita desde el campo militar y desde los palacios presidenciales, elaborada por los *héroes militares y políticos* de cuya voluntad depende la narración de esos hechos.
>
> Ángela Constanza Jerez
> Subeditora de Vida de Hoy
> (El Tiempo, Julio 17 de 2004)

La generación malcriada. (Opinión)

> Recientemente salió en Estados Unidos un libro llamado *La epidemia,* donde el psiquiatra Roberto Shaw critica a *los padres* de hoy que en su opinión están criando "seres egoístas y sin posibilidad de ser felices." Dice que los *niños* son individuos a los cuales se les ha dado gusto en todo hasta el punto que hemos creado una generación que perdió la capacidad de ver los sentimientos y necesidades de los demás. El resultado de *padres* ocupados y exceso de TV. nos ha llevado a esta "epidemia" de *jóvenes* mal educados, infelices y quejumbrosos.
>
> Ellos lo saben bien, pues muchos son producto de hogares donde *ambos padres* trabajaban y para mitigar culpas, le daban de "todo y más" a los *hijos*. Estos *padres jóvenes* están haciendo lo contrario, pues vienen hastiados de la falta de límites y ven en muchos de sus *amigos* los efectos negativos como son la falta de responsabilidad, el egocentrismo y el exceso en todo.
>
> La mayoría de los psicólogos que trabajamos con *niños* estamos de acuerdo con Shaw y vemos con temor el futuro, aunque nos tranquiliza ver una reacción bastante sana de los nuevos *padres*.
>
> Annie de Acevedo
> Psicóloga
> (El Tiempo, Julio 17 de 2004)

The use of masculine inclusive generic forms in these examples seems to correspond to the current norm of Spanish use. Despite the fact that both authors of these sample texts are women, masculine plural forms have been used, which in this type of text released by the media apparently have no negative or exclusive connotation. In the first example it is clear that *historiadores, héroes militares y políticos* refer inclusively to male and female historians, military heroes and politicians. Likewise in the second example *padres* implies 'parents'; *niños* evokes male and female children, and *jóvenes* and *amigos* refer to young men and women and male and female friends, respectively. This discourse strategy used

by both female authors could be interpreted as a common occurrence in modern Spanish. In this sense it could be said that these authors are not interested in displaying an overt manifestation of their female status as writers. From the stylistic point of view it could be added that the text would seem pedantic and unnecessarily loaded if the corresponding plural feminine forms had been included, e.g. *Historiadores e historiadoras latinoamericanos (y latinoamericanas?), expertos y expertas, heroes y heroinas militares; los padres y las madres, los hijos y las hijas, etc.*

Another case which seems to conform to the norms of a language, i.e. German, is the use of singular impersonal forms which traditionally have been marked with masculine in their corresponding pronominal forms:

Dienstpläne, selbst gebastelt.

Flexibel heißt nicht beliebig: Wie Unternehmen mit alternativen Arbeitszeitmodellen experimentieren

> Wenn jemand eine Woche lang morgens die Kinder zum Kindergarten bringen muss oder an einem bestimmten Tag einen Arzttermin hat, kann er im Team klären, dass jemand anders für ihn arbeitet." Auch der Zank um begehrte Ausgleichstage hält sich in Grenzen, das System reguliert sich selbst. „Die Mitarbeiter achten sehr genau auf Fairness," sagt Schilling. „Wenn jemand schon einen freien Samstag hatte, muss er eben das nächste Mal einen Mittwoch nehmen." Die Geschäftsleitung spricht von einer Win-Win-Situation: Das neue Modell ist bedarfsorientiert und wird so den Kunden gerecht. Gleichzeitig fühlen sich die Mitarbeiter weniger fremdbestimmt.
>
> (Süddeutsche.de, 16.07.2004)

The impersonal form *jemand (someone)* has corresponding masculine pronominal forms *er (he)* and *ihn (him)*, which do not exclude possible female referents. (This masculine marking in German is neutralized in other languages, e.g. in English by using some pronouns with impersonal meaning *someone, one, you, they, etc.*). It is clear that languages have different resources, sometimes masculine-marked, for making reference to an impersonal form. For an outsider, a non-native speaker of German, this use of masculine inclusive pronominal forms could indicate a German linguistic behaviour to favour male over female grammatical forms. However, it is still to be determined in a diachronic research to what extent the predominance of some forms over others is linked to a clear ideological stand. One runs the risk of oversimplifying matters when one states that a synchronic opposition (prevalence of male over female grammatical forms) does indicate a current ideological stand without taking into consideration the

moment in the history of the language –if it is ever determined- when this opposition was initially fixed.

Another crucial issue of gender-marked language use arises when one analyzes not only masculine plural inclusive terms, but also singular names which relate to professions or activities carried out by both men and women. It is very important to see the continuation or the shift in the use of traditionally gender-marked professions. Whenever a trend towards shift appears it indicates that some consciousness-raising and gender-ideology-related issue is at stake. Some of the most interesting changes are now taking place in academic texts, especially in human sciences texts. By their nature, human sciences texts have to do with controversial issues regarding the description, analysis and explanation of human behaviour. Language-related disciplines such as translation studies are prone to displaying some of the most remarkable inter-linguistic behaviour as two languages and cultures get in contact. The tension between tradition and change is constantly reflected not only on translated texts but also on translation studies literature itself. Let's see some examples in the field of translation studies literature in German and English:

Vorwort

> Der vorliegende Band enthält eine Sammlung von Aufsätzen verschiedener *Autoren* – es sind insgesamnt sechzehn *Autoren*, die vorwiegend aus dem deutschsprachigen Raum stammen, aber in acht verschiedenen Landern täatig sind, und sich alle hauptberuflich mit dem Übersetzen bzw. der Übersetzungswissenschaft beschäftigen.
>
> Vielmehr soll *der Leser* mit neuen Gedanken und Ideen konfrontiert werden, die die verschiedenen Perspektiven seines Faches widerspiegeln, und mit denen er sich kritisch auseinandersetzen kann.
>
> (Mary Snell-Hornby, 1986)

Translating: A Political Act

> *The translator* can artificially create the reception context of a given text. *He* can be the authority who manipulates the culture, politics, literature, and their acceptance (or lack thereof) in the target culture. (p.2)
>
> (Álvarez R & Carmen-África Vidal, 1996)

The Meek or the Mighty: Reappraising the Role of the Translator

> "This is the same line of argument proposed by Roscommon, but it is curious to find Dryden seemingly advocating two opposite translation strategies. On the one hand, he depicts the translator as bound in a servile relationship to the source text,

whilst on the other hand he urges *the translator* to go beyond words and possess *himself* of the source completely" (p.17)

(Susan Bassnett, 1996)

Despite having been (co)written by women, these texts are rather traditional –if you wish *conservative*- to the extent that singular masculine forms are used to refer to both male and female people. In the German text *der Leser*, 'the reader', is used to refer to both male and female readers, and in the English texts the *translator* is referred to as being masculine (*he, himself*).

In this same line we can observe a more radically conservative and traditional form of language use, illustrated in the following Russian text published in the media:

Конфликт на "Мерседесе - борьба против "слепого капитализма"?

Представители оппозиции высказались с пониманием касательно планов экономии на DaimlerChrysler. Как заявила в интервью газете "Берлинер Цайтунг" председатель Христианско-демократического союза (ХДС) *Ангела Меркель* (Angela Merkel), это совершенно нормально, если компания размышляет о переносе заводов в регионы с менее высокими затратами на производство, как, например, Бремен.

(http//www.dw-world.de/Russian, accessed 17.07.2004)

In this text, the word *председатель* is equivalent to the English *head, chairperson*, or sometimes*, leader*, of a political party. But in the Russian text a masculine form has been used, despite the fact that the referent, in this case Angela Merkel is female. So the author of the text could have used the feminine form of chairperson by adding the feminine-marked suffix *–itsa*, but he did not. This overt contradictory language use between gender masculine grammatical forms and female referents is not uncommon in very conservative and traditional male-driven societies, especially in texts published by mass media. It would be very interesting to see how native speakers of Russian react to this type of language use. At first one would tend to think that this form is not particularly marked, i.e. it would not call special attention on the part of Russian readers.

Our next two examples represent instances of negotiation and justification of the use of the masculine form with a (possibly) declared inclusive meaning:

Vorwort zur 2. Auflage

Zur Frage der Verwendung maskuliner/femeniner Formen im generischen Sinne („Jeder, der/die eine Frendsprache gelernt hat.") haben die Autoren –d.h.der Autor

und die Autorin- unterschiedliche Meinungen: „er“ war für eine Vermeidung der Maskulinformen, „sie“ war dagegen. Da die Durchsetzung seiner eigenen Position inkonsistent mit dieser Position gewesen wäre, hat er nachgegeben. Wenn also in diesem Buch allgemein über „den Lerner“, „die Lerner“ oder „den Lehrer“ gesprochen wird, dann sind dabei stets sowohl weibliche als auch männliche Repräsentant(inn)en gemeint.

(Vorwort zur 2. Auflage, VIII).
(W. Edmonson & J. House, 1993/2000)

Vorwort zur vierten Auflage

Diese „Einfuhrung“ setzt sich das Ziel, übersetzungsrelevante Fragestellungen, Probleme und Theorien breiteren Leserkreis nahezubringen (natürlich insbesondere auch den Studenten und Studentinnen an den Institutten für Übersetzen und Dolmetschen und den Übersetzern und Übersetzerinnen in der Berufspraxis. (2)

[Footnote] (2) Wenn in diesem Buch von Übersetzern und Dolmetschern, von Lesern und dem Leserkreis, von Sendern und Empfängern, nicht aber von Übersetzern und Übersetzerinnen oder Empfänger /-innen oder gar DolmetscherInnen die Rede ist, dann aus Gründen der Sprach- und Textekökonomie, des Sprachgefühls, vielleicht auch –warum es nicht zugeben- der Ästhetik. Und obwohl der Übersetzerberuf in vielen Ländern primär ein Übersetzerinnenberuf ist, widerstrebt mir die Extremlösung der (Total-)Feminisierung der Berufsbezeichnung. Denn ist es in unserer wirtschaftlichen und gesellschaftlichen Wirklichkeit nicht so, daß das Faktum des (reinen) „Frauenberufs“ dem Status dieses Berufs (und dem damit verbundenen Gehaltsniveau) in der Regel alles andere als zum Vorteil gereicht? (p.10).

(W.Koller, 2001)

In the first case the two authors (a man and a woman) have agreed to use the singular and plural masculine forms with an explicit recognition that both men and women alike are included therein. In the second case, the author explains that he will use in his book exclusively the masculine forms because of linguistic and text economy, linguistic feeling and aesthetics. Then he introduces his ideological stance: despite the fact that translation is worldwide a predominantly female profession, he is against the extreme solution of (totally) feminizing the (German) name used to designate it. And then he asks if taking into account our social and economic reality, the labelling of translation as a (purely) “women’s profession” would do nothing to favour the status of the profession (and its income level) at large. We think that the author reflects here on the well-known paradoxically unequal work situation, where women doing the same job as men are overtly paid less.

In this section we have seen the use of masculine inclusive generic forms in mass media texts written by both men and women, singular masculine forms with impersonal meaning in German, the designation of professions and activities typically male by using the corresponding masculine names even when referring to women, and the explicit acknowledgement of the use of masculine forms to designate both male and female professions and activities.

5.2 Masculine and feminine forms

In other languages, such as German, it is an increasingly common practice in academic texts to indicate morphologically in the plural ending of nouns (*-Innen*), or by using masculine and feminine forms, that both men and women are involved:

Vorwort

Für die Beiträge wurden *AutorInnen* aus Wissenschaft und Praxis gewonnen, die aus ausgewiesene Experten auf dem jeweiligen Gebiet sind.

Einleitung

Insofern können die einzelnen Beiträge zwar nur die zur Zeit dokumentierbaren Gegebenheiten und Entwicklungstendenzen darstellen, aber durch die enge Vernetzung der Artikel durch Queverweise wird es den *Leserinnen* und *Lesern* ermöglicht, sich über die Einzelphänomene einen Einblick in Grundsatzfragen der Translatologie und sich daraus eregebende Perspektiven zu verschaffen. (XII).

(M. Snell-Hornby, H. Hönig, P. Kußmaul, Peter Schmitt, 1999)

Dekonstruktion

Dekonstruktion hinterfragt nicht nur die Möglichkeit unveränderlicher „transzendentaller“ Bedeutungen, die ihrer Gesamtheit reproduziert und wiederhergestellt werden können, und führt damit die Implikationen der Saussureschen Theorie des arbiträaren, konventionellen Zeichens bis zur letzten Konsequenz, sondern stellt auch implizit und explizit alle traditionellen Auffassungen von Übersetzen in Frage, die von einem idealisierten Transfer unveränderlicher Bedeutungen von einer Sprache in eine andere, von einer Kultur in eine andere, ohne Ermischung der *Translatorin* bzw. des *Translators* und ungeachtet ihrer bzw. seiner Übersetzungssituation ausgehen (p.101).

Rosemary Arrojo (Sao Paulo).

Aus dem Englischen übersetzt von Annette Wußler und Michaela Wolf (1999)

Postkolonialismus

ÜbersetzerInnen sind demnach gefordert, diese Asymmetrien zu erkennen und entsprechende Übersetzungsstrategien anzuwenden. (p.103).

Michela Wolf (1999)

Einleitung-Grandsatzfragen

Dazu stellt z.B. De Beaugrande (1988:415) fest, daß keines dieser beiden Extreme repräsentativ für die Tätigkeit profesioneller *Übersetzerinnen* und *Übersetzer* (2) ist. [Footnote] (2) Im folgenden verwende ich diese beiden Formen alternierend und generisch. (p.18)

Brigitte Horn-Helf (1999)

Vorbemerkung

Inhalt und Aufbau des Bandes geben also in starkem Maße Einblicke in die für die Ausbildung von *Übersetzer/inn/n* relevanten Arbeitsbereiche und verdeutlichen in diesem Kontext die spezifieschen Merkmale und die Struktur des acht-semestrigen Studiengangs an der Heinrich-Heine-Universität. (VII)

(H. Fiedl, A-R. Glaap, K.P.Müller, 1992)

This procedure of marking both male and female referents by using bi-gendered plural forms seems to be the politically correct linguistic behaviour in languages where this distinction can be made. In English it is also possible to mark this distinction but only in those cases where there is a corresponding feminine form available, e.g. actor/actress. In all the other cases –the majority- where nouns have no gender morpheme, the marking becomes problematic and can only be made when immediate reference is made to the noun by the corresponding masculine or feminine pronoun. In the English version of the news release where opposition conservative leader Angela Merkel is mentioned, it is clear why referent pronoun should be *she*:

DaimlerChrysler Labor Dispute Closes Plants

However, Angela Merkel, the *head* of the conservative opposition, took a much more sanguine look at the growing discussion over labor costs. *She* told the newspaper that it was only logical for DaimlerChrysler to seek locations that offered the company lower production costs. *She* also warned the unions against seeking wage increases that were too high and would make German companies less competitive globally.

(http//www.dw-world.de/English)

English maintains a neutral position in the noun but speakers have to make a decision in the use of the corresponding pronoun. When it is clear that the antecedent has been identified as a female, there is no other choice but to choose the feminine pronoun. But when nouns are used with a general sense they can be made masculine or feminine. In this case the writer's decision reflects to some extent his or her involvement in the use of grammatically feminine or masculine-marked language.

5.3 Feminine (inclusive generic) forms

The most liberal -and in feminist terms perhaps the most progressive instance of gender-marked language use- is the *feminizing* of the language by using some grammar resources like pronouns (and nouns) in their feminine forms with a generic all inclusive meaning. This is done in the following English example:

> Instead of striving to set up criteria for evaluating translations that are empirically based, transparent and, at least approximating something like intersubjective reliability, propagators of this approach believe that the quality of a translation can most importantly be linked to the "human factor", the *translator*, whose comprehension and interpretation of the original and *her* decisions and moves towards "the optimal translation" are firmly rooted in personal knowledge, intuitions, interpretive skills and artistic-literary competence. […]
>
> In Stolze's view, a "good" translation can only come about when the *translator* "identifies" *herself* fully with the text *she* is translating" (p.2.)
>
> (Juliane House, 1997)

In this case, we discover that the author has 'feminized' the noun *translator* when she uses the corresponding pronouns *her, herself,* and *she.* This is very bold move on her part, and certainly she will find supporters and, very likely, detractors. This, I think, is a discourse strategy that makes women quite visible, at least in academic texts. Other authors would have been content with an equalizing mechanism, which seems to be the prevailing tendency in English academic writing. So, instead of resorting to an only feminizing form, one would have normally chosen an alternative, in-between, means: *her/him*, *herself/himself*, *she/he*. But then one could ask: If women have always lived with almost all-inclusive masculine linguistic forms, why can we (men) not have a taste of what it feels like to be constantly linguistically feminized? By using feminizing forms, women recover their visibility as discourse agents, and this, in the end, reflects their struggle to be socially visible and treated equally. Other languages, like Spanish, offer morphological mechanisms that also seem very apt to express degrees of linguistic equalization. For instance:

Más protestas contra los planes de Daimler

> Sin embargo, *la jefa* de la oposición Angela Merkel, calificó como lógica la reacción de Daimler de trasladar la producción a sitios más baratos, ante los altos costes laborales en la fábrica de Sindelfinden. "Pausas pagadas de cinco minutos por hora y suplementos salariales por turnos de tarde que se cobran a partir de las doce del mediodía, no se adaptan a los tiempos" añadió Merkel.
>
> (http//www.dw-world.de/spanish, accessed on 17.07.2004)

El machismo en México sigue siendo un obstáculo para el éxito de la mujer.

> Así se desprende del libro "Gritos y susurros. Experiencias intempestivas de 38 mujeres". Ellas son famosas y testimonian la historia no oficial. Ellas aceptaron mostrar "los reductos privados, los silencios, los secretos, las cosas que las han hecho tropezar en la vida y caer", declaró Denise Dresser, politóloga mexicana que compiló las experiencias.
>
> El libro contiene los testimonios de ocho *políticas*, entre ellas la ex presidenta del Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) Rosario Robles, y la líder del Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), Beatriz Paredes, así como los de tres mujeres del medio cultural como las escritoras Elena Poniatowska, Sara Sefkovich o Laura Esquivel.
>
> (El Tiempo, July 19 2004)

In the first example, the head of the opposition is addressed as *la jefa*, which is a double feminine expression. The definite article (or determiner) indicates that it is feminine singular form *la*, and the suffix *–a* of the noun indicates that it is feminine *jefa*. An intermediate form could have also been possible: *la jefe*, i.e. to keep the feminine marking of the definite article but maintaining the masculine noun *jefe*. This alternating possibilities can also be observed in other Spanish nouns designating professions exercised by both men and women e.g. *la juez/ la jueza, la capitán/la capitana,* etc. In the second example, the author has introduced the Spanish feminine form *políticas*, in opposition to or in addition to the masculine form *politicos*. This move is as progressive as House's feminizing of *translator.*

6. Concluding remarks

Robin Lakoff's initial concern about the unequal position women have in our societies, which is reflected in their language use, is still valid today. Women scholars have made efforts to show that gender categories are not simply biologically determined but that are the result of cultural and above all political, economic and linguistic manoeuvres implemented generally by powerful male instances. Furthermore, what all women seem to have in common is their

disadvantageous social position in comparison to men. As long as women's language is concerned, some internal differentiation, at least in English, should be made. Black women use their own language variety in ways and with nuances not always shared by the white prevailing female population. Black women have traditionally suffered a double discrimination: for being *women* and being *black*.

The key questions of the existence of a full-fledged women's language seem to be controversial. We think that the term has been used rather rhetorically, as a synecdoche, where some isolated linguistic features have been used to talk about *a* women's language. On the other hand, Nu Shu, which has been labelled rather hastily the World's Only Women's Language, seems to correspond more to a writing (calligraphic) variety of Chinese used and read exclusively by women *but* understood by men when spoken. Láaden is an elaborate linguistic endeavour of constructing an artificial women's language which, as most artificial languages and despite its particular symbolic female meaning, remains a linguistic desideratum. Then we could say that, to the best of our knowledge, an authentic and (linguistically) complete women's language which is used only by women does not exist at present.

However, the non-existence of a women's language has not discouraged women nor prevented them from struggling for equality, i.e. for linguistic visibility in an openly unfair, and clearly unequal society. This struggle –waged with words and not with weapons- has already given particularly tangible linguistic results. Some important world-wide, internationally used languages (e.g. English, Spanish, German) have gradually granted a place to more equalizing feminine and masculine forms, as alternating with, complementing or sometimes replacing traditional all-inclusive masculine forms. Some liberal, progressive female authors have even gone one step further (where angels fear to tread) and have engaged in feminizing traditional masculine designations. It comes to my mind the question posed by professor Sarah Thomason (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor) in a recently talk[9] held by her under the heading: *Can you change your language?*

Well, certainly women have been doing it for some time now, with dexterity both covertly and overtly (to use professor House's terms). And the effect of their efforts is already visible. I'd like to finish quoting Denise Dresser, the Mexican author who wrote the book *Gritos y susurros. Experiencias intempestivas de 38 mujeres*, as it summarizes the situation of many women in Latin America – and very probably in other parts in the world- their suffering but also their optimism for a better future:

[9] At the Collaborative Research Center on Multilingualism (Sondersprachlehrforschung Mehrsprachigkeit) of the University of Hamburg on July 22, 2004.

Muchas de ellas (...) han vivido en un medio hostil, en un país que no las ha apoyado, que no les ha provisto de 'pasto tierno', de cobijo, de apoyo, de aplauso.

El gran reto femenino del México actual debe ser "trascender el discurso de los derechos de la mujer como derechos de género y concebirlos (...) como derechos de las personas."

Si hace diez años entre las mexicanas había silencio, secreto, censura, mucha duda sobre la posibilidad de conquistar espacios, enormes dificultades, institucionales y políticas, para hacerlo, ahora se da un cambio positivo en el que la mujer es protagonista.

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