

## Men, Masculinities and Language

Scott Kiesling (2007)

The author introduces the concept of four cultural discourses of masculinity and illustrates how they relate to social performances semiotically associated with men.

Kiesling describes briefly first how language and gender are presented in the existing literature and talks about the *dominance* view, based on male dominance vs female subordination, and the *difference* view that is culturally motivated. An interesting point is made about the patriarchy – it works by imposing a homogeneous stereotype for white men. Kiesling sees the relationship as more nuanced, and introduces the *performance* view of language and gender. He sees masculinity as:

- “a quality or set of practices that is stereotypically connected with men.” (p. 655)
- not inherent but “performed”
- located in “the connection between social performances and the cultural discourses” (p. 659).

The author draws a distinction between ideology and cultural discourse; the latter being less strict and rigid than the former.

The four discourses that exist in every society are:

- Gender difference
- Heterosexism
- Dominance
- Male solidarity

Before discussing each, the author introduces the term *indexical meaning*, a result of the connection between a linguistic feature and the context where its frequency is higher. (e.g. the voice pitch). Masculinity is defined as “social performances which are semiotically linked (indexed) to men, and not to women, through cultural discourses and cultural models” (p. 659).

Dominance: what features do men use to express dominance? We cannot say definitively, due to the fact that one feature can have different indexical meanings depending on the context. To support this claim Kiesling gives examples with two discursive features like interruption and silence, and shows how they can mean different things in different contexts. The frequency of the used feature is not a factor for defining a powerful style. A crucial variable, he says, is the gender of the other participants. However the author does say that they use language to create dominance one way or another perhaps because culturally dominance is associated with them. So the question is what do women try to construct, and that would not be surprised if the answer is cooperation.

Dominance and solidarity are then discussed as competing discourses where playful conflict results in competitive speech acts such as insults and boasting. Kiesling draws our attention to the relationship between men and politeness. Men, studies show, tend to be less polite. With regard to patterns of variation, studies have found that men have a lower level of use

for newer features than women. Kiesling shows how explanations can be built around different notions of masculinity (power, heterosexuality, male solidarity, different from women)

Finally, men express their heterosexual orientation when discussing somebody that “looks gay”, as they tell stories about heterosexual sex and comment on women’s looks.

## **REFERENCES**

Kiesling, Scott. 2007. Men, masculinities, and language. *Language and Linguistics Compass* 1/6:653-673.

### **What was discussed:**

- cultural models as another type of social construct
- dichotomy between masculine and feminine - important to the ideologies of gender.
- what do women try to construct?
- competing discourses - how can languages build both dominance and male solidarity?
- why do men tend to be less polite? There seems to be no definitive answer, although it seems the avoidance of politeness helps to build a masculine discourse