

Women reclaim words

Feminist scholar examines our language

by Elizabeth Donovan

When Cheris Kramarae started searching for connections between gender and language, she didn't realize her quest would later become a field of study.

"The only scholarly work I could find that addressed gender as a variable in our language was a book dated 1922. In one chapter entitled 'The Woman', the author observes that 'women have an innate reluctance to curse' and 'the reason why a woman talks so much is because the ideas go through the empty chambers of her brain,'" says Kramarae, co-editor of the recently published book *A Feminist Dictionary*.

Although this book did little to satisfy Kramarae's curiosity, it did inspire her to tug at the roots of these stereotypes about women in our society.

Kramarae, a speech communications professor at the University of Illinois, spoke to a large audience of students and faculty at St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, Nova Scotia last fall.

She says that because she was unable to find any written work on the subject of gender and language she began to examine the statements our society makes about women.

"Women have always been considered the 'keepers of propriety'. Etiquette books advised women to speak softly, to soften their opinions and the number of times they offered their opinions," says Kramarae.

No quote better illustrated women's passive code-of-behavior than Emily Post's advice for the ideal secretary.

"The perfect secretary should forget she is a human being...like an office machine she should respond only when touched."

Although this advice was given in the late 1900's, stereotypical attitudes about women's voices have carried well into the 20th century.

"Even by 1954 the BBC said women need not apply for any radio announcer positions, especially for the news announcer position," says Kramarae.

"Women's speech has always been examined in relation to men's speech. historically we see such activities as Elizabeth Cady Stanton who was allowed to sit on stage, but many times her husband or brother read her speech."

Kramarae's research disproves stereotypes about women acting as facts in our society. Often the same behavior is evaluated differently for a man than a woman.

"In a study done using a crying baby, observers were asked to hypothesize why the baby was crying, and were casually told the baby's sex.

"People who thought the baby was a boy said he was expressing anger.

However, those who were told the same baby was a girl said she was crying out of fear."

Different words are used to describe men and women's sexual activity, reflecting the double standard in our society.

"Although men tend to be much more sexually active than women, there are 220 terms for a sexually promiscuous woman and only 22 for a sexually promiscuous man," says Kramarae.

Kramarae says speech patterns can indicate who possesses the power in a given interaction between men and women.

"In studies monitoring the number of interruptions during conversations between women and men, 90 per cent of the interruptions during conversations between women and men came from men. Even in teacher/student relationships, male students and professors interrupted more often than female students and professors."

During classroom discussions, studies show women feel bad if someone has been put down in class and would prefer to offer information, rather than defend their ideas. Men said they liked a clash and a battle of ideas, often using military/combat language to describe this interaction.

Kramarae says assertiveness training courses for women is one way to remedy the perceived difference between men and women. But she says she's wary of these programmes because assertiveness training doesn't take into account the power differential between men and women in our society.

"In some ways women can benefit from assertiveness training. But these programmes don't take into account that many women aren't allowed to be assertive. For example, if a secre-

tary were more assertive with her boss, she might lose her job."

Kramarae demonstrated one powerful example of the inequities that result from using the word 'girl', when referring to a woman. She cited one study where half the participants in an experiment were given a detailed work experience resume, using the word 'girl' and the

other using 'woman'. Although the descriptions were exactly the same, the one using 'girl' was recommended \$5,000 less in salary than the candidate referred to as a 'woman'.

"It's obviously clear to me that language makes a difference." ●

"The perfect secretary should forget she's a human being..."

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THE MEDIA
IS...
there aren't
enough of us.
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