

More Heat than Light? Sex-difference Science & the Study of Language



THE 2012 GARNETT SEDGEWICK MEMORIAL LECTURE
Deborah Cameron

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Sex-difference Science &
the Study of Language

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MORE HEAT THAN LIGHT?

SEX-DIFFERENCE SCIENCE & THE STUDY OF LANGUAGE

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INTRODUCTION

Garnett Sedgewick, a specialist in Shakespeare, was the first head of the English Department at the University of British Columbia. He served as head from 1920 to 1948. The Sedgewick lectures began in 1955 and honour our first head along with his legacy of literary scholarship at UBC. These lectures are given annually by prominent and accomplished scholars from a variety of areas within English studies and from a variety of locations (and occasionally from UBC itself). Famous Sedgewick lecturers have included Harry Levin, Hugh MacLennan, Northrop Frye, Anne McClintock, Jonathan Goldberg, our own William H. New and Paul Stanwood, and, most recently, Jonathan Gil Harris.

The Sedgewick Lecturer for 2012 is Deborah Cameron, who glories in the title of Rupert Murdoch Professor of Language and Communication at Oxford University. In the context of the Sedgewick Lectures, Dr. Cameron's appearance was especially noteworthy as it marked the first time that the lecture had been given by a linguist. Since the English Department at the University of British Columbia includes linguists as well as literary specialists, I felt that an invitation to a linguist was overdue.

Originally Scottish, Deborah Cameron has established herself as one of the leading sociolinguists of her generation. She is the author of several books and numerous articles and book chapters. Her best-known books are perhaps *Verbal Hygiene* (1995), a book that has been enormously influential and which is soon to be re-issued, and, more recently, *The Myth of Mars and Venus: Do Men and Women Really Speak Different Languages?* (2007).

Throughout her career, Professor Cameron has been concerned with the things people know—or think they know—about

language usage. In particular, she has been interested and has published with great distinction on the relation of gender and sexuality to language use. It is important to note that this interest is not only academic: Professor Cameron has been and remains an active feminist and has been, as she says, “increasingly involved in communicating with a wider audience about language and linguistic research.”

Professor Cameron’s Sedgewick Lecture demonstrated all the qualities I have mentioned: it was erudite, wide-ranging and displayed an enviable grasp of a number of technical issues, but it was also clear and accessible. Professor Cameron sketched the history of the belief that men and women use language differently and then went on to argue eloquently, forcefully, and with great panache against this belief. By the end of the lecture, the audience had been entertained and enlightened. Professor Cameron demonstrated that she is equally accomplished in both the theory and the practice of language use.

— Stephen Guy-Bray,
Professor and Head

MORE HEAT THAN LIGHT?

SEX-DIFFERENCE SCIENCE & THE STUDY OF LANGUAGE

My title alludes to the writings of Garnett Sedgewick, the distinguished Canadian scholar for whom these lectures are named. “More heat than light” was the name of the column which he contributed for some years to the *Vancouver Sun* newspaper. I do not know whether Sedgewick ever took up the subject of sex-differences in his column, but I do know there has been debate about his attitudes to women. Some say he was a misogynist, a man who had no regard for women and preferred not to teach them; others dispute that, including some of the women he actually did teach.¹ No one disputes, however, that until very late in his career his policy at the University of British Columbia was to segregate introductory literature classes by gender. That might suggest that he subscribed to, or at least did not dissent from, the belief that, intellectually as well as physically, men and women were different kinds of beings.

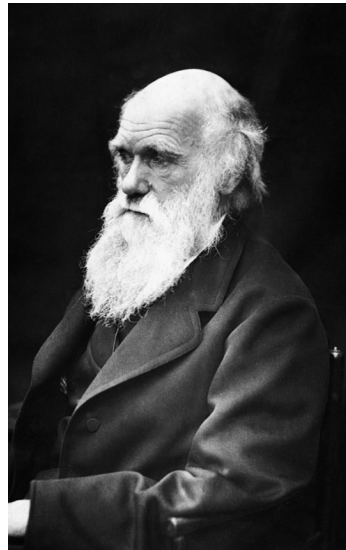
Historically, that belief has been commonplace, and often held by men whose views on other kinds of differences among humans posed a challenge to conventional wisdom. The philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, for example, is remembered for his assertion that freedom is every man’s birthright; yet in his treatise on education, *Émile*, he made clear that women were not to be treated in the same way as men, since nature had not endowed them with the same powers of reason. Charles Darwin, whose theory of evolution profoundly changed our understanding of what it means to be human, was a believer in racial equality and a passionate opponent of slavery; but he too believed that nature had not made the

sexes equal. His major work on human evolution, *The Descent of Man, and Selection by Sex*, contains the following passage:

The chief distinction in the intellectual powers of the two sexes is shewn by man attaining to a higher eminence, in whatever he takes up, than woman can attain—whether requiring deep thought, reason or imagination, or merely the use of the senses and hands. If two lists were made of the most eminent men and women in poetry, painting, sculpture, music . . . history, science and philosophy . . . the two lists would not bear comparison. . . . If men are capable of decided eminence over women in many subjects the average standard of mental power in man must be above that of woman. . . . It is, indeed, fortunate that the law of the equal transmission of characters to both sexes has commonly prevailed throughout the whole class of mammals; otherwise it is probable that man would have become as superior in mental endowment to woman, as the peacock is in ornamental plumage to the peahen.²

Yet Darwin made a far more positive contribution to the feminist thinking of his time than passages like the one just quoted might suggest. Many feminists were attracted to his work because they recognized the profound implications of a theory which said that every species developed through a continuous process of change and adaptation. From that postulate it followed that the inequalities of the past and present might be attenuated or erased in some hypothetical future—a point underlined by the American suffragist Antoinette Brown Blackwell when in 1875 she charged Darwin with failing to follow his own logic where it led. “Mr Darwin,” she wrote, “has failed to hold definitely before his mind the principle that the difference of sex, whatever it may consist in, must itself be

subject to natural selection and to evolution.”³ To Blackwell, that principle offered a compelling argument for changing the social conditions which had restricted the development of one sex relative to the other, by educating women to the same level as men, and allowing them to participate in a similar range of activities. Noting that the same argument appeared in many other writings by supporters of women’s rights in the last decades of the 19th century, the critic Angelique Richardson concludes that “Darwin’s ideas . . . proved valuable to Victorian women writers in countering prohibitive essentialist ideas about sexual difference.”⁴



Charles Darwin (1809–1882)

The same observation could not so easily be made about the kinds of Darwinian thinking which have most popular currency and influence today. Far from treating human nature as something always in the process of becoming, contemporary currents, like evolutionary psychology, present it as something set in stone, a matter of the traits we inherit from our earliest human ancestors. These new currents also emphasize that the traits in question are sex-differentiated, just like the social and reproductive roles of early humans. *Ex hypothesi*, it was not advantageous to our male and female ancestors to have the same ways of thinking, feeling and behaving. Males, as hunters and warriors, did best if they were aggressive and competitive; females, as gatherers and nurturers of children, did better if they were co-operative and empathetic. Natural selection ensured that these differences became part of the

human genetic blueprint—or in the much-used metaphor of our own time, “hard-wired.”

Far from “countering prohibitive essentialist ideas about sexual difference,” then, today’s version of Darwin rehabilitates essentialist ideas about sexual difference which had previously been out of favour for several decades. Here I want to consider two questions about this development. One is a question about the history of ideas: why has the postulate of hard-wired sexual difference enjoyed such a spectacular resurgence since the 1990s? The other is a question about the science of sex-difference: how far does the evidence support the new essentialism?

Advocates of the new essentialism might well reply that my two questions are actually indivisible: the idea of hard-wired sex differences has returned to favour precisely *because* the evidence supports it. Recent advances in knowledge, especially in genetics and neuroscience, have strengthened the essentialist case while undermining the feminist or social constructionist alternative.⁵ I will argue, by contrast, that in at least one key area of inquiry, dealing with sex-differences in verbal ability and behaviour, the new essentialism is not preferable to social constructionist accounts. It is popular for cultural rather than purely scientific reasons. In making that case, and so attempting to shed light on what is currently a very heated debate, I will draw on two intellectual traditions which are well represented in the department Garnett Sedgewick once presided over: on one hand linguistics, and on the other, cultural history.

I have chosen to focus on language for the obvious reason that I am a linguist, and the relationship between language and gender is a subject I can claim to know something about. But that does not mean I am pursuing some minor side-issue which is ultimately peripheral to the new Darwinian account of human nature. On the contrary, language is central to that account, and it

NOTES

1. The subject of Sedgewick's attitudes to women is discussed in Margery Fee, "Puck's green England and the Professor of English," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 64(3): 398–416, 1995. I am indebted to Laurel Brinton for directing me to this source, and for other background information on Sedgewick and UBC.
2. Charles Darwin, *Evolutionary Writings*, ed. J. Secord (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 304.
3. Antoinette Brown Blackwell, *The Sexes Throughout Nature* (New York: Putnam, 1875), p. 16.
4. Angelique Richardson, "Against finality: Darwin, Mill and the end of essentialism," *Critical Quarterly* 53: 21–43, 2011, p. 38. Richardson also presents evidence from both his notebooks and his published writings that Darwin himself took the feminist argument seriously.
5. See e.g. Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (London: Allen Lane, 2002).
6. See Robin Dunbar, *Gossip, Grooming and the Evolution of Language* (London: Faber, 1996).
7. See e.g. Geoffrey Miller, "Sexual selection for cultural display," in R. Dunbar, C. Knight and C. Power (eds.) *The Evolution of Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999); John Locke, *Duels and Duets: Why Men and Women Talk So Differently* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
8. Otto Jespersen, "The Woman," rep. in Deborah Cameron

- (ed.) *The Feminist Critique of Language* (London: Routledge, 1998).
9. Jespersen, "The Woman," p. 239. Jespersen attributes the explanation to [Havelock] Ellis, writing in 1904, but he clearly endorses it himself.
 10. Doreen Kimura, *Sex and Cognition* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1999), p. 91.
 11. Janet S. Hyde and Marcia Linn, "Gender differences in verbal ability: a meta-analysis," *Psychological Bulletin* 104: 53–69, 1988.
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 15. Ibid., pp.67–69.
 16. Anne Moir and David Jessel, *Brain Sex: The Real Difference between Men and Women* (New York: Delta Books, 1991); Louann Brizendine, *The Female Brain* (New York: Morgan Road, 2006); Simon Baron-Cohen, *The Essential Difference: Men, Women and the Extreme Male Brain* (London: Allen Lane, 2003); Susan Pinker, *The Sexual Paradox: Troubled Boys, Gifted Girls and the Real Difference Between the Sexes* (London: Atlantic Books, 2008).
 17. See Mark Liberman, "Sex on the brain," *Boston Globe*, 24 September 2006.
 18. M. R. Mehl, S. Vazire, N. Ramírez-Esparza, R.B. Slatcher and J.W. Pennebaker, "Are women really more talkative than men?" *Science*, July 6: 82, 2007.
 19. Pinker, *The Sexual Paradox*, p. 46.
 20. I. Sommer, A. Aleman, A. Bouma & R. Kahn, "Do women

- really have more bilateral language representation than men? A meta-analysis of functional imaging studies.” *Brain* 127: 1845–52, 2004.
21. Cordelia Fine, *Delusions of Gender: The Real Science Behind Sex Differences* (London: Icon Books, 2010).
 22. Michael Gurian and Patricia Henley, with Terry Trueman, *Boys and Girls Learn Differently!* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001).
 23. Dan Hodgins, “Male-female differences,” <http://languageblog.ldc.upenn.edu/myl/llog/Hodgins1.pdf>, accessed May 1, 2012. I cite this version, made available via the linguistics blog Language Log (which has devoted several posts to debunking Hodgins’s claims about brain-sex and learning) because it probably offers the most reliable access for scholars; I first came upon the text from links in other online sources, including NASSPE’s website, but these have proved to be more ephemeral. The version cited here carries no date, but other sources suggested to me that the text is a version or transcript of a lecture dating from 2003.
 24. K. Bishop and D. Waldsten, “Sex differences in the human corpus callosum: myth or reality?” *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews* 21(5): 581–601, 1997.
 25. Sources in which this equation is made by non-linguists include Baron-Cohen, *The Essential Difference*, Dunbar, *Gossip*, and Kimura, *Sex and Cognition*.
 26. See Terttu Nevalainen and Helena Raumolin-Brunberg, *Historical Sociolinguistics* (London: Longman Pearson, 2003).
 27. See e.g. Fatima Sadiqui, *Women, Gender and Language in Morocco* (Leiden: Brill, 2003).
 28. Momoko Nakamura, “Creating indexicality: schoolgirl speech in Meiji Japan,” in Deborah Cameron and Don Kulick (eds.), *The Language and Sexuality Reader* (Milton Park:

Routledge, 2006).

29. Baron-Cohen, *The Essential Difference*, p. 185.
30. Mona Caird, "Suppression of variant types," 1894, repr. in Ann Heilmann (ed.) *The Late Victorian Marriage Question: A Collection of Key New Woman Texts*, Vol. 1. (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 206.
31. Caird, "Suppression of variant types," p. 207.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Deborah Cameron is Professor of Language and Communication in the English Faculty of Oxford University. She was educated in Britain at the universities of Newcastle-upon-Tyne and Oxford; before taking up her present job she taught at several UK universities, and has also held visiting positions in Australia, Sweden and the US. Her re-

search interests include language ideologies, language, gender and sexuality, and the sociolinguistics of globalization. As well as publishing extensively on these topics, she is the author of a textbook on spoken discourse analysis and co-author of a book about linguistic research methods. She regularly writes and broadcasts on linguistic topics for a general audience, and is a longstanding contributor to the British radical feminist magazine *Trouble & Strife*. Her work has been translated into Japanese, Finnish and German.