Gender talk: Feminism, discourse and conversation analysis.
Susan Speer.

Reviewed by Karen Grainger

Gender Talk is essentially a book about methodological approaches to the feminist study of discourse. There is one clear theme throughout the book – that a conversation analytic approach can be rigorous whilst still satisfying the political feminist agenda. This position is argued for cogently and thoroughly by first setting up the terms of reference and then repeatedly re-visiting them as the work of various key scholars is critically evaluated.

Chapter 1 sets the scene for feminist linguistic research by providing a wide-ranging and clear summary of the various methodological approaches to gender, language and discourse. Here, the author sets out five criteria for a feminist-inspired analytic approach: (i) it should espouse a constructionist orientation, (ii) it should describe a discourse of mind and world as resource not as topic, (iii) it should view language as a form of social action, (iv) its claims should be grounded in participants’ practices and (v) it should be a relativist approach.

Chapter 2 could be regarded as a ‘standard’, but nevertheless useful, overview of the gender and language research since the publication of Lakoff’s seminal work in 1975 and prior to the postmodern era. It would be suitable as an introduction to the field for undergraduate students. The chapter is organised around a discussion of three of the key thinkers in feminist linguistics, each of whom can be said to represent the now well-known paradigms of ‘deficit’ (Lakoff), ‘dominance’ (Spender) and ‘difference’ (Tannen). This arrangement

Affiliation
Sheffield Hallam University, UK.
email: k.p.grainger@shu.ac.uk
makes the chapter clear and accessible while giving a critical review of the material including an update on Lakoff’s current thinking. Each of the paradigms is then discussed and evaluated in terms of the five criteria identified in Chapter 1. This evaluation then effectively sets the scene for an alternative constructionist approach.

Chapter 3 introduces the notions of postructuralism and ethnomethodology and again is organised around selected major authors in these traditions: Butler, Garfinkel, Kessler and McKenna. Speer describes how these scholars, in different ways, discuss gender and sex as performance and achievement. Again, all three approaches to feminist discourse analysis are discussed in terms of the five criteria, the main criticism being that, although they espouse an anti-essentialist constructionist perspective, they are empirically weak. Speer’s own approach, she argues, ‘explicates and validates ethnomethodological claims using concrete, first-hand examples of transcribed recordings from real life’ (page 89). Having established, then, what is missing from existing work, Speer’s next chapter sets out building the case for her own orientation to gender and language studies.

It’s in Chapter 4 that the coherence of the book seems to flounder slightly. Both discursive psychology (DP) and conversation analysis (CA) are introduced as empirically grounded constructionist approaches. There is a clear explanation of CA and, in keeping with the structure of previous chapters, this is discussed with reference to key scholars (such as Schegloff and Jefferson) and how their work fits Speer’s five criteria. Discursive psychology, however, seems to be unaccountably skated over. Speer refers to it as a ‘close relative’ to CA (page 90) but there is no accompanying detailed account of its aims and objectives or of the work of its main proponents. To the uninitiated reader, this might give the impression that DP and CA are so similar that they do not warrant separate treatment. This, of course, is misleading since they come from different traditions and use different concepts and techniques in data analysis. These misgivings aside, the chapter introduces an interesting set of ‘real data’ examples of cross-gender interaction from both her own and others’ work, and analyses them to show how social norms can be revealed in the data without recourse to macro contextual factors or externally (researcher)-imposed political views. She addresses those critics of CA who bemoan the absence of a political agenda by arguing that ‘when we combine the sociological perspective of CA, and the psychological perspective of DP, the abstract theoretical and analytic separation of macro-structural, cognitive-psychological and micro-interactional realms may be re-worked, and ultimately dissolved’ (page 124).

Chapter 5 further addresses the criticism that CA cannot provide explanations for observed phenomena in data and is therefore socially and politically
toothless. This purported absence is addressed mainly by discussing the debate between Wetherell and Schegloff and by re-analysing Wetherell and Edley’s data and discussion of hegemonic masculinity. Speer’s re-working of these data and analysis of her own interactional data provide a detailed and largely convincing account of how we might explain masculine identity in terms of its construction in conversation. However, while Speer does manage to provide explanations of masculinity from ‘within’ the data (according to participant orientations to the talk), I still wanted to know what sort of men were involved in these interactions. Surely pre-existing identity categories such as social class and cultural background must be relevant, in addition to the version of masculinity being oriented to in the talk. In other words, Speer’s analysis risks suggesting that constructions of masculinity do not intersect with other social variables. Here again, the problem of distinction between DP and CA is not made clear. The author uses concepts, such as ‘accountability’, which many would associate with DP, but seems to be claiming that these are part of CA. Furthermore, the notion of ‘critical DP’ is introduced without proper explanation of how this compares with other forms of discourse analysis.

Chapter 6 is a fascinating analysis of heterosexist talk from a constructionist angle. The author starts with a brief critical review of the psychological approach to heterosexism, as well as the DP work on the way homosexuality is talked about in conversation (e.g. using ‘disclaimers’). She then uses the work of Speer and Potter (2000) to argue that whether or not talk is prejudiced depends on whether it is treated as problematic by participants and how these points of potential trouble are managed. In some cases, participants’ orientations to a word conventionally considered to be homophobic can actually achieve the opposite effect by reclaiming and re-negotiating its meaning.

In the final chapter Speer summarises and crystallises her chief contention that feminist discourse analysis can and should concentrate on participants’ orientations to meaning in talk – that this approach is both methodologically robust and ideologically defensible. The discussion takes the form of answers to challenging questions relating to the five criteria set out at the beginning of the book: (i) is a constructionist approach compatible with feminism? (ii) is there really ‘nothing beyond the text’? (iii) can the study of talk in interaction account for non-discursive phenomena? (iv) can a participant oriented approach have political and practical implications? and (v) is a relativist approach compatible with a critique of existing social relations? The answer to these questions in Speer’s view is broadly ‘yes’. However, there is still room to disagree with her and I would want to argue that macro-contextual factors have a place in explanations of talk and identity in interaction (cf. Grainger, Mills and Sibanda, in press). Nevertheless I welcome the publica-
tion of a book that presents the case for an ethnomethodological approach to discourse analysis as thoroughly and coherently as this one does. Because it is clearly written, comprehensive in its coverage and critical in its treatment, it is suitable for new and experienced scholars alike. Even though it is focussed on feminist discourse analysis, it is very relevant to other areas of sociolinguistic enquiry and could be useful as a digest of discourse analytic methodologies to date.

Reference