



The British Association of Applied Linguistics (BAAL)  
8<sup>th</sup> BAAL Language, Gender and Sexuality Special Interest Group Annual Event

Deconstructing Sexism:

What can we learn from different approaches and disciplines?

**Date:** Friday 8th May 2015, 10am-6pm

**Place:** City University London, room AG07, College Building, St John Street, EC1V 4PB London, UK.

**ABSTRACTS**

**PAUL BAKER (Lancaster University)**

***"A woman who knows her place": Heterosexual Men Seeking Relationships and Sexist Discourse***

In this presentation I describe the outcomes of my research on 'men seeking women' adverts on the website Craigslist, from three countries, which had the aim of identifying gendered discourses and identity representation. While it might be hypothesised that heterosexual men seeking to attract a partner would aim to avoid sexist discourse as this may curtail replies, a range of sexist discourses emerged from the analysis of the adverts, indexed through repetitive linguistic patterns around agency, metaphor and argumentation strategies.

Glick and Fisher's (1996) Ambivalent Sexism Inventory characterises sexism as hostile and benevolent, although relies on a self-reporting questionnaire to elicit sexist attitudes. In this talk I argue that naturally occurring data is a more productive and valid site for eliciting sexist discourses and revealing the language structures that support them. The analysis shows how various forms of sexism permeate as taken-for-granted discourse at the global level, referencing a higher-order belief in 'male superiority', and in some cases linked to an early stage in domestic violence.

Glick, Peter and Fiske, Susan T. (1996). "The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory: Differentiating hostile and benevolent sexism". *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 70 (3): 491–512.

**STEPHANIE DAVIES-ARAI (No More Page 3 and author of 'Communicating with Kids')**

***Page 3 – Sexual Harassment and the Myth of Empowerment***

We live in an image-saturated culture, unprecedented in human history. Image-based media has taken over text-based media over the last few decades. We process images 60,000 times faster than text and at a much deeper level; images affect our emotions, and emotions influence our beliefs and behaviour.

What are we learning from the wallpaper of images like Page 3 around us daily? What is the message behind the image? Page 3 is the most gratuitous sexually objectified image of a woman in our media; she is a passive, interchangeable blank canvas on which a man's sexual fantasy can be projected.

Representation is important: negative stereotyping of a group is commonly used as propaganda against that group; images like Page 3 go unrecognised as a negative stereotype as they are benign and disguised as admiration.



If a newspaper containing these images is used *as a newspaper* then these images inevitably enter the lives of women and girls (and children), unsolicited, in the public space: this constitutes mass sexual harassment of women by male newspaper editors. We need to look at who places and controls the image, its context, how it is used and who sees it.

Confusing the subject of the image (an individual woman) with the message of the image - the model is 'empowered' therefore the image is empowering - is emblematic of the thinking behind 'sex positive feminism' and symbolic of the split in current feminist ideas.

**ELISABETH KELAN (Cranfield University)**

***'I've never encountered that' – Accounting for Sexism in Modern Workplaces***

Today's organisations and their workers regularly present themselves as 'beyond sexism'. Versions of sexism as presented on popular TV shows such as *Mad Men* appear as mere relicts of the past with limited relevance today. Even though gender inequality continues to persist in old and new forms, it appears that people in organizations are increasingly unable or unwilling to see and articulate gender inequalities. Instead organizational members perform discursive work to disallow the possibility of sexism's existence in their workplace. This talk will focus on exploring some of the discursive resources used when talking about sexism and gender inequality in the workplace. To substantiate the argument material generated in a variety of workplace settings will be used. It will be highlighted how traditional forms of sexism are discursively disavowed while newer forms of sexism are not only unspeakable but also often unintelligible.

**JULIA LONG (Anglia Ruskin University) and JODIE WOODWARD (Women's Sector)**

***Consent or Dissent? Reinforcing Heterosexuality in Programmes Addressing Men's Violence against Women***

This paper will draw on the academic, sectoral and activist knowledge and experience of the two speakers, and will be presented in two parts.

The first section will focus on issues of language, utilising feminist critical discourse analysis in order to examine how linguistic forms conventionally deployed in referencing men's violence against women consistently serve to render men as perpetrators invisible and absent. A range of examples – from news media, women's sector literature and survivor accounts – will be provided and discussed. This half of the paper will also examine the extent to which psychologising, individualising and woman-focused language serves to construct understandings of men's violence against women and to inform responses to that violence. Finally, this half of the paper will also consider how notions of 'consent' are deployed in constructing the development of programmes claiming to help prevent men's violence against women.

Taking the linguistic construction of men's violence against women as its starting point, the second half of the paper will focus on current practice in programmes developed to support women who have experienced such violence. With reference to a specific case study example, this section will consider some of the assumptions that currently inform such programmes and examine the ways in which normative assumptions and expectations of heterosexuality underpin how the programmes are developed and implemented. This section will raise critical questions as to how such programmes may implicitly and explicitly reinforce heterosexual norms and assumptions, and offer some thoughts on the political implications of this practice.

**SARA MILLS (Sheffield Hallam University)**

***The Struggle for Sexism***

Rather than conceptualising sexism as composed of linguistic elements, I argue in this paper that sexism is something which is struggled over - both the definition of sexism and the right to claim that something is sexist. Those, like feminists, who find it a useful term to identify and challenge discriminatory language, often define it in ways which focus on uncovering sexist intent. This is problematic in the light of recent changes in the way that sexism manifests itself, in more indirect and playful ways, which undercut notions of simple intentionality. When advertisements for example incorporate seemingly feminist messages alongside sexist messages, a more complex model of sexism is necessary. I argue that there is a struggle about how to define sexism at the moment, with claims of sexism often being undercut by being labelled political correctness. Once something is labelled to be a concern with political correctness, it is necessarily seen to be excessive. There has also been a move to argue that those who take offence are oversensitive, making it difficult to claim that a text or utterance is sexist. This has led to those who claim that something is sexist being criticised themselves. However, there have been recent changes which have meant that those in the public sphere who have made clearly discriminatory remarks have been publicly shamed or sacked from their jobs. Thus, this paper seeks to survey this complex struggle over what sexism is and who is allowed to claim that something is sexist.

**LYNNE SEGAL (Birkbeck College, University of London)**

***Feminist Mutations: Possibilities & Pitfalls when Tackling Sexism***

Tackling sexism was one source and continuing seam of women's liberation. The goal of social transformation to abolish all forms of cultural hierarchy and oppression was another. For all sorts of reasons the two goals were often hard to conjoin. However, this was only one of the problems in tackling sexism, an endlessly open and mutating concept, both despite and because of differing feminist attempts to pin it down. In my talk I will address both the persistence and mutations of differing forms of sexism, especially in relation to age, class, ethnicity and the emergence of certain women in key positions of power, both locally and globally, while at the same time noting its limitations: whether for addressing many of the conflicts and contradictions in women's lives, or in confronting the multiple hazards so many women face in these neoliberal times.

**STEPHANIE TAYLOR (Open University)**

***Avoiding Trouble? A Narrative-Discursive Approach to Sexism and Women's Identity Work***

Building on earlier social psychological work on prejudice and discrimination in relation to race and ethnicity, discursive and narrative analytic approaches raise a number of issues concerning the definition of sexism and the interpretation of data relevant to research on contemporary sexism. In particular, such approaches suggest that although sexist practice inevitably involves individuals, it is not reducible to a problem of individual belief or intention. Sexist discourses are fluid, establishing negative positionings which are closely implicated with more positive professional and personal identities claimed by women workers, and are therefore not easily avoided. Conceptualisations in these terms therefore have implications for how contemporary sexism in relation to work and careers can be recognised, and challenged, beyond the research context.

**Chairs:** Lia Litosseliti and Rosalind Gill (City University London)