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TRIBUTE

"No questions? Then, fight me!" A tribute to Deborah Cameron (1958–2026)

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Abstract

In this tribute, I pay homage to the late Deborah Cameron (1958-2026), a leading feminist linguist whose scholarship shaped sociolinguistics' understanding of the relationship among language, society, gender, sexuality, and power. The paper traces Cameron's sustained intervention against biological determinism, romanticised accounts of gender difference, and the assumption that linguistic reform alone can produce social change. Throughout, the tribute highlights Cameron's distinctive analytic stance: her insistence on complexity, her resistance to consensus, and her commitment to critique as an indispensable scholarly practice. I argue that Cameron's legacy lies not only in specific theoretical contributions but also in her enduring challenge to treat language as a social phenomenon without mistaking it as a sufficient agent of social transformation. (Sociolinguistics, language and gender, feminism, power, ideology)

"Oh, bollocks!" she would angrily interject in her unmistakably husky, low-pitched voice. Bollocks to academic fads, to sexist jokes, to unwarranted analysis, to phoney niceties, to feel-good slogans. Many of us in sociolinguistics have witnessed versions of this interjection being proffered at conferences, seminars, classrooms, podcasts, and dinner parties. Conjuring this familiar scene seems fitting to begin a tribute for the late Deborah Cameron (1958–2026), whose work debunked much sociolinguistic nonsense over the past forty years. As the title of a forthcoming festschrift in her honour foregrounds (Meyerhoff, Burnett, & Eckert 2026), Cameron will be remembered for urging us to stop talking bollocks about language, society, gender, identity, power, politics (a truly endless list!). Debbie (the friend, spouse, sister, lover, mentor, stand-up comedian, baker, activist) Cameron (the scholar, the myth, the genius) brought the *social* into sociolinguistics in ways that permanently altered the field. And she did so not by smoothing its edges, but by unapologetically confronting its limitations and demythologising reductive views of language as reflecting society.

For better and for worse, Debbie was a force of nature. Wilful, opinionated, sharp-witted, short-tempered—she had little patience for bombast, virtue-signalling, or sugarcoating analysis to shield interlocutors' sensitivities from hard empirical

facts. If she were a provocateur, it was never for vacuous effect. Her interventions always unsettled lazy certainties and brought better questions into the open. What distinguished her, beyond sheer intellectual stamina, was a rare kind of scholarly chutzpah, the nerve to state her opinions plainly, to resist consensus when it dulled analysis, and to insist on complexity when solace would have been expected. As a uniquely talented sociolinguist and a fearless feminist, she was trouble-and-strife through and through (see Cameron & Scanlon 2009).

For four decades, Debbie reshaped how scholars think about language, gender, sexuality, and power. Her work encompasses the academically groundbreaking *Feminism and Linguistic Theory* (1985), *The Lust to Kill: A Feminist Investigation of Sexual Murder* (with Elizabeth Frazer, 1987), *Researching Language: Issues of Power and Method* (with Elizabeth Frazer, Penelope Harvey, Ben Rampton, & Kay Richardson, 1992), *Verbal Hygiene* (1995), *Good to Talk? Living and Working in a Communication Culture* (2000), and *Language and Sexuality* (with Don Kulick, 2003). She was also a public intellectual who had the extraordinary talent to entice non-academics, as is testified by the widely read general interest monographs *The Myth of Mars and Venus* (2007), *Feminism: A Brief Introduction* (2019), *Language, Sexism and Misogyny* (2024), as well as the blog *Language: A Feminist Guide*. During her career, Debbie dismantled biological determinism, the romanticisation of gender difference, and the belief that linguistic reform alone can induce social change. For her, these were comforting fictions that had become obvious. In Debbie's world, obviousness was the most grotesque offence to her intellect. Her central insistence was disarmingly simple and methodologically demanding. Cameron's scholarship vividly (at times, disturbingly) demonstrated that language is neither innocent nor omnipotent. It is a social phenomenon, yet, per se, it does not change society in straightforward ways. Language change is in and of itself a form of social change that may or may not bear on larger structural transformation. A prolific scholar, she has authored and edited more than twenty books, innumerable articles, chapters, and blog posts that demonstrate how language is lived, fought over, desired, regulated, misfiring, and consequential.

From the very beginning, Debbie tested the field's epistemological (and, truth be told, patriarchal) biases. In this regard, the story behind *Feminism and Linguistic Theory* is revealing not only of her intellectual weight but of the academic misogyny she refused to accommodate. In 1983, under the direction of Roy Harris (another genius in the sociolinguistics pantheon), Debbie presented her doctoral proposal on the very topic that would later become one of her magnum opuses (the other one being, undisputably, *Verbal Hygiene*). Puzzled with the title, a male committee member fired: 'But surely, [...] that's like writing a book about linguistics and organic gardening?' (Cameron 1992:2). The proposal was rejected by the English Faculty at Oxford. Debbie disagreed with the decision ("Oh, bollocks!" I imagine her saying) and stormed out of the university without a Ph.D.

Steadfast in her convictions, she published *Feminism and Linguistic Theory* in 1985. It soon became a foundational text in sociolinguistics with reprints in 1985, 1986, 1987 (twice), 1988, 1990, and a second edition in 1992. This story is not simply about opposition to feminism (or blatant misogyny), but rather a deeper inability to grasp how feminism and linguistics could be connected. Feminism was treated as a personal eccentricity instead of a robust theoretical and political enterprise; linguistics, in contrast, was presumed to be untouched by politics if it were to live

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up to its scientific whims. What was dismissed as nonsensical by a male interviewer would, within a few years, become one of the field's most generative lines of inquiry, most notably institutionalised through the International Gender and Language Association (IGALA), its flagship journal *Gender and Language*, and its biennial conference. (IGALA3 at Cornell in 2004 was the first time I met Cameron. It was also the occasion on which her trademark 'bollocks' was first directed at me. And, years later, as we grew closer, I was fortunate enough to have been bollocked multiple times.) That Debbie responded to the institutional rejection of her Ph.D. proposal not by rebranding the project, but by sharpening it (and getting it published!), tells us a great deal about the kind of scholar she was.

Fastidiously attentive to linguistic dynamics in society, Debbie never treated language as an abstract, detached system floating above the mess of everyday life. She insisted that language is as messy as the lives of those who speak it. Her work investigated such messiness where language matters most, among people in workplaces and bedrooms, in classrooms and call-centres, in tabloids and advertising, in jokes and insults, in flirtation, policy, politics, and power. In 1990, she famously decried sociolinguistics' 'dependence on a naive and simplistic SOCIAL theory [unable to solve] the problem of how to relate the social to the linguistic' (Cameron 1990:81, original emphasis). Since then, her scholarship focused on adding nuance to the field's understanding of society and, *mutatis mutandis*, its relation to language. If sociolinguistics today is less abstract and more attuned to language's role in the social world, much of that comes from her.

Outspoken and undeterred in her beliefs, Debbie was no stranger to disagreement, including public theoretical disagreement. But what set her apart was that she always argued from a careful, empirically based diagnosis of what the field was doing to itself, what it was foregrounding, what and who it was disavowing, what concepts it was domesticating, and which questions had become off-limits. Debbie understood earlier than many that the most consequential debates in a field are not always announced as debates. They emerge when certain questions begin to feel settled, when specific vocabularies acquire moral authority, and when critique is tolerated only if it does not hurt anyone's feelings. She personally experienced disagreements prosecuted as individual failures, with arguments reduced to positions and positions reduced to persons. She was also acutely aware that epistemological disagreements could be reinterpreted as personalised critiques, in which arguments were evaluated by reference to the (perceived) conduct or character of their authors. Her refusal to participate in that narrowing of thought, her insistence on ambivalence, friction, and analytic discomfort, made Cameron an inconvenient presence. It also made her indispensable.

Her intellectual honesty and unruly mind often put her at odds with prevailing epistemic orthodoxies or the political mood of the moment. Debbie never denied the importance of feminist and queer struggles over naming, visibility, and recognition. However, she was wary of treating language in simplistic ways that often mistake symbolic innovation for structural change. Her writing on the limits of gender-neutral language, and on desire as obtuse, inconvenient, and resistant to tidy alignment with identity categories, insisted on complexity where others demanded reassurance. These positions were frequently misinterpreted, sometimes weaponised,

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and, most unfairly, folded into accusations that bore little resonance with her lifelong feminist commitments. Her intellectual journey was never about comfort. It was about unflinching inquiry and the refusal to reduce complex phenomena on behalf of anyone's interests. This is why some of her positions were sometimes exaggerated into rhetorical caricatures far from her true arguments. In university corridors and on social media alike, these misunderstandings occasionally hardened into unjust harassment that obscured the nuance of her thinking and the staunch feminist drive of her work. Cameron's response was characteristically Debbie: no grovelling, no endless clarifications, no retreat. Instead, she thought harder, wrote better, and carried on disagreeing.

Her final book, *The Rise of Dogwhistle Politics* (2025), shows this intellectual temperament at its sharpest. A testament to her keen ear for political and cultural shifts, the book illustrates Debbie's incisive attention to the contemporary mechanisms of coded language (dogwhistles and hidden signals) that now inflect debates across the political spectrum. Writing with characteristic poignancy and wry insight, she considers not only how language can hurt, but also how the impulse to police speech sometimes mirrors the very dynamics it seeks to contest. She asks whether the power of words should be equated with violence, and whether viewing language primarily as a weapon might obscure other stories about communication and cultural change. It is trademark Debbie: sharp-eared, quick-witted, arresting, ferocious against nonsense, and deeply sceptical of easy explanations. Akin to ideas she furthered throughout her career, she shows that words matter, but not in magical ways, and not always in the ways people would like them to. Her farewell book synthesises one of Cameron's main contributions to sociolinguistics: that critique can easily curdle into its own orthodoxy.

Debbie's scholarship was inseparable from her formidable personality and unsparing presence. She was no-nonsense, intellectually sharp, academically honest, and equipped with a dry, sideways humour that could disarm a whole room. Disagreement was not a social failure in her world but a mode of engagement; differences were invitations, not threats. A fierce believer in principled, republican exchange of ideas (and a ruthless detractor of censorship and cancel culture), Debbie insisted, in the conclusion of a blog post that would later trigger coordinated outrage and attempted silencing, that 'I believe in open debate on politically controversial issues, so I'm not suggesting the views of either side should be either censored or protected from criticism' (Cameron 2016). Those who disliked her message did not engage its substance; instead, they mobilised social media to defame the messenger through moralised, accusatory language, converting disagreement into denunciation and replacing intellectual debate with smear campaigns. We had numerous disagreements over several issues on which each of us took starkly opposing positions (including the topic of this specific blog post). Our heated conversations were sprinkled with more bollocks than I could ever count (from both sides!), but still, we respected each other's opinions. She liked argument, trusted friction, and had little patience for consensus purchased at the cost of thought.

Cameron was also candid about the conditions of her own writing. On my first day as a visiting researcher at Oxford (and only the second time I ever met her in person, thirteen years after an awkward encounter at IGALA3), I followed her as she cut through an auditorium brimming with students. She moved fast, unconcerned

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with ceremony. Before we had even stepped outside, she was already fishing in her bag. In a reply to my comment about how much her books had influenced me as a sociolinguist, she announced, "I don't write a word without a fag", a cigarette dangling from her mouth. Half provocation, half matter-of-fact disclosure, entirely on brand, this one-liner captures something of her suspicion of sanitised academic personas and her distrust of pretence to virtue, even (or especially) when it arrives well-intentioned.

That sense of humour was on full display at IGALA13 in Montevideo in July 2025, where Debbie was the closing plenary speaker. Too unwell to attend in person, she appeared remotely and delivered what would likely be her last keynote: 'Something old, something new: Changes and challenges in feminist language study'. Marking fifty years since the emergence of language and gender research and forty years since the publication of *Feminism and Linguistic Theory*, she traced the return, in new discursive guises, of old threats to women's rights, from resurgent fascisms to the banal everyday misogyny many assumed had faded. History, she noted, does not merely repeat itself; it mutates linguistically.

The analysis was dense, historically grounded, and intellectually unsettling. When her talk ended, applause was fervent and then, briefly, there was silence. As the audience tried to find its footing and formulate questions, Debbie cut in, drily: "No questions? That's a first. Then, fight me". The line landed exactly as one would expect. A younger, mostly North American crowd shifted uncomfortably in their seats; others—particularly those of us from South America and of a certain vintage—laughed out loud. It was Debbie being Cameron: provocative without being cruel, invitational through friction, and utterly uninterested in ornamental deference.

Her passing on January 20, 2026, following a sudden diagnosis of pancreatic cancer a month earlier, came far too fast. She faced the news of her pending death with the dignity of a plain, unsentimental truth. I was lucky enough to say farewell over the phone a few days before she succumbed. Her final words to me will surely echo for years to come: "Thanks, Rod. At the end, people are all that matters". Debbie's work was never about comfort or consensus. It was about people, how they speak, work, desire, clash, misunderstand, and persist. It was about language as one of the main ways our lives are lived.

Sociolinguistics is what it is today because we were fortunate to have her, warts and all: brilliant, difficult, wilful, affectionate, and impossible to domesticate. Debbie (the friend) Cameron (the legend) will continue to provoke, challenge, unsettle, disarm, and inspire, as all great thinkers do long after they are gone.

And if anyone thinks otherwise, that's bollocks!

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