

1. Researching the language of sex: gender, discourse and (im)politeness¹

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1.- The language of sex: multiple texts and discourses

Let me say from the outset: sex –and the language employed to denote sex or to metaphorise sexual anxiety– is a worthy subject of observation and research. However, a long tradition of prejudices or censorship, of political correction or religious intransigence, has judged this otherwise. Without a doubt, sex is one of the most profound human experiences and a complex index of identity –besides, the language of sex permeates all kinds of texts, genres or media.

Sex(uality) is a discourse which stands at the crossroads of at least two compelling forces: on the one hand, a private and intimate experience which articulates our voices and our desires; and on the other hand, a complex process of discursive construction (Foucault 1971) which is profoundly ideological and highly dependent on the morality of each historical period, on the changeable dialectics between individual values and social discipline. Each period has witnessed fierce linguistic as well as political struggles to impose on others words or concepts of profound moral and/or ideological import. There have always been unending ‘wars of words’ (Dunant 1994) over a few selected sex-related signifiers. For instance, Michel Foucault (in *The History of Sexuality*, 1984) documents the efforts of 19th-century official psychiatry to coin the term

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'homosexual' as a crime-associated malady, or 'lesbianism' as cerebral anomaly.² At a more general level, feminists believe that sexual terms are likely to undergo 'semantic derogation' (Schultz 1975) as part of a more general process of sexualisation or metapho(e)r(ot)ization of women. Many terms like *whore*, *tramp*, *trollop* or *nympho* underwent parallel processes of feminisation and pejoration, or rather of pejoration *as* feminisation.

We have to remember that just as sex(uality) –as well as social attitudes to it– is constituted in discourse, so sexual terms today are variously and contradictorily subject to challenge, confirmation or reclamation. But sexual language is a much more wide-ranging discourse. We can verify an overwhelming presence of sex in our daily lives –in our words, in our texts, in our symbolic projections. It is present in a number of words which serve to describe our body, to prescribe medical care, to arouse readers erotically, etc.; it is also present in a series of genres such as erotic novels or pornography, and even in most contemporary fiction; also in endless series of discursive situations.

Some individual words may sound trivial or ultra-formal but others are likely to trigger off virulent social reactions. For instance, D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) was prosecuted mainly for its profusion of four-letter words (see Rembar 1968). Lawrence's work is a good example of the use of sexual terms to explore and challenge both individual and societal moral conventions about sexual behaviour. Lawrence places language at the very centre of the deployment of sexuality. The presence of individual words such as 'cunt' or 'fuck' may lead to heated debates over private honour or public morality, or even to obscenity trials. The 1960 trial of the unexpurgated edition of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was concerned with whether terms denoting the genitalia and copulation were artistically suitable.

Compiling all the sexual words or expressions has been a popular task among a great number of researchers. Just to name a few: Partridge (1968) compiled a famous glossary of Shakespeare's sexual and bawdy

² More recent examples are provided today by efforts to criminalize words or attitudes ('terrorism', 'abortion' or 'nationalism'), undertaken by such ultra-conservative institutions as George Bush's puritanical America, the Roman Catholic Church or the Spanish right-wing *Partido Popular* –all three use moral issues to criminalize all forms of ideological dissent and politico-religious dialogue.

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terms; Rubinstein (1984) documents a great deal of references to Shakespeare's sexual puns; Gordon (1994) thoroughly glosses Shakespearean and Stuart sexual terminology, with nearly two thousand words and phrases. Sánchez Benedito (1998, 2004) lists some ten thousand erotic euphemisms and dysphemisms (with their Spanish equivalents) found in famous individual authors, erotic fiction, erotic magazines, etc.

The multiple significance of the language of sex can be seen in the following newspaper articles, which are not uncommon at all:

Sir Bob Fouls up

SIR Bob Geldof was in hot water after using the f-word on children's television yesterday. Cat Deeley, host of music show CD:UK immediately apologised for the former pop star's slip, adding: "And you were doing so well there, Bob!" A studio insider said: "Sir Bob apologised off-air. He wasn't told off but it's unlikely he'll be invited back soon".

SUNDAY EXPRESS November 16, 2003

Jamie 'needs a mouthwash' say teachers

JAMIE OLIVER swears too much on his latest TV series Jamie's School Dinners, a parent-teacher group claimed yesterday. The celebrity chief should release a special 'clean' version of the show for children, said Margaret Morrissey of the National Confederation of Parent Teacher Associations.

METRO March 16, 2005

A series of conclusions can be drawn from these articles:

- English-language speakers *do* use words or expressions which – directly or indirectly– refer to sex. Sexual language is present in most everyday contexts.
- There are great difficulties and social pressures when uttering sex-related words or expressions, especially in some settings (with children) and in some genres (TV discourse).
- There are unspoken norms –unspoken but taken to be universally accepted– of what it is 'appropriate', 'correct' or 'polite' to say.

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- Through (sexual) language we may provoke disapproval, censure or social exclusion.

This paper is an attempt to invite a wide-ranging analysis into the signification of sexual language –which has been widely used, since time immemorial, by speakers and writers. Its use has given rise to differing speaking practices and settings, literary genres and traditions, as well as ideological phenomena such as censorship or taboo, obscenity or pornography, etc.

2.- Sexual language and gender

There are several studies dealing, one way or another, with the language of sex, mostly carried out by gender scholars. Within sociolinguistics, there has been a strongly held (traditional) stereotype somehow associating men with the language of sex: for sociolinguists like Trudgill (1972) masculinity is associated with linguistic toughness and roughness (which includes, among other traits, swearwords).

Several studies have placed sexual language at the centre of research. Eble (1977) sees linguistic use as a continuum stretching from characteristically male to characteristically female, with an area in between which is neither. Eble confirms previous sociolinguistic stereotypes:

Terms of hostility and abuse such as curses and obscenities are generally associated with masculinity, whereas euphemistic and superlative terms are associated with femininity; neutral terms are associated with neither sex. (Eble 1977: 295)

and confirms the gendered nature of sexual language:

Probably the most obvious sex-linked feature in American English usage is the absence of swear words and obscenities in the speech of well-mannered women. (Eble 1977: 295)

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This stereotype seems almost untenable today, but as all stereotypes it still preserves part of its force and it does influence the behaviour of a certain segment of the population. Quite a few women have, however, explicitly challenged the stereotype, and an increasing number of women have violated social expectations, and shown a certain feminine linguistic ‘impropriety’: Germaine Greer received a summons to appear in court for using indecent words during a public address; Erica Jong was requested to avoid swearwords in her talks; Spanish contemporary writers like Lucía Etxebarria use sexual language as a sort of provocation both in their books and in their public appearances.

Julia P. Stanley (1977) deals with naming practices and with stereotyping –she studies the names given by men to sexually available women. She considers that:

The names that men have given to women who make themselves sexually available to them reveal the underlying metaphors by which men conceive of their relationships with women, and through which women learn to perceive and define themselves. (Stanley 1977: 305)

She analyzes 220 terms men use for prostitutes –this astonishing variety represents, in Stanley’s words, the great variety of roles and metaphors assigned to women as sexual objects. Women are considered as: receptacles for the excretions of men (*bedpan, slopjar*), animals (*bitch, sweathog, quail*), inanimate objects (*mattress, baggage, pisspallet*), holes for men (*nutcracker, bullseye, organgrinder*), etc. All of them show that “the only way a woman can define her sexuality with the names provided by our culture is demeaning, shameful, and/or oppressively non-existent, should she choose to reject the terms that men associate with her sexuality” (Stanley 1977: 305).

Barbara Risch, however, offers a significantly different interpretation. In a study of derogatory terms (‘dirty’ words) that women use to refer to men, she addresses the stereotype which considers sex-related terms associated with masculinity. The wealth of examples Risch gets from women (*bastard, asshole, dick, prick, bitch, study, jerk-off, whore, slut, bulge*, etc.) leads her to wonder: “Is nonstandard speech really associated with masculinity, or is it more a signification of public versus private discourse?” (Risch 1987: 358).

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Deborah Cameron (1995) conducted an experiment among American college students, both female and male, to list terms for the penis. The assignment proved enjoyable and the list of terms thus produced revealed deep-rooted cultural and ideological assumptions about gender and sexuality. There are some differences between the lists offered by men and women: men metaphorized the penis as a person (*his Excellency, your Majesty, Genghis Khan, Kojak, Dick, Peter, Mr. Happy*), an animal (*King Kong, hog, one-eyed trouser snake, python*), a tool (*garden hose, screwdriver, drill, fuzzbuster*), a weapon (*passion rifle, purple helmeted love warrior, destroyer*) or food (*love popsicle, vienna sausage, piece of pork*); women's terms for the penis, on the other hand, include nonsense terms (*dickhead, schmuck, tallywacker*), useless things (*pencil, blood-engorged pole, third leg*), names (*Fred, Peter-dinkie*), animals (*visions of horses*), weapons (*atlas rocket*) or food (*wiener, biscuit*).

Cameron's experiment with sexual terms reveals opposing –and clearly gendered– ideological assumptions about gender and sex(uality). Men, primarily, show serious anxiety over masculinity and sexuality: they “are not simply reproducing myths and stereotypes. They are also recognizing them as myths and stereotypes; and to a significant extent, they are laughing at them” (Cameron 1995: 211). By ridiculing terms for the penis, they paradoxically recirculate them (masculinity as dominance and sex as war and conquest). Women, as was predictable, reject the overall male metaphorical schema: they avoid mythic or heroic overtones and identify the penis with violence and aggression. Metaphors turn out to be cultural constructions, though of a highly predictable nature.

A similar study is presented by Fernández Fontecha & Jiménez Catalán (2003): they carry out a contrastive analysis (English/Spanish) of gendered metaphorical usages of the word pairs *fox/vixen* and *bull/cow* and their Spanish equivalents *zorro/zorra* and *toro/vaca*. Animal metaphors seem a good way of documenting the process of ‘semantic derogation’ which both languages share. After a careful analysis of the main metaphorical meanings of the words mentioned when applied to people, the authors conclude that “women's sexual behavior is a constant in both animal pairs in both languages” (Fernández Fontecha & Jiménez Catalán 2003: 793). Men-related metaphorical usages –in stark contrast to sociolinguistic beliefs– usually downplay their sexual nature.

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This points to an important area of concern in gender and language studies: Western languages are largely androcentric and, consequently, construct largely androcentric worlds, which are contested by feminism and by more egalitarian attitudes in society. Sexual language is an important source for insulting women. Stanley (1977: 316) affirms: “Women insult men by reference to unpleasantness in their personalities, but men insult women by reference to their availability for sexual use.” Sex is one of the obvious targets of swearing, insults, etc. and it is often done along gender(ed) lines –and hence, an abundance of ‘dirty’ jokes, of jokes about women or wives, etc. Exploiting the sexual nature of women (in jokes, stories, etc.) is an obvious and widespread way of degrading women.

3.- The language of sex and the expression of (im)politeness

Besides the textual, cultural, generic or discoursal perspectives on sexual language, we would like to suggest a further avenue of exploration: the connection of sexual language with the expression of politeness. This is a largely unexplored area of research.

Politeness is basically an expression of concern for the feelings of others, manifested linguistically and non-linguistically. It refers to any sort of behaviour (verbal or non-verbal tokens, gestures, icons, etc.) through which deference and solidarity for interlocutors is made explicit. Politeness has both a social and a linguistic character, and helps to regulate all types of communicative behaviour. Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) set up the field of politeness studies as a series of universal human ‘face wants’ and the use of a series of universal strategies for conversation participants to mitigate speech acts which might threaten someone’s face. But as Sell argues:

I do not see it as coming into operation only when people face-threateningly address each other, talk about other people, or make commands, requests, or enquiries. I see all interaction, and all language, as operating within politeness parameters. (Sell 1992: 114)

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Possibly politeness is one of the most obvious ways of reasserting (irrespective of immediately recognizable polite or impolite utterances) one's discursive position and strategies. Ways of being polite or impolite differ from culture to culture and from individual to individual. The use of swearwords among groups of young people, for instance, may express either rejection or in-group membership. Kuiper (1991) analyses sexual humiliation rituals (in common camaraderie formulas like *you fucking old woman*, *you wanker*, *cunt*, *you great penis* and many others) as a strategy of solidarity among New Zealand rugby players. So sexual insults can be –among other things– a way of reinforcing friendship and of strengthening the in-group membership dynamics.

Sexual language is, at a stereotypical level, catalogued as *impolite* and constantly demands unending apologies and justifications (see Braun 1999). But sexual language is also –again at a stereotypical level– considered as *gendered*. Janet Holmes (1995) has popularized a well-known paradigm on politeness along clear gender lines: she opens her book *Women, men and politeness* (1995) with a direct question: “Are women more polite than men? The question is deceptively simple” (1995: 1) and she gives a straight answer: “I think the answer is ‘yes, women are more polite than men’” (1995: 1). The picture is very neat and is concomitant with the ‘two-cultures’ approach suggested by Maltz & Borker (1982) and Tannen (1990). Women and men, then, in Holmes's influential view, neatly belong to differing politeness cultures:

Men tend to dominate public talking time, for instance, while women often have to work hard to get them to talk in the privacy of their homes. [...] Women tend to use questions, and phrases such as *you know* to encourage others to talk. [...] Women compliment others more often than men do, and they apologise more than men do too. (Holmes 1995: 2)

For Brown and Levinson (1987: 251) it appears that “women are more positively polite” than men, and that “women use negative politeness strategies in situations where men do not, for example in hedging expressions of emphatic opinion or strong feelings” (*ibidem*). Men, by contrast, resort to a set of different strategies (sexual jokes, ‘report’ or ‘lecturing’ style, etc.). A common element seems to be that women use

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sexual language less frequently than men do. Besides, many studies or analyses of sexual language or literature were designed as analyses of a marginal variety or of a forbidden type of text.

Specific features of what constitutes politeness or impoliteness differ from culture to culture and from individual to individual. Within Brown and Levinson's theory, sexual language would constitute a stereotypical example of FTA, because through it we reveal areas of human geography and intimate desires which most individuals are reluctant to reveal. The language of sex would be a prototypical example of a language which is likely to embarrass, degrade or humiliate the listener or reader. For a traditional theory of politeness, directives, threats, insults, complaints, disagreements, criticisms and sexual language naturally constitute face-threatening speech acts.

Sexual language may, however, pose interesting challenges to politeness studies. One of the most obvious fields of connection between politeness and sexual language is the territory of euphemisms and dysphemisms. In medical consultations, for instance, we find a mixture of formal, clinical, anatomical language ('scrotum', 'testicles', 'fallopian tube') with euphemistic, imprecise terms ('sleeping with', 'going to bed with'). How to talk about sex and sexual health is a really serious matter: it may be a major source of unease and an impediment to the necessary medical treatment. The 1998 HEA publication *Talking about sexual health* (Mitchell & Wellings 1998) makes it clear that the way doctors, nurses or advisers use sex-related terms –as well as the very terms they use– may cause offence, embarrassment or even rejection.

Both euphemisms and dysphemisms may have social consequences: the former, safeguarding social values; the latter, provoking strong moral rejection. But this is only in theory: explicit sexual (and offensive) terms may constitute either an offence or an erotic booster, a token of close friendship or a challenge to one's self-esteem. As BurrIDGE summarizes:

In contemporary Western society, euphemism is typically the polite thing to do, and offensive language (or dysphemism) is little more than the breaking of a social convention. Many euphemisms are alternatives for expressions speakers or writers would simply prefer not to use on a given occasion. (BurrIDGE 1996: 42)

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In most cases, sexual language seems to erase the canonical distinction between positive and negative politeness. The language of sex constitutes an ethical universe in itself, which is likely to prompt a myriad of responses –from erotic arousal to indifference, from light contempt to indignant moral superiority. All these might be triggered by a single word, the tone of voice, the topic under discussion, etc. The type of reaction also depends on cultural assumptions or expectations, on the period's attitude towards the body, sexuality or differing sexual identities.

We are faced with the ambivalent realization that sexual language can express, simultaneously, politeness and impoliteness. Suffice it to recall Labov's (1972) study on ritual insults among Black gang members or Kuiper's (1991) analysis of sexual insults used to reinforce in-group membership and a shared identity. In this light, we may wonder whether cat-whistles are instances of 'compliments' or of FTAs. Cultural differences in the attitude to the language of sex may explain the existence of differing and contradictory manifestations. In Latin-American cultures, cat-whistles are rather common and range from mild appreciative comments on the body to highly obscene or degrading remarks that refer to sexual actions or feelings. As for Turkish boys, Dundes *et al.* (1972) interpret their verbal duelling as a gendered/sexualised *rite de passage* which allows boys "to repudiate the female world with its passive sexual role and to affirm the male world with its active sexual role" (Dundes *et al.* 1972: 159). Sexual language (mainly in the form of insults) function for these male groups as a reinforcement of solidarity.

Erotic language (and erotic literature) poses similar problems to a theory of politeness. There are erotic passages in many texts, as eroticism is a stylization of sexual language, and sexual language is everywhere. Erotic genres use sexual language abundantly, in more or less explicit ways, though in specific erotic novels (e.g. *Fanny Hill*) euphemism is the fundamental styleme (see Santaemilia 2001).

Pornography is sometimes considered a sub-genre of erotic literature, but it is a much more widespread phenomenon –in D.H. Lawrence's words, "the attempt to insult sex, to do dirt on it" (Lawrence 1959: 69). Compared with erotic language, pornography appears as soon as pleasure or desire become mere merchandise, and is a further step towards the

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trivialisation and objectification of human sex(uality). Contrary to popular expectations, pornography de-eroticizes all forms of sexuality and all forms of sex-related stimulation. One of its most distinctive traits is the profusion of terms to refer to the female body and sexuality, mainly destined to arouse men sexually. Pornographic language is potentially aggressive, as it may serve to destroy women's intimacy and maybe constitutes one of the strongest FTAs language can articulate. Pornography (much more than eroticism) defeats any politeness expectations –while erotic language may serve to stimulate positive responses on readers or speakers, pornography constitutes a purposeful attack on others' (mainly women's) dignity.

Another area of sexual language which deserves commenting upon is swearing, which “shows a curious convergence of the high and the low, the sacred and the profane” (Hughes 1991: 4). Until recently, there was a stereotypical saying that (sexual) swearing was a male preserve. And as for the swearwords used:

On swearing the general feminist view is that, since language is generated in a ‘patriarchal’ or ‘phallocentric’ dispensation, there has developed, especially in male swearing, a prevalence of the terms of feminine anatomy, such as *cunt* and *tit*. (Hughes 1991: 206-7)

Women have not traditionally been considered (or expected) to be swearers. Feminism has brought about a more liberal attitude towards women's swearing. In fact, women's talking dirty has been reclaimed as one of women's (linguistic) rights. Liladhar (2000) studies stand-up comedian Jenny Eclair's performance in *Top Bitch*. She suggests that Jenny Eclair is a good –though ambivalent– instance of women progressively transgressing gender boundaries and occupying the traditional territories of masculinity: speaking about sexuality in public, using strong expletives, telling dirty jokes, eschewing overpolite and euphemistic language, etc. Contemporary film or TV heroines are also testimony to the fact that women are swearing to a greater extent than they were in the past and that they are doing it in a conscious and provocative way. Let us remember that around swearwords –as well as around pornography or eroticism– moral reform projects have been historically articulated.

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A strong connection between social patterns of politeness and the language of sex is offered by the cinema adult ratings. Rating boards in different countries, like the MPAA (Motion Picture Association of America), the BBFC (British Board of Film Classification) or the Spanish ICAE (*Instituto de la Cinematografía y de las Artes Escénicas*) usually classify or rate newly released films. The factors taken into account to issue these codes are: theme, language, nudity and sex, violence, etc. Apparently, cinema goes need to be protected from the potentially face-threatening force of –basically– sexually explicit language; therefore, the strictest ratings seem to depend on the presence/absence of sexual language. The R rating may include, among other things, strong sexually-derived words, whereas a NC-17 rating might involve, though not necessarily, the use of obscene or pornographic words and situations. While these ratings (and, historically, others like ‘S’ or ‘X’) are meticulously applied to sexual and obscene language in films, no similar ratings are applied on the same scale to films like *Rambo* or *Terminator* which, at best, constitute a glorification of violence and of political control. The need for official institutions to regulate the effect of films on audiences is only an implicit reminder of the destabilising character of sex and sexual language.

Sexual language, however, is experienced differently in each society or period –the use, abuse or avoidance of sexual terms differs interlinguistically and interculturally and is, perhaps, one of the main indices of each society. Besides, politeness is not operative when people face-threateningly address their interlocutors, but is experienced “as an overall style of behaviour that is decidedly to be approved of” (Sell 1992: 155).

The same can be said of impoliteness. A polite act can be experienced as impolite, and vice-versa. The perception of (im)politeness is highly individual and not restricted to specific traits, although (im)politeness is also a social question, governed by different social forces at different historical moments. 18th-century readers were –it seems– not so easily offended by physical references to sex as Victorians were. Travelling from period to period, or from country to country, we find differences in politeness expectations, as far as sex is concerned. The very inscription of desire may distort our perceptions of (im)politeness.

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4.- Conclusion

Research on the language of sex is an extremely sensitive area, and more often than not, it seems that one is stepping inadvertently into the forbidden areas of experience. There are lots of social pressures on the (sexual) language to be used. Even in an academic setting, sexual discourse still needs prologues and apologies –as Braun says, “It is as though the very act of talking transgresses a boundary between private experience and public talking that cannot be excused, even by the veil of ‘scientific objectivity’ that the university research mantles provides” (Braun 1999: 368).

Sex articulates incessant –and often conflicting– discourses on the self. It gives rise to a wealth of texts and discourses, of words and registers, of literary traditions and ideological paradigms, even to the attitude of whole civilisations. The language of sex reveals and reinforces important (underlying) cultural and ideological assumptions, and is probably the most powerful textualising device there is.

As Foucault convincingly showed, sexuality is constituted in discourse and, therefore, our idea of sex is a discursive construction. Researching sexual language always involves putting together different languages and cultures, and a variety of disciplines, often with irreconcilable approaches. Sexual language is perhaps one of the best sources of identity construction, of ideological metaphors, of narratives which revolve around the self and try to define it. Sex originates complex discourses (in the Foucauldian sense) at a multiplicity of levels –personal, social, textual, cultural, historical, etc.– which strongly determine our language and our attitude.

Its connection with politeness is also obvious: sexual language is an intimate index of our relationship with others, of our empathy with our interlocutors, of our understanding of what social conversation is. Euphemisms, insults, swearwords, cat-whistles or film censorship are just a few areas where sexual language and (im)politeness meet. The language of sex defeats the traditional expectation, in politeness theory, of a rational man or woman who reacts in rational and cooperative ways to

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any interactional move. The language of sex is, by definition, the territory of the irrational and of desire.

It is very difficult to think of sexual language without being aware of an endless string of implications. It goes beyond the purely verbal (sex-related) choices and includes the whole field of desire, obscenity, the unsaid, pleasure, taboo, etc. It is revealing to find out that most of our institutions and our societal norms, of our irrational behaviours and our capacity of transgression, are articulated around the discourse of sex. Sex (and sexual language) seems to encode one's strategic vantage point on ideology, politics, history, culture, freedom, (im)morality, respect, etc. The language of sex serves to metaphorize our fears and anxieties.

The presence/absence or use/abuse of sexual language is instrumental in the construction (or at least in the perception) of a series of gender/sexual identities. If a person uses very few sexual words or avoids them altogether, he/she is perceived as a 'prude'. If he/she uses what might be felt as too many sexual terms, he/she may be considered as foul-mouthed, indecent or obscene, and is liable to (depending on the time and place) legal persecution or social stigmatisation (see the articles on Sir Bob Geldof and Jamie Oliver). Sex is possibly the discourse which most profoundly constructs us as human and ideological beings.

There follow now five chapters devoted to practical advice for the analysis of sexual language, which cover a vast (linguistic) territory driven by desire and by the ups and downs of morality, by societal taboos and individual discursive strategies.

Helen Sauntson studies informal spoken discourse and analyses how diverse sexualities (heterosexual, gay, lesbian) are constructed through everyday conversation, how sexual identities are constantly (re)negotiated, affirmed or rejected in seemingly irrelevant conversations, etc. Sexual identities are mainly social and are basically achieved through talk about gender expectations rather than through explicit talk about sex or desire. In her chapter, Sauntson offers clear examples of the

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application(s) of discourse analysis to the study of sexual language in naturally occurring conversations.

Dolores Jiménez focuses her study on the 17th-century French anonymous pornographic novel *L'École des filles ou la philosophie des dames* (1655), as an example of the reaction against the highly sentimental and euphemistic style epitomized by the *Précieuses* (the Marquise de Rambouillet or Mlle. de Scudéry), whose ideal was a disembodied and emotional, demure and chaste type of literature. French pornographic novels like *L'École*, Chorier's *Aloisiae Sigae Toletane Satyra sotadica* (1660) or *Vénus dans le cloître* (1682) constitute an antidote to the official 'verbal hygiene' and a celebration of love and physical sex, along the lines of Aretino's dialogues. The reflections of academicians, lexicographers or philosophers in 17th-century France bring about the concept of *the obscene* –words are judged socially from a moral standpoint and they are either chaste or unchaste, moral or immoral, 'clean' or 'dirty'. In French pornography, sex is simultaneously revealed and hidden through a rhetoric of euphemism –countless sexual metaphors are invented for sex organs, desires and postures.

Sexual euphemisms deserve special attention, as they are an important part of the expressive mechanisms of most languages. **Juan José Calvo** devotes a chapter to the anthropological, historical and linguistic origins of the concept of *taboo* –i.e. "all those words or sets of words referring to objects, concepts or actions that a given society considers to be individually or collectively subject to proscription" (Calvo, this volume: 65). Unpleasant subjects, criminal actions, religious rituals, parts of the body, bodily functions or the whole field of sex(uality) are the province of *euphemisms* –i.e. the attempt to hide or disguise unpleasant or inconvenient referents for specific social groups. **Francisco Sánchez Benedito** summarises the main types of euphemisms used in English to describe sexual organs or actions. Euphemisms are linguistic mechanisms to name the basic obscenities (or 'four-letter words' –*fuck, cunt, cock*, etc.) through socially acceptable terms, as they are regarded as distasteful, unpleasant or 'dirty' within a given society. Euphemisms are invented to dignify certain terms, to downplay their potential offensiveness or to name taboo objects or actions. Euphemisms like *to make love* or *to go to bed with someone* have undergone a complete process of lexicalisation

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(thus having a primary sexual meaning) whereas others (e.g. *to ride*, *to mount*, *to nibble*, *to pull a train*, etc.) are semi-lexicalised, as they retain a certain level of ambiguity in meaning. Besides, they make up a series of perfectly articulated and consistent conceptual or metaphorical networks (such as war and violence, riding, hunting, fishing, travelling, eating and so on) (see Lakoff & Johnson 1980; Sánchez Benedito 1998, 2004).

Taking euphemism and ambiguity as starting points, **Patricia Alabarta** partially illustrates the language of sex in a series of headlines found in a selection of British, American and Spanish editions of *Cosmopolitan*. Women's magazines today are a popular subject of study because of their breathtaking sales figures around the world and are actively consumed by millions of women as a form of *self-help* literature. Therefore, they offer invaluable insights into the construction of (trendy contemporary urban) women's sexualities. In a consumer society like ours, they sell a glamorous ideal world for women made of fun, sex and success. Euphemistic and ambiguous headlines (e.g. 'READ HIS DIRTY MIND! THE SECRET **SEXY THOUGHTS** ALL MEN ARE DYING TO TELL YOU ABOUT') remind us that sex is a powerful discourse in our society, which constructs and commodifies us as human *and* sexual beings.

As we can see, this volume is organized around the 'saying' vs. 'not saying' divide: the chapters by Sauntson and Jiménez offer practical analyses of, respectively, informal conversations and 17th century French pornography; the chapters by Calvo and Sánchez Benedito –as well as Alabarta's partial analysis– focus rather on the importance of not saying in English language. Though methodologically sound, the 'saying' vs. 'not saying' divide has revealed itself particularly sterile when it comes to the expression and research of sexual desire: in everyday conversation, in erotic or pornographic literature, in advertising, in women's magazines, etc. the expression of desire is always the result of a constant struggle between revealing and hiding, between bold naming and innuendo. The desire to name and the pleasure to hide are two sides of the same discursive coin.

I hope these chapters will serve as a stimulus for further research in the field of sexual language, a field which urgently demands both practical analyses and –most especially– a firm ethical attitude. One of

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the main ethical imperatives of research(ers) is to fight any sort of (moral) prejudice, censorship or (intellectual) reductionism.

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