Language Keeps Women In Their Place

By Deborah Tannen

When talk about Walter Mondale's running mate was still speculation, *Washington Post* columnist Richard Cohen, as a guest on a radio program, commented that the country needed a black vice presidential candidate more than it needed a woman. This seems, at first, eminently sensible. It is more difficult for blacks to gain access to many positions.

But once admitted, it is far harder for a woman to fulfill the role of political candidate — or any role of authority — than for a man of any background.

The characteristics of a good man and a good candidate are the same, but a woman often has to choose between coming across as a strong leader or a good woman. If a man appears forceful, logical, direct, masterful and powerful, he enhances his value as a candidate and as a man. If a woman appears forceful, logical, direct, masterful or powerful, she risks undercutting her value as a woman.

As Robin Lakoff shows in "Language and Woman's Place," language comes at women from two angles: the words we speak, and the words spoken about us. If I wrote, "After delivering the acceptance speech, the candidate fainted," you would know I'm talking about a woman. Men don't faint; they pass out.

"Fainting" conjures up a frail figure crinkling to the floor, the back of her hand pressed to her forehead — probably for little reason, maybe just for effect. "Passing out" suggests a straightforward fall to the floor.

An article in *Newsweek* about Geraldine Ferraro quotes a Reagan aide calling her "a nasty woman" who would "claw Ronald Reagan's eyes out." Never mind the nastiness of the remark and of the news magazine using it to open its article. Applied to a man, "nasty" would be so tame as to seem harmless. Furthermore, men don't claw; they punch and sock, with correspondingly more forceful results.

Even when seeming to praise Ferraro, the article uses terms drenched with gender. She is credited with "a striking gift for tart political rhetoric, needling Ronald Reagan on the fairness issue and twitting the Reagan-Bush campaign for its reluctance to let Bush debate her." If we reversed subject and object, "needling" and "twitting" would

not sound like praise for Reagan's verbal flair — or any man's. Intended to describe her behavior, the words bend back and portray Ferraro as trifling. When we think we're using metaphors, the metaphors are using us.

It's not that writers are deliberately (nor even unintentionally) "sexist" in their use of language. Rather, gender distinctions are intertwined with language. The most damaging aspect of all this is that through language our images and attitudes are shaped and buttressed.

Ironically, it's probably more difficult for a woman in power in a relatively egalitarian society like the United States than in more hierarchical ones. An American woman who owned and edited a magazine in Athens reports that Greeks, once they realized she was the boss, focused their attention on her. But American visitors were irresistibly drawn to address themselves to her male assistant editor. For Greeks, authority looms so large, it blocks out gender. For Americans, who are refreshingly unintimidated by authority, gender remains ever in the forefront; so, achieving a position of authority does not ensure women of being treated with commensurate deference.

Body language is eloquent, too. In a typical political family photograph, the candidate looks straight out at the camera, and the candidate's wife gazes adoringly up at him. This leads the viewer's eye to the candidate as the center of interest.

In a well-publicized family photo, Ferraro is looking up at her husband, and he is looking straight out. It's an appealing photo that shows her as a good woman, but makes him the inappropriate center of interest, just as his finances became the center of interest in candidate Ferraro's financial disclosure. Whereas a man's wife easily fades into the background, wherever a husband is standing has a way of becoming center stage.

Attitudes toward gender are more deeply imbedded in us than are attitudes toward race or ethnicity. Awareness of race develops relatively late in life, and people in racially homogeneous cultures rarely, if ever, think of it. But gender, in all cultures, permeates every aspect of behavior and consciousness. Not a move can be made, hardly a sentence uttered, without reflecting gender.

The road to authority is tough for women, but once they get there, it's a bed of thorns.

Deborah Tannen is assistant professor of linguistics at Georgetown University, Washington.

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