

# Human Communication in the Critical Theory Tradition

by Robert M. Seiler

By definition, criticism involves the application of principles or values in order to make judgments for the purpose of bringing about positive change. Understandably, criticism comes in a variety of forms. For example, rhetorical criticism carefully examines and judges the quality of discourse. Our subject here is **critical social science**, which critiques basic social structure (Littlejohn, 1992, p. 238; hereafter cited by page number). The following features inform all varieties of critical social science:

- Critical social scientists believe that it is necessary to understand the lived experience of real people in context. Critical Theory shares the ideas and the methodologies of some interpretive theories.
- What makes critical scholarship different from interpretive scholarship is that it interprets the acts and the symbols of society in order to understand the ways in which various social groups are oppressed.
- Critical approaches examine social conditions in order to uncover hidden structures. Naturally, critical theory borrows from structuralism. Critical theory teaches that knowledge is power. This means that understanding the ways one is oppressed enables one to take action to change oppressive forces.
- Critical social science makes a conscious attempt to fuse theory and action. Critical theories are thus normative; they serve to bring about change in the conditions that affect our lives.

In a word, analysts working in this tradition align themselves with the interests of those opposed to dominant order of society. They ask questions about the ways in which competing interests clash and the manner in which conflicts are resolved in favour of particular groups.

## MARXIST CRITIQUE

One of the most important intellectual strands of the last century was Marxist-based social theory. Based on the ideas of [Karl Marx](#) and Friedrich Engels, this movement is made up of a number of loosely related theories which oppose the dominant order of society, i.e., economic, political, ideological, and theoretical.

### 1. Classical Marxism

In *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), Marx and Engels argued that the means of production determines the very nature of society. This is the linear idea of the base-superstructure relationship: The economy is the base of all social structure, including institutions and ideas. In capitalistic systems, profit drives production and thus dominates labor. Working-class groups are oppressed by the group (in power) who benefit from profit. All institutions that perpetuate

domination within a capitalistic society arise from this economic system. Only when the working class rises against the dominant groups can the liberation of the worker be achieved.

Such liberation furthers the natural progression of history in which forces in opposition clash in a dialectic that results in a higher social order. This classical theory is called the critique of political economy. Think of the recent financial crises in Malaysia, Japan, Russian, and Latin America, thanks to the rapid (uncontrolled) movement of money.

Marxist-based critical theory thrives today. Not all adherents to Critical Theory are strictly Marxist however. The basic ideas of dialectical conflict, domination, and oppression remain important. Much contemporary critical theory views social processes as over-determined, as opposed to Marx's simple base-superstructure model. They see social structure as a system in which numerous elements interact with one another. A number of approaches to Marxist communication theory can be taken. They all focus on two kinds of problems.

### The Politics of Textuality

This approach has to do with the ways the media produce encoded messages, the ways audiences decode those messages, and the power domination apparent in these processes. The text scholar might study (say) the ways certain kinds of media content, such as network news, are produced and how those depictions are understood by audiences so as to perpetuate or oppose the power of certain dominant economic institutions, such as government.

### The Problematic of Cultural Studies

This line of investigation examines the relation among media, other institutions, and the ideology of culture. Cultural theorists are interested in how the dominant ideology of a culture subverts other ideologies via social institutions, such as schools, churches, and the media. Both traditions focus on the evils of class society and the struggles that occur among the different social forces. Both emphasize the ways social structures are produced and reproduced in the natural daily activities of individuals, groups, and institutions.

The task analysts take on is uncovering the oppressive forces operating in society, i.e., by means of dialectical analysis. This method--the art of knowing truth by uncovering the contradictions in the reasonings of one's adversary--exposes the underlying struggle between opposing forces. The argument here is that only by becoming aware of the dialectic of opposing forces, in a struggle for power, can individuals liberate themselves and change the existing order.

## 2. Neo-Marxism

In **The Frankfurt School** of Critical Theory, we see one of the longest and the most famous traditions of Marxism. Often, commentators refer the tradition as "Critical Theory," meaning a special kind of social philosophy. To begin with, the Frankfurt School grew out of the Institute of Social Research, which was founded in 1923 at the University of Frankfurt by Felix Weil, a political scientist with a passion for Marxism. Weil had studied at the university, writing a dissertation socializing the economy. His father (a wealthy merchant) set up a substantial

endowment for the institute. One of the major purposes of the institute was to study (and eventually explain) the dynamics of social change. Carl Grunberg (political scientist) served as director for the years 1923-29. Grunberg stressed the historical context to research, recommending research which combined historical study and theoretical analysis. Max Horkheimer (philosopher and sociologist) served as director for the years 1930-58. Horkheimer stressed the interdisciplinary nature of the institute's research programme. His collaborators included Theodor Adorno (philosopher, sociologist, and musicologist), Erich Fromm (psychologist), Franz Neumann (political scientist), and Friedrich Pollock (economist). Over the years, many celebrated thinkers, such as Herbert Marcuse (philosopher), Walter Benjamin (essayist and literary critic) and Leo Lowenthal (literary critic), were associated with the group.

When National Socialism came to power, the institute fled (in 1933) to Geneva and then (in 1935) to New York, being attached to the Department of Sociology at Columbia University. In 1941, the Institute relocated to California. During WW II, then, members of the Institute settled in various parts of the United States. In 1949, Horkheimer, Adorno, and Pollock returned to Germany, and in 1951 they re-established the Institute for Social Research, with Horkheimer as director. Marcuse and Lowenthal among other members remained in the United States. The institute disbanded in 1969, but its influence continued in the work of Jurgen Habermas, representing the second wave of Critical Theory.

### achievement

Horkheimer imposed an interdisciplinary programme of research on his colleagues, one which (he argued) would result in a better understanding of the complexities of modern social life. From the outset, Horkheimer rejected the prevailing practice among empirically oriented sociologists of studying social matters in isolation/employing quantitative techniques, thereby separating facts and values. Instead, he proposed an holistic approach, a synthesis of philosophy and social science he called Critical Theory, i.e., a combination of theory and practice, which would enable researchers to respecify "the great philosophical questions" of the time using the most scientific methods; reformulate and make more precise the questions in the course of work as demanded by the object; and develop new methods without losing sight of the universal. The goal (he added) was to situate these studies in concrete historical contexts, in a definite period of time, in a definite location, taking into consideration the economic process, the psychic structures of individual members, and the totality of the system that affects and produces their thoughts.

During their exile in the United States, Horkheimer and Adorno focused on the commercial media, presenting their critique in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), a work which might be called the first volume of Cultural Studies. Here, they argue that, as a consciousness industry, the media willingly manipulate a passive and irrational public, focusing attention on (a) the great influence the media exert in setting the agenda of what should be thought about in society, and (b) the way in which the media encourage people to think about their lives.

### the New Left

For three decades, Habermas has been the best known scholar working in this tradition. During the 1970's, Habermas and Marcuse helped shape the New Left--in Germany and then in the

United States. Habermas' work draws on a wide range of thought and presents a coherent view of (communication and) society. He believes that society must be understood as a mix of three major interests: work, interaction, and power. By **work**, he means the efforts to create necessary material resources. Because of its highly instrumental nature, i.e., achieving tangible tasks and accomplishing concrete objectives, this is basically a "technical interest." By **interaction** he means the use of language (and symbols) for communication. Because social cooperation is necessary for survival, Habermas calls this item "practical interest." It involves practical reasoning and is represented in historical scholarship and hermeneutics.

Social order naturally leads to power distribution; yet, a natural interest in being freed from domination also comes from the application of power. **Power** leads to distorted communication, but by becoming aware of the ideologies that dominate in society, groups can themselves be empowered to transform society. We can understand the rationality of power as self-reflection and the branch of scholarship that deals with it is **critical theory**. For Habermas, the kind of work done by the Critical Theorists discussed so far is emancipatory; it can empower otherwise powerless groups (p. 249). Human life cannot be conducted from the perspective of only one interest: work, interaction, or power. No single activity is entirely within any one of these but includes some combination of them. All three are necessary for a complete understanding of society (p. 250).

No aspect of life is interest-free. An emancipated society is free from unnecessary domination of any one interest, and everybody has the same opportunity to take part in decision-making.

### The Public Sphere

Habermas takes as his point of departure the work of the Chicago School (see notes on the Cultural Studies Tradition), which was interested in THE PUBLIC SPHERE as a concept, as well as the work of the Frankfurt School, which viewed the mass media as an oppressive (read this as "consciousness-shaping") institution. In "The Public Sphere" (1964), Habermas argued that a part of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation where private individuals assemble to form a public body. This sphere mediates between society and state: conversation is crucial to the formation of that entity we call "the public." This means that CONVERSATION is crucial to the formation of that entity called the public.

Like members of the Chicago School, Habermas believes that the formation of opinion takes place at the community and peer-group level. Like Robert Ezra Park, he acknowledges the role played by the early newspapers in bringing about an active and partisan public which discussed the news. Unlike the members of the Chicago School, however, he does not believe that A GREAT PUBLIC OF HUMAN UNDERSTANDING (Dewey's formulation) follows from the information transmitted by modern means of communication. Habermas believes that the formation of a rational public depends upon the news and information available, together with the situations available for discussing the significance and the meaning of news and information.

As well, Habermas argues that it is the INTERPERSONAL SITUATION in which we converse that provides the necessary context for informed opinion. In formulating the concept of an IDEAL SPEECH SITUATION, Habermas stresses the need for

- adequate opportunity for people to speak,
- adequate opportunity to challenge the rules or the topic of discussion,
- adequate opportunity to acquire the skills of discourse (including those of the media), and
- adequate opportunity to be free of violence and other forms of coercion.

These observations should remind us that THE REPRESENTATIONS OF SOCIAL REALITY we receive depend upon organised, international effort for their production and dissemination.

### Neo-Marxism Today

Neo-Marxism flourished during the 1970's, especially in Great Britain. Theorists still place great emphasis on the means of communication in society. This means that communication practices are an outcome of the tension between individual creativity in framing messages and the social constraints on that creativity. Thus, only when individuals are free to express themselves with clarity and reason will liberation occur.

One of the chief constraints on individual expression is language. A class society is dominated by a language that makes it very difficult for working-class people to understand their situation and to get out of it. It is the job of the critical theorist to create new forms of language so that the predominant ideology can be exposed and that competing ideologies can be heard. An ideology can be defined as a set of ideas that structures a group's notion of reality, a system of representations or a code of meanings governing how individuals (and groups) see the world (Hall, 1989). For classical Marxism, an ideology is a false set of ideas that has been perpetuated by the dominant political force, i.e., an ideology reflects social existence.

#### (a) Antonio Gramsci

Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), the Italian political theorist and activist, founded the Italian Communist Party. He believed that the Bolshevik revolution (1917) could be transplanted to Italy. He played a key role in the general strike of 1920. As it happened, Benito Mussolini (1833-1945) became dictator in 1922. In 1926, the Fascists arrested Gramsci (a member of parliament) and put him in jail--where he spent the rest of his life. In prison, he had the misfortune of "enforced leisure" to reflect on the socialist defeat and the crucial role of culture in society, writing *Prison Notebooks*, trans. H. Hoare and G. Nowell Smith (New York, 1971).

Many Critical Theory analysts see society as the ground on which competing ideologies struggle for domination (p. 247). Following Gramsci, they define hegemony as a process of domination, whereby one set of ideas subverts or co-opts another (Gramsci, 1971). They conceptualize it as a process whereby one group in society exerts leadership over others. They point out that hegemony is what binds society together without the use of force. This is achieved when the upper classes supplement their economic power by creating "intellectual and moral leadership." The upper classes make compromises to achieve this leadership. In other words, culture is one of the **sites** where the struggle for hegemony takes place.

The process of hegemony occurs in many ways and in many settings. In essence, the process of hegemony takes place when events or texts are interpreted in a way that promotes the interests of

one group over those of another. The process can be as subtle as co-opting the interests of a subordinate group into supporting those of a dominant one. For example, during the 1980s advertisers often exploited the "women's lib" theme, making it look as though the corporation supports women's rights. What happened was that women's rights were being reinterpreted to promote the interests of the capital economy. The point to remember is that ideology has always played a central role in this process because it structures the way in which people understand their experience, and it is therefore a powerful vehicle for shaping how they interpret events.

Early studies of advertising were cast in the problematic of ideology and hegemony. In conducting textual and ideological analyses of advertising, analysts stressed the selling not just of commodities but also of ways of looking at the world. Analysts explained that advertisers set out to create an "identity" for a product, associating the brand in question with desirable human values. Buying a brand meant not only buying a product but also a lifestyle, a set of values. From this perspective, one might argue that a person is nothing more than the commodities he or she wears. According to Judith Williamson (1978), objects in advertising are signifiers of meaning which we decode in the context of known cultural systems associating products with other cultural "goods." While an image of a particular product may denote a car, it also connotes "nature" or "family." In this way, advertisers encourage us to "buy into" ideologies. We thus construct our identities through the consumption of consumer goods. As Williamson (1978) argues, Advertising is thus ideological in obscuring economic inequality at the level of production by creating images of free and equal consumption.

Similarly, analysts study the impact of the mass media on consciousness. That is, analysts show that television programs encourage us to think of ourselves as a market--as opposed to a public, consumers as opposed to citizens. As we know, networks make shows by guessing what will please audiences and finding ways to speak to them that perpetuate the cultural hegemony in operation. Networks then sell those audiences to advertisers who want what they think will be suitable audiences for their products. As well, analysts study how, in liberal capitalism, hegemonic ideology domesticates opposition, absorbing it into forms compatible with the core ideologies, absorbing and domesticating conflicting definitions of reality. Analysts like Erica Carter (1987) and Daniel Bell (1976) claim that liberal capitalist society is deeply conflicted, that is, liberal capitalist society urges people to work hard--but proposes that real satisfaction is to be found in leisure.

#### (b) Louis Althusser

Louis Althusser (1918-90), the French philosopher and ideology theorist, flourished in Paris after the student uprisings of 1968. Althusser formulated a structuralist version of Marxism (so as to make Marxism scientific). He wrote two important books, *For Marx*, trans. B. Brewster (1970), and *Lenin and Philosophy*, trans. B. Brewster (1971).

According to Althusser (1970), ideology is part and parcel of society itself; that is, ideology arises from the actual practices undertaken by institutions in society. As such, ideology forms the individual's consciousness and creates the person's subjective understanding of experience. We live in a set of shaping conditions (he added), but we normally do not understand our relationship

to actual conditions except via ideology. The real conditions of existence can only be discovered by means of science, which he poses in opposition to ideology.

From this perspective, we can say that superstructure (social organization) creates ideology, which in turn affects individuals' notions of reality (p. 247). This superstructure consists of repressive state apparatuses (RSAs), such as politics and the military, and ideological state apparatuses (ISAs), such as education, religion, and the mass media (Althusser, 1971). The repressive mechanisms enforce ideology when it is challenged, and the ideological apparatuses reproduce it in the everyday activities of communication--by making any particular ideology seem normal.

We should note that Althusser coined the term "over-determined" to signal that the reality of the economy (mode of production) is not expressed in ideology or in consciousness simply but exists in a displaced form throughout the social formation. Many determinants compete with and contradict others to create a "society," e.g., economic, political, and cultural. From this perspective, then, we can understand ideology as a conceptual framework for making sense of our lived, material conditions. Ideology thus produces our culture as well as our consciousness of who we are. During the 1970s especially, Althusser's analysis was absorbed by British Cultural Studies.

## FEMINIST CRITIQUE

Feminist theory (Kramarae, 1989, pp. 157-60) is a generic label for a perspective or group of theories that explores the meaning of gender concepts. Feminist theorists argue that almost all aspects of life can be understood in terms of gender qualities. The feminist critique aims to expose the powers as well as the limits of the gendered division of the world.

**Gender.** Feminist theory begins with the assumption that gender is a pervasive category for understanding human experience. The argument is that **gender** is a socially constructed system of values, identities, and activities and that **sex** is biologically determined. Feminist theory aims to challenge the prevailing gender assumptions of society and to achieve more liberating ways for women and men to exist in the world (p. 313).

**Patriarchy.** Wood (1997): Patriarchy (the second key concept) means "rule by the fathers." This (dictionary) definition highlights the central idea that patriarchal values, institutions, and practices reflect the experiences, values, and interests of men as a group and protect their privileges while simultaneously denying, dismissing, and/or devaluing the experiences, values, and interests of women as a group (p. 314).

Patriarchy is an overall system of structures and practices that sustains inequities between the experiences, responsibilities, status, and opportunities of different social groups, especially women and men.

Feminist communications scholars examine the ways the male language bias affects the relations between the sexes, the ways male domination has constrained communication for females, the ways women have accommodated and resisted male patterns of speech, and so on. For the

feminist scholar, traditional methods of research and male-biased theories are not only misleading but dangerous because they mute the experience of women and hide the values of women's experience. For this reason, feminist scholarship usually focuses on women's experience as central, legitimizing the value of women's experience itself.

**Multiple Ways of Knowing.** Most feminist theorists believe that different people develop different ways of knowing, as they respond to the particular circumstances of their of their lives. They say that no particular way is true or best. A good deal of research has focused on identifying feminine ways of knowing, experiencing, and acting (Belenky et al., 1986). Feminist theorists point out that women and men are typically socialized in gender-segregated groups and that as a consequence they develop different ways of communicating, i.e., experiencing life. For example, Wood points out, much research suggests that women tend to be interdependent, relationship oriented, cooperative, egalitarian, and process-minded, whereas men tend to be independent, competition-oriented, and outcome-minded (p. 316).

Within a patriarchal universe of discourse, women's interdependence and concern for relationships are viewed as a lack of independence--not as a choice for relatedness; women's willingness to nurture children and others who need help is admired less earning a high income; women's cooperativeness and their efforts to achieve equality are recast as fears of success and lack of competitive instinct. If we operated in a matriarchal universe of discourse, we'd probably disparage men who focused on jobs to the neglect of family life and we'd criticize men for lacking a cooperative instinct (p. 317).

Briefly: The principal goal of most feminist research is to diminish the gendered inequities that saturate cultural life. It is not sufficient to document inequities; description and critique serve as the starting points in the larger attempt to restructure the social world.

Feminist theorizing proceeds through two stages. During the first, the inclusion stage, scholars attempt to increase an awareness of women's contributions, experiences, values, and ways of acting and to raise awareness of inequality between women and men. One line of research focuses on education: the differences between how men and women are treated in schools. During the second, the revisionist stage, scholars attempt to broaden views of significant communication beyond public speaking to include the kinds of activities in which women have traditionally participated, to enlarge perspectives on professional communication to incorporate cooperation and attention to relationships, and to confer value on homemaking and nurturing that is equivalent to the value accorded to income-producing activities (p. 318).

## Summary

Feminist theories acknowledge that the world can be understood in a variety of productive ways, and they resist the search for positive (measurable) truth. They also see the feminine as a way of knowing that is distinct from the masculine way of knowing. Carol Gilligan makes this case in her book, *In a Different Voice* (1982). Remember that feminism is not a single theory; it is not even a single system of thought. It is a movement. At least four different feminisms have emerged:

## **1. Liberal Feminism**

Liberal feminism was the foundation of the women's movement of the 1960's and the 1970's. Liberal democracy is based on the idea that justice involves the assurance of equal rights for all individuals. Liberal feminists say that women have been oppressed as a group and that they have not had equal rights with men, that on average women make less money, that women are excluded from centres of power, and so on. In short, liberal feminism deals primarily with the public image and the rights of women.

## **2. Radical Feminism**

In some ways, radical feminism is a reaction against liberal feminism. Radical feminists believe that liberal democracy barely scratches the surface, that the oppression of women runs deeper than public rights. That is, the problem is not simply changing the laws but giving equal rights to women: this problem goes to the heart of our social structure. The patriarchy perpetuates a set of gender-laden meanings that promote masculine interests and subordinate feminine ones. If in our present order of things gender is a social construction, it is a man-made construction. The term radical suggests the demand for basic redefinitions of all facets of society. This means that women must not only aspire to achieve the equal right to become a physician but that society itself must redefine the whole nature of medicine, especially in regard to how it treats the experience of women. Indeed, the answer to social problems can be a complete restructuring of how society defines human experience.

## **3. Marxist Feminism**

Marxist feminists focus on capitalism as the source of oppression. They argue that the domination of women by men is a consequence of capital's domination over labour.

## **4. Dual Systems Theory**

According to Sylvia Walby (1990), dual systems theory represents the coming together of Marxist and radical feminism--in the belief that the oppression of women results from a complex articulation of patriarchy and capitalism. Other feminist perspectives have been formulated. For example, Rosemary Tong (1992) outlines seven feminist perspectives: liberal, radical, Marxist, psychoanalytic, socialist, existentialist, and postmodern. Below, we consider two prominent feminist theories of communication.

### **A. Muted-Group Theory**

As Wood points out, two features make this theory distinctive: focusing on how language names experiences and thus determines what is socially recognized and paying close attention to the way that a dominant discourse silences or mutes groups that are not in society's mainstream (p. 321).

### Masculine Bias

Edwin Ardener and Shirley Ardener (1975), two anthropologists, formulated the theory we know as muted-group theory. After reflecting on a large number of studies of culture, Edwin Ardener argued that anthropologists have characterized cultures in terms of the masculine. He noticed that many ethnographies were biased toward the observation of/interviews with males in a culture (p. 322).

Examining the studies more closely, Ardener concluded that the actual language of a culture had an inherent male bias, that men created the meanings for a group, and that the feminine voice was suppressed or "muted." This silencing of women leads to the inability (of women) to express themselves eloquently in the male parlance.

### Muted Language/Muted Experience

Shirley Ardener (1978) added to the theory, suggesting that the silencing of women has several manifestations and that this discrimination is especially evident in public discourse, i.e., women are less comfortable and thus less expressive in public situations than they are in private. Thus, women monitor their communications more intensely than men do.

Cheris Kramarae (1981) has expanded the muted-group theory, suggesting that Western society remains divided into public and private spheres that are occupied by men and women respectively. (Kramarae based her work on the results of research on women and communication.) She outlines the basic assumptions of muted group theory in these terms (p. 323):

- Because men and women have different experiences (based on the division of labor in society), they perceive the world differently.
- Men are politically dominant in society, and their systems of perception are therefore dominant, which prevents women's perceptions from being publicly adopted.
- Women must translate their own ways of understanding into terms of the male world-view in order to participate in public life.

Based on research findings, Kramarae suggests a number of hypotheses about women's communication:

- Women have more difficulty expressing themselves than men have. A common female experience is to lack a word for a feminine experience, because men who do not share the experience have not developed a term for it.
- Women understand men's meanings more easily than men understand women's.
- Women have created their own means of expression outside dominant male system.
- Women tend to express more dissatisfaction about communication than men express.
- Women often make efforts to change the dominant rules of communication in order to get around or to resist conventional rules.
- Traditionally, women have been less likely to coin new words that become popular in society at large.
- The things women find humorous are quite different from the things men find humorous.

## The Power to Name

Dale Spender (1984), an Australian communication studies scholar, added to muted group theory, highlighting the power of naming. To illustrate the ways in which language mutes experience, Spender cited the example of childbirth. Giving birth, she points out, is described from a male point of view--which emphasizes the joy and the beauty of the experience. Spender points out that childbirth is also a painful experience. Men have not encoded this experience into the language--because they have not undergone the physical pain of giving birth (pp. 323-34).

For the Ardeners and for Spender, the power to name experiences is equivalent to the power to construct reality. Those who name the world have the privilege of highlighting their own experiences--and thereby identify what they consider important. Thus, groups that have a marginal status are denied the vocabulary to define (and express) their own experiences. A good example is the recognition of sexual harassment, a term which was not used prior to the 1970's (see pp. 324-25).

## Resistance to dominant Discourses

One change feminist theories should bring about: Women must assume the power to name their own experiences in ways that reflect their meanings (p. 325). Julia Penelope (1990) insists that language is a dynamic, changing system of words and meanings and that the dominant discourse is decidedly masculine. Penelope thinks that this situation can change; she argues that creating a more equitable society requires revising the universe of discourse (see below).

## **B. The Patriarchal Universe of Discourse**

Julia Penelope (1990) has developed a critical theory of patriarchal universe of discourse. For this linguist, language is central to all human experience. A universe of discourse is a set of linguistic conventions that reflect a particular definition of reality. The people who accept the language accept its categories of truth. The vast majority of language users do so without question.

A universe of discourse imposes certain meanings on members of a culture who employ it. She cites the following example: being mistaken for a housewife, once when she was at home during the day, when a salesman called at the door, and once when she was called "lady of the house" by a woman on the phone. In other words, the definitions, meanings, and interpretations embedded in the patriarchal universe of discourse promote the interests of men and subordinate those of women. Most women (Penelope, 1990) do not question the categories of their language; they become co-opted into the male-dominant system. Many women use a sub-code, the cosmetic universe of discourse, which signals recognition and approval of their subordination. What distinguishes this female code? Using the highest pitch range more often than men; pausing more often than men; and using a more questioning intonation than men. It includes a vocabulary of fashion, housework, and child-rearing. Women also use more hedges like "well" and "sorta" than men typically use. They also use more tag questions, which reflect uncertainty. Women also use longer sentences than is customarily the case with men.

Penelope goes on to note that language is a living, changing system. The problem is that most people fail to recognize that it is a human creation that has been moulded to meet human needs. The culprit is prescriptive grammar, which is a codified set of rules written by men for the purpose of making language pure and unchanging. The conventions of English--as with many other languages of the world--were established by aristocratic men in ways that promoted their own interests. She lists many standard rules of English to show how they were created, why they are arbitrary, and how they perpetuate the interests of white men over other groups. One of the most important sets of conventions for the oppression of women is gender, which Penelope (1990, p. 20) calls "an essential element of the heterosexualization of grammar."

She also argues that classifying things into two categories based on biological sex is a distinctly male tendency. Even in English, where formal gender applies only to actual sexed animals and humans, e.g., bitch, husband, bull, and daughter, the language implicitly defines particular attitudes, actions, and objects as feminine and others as masculine. She calls this phenomenon sexual dimorphism. Thus, war, money, sex, cars, and sports are most often viewed as masculine, whereas babies, cosmetics, and recipes are feminine. Another example is the association of elements of nature with women because of the male tendency to manipulate objects in the environment, which she believes comes from man's need to control.

Genderization is one of the most thoroughly and uncritically accepted features of language. What makes it especially insidious is the fact that it is not just a bimodal system of classification; it is a system whereby the masculine is considered the "normal." The solution to the problem presented by the patriarchal universe of discourse is, first, to reject the assumption that the categories of language are true and invariant; second, to become conscious of the ways language oppresses; and third, to refuse to reinforce the categories of language or to resist the rules that oppress.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Theorists and researchers working in this tradition align themselves with the interests of those opposed to dominant order of society. They ask questions about the ways in which competing interests clash and the manner in which conflicts are resolved in favour of particular groups. In this regard, critical social science is economic and political in nature. Of course, much of it concerns communication. A Critical Theory of communication (or economics or politics) is necessarily a critique of society as a whole (p. 239).

### **Works Cited**

- Althusser, Louis. 1970. *For Marx*, trans. B. Brewster. New York: Vintage Books.  
---. 1971. *Lenin and Philosophy*, trans. B. Brewster. New York: Vintage Books.  
Ardener, Shirley, ed. 1975. *Perceiving Women*. London: Malaby Press.  
Belenky, Mary Field, et al. 1986. *Women's Ways of Knowing*. New York: Basic Books, Inc.  
Bell, Daniel. 1976. *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* London: Heinemann.  
Gilligan, Carol. 1982. *In a Different Voice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.  
Gramsci, Antonio. 1971. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. Q. Hoare and G. Nowell Smith. New York: International.  
Kramarae, Chris. 1989. "Coming to Terms with Women's Language." In *International*

- Encyclopedia of Communications*, ed. Erik Barnouw et al. 2 vols. New York: Oxford University Press, ii, 157-60.
- . 1981. *Women and Men Speaking*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Littlejohn, Stephen W. 1992. "Critical Theories." In *Theories of Human Communication*. 4th edn. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., pp. 238-59.
- Marx, Karl. 1888. *The Communist Manifesto*. London: Reeves.
- Penelope, Julia. 1990. *Unlearning the Lies of the Fathers' Tongues*. New York: Pergamon Press.
- Spender, Dale. 1984. *Man Language*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Tong, Rosemary. 1992. *Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction*. London: Routledge.
- Walby, Sylvia. 1990. *Theorising Patriarchy*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Williamson, Judith. 1978. *Decoding Advertising*. London: Marion Boyars.
- Wood, Julia T. 1997. *Communication Theories in Action*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co.