

How do consciousness-raising practices about sexist language become a feminist method of unlearning and redefining?

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Introduction

Even though English is not a very gendered language, it does contain and reproduce unconscious gender biases. You might have heard the famous riddle: A father and his son were involved in a car accident. The father died but the son is rushed to the hospital for an emergency surgery. In the hospital, the surgeon looks at the boy and says: „I can't operate him, that's my son" (Montell, 2019). My first initial reaction was: That's not possible, the father just died! But then it occurred to me, the surgeon is in fact the mother.

Despite identifying as an intersectional feminist and actively opposing sexism on a political and ideological level, I became aware that I unconsciously reproduce sexist patterns in the way I speak and think. I noticed that I use expressions in my vernacular, like *Hey guys!* or *bitch*, in ways that contradict my beliefs, are misogynistic and linguistically undermine women's value and with that my own. Recognizing that I unknowingly yet actively participate in sustaining sexist norms through everyday speech was a moment of rupture that lead me to think about language in a feminist context and made me approach it as a structural issue that can and should be examined, understood, and addressed collectively.

I looked into feminist linguistic theory starting with linguist Amanda Montell, through her I discovered Robin Lakoff, who wrote one of the first very influential books on gender and language, linguist Deborah Cameron, and later also Dale Spender. I found, it has long been argued that language is not a neutral medium but a political site in which gendered hierarchies are reflected and sustained. It is through language that experiences are named, categorized, and communicated, and that social norms and power relations are reproduced. The ways in which women are spoken about, addressed, silenced or made invisible through linguistic practices contribute to broader systems of gendered oppression. At the same time, feminists argue that language also holds the potential to be reshaped, reclaimed, and used as a tool of resistance (Lakoff, 1975; Spender, 1998; Cameron, 1990).

Language, as the topic of my examination, is such a complex and multifaceted subject area, with many extremely interesting aspects. For this essay, my central aim is to demonstrate why and in what ways language is a feminist issue that demands attention. I decided to concentrate on the specific underlaying, oppressive linguistic mechanisms that are at work in our patriarchal society. Mechanisms that are sexist and uphold gender inequality. I believe that once the deep-seated, internalized workings become clear, they can be recognized in other areas of life and further inspected and studied. This essay is situated within an intersectional feminist methodological framework that understands knowledge as socially produced, and historically situated rather than neutral or universal, and that acknowledges that sexist oppression cannot be cleanly extracted from other, intersecting forms of oppression. While the analysis centers on sexism and misogyny in language, my aim is not to ignore intersecting forms of oppression, nor to reinforce binary understandings of gender but to examine one dimension of how patriarchal power operates through linguistic norms. The binary nature of this research shows that we're clearly lacking words to express gender identities freely.

As a white cis-woman from Germany I find myself in a very privileged position, and a large part of this debate is beyond my perception. That is why I invite other voices to

participate in my project, *A Slip of the Tongue*. The project consists of a series of consciousness-raising group meetings that invite participants to speak about their experiences and uncover, the often hidden, sexist patterns embedded in everyday language. Each meeting revolves around a specific word, phrase, or expression*, and the conversations that emerge are documented in the form of collaborative, experimental zines. I'm glad to learn from, and together with, other voices as various factors, such as race, gender, class, and sexuality, intersect and create different experiences of oppression and privilege.

**for example: bitch, female, mistress, hey guys but more on that in chapter 3*

I also want to mention, that I consciously decided to use the term *woman* in my research. That, to me, means people who are victims of gender-based oppression, more specifically trans women, non-binary, genderqueer people who get misgendered as women, and cis-women. I must add that this umbrella term will, in some cases, prove inadequate, as the realities of life and oppression can vary greatly within the groups of people mentioned, yet I believe they're all affected, in one way or another, by the oppressive linguistic mechanism that I mention. Furthermore, this research is based in English speaking countries (mainly UK and U.S.), and thus provides only limited points of view on this topic*.

In this essay, I will explore how consciousness-raising practices can function not only as spaces for reflection, but as a feminist methodology that enables the unlearning of internalized sexism and the collective redefining of meaning.

In chapter 1, I introduce language as a social construct that reflects and reinforces patriarchal systems of power. I will show different linguistic mechanisms and how they (are used to) oppress women. In chapter 2, I examine the history and methodology of consciousness-raising groups within the feminist movement of the late 1960s and 70s, showing their achievements and potential, while also acknowledging their limitations, but most importantly how they conquer this linguistic oppression. In chapter 3, I assess how consciousness-raising practices still function today by analyzing my experiences facilitating my own consciousness-raising meetings and drawing on feedback and reflections from participants. At the end you find a glossary that further explains and contextualizes some of the words I use.

**Try so see it as the fundamental base of how language works as a social practice, something that is learned, repeated and embedded within power relations. BUT the discourse doesn't end here and there are so many ways to go from here. I chose this approach, because it allows me to analyze how language functions within patriarchal structures and how it might be transformed through feminist intervention, but please think it further on your own behalf. There is so much to uncover! For example how language also holds up other systems of oppression, which are intertwined with sexism and misogyny.*

1 – Language, Gender and Power

Language, and with that communication, are pivotal parts of the organization of human societies. Since the 1970s, linguists have increasingly examined language not merely as a neutral system of communication, but as a social practice through which speakers create solidarity, negotiate relationships, but also assert authority. Language does not only describe reality but actively participates in producing it. The words available to us influence how experiences are understood, how they get interpreted, and what is communicated. So what can be thought, said, and recognized as legitimate is heavily influenced by the words we choose (Cameron, 1985; Spender, 1998). Language thus can be used as a regulatory tool that shapes what counts as reality or what we believe in.

One of the most significant and debated areas that appeared within linguistic research has been the connection between language and gender. That is, how gender is expressed through speech, how it shapes linguistic behavior, and how it influences the perception and evaluation of speakers themselves and of what is said. It became clear, that language and gender are intertwined in more ways than we thought. And because gender is strictly linked to power and roles of authority, so is language (Montell, 2019). Language is therefore a feminist issue, precisely because it is used as a tool to maintain and reinforce power relations and male dominance, issues that are strongly questioned by feminists.

To understand the specific linguistic mechanisms through which power operates it is necessary to reveal how these processes hide in everyday language. Feminist linguistic research has identified multiple ways and mechanisms in which women are oppressed by and through language. They limit women's voices, more specifically women's expressive range, credibility, and social visibility. Even though they cut deep into women's lives, they operate subtly and are often internalized to the point that they go unnoticed. By identifying concrete forms of linguistic oppression, feminist linguistic theory makes it possible to interrupt these processes and find ways in which they can be challenged and reworked.

A central mechanism through which language exerts this power is first of all, as obvious as is sounds, speaking and more precisely the repetition of it. Deborah Cameron, a feminist linguist, emphasizes that linguistic mechanisms that are encountered repeatedly come to appear natural or self-evident, masking their historical and political origins (Cameron, 1985). A very common example, and belief, is that of women being bad in maths and parking cars. Through repetition, dominant meanings solidify into common sense, making alternative interpretations difficult to articulate or even imagine*. These generalizing beliefs get assumed and repeated in every fitting situation. This way, dominant ideologies get reinforced, which makes them appear even more inevitable. Those who have the authority to define and circulate language therefore have the power to influence what a society perceives not only as real but also as possible.

Within a patriarchal social order, this linguistic power has historically been exercised by men. As linguist Dale Spender argues, language has been shaped predominantly through male experience due to men's long-standing occupation

**„Ey man, I just saw a woman parallel park a car in one go!“*

„No man, thats impossible! There is no such thing a woman who knows how to park a car, stupid.“

of institutional and cultural positions of authority (1998). In England, for example, universities such as Oxford and Cambridge did not allow women as full members until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Oxford Royale, 2026). So the production of scholarly discourse, philosophical argumentation, and scientific terminology occurred within overwhelmingly male intellectual communities. In the legal sphere, English common law operated under the doctrine of coverture, whereby a married woman's legal identity was included in that of her husband (Cameron, 2024). The law quite literally encoded women as dependents, without separate juridical standing or any legal capacity to act on their own behalf. All this led to male perspectives being treated as universal and neutral, while women's perspectives didn't even have a chance to be heard, nor to be seen as valuable, and with that were, and still are, excluded from public discourse. The authority to define, whether in scholarly discourse, law, dictionaries, or science, is therefore inseparable from the power to shape social reality, as all the problems and questions we have about life get answered by men and we believe them*.

All this illustrates one of the most pervasive forms of linguistic oppression identified by feminist linguists, the systematic silencing of women. Silencing does not only refer to the explicit prevention of speech (e.g. through the exclusion from educational institutions) but also to the conditions under which speech is discouraged, devalued, interrupted, or made ineffective. Lakoff and Spender both argue that language functions as a gatekeeping system that regulates who is heard, how seriously speech is taken, and which forms of expression are considered authoritative (1975; 1990).

**I know, I know! I'm exaggerating. Men are obviously not always wrong. And that's not the point I'm trying to make here. What I want to express is that women's voices and experiences are not considered in that same knowledge production. It's the inequality that's the problem.*

***And this is still the case today. I kid you not, Merriam Webster still defines „man“ as „an individual human“ and „the human race“. Whereas the definition of „woman“ states: „an adult female person“ and „a servant or personal attendant“. That is crazy insane to me and the thought that most people read that and don't notice anything wrong with that, makes me angry and sad.*

A great example on how men's standing in institutional positions of power actively took charge in silencing women's experiences is the use of the generic masculine. Linguistic norms frequently position masculinity as the standard, a mechanism which feminists call male-as-norm. Femininity is seen as the exception, which reinforces a hierarchy in which women's realities are rendered less visible and less credible (Cameron, 1990). The pronoun he and the noun man(kind) have historically been presented as grammatically universal forms intended to refer to all people**. For instance, sentences such as „Every student must hand in his

paper“ or „That's one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind.“ (Nasa, 2019) are defended as inclusive, claiming to refer to students or humanity in general, when they are in fact only naming men. When man stands simultaneously for adult male and for humanity as a whole, male experiences become linguistically equated with the universal, while women appear as a deviation that must be explicitly marked*** (Spender, 1998; Cameron, 1990). Just like in the coverture law mentioned earlier, women get included into the naming of men, not worthy of individual

****A simple and effective way to test for gender bias is to reverse the scenario. If books only name and refer to „she/her“, would we perceive that just as normal? There are more and more initiatives, like Roberte la Rousse (French) a collective (Anne Laforet and Cecile Babirole) which write exclusively in the female form, and books written only using the generic-feminine haha*

recognition*. Cameron states that such patterns influence how people imagine social roles and competencies, shaping perceptions of who is relevant, authoritative, or capable within a given context (Cameron, 1985). These mechanisms operate for such a long time that even gender-neutral terms trigger a male mental image. Professional titles like *surgeon* (as seen in the introduction) or simply mentioning *a person* are grammatically ungendered, yet listeners and readers frequently imagine a man unless a feminine marker ('she'/'her') is explicitly added (Montell, 2019). The use of the generic masculine form makes that even grammatical neutrality is not perceived as genuinely inclusive, but rather as implicitly masculine. This shows how women are literally silenced and thus not even imagined at all*.

Judith Butler emphasizes that this also shapes and heavily influences the way in which bodies are evaluated. Language, then, is not external to the body or the self but participates in their ongoing formation and actively shapes self-perception (Butler, 1993). Being named, addressed, or described in particular ways contributes to how individuals come to understand their own bodies, identities, and capacities (Butler, 1990). These repeated linguistic exclusions, that happen through reoccurring male dominance in public and institutional discourses also make alternative realities unimaginable. They render women invisible, marginalize women externally and additionally shape how women come to relate to themselves, their bodies, their own legitimacy, authority, and their perceived possibilities for action. In this sense, language doesn't mirror inequality but actively participates in its reproduction*.

These repeated beliefs, reinforced through language and the use of sentences like „Women are simply not good in maths.“, ultimately lead to self-deprecating speech in women. Phrases such as „I'm not very good at maths...“, „I'm probably wrong, but...“, or „This might be a stupid question/idea...“ are not inherent facts but socially learned linguistic strategies that echo the socially learned beliefs about women's capacities. Plus, they are not only used because women are not imagined to have great ideas but also because society expects women to speak in certain ways. Lakoff even gives this a name and calls it „women's language“. She describes women's language as socially conditioned to undermine authority and credibility through linguistic features like hedging (*kind of, maybe*), tag questions (*isn't it?*), intensifiers (*so, really*), and politeness strategies. These mechanisms are socially trained, meaning women are made to speak like that, while simultaneously being interpreted as signs of uncertainty or lack of confidence (Lakoff, 1975). These features are not inherently weak, Lakoff emphasizes that they are evaluated within a sexist framework that rewards assertiveness in men but disregards women for the same behavior. As a result, women are placed in a double bind where speaking assertively gets judged as inappropriate or aggressive, but simultaneously speaking cautiously ends up being dismissed. So women also use self-deprecating speech to avoid consequences that might come with assertiveness (Lakoff, 1975).

Even in contexts where women are physically present and verbally active, mechanisms of silencing are at work. In such spaces interruption and conversational dominance play a huge role. Spender adds that silencing is also often imposed in retrospect. Women's

**And if women had bank accounts, they were in the name of their husbands, like „Mrs John Doe“ – as if she doesn't even exist...*

**There are already some feminist interventions into more gender neutral writing. A lot of them happening in France. For example ByeByeBinary who came up with ligatures that combine the masculine and the feminine version and with that allow French speakers to address all genders at the same time.*

**Judith Butlers principle of gender performativity also shows that gender is composed of repeated acts of socially regulated norms and not an expression of biological inevitability. The binary framework of male/female is a regulatory system that disciplines bodies and desires by dominant cultural expectations. This principle directly opposes the binary system of gender.*

contributions are ignored, interrupted, appropriated, or later attributed to men. Studies shows that men interrupt women more frequently than they interrupt other men, thereby controlling the flow and outcome of conversations, which ends up signaling whose speech is prioritized and whose can be cut short without consequence (West and Zimmerman, 1975). Over time, such patterns teach women to anticipate interruption and to self-regulate by speaking less, qualifying statements, or remaining silent altogether (Spender, 1998). This mechanism of silencing does not only happen in academic and professional spaces but also in private ones. Lakoff notes that when women speak about their own experiences, particularly those involving discrimination or harm, their accounts are often dismissed as exaggeration or personal complaint rather than recognized as serious problems (Lakoff, 1975). Women's speech is often framed as emotional, subjective, or trivial. Spender identifies this as a crucial strategy of male dominance: by defining what counts as rational or serious speech, patriarchal language systems reinforce the idea that women's speech lacks objectivity and therefore exclude women from the public and political discourse and the production of knowledge itself (Spender, 1998).

And here we come full circle, because when such utterances and accusations are repeated over time, first by others and then by oneself, they begin to shape the speaker's self-understanding. External influences become internalized, masking what they started as. Repeated experiences of being interrupted, ignored, or dismissed shape how women gauge their own right to speak. Over time, this can lead to self-silencing, where women anticipate negative responses and preventively limit their own speech. As Spender argues, the success of silencing lies precisely in this internalization, as it reduces the need for censorship (Spender, 1998).

Moving on*, semantic degradation is another oppressive mechanism that has been identified by feminists. That is, when words associated with women or femininity acquire negative or sexualized meanings over time. While male-associated terms tend to retain or even gain status, female-associated terms frequently undergo *pejoration*, shifting from neutral descriptors to insults or markers of moral inferiority. However, semantic degradation does not only operate at the level of insults but also through subtle shifts in meaning, where words associated with women lose seriousness or neutrality over time. This asymmetry reflects very clearly the cultural attitudes patriarchal society has towards women's sexuality and social value and doesn't follow any inherent linguistic logic (Lakoff, 1975; Spender, 1998).

Lakoff highlights how semantic degradation functions to discipline women's behavior. By attaching moral judgment to female-coded words such as *bitch*, *slut*, or *bossy*, women's behavior, which transgresses expected norms of femininity, is not described but evaluated and policed*. Through repeated use, these words come to define the boundaries of acceptable female behavior, making deviation socially risky. Here, too, certain behavior is not inherently bad, it just gets assessed and evaluated very differently for men and women (Lakoff, 1975). This is particularly evident in male/female word-pairs that once had the same meaning, such as *master* and *mistress*. Both terms derive from the Latin *magister* and originally denoted authority, skill, or leadership. In earlier English usage, *mistress* could refer to a woman who had authority over a household or who possessed expertise, parallel to the male *master* (Etymonline, 2026). Over time, however, the semantic trajectories of the

**You might think to yourself that this is quite a lot, but wait till you find out there is more!*

**Imagine a world where all genders are equal. Would insults like "bitch" and "slut" still have the same impact they have now?*

two words split dramatically. *Master* retained and expanded its associations with competence, control, and institutional recognition, one earns a master's degree or is described as having mastered a skill. The term continues to signal prestige and accomplishment. By contrast, *mistress* underwent progressive devaluation and sexualization. In contemporary usage it most commonly refers to a woman engaged in an extramarital sexual relationship*.

This very clear asymmetry is not simply a lexical shift, but a structural change that goes hand in hand with broader gender ideologies. But pejoration also happens with female-associated words that don't come in word-pairs. The words *bitch* and *slut* also didn't start out as insults. *Bitch* was simply another word to refer to anyone's genitalia, later then used for female dogs (still sometimes today) and ended up describing, to put it in a nice way, an unpleasant woman. Similarly, the word *slut* used to describe

***Interestingly, in German we still use the German equivalent sometimes to describe someone who is messy and doesn't treat their belongings well. „Geh' nicht so 'Schlampig mit deinen Sachen um!“*

someone who was untidy** and somehow ended up to call out women's frequently sexual behavior. Also interesting to point out, there is almost no equivalent that calls out men's sexual behavior in a similar way. The only ones that come to mind are *manslut* which still implies that promiscuity is only reprehensible when

**Fun Fact: While men have an affair, women are mistresses. The same behavior gets described as something men do, but as something women are. Making generally considered bad decisions an inherent part only of a woman's character, not a man's. Plus, it's putting the blame for cheating on the woman only. Men were allowed to have mistresses, but women who had an affair were severely punished, hence there is no word for a woman to have an extramarital lover.*

practiced by women (Montell, 2019), and *fuckboy*, which also calls out more the way in which someone initiates to have sex and not so much the frequency in which he is sexually active. Again, the fact that there is no male equivalent is because this behavior is not devalued in men as much as it is in women.

Coming back, such semantic developments reflect an unequal environment in which women are persistently defined in relation to sexuality rather than competence or power. Semantic degradation therefore demonstrates how language participates in the symbolic devaluation of women, embedding gendered inequality within the structure of everyday vocabulary.

The main thing these forms of oppression have in common is that they restrict what can be said, heard, and understood as meaningful. With this knowledge feminists have found ways to disrupt and actively fight these forms of linguistic oppression.

Feminist interventions into linguistic oppression aim not merely to increase women's participation in speech but to challenge the structures that regulate whose voices are recognized as meaningful. Encouraging women to speak *more confidently* or to adopt dominant speech norms cannot be the solution, because it leaves the underlying power relations intact. Feminists also call this the „confidence gap“ (Kay and Shipman, 2014). It frames inequality as a problem of individual self-belief rather than structural power, shifting responsibility onto individuals rather than interrogating the linguistic and institutional norms that define authority in the first place. If women are encouraged simply to become more assertive within existing norms, the hierarchical standards that determine whose speech is recognized as authoritative remain unchallenged. The problem is not a deficit of confidence but the unequal linguistic and social conditions under which confidence is evaluated and rewarded. If the standards of credibility remain masculinized, increasing women's confidence alone does not transform the evaluative framework within which

speech is judged. Instead, feminist strategies focus on transforming language itself by exposing its biases and creating alternative modes of speaking and listening. Spender emphasizes that reclaiming speech requires making visible the historical exclusion of women from linguistic authority and challenging the assumption that male forms of expression are neutral or universal (Spender, 1998). Similarly, Cameron argues that feminist linguistic critique is effective precisely because it denaturalizes everyday language, revealing how seemingly ordinary expressions reproduce inequality* (Cameron, 1990).

A very important tool for this feminist engagement is the political act of naming. As I already discovered earlier, naming determines which experiences enter social consciousness and which remain unseen. Naming as a feminist response functions precisely because it intervenes in the production of meaning. To name an experience is to resist silencing by making it speakable. To name a pattern is to challenge trivialization by reframing personal discomfort as structural injustice. To name sexist language itself is to expose the misogynistic mechanisms that have deep internalized roots. Naming is a powerful tool as it actively breaks the silencing and makes women's experiences count as reality.

**Which is precisely what I'm doing through this essay and my project hehe*

Naming is most effective when it's collective. It not only counters the isolation produced by linguistic oppression but also validates forms of knowledge that are typically dismissed as subjective or emotional. Through collective speech, feminist interventions therefore work against silencing by creating spaces in which marginalized voices are not only heard but taken seriously, laying the groundwork for broader social and linguistic change.

This became explicitly clear through women activists from the second-wave Women's Liberation Movement in the 1960's and 70's who were organizing so called consciousness-raising group meetings, a space that transformed private speech into a political act by creating conditions in which women could name their experiences, challenge degraded meanings, and recognize shared patterns of oppression.

2 – Consciousness-raising as a feminist intervention into linguistic oppression

Let's go back to the mid nineteenth century U.S. to recall the situation and position women found themselves in. This will show clearly why the Women's Movement emerged in the first place and highlights the achievements of feminist activism that came with it.

At that time dominant social beliefs positioned women as naturally suited to the private sphere and domestic roles, framing caregiving, homemaking, and moral guidance within the family as their primary purpose. These assumptions were used to justify women's exclusion in various areas from public, intellectual over to professional and legal spheres. Women were denied the right to vote and to hold political office, which meant they had little formal influence over laws and structures that governed their lives. They weren't allowed access to education or to speak in public. Women were economically dependent on their husbands regarding owning property or even opening their own bank account. This structural exclusion not only limited women's opportunities but also made inequality appear natural and unquestionable. After many years of fighting the suffrage movement won the right to vote for women by 1920. Access to education also slowly improved toward the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but women were still excluded from many universities and professions. Careers in law, medicine, and politics were still overwhelmingly male-dominated, while women were mainly tolerated and thus concentrated in lower-paid occupations such as teaching, factory work, or domestic labour. During World War II feminist activism came to a hold, paradoxically women enjoyed greater work opportunities and better pay than ever before. However, when the war ended they were pushed back into old roles, which lead to a rebirth of the Women's Movement, known as the second wave. The central aims were further fighting inequality with a focus on reproductive rights, sexual autonomy, equal pay and possibilities (Schomp, 2004).

In the late 1960s, many young women were politically active within other progressive movements that articulated ideals of equality and liberation*. Nonetheless, many women involved in them began to recognize that they themselves were subjects to persistent gendered hierarchies within these exact spaces. Despite their political engagement and education, women were frequently pushed back into traditional roles of lower importance. This contradiction between political ideals and lived experience generated growing frustration. In response, women began forming small, informal discussion groups in which they could speak openly about their personal experiences and feelings. Out of these early gatherings, consciousness-raising groups developed and soon became a foundational organizing practice of the Women's Liberation Movement in the United States and beyond (Freeman, 1971; 1972).

**Movements such as the civil rights movement and the New Left*

Consciousness-raising groups were deliberately organized as small, non-hierarchical gatherings that rejected formal leadership and traditional political structures. As Freeman describes, these groups were typically composed of women meeting regularly in private or semi-private spaces to share personal experiences, with the explicit aim of uncovering how individual problems were rooted in collective, structural conditions. Authority was

intentionally decentralized, participants took turns speaking, experiences were treated as equally valid forms of knowledge, and expertise was understood to emerge from dialogue rather than from credentials or hierarchy (Freeman, 1972). During these meetings topics that regard feminine identity, such as body image, roles, feelings, choices, and sexuality, were discussed, experiences were shared and the socially conditioned and automatic responses were questioned (Randolph and Ross-Valliere, 1979). The power of consciousness-raising did not lie in producing immediate political demands, but in transforming how women understood themselves and their social positioning. The practices within consciousness-raising groups strengthened solidarity and validated women's voices, often for the first time* (Freeman, 1972).

Consciousness-raising groups can be understood as the social practice through which naming as the feminist intervention into linguistic oppression became possible. Naming and speech became a political act through dialogue, comparison, and the recognition of shared patterns. Consciousness-raising groups provided the needed space for conversations in which speech itself was turned into a method of knowledge production.

Cameron argues that feminist language critique begins with exposing the lack of words needed to describe women's experiences and making visible what has previously gone unnamed (1990). As feminists found out, silencing often operates not through the absence of speech, but through the absence of language and words. Experiences that cannot be named remain difficult to articulate and are therefore more easily dismissed as individual, private, or insignificant. Now during consciousness-raising meetings, women were encouraged to speak openly about experiences that were often silenced, tabooed, or normalized such as sexual dissatisfaction, harassment, shame, anger, or linguistic humiliation. By naming experiences such as sexual harassment or emotional labour, feminists first of all validated women's experiences and transformed diffuse feelings of discomfort into socially intelligible phenomena, that can be recognized and thus take away the possibility to be labeled and diminished as personal. During these meetings new vocabularies emerged articulating these experiences, including terms such as *sexism*, *sexual harassment*, and *consciousness-raising* itself. This process shows how feminist movements actively reshape language and made women's experiences linguistically visible. The collective dimension reveals that meaning is not fixed but produced through use and negotiation (hooks, 1984; Freeman, 1971).

As Cameron argues, feminist politics depend not only on changing conditions but also on transforming the frameworks through which they are understood (1990). This practice was grounded in the principle „the personal is political,“ not only as a slogan but as a method through which private speech became collective knowledge and reframed personal experiences into structural mechanisms (Freeman, 1971). To give an example: In 1963 Betty Friedan writes about „the problem that has no name“ referring to the discrepancy between the widespread, American image of the happy housewife and the reality of these often dissatisfied, and yearning women (Friedan, 1963). This problem indeed has a name now*, but illustrates again the linguistic invisibility of women's common experiences.

As stated earlier, feminist linguists have uncovered that language exerts its power, and persist norms mainly through repetition, which also makes them vulnerable to disruption. When language is consciously repeated dif-

**This is not to say, that all the feminist work that has already been done does not count or is not visible. It simply means that many women have spoken about taboo topics for the first time and felt understood on an individual level.*

**Sexism, basically, or more precisely the systemic oppression that comes from pushing women in domestic roles.*

ferently or collectively re-signified, its regulatory force can be challenged (Butler, 1990). Which is exactly what happened during consciousness-raising group discussions.

Spender even claims that women possess a specific advantage, as they are often aware that the dominant reality is not the only reality there is (1980). Having had to navigate between socially imposed meanings and their own lived experiences, women tend to develop a greater flexibility in dealing with contradiction and ambiguity. This ability to hold multiple meanings simultaneously becomes politically productive in consciousness-raising contexts, where dominant interpretations can be questioned and reworked collectively.

Consciousness-raising group meetings have proven to be a powerful feminist method for challenging linguistic and social oppression. These meetings validated lived experience as a legitimate source of knowledge, disrupted internalized self-blame, and fostered a shared feminist vocabulary that made oppression speakable and contestable. By collectively naming experiences, consciousness-raising groups exposed the socially constructed nature of meaning and demonstrated that language can be reshaped through use and negotiation. Beyond awareness, these practices cultivated solidarity, political consciousness, and a sense of agency, showing that speaking together is not only reflective but transformative. The broader impact of these interventions became visible in the achievements of the second wave Women's Liberation Movement. Feminist activism translated newly articulated critiques of sexism into institutional reforms, including anti-discrimination legislation in employment and education, expanded access to higher education, the possibility to manage their own money, and legal advances in reproductive rights. At the same time, issues that had long been confined to the private sphere, such as domestic violence and sexual harassment, were publicly recognized as structural social problems rather than individual misfortunes. In this sense, the linguistic and collective work undertaken in consciousness-raising groups did not remain at the level of reflection, it contributed to reshaping legal frameworks, public discourse, and social norms (Schomp, 2004). However, consciousness-raising groups were not without limitations.

Author and activist bell hooks offers one of the most important critiques, arguing that early feminist consciousness-raising often reflected the experiences and priorities of white, middle-class, heterosexual cis-women while marginalizing or excluding others (1984). She contends that these groups frequently assumed a shared female experience, when in reality women's lives were (and still are) profoundly shaped by race, class, sexuality, and other structures of power. As a result, the collective naming that emerged from these discussions could unintentionally universalize partial perspectives, reproducing the very exclusions feminism sought to dismantle. hooks emphasizes that simply providing a space to speak does not automatically produce liberating knowledge. Rather, personal accounts without sustained critical analysis can remain trapped within the prevailing ideological framework (hooks, 1984).

Central to hooks' critique is her argument that experience alone cannot serve as the ultimate foundation of feminist theory or political practice. While consciousness-raising enabled women to articulate previously silenced realities, hooks warns that experience is always interpreted through existing social and linguistic structures shaped by inequality (hooks, 1984). This means that consciousness-raising can both challenge and reproduce

oppression. Without deliberate attention to differences in social position, feminist spaces risk privileging those whose speech already aligns with dominant norms. In this sense, the political potential of speech depends not only on its expression but on the collective capacity to critically examine how power shapes whose words are heard and validated. The organizational structure of many consciousness-raising groups further complicated this dynamic. As Jo Freeman (1972) argues in her influential yet controversial critique of *structurelessness*, the absence of formal hierarchies did not eliminate power but often made it less visible and therefore more difficult to challenge. Informal hierarchies emerged based on confidence, education, race, or social capital, influencing whose interpretations carried greater weight within supposedly egalitarian discussions (Freeman, 1972). hooks' critique reinforces this point by demonstrating that feminist spaces were not immune to broader systems of domination but were embedded within them. Together, these critiques reveal that meaning-making within consciousness-raising groups was not purely collective but shaped by uneven distributions of linguistic and social authority.

Another limitation hooks identifies concerns the relationship between speech and political transformation. While she acknowledges the profound importance of breaking silence, she argues that feminist practice must move beyond the sharing of personal experience toward critical consciousness and collective political action (hooks, 1984). Consciousness-raising was most transformative when it enabled participants to connect individual experiences to structural analysis, but it risked political stagnation when reflection did not translate into organized resistance. Freeman similarly observed that groups centered heavily on discussion sometimes struggled to develop sustained political strategies (1972). hooks' intervention reframes this not as a failure of speech itself, but as a reminder that speech must be accompanied by critical reflection and structural awareness.

These critiques do not diminish the importance of consciousness-raising, rather, they clarify its conditions of possibility. They demonstrate that consciousness-raising is a powerful feminist method, but only when it actively confronts internal hierarchies and remains attentive to whose voices are included, whose are excluded, and how language itself carries the traces of social inequality. In this way, hooks' analysis strengthens the feminist effort of naming by insisting that the collective production of language must remain accountable to difference, solidarity, and ongoing critical examination.

Side by side with collective political action, consciousness-raising remains a foundational feminist method precisely because of its focus on breaking silence. The insistence that women speak even when the words feel inadequate, uncomfortable, or dangerous directly contests patriarchal systems that depend on women's silence and self-censorship. In this sense, consciousness-raising groups foreground the political significance of language itself, speaking becomes a means of reclaiming agency, redefining meaning, and resisting oppression.

3 – Consciousness-raising as a practice today

In a world saturated by language, media*, and discourse, revisiting consciousness-raising through a linguistic lens highlights how sexism continues to operate subtly through everyday speech. By creating spaces where language can be collectively examined, questioned, and redefined, consciousness-raising practices extend the legacy of consciousness-raising into the present reaffirming that feminist struggle is as much about how we speak as it is about what we demand.

**Don't get me started on social media and the internet in general. This opens up another huge world of language and its distribution with many more layers, that I sadly cannot cover in this essay.*

My project *A Slip of the Tongue* is a series of consciousness-raising meetings that don't aim to merely replicate the format of the 1970s but adapt its principles to new contexts and learn from their limitations. Rather than focusing on outing suppressed and privatized female experiences as structural issues, I invite participants to uncover and speak about, the often hidden, sexist patterns embedded in everyday language. For each meeting we talk about a word, phrase or term that holds (more or less hidden) sexism. Words, that I encounter in books or through this research, that I initially saw no problem with, but was trained to see the embedded sexism through this same research. The words we talked about thus far are *hey guys, female, mistress, witch, diva, pussy and bitch***. These meetings are a space for shared reflection, rethinking, listening and learning. We come together to explore how language shapes our understanding of ourselves and the world around us. It's not about using the „right“ words, or forbidding or silencing speech. It's about interrogating why we use the words we do, who we're trying to center, and how our choices either reinforce or challenge the patriarchal norm.

***but the list is long and there are many more: bossy, to have the balls to do smth., cunt, woman, hag, girl, lady, cougar, missy, whore...*

In the meetings I host, the practice of consciousness-raising unfolds through close attention to everyday words as participants analyze familiar expressions, trace their histories, and reflect on how these terms have shaped their self-perception and interactions. The words serve as starting points for discussion. Participants are invited to share personal associations and experiences connected to the term, before we collectively unpack its connotations, implicit assumptions, and possible sexist undertones. We look into the

****Creating zines makes the process of documentation a collective and a fun one. People can freely express themselves during the meeting while simultaneously having control over what gets written down and what stays in the circle, ensuring a safer space to express one's thoughts. Easy copying enables fast distribution and something to take away from the meetings for the participants.*

etymology of the word to trace changes in usage. Short excerpts from feminist linguistic texts are introduced to provide additional frameworks and to situate individual experiences within broader structural analyses. The conversation is guided but remains open, allowing meanings to emerge through dialogue rather than being imposed. For each meeting, we collectively document key insights, contradictions, and redefinitions in the form of a zine***. I chose these methods to combine personal reflection, theoretical input, and collective meaning-making, treating language as something that gets continuously reshaped****.

The impact I observe, of my hosted meetings, is both immediate and also grows over time, drawing a bigger picture of oppressive systems. Participants often report a heightened linguistic awareness, a shift from passive acceptance of „normal“ phrases to critical attentiveness. Words and expressions that previously seemed neutral, habitual, or even harmless begin to reveal different layers of meaning. Many report that the focus on language often comes with a sense of surprise at how deeply sexism is embedded in everyday speech. This realization is frequently accompanied by discomfort, as participants recognize their own role in reproducing sexist language, sometimes against their conscious beliefs. That is often followed by a sense of relief at discovering that these experiences are shared rather than individual. Some described this moment to me as clarifying, as it shifts feelings of individual guilt towards an understanding of structural conditioning. Hearing others articulate similar realizations creates this relief but also feelings of validation and togetherness. That, then, leaves the participants with a sense of power and agency rather than paralyzation. They often report that they start noticing sexist expressions in conversations, media, and their own speech, sometimes immediately after leaving the session. Others speak of a subtle but significant shift in self-perception: a reduced tendency to internalize blame and a greater readiness to claim interpretive authority over their own experiences. Some participants, and I especially notice it in my friends, describe moments of hesitation or self-correction in their own speech. Others note that they feel the urge to share this new knowledge with others and begin to intervene in conversations outside the meetings. They feel newly empowered to question or gently challenge sexist language when they encounter it, suggesting alternatives, or initiating discussions with friends, colleagues, or family members. And so it happens, that I, too, get called out for falling back into internalized speech pattern*. In this way, the meetings appear to function as catalysts: what begins as collective reflection on language translates into everyday micro-interventions and more deliberate speech practices. By making hidden linguistic patterns visible, they encourage participants to carry the practice of questioning language into other social contexts. Keeping an ongoing dialogue is something that I only dared to wish for.

While I understand my meetings as a continuation of feminist consciousness-raising practices, I am also aware of their limitations. As they take place in Rotterdam and are largely shaped by my own social and cultural networks, the group of participants is inevitably limited in its diversity. This means that certain perspectives, particularly those shaped by different cultural, linguistic, racial, or socio-economic contexts, may be underrepresented or absent. As a result, the discussions that emerge from them cannot claim universality** but remain situated and partial. Additionally, despite aiming for a horizontal and inclusive structure, differences in confidence, language proficiency, or familiarity with feminist discourse may influence who speaks, who is heard, and whose interpretations carry more weight. There is also the risk that participants, including myself, reproduce dominant norms even while attempting to critique them***. Finally, as temporary and voluntary gatherings, the

****The more meetings I hosted, the more I realized that I wasn't actually interested in the definitions of the words, but rather in the act of speaking itself. Sure, the „new“ definitions of the words we would talk about in the meetings are not irrelevant but very valuable, otherwise I wouldn't host these meetings in the first place, but I believe that the methodology behind, speech as an intentional act, is the more influential thing at hand. Speaking, opening the discourse, being curious about language, that are the mechanisms and tools that I'm interested in and which I hope to awaken in others.

*Important to note is that this impulse to speak is not primarily framed as confrontation, but as curiosity and shared learning.

**and doesn't want to in the first place! This is something that is also openly discussed during the meetings. I try to counteract limited diversity by organizing meetings in places that lie outside my personal network and are therefore frequented by a more diverse audience.

meetings may foster awareness without necessarily leading to sustained engagement or broader structural change. This is to say that the project is not a definitive intervention, but an ongoing, situated experiment in collective (un)learning and feminist practice. Even though I personally learned a bunch through this research and hosting, I know that this is only the start and there are many more things to look at and (un)learn.

Consciousness-raising today thus operates as a practice of ongoing linguistic negotiation. It does not merely analyze sexist words but equips participants to recognize, contest, and gradually reshape the norms that structure their social realities. In my meetings, this process becomes visible when participants begin to question everyday expressions that once appeared harmless, when they articulate discomfort they had previously dismissed, and when they experiment with alternative formulations that feel more precise and inclusive, when they become more attentive listeners, more deliberate speakers, and more willing to interrupt sexist language in professional and private contexts. In this sense, the contemporary practice mirrors the central insight of the consciousness-raising groups of the 1970s: that speaking collectively about everyday life can transform private unease into political awareness.

While the historical context has changed*, the underlying mechanism remains similar. Then as now, the act of naming disrupts the apparent naturalness of dominant language, reveals its ideological underpinnings, and opens space for alternative meanings to emerge. My meetings therefore do not replicate the earlier movement but continue its methodological impulse: they treat language as both a site of oppression and a resource for resistance. By foregrounding dialogue, critical reflection, and shared interpretation, they demonstrate that the feminist effort of breaking silence is not a closed historical chapter but an ongoing practice, one in which the negotiation of words becomes a negotiation of social reality itself.

****The fact that they are so deeply engrained in our socialization makes them super hard to detect. Even though we're trying to see it all, I'm sure we're missing pieces. I've come to the conclusion that this is natural in a process of unlearning. It takes time to deepen one's understanding. The fact that we're willing to and doing the work for me, is what counts. In my opinion, trying to live up to unrealistic, perfectionistic standards only attaches shame to the discourse and thus doesn't help us grow and unlearn.*

**...and it didn't change only for the better. Yes, in North America and Europe, women have more legal rights nowadays but we're still experiencing a regression towards more traditional gender roles and a strong misogynist wave pushed by the manosphere and the extreme right (Ipsos international 2026). That's not something to be underestimated.*

Glossary

woman

That, to me and in this essay, means people who are victims of gender-based oppression, more specifically trans women, non-binary, inter and genderqueer people who get misgendered as women, and cis-women. I must add that this umbrella term will, in some cases, prove inadequate, as the realities of life and oppression can vary greatly within the groups of people mentioned, yet I believe they're all affected, in one way or another, by the oppressive linguistic mechanism that I mention. On top of that I want to acknowledge that various factors, such as race, gender, class, ability, and sexuality intersect and shape experiences additionally.

Patriarchy/patriarchal society

In a patriarchal society order positions of authority are mostly held by men. The term frames male dominance as a socially build, rather than biological, phenomenon (Merriam Webster, n.d.). In feminist contexts it is referred to as the root of the oppression of women that must be combated in order to achieve gender equality.

Gender

has been used interchangeably with sex but there is a clear distinction between them. While sex refers to the biology and the body, gender refers to the behavioral, cultural and psychological traits typically associated with sex. (Merriam Webster, n.d.)

Sexism

discrimination based on (assigned) gender, mostly towards women

Double bind

A double-bind is a conflicting situation in which a subject finds itself with two or more conflicting possibilities and contradictory expectations. Its important to note that this is not a simple no-win situation, but such an abstract, confusing, often internalized, dilemma that any response will automatically be perceived as the wrong. (Wikipedia, n.d.)

In feminist language analysis, double binds disproportionately affect women: for example, women are expected to be assertive but not aggressive, confident but not arrogant, attractive but not sexual, competent but likable, producing chronic vulnerability to criticism regardless of behavior. (Lakoff, 1975)

pejoration

a change for the worse or specifically: an historical process by which the semantic and connotative status of a word tends to decline (Merriam Webster, n.d.)

linguistic practices

with that I basically mean how we speak, our speech acts and patterns

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19 With love, Feline