

<b>Institution:</b> University of Oxford
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 029 English Language and Literature
<b>Title of case study:</b> Informing Public Debate about Language and Gender
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b> (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Deborah Cameron's research focuses on the relationship between gender and language, using sociolinguistic evidence and contemporary theories of gender and identity to examine and challenge widespread beliefs about the differing verbal abilities and behaviour of men and women. Through broadcasting, public speaking and engagement with non-academic professional groups, including secondary school English teachers, Cameron communicates the results of her (and others') research to a broad audience in Britain and internationally. She has raised awareness of sociolinguistic approaches to gender, has provided resources for professionals concerned with issues of equality and diversity, and has contributed to the public understanding of science.</p>
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b> (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>The underpinning research is a body of sociolinguistic work on the relationship between language and gender – a subject that is not only of perennial interest to a cross-section of the general public, but has implications for policy and practice in a number of professional fields, including politics (where women's under-representation has been linked to the question of their competence/confidence and their acceptability as public speakers), psychology/counselling (which often addresses questions relating to cross-sex communication in personal relationships), and education (where there has been considerable concern about the underachievement of boys, particularly in relation to literacy and those parts of the school curriculum which depend heavily on language skills). Cameron has been actively engaged in research and scholarship on language and gender since the mid-1980s, but the research relevant to this case study was carried out after her appointment to the Chair of Language and Communication at the University of Oxford in 2004.</p> <p>The research is of two main kinds. The first involves detailed analysis of gender-related patterns in naturally-occurring spoken language data, while the second explores the history and current expressions of language ideologies and folk beliefs pertaining to gender, drawing attention to variation in the prevailing beliefs across cultures and over time, and where possible setting those beliefs alongside relevant empirical findings in order to assess the degree to which they are justified by evidence. Both kinds of research are exemplified by the papers collected in <i>On Language and Sexual Politics</i> (Cameron 2006). Most recently Cameron has undertaken a detailed assessment of the increasingly influential contemporary scientific narratives which propose a biological basis for male-female differences in linguistic behaviour. This work, presented most fully in an article in the peer-reviewed international journal <i>Applied Linguistics</i> (Cameron 2010), argues that neo-Darwinian accounts are highly selective in their use of sociolinguistic evidence, and in many cases depend on linguistically naive assumptions that lead to misinterpretations of the evidence. Cameron has also investigated the uptake of these accounts in old and new media, looking particularly at the ways in which the reporting and discussion of sex-difference science tend to amplify errors and misinterpretations (e.g. Cameron 2008).</p> <p>The most general insight that emerges from this work is that both scientific and popular discourses typically overstate the extent of male-female linguistic differences and offer over-simple explanations for them.</p>
<p><b>3. References to the research</b> (indicative maximum of six references)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Cameron, D (2006) <i>On Language and Sexual Politics</i>, London: Routledge. Published by an academic press which required peer review.</li> <li>2. Cameron, D (2006) 'Theorizing the female voice in public contexts', in J. Baxter (ed.) <i>Speaking Out: The Female Voice in Public Contexts</i>. Palgrave-Macmillan. Published by an academic press requiring peer review</li> <li>3. Cameron, D (2007) <i>The Myth of Mars and Venus</i>. Oxford University Press. Published by an academic press requiring peer review and serialised in 3 parts, in extract, in <i>The Guardian</i>, October 2007 <a href="http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/oct/01/gender.books">http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/oct/01/gender.books</a></li> <li>4. Cameron, D (2008) 'Dreaming of Genie: Language, gender difference and identity on the web', in S. Johnson and A. Ensslin (eds.) <i>Language in the Media</i>. Continuum. Published by an academic press requiring peer review</li> </ol>

5. Cameron, D (2010) 'Gender, language and the new biologism', *Applied Linguistics* 31(2): 173-92. Published in the leading international peer reviewed journal of applied linguistics.
6. Cameron, D (2012) 'More heat than light? Sex difference science and the study of language'. (Vancouver: Ronsdale Press). Published text of the Garnett Sedgwick Memorial Lectures, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, 2012 for which Cameron was invited speaker (the first linguist to be asked to give this prestigious series).

#### 4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Given the social salience of gender, and the potential for our beliefs about it to perpetuate inaccurate stereotypes and justify discrimination, it is important that the findings of language and gender research, and the arguments they give rise to, should be put in the public domain, contextualized and made accessible to those without specialist linguistic knowledge. Cameron has done just that, bringing to public attention the erroneous nature of many common assumptions about male and female language use, enabling more informed debate, and dislodging some entrenched myths. In 2007 Cameron published *The Myth of Mars and Venus*, a book written at her own instigation for a general audience but based firmly on academic research, including substantial reference to her own. The book gained significant media exposure. Reviewers for newspapers, journals, blogs, and customer feedback websites regularly commented on the force and wit with which it debunked the account of gender and language popularised by John Gray's *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* – a myth that, at the time Cameron entered the debate, had 'mutated to scientific fact' (*Daily Telegraph* review). 'Cameron exposes numerous weaknesses in how such books substantiate their claims', wrote one 2008 reviewer: 'She shows that they over-emphasise insignificant linguistic and cross-cultural research findings of difference between men and women's talk, whereas the more common finding, that there are very few differences between them and significantly more variation among groups of the same gender, goes unreported. ... [W]hy does all this matter? Myths ... shape our beliefs and influence our actions. This particular myth is deeply embedded in our culture and provides a way of talking about and explaining social relations that is deeply flawed and harmful.' (*Red Pepper* February 2008). Numerous members of the public responded to the book on-line: 'We need more books like this one', is a typical comment: '[Cameron] describes how scientific evidence can be manufactured or twisted to suit the prejudices of our society. She explores why these myths so often "ring true" for so many people (humans are suggestible and prone to remember things that fit their stereotypes, while forgetting things that don't), and why we're so obsessed with gender and gender difference in the first place' (comments collected on amazon.co.uk).

Parts of *Mars and Venus* were serialised in *The Guardian*, with a follow-up article by Steven Poole (20 Oct 2007). To date, the book has sold more than 682,300 copies and netted revenue of £49,450 for OUP. Its high profile opened up opportunities for other kinds of engagement with non-academic audiences such as teachers, school students, professionals, and the public at large. The range of the activities outlined below gives evidence of the interest this work has generated outside academe, and the benefits it has had for particular groups of non-academics.

1. *Updating and enriching the teaching of language and gender in secondary schools.* 'Language and gender' is a standard topic on the main examining boards' syllabi for English Language A-level. Cameron's research has had direct impact on the teaching of the topic at A-level. *The Myth of Mars and Venus* is recommended reading for A-level students (see the AQA Resources Lists for English Language A and B); in addition, she features extensively on Kerboodle (online resources produced by Nelson Thornes, the publishers of the two A-level textbooks originally sanctioned by AQA as the "official" resources for the two A-levels in English Language; these sell around 20,000 copies a year to A-level students). She has taken part in training events for teachers and English subject advisors, and speaks regularly at conferences for English Language A-level students organized by the English and Media Centre in London and by Language Live around the country – large events, typically attracting 800 or 1000 participants. Through the book and through her subsequent contact with teachers and students, Cameron's work on language and gender has helped to update and enrich the teaching of the subject at A-level, feeding in recent research findings and moving the approach used at A-level closer to the approach used by academic researchers. The current Chair of Examiners for AQA reports that 'Cameron's books have been very useful within our English Language examining community' and that the exam board has used

extracts from *The Myth of Mars and Venus* on exam papers 'to counter the types of gender discourses promoted by writers such as John Gray'<sup>[1]</sup>. EMC conference organiser Dan Clayton confirms that 'Debbie's talks at the English and Media Centre's English Language Conference have gone a long way towards updating both teachers' and A-level students' understanding of the field of language and gender. In the past, there has often been a tendency for A-level students to uncritically accept stereotyped models of gender difference in spoken interaction, so Debbie's work, drawing on *The Myth of Mars and Venus*, has been excellent in offering a more nuanced understanding of differences between and within the sexes. In addition to the lectures at the conference, her research update, published on the EMC website, has proved very useful in helping teachers keep up to date with the most recent work on gender'<sup>[2]</sup>. In 2011 Cameron was invited to become a patron of the English and Media Centre.

2. *Enabling professional groups to engage with issues of language and gender.* As noted under (2) above, there are various professional groups other than educators to whom issues of language and gender are of practical relevance and concern. Cameron has been approached by representatives of some of these groups to write articles for their professional or trade publications, such as *The Psychologist*, published by the British Psychological Association, and *In Depth*, a trade journal for qualitative market researchers. She also contributed on 6 November 2010 to a day seminar for women in (or considering going into) politics, organised jointly by Camden Speakers' Association and a number of women's political organisations. Laura Nelson, who organised the occasion, reports that Cameron's 'impassioned and informative speech ... designed to inspire young men and women to aspire to leadership positions and not to be bound by false limitations of gender stereotypes ... helped the audience understand more about how powerful language is in restricting our perceptions of ourselves.'

3. *Enhancing public understanding of language, linguistics and gender research.* Thanks initially to the public interest in *Mars and Venus*, Cameron has been widely sought after as a contributor to broadcast media and other forms of public engagement with language. She is regularly interviewed about her research and its topic. Several of these interviews have been on serious radio and TV programmes which aim to educate as well as entertain. Some programmes in this category are specifically devoted to language, e.g. BBC Radio 4's series *Fry's English Delight*, which made an extended version of the broadcast interview available as a podcast; Swedish National Radio's weekly programme *Språket* ['the language']<sup>[4]</sup>; and the Canadian TV documentary 'Love in 2013: Mars and Venus today' made by Endless Media and broadcast on CBC, 14 Feb 2013 (9pm) (repeats on CBC News Network Sat 16 Feb, 11PM ET and Sunday 17 Feb at 6 PM ET). The producer and editor of *Språket* comments that Cameron's 'knowledge of the international trends in linguistic research and her ability to make theory clear to a general audience were valuable contributions to the program and much appreciated and commented on by our listeners.'

Cameron has given invited talks at public events connected with language-themed exhibitions, such as the 'Our Speaking Selves' conference (17 May 2009, 104 attendees) which accompanied an exhibition devoted to the human voice at the Institute for Contemporary Art in 2009, and the British Library's 'Evolving English' exhibition in 2011. In 2010 she was one of four panellists at a forum debate on 'Gendered Behaviour: What Can Science Tell Us?' (Kings Place, London, 16 November), hosted by the University of Cambridge Centre for Gender Studies in association with *The Guardian* and supported by Cambridge University Press. The extent to which Cameron set the parameters for discussion is indicated by how *The Guardian* framed the debate in advance: 'She takes issue with one of the central claims that women have superior verbal abilities; some speculate that this is linked to brain structure, others that it has an evolutionary explanation. Cameron sees both as purely speculative, and insists that explanations of difference must take account of three much more prosaic factors. ... [1] that verbal behaviour is linked to "activity type" – what someone usually spends much of their time doing. ... [2] verbal differences reflect differences in power and status. ... where status is not a factor there is no difference between men and women. ... [3] Cameron argues that we use language to project our identity ... to distinguish our sense of who we are in terms of class, life role as well as gender, and all of these identities are socially constructed. Factor out these variables, and you're left with no clear-cut differences in how men and women use language.' The podcast recording on the *Guardian* website attracted 132

comments in the 2 days open for responses. In 2012 Cameron spoke on language, gender and sexism in a series of public talks organised by the Instituto Cervantes in London under the heading 'Linguistica para todos' ('linguistics for all') and attended largely by Spanish-speakers living in the UK (total audience c. 30). She is regularly contacted by listeners and audience members who wish to canvas her opinion on questions of language, and features extensively on popular blogs and discussion sites debating these matters.

4. *Contributing to the quality and vitality of our cultural life.* Cameron has spoken about her work on language and gender at the Oxford Literary Festival (April 2008), The Edinburgh Book Festival (August 2008), the Cambridge Festival of Ideas (October 2012), and most recently the Hay Philosophy Festival in conversation with Simon Blackburn and Carol Gilligan on gender, language and thought (May 2013; tickets sold out). She has contributed to the work of the Royal Shakespeare Company, which asked her to conduct a workshop on language and gender conflict for the cast of its 2008 production of *The Taming of the Shrew* as part of their rehearsal and preparation programme; she contributed a short essay on the same topic for the programme offered to audience members at performances of the play in Stratford.

#### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

##### Testimony

- [1] Corroborating email from Qualifications Developer, AQA Exam Board, 13.6.13.
- [2] Corroborating email from English Media Centre conference organiser, 4.6.2013.
- [3] Corroborating email from leadership day organiser, Camden Speakers' Association, 5.6.13.

##### Other evidence sources

Introduction: a. <http://www.redpepper.org.uk/planetary-mythology/> Customer reviews are collected at <http://www.amazon.co.uk/product-reviews/0199550999/>

b. Sales figures xls spreadsheet from OUP.

1a. AQA recommended reading of *Mars and Venus*: <http://filestore.aqa.org.uk/subjects/AQA-2700-W-TRB-RL.PDF> and <http://filestore.aqa.org.uk/subjects/AQA-W-TRB-RL-ENGLANGB.PDF>

1b. Kerboodle (subscriber only): <http://www.kerboodle.com/subjects/english/kerboodle-for-english/>

1c. Contribution to source book for A-level students: Clayton, D (ed) (2012) *Language: A Student Handbook on Key Topics and Theories*. London: EMC

1d. Video clip contributions to the English Media Centre emagazine website (subscriber only):

<http://www.englishandmedia.co.uk/emag/> Research update for the English Media Centre: Deborah Cameron, 'Language and Gender: Some reading suggestions for A-level English language teachers', <http://www.englishandmedia.co.uk/emag/debcamemag.pdf>

2a. *The Psychologist* – sample reference: 'A Language in Common', 22/7 (July 2009), 578-81:

[http://www.thepsychologist.org.uk/archive/archive\\_home.cfm?volumeID=22&editionID=177&ArticleID=1529](http://www.thepsychologist.org.uk/archive/archive_home.cfm?volumeID=22&editionID=177&ArticleID=1529)

2b. 'Sex and the Power of Speech', *In Depth* (Spring 2010),

<http://www.aqr.org.uk/indepth/spring2010/paper1.shtml>

3a. Sample references for influence on public media debate: *Huffington Post* 13 Feb 2011:

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dr-yvonne-k-fulbright/male-female-communication\\_b\\_813095.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dr-yvonne-k-fulbright/male-female-communication_b_813095.html)

*Sandstorm Reviews* blogspot, February 2008:

<http://sandstormreviews.blogspot.co.uk/2008/02/myth-of-mars-and-venus-deborah-cameron.html>

3b. *Fry's English Delight* Series 3, episode 2, BBC Radio 4, interview with Stephen Fry: 'He Said, She Said', broadcast 18 August 2010, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00tdmqr>

3c. Språket, Sveriges Radio Göteborg: <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/avschnitt/63638?programid=411>

and <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=411&artikel=4310547>. Corroborating email from Anna Lena Ringarp, 3 September 2013.

3d. <http://www.newswire.ca/en/story/1112835/love-in-2013-mars-venus-today-are-men-and-women-really-from-different-planets-twenty-years-after-the-publication-of-john-gray-s-men-are-from-mars-wome>

3e. 'Gendered Behaviour' forum podcast:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/audio/2010/nov/24/gendered-behaviour-science-forum>

4. RSC programme for *The Taming of the Shrew*. [Hard copy.]