LANGUAGE IN LIFE, AND A LIFE IN LANGUAGE: JACOB MEY – A FESTSCHRIFT

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The Dynamics of Closeness/Distance and Sameness/Difference in Discourse About Sisters*

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I recently asked a woman about her sister, a question I have been asking frequently of late, because communication among sisters is the topic of my current research. She replied, "My sister and I have a fraught relationship. We were never close. We're very different." On hearing this, I chuckled, then had to explain why. She had, in this brief statement, encapsulated what just about all the women to whom I have spoken about their sisters told me sooner or later, usually sooner: whether or not they are close, and whether (and how) they are different.

I have long been intrigued by the relationship between the dynamics of sameness/difference and closeness/distance. That these dynamics are intimately related was noted by Brown and Gilman (1960) in their classic article introducing the notion of power and solidarity as fundamental to language and interpersonal interaction. Brown and Gilman align solidarity with sameness, and power with difference. "In general terms," they write, "the V form is linked with differences between persons" (p. 256). In contrast, in defining "the solidarity semantic" they note, "If A has the same parents as B, B has the same parents as A. Solidarity is the name we give to the general relationship and solidarity is symmetrical" (p. 257). For Brown and Gilman, then, difference and sameness play key roles in understanding power and solidarity respectively, and sibling relationships are a key site for understanding these dynamics. If we equate solidarity with closeness and power with hierarchy, then siblings are seen as both close and equal. This view of siblings underlies the

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oft-heard statements "We are like sisters" and "We are like brothers," which are understood to mean "We are close" and also "There is no hierarchy between us, we are on an equal footing."

Closeness, however, does not necessarily entail equality, nor does hierarchy necessarily entail distance, and there is no better illustration of this than the sibling relationship. Siblings are indeed emblematically close (as reflected in the metaphorical use of the phrases "like brothers" or "like sisters"). But siblings are also emblematically unequal because they are age-graded: the older sibling has authority and power over the younger. (Even twins, I've observed in my interviews, tend to identify the one born first as "older.") The hierarchy of age-grading is linguistically encoded by many cultures (Chinese is but one) in which older siblings address younger ones by name, but younger siblings use terms of address that mean, literally, "older sister" or "older brother" – and they use these forms of address throughout their lives. No matter how long they live, siblings are subject to age-graded hierarchy. This too has emerged in interviews I've conducted with women about their sisters. For example, regardless of speakers' ages, I have heard innumerable accounts of older sisters being both protective of and judgmental toward younger ones, and being described, by themselves or by younger siblings, as providing precious guidance but also as being "bossy." Similarly, regardless of age, younger sisters have described themselves to me as seeking their older sisters' approval, appreciating their protection and guidance but also of resenting their being judgmental or "bossy."[1]

The fundamental nature of the relationship between the sameness/difference and closeness/ distance dynamics is attested to not only by Brown and Gilman's power/solidarity dynamic but also by Becker's (1995) notion of "cline of person," "a grammatical continuum from oneself to the most distant 'other' upon which all the people, things, and events of experience are arrayed." Becker demonstrates that the cline of person is "A central thread – perhaps *the* central thread in the semantic structure of all languages..." (p. 109). "The cline of person," Becker argues, "underlies most linguistic systems, as well as words, systems of deixis, number, definiteness, tense, and nominal classifications, among others" (p. 110). Two simple examples are the deictic pairs "this" and "that" and "now" and "then" which locate objects as spatially and temporally close to or distant from the speaker, respectively (p. 119). Just so, women's tendency to classify and describe their relationships to their sisters as close or not close and as similar or different places them on "a continuum from oneself to the most distant 'other'." Understanding the ways that the women I spoke to did this in discourse sheds light on these interrelated linguistic dynamics: the cline of person and power/solidarity.

The closeness/distance and sameness/difference dynamics also came up repeatedly when I asked women, for a previous book (Tannen, 2006), about their mothers and daughters. Then too I was

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[1] I can't let the word "bossy" stand without remarking on its sexist nature. The term is used by and about girls and women far more often than it is about boys and men, even though the latter tell each other what to do as often as if not more often than the former. The term reflects societal gender norms that reward boys and men for behavior that exhibits authority whereas girls and women who exhibit authority are cast in a negative light. Goodwin (1990) observed in comparing boys and girls at play that boys who told others what to do, and got it to stick, gained status as leaders, but girls tended to reject other girls who seemed to rise above their peers with the dismissive censure, "She thinks she's something."

almost always told sooner rather than later "We're close" or "We're not close," and "We're the same" or "We're different." However, when women were talking about their mothers or daughters, I heard "We're the same" as often as I heard "We're different," and either sameness or difference could be cited as reason for being close or for encountering conflict and creating distance. That is, I heard "We fight because we're different" but also "We get along because we're different and complement each other." "We're the same" could be mentioned as reason for being close or as reason for conflict – as one woman illustrated by closing her hands into fists and tapping the flat surfaces of her fists against one another while explaining, "It's like two same poles of a magnet." Given how frequently I encountered this pattern in the discourse of women I spoke to about their daughters and mothers, I was not surprised to find, when I turned to communication among sisters, that once again I heard repeatedly whether or not speakers and their sisters are close, and whether they are similar or different (and also whether they are the same or different from their parents). However, in contrast to the pattern I had observed when women talked about their mothers and daughters, women who spoke to me about their sisters overwhelmingly told me that they are different. If they mentioned ways they are the same, it was almost always after having told me of many ways they are different. I heard, for example, with reference to a bedroom shared, "My side was neat, hers was a mess," or the reverse. Other polarities I heard often included that one was "good," the other rebellious; that one stayed near their parents or hometown, while the other couldn't wait to get away. Domains of difference included interests ("She was a tomboy, her interests and friends were totally different from mine; I didn't like her friends, she was a jock"), lifestyle ("my lifestyle is different. She goes for big houses, I live in a small apartment"), life circumstances ("I have grandchildren and she doesn't"), outlook on life ("We define ourselves differently"), and appearance ("Even physically you know my mother has really dark hair and you know my sister has really dark hair and you know they look exactly alike"). As this last remark indicates, the sameness/difference dynamic also figures in the description of family alignments. I was often told that the speaker or her sister was closer to one or the other parent because of one or more of these similarities (they both like to read, they both like sports, and so on).

An interesting aspect of this pattern was the evident assumption that sisters ought to be similar. A typical observation was, "People can't believe we're sisters because our sensibilities are so different." The assumption that sisters should be similar is ironic, given how nearly universal it was for women to tell me that they and their sisters differ. Perhaps it was precisely because they felt that sisters are assumed to be similar that women were so eager to tell me how they differed. And it was clear that speakers could interpret behavior as evincing either similarity or difference. For example, one woman told me many ways that she and her sister differ, then noted ways that they are the same. She said, for example, that they both have masters degrees in subjects that are internationally related: she has an MBA in international business, while her sister has a masters degree in international communication. She might well have referenced this information as evidence of their difference: her interest in business and her sister's in communication. Instead, she emphasized their shared international focus. Interestingly, though, she noted this similarity in order to illustrate that they both differ from their brother.

Another reason that it is intriguing to observe the assumption that sisters should be the same is the widespread representation, in literature, film, legend, and song, of siblings who represent opposing values, concepts, or approaches to life. For example, the ubiquitous work/family split that many women confront is frequently explored in film as the canonical tale of two sisters, one who chose a career (and is usually portrayed as unmarried) and one who chose to stay home and raise children. Stories of sisters who differ go back as far as Grimms' fairy tales (the blameless Cinderella and her wicked stepsisters) and Shakespeare (the feisty Katherina and her pliant sister Bianca in *Taming of the Shrew*, the faithful Cordelia vs. the fickle Goneril and Regan in *King Lear*), and are ubiquitous in contemporary novels and films (the responsible vs. flighty sisters in the novel and film *In Her Shoes*).

I hasten to repeat that women who told me that they and their sisters are different did so in support of both favorable and unfavorable characterizations of their relationships. Many women told me that they cherished their sisters because they could laugh and be silly together; no one else truly knew and understood their lives; they came to each other's aid at times of illness or personal crisis; they missed each other when they were separated by circumstance; they could call each other at any hour to talk when they needed to; they could not imagine life without their sisters, and so on. The point is not whether it is regarded as positive or negative to be close or similar, distant or different, but rather that the closeness/distance and sameness/difference dynamics provide, in another of Becker's (1995) terms, "coherence principles" organizing the discourse through which women told me about their sisters.

The widespread pattern by which women drew on these coherence principles in telling me about their relationships with their sisters reflects and reinforces the fundamental nature of the closeness/distance continuum as it relates to the dynamics of solidarity and power. At the same time, examining the many and varied ways that women referred to sameness and difference in constructing their accounts deepens our understanding of how sameness/difference and power/solidarity relate to, and interplay with, each other. Finally, exploring the interplay between closeness/distance and sameness/difference helps us understand the importance of Becker's notion of cline of person, and the role it plays in discourse.

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