The Articulation of Difference:

Imagining “Women’s Language” between 1650 and the Present

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Abstract

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This dissertation is an archaeology of so-called *Weibersprache*. While the concept of feminine language is typically associated with 1970s feminist theory, this study shows that there was a diverse history of conceptualizing “women’s language” prior to this period. I begin with seventeenth-century ethnographic texts that report on a *langage des femmes* among Island Caribs (by authors such as Jean Baptiste du Tertre, Charles de Rochefort, and Raymond Breton). Shifting genres, I then trace how the idea of a separate women’s language was appropriated by German philology and philosophies of language in the nineteenth century. I show how authors ranging from Wilhelm von Humboldt to Fritz Mauthner reconceptualize *Weibersprache* to be a universal female phenomenon and present “primitive” women’s languages as evidence for the general alterity of female speech. The second chapter of the dissertation juxtaposes this genealogy of *Weibersprache* with the nineteenth-century debate over the origin of grammatical gender, and contends that discourses on gendered language constitute an important part of the broader reconfiguration of the sexes during this period. The third chapter moves to literary discourse to show how the notion of women's language fulfills a different discursive function around 1900. With recourse to texts by Robert Musil (*Vereinigungen, Drei Frauen*), Hugo von Hofmannsthal (*Furcht, Elektra*), and Walter Benjamin (“Das Gespräch”), I demonstrate how Modernist writers use the idea of an alternative feminine language as a means to test the
boundaries of their own literary genres. Once the concept of *Weibersprache* is reimagined in
Modernist literature, it assumes a utopian dimension, which then becomes a central concern for
French feminist theory. The fourth chapter offers new readings of feminist theories of language
(Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva) by contrasting their focus on textuality with
earlier conceptions of *Weibersprache* that link women’s language to orality. A genealogy of
“women’s language” from “primitive” phenomenon to feminist politics in ethnography,
philology, literature and theory, this dissertation is an interdisciplinary study of language, sex
and gender.
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Introduction

In *Les Bijoux indiscrets*, Denis Diderot’s novel from 1748, the sultan Mangogul is bored with his life of leisure and decides to play a trick on the ladies at court. He wishes for the women to tell him of the amorous adventures “qu’elles ont et qu’elles ont eues” and, to this end, invokes a genie. The genie balks at first—“vouloir que des femmes confessent leurs aventures, cela n’a jamais été et ne sera jamais”¹—but then produces a magic ring. Whenever the sultan wears this ring, the genie instructs,

“Toutes les femmes sur lesquelles vous en tournerez le chaton, raconteront leurs intrigues à voix haute, claire et intelligible: mais n’allez pas croire au moins que c’est par la bouche qu’elles parleront.”
—Et par où donc, ventre-saint-gris! s’écria Mangogul, parleront-elles donc?
—Par la partie la plus franche qui soit en elles, et la mieux instruite des choses que vous désirez savoir, dit [le génie]; par leurs bijoux.²

Much to the delight of the sultan, and to the dismay of the ladies, the genie’s decree turns out to be true. In the presence of Mangogul’s ring, the “bijoux” reveal the sexual exploits that the women would prefer to keep hidden. Some women try to muzzle their genitals, with disastrous results: within Diderot’s text, the jewels speak a truth that cannot be silenced. In the end, the sultan abandons the amusement of the ring only once he has turned it on his “favorite” and obtained documentation of her fidelity.

Diderot does not invent the trope of the *vagina loquens*; it is present already in the medieval period, if not earlier. Texts such as *Le Chevalier Qui fit les Cons Parler* and *Der Rosendorf* from the thirteenth century, as well as a contemporary text of Diderot’s, *Nocrin*,

² Ibid., 15-16.
all feature male characters who receive the power to make women’s genitals speak. What is noteworthy about Diderot’s novel, as well the earlier texts that he borrows from, is that the language the vagina speaks is not in any way marked as Other. It is the same language as that of the narrator, as well as of the other characters—“à voix haute, claire et intelligible,” as the genie puts it. Indeed, the voices of the jewels seem to be directly aligned with the voice of the narrator in Les Bijoux indiscrets, insofar as they are themselves associated with narration. At the beginning of the novel, the sultan is bored because his favorite lady has run out of stories to tell him. He escapes his boredom only once the jewels begin to tell their tales; the jewels thus take over the function of storytelling within the text. In the kind of speech they produce, Diderot furthermore does not distinguish the jewels from other figures. Their loquacity, for instance—the text often makes reference to their “chatter”—is not marked as specifically female, as Diderot assigns this attribute to male characters as well.4

Les Bijoux indiscrets suggests that, whatever difference there may be between the sexes, this difference is not borne out in language. In fact, the arrival of the “talking jewels” does away with superficial distinctions between male and female speech in the text. The female characters

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4 Chantal Thomas, for instance, compares the chatter of the “jewels” to the “irrepressible chattering” of the titular character in Diderot’s Jacques le fataliste et son maître. See Thomas, “The Indiscreet Jewels: A Dangerous Pastime,” in The Libertine Reader: Eroticism and Enlightenment in Eighteenth Century France, ed. Michel Feher (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997), 334-346, specifically page 336. Thomas Kavanagh furthermore argues that the language the “jewels” speak is not marked in relation to the physical body: “If it is a voice of nature we are listening to here, it is a nature held strangely apart from the whole and disruptive body in which it is grounded. […] the jewels express themselves in a voice abstracted from the present reality of the physical body.” Thomas Kavanagh, “Language as Deception in Diderot’s ‘Les Bijoux indiscrets,’” Diderot Studies, vol. 23 (1988): 101-113, here 107-108.
may seem to speak differently than their male counterparts—more prudent and coquettish, less direct—but the language of the jewels, which is clear and candid, show this to be an affected stance, rather than evidence of a truly different nature.

In the French and German contexts, it is not until the end of the eighteenth century, several decades after the publication of Diderot’s *Bijoux*, that the categories “language” and “sex” begin to be brought together conceptually and are understood to act upon each other. This takes several different forms. In the early 1800s, for instance, theories of “women’s language”—produced by discourses on philology, anthropology, and the philosophy of language—link the supposed women’s languages of “primitive” tribes to female speech in general, and assert that all women express language differently than men. Beginning in the 1770s and ‘80s, philologists also produce new theories about the origin of grammatical gender, in which they maintain that gender is a kind of sex that language makes for itself. According to these texts, the meaning behind particular instances of grammatical gender (why *Fuβ* is a masculine noun in German, for instance) can be decoded through the human categories male/female, and their corresponding attributes (*Fuβ* is masculine, Jacob Grimm argues, because feet are “groß” and “stark,” presumed male qualities⁵). In terms of literary discourse, it is the argument of this dissertation that such a reconceptualization of language and sex does not take place until around 1900, when Modernist texts construct “feminine language” as ideal alternative to the conventional language of narrative prose. This understanding of feminine language—as radically opposed to ordinary language—is also operative in feminist theories of language from the 1970s and ‘80s, for instance in the work of Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous.

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⁵ Jacob Grimm, *Deutsche Grammatik*, vol. 3 (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1890), 400.
I will consider these different configurations of women’s/feminine language in more detail shortly, in the outline of my chapters, but first I would like to highlight some of the questions that Diderot’s text raises. In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, discussions of both grammatical gender and women’s languages presume, as does Diderot in *Les Bijoux indiscrets*, that sex is not a category particularly relevant to or marked in language. Theories of grammatical gender, for example, link gender to biological sex only tangentially, while ethnographic texts portray women’s languages as specific to so-called “primitive” tribes, rather than the expression of a universal female alterity. If we may thus take Diderot’s novel to be exemplary for the Enlightenment understanding of the relationship between language and sex, then we are faced with several questions:

1.) What changes in the conceptualization of both language and sex such that, beginning in the late eighteenth century, language is understood to be a place where sexual difference is expressed?

2.) Which discourses participate in this reconfiguration of language and sex? Furthermore, what is the function of concepts of “sexed language” within these discourses?

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In the seventeenth century, discrete women’s languages are explained to be the result of bridal capture practiced by warring tribes. I will explore the different understandings of women’s language and grammatical gender further in Chapters 1 and 2, respectively.
3.) Can we understand ideas of “women’s language” from 1800 onwards in terms of twentieth-century theoretical concepts, such as *écriture féminine*? What are the limitations of such a comparison?

This dissertation addresses these questions by isolating discursive sites where the relationship between sex and language is renegotiated. In this way, I am less interested in constructing a history of the *representation* of women’s language—which might chart the speech of female characters, as well as descriptions of female authorship—than in understanding how “women’s language” has been conceptualized and made to serve different functions within the modern episteme. It is the thesis of this dissertation that, although we may say that it is first around 1800 that a relationship between language and sex begins to be posited, in the centuries that follow, this relationship does not remain conceptually stable. It is difficult to establish any continuity, for example, in the way that “women’s language” is defined in different historical discourses: is it what we would now call a genderlect, located in a particular culture? A universal “female” manner of speech? A poetic device? A subversive practice? It is also difficult to trace any continuity in the status of women’s language within the texts that discuss it: is it a phenomenon? An idea? A theme? A trope? A theory? This, too, changes depending on the context. Any history of women’s language—and, more broadly, any history of the relationship between language, sex, and gender—must be written as a history of its discontinuities.

The only generalization that may be made about the different historical imaginations of women’s language is, perhaps, a functional one: women’s language is always situated at the limits of the discourse that discusses it. In this sense, “women’s language” is a kind of non-object that allows us to see how knowledge is configured in different discourses because it is
constructed as closely related to the limits of knowledge. These limits are not always the same. In seventeenth-century ethnography, for example, the limits of knowledge about “primitive” women’s languages are set by what has been documented and discovered. This is a porous boundary that can ostensibly be broached by new expeditions and information. In nineteenth-century theories of grammar, on the other hand, the limits of knowledge are determined by history. According to Grimm, the original motivations behind the “sex” of language—why the first speakers saw trees as male, for instance, and therefore made Baum a masculine noun—can never be fully recovered, only speculated about. Here, the limits of knowledge operate according to a clear division that can never be overcome. In early twentieth-century literature, “feminine language”—or what Walter Benjamin calls die Sprache der Frauen—is constructed as an ideal medium that exists beyond the limits of what is expressible in textual form. This limit can be approximated but never breached. In postwar feminist theory, on the other hand, “feminine language” is asserted to be a subversive practice that works at the limits of the masculine symbolic to reveal what the symbolic represses. Here the limit cannot be overcome, but must be maintained because it is precisely where feminine language takes place.

If “women’s language” is always situated outside or at the limit of the master discourse—yet what constitutes this outside is always changing—then an archaeology of language and sex shows us the limits of applying postwar feminist theory to texts from earlier periods. There may be surprising continuities between earlier ideas about women’s language and, for instance, Cixous’ concept of écriture féminine, or Julia Kristeva’s theory of the semiotic, but where they locate the difference of feminine language is fundamentally different than in earlier discourses (I will discuss this at length in Chapter 4). Consequently, this dissertation does not use feminist
theory in an explanatory capacity, but instead considers it as one historical discourse among many.

**Sex as Historical Category**

This dissertation contends that a reconceptualization of the relationship between language and sex occurs in the discourses of philology, philosophy and anthropology beginning in the late eighteenth century. Here I would like to provide an overview of the dominant theories of the sexes during this period, as well as discuss existing scholarship on the history of sex and gender. I will then explain how my dissertation contributes to this field while also distinguishing my methodology from that of intellectual and social history.

“Il y a entre les sexes une différence radicale, innée, qui a lieu dans tous les pays, et chez tous les peuples,” writes the physician Pierre Roussel in 1775. In his *Système physique et moral de la femme*—exemplary of many studies of “woman” from this time—Roussel argues that the bodies of women are constituted fundamentally differently from those of men, including in their bones and organs. Sexual différence, in other words, is not restricted to the reproductive organs, but is expressed in all aspects of the body:

La différence de moyens constitue le sexe, dont l’essence ne borne point à un seul organe, mais s’étend, par des nuances plus ou moins sensibles, à toutes les parties; de sorte que la femme n’est pas femme seulement par un endroit, mais encore par toutes les faces par lesquelles elle peut être envisagée.

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8 Ibid., 21-22.
According to Roussel’s biological determinism, corporeal differences result in emotional and intellectual differences between the sexes. Roussel writes that women are ruled more by sentiment than reason: “la faiblesse et la sensibilité qui en est la suite sont donc les qualités dominantes et distinctives des femmes.”

In its argument about the difference of the female sex, Roussel’s book is similar to a number of studies published around this time. Such texts include—to offer only an abridged list of titles in French and German—Antoine Léonard Thomas, Essai sur le caractère, les moeurs et l’esprit des femmes dans les différents siècles (1772); Ernst Brandes, Ueber die Weiber (1787); Jacob Ackermann, Über die körperliche Verschiedenheit des Mannes vom Weibe außer den Geschlechtsstheilen (1788); Christoph Meiners, Geschichte des weiblichen Geschlechts (1788); Jacob Mauvillon, Mann und Weib nach ihren gegenseitigen Verhältnissen geschildert (1791); Karl Friedrich Pockels, Versuch einer Charakteristik des weiblichen Geschlechts (1797); and Jacques Louis Moreau de la Sarthe, Histoire naturelle de la femme (1803). Although these texts disagree on various points, they all assume, like Roussel, that the difference between the sexes extends beyond the reproductive organs and into the entire body and mind. They also assume that the experience of being woman (just as that of being man) is a relatively stable identity that transcends historical and cultural circumstances—hence the proliferation of comparative studies.

9 Ibid., 56. Roussel furthermore gives a biological foundation to woman’s lack of reason, arguing that a dominance of “cold reason” would harm woman’s capacity to bear and nurture children: “Quant au moral, tout en elles prend la force du sentiment: c’est par cette règle qu’elles jugent toujours les choses et les personnes. Leurs opinions tiennent peut-être moins aux opérations de l’esprit qu’à l’impression qu’ont faite sur celles ceux qui les leur ont suggérées; et quand elles cèdent, c’est moins aux traits victorieux du raisonnement qu’à une nouvelle impression qui vient détruire la première. Cette organisation était sans doute nécessaire dans le sexe à qui la nature devait confier le dépôt de l’espèce humaine encore faible et impuissante. Celle-ci eût mille fois péri, si elle eût réduite aux secours tardifs et incertains de la froide raison” (56, my emphasis).
of women from different times and places. Such texts on the \textit{weibliches Geschlecht} continue to be produced throughout the nineteenth century, as evidenced, for example, in the publication of Hermann Heinrich Ploss’ \textit{Das Weib in der Natur- und Völkerkunde}, which I will examine in detail in Chapter 1.

The assumptions about sexual difference posited by these texts correspond to what has variously been called the “Polarisierung der Geschlechtscharaktere” (Karin Hausen),\textsuperscript{10} the move from a “one-sex” to “two-sex” model (Thomas Laqueur),\textsuperscript{11} the “Ordnung der Geschlechter” (Claudia Honegger),\textsuperscript{12} and a “fundamental shift in the definition of sex differences” (Londa Schiebinger).\textsuperscript{13} Although the timeline, and corpus, of these historians are not identical, one thing on which they do agree is this: that sexual difference begins to be reconfigured in the later eighteenth century such that the female sex comes be viewed, in the words of Laqueur, as “incommensurable” with the male, rather than as its lesser inversion. Whereas it is possible to locate a kind of “Cartesian feminism” in the late 1600s and early 1700s—which holds that “l’esprit n’a point de sexe”—by the end of the eighteenth century, a widespread “Resexualisierung von Seele und Geist” has taken place.\textsuperscript{14} Reconceptualized across multiple

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11} Thomas Laqueur, \textit{Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud} (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 1992).
\item \textsuperscript{12} Claudia Honegger, \textit{Die Ordnung der Geschlechter: Die Wissenschaften vom Menschen und das Weib, 1750-1850} (Frankfurt; New York: Campus Verlag, 1991).
\item \textsuperscript{14} Honegger, 87.
\end{itemize}
discourses, sexual difference is now understood to permeate and organize multiple domains of life: body, mind, spirit, moral and social identity.

With regard to the historical framework that they establish for the conceptualization of sexual difference, this dissertation draws on the work of historians of sex and gender—Laqueur, Honegger, Schiebinger, and Hausen, in particular. However, my study differentiates itself from their work in two important ways. First, I choose a relatively unexamined field of inquiry. Laqueur, Honegger, and Schiebinger draw their conclusions mainly from the analysis of scientific and medical discourses, while Hausen focuses on lexical, philosophical, and educational texts. One objective of this dissertation is to demonstrate that, beginning in the late eighteenth century, discourses on language also participated in the ordering of the sexes identified by these historians.

Second, and more significantly, this dissertation differs from such histories of sex and gender in terms of its methodology. Whereas Laqueur—to take one example—is interested in historical discourses for the ways that they represent the female sex, I am interested in the ways that concepts of sex/gender function within the construction of these discourses. Throughout Making Sex, which covers the period “from the Greeks to Freud,” Laqueur uses “language” and “representation” as relatively neutral, ahistorical terms. Although he tracks specific changes in vocabulary, he does not consider that “language” itself is understood differently in relation to sex in different historical discourses. In the service of broader claims about historical shifts,

15 For example, Laqueur writes that “vagina” “or equivalent words (scheide, vagin) standing alone to designate the sheath or hollow organ into which its opposite, the penis, fits during coition and through which the young are delivered only entered the European vernaculars around 1700” (159).
Laqueur furthermore flattens out the differences between discourses. There is little distinction, for instance, between anatomical, philosophical, political or literary texts—as long as they come from the same period.\(^\text{16}\)

Conversely, this dissertation emphasizes the differences between discourses in order to examine the role that sex/gender plays in their constitution and in the establishment of their protocols. I argue that such a differentiated approach is necessary because the way that “women’s” or “feminine” language has been configured historically is closely related to the demands of the discourse that discusses it. As I will show, the *Weibersprache* that emerges out of nineteenth century *Sprachwissenschaft*, for example, is a response to the criteria of scientificity imported from the natural sciences, whereas the “feminine language” that emerges out of Modernist literature is a response to the conventions of narrative prose.

**Outline of Chapters**

Each chapter of the dissertation focuses on a different discursive site where the relationship between language and sex is reconfigured. Chapter 1, “Auch bei uns: ‘Women’s Language’ between Cultural and Sexual Difference,” begins by investigating seventeenth-

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\(^{16}\) Literature is not the primary focus of *Making Sex*. In the first chapter, Laqueur makes a broad claim about literature’s special status among discourses, but does not explain this further or differentiate much between literary and other discourses in his later analysis: “Literature, in a similar way [to science], constitutes the problem of sexuality and is not just its imperfect mirror. As Barbara Johnson argues, ‘it is literature that inhabits the very heart of what makes sexuality problematic for us speaking animals. Literature is not only a thwarted investigator but also an incorrigible perpetrator of the problem of sexuality.’ Sexual difference thus seems to be already present in how we constitute meaning; it is already part of the logic that drives writing. Through ‘literature,’ representation generally, it is given content. Not only do attitudes toward sexual difference ‘generate and structure literary texts’; texts generate sexual difference” (17).
century ethnographic texts, written by French missionaries to the Caribbean. These texts, such as Jean Baptiste du Tertre’s *Histoire générale des Antilles habitées par les François*, Charles de Rochefort’s *Histoire naturelle et morale des Isles Antilles de l’Amérique*, and Raymond Breton’s *Dictionnaire caraïbe-français*, report on what they term the *langage des femmes* of the Island Caribs. This refers to the fact that the women on the islands supposedly speak a different language than their male compatriots; the French missionaries explain this to be the result of bridal capture practiced by warring tribes. In the early 1700s, French, German, and English texts document the existence of separate women’s languages (known as *Weibersprachen* in German) among other so-called “primitive” peoples, including those in Africa and North America.

After providing an overview of early ethnographic and ethnological discussions of women’s languages, I then trace how the idea of a separate women’s language was appropriated by German philology, anthropology and philosophies of language in the nineteenth century. I show how authors including Wilhelm von Humboldt, Georg von der Gabelentz, Hermann Heinrich Ploss, and Fritz Mauthner reconceptualize *Weibersprache*—previously understood to be restricted to certain cultures—to be a universal female phenomenon, found among “civilized” as well as “primitive” peoples (“auch bei uns” is a popular explanatory phrase). Their texts turn the existence of “primitive” women’s languages into evidence for a universalist theory of the alterity of female speech. Here I furthermore contend that this reevaluation of women’s language in the nineteenth century functions as a strategy of authority. Humboldt, for instance, characterizes women’s speech such that it stands in opposition to the “objective” language of science, and thereby draws a fundamental distinction between his text and its object of study.
Chapter 2, “The Sex of Language: Locating the Origin of Grammatical Gender,” analyzes theories that posit a connection between grammatical gender and (human) biological sex. First, I review Enlightenment-era texts on grammatical gender, which argue that gender is based on “caprice” and therefore unintelligible to the modern speaker. I then contrast this understanding of grammatical gender with the theories that emerge in the late eighteenth century, which contend that there is a direct link between grammatical gender and biological sex. I pay particular attention to a debate that took place in the 1880s and ‘90s between the “Romantic linguists” (Jacob Grimm and his circle) and the Neogrammarians (including Karl Brugmann). Grimm and his followers claim that grammatical gender is derived from sex, while the Neogrammarians argue that grammatical gender is a purely formal means of nominal classification. I show how their debate over the origin of grammatical gender centers around the question as to whether it is possible to conceive of the human as unsexed, or whether sex is a constitutive element of human identity. In this way, the chapter links the debate on grammatical gender to contemporaneous discussions of the nature and authority of sexual difference.

Chapter 3, “Embodying the Unsayable: ‘Feminine Language’ and Literary Form around 1900,” moves from philological to literary discourse to show how the notion of women's language fulfills a different discursive function around 1900. With recourse to texts by Robert Musil (Vereinigungen, Drei Frauen), Hugo von Hofmannsthal (Furcht, Elektra), and Walter Benjamin (“Das Gespräch”), I demonstrate how Modernist writers configure feminine language to be an ideal, ineffable language that cannot be fully incorporated into their texts. Benjamin, for instance, writes that “the language of women remains uncreated” and that regular language “robs
women of their souls,” while Hofmannsthal references an alternative language of the body, which he connects to femininity and the activity of Gebären, and which cannot be captured by narrative prose. I contend that these authors use the idea of an alternative feminine language as a means of formal innovation, a device to test the boundaries of their own literary genres.

In Chapter 4, “‘Women’s Language’ Revisited,” I analyze perhaps the best known iteration of women’s language: theories of feminine language first developed in the 1970s by Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, and Julia Kristeva. I use a discussion of their theories to revisit some of the major texts examined in the dissertation and compare them based on three issues: 1.) the conception of language from which women’s/feminine language supposedly deviates; 2.) the connection between women’s/feminine language and textuality; and 3.) the relation between conceptions of women’s/feminine language and the genres of the texts that discuss them. I then posit that the feminist theories of the 1970s mark the end of essentialist discussions about language and sex, and conclude the dissertation with an analysis of two different trajectories taken by thinking on language, sex, and gender after the 1980s: debates about women’s speech in the popular press, which denaturalize female speech differences in the name of economic progress; and the work of Judith Butler, which argues that sex does not exist prior to language, but rather that the materialization of sex is discursively compelled.

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A Note on Terminology

Because of the wide range of historical periods that this dissertation covers, choosing the appropriate terminology poses a significant challenge. The term “gender,” which is in common usage today, was not used outside of the grammatical context until the second half of the twentieth century. “Female” and “feminine,” which are also used today to draw a distinction between sex and gender, are not dissociated in texts examined here. This is further complicated by the problem of translation: what to do with the German “weiblich,” the French “féminin”? Indeed, what to do with the very term “women’s language,” which strikes us now as outdated and essentialist?

In choosing the terminology to use, I had two goals: 1.) As much as possible, for the sake of textual fidelity, I wanted to maintain the terminology used by the works themselves; 2.) through this terminology, I also wanted to make clear what was being referenced—to distinguish, in other words, between claims about specific groups of women and claims about a female manner of speech (both of which might fall under the term “sex,” at least as it is understood in the nineteenth century) and claims about a feminine language, which do not refer to actual women, but to something like a theoretical or aesthetic category (which I refer to as “gender”). This manner of differentiation is, I think, important, because it is precisely the distinction between women/female/feminine that many of the texts I analyze attempt to conflate.

Following the two objectives outlined above, in Chapters 1 and 2, I employ the term “sex” exclusively (“gender” is used only to refer to grammatical gender). In Chapter 3, I use “feminine” as well as “gender,” even though this is not a term that would have been familiar to early twentieth-century authors. I do so in order to convey that their texts are not referring to “real”
women or bodies, but to a theoretical position. Chapter 4, on the other hand, does not use “gender” until discussing the work of Judith Butler; in my analysis of Cixous, Kristeva, and Irigaray, I use the terms “feminine” and “sexual difference,” which come directly from their texts.
Chapter 1.

Auch bei uns:
“Women’s Language” between Cultural and Sexual Difference

“Die weibliche Eigenthümlichkeit,” writes Wilhelm von Humboldt in the 1820s, “die sich so lebendig und sichtbar auch in dem Geistigen ausprägt, erstreckt sich natürlich auch auf die Sprache.”18 Reports from the Americas, which described women speaking a language completely unknown to their male compatriots, had prompted Humboldt to contemplate women’s speech. “Frauen,” Humboldt concludes, “drücken sich in der Regel natürlicher, zarter und dennoch kraftvoller, als Männer aus.”19 In making this claim about the female expression of language, Humboldt participates in a popular nineteenth-century practice: he conflates the supposed facticity of separate women’s languages, always located in “primitive” cultures, with a universal theory of how all women speak.

The idea of a separate women’s language first enters the European imagination through seventeenth-century ethnographic texts, written in French by missionaries to the Caribbean. These texts report that the women on the islands speak differently than the men, and often document this langage des femmes. Such ethnographic accounts do not dwell on the subject of the women’s language. Those that bother to explain the phenomenon cite an event of mass-murder and bridal capture: long ago, they report, Carib men from the mainland came to the

19 Ibid.
island and killed the male inhabitants, taking the women for their wives. These women, who belonged to a different tribe, continued to pass down their native language to their daughters, generation after generation.

By the time Wilhelm von Humboldt takes up this topic in the nineteenth century, women’s languages—known as *Weibersprachen* in German—have been documented in a number of so-called “primitive” cultures around the world, both contemporary and historical. But whereas the seventeenth-century texts claim that the Carib women’s language results from “savage” practices, Humboldt takes recourse to a different explanation: the authority and influence of sexual difference. From the late eighteenth through the nineteenth centuries, this interpretation of *Weibersprache* will be mobilized in a variety of disciplines and discourses, including theories of language and philology (Johann Gottfried Herder, Georg von der Gabelentz, and Fritz Mauthner, in addition to Humboldt) and anthropology (Hermann Heinrich Ploss). These writers exploit the double meaning of “Sprache,” linking their discussions of discrete women’s *languages* to general theories of female *speech*—which now extend to European women as well.

None of these writers devotes more than a few pages to the issue of women’s language, and it would be difficult to argue that their theories of *Weibersprache* are necessarily constitutive of their larger arguments. Yet the topic continues to appear, recurring in text after text. This chapter asks: Why does the trope of *Weibersprache* persist? What function does the imagination of women’s language perform for these nineteenth-century texts? More broadly, what can the history of the conceptualization of *Weibersprache* tell us about the history of the conceptualization of sexual difference?
As I discussed in the introduction to the dissertation, since the 1970s, historians have demonstrated that sexual difference begins to be reconfigured in the late eighteenth century such that the male and female sexes come be viewed as oppositional, fundamentally different in kind. What I want to show in this chapter is that the dominant understanding of the sexes identified by these historians was not only received, but also actively perpetuated, by contemporaneous discourses on language, in particular through the trope of *Weibersprache*. I will argue that discussions of *Weibersprache*, especially in the context of philology and theories of language, constitute a significant—and overlooked—part of the larger history of constructing a fundamental difference between women and men. Moreover, the case of *Weibersprache* illuminates how the “polarization of the sexes” that began in the late eighteenth century was often made possible by the conflation of multiple forms of alterity. Specifically, in theories of women’s language and speech, the difference of the “primitive” Other becomes fodder for establishing the difference of the female sex.

In addition to situating the nineteenth-century discussion of women’s language within a larger historical and discursive context, I will show that *Weibersprache* fulfills an important internal function for these texts with regard to their establishment of disciplinary authority. Nineteenth-century texts on *Weibersprache*—regardless whether they participate in philological, anthropological, or philosophical discourses—portray women’s speech as “chaste” and “natural,” but also as un-intellectual and un-rigorous. This essentialist characterization of female speech is a strategy that implicitly works to shore up a masculinist, scientific authority: female speech is constructed as a foil to the authoritative language of the text that describes it.
Following the trajectory sketched out above, the chapter is divided into three main sections. Part I isolates and analyzes the salient discussions of the Carib *langage des femmes* in ethnographic texts from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Since this is the first women’s language referenced by Europeans, and since little new ethnographic research will be conducted on women’s languages until the later 1800s, these texts set the terms for how the phenomenon will be interpreted for centuries to come. Part II investigates how, beginning in the late eighteenth century, these ethnographic accounts are transformed by German philology and philosophies of language. I focus on texts from this period because it is here that women’s language is actively theorized, transformed from a minor “barbaric” detail into evidence for the difference of all women’s speech. Part III examines the way that nineteenth-century texts, particularly those by Gabelentz, Ploss, and Mauthner, stage women’s speech such that it stands in contradistinction to the authoritative language of their own discourses.

“La rudesse de leur langage, la Barbarie de leurs moeurs”:
Early Ethnographic Accounts of the *langage des femmes*

In the mid-1600s, French-speaking missionaries to the Lesser Antilles began to publish studies of the native people they encountered. Such texts often included a dictionary, or at least a “vocabulaire,” of what they understood to be the Carib language. Charles de Rochefort’s 1658

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20 The missionaries believed that the people native to the Lesser Antilles were descendants of mainland Caribs (known today as Karina). This is a point now contested by modern scholarship. Several scholars have argued that the “Island Caribs” were actually Arawaks, the “Carib” language spoken on the islands actually an Arawakan language, and that differences between Arawaks and Caribs were exaggerated by early European settlers in order to validate their takeover of the islands. For the purposes of my dissertation, however, to avoid confusion, I will maintain the name “Carib” or “Island Carib,” since these are the terms used by my primary
As these texts report it, women could understand and speak the language used by men, but men either could not understand or would not dare to use the *langage des femmes*, for fear of ridicule. This division was explained by the assertion that the women were supposed to be descendants of a different tribe, the Arawaks, and thus spoke an Arawak instead of Carib language. Some texts also cited a third language, reputed to be very difficult, and spoken only by adult male warriors.


In seventeenth-century ethnographic texts, the difference between the women’s language and the language spoken by men is presented as a difference of vocabulary. Breton’s *Grammaire caraïbe* does list a few grammatical differences between the men’s and women’s languages, but otherwise implies that they adhere to the same grammatical rules. Raymond Breton, *Grammaire caraïbe* (Auxerre: Gilles Bouquet, 1667).

See, for instance, Charles de Rochefort, *Histoire naturelle et morale des Isles Antilles de l’Amérique: enrichie de plusiers belles figures des Raretez les plus considerable qui y sont d’écrites, avec un Vocabulaire Caraïbe* (Rotterdam: Arnould Leers, 1658), 395. Rochefort reports that the brid capture explanation comes from the Island Caribs themselves: “pour confirmer ce que nous avons recité sur l’origine de cette difference de Langage, on allege qu’il y a quelque conformité entre la langue des Arouâgues de la Terre Ferme & celle des femmes Caraïbes” (395).
event in the Island Caribs’ history—bridal capture—which is made possible by their “savage” nature, but which is also a unique and contingent occurrence. In the eighteenth century, however, texts begin to compare the Caribs with ancient barbaric tribes, and thereby turn women’s language into a trans-historical phenomenon that is common to many “primitive” nations. In the early nineteenth century, Alexander von Humboldt, who also writes an ethnographic study of the Americas in French, although he does not encounter the people native to the Caribbean islands directly, raises the possibility that the Carib women’s language is a manifestation of something practiced by all women around the world, albeit to different degrees. In the history of the interpretation of the langage des femmes, Alexander von Humboldt’s text marks a transition: a shift in emphasis from cultural to sexual difference, and from the ethnography of local peoples to a general theory of women’s language.

I will begin by examining the seventeenth-century depiction of the langage des femmes in more detail. The Carib-French and French-Carib dictionaries compiled by Raymond Breton comprise the most comprehensive record of the Carib language from this period. Breton arrived on Guadeloupe in 1635, and “was one of the original four Dominican missionaries who helped establish a base for the Frères prêcheurs,” his religious order, in the French West Indies. Breton’s French-Carib dictionary distinguishes between words used by women and men, but offers basically no commentary on this two-language phenomenon except to note how the

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23 This is according to Gaetano DeLeonibus, “Raymond Breton’s 1665 ‘Dictionaire caraïbe-français,’” The French Review, vol. 80, no. 5 (April, 2007): 1044-1055, here 1045. DeLeonibus provides extensive background information on Breton’s time in the West Indies and the contemporaneous context of lexicography and “of the aesthetic and ideological discourses that usurped the cultural arena under French neo-classicism” (1045).
dictionary should be read: “la lettre f. marque que le mot qui suit est du langage des femmes.”

Similarly, Breton’s Carib-French dictionary mentions the women’s language only in a few relevant definitions. Readers would find lengthier interpretations of the langage des femmes in the “Histories” of Jean-Baptiste Du Tertre and Charles de Rochefort, who were Dominican and Calvinist missionaries, respectively.

Unlike Breton, neither Rochefort nor Du Tertre wrote a personal account of their time in the Caribbean and, consequently, less is known about their background. Charles de Rochefort was a French pastor of the Walloon church in Holland, who was first sent to the Antilles in 1636 and lived there for twelve years, until 1648. Du Tertre was a French Dominican friar who was sent to the Antilles in 1640 and remained until 1658. Both of their texts appear to have met relative success upon publication, as multiple editions were reissued in the second half of the seventeenth century. Rochefort’s text was furthermore translated into Dutch, German, and English.

24 Raymond Breton, *Dictionnaire françois-caraïbe* (Auxerre: Gilles Bouquet, 1666), 5. Breton’s Carib-French dictionary (*Dictionnaire caraïbe-français*) was published one year earlier, in 1665, but it is only in the French-Carib dictionary that he uses the term “langage des femmes.”

25 Rochefort’s and Du Tertre’s texts were often confused and misattributed. The first three editions of Rochefort’s text were published anonymously, which may have led to his work being attributed to Du Tertre, especially in translation. In the early eighteenth century, Rochefort’s text was attributed to a César, rather than Charles de Rochefort, further complicating matters. For more on the publication history of Rochefort’s text, see Benoît Roux, “Le pasteur Charles de Rochefort et l’*Histoire naturelle et morale des îles Antilles de l’Amérique,*” *Cahiers d’Histoire de l’Americque Latine*, issue 5 (2011): 175-216.
Compared to earlier Spanish reports of the Caribs as vicious cannibals, Du Tertre’s *Histoire générale* and Rochefort’s *Histoire naturelle et morale* offer a more sympathetic view of the people native to Dominica, St. Christopher (now St. Kitts), Guadaloupe, and other nearby islands. Du Tertre’s text in particular attempts to balance two potentially opposing views of the Island Caribs. On the one hand, he often portrays them according to the stereotype of the noble savage (“ils sont tels que la nature les a produits,” Du Tertre writes, to offer just one example, “c’est à dire, dans une grande simplicité & naïveté naturelle”). On the other hand, in the words of historian Philip P. Boucher, Du Tertre “accepts the orthodox Christian view that natural man tends towards evil,” which leads him to condemn many of the practices he encounters. Indeed, if the Caribs were found to be entirely virtuous, there would be no need to convert them to Christianity. Regardless, however, of whether Du Tertre is portraying the Caribs as noble savages or as deplorable heathens, the relationship he constructs between Caribs and Europeans is seemingly always based on difference. “Il faut de plus que ie traite des oiseaux de l’air, des poissons de la mer, des rivières & des estangs,” Du Tertre writes in the introduction to the second volume of his *Histoire*, “& que ie fasse connoistre leur difference d’avec les oiseaux &

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27 Jean-Baptiste Du Tertre, *Histoire générale des Antilles habitées par les François*, vol. II (Paris: Thomas Iolly, 1667), 357. I have recorded quotations from the seventeenth-century texts as they originally appeared, which is why there are some inconsistencies in orthography.

This method—contrast with Europe, rather than comparison—is Du Tertre’s technique for describing not only the birds and fish of the islands, but the people as well.

Although first published in 1654, it is not until the revised 1667 edition, after the publication of Breton’s dictionary, that Du Tertre’s *Histoire* makes any mention of a *langage des femmes*. Even then, the existence of men’s and women’s languages is referenced only in passing, as further evidence for a certain interpretation of, as the chapter title puts it, “l’Origine des Sauvages de nos Isles.” Du Tertre believes that the Island Caribs are related to the mainland Caribs (“Galibis”), and offers several reasons to support this argument. First, there is “la tradition commune de tous les Sauvages”; second,

> c'est la diversité du langage des hommes & des femmes, qui dure encore aujourd’hui; car ils disent que cette diversité a pris son origine dans le temps de cette conquête, d’autant que les Galibis ayant tué tous les masles de ces Isles, & n’ayant réservé que les femmes & les filles auxquelles ils donnerent de jeunes hommes de leur nation pour maris, les uns & les autres conservent leur langage originaire. A quoi si vous ajoutez la conformité de religion, de mœurs & de langage, il n’y a pas lieu de douter, qu’ils tirent leur origine des Galibis de terre ferme.\(^{30}\)

In Du Tertre’s text, there is no comparison of the Carib *langage des femmes* and the language of women in Europe or elsewhere, yet his *Histoire* also does not mark the existence of a women’s language as something unexpected. On the contrary, it is understood to be in line with the Caribs’ general “savage” behavior. Earlier on the same page, Du Tertre references the women’s language in the same sentence that he describes the Carib custom of decapitating and keeping the heads of enemies. Quoting from Breton’s definition of “Galibi,” Du Tertre explains that the leader of the Caribs who left the mainland to conquer the islands killed the original inhabitants,


à la reserve des femmes, qui ont toujours gardé quelque chose de leur langue, que pour cōserver la memoire de ses conquestes, il avoit fait porter les testes des ennemis (que les François ont trouvées, dâs les antres des rochers qui sont sur le bord de la mer, afin que les peres les fissent voir a leurs enfans, & successivement à tous les autres qui décendroïêt de leur posterité.  

Just like the skulls of enemies, the *langage des femmes* is the legacy of the Caribs’ violent takeover. Furthermore, like these heads “que les François ont trouvées,” the missionaries have observed the women’s language and understood it to be empirical evidence for the validity of this origin story. One might draw a corollary between the Caribs’ conquest of the islands and European colonization, but the practice of the mass-extirmination of men and the abduction of women marks, in the ideology of Du Tertre’s text, a fundamental different between two. Even though Du Tertre criticizes European colonizers for specific incidents of violence against the Caribs, and for their mistreatment of slaves, it is generally understood that the French have come to the West Indies in the name of civilization and Christianity—and that their possession of the islands is supposed to be of a different order than the Carib capture of the Arawaks. For all his sympathy for the Caribs’ noble, “primitive” way of life, Du Tertre is still a Christian missionary, and does not question the general colonial project.

Du Tertre’s Huegenot contemporary Charles de Rochefort provides basically the same account of the origin of the Carib women’s language, although he also elaborates, in a way that Du Tertre does not, on the more practical aspect of how the *langage des femmes* gets perpetuated:

Les Sauvages de la Dominique disent que cela procede de ce que lors que les Caraïbes vinrent habiter les Iles, elles étoient occupées par une Nation d’Arouâgues, qu’ils détruisirent entierement, à la reserve des femmes qu’ils épousèrent pour peupler le país.

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31 Ibid., 361.
De sorte que ces femmes-là ayant conservé leur Langue, l’enseignerent à leurs filles, & les acoutumerent à parler comme elles. Ce qui s’étant pratiqué jusque à présent par les Meres envers les filles, ce Langage est ainsi demeuré différent de celuy des hommes en plusieurs choses. Mais les garçons, bien qu’ils entendent le parler de leurs Meres & de leurs sœurs, suivent neantmoins leurs Peres & leurs freres, & se fassonnet à leur Langage, dès l’âge de cinq ou six ans.32

In Rochefort’s formulation, the Caribs’ langage des femmes persists because the sons reject their mother tongue. Whether these sons will ultimately forget their mothers’ language, or whether they always retain the capacity to understand it, Rochefort does not say. But it is noteworthy that, in Rochefort’s text, the continuation of the women’s language has more to do with the agency of men than of women: it is the “Peres & frères” who keep the women’s language at bay, who prevent it from becoming dominant. The langage des femmes is in no way a secret language guarded by women, as it will be interpreted by later texts.

It is important not to overstate the significance that Rochefort affords to the women’s language. Only a small portion of the chapter on language is devoted to discussing the langage des femmes, as it is just one of a number of examples of what Rochefort understands to be the particularity of the people he has encountered. Rochefort practices a kind of relativism—“Les Caraïbes ont un Langage ancien & naturel, & qui leur est tout particulier, comme chaque Nation a le sien”33—in which a people’s language is a reflection of their distinct customs. Consequently, Rochefort aims to document numerous traits that distinguish the Carib language from those spoken in Europe. First, there are all the things it apparently lacks: the letter “p”;34 words for winter or ice; any number higher than 10; comparatives and superlatives; a word for “soul”;

32 Rochefort, Histoire naturelle et morale, 394-395.
33 Ibid., 392.
34 Ibid., 393.
more than four colors.\textsuperscript{35} Then there are the “traits de la naïvité & d’élégance du leur langage,” like the fact that Caribs call lips “the edge of the mouth.”\textsuperscript{36} The langage des femmes is not granted any special revelatory status, but is rather one of many distinctive features of the Caribs that Rochefort’s text presents for its readers—including, according to the list in his opening epistle, “l’obscurité de leur origine, la rudesse de leur langage, la Barbarie de leurs mœurs, leur étrange façon de vivre, la cruauté de leurs guerres, leur ancienne pauvreté.”\textsuperscript{37}

In the early 1700s, the raptio account introduced by Du Tertre and Rochefort remains the dominant explanation of the langage des femmes. What changes in the eighteenth century, however, is that instead of being exclusive to the Island Caribs, women’s language begins to be conceptualized as a phenomenon found generally among “savage” peoples. Joseph-François Lafitau, for instance, a Jesuit missionary and naturalist, turns to Herodotus to find further evidence for the theory that the abduction of women can lead to the development of a separate women’s language. Lafitau thereby reconfigures women’s language to be a trans-historical phenomenon rather than a conditional result of the Carib brid al capture. “Hérodote raconte un fait très singulier, d’où l’on pourroit tirer quelques lumières sur l’origine des Caraïbes des Isles Antilles,” Lafitau suggests in his 1724 comparative study, Moeurs des sauvages amériquains comparées aux moeurs des premiers temps. Here, Lafitau recalls Herodotus’ story of a group of Ionians. This group murdered Carian men and took the women to be their wives. Because of this massacre, the captured women,

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 399.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 397.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., “Epistre a Messire Iaquys Amproux, Seigneur de Lorme, Conseiller du Roy en ses Conseils d’Etat & Privé, & Intendant de ses Finances,” (no pagination).
firent un serment entr’elles de ne manger jamais avec leur maris, & de ne les nommer
jamais par leur nom; & elles firent une Loi de faire passer cet usage à leur postérité, en
instruisant les enfans qui naîtroient de ces mariages: Qu’elles en usoient ainsi, parce que
leurs Vainqueurs avoient egorgé leurs peres, leurs époux & leurs enfans. Les femmes des
Caraïbes ne mangent aussi jamais avec leurs maris; elles ne les nomment jamais par leur
nom; elles les servent comme si elles étoient leurs esclaves: & ce qui est encore de plus
particulier, s’est qu’elles ont une Langue toute differente de celle de leurs maris, ainsi que
l’avoient probablement les femmes Cariennes, lesquelles étoient étrangéres a ces Peuples
venus de l’Eubée, qui portèrent la désolation chez elles. On pourroit ajouter qu’on trouve
encore quelque rapport entre le nom ancien de Cariens & celui des Caraïbes, que se
donnent aujourd’hui les Sauvages dont je parle.38

Although Lafitau varies little from Du Tertre and Rochefort in his general history of the Island
Caribs’ origins, he does differ significantly in his explanation of the motivation behind the
existence of the langage des femmes. Whereas the seventeenth-century writers characterize the
women’s language as a relatively organic occurrence (the Arawak women spoke a different
language and, thus, continued to speak it), Lafitau turns it into a conscious choice, even a means
of revenge. Refusing to call their husbands by name is, of course, different from speaking an
altogether distinct language; Lafitau nonetheless conflates the two in one sweeping sentence. In
his interpretation, the survival of the langage des femmes is the women’s retaliation for the
abduction and murder of their ancestors.

By turning to Herodotus, Lafitau seems to naturalize the women’s language of the
Caribbean: the phenomenon is recognizable, categorizable according to recorded traditions.39

38 Joseph-François Lafitau, Moeurs des sauvages amériquains comparées aux moeurs des
39 There is a second section in Herodotus’ Histories where the notion of men’s and women’s
languages is at issue, which Lafitau does not mention—the story of the Amazons and the
Scythians. According to Herodotus, their intermarriage originally resulted in a linguistic division,
but the Amazons quickly adapted to the language of the Scythians, forsaking their “women’s
language”: “the two sides joined forces and lived together, forming couples consisting of a
Scythian man and the Amazon with whom he had first had sex. The men found the women’s
Lafitau’s idiosyncratic etymology even draws a similarity between the names of the Caribs and the Cariens. Certainly, comparing the “savages” to the “ancients” is the stated objective of Lafitau’s text. Because he wants to argue against atheists who claim that “natural man” has no inclination towards religion, Lafitau must contend that “the striking similarities between the religious traditions of the Chinese, the American savage, the antique Greek and Hebrew, and the Christian could be satisfactorily explained only by the hypothesis that true religion existed long before Moses.” Yet this argument also, obviously, still insists on an essential gap between Caribs and modern Europeans, since Lafitau must look to Europe’s ancient past—to the barbaric pre-history of Greek civilization—in order to find an analogue to the Caribs. Nonetheless, between Du Tertre and Rochefort in the 1660s and Lafitau in 1724, we can see a significant shift in the interpretation of “women’s language.” Rather than being a curiosity particular only to the Caribs, in Lafitau’s text, “women’s language” is a custom practiced by “uncivilized” people throughout history.

The notion that the existence of men’s and women’s languages signifies a people’s violence and primitivism gains further traction over the course of the eighteenth century. In 1738, the Englishman Francis Moore, who had worked as a clerk for the Royal African Company, issues a description of life along the River Gambia, his *Travels into the Inland Parts of Africa*. In the *Travels*, Moore writes of a language “entirely unknown to the Women, being only spoken by the Men,” which is:


seldom us’d by them in any other Discourse than concerning a dreadful Bugbear to the Women, call’d Mumbo-Jumbo, which is what keeps the Women in Awe: And tho’ they should chance to understand this Language, yet were the men to know it, they would certainly murder them.41

It is this “men’s language” that, fifty years later, secures the attention of Christoph Meiners in his Geschichte des weiblichen Geschlechts. Meiners was a professor of philosophy in Göttingen; he was also “cultural racist” who constructed a hierarchy of the world’s Völker.42 As Caroline Franklin has demonstrated, Meiners was not a particularly original thinker in his attitudes on sex and race, but rather a “mediator, synthesizer and reformulator of Enlightenment thought for [his] middle-class readers.”43

In the Geschichte des weiblichen Geschlechts, Meiners argues that a people’s level of development can be measured by its treatment of women and by its women’s sexuality.44 Writing about the same African tribe as Moore, Meiners goes beyond Moore’s description in that he compares the “men’s language” of the Mandingos to that of the Caribs, and thereby turns the

41 Francis Moore, Travels into the Inland Parts of Africa; containing a description of the several nations for the space of Six Hundred Miles up the River Gambia (London: Edward Cave, 1738), 28.

42 The term “cultural racist” in reference to Meiners comes from Marilyn Katz. Katz distinguishes between “cultural racism” and “scientific racism,” which is “a theory about the existence of biologically distinct forms of humanity, distinguished from one another not on the basis of geography, climate, customs, or manners, which are susceptible to change and influence, but on the basis of an inherent and immutable biological essence.” Marilyn Katz, “Ideology and the ‘Status of Women’ in Ancient Greece,” History and Theory, vol. 31, no. 4, Beiheft 31: History and Feminist Theory (Dec., 1992): 70-97, here 91.

43 Franklin makes this claim about both Meiners and Joseph Alexandre Pierre Ségor, who wrote a similar book about the history of women in French. Ségor, however, does not make mention of men’s and women’s languages. See Caroline Franklin, “‘Quiet Cruising o’er the Ocean Woman’: Byron’s ‘Don Juan’ and the Woman Question,” Studies in Romanticism, vol. 29, no. 4 (Winter, 1990): 603-631, here 606.

44 In the “Vorrede,” Meiners argues that the condition of women in different lands can be used “als eine Scala, oder als einen Maaßstab des Werths, der Sitten” of the people in these lands (v).
existence of discrete men’s and women’s languages into a trait common among “savage” peoples, or—as he puts it—Wilden. (In reference to the Caribs, this is the language of adult male warriors mentioned by Rochefort and others.) For Meiners, the violence that Mandingo men use to keep women from learning their language is supposed to illustrate the baseness of their society:

Because he is arguing for a hierarchy of the world’s nations—based, no less, on the status of the women in them—Meiners’ description of the Mandingos is implicitly contrasted with the description of women in “higher” peoples, where there is no division between the language of men and women. In Meiners’ text, the existence of separate men’s and women’s languages is coterminous with uncivilized violence, and thus with “uncivilized” society.

To conclude this section I will return to the Island Caribs, specifically to the interpretation of their women’s language put forward by Alexander von Humboldt. In 1799, Humboldt begins a voyage to South America. The notes and diaries he keeps on this journey become fodder for what is known in English as Humboldt’s “personal narrative”: the three-

volume *Relation historique du Voyage aux Régions équinoxiales du Nouveau Continent*, published between 1814 and 1831. Humboldt is significant insofar as his text stands as a bridge between the perspective on women’s language found in the 1700s (women’s language as a practice of the uncivilized, located at a great historical or cultural distance) and the “auch bei uns” interpretation that will become evermore prevalent in the centuries that follow. Furthermore, because he is a German who writes his travelogue in French, Alexander von Humboldt also acts as an intermediary between the discussion of the Carib women’s language in French ethnographic discourse and the interpretation of women’s language in German philosophy of language, particularly that initiated by his brother, Wilhelm von Humboldt.

In his discussion of the women’s language found in the Lesser Antilles, Alexander von Humboldt vacillates between the two perspectives mentioned above. On the one hand, he wants this phenomenon, women speaking differently, to be particular to and characteristic of the tribes of the Americas. He maintains that sex-based language differences are also to be found, albeit to a lesser degree, “chez d’autres nations américaines (les Omaguas, les Guaranis et les Chicquitos), où elle ne porte que sur un petit nombre d’idées, par exemple, sur les mots mère et enfant.” On the other hand, with an invocation of Cicero, Humboldt then suggests a more universal explanation:

> On conçoit que les femmes, d’après leur manière isolée de vivre, se créent des locutions particulières que les hommes ne veulent point adopter. Cicéron observe déjà que les formes anciennes se conservent de préférence dans la bouche des femmes, parce que leur position dans la société les expose moins à ces vicissitudes de la vie (à ces changements

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Humboldt ultimately dismisses this dictum as insufficient for explaining the women’s language of the Caribs, which is “si grand et si surprenant” to simply be an example of what Cicero describes. Instead, he chooses the *raptio* theory favored by the French missionaries, even emphasizing the violent nature of the Carib takeover—“ils y arrivèrent *comme une horde de guerriers*, non comme des colons accompagnés de leurs familles.” Nonetheless, the mere fact that Humboldt suggests Cicero’s explanation as a possibility is important, especially when we compare it to the prior 150 years of writing on the *langage des femmes*, which made no connection between the women’s language of the Caribs and general qualities of women’s speech. This is not Lafitau’s equation of American “sauvauges” with ancient barbarians; quite to the contrary, in the passage that Humboldt cites from Cicero, the speaker Crassus refers to the language of his mother-in-law, a member of the Roman upper class. Whereas in Lafitau, women’s language was a more general, primitive feature within an overall history of the human species’ progress, in the case of Alexander von Humboldt we have a universalizing take on women’s language that is not bound up with women’s lack of access to a specific culture, but rather with the possibility of a distinctly female culture as opposed to the dominant male one.

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47 Humboldt, *Relation historique* III, 10-11. The exact quote from Cicero, which Humboldt footnotes, is from Book III of *de Oratore*. The English translation reads: “For my part, when I hear my mother-in-law Laelia, (for it is easier for women to keep the purity of antiquity, because, by keeping less company than men, they always stick to what they first learned,) I think that I am conversing with Plautus or Naevius [...].” Cicero, *De Oratore*, trans. William Guthrie (Oxford: Henry Slatter, 1840), 225.

Oliver Lubrich argues that Humboldt’s *Relation historique* is a hybrid text in which many voices and registers compete for authority, and that Humboldt, in his refusal to find a “master signifier” for the geographical area he describes, writes a text that is neither “occidentalist” nor “latinoamericanist.”\(^49\) If we accept this interpretation, then the passage cited above is another example of the general tension that defines Humboldt’s text. Is the Carib *langage des femmes* a “savage” custom, or is it a widespread, “female” phenomenon—found even among the Roman aristocracy? Is it a completely separate language, or simply a different manner of speech? In other words, how much do “civilized” Europeans and “primitive” natives have in common? And which is the ultimate divisor: cultural or sexual difference? Humboldt’s text cannot quite decide. And with this ambivalence, he initiates a new phase in the interpretation of the *langage des femmes*, in which “woman” becomes a link between the civilized and the primitive.

In tracing the changing interpretations of the Island Caribs from the seventeenth into the nineteenth century, we have observed two general shifts: “women’s language” went from being viewed as 1.) exclusive to the Caribs, a contingent result of their particular historical circumstances, to 2.) a common characteristic of “primitive” peoples, to 3.) a phenomenon potentially found among women everywhere. Throughout the nineteenth century, German texts on language further develop this third, universalist interpretation.

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Linguistic Relativity and the Sexed Speaker

*How do women speak?*

While the Carib women’s language was being documented and interpreted in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, ideas about women’s speech were obviously already in existence. The classicist Thorsten Fögen, for instance, has argued that it is possible to locate moments of “gender-specific communication in Graeco-Roman antiquity.” Fögen contends that we may already find some long-held ideas about women’s speech, such as women’s inclination towards loquacity and mendacity, and the belief that women preserve older forms of language, within ancient works. Classical texts on rhetoric are an additional source for ideas on language and sexual difference: the Roman rhetorician Quintilian asserts that “a feeble and thin voice is associated with female speech and thus by all means to be avoided by the future orator.”

The above are just a few examples of ideas about women’s speech which inform a vast folk wisdom about language and sex, and which persist from antiquity into modern Europe. Most of these stereotypes can be sorted into three categories: 1.) women’s speech is purer/more natural than that of men (they conserve uncorrupted forms); 2.) women’s speech is unsophisticated (too emotional, lacking reason); and 3.) women’s speech is not virtuous (women speak too much, their voice is too sensual, what they say is false, they use language to charm and manipulate).

When language is understood to be an expression of the intellect, women are not masters of what

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51 Fögen, 219.
they say; when language is understood to be an expression of nature, women are the preservers of “pure” linguistic forms. This latter notion is why, for example, Jacob Grimm advocates against instructing German girls in grammar, lest this corrupt their more “natural” way of speaking. 52

In literary as well as pedagogical texts, examples abound of assumptions about women’s use of language, and I can reference here only a small sample. Often-cited examples of depictions of female language include: Boccaccio’s De mulieribus claris [On Famous Women] from 1362, which catalogues both honorable and dishonorable instances of female speech, including the virtuousness of a demure silence, 53 as well as Shakespeare’s As You Like It, in which Rosalind famously proclaims, “Do you not know that I am a woman? When I think, I must speak.” 54 For a particularly caustic example from the eighteenth century, scholars often turn to the pedagogue Johann Ludwig Ewald, who, in Die Kunst, ein gutes Mädchen, eine gute Gattin, Mutter und Hausfrau zu werden, writes of women who pretend to speak intellectually, but really only babble back [nachlalleln] what they have heard said by men. Women’s speech thus betrays their ignorance: “Zu einer eigentlichen Denkerin ist also das Weib nicht bestimmt.” 55

52 “wichtig und unbestreitbar ist hier auch die von vielen gemachte beobachtung, daß mädchen und frauen, die in der schule weniger geplagt werden, ihre worte reinlicher zu reden, zierlicher zu setzen und natürlicher zu wählen verstehen.” Jacob Grimm, “Vorrede,” Deutsche Grammatik (Göttingen: Dietrich, 1819), ix-xxv, here x.
53 As quoted in Fögen, 232-235.
states explicitly what many contemporaneous texts assume: namely, that women are incapable of being men’s equals, either intellectually or linguistically.

This, generally, is the state of popular wisdom on women and language at the time when ethnographic reports on the Caribbean langage des femmes are being written and published. The convergence of these two discourses, the ethnographic and the popular, is an important moment of transformation. It is at their intersection that women’s language—formerly only a “strange” characteristic of the Caribs—is actively theorized, crystallized into a trope which means both a separate women’s language and a particularly female way of speaking. It is my argument that the convergence of these discourses first takes place within nineteenth-century German Sprachwissenschaft.

One reason for the transfer of knowledge from French ethnography into German texts on language are the divergent histories of the term “women’s language” in French and German, specifically the fact that the term does not have as extensive a history in French. While the phrase “langage des femmes” appears in print as early as the mid-sixteenth century, in a translation of Herodotus, it refers there to a specific group (the language of Amazon women) rather than a generalized concept (the language of women). And although early French dictionaries do, at times, give a listing for “voix féminine,” they provide no entries for “langage des femmes” or other equivalent terms. Likewise, the section on “Langage” in Diderot and

56 See the section on the Amazons and the Scythians in Les neuf livres des histoires d’Hérodote, prince et premier des Historiographes Grecz, intitulez du nom des Muses, trans. Pierre Saliat (Paris: Jean de Roigny, 1556), CVIII.

57 The 1690 Dictionaire universel by Antoine Furetière lists “voix feminine” as an example under the entry “Feminin”: “Les châtrez ont la voix feminine” (volume II, no pagination). The text makes no mention of the “langage des femmes” or any similar term. There is no entry for
d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie* makes a case for relativity among nations—arguing that culture and climate influence the vocabulary and expression of a people’s language—but there is no discussion of differences in language use between the sexes. While there were of course stereotypes about women’s manner of speech in existence, the term “langage des femmes,” based on its absence from the historical record, appears to have had no referent in French before its introduction in the ethnographic context. English similarly has little trace of “women’s language” as a generalized term prior to its use in ethnographic texts.58

By the end of the seventeenth century, however, the word “Weibersprache” can already be found in the German lexicon as a derogatory term whose meaning is unrelated to the women’s language documented in the Caribbean. In the 1691 dictionary *Der teutschen Sprache Stammbaum und Fortwachs, oder Teutscher Sprachschatz*, Kaspar von Stieler defines “jungfer- und Weibersprache” as “sermo tinniens, vox acuta.”59 Stieler’s definition of “Weibersprache” then resurfaces in the Grimms’ *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, which also adds a second reference to the Caribs.60 The entry in Stieler for “men’s language,” on the other hand, is much more positive:

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“voix féminine,” “langage des femmes,” or anything about women under the entries “Langue” and “Langage” in *Le Thresor de la langue francoyse* (1606) or the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française* (first edition 1694). The term “langage des hommes” appears often in texts from this period, but this is “hommes” as in “mankind.”

58 There is no entry for “women’s language” or any similar terms in Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary of the English Language* (first published 1755), or in Nathan Bailey’s 1756 *Universal etymological English Dictionary*. It also does not appear in the Oxford English Dictionary.

59 Kaspar von Stieler, *Der teutschen Sprache Stammbaum und Fortwachs, oder Teutscher Sprachschatz* (Nürnberg: 1691), 2102. Stieler’s dictionary was unprecendented for its time, containing more words than any German dictionary compiled previously.

60 The exact definition reads: “weibersprache, f. verächtlich im täglichen leben: jungfer- und weibersprache, sermo tinniens, vox acuta STIELER 2102, objective in wiss. würdigung: Caraiben, ausgestorben. Weibersprache am ausgedehntesten W. v. HUMBOLDT 5 (1823) 26.”
“sermo robustus, oratio mascula, valida, fortis, gravis.” In Stieler’s dictionary, “Webersprache” is, furthermore, differentiated from “Weiberstimme,” which receives its own entry (“vox foeminea, exilis, tinniens”)\footnote{Stieler, 2167.}, and which is analogous to the French “voix féminine.”

Charles de Rochefort’s \textit{Histoire naturelle et morale} was translated into German in 1668, but this edition remained relatively obscure, significantly less well-known than the popular English translation.\footnote{Du Tertre’s \textit{Histoire générale} was never translated into German; the same is true for another seventeenth-century French text that would have informed its readership of the Carib women’s language, Antoine Biet’s 1664 \textit{Voyage de la France équinoxiale}. Stieler’s “shrill speech” definition of \textit{Weibersprache} thus predates the widespread introduction into German of French ethnographic writing on the Caribbean. This suggests, perhaps, one reason why it is predominantly German texts, rather than French or English ones, that initiate the practice of conflating the Carib women’s language with a general theory of women’s speech. German already had a codified term for the popular ideas about women’s speech, while French and English did not.}


\footnote{Stieler, 2102. This definition is also reproduced in the Grimms’ \textit{Wörterbuch}.}

\footnote{According to Benoît Roux, “Le pasteur Charles de Rochefort.” This early German translation furthermore does not use the term \textit{Weibersprache} to refer to the women’s language, but states simply, “es haben die Weiber guten theils eine andere Sprache als die Männer.” Charles de Rochefort, \textit{Historische Beschreibung der Antillen Inseln in America gelegen: in sich begreiffend deroselben Gelegenheit, darinnen befindlichen natürlichen Sachen, sampt deren Einwohner Sitten und Gebräuchen mit 45. Kupfferstücken gezieret} (Franckfurt: Wilhelm Serlins, 1668), II: 296. I would like to thank the John J. Burns Library of Rare Books and Special Collections at Boston College for providing access to the German translation of Rochefort’s text.}
Londa Schiebinger argues that, from the late eighteenth into the nineteenth century, “the study of the ‘nature’ of woman became a priority of scientific research. The increasing tendency to look to science as an arbiter of social questions depended on the premise that hotly debated social issues—such as women’s rights and abilities—could be resolved in the cool sanctuary of science.”\(^{64}\) What Schiebinger contends occurred within the history of anatomy—the impetus to locate sex differences and the inferiority of women in all aspects of the body, including the skeleton—also applies to the history of the interpretation of women’s language use. By the mid-1700s, anatomists across Europe are cataloguing the numerous ways in which the female body differs from the male, including the “difference” of the female throat and voice box.\(^ {65}\) By the nineteenth century, the female human skeleton is being likened to those of apes\(^ {66}\) and so-called “primitive” peoples.\(^ {67}\) But the assertion made by one German anatomist, for instance, that the female voicebox is a “wichtiges Geschlechtskennzeichen”\(^ {68}\) is simply a more scientific version of old stereotypes about the female voice, not a claim about women’s language as such. The transformation of popular notions of women’s language use—from diction and grammar to pitch and timbre to the content of their speech—into a more abstract theory of “women’s language” requires a discourse that takes language, rather than the body, as its subject of study. This we

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\(^{64}\) Schiebinger, 26.

\(^{65}\) Ibid., 31.


\(^{68}\) Jakob Ackermann, *Ueber die körperliche Verschiedenheit des Mannes vom Weibe außer den Geschlechtstheilen* (Koblenz: Johann Kaspar Huber, 1788), 112.
find in the German philologists of the nineteenth century, particularly in the work of Wilhelm von Humboldt.

**Weibersprache universalized**

Johann Gottfried Herder’s 1772 “Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache” is typically understood to mark a new paradigm in the conception of language in German letters. In addition to arguing against the idea that language is divine in origin, Herder writes against the theories of Rousseau and Condillac, which claim that the signs of human language derive from the natural signs of animal language. Herder contends that human language is not a higher development of animal language, but something fundamentally different and specific to man. The origin of human language, according to Herder, is to be found in man’s capacity for reflection [*Besinnung*]: through language man orders the world and therefore himself and his perceptions.⁶⁹

Herder’s essay also proves innovative in terms of our specific topic, namely the changing discussion of *Weibersprache*. Herder’s is the first non-ethnographic text—specifically, the first text on the subject of language—to make reference to the women’s language in the Caribbean. While the “Abhandlung” is important in that it includes the first mention of a culturally-specific *Weibersprache* by a German theory of language, Herder does not analyze the phenomenon in

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detail, nor does he connect it to any general theory of women’s speech, as German philologists later will.

Instead, Herder marshals the existence of the men’s and women’s languages in the Caribbean as evidence for the human invention of language. If language originated in God, Herder asks, why would God have created a system so full of superfluous words—how could this reflect divine order? A human origin better explains the existence of synonyms. Herder offers the following theory:

Je unbekannter man mit der Natur war, von je mehrern Seiten man sie aus Unerfahrenheit ansehen und kaum wiedererkennen konnte, je weniger man a priori, sondern nach sinnlichen Umständen erfand, desto mehr Synonyme! Je mehrere erfanden, je umherirrender und abgetrennter sie erfanden, und doch nur meistens in einem Kreise für einerlei Sachen erfanden; wenn sie nachher zusammenkamen, wenn ihre Sprachen in einen Ozean von Wörterbuch flossen: desto mehr Synonyme! ⁷⁰

The division of men’s and women’s languages is an extreme example of such linguistic superfluity. “Die Sprache der wilden Kariben ist beinahe in zwo Sprachen, der Weiber und Männer verteilt,” writes Herder, “und die gemeinsten Sachen: Bette, Mond, Sonne, Bogen benennen beide anders; welch ein Überfluß von Synonymen!” ⁷¹ As we saw in the citation above, one reason that languages supposedly have so many synonyms is that early humans lived apart, and each group developed its own vocabulary. This should also explain why men and women of the Caribbean have two words for everything—

Nur läßt sich auch eben hier anmerken, warum unter so manchen Völkern, von denen wir Beispiele angeführt, das männliche und weibliche Geschlecht fast zwo verschiedene Sprachen haben, nämlich weil beide nach den Sitten der Nation als das edle und unedle Geschlecht fast zwei ganz abgetrennte Völker ausmachen, die nicht einmal zusammen

⁷¹ Ibid., 120.
speisen. Nach dem nun die Erziehung väterlich oder mütterlich war: so mußte auch die Sprache Vater- oder Muttersprache werden, so wie nach der Sitte der Römer es gar lingua vernacula wurde.\textsuperscript{72}

According to Herder, a sex-based division of language, such as the one found among the Caribs, is not particularly exceptional. The phenomenon of \textit{Weibersprache} is certainly not limited to the Caribbean: women’s languages are found “unter so manchen Völkern,” writes Herder, who even draws a connection between the \textit{Weibersprache} documented in the Americas and the Romance (vernacular) languages. Yet, in Herder’s text, there is no universal female characteristic that leads to the development of separate women’s languages around the world. Herder does discuss general linguistic differences between men and women insofar as he argues that language is passed to woman from the “sprachbildend[em] Mann.”\textsuperscript{73} However, he does not connect this theory to the existence of women’s languages in specific geographic areas.

The next time the topic of \textit{Weibersprache} appears in a German text on language is in the work of Wilhelm von Humboldt. It is in the wake of Herder and Humboldt that the study of the nature and history of distinct languages becomes a serious academic discipline. This disciplinary institutionalization of the study of languages produces a demand for empiricism, as the criterion of admitted scientificity are imported from the natural sciences into philology. As Peter Hanns Reill and others have shown, Humboldt endeavored to establish \textit{Sprachwissenschaft} as its own discipline, as an “observational” science that borrowed from, but also surpassed, the natural

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 186.
\textsuperscript{73} Herder: “\textit{Ist's denn nicht Gesetz und Verewigung gnug, diese Familienfortbildung der Sprache? Das Weib, in der Natur so sehr der schwächere Teil, muß es nicht von dem erfahrenen, versorgenden, sprachbildenden Manne Gesetz annehmen?” Ibid., 178.
Once it is taken up by this new science, *Weibersprache* also acquires a new evidentiary status. Beginning with Humboldt, ethnographically documented women’s languages become unequivocally connected to claims of a general “female” manner of speech. Whereas *Weibersprache* was taken as a sign of a people’s barbarism in the early eighteenth century, in Humboldt it is mobilized as evidence for the reality of sexual difference.

Before considering Wilhelm von Humboldt’s writing on *Weibersprache*, it is important to appreciate his general theory of sexual difference, since it is through the categories established there that Humboldt interprets the phenomenon of women’s language. The division of the sexes had been an interest of Humboldt’s since early in his career. In the 1790s, he published two essays in Friedrich Schiller’s journal, *Die Horen*: “Ueber den Geschlechtsunterschied und dessen Einfluß auf die organische Natur” and “Ueber die männliche und weibliche Form.” In these early texts, Humboldt characterizes “Weiblichkeit” and “Männlichkeit” as principles whose unification leads to ideal beauty and ideal humanity. Although the term “principle” might imply that Humboldt is theorizing gender divorced from biological sex, the attributes he assigns to masculinity and femininity take the sexed human body and the heterosexual act as their origin. In other words, there is little difference in Humboldt’s theory between gender (the feminine) and sex (the female). Christina von Braun makes a similar point, arguing that while Humboldt may

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have opened the door for later theories that distinguish between biological sex and social or “psychological” gender, for Humboldt it was true “dass sich psychische Weiblichkeit auch im weiblichen Körper befinden müsse—und genauso bei psychischer Männlichkeit.”

Borrowing from Aristotle, Humboldt portrays femininity as passive matter, masculinity as active form: “Alles Männliche zeigt mehr Selbstthätigkeit, alles Weibliche mehr leidende Empfänglichkeit.” However, the difference between Humboldt and Aristotle, as von Braun also points out, is that Humboldt moves from biology to culture, extrapolating gender from sex, whereas Aristotle proceeds in the opposite direction. Nonetheless, Humboldt generally adheres to the active/passive binary established by Aristotle and his epigones: for instance, “Wo die Männlichkeit herrscht,” claims Humboldt, “ist das Vermögen: Kraft des Lebens, bis zur

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75 Christina von Braun, “Männliche und weibliche Form in Natur und Kultur in der Wissenschaft,” (presentation, “Humboldt Gespräche,” Conference for the Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, Berlin, Germany, June 7 and 8, 2007). Braun argues that Humboldt’s construction of masculinity as (among other things) a “Dürftigkeit von Stoff” mirrors the construction of the nineteenth-century scientist, who is required “seinen Körper an der Garderobe [abzugeben], bevor er das Labor betritt” (1). In contrast, Simon Richter, who wants to recuperate Humboldt’s “gendered aesthetics” argues that Humboldt actually distinguishes between sex and gender, and that he “takes great pains never to subordinate weiblich to männlich, but carefully regards each as equally, if differentially empowered” (145). I disagree with Richter that femininity finds any kind of equal status in Humboldt’s work. According to Humboldt, femininity is mindless matter. While femininity might play an equal part in the creation of the Beautiful, it is the masculine, thinking principle which allows (for instance) for Humboldt to write this essay on aesthetics in the first place. It is only through the masculine that there can be a conception of the feminine, which establishes an inherently hierarchical relationship. See Simon Richter, “Weimer Heteroclassicism: Wilhelm von Humboldt, Caroline von Wolzogen, and the Aesthetics of Gender,” *Publications of the English Goethe Society* LXXXI, no. 3 (2012): 137-51.


77 Braun, “Männliche und weibliche Form.”
Dürftigkeit von Stoff entblößt.”⁷⁸ And in the essay on “männliche und weibliche Form,” Humboldt once again outlines the form/substance binary: “Unverkennbar wird bei der Schönheit des Mannes mehr der Verstand durch die Oberherrschaft der Form (formositas) und durch die künstmäßige Bestimmtheit der Züge, bei der Schönheit des Weibes mehr das Gefühl durch die freie Fülle des Stoffes.”⁷⁹

For further evidence that Humboldt draws little distinction between what we would now term sex and gender—and that his characterization of the “feminine principle” is basically identical to his characterization of women—we may look to his “Plan einer vergleichenden Anthropologie,” which was written in 1795 but never published. In this text, Humboldt uses the same language to describe “Frauen” as he did “das Weibliche.” For instance:

Wie bei den Männern der Geist, so ist bei den Frauen die Gesinnung am meisten rege und thätig. […] der wichtige Unterschied ist der, daß die Frauen der empfangende und bewahrende Theil sind, daß nur ihnen das durchaus eigne Gefühl angehört, Mutter zu seyn, und daß der Charakter des Geschlechts überhaupt inniger in ihre Persönlichkeit verwebt ist.⁸⁰

Just as he claimed about the “feminine principle,” Humboldt characterizes women as passive receivers and preservers (“der empfangende und bewahrende Theil”). And whereas “das Weibliche” was defined as “Stoff” in the Horen essays, so too are women defined here by their capacity for motherhood, i.e. by their bodies. We furthermore find in this paragraph the claim

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that sex/gender is more integral to women than it is to men, presumably because men also have the intellect. In short, as the three texts I have just referenced should illustrate, by the time Humboldt makes the discursive shift from aesthetics to philology in the nineteenth century, he has already developed a relatively rigid theory of sexual difference, which applies to actual women as well as to the feminine theoretical principle, and which he will use to consider the subject of women’s language.

Humboldt writes about women’s language in “Ueber die Verschiedenheiten des menschlichen Sprachbaues” (1827-29), which is an early version of his well-known Kawi-Einleitung, the introduction to Humboldt’s three-volume study of the Kawi language of Java. Both versions outline Humboldt’s theory of linguistic relativity, which, following Herder, holds that every language embodies a distinctive Weltansicht, which also structures human cognition. There is of course room for individual variation in Humboldt’s theory; there are also transcultural qualities that condition a person’s worldview and, thus, their expression of language. For example, in the chapter entitled “Language and Individualities,” the reader learns of “the first distinction of individuals within a nation”—“die von der Natur gegebene des Geschlechts und des Alters.” However, before moving on to examples of women’s languages around the world, Humboldt offers an introduction, in which he theorizes about a universal mode of female expression. “Die weibliche Eigenthümlichkeit,” Humboldt asserts here,

die sich so lebendig und sichtbar auch in dem Geistigen ausprägt, erstreckt sich natürlich auch auf die Sprache. Frauen drücken sich in der Regel natürlicher, zarter und dennoch kraftvoller, als Männer aus. Ihre Sprache ist ein treuerer Spiegel ihrer Gedanken und Gefühle, und wenn dies auch selten erkannt und gesagt worden ist, so bewahren sie vorzüglich die Fülle, Stärke und Naturgemässheit der Sprache mitten in der diesen Eigenschaften immer raubenden Bildung, in der sie in gleichem Schritt mit den Männern fortgehen. Wirklich durch ihr Wesen näher an die Natur geknüpft, durch die wichtigsten und doch gewöhnlichsten Ereignisse ihres Lebens in grössere Gleichheit mit ihrem
ganzen Geschlechte gestellt, auf eine Weise beschäftigt, welche die natürlichensten Gefühle in Anspruch nimmt, oder dem inneren Leben der Gedanken und Empfindungen volle Müsse gewährt, frei von Allem, was, wie das Geschäftsleben und selbst die Wissenschaft, dem Geist eine einseitige Form aufdrückt, nicht selten zwischen äusserer Beschränkung und innerer Sehnsucht in einem Streite, der, wenn auch schmerzhaft, doch fruchtbar auf das Gemüth zurückwirkt, oft der Ueberredung bedürftig und durch innere Lebendigkeit und Regsamkeit zur Rede geneigt, verfeinern und verschöneren sie die Naturgemässheit der Sprache, ohne ihr zu rauben, oder sie zu verletzen.

The characteristics that Humboldt ascribes to women’s speech are new interpretations of old clichés: women preserve language, they beautify it, they speak in a manner more “natural, tender, powerful.” More “tender,” of course, than men—men speak the regular language while women speak a variation. Indeed, there is no equivalent section on Männersprache in Humboldt’s work; the entire text is a performance of “male language.” Paradoxically, despite the fact that women’s speech is seen as a variant from the male norm, women are also charged with preserving older, more “natural” linguistic forms. That women lead lives sheltered from the world of commerce was Cicero’s way of explaining women’s preservation of language; we saw Alexander von Humboldt make use of a similar explanation in his interpretation of the langage des femmes of the Americas. It is noteworthy that Wilhelm von Humboldt, too, takes recourse to this explanation—“frei von Allem, was, wie das Geschäftsleben und selbst die Wissenschaft, dem Geist eine einseitige Form aufdrückt”—but also expands it, shutting out women not only from commerce [Geschäftsleben], but also from science [Wissenschaft]. Unlike his brother Alexander, Wilhelm von Humboldt is not satisfied with a purely sociological explanation, but must also add

the more speculative claim that women preserve the “Naturgemässheit der Sprache” because they are inherently closer to nature.

Even as Humboldt tempers his statements about women’s speech, he also—simultaneously—re-inscribes women’s difference. “Die weibliche Eigenthümlichkeit,” writes Humboldt again,

bringt aber auf die eben gesagte Weise nicht eine eigne Sprache hervor, sondern nur einen eignen Geist in die Behandlung der gemeinsamen. Auch bei genauer Aufmerksamkeit würden sich kaum einzelne Ausdrücke und Wendungen auffinden lassen, welche dem andren Geschlecht mehr, als dem unsrigen eigenthümlich wären. Indess bezeugt Cicero aus seiner Erfahrung, dass veraltete Ausdrücke sich länger im Munde der Frauen erhalten, was, da dasselbe im Volk Statt findet, das im Vorigen Gesagte bestätigt.82

Humboldt’s possessive pronouns reinforce the very division he denies: “kaum einzelne Ausdrücke und Wendungen auffinden lassen, welche dem andren Geschlecht mehr, als dem unsrigen eigenthümlich wären.” This “unser” is an essential self-referential act, for it establishes a divide between Humboldt and his object of study, making clear that “weibliche Idiotismen” have no place in the language of his text.

If the above citations seem vague—replete with abstract terms, lacking in examples, the only reference to Cicero, and even then without a citation—Humboldt compensates for this in the following paragraphs by furnishing data on women’s languages around the world. This section of the text looks noticeably different, full of extensive footnotes and references. Humboldt also discusses a women’s language in Japan, but he is most interested in the Weibersprachen of the Americas, even going so far as to have compiled his own dictionary of

82 Humboldt, “Verschiedenheiten,” 254.
Carib women’s words out of the material provided by Raymond Breton. Humboldt acknowledges that the universal manner of female speech he describes above and the women’s language of the Caribbean are not necessarily related—returning to the raptio explanation, he maintains that the existence of the Carib Webersprache “gehört, wie man auch bisher meistentheils angenommen hat, mehr die Geschichte, als die Sprachkunde an.” Nonetheless, even when Humboldt states outright that the general “female” manner of speaking is not the source of the Carib Webersprache, the very structure of his text belies this statement: by juxtaposing these two phenomena, Humboldt implicitly signals their connection. Indeed, Humboldt’s discussion of the general characteristics of female speech, which I cited above, is the introduction to his section on ethnographically documented women’s languages. Humboldt’s claim for a distinction between the universal “female speech” and the Caribbean women’s language is thus, I would argue, a disingenuous disavowal of the connection his own text repeatedly generates.

Furthermore, when Humboldt discusses other American languages with female variants, he actually does describe them as resulting from the “weibliche Eigentümlichkeit” named earlier. Sex differences in these languages, Humboldt writes,

\[\text{beziehen sich meistentheils hauptsächlich auf die Benennung der verschiedenen Verwandtschaftsgrade; diese aber sind fast durchgängig nach dem Geschlecht des Redenden verschieden, was vermutlich in der Verschiedenheit der Empfindung seinen Grund hat, mit welcher beide Geschlecht den Familienkreis umfassen.} \ldots\]

\[\text{Ausser}\]

83 Humboldt cites Breton’s dictionary in a footnote, then writes, about the words used by women: “Diese habe ich in einem doppelten Wörterbuch gesammelt, so dass man nicht bloss die einheimischen Weiberwörter sondern auch, was vorzüglich wichtig ist, den Kreis der Gegenstände übersehen kann, auf den sie sich erstrecken.” “Verschiedenheiten,” 255.

84 Ibid., 225.
Humboldt describes here a linguistic prohibition, in which women are forbidden from speaking the names of their (assumedly, male) family members. The source of this prohibition is, according to Humboldt, the “Verschiedenheit der Empfindung” between the two sexes. If we recall Humboldt’s introduction, it was also this “Verschiedenheit” that led to the “female characteristic” and, thus, to the universal female mode of speech. The phenomenon documented in the above citation—the existence, in the Americas, of linguistic variants exclusive to women—thus functions as empirical evidence for the abstract, essentialist claims about women’s speech made by Humboldt in his introduction.

The fact that Humboldt, in documenting various *Weibersprachen*, has gained access to something that would ordinarily be restricted to women lends this part of the text a certain titillating quality. There is a section shortly before the paragraph cited above in which Humboldt laments the lack of data on the women’s languages of antiquity, which he believes surely must have existed:

> Die immer und unter gleichem Drucke zusammen Lebenden können sich von selbst zu einer Gleichartigkeit der Ausdrücke und Wendungen bilden, und haben auch ein Interesse dem andren Theil unverständlich zu bleiben. Es ist daher zu verwundern, dass von den Gynaeceen der Griechen und den Harems der Morgenländer, so viel ich weiss, so etwas nirgends angedeutet wird. Es mag aber nur am Mangel der Beobachtung liegen.\(^8\)

As Humboldt recounts it here, women develop separate forms of language so as to keep secret what they say from men (“dem andren Theil unverständlich zu bleiben”). Humboldt wishes he could penetrate this secrecy and observe, for instance, the women of a harem. Even if he lacks

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\(^{85}\) Ibid., 225, my emphasis.

\(^{86}\) Ibid., 254-255.
the desired facts on ancient women’s language use, Humboldt is able infiltrate the “female spheres” of several cultures, thanks to the observations provided by ethnographic texts. In the citation above, Humboldt remains coy about what, exactly, women would hope to keep “unverständlich,” yet he almost certainly means words relating to sex. That women develop a separate language to discuss sex and sexuality comes to be the most popular theory of the origin of Weibersprachen in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In the salacious element here, as well as in its interpretive methods, Humboldt’s text marks a radical departure from the earlier ethnographic discourse on the Carib women’s language, which primarily understood the langage des femmes to be yet another example of the savagery of the Americas. As Humboldt evidences, and as I shall continue to argue in this chapter, beginning in the nineteenth century, Weibersprachen are increasingly understood in terms of sexual rather than cultural difference. From Humboldt onwards, the discussion of culturally-specific women’s languages functions to motivate speculative claims about a specifically female mode of speech that is supposed to be trans-historical and trans-cultural. These claims, in turn, corroborate an ideology of sexual difference that asserts the fundamental alterity of the female sex. Moreover, the notion that the speech of women is essentially different from the speech of men, and that this female speech is the opposite of the language of the scientific text, reinforces the division between the (male) scientist and his (female) scientific object, thus working to bolster the text’s claim to scientific authority. I will explore the use of Weibersprache in the construction of scientific authority further in the following section.
Strategies of Authority: Female Speech vs. the Language of Science

The ethnographically documented women’s languages of non-Western cultures are also marshaled in support of general assertions about the way all women speak in Das Weib in der Natur- und Völkerkunde, an expansive, two-volume ethnological work by Hermann Heinrich Ploss. Ploss first published Das Weib serially, then as a complete book in 1885; the text was later revised by three different men between the 1890s and the 1920s.87 Ploss was a gynecologist and anthropologist; I am including his text here in order to show that the concept of a female language was not exclusive to philology but widespread across academic disciplines. Ploss is the first to recognize women’s language as its own topic, and devotes an entire section to what he calls “Frauensprache.”88 Ploss furthermore develops the theory that women’s languages derive from a sexual prohibition, which will become a popular reference point for later linguistic texts.

The premise established by Humboldt—that there is a universal “female” manner of speech—appears in Ploss’ Das Weib, but in less abstract terms. Also similar to Humboldt, Ploss opposes the scientific language of his own text to the unscientific language of women. Ploss begins the chapter on women’s languages with the following assertion:

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87 The most significant difference between Ploss’ first edition and those that follow is the addition of illustrations. In 1887, two years after Ploss’ death, Ploss’ colleague Max Bartels edits a new edition that includes pictures. His son, Paul Bartels, then takes over the editing; later, Ferdinand von Reitzenstein images the last German edition, expanded to three volumes, in 1927. For more on the publication history, see Paula Weideger’s introduction to her 1985 English translation, History’s Mistress: a new interpretation of a nineteenth century ethnographic classic (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985). I am working here with the 1908 edition: Heinrich Ploss and Max Bartels, Das Weib in der Natur- und Völkerkunde, ed. Paul Bartels, 2 volumes (Leipzig: Th. Grieben’s Verlag, 1908). With the exclusion of the added images, the text I quote here is the same in 1908 as in Ploss’ 1885 version.

88 The German terminology for “women’s language” changes in the later nineteenth century from “Weibersprache” to “Frauensprache” as the word “Frau” is substituted for “Weib” in everyday usage.

There are two points of interest in this paragraph. The first is Ploss’ assertion that he will not keep silent on the topic of women’s language—I will return to this shortly. The second is the claim that Frauensprachen can be found in gradations [Abstufungen]. In other words, Frauensprache is a widespread phenomenon that presents itself at different degrees in different cultures. The paragraphs that follow, in which a panoply of women’s languages are introduced and catalogued, work to confirm this assertion. From Malaysia to the Caribbean, to East Africa, to Brazil, to Northwestern Canada—Frauensprachen seem to have been documented in all corners of the world. Various explanations are provided, including the familiar story of bridal capture. But Ploss does not favor this interpretation for the majority of cases of women’s languages. Moving quickly past the raptio explanation of the Carib women’s language, Ploss posits that most women’s languages are rooted in a feeling of shame about sexual matters. This applies to the language of European women, too:

Etwas, was man in das Gebiet der Frauensprache rechnen könnte, läßt sich sogar auch bei uns nachweisen. Es braucht nur darauf hingewiesen zu werden, daß auch unsere Frauen für alles die Sphäre des Geschlechtslebens Berührende ihre eigene Ausdruckweise besitzen, welche von derjenigen der Männer ganz bedeutend verschieden ist und gar nicht selten von den letzteren nicht einmal verstanden werden kann. Ähnliches berichtet Zache von den Suaheliweibern; die Vulva heißt dann beispielsweise Hof, Muschel, Weib. Hier war es zweifellos das Schamgefühl, welches die besonderen Ausdrücke vorgeschrieben und erfunden hat. Aber auch das Verbot, die Namen der männlichen Verwandten auszusprechen, werden wir wohl auf Rechnung des Schamgefühls zu setzen haben [...] 

89 Ploss, Das Weib I, 199
90 Ibid., 202.
Is it a coincidence that *Frauensprachen* are said to develop out of the “Sphäre des Geschlechtslebens,” the same topic of Ploss’ book? According to *Das Weib*, women produce replacement terms for words related to sex because they feel shame and a need for secrecy. Ploss makes it clear that he does not operate under the restrictions of such linguistic taboos: “Ich betrachte das Weib in seinem geistigen und körperlichen Wesen mit dem Auge des Anthropologen und Arztes.”

Ploss, who has no *weibliche Scham*—and thus no *Schamgefühl*—can name what women cannot. He can say “vulva” where Swahili women must say “Hof” or “Muschel,” and where German women must take recourse to one of their “eigene Ausdrucksweise.” And say it he does: the text is replete with descriptions—and later, diagrams—of the female body, particularly the female genitals. Thus when Ploss writes, at the beginning of the section on *Frauensprache*, that he “[kann] nicht mit Stillschweigen übergehen,” he re-inscribes a fundamental difference that he has constructed between himself and his object of study. In contrasting its scientific language to the language of women, Ploss’ text performs its own authority and the authority of its discipline.

The question whether women “speak differently” at this time was not purely academic: it had real political consequences. In the late nineteenth century, women’s rights was a pressing issue in Germany. The *Frauenfrage*—the debate over women’s political, social, and educational rights—was threatening long-established institutions of male power in Europe. For his part, Ploss objects to granting equal rights to women, and quotes from a number of sources to support

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91 Ibid., Vorrede zur ersten Auflage, IX.
92 Although Ploss maintains that his book cannot be an *answer* to the *Frauenfrage*, he engages explicitly with the issue of women’s rights at several points in the text.
this argument. He then reaches the following conclusion: “Die Fehler, welche in der modernen Erziehung des Weibes begangen werden, bedrohen nicht bloß dessen körperliches und moralisches Gedeihen, sondern sie sind auch mit schwerwiegenden Nachteilen für das Wohl der Familie und damit für das der Gesellschaft verbunden.” Ploss is explicitly opposed to educating women in the same way as men, as well as to allowing women to assume occupations that would distract them from their roles as wives and mothers. One way to argue against women’s emancipation is to argue for women’s alterity—“Das Weib ist keineswegs gleichwertig mit dem Manne, sondern vollkommen anderswertig.” This tactic is put to good use in Das Weib: in the main section on the Frauenfrage, Ploss’ editors intersperse pictures of exotic looking women between textual passages concerning the topic of women’s rights. These pictures—for instance of a “Brahminen-Mädchen aus Bombay, mit Ringen im Ohräppchen und im Ohrmuschelrande” and of a “Türkin aus Konstantinopel in ihrem Harem”—have literally no relation to the text that surrounds them. Instead, I would argue, they function to remind the (male) reader: look how strange these women are—“our” women are closer in relation to them than they are to us, their cultural contemporaries. One difference is substituted for another, just as in the section on FrauenSprache, where the abundance of data on “primitive” women’s languages is substituted as evidence for unsubstantiated claims about the “difference” of European women’s speech. Das


94 Ibid., 58.

95 Ibid., 58. This is a quotation from Runge.
Weib presents itself as a book about women among the so-called Naturvölker, but it is also a book about the political status of women at home in Europe. To link European women’s speech with the FrauenSprachen of “primitive” cultures is to undermine the contemporaneous feminist movement’s campaign for women’s equality. That men and women use language differently is another argument for the preservation of their “separate spheres.”

As both Das Weib and Humboldt’s “Ueber die Verschiedenheiten des menschlichen Sprachbaues” have illustrated, the discourse on “primitive” women’s language was a site where European women’s rights were implicitly negotiated. If “primitive” societies were understood to represent an earlier stage of European civilization, then the discovery of women’s languages among so-called “savage” cultures worked to naturalize and legitimate the sex-based social divisions of nineteenth century Europe. In this line of historical thinking, the non-Western “primitive” is equated with “natural man”; the relations between the sexes may be more “developed” or “civilized” in Europe, but the main fact, that women are different, and thus deserve a different role in society, remains the same. That women speak a different language (as found, for instance, in the Caribbean), is taken as empirical proof that the social division of the sexes is a natural occurrence. It then follows, of course, that to integrate men and women by granting women equal rights would be a transgression of natural law. To conclude this section, I will offer two more examples of how this trope, “Weibersprache unter den Wilden,” was continually exploited to confirm the alterity—and thus the inequality—of women in German discourses on language between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Specifically, I am interested here in works by Georg von der Gabelentz and Fritz Mauthner. Theirs are texts
that, like those of Ploss and Humboldt, attempt to mediate between empiricism and abstract essentialism in their claims about women’s language use.

Georg von der Gabelentz was a German linguist known especially for his extensive study of Chinese. In 1891 he issued the monograph, *Die Sprachwissenschaft: ihre Aufgaben, Methoden, und bisherigen Ergebnisse*. As the title suggests, the book was meant to be an introduction to the discipline; it also included an analysis of the phenomenon of women’s language. Gabelentz generally subscribed to Humboldt’s philosophy of language, which is one reason why he never gained much posthumous recognition. At the time when Gabelentz was writing *Die Sprachwissenschaft*, Humboldt’s project—predicated on the belief that the study of language could lead to the discovery of philosophical truths about human nature and history—was losing favor.96

In Gabelentz’ analysis of women’s languages, we find a familiar claim—that women have a secret vocabulary which they keep hidden from men. This is the product of a “Keuschheitsgefühl,” which “verbietet, mit Personen des anderen Geschlechts leichthin über gewisse Dinge zu reden.”97 Gabelentz presents this as a universal phenomenon, referring, comprehensively, to all men and women: “Männer und Weiber haben je unter sich besondere

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96 By the end of nineteenth century, linguists such as the Young Grammarians in Leipzig were attempting to further align their discipline with the methodologies of the natural sciences, eschewing concepts like “Volksgeist” and “Geisteskraft” (Humboldt). See Els Elffers, “Georg von der Gabelentz and the Rise of General Linguistics,” *Ontbeven aan de tijd: linguïstisch-historische studies voor Jan Noordegraaf bij zijn zestigste verjaardag*, ed. L. van Driel and T. Janssen (Amsterdam: Stichting Neerlandistiek, 2008).

Wörter im Gebrauche, die sie dem anderen Geschlechte verheimlichen.”

Gabelentz’ references to studies that have documented instances of men’s and women’s languages work to confirm this claim. Yet all of his examples are drawn exclusively from non-European cultures: the Caribbean, South America, Greenland. Because—according to the implicit logic of Gabelentz’ text—sex is an essential constituent of human identity, data on “primitive” women’s languages can substitute as evidence for the general difference of women’s speech elsewhere. Female identity, understood as distinct from male identity cuts across cultural, political, and historical contexts.

When Gabelentz articulates the goals of the book in his preface, he uses metaphors of uncovering and conquering. *Sprachwissenschaft*, a discipline which “[bietet] noch den Reiz und die Gefahren eines jungfräulichen Bodens,” is a project which demands the exactitude of the cartographer: “umschrieben habe ich das ganze Gebiet, soweit ich es ermass, und von dem Rechte des Kartographen, sein Gradnetz auch durch die Terra incognita zu ziehen, habe ich ausgiebigen Gebrauch gemacht.” In contrast, the *Sitte* which regulates women’s speech, writes

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98 Ibid., 248.

99 Consider, for example, the number of sources referenced in the following quotation: “Beispiele von Webersprachen finden sich auch sonst, und überall wird etwas von geschlechtlicher Scheu bei ihrer Entstehung oder Erhaltung im Spiele sein. So verändern die Grönländerinnen auslautende *k* und *t* in die entsprechenden Nasale *ng* und *n* (P. EGEDE, Gramm. P. 4. O. FABRICIUS, Gramm. p. 10. S. KLEINSCHMICH, Gramm. S. 5). Bei den Chiquitos in der Provinz Santa Cruz besteht gleichfalls ein scharfer Unterschied zwischen der Sprache der Männer und der Weiber. Letztere haben sich für gewisse Begriffe besonderer Wörter zu bedienen; in anderen Fällen kürzen sie die Wörter um den Anlaut, die Suffixe um die letzte Sylbe oder gebrauchen auch grundverschiedene Formen (L. ADAM et V. HENRY Arte y Vocab. P. 4-8).” Ibid., 248.

100 Gabelentz, iv.

101 Ibid., iv.
Gabelentz, requires “dass gewisse Dinge nicht bei den ihnen eigenen, sondern umschreibend, andeutend, bei entlehnten Namen genannt werden.” To speak euphemistically and indirectly is—at least on the surface—the opposite of Gabelentz’ explicit goal for the discipline of Sprachwissenschaft, which is supposed to chart and diagram language with scientific objectivity. In this way, his text stands as yet another example of the way women’s speech was constructed to be incompatible with scientific language in the nineteenth century.

In the Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache from 1901, Fritz Mauthner naturalizes the sex-based linguistic differences described by Gabelentz and extends them to the animal kingdom. In this text, Mauthner’s language skepticism asserts, among other things, that: 1.) language is always individual, so that no two people can communicate without misunderstanding; 2.) there is no thinking outside of language; 3.) language cannot be used to access philosophical truth. Instead of Mauthner’s contributions to the philosophy of language, I am interested here in a minor point made in his text, a section from the first volume of the Kritik, entitled “Mißverstehen durch Sprache,” where Mauthner devotes several pages to the phenomenon of Weiber-/Frauensprache. Although Mauthner is writing a philosophy of language rather than a philological study, and is thus less concerned with providing empirical proof for his claims, he does engage in a practice initiated by linguists before him: contrasting the authoritative language of the text with the unrigorous language of women. Mauthner begins his section on Weibersprache by discussing the women’s language of the Caribbean. He reviews the traditional raptio explanation, which holds that women pass on their language—a form of Arawak—to their daughters. “An sich,” writes Mauthner,

102 Ibid., 248.

Wir sind keine Karaiben, aber es gehört nur ein geringer Grad von Aufmerksamkeit dazu, zu bemerken, daß auch bei uns, namentlich in den kultivierten Kreisen der Kulturländer, ein fühlbarer Unterschied zwischen Männersprache und Weibersprache besteht.\(^{103}\)

The Carib *Weibersprache*—and its ostensible origin in the capture of women from another tribe—posed a considerable problem for the texts I examined earlier. For the theories of Humboldt, Ploss, and Gabelentz, the women’s language of the Caribbean was either an exception or an incongruous example, which did not quite fit into the their theories of a universal female manner of speech. These authors concede that the Carib *Weibersprache* was a historically contingent phenomenon and not actually the product of that principle which supposedly regulates all women’s speech (for Humboldt the “weibliche Eigenthümlichkeit,” for Ploss, the “Schamgefühl,” and for Gabelentz, the “Keuschheitsgefühl”). Nonetheless, despite this apparent contradiction, they all co-opt the Carib women’s language such that it becomes evidence of a universal female mode of linguistic expression.

What is significant about Mauthner’s reading of the Carib *Weibersprache* is that Mauthner actually universalizes and naturalizes the traditional *raptio* explanation, instead of trying to align it with a theory of women’s speech that it does not support. In Mauthner’s text,

the *Weibersprache* of the Caribbean illustrates the social division of the sexes, which supposedly exists in all societies. According to Mauthner’s logic, it makes sense that mothers in the Caribbean pass on their language to their daughters, because this is what happens everywhere. Sex-specific characteristics, including manner of speech, are an inheritance [*Erbschaft*] from one’s ancestors: Sexed beings beget sexed beings. This is true even for animals, as Mauthner reminds his readers—“Daß der Hahn anders ‘singt’ als die Henne, das wundert uns nicht. Nicht, daß nur die Männchen unter den Singvögeln die Gesangskunst ausüben, nur sie die Kunst geerbt haben.” Sex-based attributes, like a “männliche Gesangskunst” are not learned, but “geerbt”: inborn, biological. Moreover, as Mauthner’s example of the *Hahn und Henne* is meant to illustrate, the linguistic division of the sexes is so primal that it overcomes not only cultural and historical difference, but special difference as well.

Mauthner’s comparison of the hen and the rooster is by no means new; already in Buffon’s *Histoire naturelle*, we find a discussion of the fact that male animals have a lower “voice” than females.¹⁰⁴ Over a hundred years later, in 1879, the French biologist Gaëtan Delaunay connects Buffon’s observations of male and female animals to studies of the human larynx, ultimately reaching the conclusion that “chez toutes les espèces, la voix de la femelle est plus aiguë et plus faible que celle du mâle […] De même la femme a la voix plus aiguë que l’homme” and “dans les races humaines inférieures la femme a aussi la voix plus haute que

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¹⁰⁴ This observation is made about numerous animals, for instance, the quail, the horse, the donkey, and the ox. About the horse, Buffon’s text reads: “dès la naissance le male a la voix plus forte que la femelle; à l’âge de puberté la voix des mâles & des femelles devient plus fort & plus grave, comme dans l’homme et dans la plupart des autres animaux.” Le Comte de Buffon, *Œuvres complètes, Tome premier, Histoire des Animaux quadrupèdes* (Paris: De l’Imprimerie Royal, 1775), 125.
l’homme.” Delaunay, however, makes no mention of women’s languages in the Caribbean or elsewhere. Furthermore, whereas Delaunay claims that the difference in the sound of men’s and women’s speech derives from the position of the larynx, Mauthner argues for a kind of difference that cannot be so easily measured. According to Mauthner’s text, women’s speech is not only different in pitch, but also in vocabulary and—most significantly—in content.

Because he has turned the existence of Männer- and Weibersprache into a law of nature, it is then easy for Mauthner to claim that a women’s language can also be found in his contemporary Europe. This point is already made in the citation above—“auch bei uns […] ein fühlbarer Unterschied zwischen Männersprache und Weibersprache besteht”—and is developed further in the pages that follow. Like Humboldt and others before him, Mauthner presents his claims about women’s language in two stages. First, he cites a “primitive” women’s language (in this case, of the Caribbean) in order to corroborate the actuality and naturalness of women’s languages everywhere. Second, as I will argue here, Mauthner then negatively characterizes women’s speech such that it stands in opposition to the language of his own text.

To begin with, Mauthner sets out to demonstrate that differences in men’s and women’s speech are not solely the result of their dissimilar social roles and unequal education. In Arbeiterkreisen, he argues, where schooling and life experience are relatively similar between the sexes, men and women still speak differently. This, writes Mauthner, is because of the “Keuschheit der Frauenohren,”

105 Gaëtan Delaunay, Études de biologie comparée basées sur l’évolution organique (Paris: V. Adrien Delahaye, 1879), 99-100. Delaunay actually proposes the theory that it was the difference between men’s and women’s voices which led to masculine and feminine noun endings.
The explanation offered here would seem to be purely sociological, if it were not for the use of
the word “natural.” Like the difference in song between the Hahn and the Henne, the difference
of women’s speech is—potentially—grounded in inborn, biological difference. And if chastity is
the distinctive feature of this women’s language, then Mauthner’s text unquestionably aligns
itself with the men’s language he constructs as its opposite. Directly before and after this citation,
Mauthner engages in explicit discussions of topics such as the origins of vulgar words, popular
names for prostitutes, and the sex drives of animals and humans. Needless to say, these are
subjects about which (according to Mauthner) women may speak only euphemistically and never
with the directness he employs.

In addition to the linguistic prohibition imposed by the rules of chastity, which is
supposedly found among women of all classes, Mauthner outlines a feature especially noticeable
among upper-class women. In the speech of the Salonweiber, as he calls them, there is an air of

106 Mauthner, 58. Emphasis mine.
107 “Unser ‘kacken’ war wahrscheinlich im 15. und 16. Jahrhundert das feine Salonwort, das
Fremdwort (lat. caccare), das dort gesagt wurde, wo ‘scheißen’ die Ohren verletzt hätte. So
Luther einmal: ‘Gott kacket und bißet nicht.’ Die Herkunft des ebenfalls prüden ‘pissen’ (für:
‘seichen’) ist nicht aufgeklärt.” Mauthner, 60.
108 “Man nannte die armed Frauenzimmer ‘die Horizontalen’; der Ausdruck ‘horizontales
Handwerk’ bestand schon länger.” Mauthner, 59.
109 Mauthner’s main concern in this section is to compare the human and animal sex drives,
which he does in detail. For instance: “Man mache sich aber das Wesen des Unterschiedes klar,
wenn bei den Tieren dieDisposition des Weibchens auf die Geruchssorgane des Männchens wirkt
(also körperlich) und die Reaktion erzeugt” (45).
pretension that is belied by the fact that these women do not really understand what they are saying:


After identifying the practice as a sign of ignorance, Mauthner’s text of course does not engage in the “Anwendung überflüssiger Fremdwörter” that marks the *Salonweibersprache*. Even more important, however, is Mauthner’s declaration that women speak this way because of a lack of education. According to Mauthner’s text, even women who are educated are, when compared with men, only “halbgebildet.” That Mauthner’s own language is capable of recognizing women’s educational deficiency demonstrates his authority over and distance from them. His frequent references throughout the *Kritik* to philosophers both ancient and modern furthermore confirms his status, in contrast to “half-educated” women, as *gebildet*.

Although Mauthner has outlined here two relatively straightforward linguistic practices that supposedly differentiate women from men—the use of foreign terms, the inability to speak of vulgar topics—his general description of *Weibersprache* nonetheless remains abstract and rather vague. He makes declarations like “Griechen und Römer achteten in ihren Schauspielen natürlich nicht auf den Unterschied zwischen Männer- und Frauensprache. Selbst das Genie Shakespeares achtet selten darauf. Erst als Frauenrollen regelmäßig von Frauen gespielt wurden,

110 Mauthner, 61.
gehörte es zur Technik des Dramas, die Weiber ihre Webersprache reden zu lassen”\textsuperscript{111}; or, “Hundertmal kann man über den Roman einer Schriftstellerin die Bemerkung hören, man erkenne die Webersprache.”\textsuperscript{112} These cryptic statements are neither explained nor elaborated. They suggest that, for Mauthner, \textit{Webersprache} is not simply reducible to a few characteristics but is, rather, a generally “different” mode of expression, more easily recognized than described. \textit{Webersprache} expresses the fundamental difference between the sexes: Mauthner knows this difference to be true, but it is, he admits, “schwer begrifflich auszudrücken.”\textsuperscript{113}

Mauthner states that his purpose in discussing women’s languages was to provide another example of the fact that “nicht zwei Menschengruppen die gleiche Sprache reden.”\textsuperscript{114} Yet, it also serves another function—namely, to reinforce the authority of his language in contradistinction to the language of women. As we have seen, this approach is typical for the texts examined in this section. Although these texts may have participated in different discourses—philology, anthropology, philosophy of language—they all construct women’s language as a foil to their own authoritative speech.

\textbf{Conclusion: Webersprache into the Twentieth Century}

At the beginning of this chapter, we saw how the ethnographic texts that first documented a women’s language in the Caribbean understood the \textit{langage des femmes} to be peculiar to the Island Caribs. In these texts, the women’s language was one of many manifestations of the

\textsuperscript{111} Mauthner, 58.
\textsuperscript{112} Mauthner, 57.
\textsuperscript{113} Mauthner, 57.
\textsuperscript{114} Mauthner, 61.
Caribs’ “savagery,” and it was not afforded any special status or attention. Then, between the mid-1600s and the end of the eighteenth century, women’s language was reinterpreted to be a characteristic of “primitive” cultures around the world and throughout history. In the nineteenth century, German philology appropriated the topic of women’s languages and shifted the focus from cultural to sexual difference. Obviously, the distinction between the civilized and the primitive was still in existence, but it was no longer the master dichotomy through which women’s languages were interpreted, and which they were made to support. Nineteenth-century texts, rather, emphasized the alterity of the woman over the alterity of the cultural Other.

In this sense, the story of the interpretation of “women’s language” is a story of changing beliefs about human difference, and about the flexibility of that difference. The binary civilized/primitive, because it is also a model of development, is inherently more flexible than the binary male/female. The “primitive” can be civilized, be Christianized—this was indeed the missionaries’ objective in voyaging to the Caribbean in the first place. But, at least in the ideology of the nineteenth century, which asserts the incommensurability of the sexes, a woman can never become a man. The nineteenth-century reevaluation of Webersprache, then, comes out of the coincidence of this understanding of sexual difference and the development of the concept of linguistic relativity. Beginning with Herder, language is understood to have a world-making function. It is what distinguishes human from animals, and what reflects and forms cultural and individual identity. If it is also assumed that there are two fundamentally different types of humans—male and female—then it follows that there must be two basic Weltansichten and, thus, two different types of linguistic expression.
What happens to women’s language after it undergoes this reconceptualization in the nineteenth century? For one, the universalizing impulse grows stronger, as the “difference” of female speech continues to be expanded to Western as well as non-Western women. This also means that the bridal capture theory loses favor. By the beginning of the twentieth century, for instance, texts on women’s languages are characterizing the bridal capture explanation as naïve and outdated.115 In 1912, an American review of recent German scholarship on women’s languages contends, with evident disdain, that “Some other social motif than wife-stealing, or the capture of women, must be looked for at the source of ‘women’s languages.’”116 Also around this time, several German-speaking anthropologists call the relevance of bridal capture narratives into question.117 Whereas in nineteenth-century texts the raptio explanation was still entertained, although downplayed, by the twentieth century it is dismissed altogether. Instead, new theories are posited; the phenomenon of women’s language is made to underwrite new ideologies. The Danish linguist Otto Jespersen, for example, suggests an evolutionary origin to women’s languages, arguing that men and women speak differently because of the historical division of

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115 There is one notable exception to this: James Frazer’s essay, “A Suggestion as to the Origin of Gender in Language,” Fortnightly Review 73 (January, 1900): 79-90. Frazer argues that men’s/women’s languages are potentially the source of grammatical gender.


labor. According to Jespersen, the work of prehistoric man, such as hunting, required silence, while woman’s more domestic tasks allowed for idle chitchat—thus the development of women’s “volubility.” An essay in *Imago*, on the other hand, claims that women’s languages developed as a result of “die verdrängten Tendenzen der Sexualität,” including the incest taboo, as theorized by Freud. Although these two interpretations point to *Weibersprachen* in order to substantiate different theoretical programs, what they have in common is that their understanding of women’s language presupposes an absolute difference between the sexes, a difference bound neither by culture nor history. As I have shown here, this presupposition has its roots in the nineteenth century, where *Weibersprache* was first constructed as a universal “female” phenomenon.

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118 “For thousands of years the work that especially fell to men was such as demanded an intense display of energy for a comparatively short period, mainly in war and in hunting. Here, however, there was not much occasion to talk, nay, in many circumstances talk might even be fraught with danger. […] Woman, on the other hand, had a number of domestic occupations which did not claim such an enormous output of spasmodic energy. the care of the children, cooking, brewing, baking, sewing, washing, etc., - things which for the most part demanded no deep thought, which were performed in company and could well be accompanied with a lively chatter. Lingering effects of this state of things are seen still […]” Otto Jespersen, “The Woman,” *Language: its nature, development and origin* (New York: H. Holt, 1922), 237-54, here 254.

Chapter 2.

The Sex of Language: Locating the Origin of Grammatical Gender

“...und damit war das weibliche Sprachgeschlecht aus dem männlichen geboren, denn wie hätte sich der mit einigen Subjektsbegriffen verbundene Gedanke der Passivität schicklicher vorstellen lassen, als unter dem Bilde der Weiblichkeit?”

What is the relationship between grammatical gender and biological sex? This question has been posed repeatedly since the grammarians of ancient Greece attempted to explain the categories of nouns in their language; it vexed ancient Roman grammarians as well as those of early modern Europe. That is to say, the origin of grammatical gender was not a new problem invented by scholars of language towards the end of the eighteenth century, but rather an old concern that reemerged during this period—and that was taken up with vigor.

Prior to the late eighteenth century, speculation on the topic generally adhered to the view that grammatical gender exists because the first speakers perceived a relationship between the objects of the world and the male and female sexes. According to this theory, a noun’s grammatical gender is the transfer into language of the sex assigned to the object it represents.

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Yet there was also at this time—at least in France and Germany—an understanding that whatever had motivated early man to classify one object as male, another as female, had to remain obscure, since this classification did not follow any recognizable logic.\(^{122}\)

In the mid-1600s, for example, the influential *Grammaire générale et raisonnée de Port-Royal* maintained that, except for the nouns that refer specifically to men and women (such as *rex* or *regina*), or to objects associated with them, there is no relation between a word’s gender and its meaning. Grammatical gender was created “par un pur caprice, et un usage sans raison; ce qui fait cela varie selon les langues, et dans les mots même qu’une langue a empruntés d’une autre.”\(^{123}\)

This idea from the Port-Royal grammarians, that grammatical gender originated in *caprice*, and thus cannot be said to bear any meaning, recurs during the first half of the eighteenth century. In 1747, for instance, the Abbé Gabriel Girard argues that there is indeed a connection between grammatical gender and biological sex: masculine nouns refer to objects understood to have “un raport au mâle,” while the objects designated by feminine nouns likewise

\(^{122}\) A notable exception to this is the English text *Hermes: Or, a Philosophical Inquiry Concerning Universal Grammar*, written by James Harris in 1751 (London: H. Woodfall). Harris develops a theory of analogy, such that, “In [other words] we may imagine a more subtle kind of reasoning, a reasoning which discerns, even in things without Sex, a distant analogy to that great NATURAL DISTINCTION, which (according to Milton) animates the World.” *Hermes* was not translated into German until 1788; as a result, it is Herder’s theory of gender as enlivening the world—rather than Harris’ theory of analogy—that has the most initial influence in the German context. Harris, *Hermes: Or, a Philosophical Inquiry Concerning Universal Grammar* (London: H. Woodfall, 1751), 44

have “un raport à la femelle, ou comme étant de ce dernier sexe.” Yet, Girard continues, this raport does not follow an identifiable system. When man first assigned words their genders, he did so “sans consulter ni Logique ni Physique. Ce que le premier trait de l’imagination a peint sans examen, l’Usage l’a confirmé sans délibération.” According to Girard, gender is “une idée accessoire,” created “sans motif ni plan de système.”

Similarly, the 1757 entry for genre in Diderot and d’Alembert’s encyclopedia asserts that many inanimate nouns were assigned their gender either arbitrarily or based solely on formal characteristics: “Quelques noms seront d’un Genre par la raison du sexe, d’autres à cause de leur terminaison, un grand nombre par pur caprice.” Once again, the modern speaker cannot find meaning in the categories of grammatical gender because these categories are based on caprice, rather than on empirical truth. Thus, it would be “une peine inutile, dans quelque langue que ce fût, que de vouloir chercher ou établir des régles propres à faire connoître les genres des noms: il n’y a que l’usage qui puisse en donner la connaissance.

Other Enlightenment texts engage even less with the topic, favoring the more practical concern of standardizing grammatical gender over speculating about its genesis. In his

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125 Ibid., 147.
126 Ibid., 147.
128 Ibid., 590.
Grundlegung einer deutschen Sprachkunst from 1748, for instance, Johann Christoph Gottsched does not entertain a theory of grammatical gender’s origins except to say that there is a general correspondence between grammatical gender and biological sex.\(^{129}\) Although Gottsched spends twenty pages discussing and categorizing the genders of German Hauptwörter, he makes no conjecture about their provenance or whether a word’s Geschlecht ever held semantic value. Of course, there are the words that correspond to sexed beings: for example, one should use the feminine article for women’s names, (“Barbara,” “Kunigunda”), for words referring to women (“Dirne,” “Jungfrau”), and for what we might term female occupations (“Dichterinn,” “Köchin”).\(^{130}\) As for all other words, however, gender does not necessarily relate to meaning; it must either be derived from the form of the word (e.g., all words ending in “-heit” are feminine), or simply memorized.\(^{131}\)

Beginning in the 1770s, however, French and German texts on language take a new approach to the study of grammatical gender: previously considered insignificant, grammatical gender is now made intelligible through the modern speaker’s understanding of sexual difference. Antoine Court de Gébelin, for example, writes in 1774 that a word was assigned the feminine gender “lorsque son objet offrira quelqu’une des propriétés du sexe féminin; qu’il aura plus de graces que de force, plus de douceur que de vivacité, plus de délicatesse que de vigueur; ou qu’il

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\(^{129}\) “Da die Menschen und Thiere von zweyerlen Geschlechter sind; außer diesen aber viele andre Dinge weder Man noch Weib sind […] so hat man auch in den Wörtern der Sprachen deryerlen Geschlechter, nämlich das männliche, weibliche und ungewisse eingeführhet.” Johann Christoph Gottsched, Grundlegung einer deutschen Sprachkunst [1748]. (Leipzig: Bernhard Christoph Breitkopf, 1752), 147.

\(^{130}\) Ibid., 208.

\(^{131}\) Gottsched even provides a “Verzeichniß derer Hauptwörter, deren Geschlecht man ohne Regeln lernen muß” (Ibid., 221).
sera un Être portant quelque production et fécondé par la Nature; et plus passif qu’actif.”

In the 1780s, Johann Christoph Adelung makes a similar argument for a direct link between genus and sexus in inanimate nouns. According to Adelung, masculine nouns correspond to “alles, was den Begriff der Lebhaftigkeit, Tätigkeit, Stärke, Größe, auch wohl des Furchtbaren und Schrecklichen hatte,” while feminine nouns are that which “man empfänglich fruchtbar, sanft, leidend, angenehm dachte.” Neuter, on the other hand, has two possible explanations: that “woran man aber dergleichen nicht gewahr ward, oder es wenigstens nicht ausdrucken wollte.”

This extensive listing and ordering of concepts into the categories masculine and feminine, such as passivity and weakness vs. activity and strength, is a new practice, not to be found in the Enlightenment discourse on grammatical gender. No longer irrational, or lost to the past, the motivation behind grammatical gender is accorded a new intelligibility and coherence towards the end of the eighteenth century. Specifically, grammatical gender is made legible through the reality of sexual difference, conceived as a foundational principle of organization, whose actuality the modern speaker can recognize in his own body and in the divergent social roles of his contemporary men and women. Instead of relegating the motivation behind grammatical gender to caprice, linguists now begin to conjecture about the reasoning behind

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133 Johann Christoph Adelung, Deutsche Sprachlehre (Berlin: Christian Friedrich Voß und Sohn, 1781), 116.

134 The authors who participate in the discourse on grammatical gender understand their texts to fall within a variety of disciplines: philology (Philologie), language science (Sprachwissenschaft), linguistics (Linguistik or Sprachkunde), and what we would now term the
the genders of different words. Court de Gébelin—to offer just one example—writes that “mer” is feminine because it was understood to be “le receptacle & les productrices d’une prodigieuse quantité de plantes & d’animaux,” whereas “océan” is masculine because it captures “sa vaste étendue & au mugissement terrible de ses flots.” Throughout the nineteenth century, texts on language continue to naturalize grammatical gender in this way by connecting masculine and feminine words to characteristics associated with the male and female sexes.

What allows for this newfound interest in the origin of grammatical gender? How can we explain the shift from Gottsched’s relative indifference to gender’s origins to Adelung and Court de Gébelin’s elaborate speculation? The attention to grammatical gender that develops in the 1770s, and continues into the nineteenth century, is made possible by a conception of language that presupposes, at its origin, the existence of an active, inventive subject. “Der Mensch ist ein frei denkendes, tätiges Wesen,” reads the first Naturgesetz of Herder’s essay on the origin of language from 1772, “dessen Kräfte in Progression fortwürken; darum sei er ein Geschöpf der Sprache!” The theory of grammatical gender that arises in the late eighteenth century—eventually termed the “Romantic” theory in reference to Jacob Grimm and his circle—takes Herder’s conception of language as its point of departure, as it not only understands language to philosophy of language (Sprachphilosophie). Throughout the chapter, I will switch between these terms depending on the author and text. I will use “linguist” most generally to refer to those authors who write on the history and grammatical rules of a language. For background on the term linguistique in French, and its roots in the German Linguistik, see Sylvain Auroux, “The First Uses of the French Word ‘Linguistique’ (1812-1880),” Papers in the History of Linguistics: Proceedings of the Third International Conference on the History of the Language Sciences, ed. L. G. Kelly, Hans-Josef Niederehe, and Hans Aarsleff (1984): 447-459.

135 Court de Gébelin, 74.

be a specifically human faculty, but also asserts a connection between the emergence of language and the emergence of human consciousness.

It is this significance accorded to the human that I would like to foreground in my reading of the discourse on grammatical gender. For, as I will argue in this chapter, it is the emphasis on the human subject at the origin of language that makes it possible to render the rationale behind grammatical gender accessible to the modern speaker beginning in the later eighteenth century. It is also the issue that underlies the debate on grammatical gender that takes place some 100 years later, between the Romantic linguists and the Neogrammarians, who argue for a dissolution of the link between gender and sex. Another way to rephrase the question that all theories of grammatical gender attempt to answer (What is the relationship between grammatical gender and biological sex?) is to ask, how central is the human to language? To what extent are human categories, such as sex, inscribed in language; or does language have categories of its own? Is the existence of grammatical gender the product of human activity, or is it simply a formal means of classification, an historically contingent development? In other words: Does meaning inhere within the structures of our language? And can the human subject—indeed, the *human body*—be the device to decode that meaning?

Although relatively unproblematic for the nineteenth century, we recognize now that “the body” is not a neutral term. When Humboldt writes that the dual grammatical form is a parallel of the “Begriff der Zweiheit” found in nature, including the “Theilung der beiden Geschlechter” and the formation of the “Körper in zwei gleiche Hälften und mit paarweise vorhandenen Gliedmassen und Sinnenwerkzeugen”\(^\text{137}\)—we may ask, whose bodies? The body according to

\(^{137}\) Humboldt, “Dualis,” 137.
whom? It is worth pausing here to draw attention to something that has perhaps already become obvious: namely, that the creative subject at the center of this conception of language is an implicitly *male* subject; and, furthermore, that the characteristics mobilized by Romantic theories of grammatical gender conform to a rigidly heteronormative, binary understanding of the sexes, in which the feminine is subordinate to the masculine and their unification is the ideal. Grammatical gender was not debated in isolation. When linguists employ an argument that says, for instance, that femininity corresponds to weakness and passivity, masculinity to strength and activity, they are participating in the construction and ordering of the sexes that is taking place across multiple discourses at this time, including in texts on medicine, politics, education, and biology.\(^{138}\) Theories of grammatical gender like those of Adelung or Court de Gébelin, which emphasize the oppositional nature of the sexes, are devised during the same period that moral physiologists are finding copious evidence for the inferiority of the female mind and body, and that a theory of “separate spheres” increasingly excludes women from public and intellectual life: in short, during the period in which woman is constructed as fundamentally different from, yet also complementary to, man. The foundational status of sexual difference and the universalization of the male subject—coupled with the belief that language both forms and is formed by this (male) subject—are the assumptions that make the Romantic theory of grammatical gender possible.

It has long been recognized that certain strains of the nineteenth-century discourse on language participated in the establishment of racial hierarchies. With the idea of an *Ursprache* also came the idea of an *Urvolk*; the categorization of languages led to the categorization of

\(^{138}\) See Laqueur, Honegger, Schiebinger, as discussed in the introduction.
peoples, which, for some authors, turned into the categorization of races.\textsuperscript{139} One objective of this chapter is to show that, just as texts on language engaged in the construction of racial categories, they also took part in the construction of categories of sex. It is no coincidence that the term “gender,” which has more or less replaced “sex” in modern parlance, originated in grammatical discourse.\textsuperscript{140} For it is first in grammatical discourse that gender gets formulated in a way we would recognize today: as an abstraction of biological sex, and as its symbol.

The nomenclature “masculine,” “feminine,” and “neuter” has, at least since the Ancient Greeks, made the connection between \textit{genus} and \textit{sexus} appear relatively self-evident. Grammatical gender thus functions as a unique case study in the history of theories of language because it, perhaps like no other aspect of language, invites the presumption that there is indeed a relationship between the structures of language and the structures of human identity. Even Enlightenment texts, if they did not consider it intelligible, understood there to be a general correspondence between grammatical gender and biological sex. At the end of the nineteenth century, however, this seemingly intuitive connection between gender and sex—between the word and the world—is called into question by the theories of the Neogrammarians.

\textsuperscript{139} See, for instance, Geoffrey Galt Harpham, “Roots, Races and the Return to Philology,” \textit{Representations} 106 (Spring 2009): 34-62. Harpham shows how many nineteenth-century philologists “found it increasingly difficult to sustain a methodological distinction between language and its speakers, and many failed to see the point of the effort, since the idea of race was so helpful in concretizing the conclusions of linguistic scholarship” (42). Tuska Benes also makes a case for comparative philology’s role in establishing racial and national categories in \textit{In Babel’s Shadow: Language, Philology and the Nation in Nineteenth-Century Germany} (Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 2008).

\textsuperscript{140} For a detailed account of the replacement of “sex” with “gender” in a variety of discourses, and the origin of “gender” as a purely grammatical term, see Robert A. Nye, “How Sex Became Gender,” \textit{Psychoanalysis and History} 12.2 (2010): 195-209.
The chapter is divided into three sections, which together chart the changing conceptualization of grammatical gender between 1770 and 1890. Section I, “Die Sache verdient eine kleine Untersuchung”: The Beginnings of the Romantic Theory of Grammatical Gender,” examines texts by Herder, Adelung, Court de Gébelin, and Karl Philipp Moritz, whose theories describe grammatical gender as the result of an animistic enlivening of the world through language. Section II, “From Animism to Analogy: Humboldt and Grimm on Grammatical Gender,” analyzes the work of Wilhelm von Humboldt and Jacob Grimm, whose theories replace the concept of enlivening or animation with analogy, but where many assumptions about the origin of grammatical gender remain the same. This section furthermore investigates how Grimm establishes the primacy of the masculine gender. The third section, “Eine nichtsagende Form’: The Neogrammarian Critique of Grimm,” turns to a debate that occurred around 1890 between Grimm’s defender, Gustav Roethe, and his detractor, the Neogrammarian Karl Brugmann. Here I argue that their debate centers around the question of the centrality of sexual difference to human identity.

Throughout the chapter, I will use the terminology of the “semiotic triangle” as a tool in order to clearly identify in which aspects and elements of language these changes in the understanding of grammatical gender take place. The terminology associated with this tripartite division of the sign varies according to the theorist, but we may say most simply, with Umberto Eco, that the semiotic triangle allows us to distinguish between three aspects of the sign: the signifier (the word), the signified (the idea), and the referent (the object in the world).141 Relating

this to the debate on the origin of grammatical gender, we see that the theory of animism locates grammatical gender in a referent that language itself produces; the theory of analogy, in the signified; and Brugmann’s formalist theory locates gender within the signifier.

“Die Sache verdient eine kleine Untersuchung”:
The Beginnings of the Romantic Theory of Grammatical Gender

As evidenced by the quotations introduced at the beginning of this chapter, most scholars in the seventeenth through mid-eighteenth century understood there to be an intuitive connection between sexed beings and the genders of the words that represent them. It was not questioned, for example, that *femme* and *Frau* should be of the feminine gender, while *homme* and *Mann* were masculine. This assumption also extended to some animals (e.g. *Katze* vs. *Kater*), and to other words related to men and women. That the gender of such nouns should be semantically motivated was not seen as problematic; these words, however, comprise only a small percentage of all nouns. More difficult was explaining how the words for inanimate objects, which have no sex, also came to possess gender.

Johann Gottfried Herder does not suggest a semantic motivation (in other words, he does not suggest that there are specific meanings behind the attribution of the masculine gender to some words, the feminine to others, and does not attempt to make sense of the genders of particular nouns). Adelung, however, who writes a detailed theory of semantic motivation, is greatly influenced and inspired by Herder’s work. Thus, before discussing Adelung’s theory of gender more extensively, I would first like to turn to Herder, to establish how he understands gender to operate.
Herder’s theory proposes that gender results from “primitive” man’s enlivening of the world through language. “Indem der Mensch aber alles auf sich bezog,” writes Herder in his “Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache,”

indem alles mit ihm zu sprechen schien, und würschlich für oder gegen ihn handelte, indem er also mit oder dagegen Teil nahm, liebte oder haßte, und sich alles Menschlich vorstellte; alle diese Spuren der Menschlichkeit drückten sich auch in die ersten Namen! Auch sie sprachen Liebe oder Haß, Fluch oder Segen, Sanftes oder Widrigkeit, und insonderheit wurden aus diesem Gefühl in so vielen Sprachen die Artikel! Da wurde Alles Menschlich, zu Weib und Mann personificiert, überall Götter, Göttinnen, handelnde, bösertige oder gute Wesen! Der brausende Sturm, und der süße Zephyr, die klare Wasserquelle und der mächtige Ocean—ihre ganze Mythologie liegt in den Fundbrugen, den Verbis und Nominibus der alten Sprachen und das älteste Wörterbuch war so ein tönendes Pantheon ein Versammlungssaal beider Geschlechter, als den Sinnen des ersten Erfinders die Natur.¹⁴²

There are two points that I would like to draw attention to in this passage: the status of sexual difference, and the description of objects as “beings.” First, Herder argues that the animation of the world includes the projection of biological sex onto inanimate objects (“Da wurde Alles Menschlich, zu Weib und Mann personificiert”). This is significant, for it implies that it is not possible to conceive of the human without conceiving of it as sexed. (Whether the human can be conceptualized without the category of sex will be debated at length approximately one hundred years later; I will return to this question in a subsequent section.)

Second, the animistic mindset that Herder describes does not understand inanimate objects to be like men and women—and thus to have an analogical relationship to human sexual difference—but to be men and women. Oceans, zephyrs, and springs, for instance, are “handelnde, bösertige oder gute Wesen.” According to Herder’s theory, this transformation of the

objects of the world into “handelnde Wesen” does not take place prior to language, but rather in and through it. The paragraph cited above comes, in Herder’s essay, in the context of language already having originated; language is what allows man to order the world. In this way, we may say that Herder’s theory locates gender in the referent—the specific object in the world, rather than in an idea of the object—but only insofar as the referent (the enlivened object) is itself produced by language.

Adelung takes up this idea from Herder, that grammatical gender comes from an enlivening of objects into Wesen, and furthermore speculates about the logic behind assigning objects the masculine or feminine gender. Adelung publishes three texts that deal with gender in the early 1780s, each one more expansive than the other, all of which derive many of their claims from Herder. Here I would like to offer a brief analysis of Adelung’s final essay on gender, “Von dem Geschlechte der Substantive” (1783), which is his longest and most developed. In this text, Adelung vacillates between claiming gender to be a useless relic from a “primitive” past, and presenting it as a natural constituent of language. Additionally, in Adelung’s changing stance on the neuter grammatical gender over the course of the three essays, we can see the development of a rigid and binary model of sexual difference, such as is also being constructed in other discourses at this time.

Adelung published three texts that deal with on grammatical gender; each text built upon the previous one. The first discussion of grammatical gender, from 1781, was published in Adelung’s Deutsche Sprachlehre. The second, “Von dem Geschlechte der Hauptwörter,” was published in Adelung’s periodical, Umständliches Lehrgebäude der Deutschen Sprache, zur Erläuterung der Deutschen Sprachlehre für Schulen, in 1782. In 1783, Adelung then publishes “Von dem Geschlechte der Substantive” in his Magazin für die deutsche Sprache.
First, let us recall Adelung’s explanation of the origin of grammatical gender, which draws heavily on Herder’s theory. “Nunmehr ist es auch nicht schwer zu begreifen,” Adelung writes,

nach welchen Gründen man diese Geschlechter vertheilete. Ein jedes Ding, welches männlichen Eigenschaften ähnlich war, wenn es Stärke, Lebhaftigkeit, Wirksamkeit, Erhabenheit befaß, mit einer mittheildenden, hervorbringenden und thätigen Kraft begabt war, war ein männliches Wesen, und dessen Nahme ward ein männliches Substantiv. Hingegen wenn ein Gegenstand weibliche Eigenschaften verrath, wenn er mehr Reitz als Stärke, mehr Sanftes als Lebhaftigkeit, mehr Feinheit als Kraft besitzt, und sich überhaupt mehr leidend als thätig verhält, so sahe man es als ein weibliches Wesen an, und fölglich ward dessen Nahme weiblichen Geschlechts.144

Like Herder, Adelung works with the understanding that grammatical gender derives from the transformation of inanimate objects into living beings (“ein männliches Wesen,” “ein weibliches Wesen”). What Adelung develops out of Herder’s argument is the assertion that grammatical gender is not a particularly desirable attribute of modern languages. It is the “Überrest der ersten Kindheit des menschlichen Geschlechts,”145 a relic from a primitive era that the Germans have long since left behind. People no longer interact with the objects of the world by considering them to be alive; their language, Adelung asserts, should reflect this reasoned outlook. Thus Adelung describes the elimination of grammatical gender as a marker of Aufklärung, and cites English as a model language in this regard.146 One result of Adelung’s distinction between

145 Ibid., 9.
primitive and civilized consciousnesses is that he must establish a distance between his reasoned
stance and the fanciful outlook of the first speakers, the inventors of grammatical gender. “Aber
diese rohen und ganz sinnlichen Menschen so natürliche Vorstellungsart,” Adelung questions,
“wie viel Schwankendes und Willkührliches hat sie nicht?”147

It may initially seem difficult to reconcile Adelung’s insistence on the \textit{Willkürlichkeit} of
grammatical gender with his earlier assertion that the motivation behind gender is “nicht schwer
to begreifen.” How is it possible that the allocation of gender is both arbitrary and obvious
enough to allow for modern insight? One way to make sense of this contradiction is to
distinguish between the categories of gendered attributes—which he asserts as universally
valid—and the way that the world is interpreted through them—which is contingent, culturally
dependent. This allows Adelung to account for why the same objects are assigned different
genders in different languages:

Und wie viel kommt hier nicht auf die individuelle Empfindugs- und Vorstellungsart
jedes Volkes an? Hierin liegt denn auch die Ursache, warum der Nahme eines und eben
desselben Dinges bey dem einen Volke männlich, bey dem andern aber weiblich ist. Die
Sonne ist dem Griechen und Römer ein wirksames, alles durch sein Licht und seine
Wärme befruchtendes, dem Deutschen ein sanftes, reitzends, erquickendes Wesen. Bey
den beyden ersten ist der Mond weiblich, weil sein Licht schwächer und sanfter ist, als
das Licht der Sonne; bey dem Deutschen hingegen ist er männlich, weil man ihn als die
wirkende Ursache der vornehmsten Zeittheile ansahe, und vielleicht auch, weil man
schon sehr frühe an seine Einflüsse in die Erde und in die menschlichen Schicksale
glaubte. Und so mit andern Wörtern mehr.148

The inanimate objects of the natural world have no sex; they can be assigned any gender,
depending on a culture’s view of them. What cannot proceed arbitrarily, however, is the

halten daß sie es hat, ob es gleich ein wichtiger Beweis ihres ehrwürdigen Alterthumes ist” (Ibid.,
19).

147 Ibid., 12.
classification of masculine and feminine characteristics: it would never be possible to say a word is feminine because it exhibits the qualities of strength and activity. The truth that grammatical gender evinces is therefore not, for instance, the inherent femininity of the moon, but rather the inherent femininity of the qualities weakness and delicateness. The gendered categories employed by Adelung are presented as unalterable and universal, uniting languages across space and time. His theory allows many things to be historicized or considered culturally relative, but not the conceptualization of sexual difference.

But what about the neuter? Adelung distinguishes between what he calls das persönliche Geschlecht (either feminine or masculine) and das sächliche Geschlecht (neuter). When language was first created, Adelung writes, words could only have been classified as masculine or feminine: “Da die Natur eigentlich nur zwey Geschlechter kennet, so glaube ich, daß die ersten und ältesten Sprachen deren auch nicht mehrere gehabt haben.” The neuter gender, on the other hand, dates from a more enlightened, historically later period, when man had dispensed with anthropomorphization and acquired the reason necessary to classify inanimate objects as sexless. This is a shift from what Adelung first writes on gender in 1781, and which I quoted at the beginning of this chapter: namely, that the neuter was assigned to everything “woran man aber dergleichen [“männlich” or “weiblich”] nicht gewahr ward, oder es wenigstens nicht ausdrucken wollte.” Instead of being a third sex, in which neither “male” or “female” characteristics appear dominant, the neuter is now defined as the complete absence of sex and linked to inanimacy.\(^\text{149}\) The categories of human sex, and the categories of grammatical gender

\(^\text{149}\) Already in the 1782 revised edition of his first essay on gender (from 1781), Adelung begins to conceive of the neuter as the absence of sex. He criticizes scholars who call neuter das ungewisse, since the neuter should stand for lack of sex, not unclear sex: “und so enstand das
created in their image, have been strictly limited to male and female. Indeed, as he put it already in 1782, “‘Gott hat nichts erschaffen, heißt es im dem Alkoran, was nicht männlich und weiblich wäre; das ist von allen Erzeugnissen der Erde, von den Seelen, und selbst von Dingen gewiß, von welchen man es am wenigsten vermuten sollte.’” The possibility of a third sex, briefly entertained in 1781, has been quickly discarded.

In the years that follow, Adelung’s ideas are taken up and reinterpreted by other texts on language. August Bernhardi, for example, elaborates on the theory that the neuter gender dates from a later period, and strongly links the appearance of neuter to the rise of reason. Karl Philipp Moritz, on the other hand, further reinforces the dichotomy masculine/feminine, as he makes the remarkable argument that German nouns can be sorted in pairs that mirror human heterosexual coupling. In *Deutsche Sprachlehre für die Damen*, Moritz writes that every masculine noun was created such that it has a feminine counterpart. “Daher kömmt es nun,” he explains, “daß wir z. B. sagen,”

- der Baum, die Blume
- der Wald, die Wiese,
- der Zorn, die Sanftmuth,
- der Haß, die Liebe.

dritte, das Genus Neutrum, oder das sächliche, welches von vielen Sprachlehrern sehr unschicklich das ungewisse genannt würd, indem es so gewiß und bestimmt als eines der beyden übrigen ist, wenn es gleich aus der Unwissenheit der ersten Spracherfinder seinen Ursprung haben sollte.” Johann Christoph Adelung, “Von dem Geschlechte der Hauptwörter,” *Umständliches Lehrgebäude der Deutschen Sprache, zur Erläuterung der Deutschen Sprachlehre für Schulen* (Leipzig: Breitkopf, 1782), 343-369, here 345. In this essay, however, Adelung has not yet developed the theory that the neuter dates from a later period than the masculine and feminine.

150 Adelung (1782), 344.
Wo denn auch der härtere, männlichere Artikel der in das sanftere die hinüberschmilzt. So scheint die Sprache auch alles leblose in der Welt zu paaren, indem sie zu etwas Größern oder Stärken immer etwas Aehnliches aufzufinden weiß, das nur kleiner oder schwächer, aber schöner und angenehmer ist.\footnote{152 Karl Philipp Moritz, \textit{Deutsche Sprachlehre für die Damen, In Briefen} (Berlin: Arnold Wever, 1782), 231.}

Moritz, like Adelung, subscribes to a theory of animation; he writes that grammatical gender originates in the extension of \textit{Persönlichkeit} to inanimate objects.\footnote{153 \textit{"Indem man also von dem Baume sagt, er ist grün, so redet man von ihm, als von einer Person männlichen Geschlechts, und indem man von der Rose sagt, sie blühet, so redet man von ihr, als von einer Person weiblichen Geschlechts. So drückt der Mensch auch in dieser Absicht der leblosen Natur sein Gepräge auf. Alles leblose, was man sich als stark, groß, wirksam, oder auch wohl als schrecklich denkt, wird, wenn man ihm eine Persönlichkeit beilegt, mit dem männlichen Geschlechts verglichen; alles aber, was man sich als sanft, leidend oder angenehm denkt, vergleicht man, in dem Falle, daß man ihm Persönlichkeit zuschreibt, mit dem weiblichen Geschlechte [...]" Ibid., 230-231.} Like Herder, Moritz also grants language itself a productive function: it is \textit{language} that sorts nouns into couples, that orders the objects of the world into gendered pairs (“So scheint die \textit{Sprache} auch alles leblose in der Welt zu paaren”). In this way, language mirrors what is, for Moritz, a fact of human life: the coming together of male and female in heterosexual marriage.

If we review the theories of grammatical gender discussed in this section, several trends become apparent. First, there is a consistent effort to link grammatical gender to human sexual difference. This sexual difference, moreover, is conceived in a strictly binary manner, the truth of which is understood to be universally valid. Just as the medical literature of this period asserts “une \textit{différence radicale}” between women and men, the discourse on grammatical gender, too, participates in the ordering and classification of the sexes via its insistence on rigid categories of masculinity and femininity.
Second, what distinguishes the late eighteenth-century texts on grammatical gender from those that precede them is the very interest that these texts express in the origin of grammatical gender. Neither Beauzée nor Gottsched, for instance, spends much time speculating about what might have motivated the first speakers to assign various words their genders. More pragmatic concerns, such as the standardization of dialects, often take precedence over imaginative conjecture. But for the scholars who come after these Enlightenment thinkers, such as Adelung or Moritz, the origin of grammatical gender is a subject of fascination: the topic “verdient eine kleine Untersuchung,” as Adelung puts it in his introduction. Of course, in this period, too, there are those who criticize the idea of linking grammatical gender to biological sex. For instance, the scholars Johann Werner Meiner and Christian Heinrich Wolke both argue, in 1781 and 1812, respectively, against connecting a word’s gender to its meaning. Yet, these voices are in the minority; from the late eighteenth until the end of the nineteenth century, the dominant theory of the origin of grammatical gender is that it can be understood through the human categories male/female. Furthermore, once it is established that grammatical gender holds a meaningful connection to biological sex, an investigation into gender also becomes an investigation into the human—not only into the supposed “primitive” mind that first created gender in language, but also into the reality and force of sexual difference. As Wilhelm von Humboldt would put it in the 1820s, the ultimate aim of Sprachstudium is not simply the study of language “in sich selbst”; on the contrary, Sprachstudium “ordnet sich mit allen andren dem höchsten und allgemeinen Zweck

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The theories examined in this section—which contend that grammatical gender is the necessary expression of sexual difference in language—uphold the connection between language and world that makes it possible to turn the study of language into a study of humanity.

From Animism to Analogy: Humboldt and Grimm on Grammatical Gender

In the beginning of the nineteenth century, the tension between arbitrariness and intelligibility encountered in Adelung’s texts continues to be a defining feature of the discourse on grammatical gender. Both Wilhelm von Humboldt and Jacob Grimm carry on the tradition of relating grammatical gender to biological sex. What Humboldt and Grimm share with Herder and Adelung is the understanding that inanimate objects are not assigned a sex prior to language, but through it, such that gender is linguistic presentation rather than representation. Where they differ from Herder and Adelung, however, is in the assertion that inanimate objects were understood to be living beings, or “handelnde Wesen.” Although they do so in different ways, both Humboldt and Grimm deemphasize the idea of the animation of objects, and instead claim that gender exists in language because sex is as important a category for language as it is for human life. Grimm does this by establishing the primacy of the masculine within language—not only the masculine gender, but also what he terms masculine “sounds”—while Humboldt aligns sexual difference with a more general ordering principle, the “Begriff der Zweiheit.”

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Humboldt and “der Begriff der Zweiheit”

We find a discussion of grammatical gender in two places in Wilhelm von Humboldt’s corpus: first, in an 1826 letter to the Sinologist Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat and, second, in the 1827 essay “Ueber den Dualis.” In both of these texts there is a shift in emphasis away from “primitive” psychology à la Adelung and towards language’s own creative capacity. Also unlike Adelung, Humboldt assigns grammatical gender a positive value, and considers it an indication of the productive potential of language. In the letter to Abel-Rémusat, for instance, Humboldt writes that the “distinction des genres des mots” belongs entirely to:

*la partie imaginative des langues.* L’examen de la pensée et des ses rapports intellectuels ne saurait y conduire ; regardée de ce point de vue, elle serait même rangée facilement parmi les imperfections des langues, comme peu philosophique, superflue et déplacée. Mais dès que l’imagination jeune et active d’une nation vivifie tous les mots, assimile entièrement la langue au monde réel, en achève la prosopopée, en faisant de chaque période un tableau où l’arrangement des parties et les nuances appartiennent plus à l’expression de la pensée qu’à la pensée même, alors les mots doivent avoir des genres, comme les êtres vivans appartiennent à un sexe. Il en résulte ensuite des avantages techniques, dans l’arrangement des phrases; mais pour les apprécier et en sentir le besoin, il faut qu’une nation soit frappée surtout de ce que la langue ajoute à la pensée, en la transformant en parole.156

Of course, Humboldt has not discarded all aspects of the discussion of grammatical gender we saw in Adelung. Humboldt still references “l’imagination jeune et active d’une nation”; he still relates grammatical gender to biological sex. What is different, however, is Humboldt’s focus on the word itself rather on that which it represents: the imagination vivifies “tous les *mots,*” not “tous les *objets.*” The category gender may have been inspired by the outside world, by biological sex, but it is not a simple one-to-one reflection of sex (indeed, if it were, all inanimate

objects would be neuter). Instead, Humboldt understands grammatical gender as a way of animating language itself. “Alors les mots doivent avoir des genres, comme les êtres vivans appartiennent à un sexe”: words must have genders because language, too, is a kind of Etre vivant, a creative and dynamic organism.157

One year later, in “Ueber den Dualis,” Humboldt further elaborates on this point. Here, Humboldt links sexual difference to a general principle of complementarity, a kind of ontological dualism, which he refers to as the Begriff der Zweiheit. The Begriff der Zweiheit is identifiable in all aspects of life and belongs to the realm of the visible as well as invisible,


According to Humboldt, the division of the sexes is one of the first dualities that man recognizes. After he learns to differentiate between groups of two vs. groups of more than two, “Dann geht die Wahrnehmung und die Empfindung der Zweiheit in den Mensch in der Theilung der beiden Geschlechter und in allen sich auf dieselbe beziehenden Begriffen und Gefühlen über.”159

This recognition of binarism is then extended to all kinds of natural phenomena, including day/night, earth/sky, and land/water. Man furthermore finds duality within the dialogic structure

158 Ibid., 136.
159 Ibid., 137.
of language itself, in the fact that the very possibility of language “wird durch Anrede und Erwiedерung bedingt.”

The previous attempts to naturalize grammatical gender that we encountered all functioned by relating gender to sex—languages have masculine and feminine genders because humans are male and female. Humboldt takes this reasoning one step further: he naturalizes even the division of the sexes, incorporating sexual difference into a grand scheme of complementarity and duality. Thus Humboldt’s philosophy necessarily excludes the possibility of a third: if it is a principle of duality that organizes the world, there can only ever be two sexes. Like Adelung’s later texts, Humboldt creates a secondary binary that distinguishes between the genders masculine and feminine, on the one hand, and neuter, on the other.

Because duality is inherent to the dialogic act at the root of linguistic communication, Humboldt claims that the dual is a grammatical form well-suited to the structure of language. This is a status that he will also claim for grammatical gender. But not all aspects of the world are equally suited to linguistic assimilation. The distinction between animate and inanimate objects, which is used in some Native American languages to classify nouns instead of gender, does not contain anything, asserts Humboldt, “das sich innig in die Form der Sprache verschmelzen liesse, so bleiben die auf sie gegründeten grammatischen Unterschiede, wie ein fremdartiger Stoff, in der Sprache liegen, und zeugen von einer nicht vollkommen durchgedrungenen Herrschaft des Sprachsinns.”

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160 Ibid., 138.
161 Ibid., 140.
Humboldt implies that the distinction of sex, on the other hand, is not only a category more easily absorbed by language, but also one that brings us closer to the “pure form of language.” Every language that adopts grammatical gender, Humboldt writes,

steht, meines Erachtens, schon der reinen Sprachform um einen Schritt näher, als eine, die sich mit dem Begriff des Lebendigen und Leblosen, obgleich dieser die Grundlage des Genus ist, begnügt. Allein der Sprachsinn zeigt nur dann seine Herrschaft, wenn das Geschlecht der Wesen wirklich zu einem Geschlecht der Wörter gemacht ist, wenn es kein Wort giebt, das nicht, nach den mannigfaltigen Ansichten der sprachbildenden Phantasie, einem der drei Geschlechter zugetheilt wird. Wenn man dies unphilosophisch nannte, verkannte man den wahrhaft philosophischen Sinn der Sprache. Alle Sprachen, die nur die natürlichen Geschlechter bezeichnen, und kein metaphorisch bezeichnetes Genus anerkennen, beweisen, dass sie entweder ursprünglich, oder in der Epoche, wo sie diesen Unterschied der Wörter nicht mehr beachteten, oder über ihn in Verwirrung gerathend, Masculinum und Neutrum zusammenwarfen, nicht von der reinen Sprachform energisch durchdrungen waren, nicht die feine und zarte Deutung verstanden, welche die Sprache den Gegenständen der Wirklichkeit leihst.\(^{162}\)

Those languages that distinguish between animate and inanimate—instead of between masculine, feminine and neuter—are, in Humboldt’s formulation, further from the “reine Sprachform” because they do not exercise their imaginative and metaphorical capacity. To make a nominal distinction between animate and inanimate objects is simply to reflect, in language, the world as it is. To classify nouns based on gender, however, is to allow language to reinterpret and reimagine the world—rendering the sky masculine, for instance, or the sun feminine. This, writes Humboldt, is the true law of language: “dass Alles, was in denselben [Sprachen] hinübergezogen wird, seine ursprüngliche Form ablegend, die der Sprache annehme. Nur so gelingt die Verwandlung der Welt in Sprache, und vollendet sich das Symbolisiren der Sprache auch vermittelst ihres grammatischen Baues.”\(^{163}\)

\(^{162}\) Ibid., 141.
\(^{163}\) Ibid.
subordinates the categories of the world to the categories of language, whereas the nominal distinction inanimate-animate would attempt the opposite.

Humboldt does not declare a relation between sexual difference and the underlying structure of language and cognition, as he did with the dual. Yet he does, elsewhere in the essay, claim that the division of the sexes plays a fundamental role in all human thought and feeling—no small assertion. “Der in seiner allgemeinsten und geistigsten Gestaltung aufgefasste Geschlechtsunterschied,” Humboldt writes, “führt das Bewusstseyn einer, nur durch gegenseitige Ergänzung zu heilenden Einseitigkeit durch all Beziehungen des menschlichen Denkens und Empfindens hindurch.” Grammatical gender is thus significant for two reasons: first, because it introduces sexual difference—for Humboldt, a central distinction of human life—into language. And second, because grammatical gender is language’s reconfiguration of sexual difference, rather than its mere reflection. In his emphasis on words instead of objects, Humboldt shifts the location of gender to the signifier, but maintains a necessary connection between the categories of language and the categories of the world: genus is inspired by sexus, but not reducible to it.

“Aus dem Mann geschaffen”: The Primacy of the Masculine Gender

Although we do not find it stated explicitly in his discussions of grammatical gender, it is evident from Humboldt’s other writings that he considered the masculine to be a kind of first principle, to which the feminine is secondary. This is true for his analysis of Männersprache vs. Weibersprache, where Männersprache is deemed equivalent to language in general, while

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164 Ibid., 138.
women’s speech is defined as a deviation or aberration from this norm. In his writings on aesthetics, which I also examined briefly in Chapter 1, although Humboldt considers the masculine and the feminine to be two necessary parts in constituting the whole, it is clear that, without the masculine, any conception of the feminine would be impossible. We may recall, for instance, Humboldt’s definition of the masculine as *Form* and the feminine as *Stoff*, such that “Alles Männliche zeigt mehr Selbstthätigkeit, alles Weibliche mehr leidende Empfänglichkeit.” One does not philosophize in *Empfänglichkeit* and *Stoff*. It is form which brings forth order, meaning, reason—and which makes it possible to craft a theory of gendered aesthetics in the first place. This distinction between active form and passive materiality furthermore aligns the masculine with the creation and true nature of language: first, because the human’s *sprachbildende Phantasie* is an active rather than a passive endeavor; and, second, because even Humboldt’s famous distinction between *Ergon* and *Energeia* can—at least according to his own theoretical system—be divided along gendered lines. Ibid Obvously, Humboldt understands language to be comprised of both form and substance; without some kind of materiality, such as verbal sounds, linguistic communication would be impossible. Yet, it is equally obvious that language should not, and cannot, be reduced to this material substance. To


do so would be to confuse *Energeia* with *Ergon*, or the activity of language (speech) with its finished product (writing, rules of grammar, “dead words”). What Humboldt valorizes in language is that it is dynamic, active, generative—concepts that he repeatedly associates with the masculine, over and against the feminine. In *Ueber die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues*, Humboldt writes that language should not be understood as a dead product (*todtes Erzeugtes*), but rather as a producing (*Erzeugung*).¹⁶⁷ Compare this to Humboldt’s characterization of the masculine, which is defined as the active principle required to initiate conception. “Jede Zeugung,” writes Humboldt in the essay “Ueber den Geschlechtsunterchied,” “ist eine Verbindung zweier verschiedener ungleichartiger Principien, die man, da die einen mehr thätig, die andern mehr leidend sind, die zeugenden (im engern Verstande des Wortes) und die empfangenden nennt.”¹⁶⁸ Although both masculine and feminine are required for procreation, it is the masculine *zeugende Kraft* that brings life into the feminine *Stoff* and thereby begins the process of conception. Similarly, it is language as *Energeia* that acts upon language as *Ergon* in order to generate linguistic change, reworking ‘dead’ material to craft new words and forms out of pre-existing ones. *Energeia* is what we might call the “erzeugende Kraft” of language, coded masculine in Humboldt’s philosophy, whereas *Ergon* is its ‘feminine’ passive material. Their coming together forms what Helmut Müller-Sievers has termed the “Hochzeit von Selbsttätigkeit und Empfänglichkeit im Sprechakt.”¹⁶⁹

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¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 416.


From this conception of the sexes, in which the masculine is the active and primary principle, follow several consequences. In regards to the origin of language, it means that the original creation of language is aligned with the masculine, since the feminine—aligned with passive materiality—does not possess the active, creative capacity required to produce and shape language.\textsuperscript{170} In regards to grammatical gender, it means that the masculine gender must not only have a relation to the concepts strength, activity, etc., but also that it must predominate over the feminine: the feminine must be a later and weaker form. It is this understanding of grammatical gender—as inherently hierarchical—that we find most clearly articulated in Jacob Grimm’s sprawling study of the Germanic language family, his three-volume \textit{Deutsche Grammatik}.

Grimm defines grammatical gender as “eine, aber im frühsten zustande der sprache schon vorgegangene anwendung oder übertragung des natürlich auf alle und jede nomina.”\textsuperscript{171} This sentence echoes Humboldt’s theory that gender is something generated inside of, not prior to, language. Like Humboldt, Grimm asserts that sex (“natürliches geschlecht”) was assigned to “alle und jede nomina,” rather than “alle und jede objekte.” Later in the text, Grimm defines grammatical gender slightly differently, as “eine in der phantasie der menschlichen sprache entsprungene ausdehnung des natürlich auf alle und jede gegenstände.” But even here, where Grimm seems to relate a word’s gender to the object it represents (the “gegenstand”), gender is

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\textsuperscript{170} As we already saw in Chapter 1, “the feminine” and “woman” are basically synonymous for Humboldt. In other texts he characterizes women in the same way that he characterizes the feminine principle; it is understood that the feminine resides in woman, the masculine in man.

\textsuperscript{171} Jacob Grimm, \textit{Deutsche Grammatik}, vol. 3 (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1890), 314. Hereafter Grimm’s \textit{Deutsche Grammatik} will be referred to in citations as \textit{DG}. 

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still understood to come from within language; it is produced not by an anthropomorphization of the world, as Adelung argued, but by the *Phantasie* of human language itself.

In his introduction to the chapter on *genus*, Grimm makes an assertion that he will spend a significant portion of the chapter supporting: that the three genders did not appear simultaneously, but that the feminine and neuter arose from the masculine:

Obgleich die drei geschlechter schon in den ältesten denkmälern deutscher sprache und weit über unsere geschichte hinaus als etwas vorhandes tiefeingewürzeltes gesetzt werden müßen, wird hierdurch nicht die wahrnehmung ausgeschloßen, daß sich masculinum als die lebendigste, kräftigste und ursprünglichste unter allen darstellte.\(^{172}\)

Grimm bases this declaration of the primacy of the masculine gender on grammatical, phonological, and semantic evidence. His claim furthermore extends to nouns representing animate as well as inanimate objects.

I will begin by examining Grimm’s arguments about phonology, specifically his gendered system of sounds. Although Grimm writes elsewhere that vowels are “feminine” and consonants are “masculine,”\(^{173}\) he makes an additional distinction here—between “masculine” short vowels and “feminine” long vowels. Weak masculine nouns, writes Grimm, “wird durch einen *kurzen* vocal eingeleitet (hana, ahd. hano), die des fem. durch einen *langen*.“ After a series of examples, Grimm then asserts that “es kann nicht bezweifelt werden, daß die kurzen vocale älter und elder sind.” Grimm does not bother to justify this claim in *Deutsche Grammatik*, but we can explain it based on his essay on the origin of language from 1851. There, Grimm proposes a theory that says language develops in several stages of increasing phonological and grammatical

\(^{172}\) Grimm, *DG*, 309.

\(^{173}\) Jacob Grimm, “Über den Ursprung der Sprache: Aus den Abhandlungen der königlichen Akademie der Wissenschaft vom Jahr 1851” (Berlin: Dümmler, 1866), 42.
complexity. According to this theory, in the first stage of development, language contained only short vowels and consonants. Masculine nouns are therefore “älter” because they apparently contain vowel sounds that have existed in language since its origin. The vowels found in feminine nouns, on the other hand, date from a later period and were derived from the short, ‘masculine’ vowels already in existence.

Words of the masculine gender are also primary, according to Grimm, because of the way they behave when declined: “das masc. pflegt in seiner *consonantischen* starken endung die strenge wortform zu enthalten […] Das weibliche kennzeichen ist ein weiches, auch im acc. haftendes A. Die form des fem. scheint daher schon eine milderung der spröderen männlichen.” Why the fact that masculine nouns retain their form during declension means that they pre-existed feminine nouns, Grimm again does not explain. Instead, he offers eleven other points in favor of his thesis “daß sich das *masculinum* als die lebendigste, kräftigste und ursprünglichste unter allen darstellte.” These points include: the fact that masculine nouns formally distinguish between nominative and accusative, whereas feminine nouns do not; that the genitive and dative forms of the feminine “scheint aus dem *gen. sg. masc.* erzeugt zu warden”; that words derived from masculine pronouns, such as *man*, are used for men as well as women; that feminine nouns can be derived from masculine words (“Herrin” from “Herr”), but rarely vice versa; and that “aus dichter kann dichterisch, aus gärtner gärtnerei gebildet werden,

174 “Der ursprache waren *e* und *o* fremd. wenn diphthonge und brechungen dem zweiten zeitraum, dem dritten umlauten und noch andere vocalrühungen gemäss sind, so wird man dem ersten vorzugsweise fast nur kurze vocale und einfache consonanten bezumessen haben.” Ibid., 43.

175 Grimm, *DG*, 309.
aus dichterisch, gärtnerin kein dichterinnisch, gärtnerinnei.”

We thus reach the conclusion that “Strenger consonantismus, rascher vocalgang und größere bildungsthätigkeit bestimmen hiernach den rang des masc. vor dem fem., das jenen consonanten vocale, jenen kurzen vocalen lange entgegensetzt und mehr leidender natur ist.”

My objective here is not to evaluate the veracity of Grimm’s linguistic claims but, rather, to draw attention to the way that he uses them to naturalize a hierarchical conception of the sexes. That certain feminine nouns have long vowels may be true, but that these words are “mehr leidender natur” is a not a linguistic judgment, but an ideological one (and one that he furthermore does not substantiate or explain). We find a similar naturalizing gesture at the beginning of Grimm’s section on the gender assigned to inanimate objects. After providing a list of weak feminine nouns derived from strong masculine ones, Grimm concludes: “Wenn man auch hierin keine bestärkung der mythe, daß die frau aus dem mann geschaffn worden ist, finden mag, so läßt sich doch selbst aus diesem zug der sprache die abhängigkeit des weibes von dem mann folgern.”

This “myth,” of course, is the story of Genesis, specifically the creation of Eve from the rib of Adam. Grimm indicates here that the science of linguistic analysis—which he lays out before the reader on the page—may replace faith in the Bible; elsewhere, he also suggests that the study of the German language might replace the study of the Bible within the German home.

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176 Ibid., 310.
177 Ibid., 311.
178 Ibid., 345.
179 In the introduction to the Deutsches Wörterbuch, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm write: “so könnte das Wörterbuch zum hausbedarf, und mit verlangen, oft mit andacht gelesen werden." Deutsches Wörterbuch, vol. I, col. xiii. As quoted by Michael Townson in Mother-Tongue and
study of language), the lesson remains the same: man is primary, woman secondary and dependent.

Grimm analyzes a variety of types of gendered nominal derivation (*Movierung*): strong masculine to weak feminine, weak masculine to weak feminine, strong neuter to weak feminine, and so on. “Strong” and “weak” can function as purely grammatical terms, referring to the way a noun behaves when declined; for Grimm, I would argue, they are *not only* grammatical, but also evaluative. Recall that Grimm bases his theory of grammatical gender on analogy: when creating a noun, the first speakers assigned it a gender based on whether they understood the object it represented to possess “male,” “female,” or “neuter” characteristics. Grimm enumerates these characteristics as follows: “das masculinum scheint das frühere, größere, festere, sprödere, raschere, das thätige, bewegliche, zeugende; das femininum das spätere, kleinere, weichere, stillere, das leidende, empfangende, das neutrum das erzeugte, gewirkte, stoffartige, generelle, unentwickelte, collective.” \(^{180}\) The characteristics “strong” and “weak” map onto this masculine/feminine dichotomy. Although he does not list them explicitly here, Grimm often uses the distinction *stark/schwach* throughout the chapter to explain the semantic content of masculine and feminine nouns. The way Grimm organizes his material in the section on nominal derivation is thus no accident. The case of weak feminine nouns derived from strong masculine nouns is the first entry; the phenomenon of *masculina moviert aus femininis* is the last. It is as if Grimm had arranged the types of derivation from most to least “natural,” where masculinity

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\(^{180}\) Grimm, *DG*, 257.
corresponds to strength, femininity to weakness. Indeed, the very fact that a masculine noun could come from a feminine one Grimm deems “überhaupt selt[en] and schwierig.”

Grimm’s conflation of grammatical and natural categories continues throughout the chapter on genus. Although, with his discussion of “masculine” and “feminine” vowels, it might seem that Grimm understands gender to be a property inherent in the word itself (in other words, a property of the signifier), he ultimately returns to a semantic explanation, arguing that a noun’s gender is motivated by its meaning. For the gender of animate objects, (which possess what Grimm terms “natürliches Geschlecht”), this is relatively straightforward: Mann is a masculine noun because men are male. For inanimate objects (which possess “grammatisches Geschlecht”), Grimm furnishes a theory of analogy. “Die einzig zulässige oder fruchtbare weise,” he writes,

das grammatische geschlecht vorzutragen, scheint mir diejenige, welche auf bedeutung der wörter rücksicht nimmt; auf diesem wege allein kann es vielleicht gelingen, analogien aufzuspüren, denen die menschliche einbildungskraft nachgehangen hat, indem sie das natürliche geschlecht auf eine unabsehbare menge anderer substantiva übertrug. 181

Grimm’s theory, based on the “bedeutung der wörter,” situates gender in the signified. The relation between the signifier and the signified is not arbitrary—this is why masculine nouns apparently have short vowels and strong consonants, sounds that Grimm associates with masculinity. Yet it is important to emphasize that, according to Grimm’s theory, masculine nouns are not masculine simply because they have ‘masculine’ sounds or suffixes. Instead, they have these properties because they stand for something “masculine”: an object or concept that has an analogical relation to the male sex. “Masculine” form is motivated by “masculine” meaning. According to Grimm’s theory of language, in the original Germanic Ursprache, the

181 Ibid., 356.
form and meaning of all words were united as one; every object and experience had its perfect, corresponding mode of linguistic expression.\textsuperscript{182} Grimm laments that we have fallen away from this original language, but also celebrates that traces still exist in modern Germanic tongues, which allows language to be a source of knowledge about the Germanic people and their history.\textsuperscript{183}

Unlike the Enlightenment texts I discussed at the beginning of this chapter, which believe the assignment of grammatical gender to be relatively arbitrary—based on caprice, and therefore inaccessible to the modern speaker—Grimm understands the motivation behind grammatical gender to be fundamentally intelligible. The universal “truth” of sexual difference provides the code through which the modern scholar of language can decipher or detect (aufspüren in the above quotation) the reasoning behind a word’s grammatical gender. This is a practice in which Grimm engages repeatedly in Deutsche Grammatik: For many types of insects, writes Grimm, “gilt die regel, daß sie ihrer kleinheit und schwäche wegen weiblich sind.”\textsuperscript{184} On the other hand, the reason why most trees are of the feminine gender in Greek and Latin may be found “in der

\textsuperscript{182} According to Benes, 126.

\textsuperscript{183} “Da die hochdeutsche sprache des dreizehnten jahrhunderts edlere, reinere formen zeigt, als unsere heutige, die des achten und neunten wiederum reinere, als des dreizehnten, endlich das gothische des vierten oder fünften noch vollkommner; so folgt, dazs die sprache, wie sie die deutschen völker im ersten jahrhundert geredet haben, selbstt die gothische übertroffen haben werde. man könnte ein förmliche berechnung über den progressive untergang der flexionsfähigkeit anstellen.” Jacob Grimm, “Einige Hauptsätze, die ich aus der Geschichte der deutschen Sprache gelernt habe,” Kleinere Schriften, vol. 8 (Hildesheim: Olms, 1965-66), 45-55, here 45. This text was originally part of the preface to volume 1 of Deutsche Grammatik.

Ulrich Wyss points out that Grimm also hoped that an attention to language will reinvigorate historical study: for Grimm, “die Sprache erscheint als privilegierte Geschichts-Quelle, aber auch als Gelegenheit zur Erfrischung der müden Historiographie.” See Wyss, Die wilde Philologie: Jacob Grimm und der Historismus (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1979), 171.

\textsuperscript{184} Grimm, DG, 363.
beschränkteren lebenstätigkeit der unbeweglichen bäume.”185 In German, the word Stamm is masculine because the trunk is “gleichsam dem vater und erhalter des ganzen baums.”186 Hand is feminine and Fuß masculine, Grimm furthermore tells us, because hands are “kleiner, zierlicher” whereas feet are “größer” and “stärker.”187

“Warum werden soviel frauennamen mit –burg und –gart gebildet,” Grimm wonders at one point, “keine mit haus, hof, heim, wang?”188 This question suggests that words related to women should reflect women’s natural place—the home, the private sphere. The desire to naturalize gender in language, as evidenced here, is an overriding impulse of Grimm’s text. Similar to those before him, Grimm’s explanation of grammatical gender works to bolster a binary and complementary conception of the sexes, in which the masculine is defined by activity, the feminine by passivity. Like with Adelung, Moritz, or Humboldt, Grimm’s theory only allows for two real sexes; the neuter is supposed to designate a not-yet-developed sex, as in that of a fetus.189 However, in his insistence on the derivational and phonological primacy of the masculine, Grimm goes a step further than his predecessors, turning the existence of gender in language into a confirmation of male dominance and authority. Many scholars have analyzed

185 Grimm, DG, 366
186 Grimm, DG, 409
187 Grimm, DG, 400. Grimm is especially interested in the fact that the genders of “hand” and “foot” are consistent across German, Latin, and Ancient Greek.
188 Ibid., 319.
189 Grimm’s explanation of the neuter gender is as follows: “Es scheint bedenklich, ob man auch schon dem neutrum, das in dem grammatischen genus eine so große rolle spielt, natürlichen anfang zuschreiben könne, mit andern worten, ob sein ursprung in dem begriff von foetus oder proles lebendiger geschöpf e gesucht und daraus eine übertragung auf andere wörter geleitet wurden dürfe?” (DG, 314).
Grimm’s emphasis on patriarchal authority in his compilation (with his brother, Wilhelm Grimm) of the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, as well as in his work on legal history. Jack Zipes, for instance, argues that many of the Grimms’ fairy tales support a process of male socialization that endorses “male domination” and “benevolent patriarchal rule.” In Grimm’s repeated advocacy of the primacy of the masculine gender in *Deutsche Grammatik*, we can see that this ideology also extends to his work on language.

The epigraph to my chapter is a quotation from the Dutch linguist Willem Gerard Brill, who, in 1846, advocated a similar theory of grammatical gender in which the masculine precedes and “gives birth” to the feminine. According to Brill’s theory, there originally was no nominal distinction between masculine, feminine, and neuter. There was only one gender—what we now know as the masculine. Later, however,

\[\text{als man sich bewußt wurde, daß in den meisten Fällen nur durch eine Fiktion einem toten Gegenstande oder abstrakten Begriffe sinnliche Wirkungen geliehen wurden und die ursprüngliche energische Kraft der Nomina verlorengegangen war, da drückte sich dieses Bewußtsein durch weichere Biegungsformen an den Substantiven aus, und damit war das weibliche Sprachgeschlecht aus dem männlichen geboren, denn wie hätte sich mit einigen Subjektsbegriffen verbundene Gedanke der Passivität schicklicher vorstellen lassen, als unter dem Bilde der Weiblichkeit?}\]

Brill’s theory varies slightly from Grimm’s in that Brill suggests that gender is completely a property of inflection (weak forms of inflection are retroactively assigned the feminine gender), whereas we know Grimm believes there to be a correlation between the meaning of a word and its gender (words that designate “weak” or “passive” objects, for instance, are created feminine).


191 Brill, 294. As quoted and translated in Royen, 56. My emphasis.
Nonetheless, Brill and Grimm share the same overarching position: namely, that the masculine is not only superior, but also antecedent, to the feminine. That Brill inverts the roles of the sexes in procreation and uses a birthing metaphor to express this idea illustrates his commitment—a commitment he shares with many in the nineteenth century—to the validation of male authority via the manipulation of scientific evidence, whether linguistic or otherwise. In the discourse on physiology, for instance, a similar conjecture appears: Philipp Franz von Walther, a surgeon and ophthalmologist, writes earlier in the century that the male sex is “das Uranfängliche,” “etwas durch sich selbst, in allen seinen Attributen rein positive,” while the female is “rein negative, nur im Gegensatz des Männlichen, nur durch dieses, und indem dasselbe ihm einen Theil seiner Wesenheit verleiht.” Like Wilhelm von Humboldt’s *Horen* texts from the 1790s, Walther argues that the process of conception is totally dependent on the male sex. In fact, according Walther’s theory, man creates both himself and woman: “die Kraft des Mannes erschafft sich selbst und das ihr Gleiche in dem Weibe, und vereinigt sich mit ihm.” Underlying Walther’s physiology is a patriarchal fantasy of procreation that attempts to dispense with the female sex altogether. We see this fantasy echoed in Jacob Grimm’s theory of grammatical gender, in his attempt to prove that it is the masculine in which all other genders originate.

**“Eine nichtsagende Form”: The Neogrammarian Critique of Grimm**

Jacob Grimm died in 1863, but his *Deutsche Grammatik* lived on, republished in 1890 with a new preface by the philologist Gustav Roethe. Grimm’s chapter on *genus*, hailed by its

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192 Philipp Franz von Walther, *Physiologie des Menschen mit durchgängiger Rücksicht auf die comparative Physiologie der Thiere* (Landshut: Krüll, 1808), 373. As quoted in Honegger, 188.
193 Ibid., 375.
editors as the most important part of *Deutsche Grammatik*, became a topic of debate beginning in the late 1880s—specifically, between Roethe and several members of the Neogrammari an school, including Karl Brugmann and Victor Michels. The Neogrammarians were a group of linguists based in Leipzig who advocated a formalist approach to the study of language and who are most well known for proposing a theory of the regularity of sound change.

Grimm’s text not only incorporated earlier, by then well-known theories of gender in language (such as those of Herder, Adelung, and Humboldt), but was itself enormously influential. As the linguist Marcin Kilarski has shown, Grimm “constituted the basis for other 19th century accounts of the nature and origin of Indo-European gender,” such as those of Franz Bopp (1832), Wilhelm Bleek (1872), and Karl Heyse (1838); other prominent philologists,

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194 As cited in Kilarski, 128.


196 “The extension of gender to inanimate nouns was viewed in comparable terms [to Grimm] by Franz Bopp (1791-1867), as illustrated by his treatment of neuter gender in his comparative grammar of Indo-European (Bopp 1833), and by Wilhelm Bleek, as shown by his description of personification in an article on gender/noun classes in Indo European, Bantu and Khoisan languages (Bleek 1872a). Semantic properties of genders in Grimm’s *Grundsatz* were reflected in other grammars of German as well as more general studies. For example, Karl Heyse (1797-1855) drew on the semantic contrasts proposed by Grimm in an argument against a formal explanation of the origin of gender. Heyse allowed only for a notional explanation in view of the
including August Friedrich Pott (1836) and Heymann Steinthal (1865), also championed a similar understanding of the origin of grammatical gender. In attacking the theory of gender presented in Grimm’s *Deutsche Grammatik*, the Neogrammarians were thus attacking a relatively entrenched understanding of gender and the relationship between language and sex.

In this way, the debate between Roethe and Brugmann can be seen as a liminal moment between two different conceptions of language. The first believes grammatical structures to be non-arbitrary, motivated by categories of human experience. The second understands the form of language, and its course of development, to be primarily the product of chance. Another way to differentiate between these two perspectives is to ask a question posed at the beginning of this chapter: “Does meaning inhere within the structures of our language?” For Grimm, Humboldt, et al., the answer is decidedly “yes”: the meaning offered up by grammatical structures is that they affirm the structures of human life and identity. The dual grammatical form affirms the dialogic structure of language as well as our binary experience of the world; grammatical gender affirms the naturalness of sexual difference and the male/female categories it is assumed to create. For Brugmann, on the other hand, the existence of grammatical gender proves nothing except itself; it is nothing beyond a purely formal means of distinguishing between nouns.

Brugmann’s contention—that grammatical gender is internally rather than externally motivated—also has the consequence of de-emphasizing the formative power of sexual difference. What was a determinative factor for Grimm’s theory becomes, in Brugmann’s texts, a nonessential characteristic. Thus we arrive at a dispute between Brugmann and Roethe as to

derivative nature of morphological and phonological properties of nouns.” Kilarski, *Nominal Classification*, 129-130.

197 See Kilarski, 131.
whether it is possible to attribute human characteristics to an object without also assigning it a sex. In 1889, Brugmann attacks what he sees as Grimm’s emphasis on “sexualization”: Brugman argues that, even if it were true that our primitive ancestors anthropomorphized inanimate objects, this does not necessarily mean that they also assigned them a sex. In 1890, Roethe counters Brugmann’s claim through a series of rejoinders:


First, a note on terminology: both Brugmann and Roethe use the term “personify” (personificiren) to describe Grimm’s theory of the origin of grammatical gender, but this should not be confused with the theory of animism or anthropomorphism put forth by Adelung and Herder. Grimm does relate grammatical gender to personification in Deutsche Grammatik, but this is limited to a very restricted class of nouns—words that correspond to mythological figures, such as “sun,” “moon,” “thunder” and “lightning.” Grimm argues that the personification of these entities in ancient myths decided their grammatical gender. Donar and Thunar, for instance, “drücken in ahd. und säch. mundart nicht nur den donnernden gott, sondern auch den schall

¹⁹⁸ Roethe 1890, xxiv-xxv.
seines wagens am himmel aus, der *donner* ist darum masc.”\textsuperscript{199} Brugmann, for his part, claims that the reverse is true: the grammatical gender of words actually determined the way they were personified in mythology.\textsuperscript{200} More broadly, however, Roethe and Brugmann seem to use the term “personificiren” to refer both to the specific cases of personification outlined in *Deutsche Grammatik* and to Grimm’s general theory of gender, in which gender is semantically motivated via an analogical relation to sex.

This point of disagreement between Roethe and Brugmann may seem arcane, but the stakes of their dispute are in fact quite high. In the above quotation, Roethe is arguing for nothing less than the fundamental status of sexual difference. “Personification ohne geschlechtsanschauung ist ein unding,” he writes. For Roethe, sex is a constitutive quality of human existence; there is no general conception of the human that is not already sexed. Roethe’s ideology instead believes in a universal human subject that is not sex-less, but male. Woman is the particular, the different, the pathological, and the deviation from the male model. Hence the fact that (as we saw in the first section of this chapter), numerous books were written in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries on the topic of “Woman,” while significantly less ink was spilled attempting to uncover the secrets of male identity. “Mensch,” Roethe writes, “ist eben nur eine unschauliche abstraction von mann oder frau.” Implied here—and in fact articulated explicitly by Grimm—is the assumption that man is the universal, woman the derivational.

Conversely, what Brugmann suggests in his essays on grammatical gender is a general conception of the human that is independent of sex. In his 1890 response to Roethe, Brugmann

\textsuperscript{199} Grimm, *DG*, 351.

\textsuperscript{200} See Brugmnan 1897, 20.
concedes that “our primitive ancestors” may have indeed personified some inanimate objects, but it is unlikely that they also “sexualized” them, and that this practice has any relation to the formation of grammatical gender. Brugmann writes,

Dass unsre in primitiven culturverhältnissen lebenden vorfahren einen regeren personificationstrieb hatten als wir heutigen, hab ich natürliche nicht geleugnet. Ich habe auch das als principiell denkbar zugegeben, dass man in der sprache im weitesten umfang lebloses als lebendiges, persönliches behandelt habe. Nur das erklärte ich für unwahrscheinlich, dass man auch jeden gegenstand und begriff, den man verpersönlichte, nach einer bestimmtenseite hin sexualisierte, ihm entweder männliche oder weibliche wesenheit ansah.\textsuperscript{201}

That it is possible to have an idea of der Mensch that is not already sexed is, compared to the other texts on gender that I have examined in this chapter, a radical de-emphasis of the role of sex in human identity. In this way, Brugmann’s critique of Grimm and Roethe is also an implicit critique of the dominant nineteenth-century ideology of sexual difference, which understands sex to order and influence all aspects of life.

In addition to offering a new perspective on the significance of sexual difference, Brugmann also, of course, offers a new theory of the origin of grammatical gender. Brugmann’s explanation of gender proceeds as follows: in Indo-European, the suffixes –ā- and –iē- became associated with the feminine gender because a small group of words with these suffixes referred to women, for instance *mā-mā (mother).\textsuperscript{202} These suffixes then become productive such that other words with the same suffixes were also associated with the feminine gender, even though these words had no semantic relation to women. In 1897, Brugmann revises this thesis to say that the suffixes –ā- and –iē- originally did not even refer to women at all, but rather to “abstracts and

\textsuperscript{201} Brugmann 1890, 529.
\textsuperscript{202} Brugmann 1889, 104. For a more lengthy explanation of Brugmann’s theory, see Kilarski, 133-141.
collectives.” They gained a feminine association only later, through a series of derivations, such as what occurred with the German word *Huhn*: “this meant at first the cocks and the hens together, then the flock of female fowl, and finally the individual female fowl.” Thus, Brugmann continues, “If the suffixes –ā- and –iē- implanted themselves in this manner in a number of words of feminine signification, the idea of feminine sex could attach itself to the suffixes, and they could acquire this additional shade of meaning.”

Although Brugmann’s theory does establish an initial connection between grammatical gender and biological sex, this connection is quickly severed. First, for Brugmann, the fact that these particular suffixes are associated with the feminine gender is completely arbitrary. There is no intrinsic relation between the sounds –ā- and –iē- and any concept of maternity or femininity. This runs counter to Grimm’s theory of gendered phonology, which suggests that consonants and short vowels are “masculine” because they bear a resemblance to characteristics like strength, power, activity, etc. Second, in Brugmann’s theory, once the suffixes become productive and the feminine categorization is applied to other nouns, the feminine gender ceases to hold any relation to the female sex; gender becomes purely a means of formal classification.

What this means semiotically is that there is no longer a connection between gender and the signified, or indeed the referent. Grammatical gender is enclosed completely within the signifier. Decoupled from the world, language becomes autonomous: it no longer derives its form from the structure of man’s body, culture, or environment. Where Grimm’s retrospective epistemology made language speak of the power of the human will, and of a majestic cultural

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203 Brugmann 1897, 27.
heritage, Brugmann allows language to speak only about itself. This marks a closure of Humboldt’s project of *Sprachwissenschaft*, in which the study of language could lead to the revelation of fundamental human truths. For Brugmann and his fellow Neogrammarians, this is a sign of scientific progress. It means a departure from Romantic myths of “pro-ethnic antiquity” surrounded with “a fantastic and mystical glamour.”  

Neogrammarian linguistics instead “regards more the present,” and even then only that which can be found within language. A consequence of Brugmann’s conception of language, however, is that, in severing the word from the world, it renders language foreign to man, incapable of reaching the reality of things. When the so-called *Sprachkrise* begins around 1900—bringing with it a loss of confidence in language and its ability “ins Innere der Dinge zu dringen,” as Hugo von Hofmannsthal so famously put it—it is precisely this conception of language that becomes so troubling, yet also allows for new means of literary experimentation.

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204 Brugmann 1897, 32.
205 Ibid.
Chapter 3.

Embodying the Unsayable:
“Feminine Language” and Literary Form around 1900


What Benjamin refers to here as the “Sprache der Frauen” is neither the ethnographically-documented women’s language of a “primitive” tribe, nor the presumption that all women generally speak differently than men. Instead, it is a theoretical conception of women’s language that understands the language of women to be ontologically different from the language of men. As I will demonstrate in this chapter, Benjamin’s “language of women” is immediate and non-conceptual, a kind of corporeal communion rather than verbal communication. The “language of women” is a non-language, an imagined medium of expression that does not mean but is. As such, it must remain “ungeschaffen” because the moment that the “Sprache der Frauen” becomes articulated as language it will tip over into the regular language of men and thus cease to exist.

The notion that there are two fundamentally different kinds of language—one transcendent and one mundane—is well-known within the Judeo-Christian tradition: consider the

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distinction between the language of God and the language of man, between human language before and after the Fall, or before and after the destruction of Babel. Indeed, these are distinctions that will interest Benjamin later in his career. But in this early text from 1914, there is no mention of God or of Adamic language. Instead, it is women who are associated with the idea of an alternative medium of expression. How does gender come to be the means of differentiation here? What are “die Frauen” doing in a text about the nature of language and “the conversation”? And how does Benjamin’s imagination of the “Sprache der Frauen” relate to the hybrid genre of his text, which is equal parts poetic meditation and theoretical argument?

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I have opened with Benjamin here because “Das Gespräch” employs a strategy that I want to call attention to in this chapter: namely, the imagination of an ideal medium of expression, associated with femininity, which is understood to access what is unsayable in regular language. If, in this conceptualization, feminine language exists beyond the limits of the effable, then it also must exist beyond the limits of the textual. Benjamin’s text, for instance, stages a dialogue or “conversation” in which the “Sprache der Frauen” does not partipate, since this language can be manifested in the text only as silence. This chapter investigates how the idea of an alternative feminine language, which cannot be integrated into linguistic media, became a productive means for testing and exploring the boundaries not only of the dialogic form, as in Benjamin’s text, but of other literary genres as well. In what follows, I will look at three examples of authors from the period around 1900 who stage a feminine language in their texts in order to confront the limits of their own literary forms, including: Walter Benjamin’s poetic-
philosophical meditation “Das Gespräch,” Robert Musil’s collections of novellas, Vereinigungen and Drei Frauen, and Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s writings on dance, including Furcht and his pantomimes.

Benjamin, Musil, and Hofmannsthal are canonical figures, and the extent to which they, like many Modernist writers, were engaged in projects of experimenting with generic form is well-documented. What I want to show is that these experimental projects often depend on a gendered conception of language that links the possibility of a radically “other” language—which can exist only in the realm of the theoretical—with femininity. By focusing on the relationship between gender and literary form, I want to advocate here for a literary gender studies that does not focus exclusively on representation, but that attempts to uncover the role of gender in the very production of literature. In other words: To what extent are the theoretical programs of Benjamin, Musil and Hofmannsthal’s texts actually made possible by a reliance on concepts of gender? How is gender embedded in the formal experimentation that we consider to be a hallmark of Modernism?

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Benjamin, Musil and Hofmannsthal write during a period of intense interest in the nature of woman and her relationship to man. By the time the nineteenth century turns into the twentieth, the category “woman” has become an overdetermined and readily available symbol of alterity. As we saw in the previous two chapters, discourses on biology, medicine, education, politics—and even Sprachwissenschaft—worked throughout the nineteenth century to shore up the notion of the two sexes as fundamentally different in kind, incommensurable. The early 1900s witnesses a renewed attention to the allegedly immutable differences between man and
woman. In 1908, for instance, Sigmund Freud develops a psychoanalytic model in which woman’s penis envy destines her for a different course of sexual development than man.\textsuperscript{207} Around this same time, the neurologist Paul Julius Möbius pens the book, \textit{Über den physiologischen Schwachsinn des Weibes} (1900), which argues that women are inferior to men in all areas except raising children.\textsuperscript{208} In 1903, Otto Weininger’s \textit{Geschlecht und Charakter} infamously claims that “das absolute Weib hat kein Ich”\textsuperscript{209} and that woman is soulless and incapable of genius. In 1910, to take just one more example, the German author Max Funke publishes the monograph \textit{Sind Weiber Menschen? Mulieres homines non sunt}, recovering a question that had first been posed in print in the 1500s but that had remained dormant for several centuries.\textsuperscript{210} Funke answers his own query in the negative: women are not “human,” but a intermediary evolutionary category between men and apes.

Historians of this period have postulated a variety of reasons for the proliferation of such theories of woman’s difference, including: the rise of the feminist movement in Austria and Germany; a general “crisis of masculine identity”; and women’s increased participation in the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{208} For more on Möbius and Weininger, and the contemporaneous feminist response to them, see Agatha Schwartz, “Austrian Fin-de-Siècle Heteroglossia: The Dialogism of Misogyny, Feminism, and Viriphobia,” \textit{German Studies Review}, vol. 28, no. 2 (May, 2005): 347-366.
\item \textsuperscript{209} Otto Weininger, \textit{Geschlecht und Charakter: eine prinzipielle Untersuchung} (Wien, Leipzig: W. Braumüller, 1903), 240.
\item \textsuperscript{210} For background on this question in the sixteenth-century, see Manfred Fleischer, “‘Are women human?’ – The Debate of 1595 between Valens Acidalius and Simon Gediccus,” \textit{The Sixteenth Century Journal XII}, no. 2 (Summer 1981): 107-120.
\end{itemize}
labor market.211 The historical circumstances behind these theories of “woman” are beyond the scope of this chapter. I wish only to draw attention to the fact that, in the early twentieth century, the idea of woman’s alterity was not only readily accessible, but thriving, continually being redeveloped.

This chapter connects these discourses on women’s difference to the way that Benjamin, Musil and Hofmannsthal configure their female characters’ relationship to language. It is woman’s established status as man’s Other, I will argue, that allows these authors to link their female characters to multiple forms of difference, including the difference of an alternative language and—in the case of Hofmannsthal—a different aesthetic medium altogether. “Man spricht Gedanken im Roman od. in der Novelle nicht aus sondern läßt sie anklingen,” Musil would write in a notebook entry shortly before the publication of Vereinigungen. “Warum wählt man dann nicht lieber den Essay? Eben weil diese Gedanken nichts rein Intellektuelles sind sondern ein Intellektuelles verflochten mit Emotionalem. Weil es mächtiger sein kann solche Gedanken nicht auszusprechen sondern zu verkörpern.”212 The category “woman” is one device that allows this Verkörpern to take place: the alterity of a new language and experience, which is marked as beyond the limits of the textual, is assigned to a female character and embodied by the alterity of woman within the text.


212 Robert Musil, “[Form und Inhalt/Ohne Titel – um 1910],” Gesammelte Werke II: Prosa und Stücke, Kleine Prosa, Aphorismen, Autobiographisches, Essays und Reden, Kritik, ed. Adolf Frisé (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1978), 1299-1302, here 1301. From here on, this volume will be referred to in citations as GW II.
Can Women Speak? Benjamin’s Silent Sappho

“Das Gespräch” is a short text that dates from 1913/14, early in Benjamin’s career, and is comprised of eight enigmatic meditations on the nature of language, the relationship between speaker and listener, and the conditions of artistic production. Although Benjamin’s characterization of “Sappho und ihre Freundinnen” offers one of the most explicitly gendered conceptions of language from the early twentieth century, it has received relatively little critical attention. The scholars who do write about “Das Gespräch” usually do not analyze it in depth, and often stress a similarity to French feminist theory from later in the century, particularly the work of Luce Irigaray.\(^{213}\) I will take a different tack here and focus on the form of Benjamin’s text. In what follows, I aim to show that there is a direct connection between the elliptical style and hybrid genre of Benjamin’s text and his imagination of the “Sprache der Frauen.”

I would first like to provide a brief outline of the role of gender in “Das Gespräch,” although the text, with its non-narrative structure and opaque language, resists summary. Woman

\(^{213}\) Sigrid Weigel, for example, argues that Irigaray “might well find herself in agreement” with Benjamin’s assessment that “language deprives [women] of their souls” and also compares Benjamin’s text to Julia Kristeva’s About Chinese Women. See Weigel, “‘How did Sappho and her friends speak?’: Language Magic and Gender Difference,” in Body- and Image-Space: Re-reading Walter Benjamin, trans. Georgina Paul with Rachel McNicholl and Jeremy Gaines (New York: Routledge, 1996), 77-79, here 78. Generally, Benjamin’s question, “Wie sprachen Sappho und ihre Freundinnen” is cited as an example of a theory of gendered language but is rarely analyzed in detail. See, for instance, Silvia Bovenschen, Die imaginierte Weiblichkeit (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1979). In Benjamin scholarship, “Das Gespräch” is sometimes mentioned as an example of his early writing, but here it is also rarely the subject of significant inquiry. The Cambridge companion to Walter Benjamin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), for example, does not mention “Das Gespräch” at all, while the similarly titled A Companion to the Works of Walter Benjamin mentions it only in the context of Benjamin’s conception of eros throughout his career. See Diane Chisholm, “Benjamin’s Gender, Sex, and Eros,” in A Companion to the Works of Walter Benjamin (Rochester: Camden House, 2009), 246-272.
is absent from the beginning of “Das Gespräch.” Parts I and II are comprised of exclusively male figures: Fathers and youths, a male speaker [der Sprechende] and a male listener [der Hörende]. As the text progresses, however, Benjamin’s figures increasingly move away from the male-dominated space of the first few pages. By section IV, the listener has been rendered female [die Hörende] while the speaker remains male. “The conversation” is now described in terms of heterosexual intercourse: the listener is likened to a prostitute [Dirne] who “receives” [empfängt] silence just as a woman “receives” a man.214 Then, at the end of section VI, Benjamin writes that men, whose language has been composed of dirty jokes [Zoten] and the violent manipulation of words, must “aufstehen und ihre Bücher erschlagen und sich ein Weib rauben, sonst werden sie heimlich ihre Seelen erwürdigen.”215 Once the men stand up and close their books, they do not return—they are excised from the rest of the text. In the final two sections, men are replaced by “Sappho und ihre Freundinnen,” and heterosexual sex is replaced by the “unproductive” [ohne Zeugung] sex between women, as Benjamin turns to a contemplation of “die Sprache der Frauen.” In this way, just as Benjamin tells us that silence is the “internal frontier” of the conversation, women—and their language of silence—is the “internal frontier” of his own text, the point towards which his writing progresses.

These final sections both begin with the question stated earlier, “Wie sprachen Sappho und ihre Freundinnen?” Section VII follows this up with the seemingly absurd query, “Wie kam es, daß Frauen sprachen?” How, indeed? For, according to Benjamin, it is not natural for women to use the regular language of men:

214 Ibid., Sections IV and VI.
215 “Das Gespräch,” 95.
Denn die Sprache entseelt sie. Die Frauen empfangen keine Laute von ihr und keine Erlösung. Die Worte wehen über die Frauen hin, die beieinander sind, aber das Wehen ist plump und tonlos, sie werden geschwätzig. Ihr Schweigen thront aber über ihrem Reden. Die Sprache trägt die Seele der Frauen nicht, denn sie vertrauten ihr nichts [...] Worte sind stumm. Die Sprache der Frauen blieb ungeschaffen. Sprechende Frauen sind von einer wahnwitzigen Sprache besessen.\footnote{Ibid., 95.}

Women may speak in regular language (what Benjamin simply calls *die Sprache*), but they cannot use it to truly express themselves (it does not “bear their souls aloft”\footnote{This translation is from Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. I, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 9.} and they also cannot master or control it (speaking women are passive, “possessed” by a “crazy” language). This is because women are not meant to speak it; or, alternatively, it is not meant for them. Woman’s true language is something else, a language of bodily communion rather than verbal communication, a language of silence. Benjamin describes this language in the following section, again using “Sappho und ihre Freundinnen” as a model:


In this passage, Benjamin directly contrasts verbal language with the women’s bodily experience. Sappho and her female friends either cannot or do not speak to each other (their words “remain unspoken”), but they do converse with their bodies, through “caressing one another.” Benjamin works with a number of contradictions here. He writes repeatedly of the “Sprache der Frauen”
and refers to the women’s bodily communion as a “conversation” [Gespräch], but their conversation is also clearly described as moving beyond language (it “frees itself” from language) and including in itself its own end (only when they are together does the conversation “come to rest in the past”). Furthermore, the women listen [lauschen], but they are listening to silence; they speak, but they are speaking silence. These contradictions arise because Benjamin describes the medium through which the women commune as if it were a language—using terms such as “speak,” “listen,” “converse”—but his point is precisely the opposite: that their medium of expression is not language in the usual sense, not die Sprache. Instead of words, which represent, the women have the body, which experiences. This experience is both haptic and optic (they “liebkosen,” “sehen,” “schauen,” “wagen den Anblick”), but not symbolic, in that it does not stand for anything else. Benjamin writes that “ihr Gespräch befreite sich vom Gegenstand.” Their “language” is its own object; it does not relate to anything outside of itself.

*Humboldt vs. Benjamin, or parole vs. langue*

The association of women with the body that underwrites Benjamin’s claims here is not necessarily new. It is the same ideology that associates men with the intellect, an assumption that Benjamin also employs in this text when he portrays “the Genius” as male. Yet, if we compare the way Benjamin uses the female body in his description of “die Sprache der Frauen” to the way that it was used in the nineteenth century, a significant distinction emerges. In Chapter 1, I traced how nineteenth-century discourses on Webersprache drew on woman’s supposedly unique link to the body in order to substantiate a number of arguments. Wilhelm von Humboldt, for instance, wrote that women speak more “naturally” because they are “näher an die Natur geknüpft”—because their reproductive role ties them more directly to natural processes. In a similar vein,
Hermann Heinrich Ploss claimed that women’s shame about uttering words related to their genitals caused them to create a new way of speaking, which led to the evolution of certain women’s languages. In both of these examples, women’s speech—and even discrete women’s languages—are understood to be influenced by the particularities of women’s bodily identity, but they still function in the same way as men’s language does, following the same grammatical structures. There is only one Language, and—according to most nineteenth-century accounts—men have mastered its expression better than women. In Benjamin’s text, however, this is not the case. The “language of women” is now ontologically different from the language of men. Women’s speech (silence, bodily communion) is the expression of a fundamentally different “language,” not a different expression of the same language used by men. Or, to put it more simply, borrowing from Ferdinand de Saussure: in the nineteenth century, the difference of women’s language is a difference of *parole*, whereas in Benjamin’s text, it is a difference of *langue*.219

What are the stakes of this shift? One consequence of the move from *parole* to *langue* is that the figure of woman is taken out of the material world and relocated in the realm of the theoretical. Woman and woman’s language become an ideal, but the impossibility of the realization of this ideal also acts as a kind of erasure. Women’s language is valorized by Benjamin’s text as the “unappropriated source of meaning,” a positive alternative to the violence and inauthenticity of *die Sprache*. Yet, we should not forget that the end result of this

valorization is, quite literally, the silencing of women—the suppression of women’s speech. Benjamin must speak for woman about her language, since woman is rendered incapable of speaking about it herself. In situating women’s language exclusively in the realm of *langue*, Benjamin’s text assures the impossibility of its expression, as *parole* is needed to say what *langue* is.

In this way, Benjamin’s text may seem to establish its authority over the “Sprache der Frauen” in a manner not so dissimilar from that practiced by the linguists of the nineteenth century. Nineteenth-century linguists exerted control over women’s language through their application of the scientific apparatus. Women may have provided the raw linguistic data, but it was the male scientist who observed and categorized it: only the scientist, from his seemingly objective vantage point, could render women’s language intelligible. Similarly, one might say that, in Benjamin’s text, it is only the (male-authored) text which can describe women’s speech, since, if women were to speak their true language, they would speak only silence.

Yet, Benjamin’s text is not an attempt at objective description—*not* a participant in scientific discourse—but an intricate poetic-philosophical meditation. And although “Das Gespräch” is engaged in a theoretical project, its modes of representation are unquestionably literary. Rather than providing a straightforward argument or presentation of ideas, the text makes use of literary conventions such as character, dramatic dialogue, and figurative language. With these literary devices, the text does not seek to chronicle a phenomenon that exists in the world (such as female speech patterns), but rather to construct a theoretical possibility. Thus, if Benjamin’s text must speak for woman, it will do it in a way that attempts to approximate, within the confines of language, the effects of the “Sprache der Frauen.” “Woman,” Benjamin writes in
an earlier section, “protects meaning from understanding” [behütet den Sinn vor dem Verstehen].

Does not Benjamin’s text, with its difficult style, perform something similar? “Das Gespräch” is written in a manner that might generously be called enigmatic. There is no coherent narrative or argument, and even on the level of individual sentences it is often difficult to follow what is being discussed.

One cannot write an essay on “the Conversation” in the “language of women”; one cannot write anything in it, for that matter. For if we take seriously Benjamin’s construction of the “Sprache der Frauen”—as silence, as immanent bodily experience, as non-language—then it becomes clear that the impossibility of its expression is actually a condition of its possibility. This perhaps explains why Benjamin chooses Sappho as a guide with whom to investigate the “Sprache der Frauen”—not only for her presumed lesbianism, which would remove her from the influence of men, but also because almost none of her lyrics survive today. The absence of Sappho’s poetry from the historical record is, for the purposes of Benjamin’s text, an elegant illustration of the impossibility of writing or communicating in the “language of women.” And if it is impossible to write or even to speak in the language of women (for speaking already brings one into the realm of die Sprache), then Benjamin’s text can, at best, only describe and imitate its effects. He can “protect meaning from understanding” by writing in a way that resists interpretation. He can use abstract nouns whose referents are consistently indeterminate—is “the listener” male? The female half of a heterosexual pair? Part of Sappho’s circle? Benjamin’s text does not allow us to know this unequivocally. He can furthermore structure his text such that it is comprised of tangentially related parts rather than a linear narrative, fragmented sections rather
than an univocal whole. These strategies approximate the supposed unintelligibility of Sappho’s non-language while still remaining intelligible—still remaining within *die Sprache*.

Benjamin’s “Gespräch” is not a conversation or dialogue in the traditional sense of the genre: the numbered sections do not represent speeches assigned to different participants, no student and teacher or interlocutor and respondent. Instead, we might say that Benjamin stages a conversation between two kinds of language—what he portrays as the instrumentalized language of men, and the silent language of women. Although the language of women cannot be manifested in language—and thus cannot be present in the content of the text—it exerts its influence over the text’s form, specifically in the way that “Das Gespräch,” in its constant revisions and abstractions, preserves ambiguity and renders full understanding impossible.

Sigrid Weigel has argued that Benjamin purposely wrote in a difficult style throughout his career, and that the lack of unity in his writing is “erkenntnistheoretisch in einem Verfahren begründet, das mit Rücksicht auf das Differente, Nicht-Identische und Ausgeschlossene hinter die begrifflich gestifteten Einheiten zurückgeht.”220 In the early text “Das Gespräch,” I would like to suggest, it is the imagined “language of women,” and the fragmented form that it demands, that serves as inspiration for the new kind of theoretical writing that would later come to be Benjamin’s hallmark. More specifically, it is the text’s attempt to approximate the “language of

women” that prevents “Das Gespräch” from taking the form of a theoretical treatise and lends it the ambiguity in form and language that we typically associate with the literary.

The disappearance of Woman

None of Benjamin’s later, better-known texts on language—such as “Über die Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen” (1916), “Über das mimetische Vermögen” (1933), “Lehre vom Ähnlichen” (1933) or “Probleme in der Sprachsoziologie” (1935)—many of which have a hermetic style equal to that of “Das Gespräch,” mention women or make use of concepts of femininity. This is not to say that Benjamin’s thinking undergoes a complete transformation: in these texts there is still a distinction between what might crudely be called “good” vs. “bad” language, or what Benjamin later distinguishes as the “bourgeois conception of language” vs. “true language.” In “Über die Sprache überhaupt und die Sprache des Menschen,” for instance, there is a distinction between the bourgeois instrumentalized language and Adamic naming language. Benjamin does write positively here of a silent language of materiality—but this is the silence of objects, not of women: “[Die Dinge] können sich nur durch eine mehr oder minder stoffliche Gemeinschaft einander mitteilen.” 221 Later, in the essay “Probleme der Sprachsoziologie,” Benjamin will also discuss the materiality of language in positive terms, but this is in reference to a “physiognomic phonetics,” which focuses on the origins of speech within the body and believes that “die Artikulation als Gestus des Sprachapparates dem großen Umkreis

der körperlichen Mimik [sich anschließt].” As both “Über die Sprache überhaupt” and “Probleme der Sprachsoziologie” demonstrate, although Benjamin remains interested in the relation between language, body and materiality, after “Das Gespräch,” he no longer expresses this relationship through female figures or in gendered terms.

Why do women disappear from Benjamin’s writings on language? My hypothesis is that, as Benjamin’s theory of language becomes more complex, “woman” can no longer serve as a catch-all figure of alterity. The conception of language presented in “Das Gespräch” is, in comparison to Benjamin’s later writings, relatively undertheorized. The text is organized around one major binary—speaker and listener—that can be easily mapped onto the division of the sexes. In Benjamin’s later texts on language, however, the complex nature of his theory requires that different types of language cannot simply be reduced to masculine vs. feminine. “Sappho und ihre Freundinnen” appear in “Das Gespräch,” I would argue, not because this other language is necessarily feminine (and so it does not need to appear as feminine in his later texts), because sexual difference is an expedient way to signal difference. “Woman” is an accepted figure of alterity that can be incorporated into Benjamin’s text without scrutiny, no theorization required. Indeed, there is no justification given: Benjamin does not provide an explanation of why it is woman who holds the status of the listener and speaker of a silent language. The assumption that woman stands for everything that man is not—and that man commands the dominant forms of expression—is the unexamined premise of Benjamin’s meditations in “Das Gespräch.” Yet,

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because woman’s position as Other is based on a crude binarism, it cannot stand up to the more complex theorization of Benjamin’s later writings on language and is thus abandoned after 1914.

“Unsagbar”: Feminine Language and Narrative Form in Musil

Similar to Benjamin’s depiction of Sappho in “Das Gespräch,” the narratives of Robert Musil’s collections Vereinigungen (1911) and Drei Frauen (1924) portray their female protagonists as having access to a medium of expression that is different from the regular language of the everyday. In “Die Vollendung der Liebe,” from Vereinigungen, this medium of expression is a language of the body. “Die Versuchung der stillen Veronika,” on the other hand, the second narrative of Vereinigungen, describes its protagonist as having spoken in the language of angels. In “Grigia” and “Tonka” from Drei Frauen, the eponymous female characters are portrayed as speaking “Zauberworte” and the “Sprache des Ganzen,” respectively.223

Musil’s experimentations with narrative form are well known. Scholars have drawn on Musil’s comments on his own work—from his diaries, letters, and Nachlass zu Lebzeiten—to demonstrate his desire to create a “neu[e] Erzählkunst,” a literary form flexible enough to explore complex problems in a way that other genres would not allow.224 Vereinigungen in

223 In the published book, Musil gave Vereinigungen the subtitle “zwei Erzählungen,” while Drei Frauen is subtitled “Novellen.” Although Musil does refer to the stories of Vereinigungen as “Novellen” in his notebook entries, I will use the term “narrative” here to refer to “Die Vollendung der Liebe” and “Die Versuchung der stillen Veronika” in keeping with the designation of Musil’s published book.

224 Generally, Musil argues that literature, or Dichtung, can address certain problems that scientific language cannot: “Jede Novelle jeder Roman u jedes Drama hat ein ‘Problem.’ Dieses Problem darf in Sachprosa nicht behandeln sein.” Specifically, Musil characterizes narrative as a medium in which “man zeigt neue Gefühle, beschreibt unbekannte Emotionen, für die man als erster Worte findet.” As quoted in Florentine Biere, “Unbekanntes, für das man als erster Worte
particular is often considered to be Musil’s most formally radical work and, while it has not received the same attention as Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften, it has been recognized as an early example of Musil’s experimentation with narrative structure. Scholarship on Vereinigungen thus tends to value the collection for its open form and de-emphasize the importance of its plot or characters. The exception to this is feminist criticism, which tends to focus more on the plot, reading Musil’s characters psychologically, and focusing on his representation of female sexuality. In what follows, I aim to bring together these two scholarly trends to show that


225 Examples of feminist scholarship on Musil’s novellas are articles by Lisa Appignanesi and Stephanie Bird. Appignanesi claims that the text “investigates the feminine in depth, in an attempt to reveal the core components of that which is essentially feminine,” while Bird argues that the “radicality of the text’s exploration of masochism” is “tempered by the persistence of the fantasy of feminine masochism.” While both of these articles recognize Musil’s experimental style, their emphasis is on the events of the plot, specifically the sexual union of Claudine with the Ministerialrat. See Bird, “Masochism and its Limits in Robert Musil’s ‘Die Vollendung der Liebe’” *The Modern Language Review*, vol. 100, no. 3 (July, 2005): 709-722, here 722; and Appignanesi, “Femininity and Robert Musil’s ‘Die Vollendung der Liebe,’” *Monatshefte*, vol. 65, no. 1 (Spring, 1973): 14-26, here 15. Marja Rauch’s *Vereinigungen: Frauenfiguren und Identität in Robert Musils Prosawerk* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2000) does discuss the form of Musil’s novellas but does not make a connection between the form and the female figures that she examines.

Scholarship that focuses on the form of Musil’s narratives but does not discuss gender are in the majority. There are too many works to mention here, but I will take one of the more recent articles on “Die Vollendung der Liebe” as a representative: Armen Avanessian’s “Cubist Unions: Robert Musil’s Novella The Perfecting of a Love,” *The Germanic Review* vol. 88, iss. 1 (March, 2013): 5-27. Avanessian provides a compelling reading of the text’s form as “a literary attempt to create a cubist unification of time and space” in a desire to show, contra Kant, that “time and space are not a priori forms of intuition independent of our sensual apparatus” (5). Yet for the sophistication of his general argument, Avanessian’s treatment of gender in the text is surprisingly superficial. He quotes from two theories from the late twentieth century to suggest that Claudine’s experience could correspond to a “particular feminine spatiality”—but does not interrogate 1.) whether this is a valid concept that should be imported uncritically; and 2.) what work it might perform for Musil’s text to imagine femininity in this way. Other often-cited narratological studies of “Die Vollendung der Liebe,” which do not address gender, include:
gender is as conceptually important for the form as it is for the plot of these early novellas. I will argue that Musil uses gender as a strategy for formal experimentation such that Musil’s engagement with gender in these works is actually constitutive of his engagement with the genre of narrative. More precisely: in Vereinigungen, Musil genders feminine the idea of an alternative language and experience. By associating this “other” language with femininity and having it embodied by a female character, Musil is able to simultaneously incorporate this “other” experience into his text while also maintaining its alterity.

Textual Unions in “Die Vollendung der Liebe”

“Der Fehler dieses Buches ist, ein Buch zu sein, Musil once wrote about the texts of Vereinigungen. “Daß es einen Einband hat, Rücken, Paginierung. Man sollte ein paar Seiten davon ausbreiten und sie von Zeit zu Zeit wechseln. Dann würde man sehen, was es ist.”226 What would it mean to experience these texts only a few pages at a time, as Musil suggests? What could the text be, if not a book?

Musil wants to free his narrative from the constraints of narrative—the conventions of what he would later call the “alte Naivität des Erzählens”—which, he claims, are too restrictive to adequately express new ideas. One of these constraints is chronology: instead of pagination, which implies a sequential ordering, Musil writes that the book’s pages should be changed “von Zeit zu Zeit,” without regard for temporal progression. In this way, the narrative would

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226 Musil, Tagebücher, Aphorismen, Essays und Reden (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1955), 188.
contradict the very foundations of the genre—the book as it is imagined here is literature posing as visual art. This new way of writing would create a text that should be looked at (“dann würde man sehen”), rather than read, encountered rather than understood. Musil’s notebook entries from around the time of the publication of Vereinigungen further emphasize his desire to break with realist modes of narration: “Man könnte zu bestimmen versuchen,” he writes in one entry, “daß diese Erzählungen durch den Ekel am Erzählen geformt sind.”227 Elsewhere he describes Vereinigungen as “Konzentration fast mathematischer Strenge, engstes Gedankenmosaik,”228 further encouraging the notion that his text should be viewed as visual art (in an instant, as mosaic) rather than a narrative depiction of events in time.

On the face of it, Musil’s radical descriptions of his work may appear disingenuous. For he does not give up all the trappings of narrative prose in “Die Vollendung der Liebe,” and the events of the narrative do follow a general progression: The main character Claudine leaves her husband at home in the city and takes a train to visit her daughter, who is at school in the country. Away on this trip, Claudine meets a man, the Ministerialrat, for whom she feels simultaneous disgust and desire and with whom she begins a relationship.229 The story ends when they are about to consummate their relationship.

227 Musil, GW II, 1315.
228 Ibid., 1314.
229 In my discussion of Vereinigungen I will focus exclusively on “Die Vollendung der Liebe.” “Die Versuchung der stillen Veronika” is in many ways an intensification of the issues staged in “Vollendung.” “Veronika” is also concerned with the relationship between a woman and two men, but the form of “Veronika” is even more experimental—and impenetrable—than “Vollendung.”
Nonetheless, while it is possible to sketch an outline of the plot, the events of this plot are not the focus of the narrative. Repeatedly, once a particular setting is introduced, the narrative moves away from any grounding in time and space, to instead describe, for pages at a time, a kind of transformative experience that Claudine undergoes. In this experience, the text presents Claudine as progressively losing the capacity for differentiation. Various forms of difference become erased—the distinction between her “self” and the world, the divide of past from present, and the differentiation between words and sounds that makes language possible.

As the narrative stages this experience, it attempts to mimic Claudine’s loss of differentiation formally by collapsing binaries on different levels of the text. This plays out in: 1.) the production of similes and nominalized verbs; 2.) the merging of the voice of the narrator with the perspective of Claudine; 3.) the fusion of multiple temporalities; and 4.) the unification, on the level of the plot, of Claudine with her husband via her relationship with the Ministerialrat.

None of these textual “unions,” however—to borrow from Musil’s title for the collection—makes a claim to the absolute elimination of difference. In the simile, for instance, two disparate things are combined, such as “ein Gefühl; eine wundersam liebliche Bitterkeit, wie im Wind, der sich vom Meer hebt” 230—here a joining of the human psyche and the natural world, to take just one of Musil’s numerous similes. Yet the “wie,” the very mechanism that brings together the two sides of the simile, also stands between them, simultaneously maintaining their dissimilarity. This “both/and” procedure of the simile, in which difference is both erased and preserved, can be taken as a model for Musil’s text and its experimentation with narrative form.

Musil’s engagement with the issue of the binary through these textual unions is significant not only as it relates to the experience that Claudine supposedly undergoes, but also as it relates to narrative as such. There is a binary structure inherent to the genre of narrative: I am referring here to the premise that there is a distinction between narrator and narrated, which all third-person narration presupposes in its form, even as it obscures this distinction through techniques such as free-indirect-discourse. To the extent that narrative is the verbal presentation of an unfolding of events in time, then the structure of narrative is also premised upon a binary, that of beginning vs. ending—two poles separated by the progression of linear chronology.\textsuperscript{231} Musil’s play with binarism on all levels of the text—in figurative language, perspective, plot—can therefore be seen as a recognition of and challenge to the underlying structure of narrative, and thus as a meta-textual reflection on the possibilities and limits of the genre. This is the conceit of Vereinigungen: that it styles itself as an anti-narrative (a book that shouldn’t be a book at all, as Musil puts it), but also retains a shell of narrative form, refusing to let go of the genre in its entirety, for this would lead to silence.

Having briefly sketched out the link between binarism and narrative form, we now come to the issue of sexual difference. The protagonist of “Die Vollendung der Liebe” is a woman, I would like to suggest, not only because women and women’s language have traditionally been associated with materiality and the body—two things that the text presents as constitutive of Claudine’s experience—but also because sex is presumed to be one of the ultimate binaries of

\textsuperscript{231}“…wobei das Erzählte aufzufassen ist al seine zeitlich organisierte Handlungssequenz, in der mindestens eine Figur einen dynamischen Situationswechsel erlebt [Stanzel]” “Erzählung,” Reallexikon der deutschen Literaturwissenschaft, Bd. I (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2007), 517-522, here 517.
human life. In the bringing together of Claudine’s point of view with what Musil stages as the “masculine” narrative voice, the text thus becomes a place where the two sexes are joined, and the supposed difference between them is elided. Yet, insofar as it is Claudine’s perspective, and not her speech that is united with the narrative voice, Musil marks Claudine’s relationship to language as distinct from that of the narrator, and thereby maintains a differentiation between them: the masculine is articulate while the feminine is inarticulate; the masculine speaks while the feminine sees and experiences. To the extent the feminine is aligned with the visual here, it is also opposed to the narratival, at least in Musil’s constellation. If we remember from earlier, visuality was precisely the category that Musil used to imagine a new kind of narrative, a book that wouldn’t be a book, a text that would approximate visual art. In constructing a feminine perspective that cannot be spoken, Musil’s text thus attempts to stage this visuality, this anti-narrative element, within itself. But the text also shows the impossibility of this project as the narrator must constantly intercede, translating what is “seen” for the reader. The problem of what we might call “feminine language” thus appears in Vereinigungen less as a problem of sex or gender, or even as a problem of language, but as a problem of narration: How can a narrative include that which stands in opposition to the very premises of its own form?

To show how Musil uses gender as a strategy to incorporate this “other” mode of language and experience into his text, I will begin with the language of the text itself, specifically its use of similes and nominalized verbs. In an attempt to describe what happens to Claudine, the text generates an extraordinary number of similes—the comparative structures “wie,” “wie
wenn,” and “als ob” appear 337 times, to be exact. Consider, for example, the following passage:

In der letzten Zeit, manchmal, vielleicht etwas häufiger, war dieses Zurücksehen, ein stärkeres Sichzurückbiegen nach der Vergangenheit. Claudinens Treue lehnte sich dagegen auf, gerade weil sie keine Ruhe, sondern ein Kräftefreimachen war, ein gegenseitiges Einanderstützen, ein Gleichgewicht durch die beständige Bewegung nach vorwärts. Ein Hand in Hand laufen, aber manchmal kam, mitten darin, doch, plötzlich, diese Versuchung stehen zubleiben, ganz allein stehen zubleiben und um sich zu seh. Sie fühlte dann ihre Leidenschaft wie etwas Zwingendes, Nötigendes, Forttreißendes; und noch wenn es überwunden war und sie Reue fühlte und das Bewußtsein von der Schönheit ihrer Liebe sie von neuem überkam, war das starr und schwer wie ein Rausch und sie begriff entzückt und ängstlich jede ihrer Bewegungen so groß und steif darin wie in goldenen Brokat verschnürt; irgendwo aber lockte etwas und lag still und bleich wie Märzsonnenschatten auf frühlingswunder Erde.

Musil uses a number similes in this quotation—including “wie ein Rausch,” “wie in goldenen Brokat verschnürt,” and “wie Märzsonnenschatten auf frühlingswunder Erde.” These comparisons seem to take us closer to the experience presented, in that they provide another level of description and, therefore, insight. Yet, insofar as the images produced take us out of the narrative setting—away to the shadow of a March sun, for instance—they also act as a distancing mechanism, reminding the reader that what the text is portraying here cannot be accessed directly, but can only be approached through these rather cliché comparisons. Claudine may be entering into a realm of experience in which difference no longer exists, but the text, in order to remain intelligible, must remain in the realm of differentiation. In its excessive generation of similes, then, the text asymptotically approaches what it presents as Claudine and her experience, but also marks its own limits, its inability to reach it entirely.

232 This is according to Jürgen Schröder, “Am Grenzwert der Sprache: Zu Robert Musils ‘Vereinigungen,’” *Euphorion* 60 (1966): 311-334.

233 Musil, *GW II*, 163-64.
The presentation of time further underscores Musil’s attempt to parallel Claudine’s experience in the form of his text. Three different temporal modes are brought together in the passage quoted above: a turning backwards to the past (“Sichzurückbiegen nach der Vergangenheit”), a progressing forwards into the future (“die beständige Bewegung nach vorwärts”), and the sudden immediacy of the present (“mitten darin, doch, plötzlich, diese Versuchung stehenzubleiben”). Elsewhere, the transformation that Claudine undergoes is presented as a return to an earlier state—she had the same experience once in America, when her daughter was conceived—suggesting that, for her character, the past is not superseded by the present, but recurs in it. In the passage above, the three temporal modes (past, present, future) are also presented as coexisting for her at once, together, rather than being organized linearly. In its form, the text mimics this conflation of temporalities. Musil’s narrative maintains the outline of a plot (in which events occur, time moves forwards, there is a problem and a resolution), but also frequently disregards this plot by engaging in lengthy descriptions for pages at a time, which take the reader out of narrative time. That is to say: the structure of the text both imitates what it portrays to be Claudine’s experience of time, and, because it will not abandon a linear plot altogether, marks her experience as incompatible with narrative convention and thus impossible to completely incorporate into the text.

Like the simile, the compound nominalized verbs that Musil uses in the text perform both an erasure and an affirmation of difference. Nominalized verbs appear extensively throughout “Die Vollendung der Liebe.” To take just one passage as an example: Musil writes that after meeting the Ministerialrat, Claudine felt,

234 Ibid., 160.
wie dadurch etwas in ihr entstand, wie wenn man am Meer geht, ein Sichuneindrückbarfühlen in dieses Tosen, das jedes Tun und jeden Gedanken bis auf den Augenblick wegreißt, und allmählich ein Unsicherwerden und ein langsames Sich-nicht-mehr-begrenzen-können und –spüren und ein Selbstverfließen, – in einen Wunsch zu schreien, eine Lust nach unglaublich maßlosen Bewegungen, in irgendeinen wurzellos aus ihr emporschwindenden Willen etwas zu tun, ohne Ende, nur um sich daran zu empfinden; es lag eine saugende, schmatzend verwüstende Kraft in diesem Verlorengehn, wo jede Sekunde wie eine wilde, abgeschnittene, verantwortungslose Einsamkeit ohne Gedächtnis blöd in die Welt starrte. Und es riß Gebärden und Worte aus ihr heraus, die irgendwoher neben ihr vorbeikamen und doch noch sie waren, und der Ministerialrat saß davor und mußte gewahren, wie es etwas, das in sich verborgen das Geliebte ihres Leibes trug, ihm näherte, und schon sah sie nichts mehr als die unaufhörliche Bewegung, mit der sein Bart auf und nieder ging, während er sprach, gleichmäßig, einschläfernd, wie der Bart einer schauerlichen, halblaute Worte kauenden Ziege.235

The German language allows for verbs to be turned into nouns with a simple capitalization; Musil pushes this possibility to the extreme here, crafting the words “Sichuneindrückbarfühlen,” “Unsicherwerden,” “Selbstverfließen,” and “Verlorengehn.” Writing these words as nouns brings together components that would otherwise be separated in the verbal form (“Sie wird unsicher,” for instance, vs. “Unsicherwerden”). By erasing the differentiation between words in this way, the language of the narrative appears to mimic Claudine’s experience of disintegrating boundaries. Furthermore, the transformation of verb into noun again mirrors what the text presents to be Claudine’s non-linear experience of time. Instead of an action (verb), a forward progression in time, we have a thing (noun), which stands outside of time, bearing no intrinsic relationship to any temporal mode. Yet, Musil’s creation of the hyphenated “Sich-nicht-mehr-begrenzen-können” also calls into question the ability of the narrative to unite itself completely with the experience it accords to Claudine. The form of this noun mimics what it signifies, in that the words themselves are no longer begrenzt, separated by spaces. Yet, because the words

235 Ibid., 184.
are still individually identifiable, separated by hyphens, the form also underlines the gap between Claudine’s experience and the narrative representation of it. The narrative may push the boundaries of language, constructing new words and generating endless figures of comparison, but it cannot actually narrate in the type of language that it has ascribed to Claudine, just as Benjamin could not write in the “Sprache der Frauen”—for, to write in a way completely unbegrenzt would be to write without words or grammar, which would render the text incomprehensible.

In contrast to the language of the text, which is excessively figurative, and which maintains the principle of differentiation that makes meaning possible, the text presents Claudine as engaged with a language that is literal, material, and uninterested in signification. The “language” that the text describes in reference to the figure of Claudine does not mean, but is. In the figure of Claudine, language is brought back to the body: in the quotation above, she wants to “schreien,” and desires “eine unglaublich maßlose Bewegung”—inarticulate, performative acts. Words and gestures are pulled from Claudine like material objects. She listens to the talk of the Ministerialrat but understands his language only in terms of the bodily movement that produces it, the “unaufhörliche Bewegung, mit der sein Bart auf und nieder ging.”

Throughout the text, the experience of the world assigned to Claudine is continually marked as either prior to or beyond language. For example, the narrative presents Claudine as suddenly being gripped by disgust when she “fühlte wieder,”

däß es nicht auf das ankam, was sie von sich sagen, mit Worten erklären konnte, sondern daß alle Rechtfertigung in etwas ganz anderem lag, – einem Lächeln, einem Verstummen, einem inneren Sichhören. Und sie empfand plötzlich eine unsagbare Sehnsucht nach jenem einzigen Menschen, der auch so war [...]^{236}

^{236} Ibid., 183.
Her "Rechtfertigung"—presumably a justification of her adultery, although this is not made clear—is not to be found in words, but rather in a smile, in a falling silent, in a listening to oneself. Here, Claudine longs to express herself in something other than language (in the body, in silence); elsewhere, the text explicitly tells us that she experiences the world in a way that cannot be captured by words or concepts. As she is out on the street with the Ministerialrat, the narrator describes Claudine wondering,

Dieses Leben blau und dunkel und mit einem kleinen, gelben Fleck ... was will es? Dieses Locken der Hühner und leise Aufschlagen der Körner, durch das es plötzlich wie der Schlag einer Stunde geht, ... zu wem spricht es? Dieses Wortlose, das sich in die Tiefe hineinfräßt und nur manchmal durch den engen Spalt weniger Sekunden in einem Vorübergehenden heraufschießt und sonst tot bleibt, ... was soll es? Sie blickte es an, mit schweigenden Augen und spürte die Dinge, ohne sie zu denken, bloß wie Hände manchmal auf einer Stirn ruhn, wenn nichts mehr sagbar ist.237

Claudine’s loss of language is linked to her loss of thought. She “feels” the things around her but does not “think” them—she has lost the categorical structures that make language and thought possible. Indeed, Claudine is almost always described as “feeling” [fühlen, spüren] rather than thinking, which would imply concepts, order, form—all things that the text presents Claudine as having lost.

If the narrative insists on the non- or extra-linguistic quality of Claudine’s experience—“dieses Wortlose”; “unsagbar”; it is not what she “mit Worten erklären konnte”—then it must follow that the language of the text, particularly the figurative language, is not Claudine’s (not free-indirect-discourse), but the narrator’s. According to the logic of the text, Claudine cannot

237 Ibid., 192.
speak: the narrator must translate what it presents her as “feeling” into intelligible discourse.\textsuperscript{238}

The narrative perspective, however, is still tied to Claudine—we see only what she sees. This merging of Claudine’s “feminine” perspective with the presumably “masculine” narrative voice\textsuperscript{239} is yet another example of the way Musil’s text both maintains and elides difference. The text never allows the voice of the narrator and the voice of Claudine to completely become one—for this would mean the narrative would fall silent—but it also obscures the distinction between narrator and narrated as it unites voice and perspective on the level of the sentence.

It is true that the text reports instances of Claudine speaking, but what she says never completely makes sense. Her speech is often fragmentary, as she begins sentences that she cannot finish. At the very end of the text, for instance, all she can do is say “mir ekelt”—expressing an involuntary corporeal reaction rather than producing meaning.\textsuperscript{240} Shortly before this, when the Ministerialrat asks Claudine if she loves him, she can only respond in a way that is adjacent to the question: “wie sonderbar, daß man einen gern hat, eben weil man ihn gern hat, seine Augen, seine Zunge, nicht die Worte, sondern den Klang...”\textsuperscript{241} What interests Claudine in language is not the meaning it produces, but its sound and bodily origin, its physical source.

\textsuperscript{238} In this I agree with Dorrit Cohn, who argues that Musil does not use interior monologue or erlebte Rede in “Die Vollendung der Liebe” because the consciousness that he endeavors to represent “bypasses not only self-articulation, but also self-consciousness and self-understanding.” For an in-depth analysis of the language of the narrator, see Cohn, ”Psyche and Space,” esp. 157.

\textsuperscript{239} Presumably masculine not simply because Musil was a man, but because the text correlates the non-verbal nature of Claudine’s experience with her identity as woman. The opposite of this dichotomy would, therefore, be intelligibility/the masculine.

\textsuperscript{240} Musil, \textit{GW II}, 193.

\textsuperscript{241} Ibid., 193.
By the end of the narrative, this link between Claudine’s language and her body is made explicit. On the final page of the text, Musil writes,

Und Claudine schwieg; nur noch einmal sprach sie; während sie sich entkleideten; sie begann zwecklos zu reden, unpassend, vielleicht wertlos, bloß wie ein schmerzliches Überetwashinstreicheln war es: “... es ist wie wenn man durch einen schmalen Paß tritt; Tiere, Menschen, Blumen, alles verändert; man selbst ganz anders. Man fragt, wenn ich hier von Anbeginn gelebt hätte, wie würde ich über dies denken, wie jenes fühlen? Es ist sonderbar, daß es nur eine Linie ist, die man zu überschreiten braucht. Ich möchte Sie küssen und dann rasch wieder zurückspringen und sehen; und dann wieder zu Ihnen. Und jedesmal beim Überschreiten dieser Grenze müßte ich es genauer fühlen. Ich würde immer bleicher werden; die Menschen würden sterben, nein, einschrumpfen; und die Bäume und die Tiere. Und endlich wäre alles nur ein ganz dünner Rauch ... und dann nur eine Melodie .. durch die Luft ziehend ... über einer Leere ...”

It is not a coincidence that Claudine gives her final speech while undressing, as this is the culmination of a process of merging language and body that has been developing over the course of the narrative. The text likens Claudine’s speech to a caress, an “Überetwashinstreicheln”—another nominalized verb—so that Claudine’s speech performs a movement that would ordinarily be enacted by the hands.

The narrative, of course, cannot put an “Überetwashinstreicheln” into direct discourse—it cannot say the non-semantic or the bodily, constitutive parts of Claudine’s “other” language. In citing Claudine’s speech here, the narrative thus reduces her language to its own, and leaves out the very dimensions of Claudine’s language that would constitute its alterity. Instead of using wild gestures or screams, which the text ascribed to her earlier, Claudine speaks in similes here, and trades in clichés—we might say, she speaks as the narrator does (“only a line that one needs to cross”; a “thin line of smoke”). The attempt to capture this “other” language in direct discourse must necessarily fail, precisely because direct representation is not possible. Indeed,

242 Ibid., 193.
the narrative seems to draw attention to this failure: In having Claudine’s cited speech operate according to the principles of a naïve realism—which assumes that this transgression, or the crossing of a boundary, can in fact be narrated—the text self-consciously exposes the problem of this approach. The attempt to narrate this “border crossing” is foreclosed upon as Claudine’s reported speech ends in ellipses.

In these ellipses, Musil’s text gives way from language to punctuation, those marks that separate words and sentences and thereby clarify meaning. As Claudine’s language retreats from the text, all that is left is the narratival ordering of her absent speech. Without words to organize, the form of narrative reveals itself here as pure structure. Thus a major principle of narrative form is laid bare: the sequential presentation of time. What is perhaps most radical about Musil’s text is, therefore, not that it abandons the genre of narrative altogether—in the end, it is a book, not a painting or a mosaic—but rather that it presents the components of narrative for inspection: it draws our attention to the preconditions of the genre.

*Excursus: The limits of “feminine language”*

In comparison to the narrator’s strained similes in “Die Vollendung der Liebe,” Claudine’s relationship to language may seem positive—she has moved beyond the ostensibly limiting structures of language. Yet, in that Claudine’s language is essentially anti-figurative, her relationship to language also precludes her from taking part in any kind of poetic production, which depends on figuration. The alterity of women’s experience—and Musil tells us that Claudine is not unique but an “alltäglich[e] Frau,”243 a stand in for every other woman—can only

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243 Ibid., 160.
be gestured towards, approached through ordinary language. It follows, then, that women can only be the subjects, not the writers, of literature—at least if they are to write in the language that Musil’s and Benjamin’s texts designate as their most authentic.

In *The Gender of Modernity*, Rita Felski makes a similar argument about the sociological writings of Georg Simmel, who crafts a theory of “weibliche Kultur” around the same time that Musil publishes *Vereinigungen*. For Simmel, modernity is fundamentally male; in order to be authentic, female culture must exist completely outside of it. In his characterization of male and female culture, Simmel relies upon a “dualistic ontology of fragmentation versus plenitude, mediation versus immediacy, alienation versus authenticity,”²⁴⁴ which associates woman with the wholeness of a mythical, pre-industrialized past and man with the immediate present. This gendered theory of culture necessitates that women be the subjects rather than the producers of art, since the purpose of art is, according to Simmel, to “transcend the fractured nature of modern experience and [heal] the split between subjective and objective culture”²⁴⁵—a split that defines (male) modernity, and thus one that women do not need to overcome. Yet, because “female culture” is an ideal that can never be realized within the “male” culture of modernity—it must remain “pure potentiality […] for the sake of its own integrity”²⁴⁶—Felski argues that Simmel “effectively closes off the possibility of women participating in modern society as women.”²⁴⁷

Within their respective narrative universes, Benjamin and Musil depict the feminine relationship

²⁴⁵ Felski, 48
²⁴⁶ Felski, 48, quoting Klaus Licht-Blau
²⁴⁷ Felski, 41-42
to language as an ideal that can never be fully actualized—at least not in the bounds of the literary text—and thus implicitly restrict literary production to the realm of the masculine.

Drei Frauen: “Feminine Language” Depotentialized

In Claudine’s speech from the end of “Die Vollendung Liebe, quoted above, she refers to a “Grenze” or a “Linie,” “die man zu überschreiten braucht.” We can interpret this in several ways. Within the plot, this is the “Grenze” of bourgeois sexual norms that prohibit adultery. When Claudine transgresses these norms by initiating a relationship with the Ministerialrat, however, the text presents it as a “perfection” [Vollendung] of her love with her husband rather than a violation of it.248 It is only through the introduction of this third figure that the difference between Claudine and her husband can be bridged and the problem posed between them at the beginning of the narrative—“Ist nicht jedes Gehirn etwas Einsames und Alleiniges?”—resolved.249

248 Although the relationship between Claudine and the Ministerialrat is often described as “sexual” in secondary scholarship, the text does not actually show Claudine and the Ministerialrat consummate their relationship—suggesting that this physical encounter, too, would be beyond its ability to represent. Instead, the consummation takes place in language, when Claudine switches from the formal “Sie” to the informal “du.” Once this shift occurs, the text can end—“dann fühlte sie mit Schaudern, wie ihr Körper trotz allem sich mit Wollust füllte. […] Und ganz fern, wie Kinder von Gott sage, er ist groß, hatte sie eine Vorstellung von ihrer Liebe” (Musil, GW II, 193).

249 This question is posed several times in a discussion between Claudine and her husband at the beginning of the text—Musil does not distinguish between them in their reported speech—as they are thinking about a “Kranke,” some kind of sexual predator from a book they have read. The idea of a third figure, necessary to bridge the gap between the two of them, is already explicit at the beginning of the narrative: they “dachten gemeinsam an jenen Dritten, Unbekannten, an diesen einen von den vielen Dritten, als ob sie miteinander durch eine Landschaft gingen…” (Musil, GW II, 158).
More generally, the “Grenze” or “Linie” is also that which separates normal life from some “other” kind of existence—what Musil would later come to call the “der andere Zustand.”

In 1925 Musil describes this “other condition” as,

das Dastehn einer andern Welt, wie ein fester Meeresboden, von dem die unruhigen Fluten der gewöhnlichen zurückgetreten sind, und im Bilde dieser Welt gibt es weder Maß noch Genauigkeit, weder Zweck noch Ursache, gut und böse fallen einfach weg, ohne daß man sich ihrer zu überheben brauchte, und an Stelle aller dieser Beziehungen tritt ein geheimnisvoll schwellendes und ebbendes Zusammenfließen unseres Wesens mit dem der Dinge und anderen Menschen.250

This depiction of the “other condition” from Musil’s “Ansätze zu einer neuen Ästhetik,” particularly the emphasis on the “zusammenfließen” of self and world, could easily be used to describe what “Die Vollendung der Liebe” presents as happening to Claudine. Yet what Claudine experiences has no name, and no corresponding theoretical articulation: hers is a vague experience of something different than the regular experience of the world, of language, and of sexuality. When “Die Vollendung der Liebe” is published in 1911, although there is obviously some kind of proto-concept of the “other condition” at work in the text, Musil has not yet developed it into a full-fledged theory. I would argue that it is precisely because of the undeveloped nature of Musil’s conceptualization of der andere Zustand at this point that he turns to gender and links this “other condition” to femininity in Vereinigungen. Presenting the alterity of this other experience through the alterity of woman is a deft strategy for expressing an idea that the text marks as essentially incommunicable, insofar as it cannot be conveyed in language.

By the time Musil begins to publish Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften in 1930, however, he has not only theorized der andere Zustand as a concept in the “Ansätze,” but he has also

developed a series of figures and corresponding ideologies through which to explore “the other condition” within literature: there is the insane Moosbrugger, for instance, the Nietzschean Clarisse and the “siamesische Zwillinge” Ulrich and Agathe. As in “Die Vollendung der Liebe,” in *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, access to the “other condition” is linked to sexual transgression, although here it is incest instead of adultery. The association of femininity with this other mode of experience, however, does not persist throughout Musil’s engagement with the topic. Similar to the way that Benjamin eventually dispenses with gender in his theory of language, Musil also abandons this practice in his later work: in both the “Ansätze zu einer neuen Ästhetik” and *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, the idea of the “other condition” is not tied to a specific gender.²⁵¹

In 1924, however, shortly before Musil publishes these texts, he issues a collection of novellas entitled *Drei Frauen*. In the following section I will argue that the form of *Drei Frauen* enacts a critique of *Vereinigungen*, specifically its use of gender as a strategy for portraying an experience it deems unrepresentable and its association of woman with a “different” mode of language. In this way, *Drei Frauen* occupies an intermediary stage between *Vereinigungen* and *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, not only chronologically, but also in the development of the idea of “der andere Zustand” and in the narrative experimentations Musil performs to accommodate it. For the sake of brevity, I will focus here on only two novellas from *Drei Frauen*, “Tonka” and “Grigia.”

²⁵¹ If anything, *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* has been gendered masculine. It was received critically and popularly as a particularly “masculine” novel, because of its style as well as the characterization of its male protagonist. Ulrich Boss provides a detailed account of the “masculine” reception of Musil’s novel in “Ein Autor von ‘hypotropher Virilität’: Geschlecht in der Musil-Rezeption der 1920er und 1930er Jahre,” *Musil-Forum 33* (2013/2014): 125-141.
What most obviously distinguishes *Drei Frauen* from *Vereinigungen* is the introduction of a male protagonist who is allied with the narrative voice and perspective. Although both “Grigia” and “Tonka” center around women (as their titles suggest), these women are presented only as they appear to the men who love them. The novellas rarely report the female characters’ speech. Furthermore, when the texts describe the actions of the female characters, these actions are always filtered through the male characters’ consciousnesses, told in their voices and from their perspectives via free-indirect-discourse. In other words: it is the male characters who both see and speak in *Drei Frauen*. The text does not attempt to incorporate a “feminine” perspective like in “Die Vollendung der Liebe.” What consequences result from this change in form?

The most significant consequence for our purposes is the change in where the idea of an alternative, feminine language is situated within the text. The association of the female characters with some “other” language—“die Sprache des Ganzen” in “Tonka,” “Zauberworte” in “Grigia”—is now explicitly made to come from the male characters, rather than posited by the narrator. In the following, I will show how the women’s different languages are portrayed in *Drei Frauen* to be a product of the male characters’ fantasy. By ironizing the idea of an alternative feminine language in this way, Musil also implicitly critiques the poetics of *Vereinigungen*, insofar as *Vereinigungen* relied on the notion of an alternative language as a productive model and a means to test the boundaries of narrative form.

I will begin with the novella “Tonka,” which tells of an unnamed man who falls in love with a poor Czech-Austrian girl. He procures her a position as a caregiver for his grandmother; after the grandmother dies, they move together to the city. Later, while the man is away, Tonka becomes pregnant and contracts a venereal disease. Tonka insists that she was never unfaithful,
yet it remains a mystery how she could have become sick and pregnant in his absence if she did not sleep with another man. The protagonist finds it difficult to reconcile Tonka’s vow of fidelity with the fact of her illness—“es verstrickte ihn also entweder ein mystischer Vorgang mit Tonka oder sie hatte gemeine irdische Schuld auf sich geladen”\textsuperscript{252}—and she eventually dies. The division between scientific rationality and romantic idealism is clearly split along gendered lines in the narrative. The man is a student of chemistry who “stellte sich taub gegen alle Fragen, die nicht klar zu lösen sind,”\textsuperscript{253} whereas Tonka is repeatedly referred to as existing in a “Märchen” rather than in reality.\textsuperscript{254} As this brief summary of “Tonka” should already make clear, the narratives of \textit{Drei Frauen} do not have the same resistance to plot as those of \textit{Vereinigungen}. They furthermore conform much more closely to generic convention, specifically the traditional definition of the novella as the depiction of an “unerhörte Begebenheit”—here that “unheard of event” is the mystery of Tonka’s illness.\textsuperscript{255}

In addition to the notion that Tonka belongs to a fairy tale, the male protagonist idealizes Tonka in numerous other ways: he associates her with nature,\textsuperscript{256} he views her as simple and childlike, and he also believes her to speak a language that is different than his own. Of course, she does speak another language—Czech—but for the protagonist, the difference of her speech is

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid., 283.
\item Ibid., 289, 296.
\item “Sie blieb wie die Natur rein und unbehauen” (Musil, \textit{GW II}, 285); “Sie war Natur, die sich zum Geist ordnet; nicht Geist werden will” (285).
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
not simply a matter of a foreign tongue, but a language with an entirely different relation to the world.

The first reference to Tonka’s different language comes when the man questions her about whether she enjoys working for his grandmother, or whether she does not want something more out of life. Tonka has trouble responding, and the man grows impatient:

“Ja – nein, ja – nein” – er wurde ungeduldig – “was soll das heißen? Schimpfen Sie wenigstens auf uns!” Aber er sah, daß sie mit Antworten kämpfte, die sie immer wieder im letzten Augenblick von den Lippen verwarf, und sie tat ihm plötzlich leid.[…]

“Verstehen Sie mich jetzt?”


Then, after their conversation continues to falter, Tonka begins to sing a “Volkslieder ihrer Heimat.” The man hears her singing and, the narrator tells us that,

Tonka, weil sie die gewöhnliche Sprache nicht sprach, sondern irgend eine Sprache des Ganzen, hatte leiden müssen, daß man sie für dumm und unempfindlich hielt. Damals war es ihm klar, was es bedeutet: Leider fallen ihr ein. Sie kam ihm sehr einsam vor. Wenn sie ihn nicht hätte, wer würde sie verstehen?258

In the above passage, the way Tonka speaks is marked as unusual because she has difficulty responding to questions, she prefers to sing instead of talk, and she sings in Czech rather than German. Yet these are little more than eccentricities, or a result of her foreign ancestry. It is the male protagonist who interprets her stuttering speech, her Volkslied, as participating in some kind of mystic language, a “Sprache des Ganzen.” The question that follows, which is clearly in the voice of the protagonist—“Wenn sie ihn nicht hätte, wer würde sie verstehen?”—

257 Musil, GW II, 274-5.
258 Ibid., 276.
demonstrates that this entire section is narrated in free-indirect-discourse, and that the diagnosis of Tonka’s language also comes from the protagonist rather than from the third-person narrator.

A similar portrayal of a “different” feminine language appears in “Grigia.” “Grigia” follows Homo, a geologist who leaves his family to travel to a village in northern Italy. There Homo takes part in the opening of a gold mine. Living in this village is a group of German-speakers, one of whom becomes his lover (Grigia). But Grigia is married, and her husband is, unsurprisingly, unhappy about her affair. The husband follows Grigia and Homo on a rendezvous in a cave and walls them in; Grigia manages to escape, but the text implies that Homo will die there. Unlike in “Die Vollendung der Liebe,” Homo’s adultery does not result in the perfection of his relationship with his wife; quite to the contrary, once with Grigia, he seems to forget her altogether.\textsuperscript{259} In \textit{Drei Frauen}, in other words, it is no longer possible to unite two sides of a binary through a third figure.

Merging two sides of a binary is no longer possible in \textit{Drei Frauen}, I would argue, because the male characters are invested in an opposite project: reinforcing the differences between the sexes. Homo associates the women of the village with everything that he, an engineer from a developed land, is not—the pre-industrialized past and a more natural order of life. “So waren diese Weiber,” the text tells us in free-indirect discourse,

\begin{quote}
Ihre Beine staken in braunen Wollkitteln mit handbreiten roten blauen oder orangenen Borten, und die Tücher, die sie am Kopf und gekreuzt über der Brust trugen, waren billiger Kattundruck moderner Fabrikmuster, aber durch irgend etwas in den Farben oder deren Verteilung wiesen sie weit in die Jahrhunderte der Altvorderen zurück. Das war viel älter als Bauerntrachten sonst, weil es nur ein Blick war, verspätet, durch all die Zeiten gewandert, trüb und schwach angelangt, aber man fühlte ihn dennoch deutlich auf sich
\end{quote}

ruhn, wenn man sie ansah. Sie trugen Schuhe [...] auf denen sie in ihren blauen und braunen Strümpfen gingen wie die Japanerinnen. Wenn sie warteten, setzten sie sich nicht auf den Wegrand, sondern auf die flache Erde des Pfarls und zogen die Knie hoch wie die Neger. ²⁶⁰

Even though their Tücher are of cheaply-made factory cloth, the women’s dress somehow ("durch irgend etwas") reaches far back into the past. In their gaze, in their perspective on the world, Homo sees an unbroken connection to ancient history. The text thus marks the women as Other by showing them to be foreign to the present day, out of sync with modern life. In comparing the women to “Japanerinnen” and “Neger,” Musil furthermore emphasizes Homo’s perception of the women’s alterity: it as if their location in Italy is not enough to signal their difference, so more foreign lands and peoples must be marshaled in their description.

Out of this sentimentalization of the village women comes Homo’s affair, and he renames Grigia so as to make her better fit in with his fantasy. In reality, her name is “Lene Maria Lenzie”:

das klang wie Selvot und Gronleit oder Malga Mendana, nach Amethystkristallen und Blumen, er nannte sie noch lieber Grigia, mit langem I und verhauchtem Dscha, nach der Kuh, die sie hatte, und Grigia, die Graue, rief. ²⁶¹

The associative connection between Grigia and natural phenomena that begins this paragraph is literalized by the final sentence, as Musil moves from simile to metaphor. Whereas the name “Lene Maria Lenzie” is like “amethyst crystals” and “flowers,” to call her “Grigia” is to collapse the difference between this woman and the natural world. Once renamed “Grigia,” she is the cow, is nature: she is now synonymous with the past natural order for which Homo is apparently nostalgic.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 238-9.
²⁶¹ Ibid., 245.
Musil attributes the kind of language use that Homo exhibits—where the point of speech is not communication, but the assertion of one’s will upon the world, the furthering of one’s pleasure—to all the men involved in the gold mine project. As the men listen to the gramophone in the evenings, for instance,

Sie sprachen nichts mehr miteinander, sondern sie sprachen. Was hätten sie sich sagen sollen, ein Privatgelehrter, ein Unternehmer, ein ehemaliger Strafanstaltsinspektor, ein Bergingenieur, ein pensionierter Major? Sie sprachen in Zeichen—mochten das trotzdem auch Worte sein: des Unbehagens, des relativen Behagens der Sehnsucht—, eine Tiersprache. Oft stritten sie unnötig lebhaft über irgendeine Frage, die keinen etwas anging, beleidigten einander sogar, und am nächsten Tag gingen Kartellträger hin und her. Dann stellte sich heraus, daß eigentlich überhaupt niemand anwesend gewesen war. Sie hatten es nur getan, weil sie die Zeit totschlagen mußten, und wenn sie auch keiner von ihnen je wirklich gelebt hatte, kamen sie doch roh wie die Schlächter vor und waren gegeneinander erbittert.\(^{262}\)

Like the disembodied voice coming from the gramophone, the speech of these men does not facilitate any meaningful human connection. They speak, but only to themselves ("nicht mehr miteinander") and only for the purpose of passing the time: their language is a kind of duel, a game devoid of content. Indeed, they may speak in "Zeichen," throwing around concepts like displeasure, the relative pleasure of desire—but this type of speech earns the ironic designation "Tiersprache" because it is a mechanized language that bears no relation to the soul, which should distinguish humans from animals. It is an instrumentalized language, much like Benjamin’s description of the language of men.

Similarly, in “Tonka,” Musil provides a countermodel to Tonka’s language in the manipulative language of the protagonist’s family. After his grandmother’s death, members of

\(^{262}\) Ibid., 243-4.
his family use language as a means to perform their grief and buffer their status. “Seine Verwandten sprachen lebhaft durcheinander,” Musil writes,

und er bemerkte, wie gut sie damit ihren Nutzen wahrten. Sie sprachen nicht schön, aber flink, hatten Mut zu ihrem Schwall, und es bekam schließlich jeder, was er wollte. Redenkönnen war nicht ein Mittel der Gedanken, sondern ein Kapital, ein imponierender Schmuck [...] Wie stumm war Tonka! Sie konnte weder sprechen noch weinen.263

As we saw earlier, Tonka’s “Sprache des Ganzen,” which manifests in the world as silence, is the antithesis to this conception of language as “Nutzen” and “Kapital.” A similar juxtaposition is evident in “Grigia.” While the men use their language to argue, to injure (“beleidigen”) and to “kill time” (“die Zeit totschlagen”), Grigia’s language is, apparently, magical and productive:

Und sie hatte Zauberworte: Die Nos, sagte sie etwas, und statt Bein der Schenken. Der Schurz war die Schürze. Tragt viel aus, bewunderte sie, und geliegen han i an bißl ins Bett eini, machte es unter verschlafenen Augen. Als er ihr einmal drohte, nicht mehr zu kommen, lachte sie: „I glock an bei Ihm!“ und da wußte er nicht, ob er erschrak oder glücklich war, und das mußte sie bemerkt haben, denn sie fragte: „Reut’s ihn? Viel reut’s ihn?“ Das waren so Worte wie die Muster der Schürzen und Tücher und die farbigen Borten oben am Strumpf, etwas angeglichen der Gegenwart schon durch die Weite der Wanderschaft, aber geheimnisvolle Gäste. Ihr Mund war voll von ihnen, und wenn er ihn küßte, wußte er nie, ob er dieses Weib liebte, oder ob ihm ein Wunder bewiesen werde, und Grigia nur der Teil einer Sendung war, die ihn mit seiner Geliebten in Ewigkeit wieder verknüpfte.264

Grigia does indeed speak “differently,” in that she speaks a dialect rather than High German. But, as the narrative is aligned with Homo’s voice and perspective here, it is Homo’s sentimental imagination of Grigia that turns her words into “Zauberworte,” her language into evidence of a miracle.

As we recall, the notion of a “different” language, associated with the feminine, held positive potential in Vereinigungen: it was a way for the text to transcend the limits of its own

263 Ibid., 280.
264 Ibid., 247.
language and narrative form. But here in *Drei Frauen*, the idea of “feminine” language is depotentialized, no longer generative for the text’s own poetics. Other related concepts from *Vereinigungen* also appear in a diminished capacity in *Drei Frauen*, for instance the idea of ineffability. Musil uses the term “unsagbar” in “Die Vollandung der Liebe” to refer to Claudine’s almost ecstatic experience, which the language and form of the text cannot capture. In “Grigia,” however, “unsagbar” appears only to describe pieces of furniture. This is the description of Homo’s room:

> Es gab da drei Dinge, die ihm auffielen. Betten von einer unsagbar kühlen Weichheit in schöner Mahagonischale. Eine Tapete mit einem unsagbar wirren, geschmacklosen, aber durchaus unvollendbaren und fremden Muster. Und ein Schaukelstuhl aus Rohr [...]265

In the move from *Vereinigungen* to *Drei Frauen*, the text’s relation to the ineffable has, quite literally, been domesticated. The idea of *Unsagbarkeit* has been flattened into banality—“unspeakable softness.”

Whereas it was Claudine who was universalized “Die Vollandung der Liebe”—by calling her an “alltägliche Frau,” Musil implied that she could stand for all women—in “Grigia” and “Tonka,” it’s the male perspective that is constructed as universal. The male protagonist of “Tonka” has no name (he could be anyone) and the protagonist of “Grigia” is named “Homo”—generic man. These narratives are less about the “three women” than about the male imagination of them. This shift in focus away from woman and towards the male gaze is also accompanied by a change in form. The narratives of *Drei Frauen* are much less experimental than those of *Vereinigungen*. “Grigia” begins in an almost exaggeratedly conventional manner, with a maxim

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265 Ibid., 235.
about life and then a description Homo’s family and setting. “Tonka” begins in a way more reminiscent of Vereinigungen: “An einem Zaun. Ein Vogel sang. Die Sonne war dann schon irgendwo hinten den Büschen. Der Vogel schwieg. Es war Abend.” But this more radical narrative style is quickly foreclosed upon, with the introduction of “die Wahrheit”: “Aber war es überhaupt so gewesen? Nein, das hatte er sich erst später zurechtgelegt. Das war schon das Märchen; er konnte es nicht mehr unterscheiden. In Wahrheit hatte sie doch damals bei ihrer Tante gelebt, als er sie kennen lernte. The narrative continues to correct itself in this way, providing a märchenhaft description and then revising it with the “truth,” which corresponds to a linear narrative.

In contradistinction to Vereinigungen, the language of the female characters in Drei Frauen is not a productive source for narrative invention; there is, for instance, no tension between Grigia’s supposed “Zauberworte” and the language of the narrative itself. Instead of attempting to mimic these “Zauberworte,” the narrative solves the problem of representation—how do you use regular language to depict magical language?—by shifting the burden of responsibility onto the male protagonist. The idea of Grigia’s “other” language is not a premise that the text is positing (and thus would be invested in depicting), but only a fantasy held by one of its characters. And precisely because it has the status of fantasy in the text, the “Zauberworte,” just like Tonka’s “Sprache des Ganzen,” has no need to be manifested within the narrative.

266 “Es gibt im Leben eine Zeit, wo es sich auffallend verlangsamt, als zögerte es weiterzugehn oder wollte seine Richtung ändern. Es mag sein, daß einem in dieser Zeit ein Unglück zustößt” (Ibid., 234).

267 Compare to the first sentence of “Die Versuchung der stillen Veronika”: “Irgendwo muß man zwei Stimmen hören” (Ibid., 194).

268 Ibid., 270.
If using female characters as a medium to express an alternative to ordinary language and experience was a strategy of Musil’s early writing, later abandoned once he had theorized “the other condition” in more complexity, then the critical stance enacted in the form of *Drei Frauen* marks the beginning of Musil’s turning away from this imagination of woman and her access to an “other” language. As the strategy of gender is depotentialized, so too is the possibility for a radically open narrative form.

**The Female Body in Hofmannsthal’s “Medienwechsel”**

In 1911, the same year that Musil publishes *Vereinigungen*, Hugo von Hofmannsthal writes an essay entitled “Über die Pantomime.” Taking inspiration from a dialogue by Lucian on the same subject, Hofmannsthal reconfigures the ancient Greek text to address his specific concerns: the limits of linguistic expression and the corresponding need for non-linguistic aesthetic media.

Ten years prior, Hofmannsthal had put forward a similar problem in his “Chandos-Brief.” This letter from the fictional Lord Chandos to Francis Bacon describes, in elegant prose, the writer’s increasing mistrust of language and his subsequent crisis and loss of speech. The performative contradiction that “Ein Brief” enacts—how can a loss of language be rendered *in* language?—is never resolved within the text. Hofmannsthal has Lord Chandos conclude the

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269 The title of Lucian’s text has also been variously translated as “On Dance” and “On Dancing,” although Hofmannsthal writes in his essay that Lucian’s text has the same title as his own. For an in-depth analysis of Lucian’s dialogue, see Karin Schlapbach, “Lucian’s On Dancing and the Models for a Discourse on Pantomime,” in *New Directions in Ancient Pantomime*, ed. Edith Hall and Rose Wyles (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
letter by writing about a new language “in welcher die stummen Dinge zuweilen zur mir sprechen,” translating this silence into intelligible language for his reader.  

In “Über die Pantomime,” however, Hofmannsthal resolves the tension between form and content staged in “Ein Brief” by turning from language to the body, and from narrative prose to dance and pantomime. In his description of pantomime, Hofmannsthal emphasizes dance’s capacity to portray what language cannot. Like language, pantomime does include representational [darstellend] elements, Hofmannsthal argues, but it cannot be reduced to these elements. Pantomime would be unthinkable, 

ohne daß es durch und durch vom Rhythmischen, rein Tanzmäßigen durchsetzt wäre; fällt dies weg, so befinden wir uns in einem Schauspiel, dessen Darsteller sich absurderweise der Hände bedienen, anstatt ihrer Zunge; also in einer mit Willkür unvernünftigen Welt, in der zu verharren beklemmend wirkt. Dagegen in eine Haltung, eine rhythmische Wiederholung von Bewegungen einen Gemütszustand zusammenfassen, darin ein Verhältnis zu umgebenden Personen, gedrängter, und bedeutender als die Sprache es vermöchte, auszusprechen, etwas an den Tag zu geben was zu groß, zu allgemein, zu nahe ist, um in Worte gefaßt zu werden [...] 

This emphasis on pantomime’s non-representational nature is not in Hofmannsthal’s source text. Lucian finds no fault with pantomime as imitation, only when this imitation exceeds the proper bounds and becomes too exaggerated. And while Lucian does compare pantomime to other 

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272 Lucian writes, “As in literature, so too in dancing what is generally called ‘bad taste’ comes in when they exceed the due limit of mimicry and put forth greater effort than they should; if something dainty, they make it extravagantly effeminate, and they carry masculinity to the point of savagery and bestiality.” Lucian, Works, trans. A. M. Harmon, vol. 5 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 285.
genres in order to defend its legitimacy, he does not make an argument for dance as overcoming the impotency of language. This is Hofmannsthal’s own addition, reflective of his particularly modern concern with language as arbitrary and artificial.

If the world of words is limited by arbitrariness [Willkür], as Hofmannsthal suggests, then the world of pantomime can transcend this arbitrariness because its medium is not language, but the body. The rhythmic and “rein Tanzmäßige” gestures of pantomime are what allow pantomime to serve as a countermodel to language in Hofmannsthal’s text, because they are not imitative, but simply expressive. By championing dance here, Hofmannsthal is able to offer in “Über die Pantomime” something that was not possible in “Ein Brief”—an alternative to language other than silence.

This alternative medium of expression, of course, still exists beyond the bounds of his own text: if dance exceeds the linguistic, then it is impossible for Hofmannsthal to adequately describe it in prose. Indeed, in “Die unvergleichliche Tänzerin,” an essay on the dancer Ruth St. Denis, Hofmannsthal designates her performance as “unschilderbar” and “unbeschreiblich,” resolving that he will “kaum versuchen, ihr Tanzen zu beschreiben.” Yet the difference between “Ein Brief” and these texts on dance is that “Ein Brief” posits a resolution to the problem of language within language (the creation of a new language in which “silent things” communicate, which cannot presently be manifested in the world, but exists only in the realm of the theoretical), while “Über die Pantomime” points outside of itself to locate the solution in a different aesthetic medium.

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In addition to “Über die Pantomime,” Hofmannsthal wrote a number of pantomime and dance librettos, collaborated with dancers of his time, and incorporated scenes of dance into his dramas. Much of this work has been well-researched. Scholars have documented the way in which Hofmannsthal’s interest in dance can be understood as a response to the problem of language posed in “Ein Brief” and elsewhere, a “Medienwechsel vom Wort zum Körper,” to use Carsten Zelle’s phrase.274

What I want to contribute to this discussion is to show that Hofmannsthal’s turn from the word to the body is not just a turn to “the body” in general, but to the female body in particular. Or to put it more precisely: Hofmannsthal’s turn to dance and the body is facilitated by a certain idea of “woman” that understands femininity to be inextricably linked to corporeality. Of course, many of Hofmannsthal’s texts on dance include male as well as female characters, but in the places where the idea of a non-arbitrary sign is most explicitly being worked out—and where the dance is supposed to be completely expressive, non-representative—Hofmannsthal takes recourse to female figures and tropes of femininity.

Before investigating the work that “woman” performs for Hofmannsthal’s conception of dance, it is important to clarify that Hofmannsthal is interested in a specific kind of dance—not formalized European dances, like the waltz, but the more experimental movements of modernist

For Hofmannsthal, this kind of dance is associated with practices of ancient and foreign cultures. As he puts it in “Über die Pantomime,”

diese Ausdrucksform ist einfachen heroischen Zeiten, ja besonders dem urweltlichen Zustand geläufig und wiederum aus unserer bis zur Verworrenheit vielfachen, übergreifenden Gegenwart hebt sich, wie alles Menschliche beharrender Art ist, das gleiche unzerstörbare Bedürfnis hervor, welches zu stillen, da der Lebensboden ungünstig ist, die Kunst eine ihrer uralten Formen zu einer neuen Belebung uns darbietet.

Similarly, what Hofmannsthal values in Ruth St. Denis’ “orientalistisch[er] Tanz” is that it is “etwas so durchaus Fremdes und das sich seiner geheimnisvollen Fremdheit in keiner Weise schämmt; das kein Vermittlung sucht, keine Brücke; das nichts mit Bildung zu tun haben will, nichts illustrieren, nichts nahebringen.” The absolute alterity that distinguishes St. Denis’ dance also marks her body: although Hofmannsthal writes that she is either Canadian or Australian (in fact she was American), he muses that she must have “noch ein Tropfen fremderen Blutes, eine Großmutter aus indianischem Geblüt, etwas vom Geheimnis und von der Kräften einer Urrasse.” It is not a coincidence that Hofmannsthal imagines a female dancer to embody otherness in this way, and “Die unvergleichliche Tänzerin” is just one of multiple texts in which Hofmannsthal associates women or female characters with a cultural Other. Hofmannsthal so often links dance and femininity in his work, I will argue here, because woman is understood to

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276 Hofmannsthal, Reden und Aufsätze I, 499.
277 Ibid., 497.
278 Ibid., 496.
already embody the alterity of sexual difference, and can thus can act as an intermediary to other forms of difference, a conduit between these “uralten Formen” and Hofmannsthal’s modern audience.

In the nineteenth-century discourse on Weibersprache, instances of cultural difference were often used to bolster the authority of sexual difference (images of foreign-looking women inserted into the section on European women’s rights in Das Weib in der Natur- und Völkerkunde, for instance). In Hofmannsthal’s dance texts, the opposite occurs: sexual difference is mobilized in the service of other forms of alterity—the alterity of the “pure” dance, and the supposed alterity of the ancient and foreign cultures from which it originates.

The Other Sex on Other Shores: The foreign origins of “pure” dance in Furcht

In order to further examine the function of gender in Hofmannsthal’s depictions of dance, I will consider the text Furcht, which Hofmannsthal published in 1907 in Die neue Rundschau. Furcht is a dialogue between two female dancers—presumably courtesans—named Hymnis and Laidion. Furcht also presents, perhaps more extensively than any of his other texts, Hofmannsthal’s conception of dance as essentially non-representational. Like “Über die Pantomime,” Furcht also takes inspiration from Lucian—here it is his dialogues of the Hetaræ, the ancient Greek courtesans, upon which Hofmannsthal draws. Yet, as he also will do in “Über die Pantomime” a few years later, Hofmannsthal deviates significantly from Lucian’s text,

using the ancient dialogues only as a springboard from which to explore his own concerns, namely the expressive capabilities of different aesthetic media.

In Furcht, Hofmannsthal presents two dancers who disagree about the virtues of the dance they perform for their male audience. While the first dancer, Hymnis, is relatively uncritical of their manner of dancing, the second dancer, Laidion is dissatisfied, arguing that the performance is only for the benefit of the men, and never makes her, the dancer, happy. “Ach Gott,” Laidion proclaims,

wie schal und nichtswürdig ist das alles. Da tanzen wir für zwölf oder zwanzig Männer, darunter sind ein paar alte Reiche und die übrigen sind Schmarotzer und wir tanzen und dann sind wir müd und dann wird alles häßlich: alles dringt auf mich zu, die Gesichter der Männer, die Lichter, der Lärm, wie gierige Vogelschäbel hackt alles mir ins Gesicht und ich möchte lieber sterben als mit ihnen liegen und trinken und ihr Geschrei anhören. Da wünsch ich mich so weit weg, als ein Vogel fliegen kann.280

In describing her disgust for their current manner of dancing, Laidion makes use of two bird comparisons: the men peck at her face “like greedy bird beaks,” and she wants to go as far away “as a bird can fly.” The way the simile functions here—that the men are like, but not actually the same as bird—is precisely what Laidion criticizes about the dance that she and Hymnis perform.

“So hast du Wünsche,” she tells Hymnis, “und Wünsche sind Furcht.”


281 Ibid., 575.
The problem with the way the women dance, according to Laidion, is that their dance is mimetic. The dancer may ape the movements of animals and trees, but she will never be an animal or a tree; this difference between signifier and signified, between the self and the world, and between the dancer and the dance she performs, is never eliminated. Why is this a problem? For one, Laidion’s argument implies, because it is restrictive: the dancer is ruled by the desire of the audience, rather than by a desire to give herself over to the dance itself. Elsewhere, Laidion compares herself and the other dancers to marionettes: the male spectators “hält oben die Fäden, die mitten in unserm Leib befestigt sind, und reißt hierhin und dorthin und macht unsre Glieder fliegen.” It is not desire, Laidion continues, that makes her perform the ecstatic movements of a “Mänade,” but fear. In other words, their dance does not allow for authentic expression: they dance for the sake of the men, rather than for the sake of the dance.

Even more importantly, the critique that Hofmannsthal conveys through Laidion’s speech is that the type of dance they perform does not allow dance to express its true form. Instead of dance in the emphatic sense, the rhythm of the “rein Tanzmäßige,” we have here dance masquerading as language—dance that attempts to signify and convey meaning, as language does. (Indeed, this is what Hofmannsthal dismisses in “Über die Pantomime” as a “Schauspiel, dessen Darsteller sich absurderweise der Hände bedienen, anstatt ihrer Zunge.”) Dance, however, has an alternative available to it that language does not: the movements of the body, gestures which do not stand for anything external but are “pure” expression.

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282 Ibid., 577
283 Hofmannsthal, Reden und Aufsätze I, 502.
Hofmannsthal uses this alternative conception of dance to construct a countermodel to Hymnis and Laidion’s dance in the text. This countermodel, this “dream of another dance,” to use Gabriele Brandstetter’s phrase, is a dance that Laidion has heard is performed on a distant island. In what follows, I will show that the depiction of this other dance in Hofmannsthal’s text depends on the conflation of cultural, historical, and sexual difference such that one form of difference acts as a conduit to others. In that Hofmannsthal creates a female character to discuss and perform this radically different dance, his text makes an implicit argument for woman’s alterity, since in Furcht and elsewhere it is always female characters who access this ostensibly foreign and ancient manner of dancing.

What is this other dance, and how does it work? According to Laidion, who learned the story from a visiting sailor, there is an island where a “primitive” people live and worship their gods through dance. These people have an animistic culture that makes no distinction between religion and nature. The trees are giant and their shadows are “wie etwas Lebendiges,” while the

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284 Gabriele Brandstetter, “Der Traum vom anderen Tanz. Hofmannsthal’s Ästhetik des Schöpferischen im Dialog ‘Furcht,’” in Hugo von Hofmannsthal: Neue Wege der Forschung, ed. Elsbeth Dangel-Pelloquin (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2007), 41-61. Brandstetter argues that in Furcht, Hofmannsthal develops a theory of the creative [das Schöpferische] that involves two conceptions of “das Fremde”: “Es erschient einerseits als das Traumbild eines anderen Tanzes, als ‘barbarisches Ritual, in dem die als Kulturprodukt der Hemmung erfahrene Körpereinfremdung aufgehoben ist, und zwar im Erlebnis von Ursprünglichkeit und Identität in tänzerischer Bewegung; und dieses ‘Fremde’ wird andererseits berührt in der Frage nach dem Anderen eines genuin weiblichen Schöpfertums – als Gegenbild zur männlich dominierten abendländischen Kultur” (42). I would like to build on Brandstetter’s argument here to more explicitly highlight the extent to which Hofmannsthal’s conception of this other dance depends on a certain understanding of femininity, and connect this to the way gender functions for Benjamin and Musil.
The gods live “in den Bäumen und zwischen den Bäumen.” The people there have no shame in their dancing, Laidion continues,


While both kinds of dance lead to copulation (the dance Laidion and Hymnis perform concludes by “laying with” the male spectators), Laidion’s description of the island dance turns sex into a religious fertility ritual (“um der Götter willen tun sie es und die Götter segnen es”) rather than crude secular amusement. Furthermore, both the dance and the sex that this dance sanctifies are marked by non-individuation. Instead of being individual agents, the island dancers’ bodies are “wie ein Leib”; when they go to reproduce with the men, it is “ohne Wahl.” The principle of differentiation, which language depends upon, and which Laidion finds so oppressive in the courtesan dance she and Hymnis perform—you mimic a tree but never become a tree, for instance—this differentiation evaporates in the dance of the island. Laidion continues the description,


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286 Ibid., 575.

287 Ibid., 578.
While the men apparently do watch the women’s dance on the island, Laidion’s description makes it clear that the dance is not directed at the male spectators (the men are “ganz klein, ganz weit,” they “kauern auf der Erde”). This stands in contrast Laidion’s earlier description of her own male audience, where the viewers are so aggressive that they peck at her face like birds. In addition, the theme of lack of individuation is further developed here: the women forget that they will be wives and mothers, and instead exist in a kind of urfemininity before the establishment and institutionalization of social gender roles. As Brandstetter points out, the way that the dancer’s bodies are supposed to blend together corresponds to a popular contemporaneous thesis about “primitive” cultures, which held that “der Wilde im Vergleich zum Zivilisierten einen anderen Lebensrhythmus habe, dem ein anderes Selbstgefühl zugrunde liebe.” In the description of this dance, Hofmannsthal brings together two forms of difference—that of “primitive” cultures and that of the female sex—in order to signify the alterity of the dance itself.

Hofmannsthal ends Furcht by having Laidion perform this other dance, and the way the dance is integrated into the text further emphasizes its difference. An italicized narrative voice—absent up until this moment—enters the text to describe Laidion’s movements. “Sie fängt an, sich in den Hüften zu bewegen,” Hofmannsthal writes,

\[ \text{Irgendwie fühlt man, daß sie nicht allein ist, daß viele gleiche um sie sind, und daß alle zugleich tanzen unter den Augen ihrer Götter. Sie tanzen und kreisen, und es dämmert schon [...] Sie sind die Gebärenden und die Geborenen der Insel, sie sind die Trägerinnen des Todes und des Lebens.} \]

\[ \text{Laidion gleicht in diesem Augenblick kaum mehr sich selber. Unter ihren gespannten Zügen ist etwas Furchtbares, Drohendes, Ewiges: das Gesicht einer barbarischen Gottheit. Ihre Arme fliegen in einem furchtbaren Rhythmus hinauf und wieder hinab,} \]

\[ \text{288 See Brandstetter, “Der Traum vom anderen Tanz,” 55. This is in reference to the essay by Rudolf Kassner, “Der indische Idealismus” (1903), which Hofmannsthal read and appreciated.} \]
todesdrohend, wie Keulen. Und ihre Augen schienen angefüllt mit einer kaum mehr erträglichen Spannung inneren Glücks.\textsuperscript{289}

*Furcht* was not intended to be performed. It is one of Hofmannsthal’s many *erfundene Gespräche*, fictional conversations or dialogues.\textsuperscript{290} In its form, the dialogue typically emphasizes its own linguistic medium—the only action is the speeches given by the participants. Yet, in this description of Laidion’s dance, the text breaks out of the dialogic form to something resembling stage directions. The introduction of the theatrical here suggests that the genre of the dialogue—and by extension, the medium of language—is insufficient to portray this kind of dance. The dance is a third element that interrupts the two-character dialogue, the conversation between Hymnis and Laidion, and thereby identifies itself as incongruous—not only with the setting, the “civilized” world of the courtesans, but also with the text itself. In taking recourse to a generic convention of drama, Hofmannsthal marks the dance as performance, and beyond the bounds of the textual.

In this ecstatic moment of performance, Laidion is transported out of herself and onto the island; she dances as one with other women. We know these other dancers are female not only from Laidion’s earlier account of the dance, but also from the description here, which refers to the performers in the feminine plural as the “Trägerinnen des Todes und des Lebens.” Obviously, this female fertility ritual must be performed by women: that is part of its very definition. Yet the larger status of gender remains ambiguous in Hofmannsthal’s text. Is this female ritual one

\textsuperscript{289} Hofmannsthal, *Erzählungen*, 579.

\textsuperscript{290} Other fictional dialogues of Hofmannsthal’s include “Über Charaktere im Roman und im Drama” (1902); “Das Gespräch über Gedichte” (1903); and three “Unterhaltungen” that he wrote in 1906, respectively titled “über die Schriften von Gottfried Keller,” “über den ‘Tasso’ von Goethe,” and “über ein neues Buch.”
example of a generally “other” kind of dance, of which there are many possible instantiations, male as well as female? Or is femininity actually integral to the very constitution of this dance? In other words: is the all-female cast in Furcht simply a matter of expediency (portray the otherness of dance via the other sex), or does Hofmannsthal understand dance to be a specifically feminine mode of expression?

To address these questions, I will turn briefly to several other texts that Hofmannsthal wrote around the same time as Furcht. Furcht may be where Hofmannsthal most explicitly presents the idea of dance as a countermodel to language, but it is certainly not his only text that engages with this notion, nor the only one to use female figures to do so. In the tragic drama, and then opera, Elektra (1903/1909), for instance, Hofmannsthal has his female protagonist perform a dance very similar to that of Laidion.

Hofmannsthal bases his Elektra on the Sophoclean tragedy, and maintains the general storyline and characters from the ancient Greek. Yet, as many scholars have shown, he also incorporates elements of the early twentieth-century discourse on hysteria, led by Freud and Breuer’s Studien über Hysterie, into his portrayal of the tragedy’s female characters.291 I am less interested here in the role of hysteria, which has been well documented, than on the way that Elektra’s dance is configured in contradistinction to the linguistic. Both the stage directions and the way that Elektra speaks of her dance emphasize its non- or extra-linguistic nature. “Elektra

hat sich erhoben,” Hofmannsthal’s stage directions read, “Sie schreitet von der Schwelle herunter. Sie hat den Kopf zurückgeworfen wie eine Mänade. Sie wirft die Knie, sie reckt die Arme aus, es ist ein namenloser Tanz, in welchem sie nach vorwärts schreitet.” The movements of Elektra’s body echo those of Laidion, who also throws her head back and moves her arms in the same manner. As Elektra performs this “nameless” dance, she proclaims,

Alle müssen
hierbei! Hier schließt euch an! Ich trag die Last
des Glückes, und ich tanze vor euch her.
Wer glücklich ist wie wir, dem ziemt nur eins:
schweigen und tanzen!

In both Furcht and Elektra, Hofmannsthal correlates this ecstatic type of dance with the word Tragen. Elektra declares that she “tr[ägt] die Last des Glückes,” while the description of Laidion’s dance refers to the women as the “Trägerinnen des Todes und des Lebens.” Tragen, I would like to suggest, encapsulates what is particular to the semiotics of dance for Hofmannsthal. The body of the dancer does not represent, signify, or even perform (for that would be too spectator-oriented, like the repudiated dance of the courtesans in Furcht), but trägt—carries the experience that language fails to express and that can only be externalized through movement. A second meaning of tragen is also operative here, namely that of biological reproduction. “Pure” dance, the “rein Tanzmäßige,” is itself a kind of birth: the dancer brings forth expression into the world through the gestures of the body. In this way, it is not a coincidence that Hofmannsthal chooses to imagine a female fertility ritual in Furcht, his most programmatic text on dance. The

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293 Ibid., 233-234.
294 “Tragen” can also mean to bear or yield fruit, as well as (for female animals) to be pregnant.
dancers there are the “Gebärenden und die Geborenen der Insel” not only because they are about to become mothers and have children, but also because the dance itself is productive, creative. That he continually makes use of female characters and the idea of Tragen in his depiction of this ‘other’ dance suggests that, for Hofmannsthal, the medium of dance is inextricably linked to the feminine, and to what Brandstetter has called a “weibliches Schöpfertum.” 295 Several years later, Hofmannsthal will compare the movements of pantomime to the tea ceremonies of Japanese Geishas, creating another figure that brings together bodily movement, female sexuality, and cultural difference. 296

The association of female characters with non-representational movements, which define the dances of Furcht and Elektra, also appears in Hofmannsthal pantomimes. In Das fremde Mädchen, from 1910, the most indecipherable gestures of the piece are assigned to the female character from whom the pantomime takes its name. 297 In Amor und Psyche, written the

295 Brandstetter, “Der Traum vom anderen Tanz,” 42. Alexandra Kolb also argues that Hofmannsthal, along with other early twentieth-century writers, imagined dance to be a specifically feminine medium. Kolb shows how male writers purposely ignored the intellectual dimensions of female dancers’ work in order to further their conception of dance as “total” and “immediate.” Kolb critique this practice: “the conceptualisation of dance in terms of a manifestation of a female psyche and anatomy broadens the gap between the sexes, and contributes to the binarism which caused the very hierarchy female dancers were seeking to undermine.” Alexandra Kolb, Performing Femininity: Dance and Literature in German Modernism (Oxford; New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 46.


297 “Es ist ihrer ein ganz Klumpen, der sich auf dem Straßenpflaster beisammenhält: ein altes Weib, ein Bucklinger, ein Einarmiger, einer, der nur ein Auge hat, und ein junger frecher Großer,
following year, Hofmannsthal reworks the classical love story and devotes the majority of the pantomime to the female character Psyche. In her most expressive dance, Psyche’s movements parallel those of Laidion and Elektra. “Ist außen und innen das Gleiche?” Hofmannsthal’s description reads, “der arme Kopf hält es nicht mehr auseinander: ein angstgejagtes Hinauswollen aus diesem Höllekreis, ein Vorstürzen – dann krümmt sie sich, wirft sich hinauf, als wollte sie sich aus sich selber herauswerfen.”

To Grete Wiesenthal, the dancer who would perform the lead role in both Das fremde Mädchen and Amor und Psyche, Hofmannsthal wrote about his directions for the pantomime: “Das sind Worte. Sie übersetzen sich in eine bessere Materie.” What exactly makes the body a “better material” than language? In Furcht, Hofmannsthal critiqued the courtesans’ dance for not being true to its own form, for trying to mimic language and represent rather than simply express. This distinction again appears in Hofmannsthal’s letter to Wiesenthal, where he distinguishes between “pure” and “impure” gestures:

Es handelt sich um eine Folge reiner Stellungen und Geberden. Die Geberden, die das Schauspielerische begleiten, sind alle unrein, weil vermischt; sie gehen ineinander über; auch ihrer Natur nach sind sie unrein, zum geringen Teil wahrhaft ausgebildete mimische Geberde, zum großen Teil bloße conventionelle Zeichen, wie die Buchstaben, die ja aus wahrhaften Bildern, den Heiroglyphen, enstanden sind.

mit einer Kappe. Gespannt schauen sie alle auf ihn herüber, jetzt springen sie zur Seite, es ist als hätten sie für ihn etwas auf den Boden gelegt, ein Paket, nein einen Körper, ein menschliches Wesen, ein junges halbwüchsiges Mädchen. Mager und durftig sieht sie aus, ihr Haar hängt über die Schultern, sie hebt, auf den Knien liegend, die Hände gegen den schönen erleuchteten Tisch hin, - ist es angelernt, eine Bettlergebärde, oder wirklich eine stumme angstvolle Bitte?“ Shortly thereafter, her movements are again unclear—„es ist als würde sie von rückwärts geschoben.“ Hofmannsthal, Dramen IV, 69 and 70.


299 Grete Wiesenthal, 97.

300 Ibid., 96.
Unlike words, which are arbitrary, tethered to their meanings only by convention, the body offers the possibility of a different kind of sign: a sign that is motivated, whose form is ostensibly necessitated by nature, and which Hofmannsthal therefore conceptualizes as “pure.” As Hofmannsthal writes in a different letter to Wiesenthal,

Gretl, nirgends und überall ist Gegenwart, die Geheimnisse sind offenbar, die Thaten dunkel, aber rein, weil sie nur sich wollen und in sich selber beschlossen sind. Die Worte verwirren und gehen von einem Ding zum anderen hinüber; sie sind gefährlich, weil sie ohne Selbst sind und aus sich herausschweifen.\textsuperscript{301}

Language can be deceptive, Hofmannsthal implies because it has no necessary form; it is “ohne Selbst.” The gestural movements of dance, on the other hand, precisely because they are “dunkel” and unintelligible, are “pure” in that they exist only for themselves. The instances of ecstatic dance from \textit{Furcht} to \textit{Amor und Psyche} thus offer the body as an alternative to what Hofmannsthal would elsewhere call the “trügerisch” nature of language: unlike words, the frenzied movements of the dance do not pretend to mean, a disingenuous standing in for something else, but are “pure” expression.\textsuperscript{302} As I demonstrated in the preceding section, it is not a coincidence that the bodies Hofmannsthal repeatedly chooses to perform this kind dance are female. What makes it possible for Hofmannsthal to gender this other dance feminine is the presumption that woman, more than man, bears a connection to the “primitive” culture out of which this dance supposedly originates. This idea, that woman cannot be completely integrated

\textsuperscript{301} Ibid., 99

\textsuperscript{302} This is from the essay “Augenblicke in Griechenland,” where Hofmannsthal distinguishes between disingenuous linguistic media (ancient literature and philosophy) and the non-arbitrary forms of material objects that take their shape from the female body. See Hofmannsthal, \textit{Erzählungen}, 617-628.
into modern culture, but always retains a link to some primeval way of life, can perhaps be traced back Johann Jakob Bachofen’s *Das Mutterrecht*, which argued that the order of modern civilization only came into effect once men overthrew the rule of matriarchy to establish their own patriarchal law.\(^{303}\)

Hofmannsthal is certainly not the only writer in this period to cast woman as anti-modern: Georg Simmel’s theory of a “weibliche Kultur” that must stand outside of modernity is another example, as are the theories of woman’s intermediary evolutionary status mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. Benjamin, too, locates the “Sprache der Frauen” in the ancient past, although Sappho belongs to ancient Greek civilization rather than an imagined primitive culture. Musil, on the other hand, critiques this very association of woman with a nostalgia for the past in the novellas of *Drei Frauen*. In *Vereinigungen*, the new language and experience that he points to through Claudine is one of the future: the “other condition” is related to the transgression of social norms, not the regression to a previous order. Although Musil is future-oriented, in contrast to Hofmannsthal and Benjamin, who look to the past as a way to renew the present, all three writers engage gender as a strategy to incorporate into their texts what they construct as beyond the limits of the textual. As I have attempted to show in this chapter, the idea of woman’s alterity plays an integral role not only in the way these authors portray their female characters, but in their exploration of the possibility of new literary forms as well.

In the works of Musil, Hofmannsthal, and Benjamin, therefore, representations of “feminine language” are implicit references to and comments on the conditions of possibility of

poetological discourse. As we have seen, “feminine” language takes on a utopian dimension here—becoming an ideal language that, because of the impossibility of its expression, can never actually be articulated. “Feminine language” thus appears in the works of these authors less as an issue of sexual politics than as an issue of hermeneutics. The “other” language that Musil assigns to Claudine, for instance, cannot be understood because it contradicts the very principles that make narration possible, such as the chronological progression of time or the distinction between word and meaning. In this way, the feminine is cast as absolute Other—not only to the masculine, but also to literature itself, insofar as literature is premised upon the possibility of interpretation.
Chapter 4.

“Women’s Language” Revisited

In the 1970s, a new kind of text on “feminine language” begins to appear in France. Simultaneously drawing on and critiquing Lacanian psychoanalysis, these texts celebrate the possibility of a language aligned with the feminine—a language that, they contend, would allow for the expression of an authentic feminine subjectivity, no longer suppressed by the phallocentrism of ordinary discourse. The emancipatory feminine language imagined in these texts often derives its constitutive elements from the female body, and the maternal body in particular: “La femme n’est jamais loin de la ‘mère,’” writes Hélène Cixous in her now famous “Le Rire de la Méduse” from 1975. “Toujours en elle subsiste au moins un peu du bon lait-de-mère. Elle écrit à l’encre blanche.”

Similarly, Luce Irigaray contends in 1977 that women must find a language specific to the female body: “Si nous n’inventerons pas un langage, si nous ne trouvons pas son langage, notre corps aura trop peu de gestes pour accompagner notre histoire.” Working with the dichotomy masculinity/rigidity vs. femininity/fluidity, Irigaray furthermore claims that, in this new language, “le ‘dur’ ne s’impose pas. Nous connaissons assez les contours de nos corps pour aimer la fluidité.” Julia Kristeva’s theory of the semiotic, also developed in the ‘70s, differs from Cixous’ and Irigaray’s conceptions of “feminine” language insofar as Kristeva does not imagine the possibility of a different, feminine language, but rather

305 Luce Irigaray, “Quand nos lèvres se parlent,” Ce sexe qui n’en est pas un (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1977), 212.
306 Ibid., 214
describes an element of language which, she claims, is a precondition of the symbolic and which the symbolic represses. Still, it is not without reason that Kristeva’s theory is often discussed in conjunction with those of Irigaray and Cixous. Kristeva, too, links this other side of language to the maternal body—“La fonctionnalité kinésique à laquelle nous pensons en parlant du sémiotique,” Kristeva writes in *La révolution du langage poétique*, “est antérieure à la position du signe; aussi ne saurait-on dire qu’elle est cognitive au sens d’assumée par un sujet constitué connaissant. […] Il s’agit donc de fonctions sémiotiques pré-œdipiennes, de décharges d’énergie qui lient et orientent le corps par rapport à la mère.”

I have chosen to focus on Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva in this chapter because their theories were arguably the most influential for a certain kind of thinking about language and sexual difference that emerged in the 1970’s and ‘80s. Specifically, I am interested in their earliest work that engages with the question of language—for Cixous, “Le Rire de la Méduse” and “Le sexe ou la tête?”; for Irigaray, *Ce sexe qui n’en est pas un*; for Kristeva, *La révolution du langage poétique*—as these texts most programmatically describe their respective versions of “feminine language.” Of all the texts examined in this dissertation, those by Kristeva, Irigaray, and Cixous are perhaps the best known. My purpose here is neither to offer a new critique of their theories nor to rehearse arguments about essentialism, the extent to which the “female bodies” that their texts reference are real or imagined. This ground has been well-covered.

Instead, I want to put their ideas about feminine language into conversation with the notions of

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women’s language discussed in the previous three chapters. I will focus on three points of comparison here: 1.) the conception of language from which women’s/feminine language supposedly deviates; 2.) the connection between women’s/feminine language and textuality; and 3.) the relation between conceptions of women’s/feminine language and genre.

The objective of this comparison is twofold. First, it serves to revisit major texts from the first three chapters and analyze significant issues that I was not able to address earlier, such as the distinction between speech and writing or the relation between conceptions of “women’s language” and claims about the arbitrariness of the sign in human language. Second, it serves as an experiment in the practice of bringing twentieth-century theory into exchange with earlier texts without subsuming one under the terms of the other. What does it mean to read Humboldt’s *Weibersprache* with Cixous’ *écriture féminine*—especially now, 40 years after the heyday of French feminism? What can twentieth-century theory say to us today?

**What is language? Norms and deviations.**

The texts examined in this dissertation obviously do not all understand language in the same way. If there is one thing that unites them, it is that they characterize “women’s language” as a deviation from what they understand as “regular” or ordinary language. The way in which “women’s” language deviates from ordinary language, however, is not always the same: the aspect of language in which this deviation is supposedly *located* changes from discourse to discourse, and from episteme to episteme. In this section, I will briefly outline the concepts of language important for Chapters 1-3, in order to elucidate the changing location of the difference
of women’s language. I will then contrast this with the Lacanian theory of language, the main theory with which 1970s feminist texts engage.

The understanding of language operative in the context of seventeenth-century ethnography is, if we follow Foucault, based upon the paradigm of representation. While there is no evidence that the French missionaries who first reported on the Carib langage des femmes themselves read the texts that Foucault cites, the way they relate the existence of the women’s language follows a similar pattern. In particular, Foucault’s argument that, during the Classical episteme, language was understood in terms of its discursivity, resonates with the way that the ethnographic texts are organized. “What civilizations and peoples leave us as the monuments of their thought,” Foucault writes, describing what he understands to be the outlook of this period, “is not so much their texts as their vocabularies, their syntaxes, the sounds of their languages rather than the words they spoke; not so much their discourse as the elements that made it possible, the discursivity of their language.”

Similarly, when describing the Carib men’s and women’s languages, seventeenth-century ethnographic texts emphasize what kind of knowledge these languages allow, what it is possible for their speakers to say. According to Breton, Du Tertre and Rochefort, the three major authors of studies on the Caribs, the deviation of the langage des femmes is one of vocabulary: there are certain words that only women speak, which the missionaries then document. Generally, however, the langage des femmes is believed to follow the same grammatical structures as the “Carib” language, and to occupy the same lesser status in relation to the languages of antiquity

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310 Ibid., 87.
and European modernity. In terms of expressive capability, the Carib languages are supposedly limited in scope. Island Caribs have no word for “soul,” Charles de Rochefort reports; they have terms only for four colors. Implicit in these ethnographic texts is the claim that “primitive” women’s languages are united with men’s languages in their difference from French.

Beginning with Herder in the late eighteenth century, and continuing into the philosophies of language espoused by Wilhelm von Humboldt and Jacob Grimm, language is understood to have a world-making function. There is, according to these theories, a reciprocal relationship between the structures of human language and the structures of the human world—including (they assert) that most fundamental of structures, sexual difference. The existence of both grammatical gender (the sexual difference of language) and separate “women’s languages” (the language of sexual difference) are thus not products of historical contingency, but the necessary manifestation in language of a fundamental human truth.

In this way, nineteenth-century theories of Weibersprache naturalize what was, in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, understood to be the product of history. Women’s languages are not the effect of warring tribes and bridal capture, but the expression of women’s essentially different nature. Thus the “difference” of women’s language is not restricted to certain words, but is expanded to all aspects of language, including both the content of women’s speech (the meaning of what they say) as well as their style of expression (pronunciation, emphasis, sentence structure). Humboldt’s contention about women and language—that women

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312 See the introduction to Chapter 2.
speak more “natürlicher, zartlicher, und dennoch kraftvoller als Männer aus”\textsuperscript{313}—is an unquantifiable statement. “More naturally, tenderly” is not an objectively measurable standard: thus the inclusion of ethnographically documented data as a means of corroboration.

Yet, what remains constant between the conception of women’s language operative in ethnographic and philological discourses is that both situate the difference of women’s language within \textit{parole}, to borrow again from Saussure’s terminology. As I discussed briefly in Chapter 3, the difference of women’s language in the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries is not a difference of language \textit{as such} (a difference in the constitution of \textit{langue}), but a difference in the way this language is expressed.

By contrast, in literary texts of the early twentieth century, the difference of women’s language is located in \textit{langue} itself, specifically in the relationship between signifier and signified. While the relation of signifier to signified is presumed to be arbitrary in the “regular” language of men (we may remember Hofmannsthal’s discussion of \textit{Willkürlichkeit} of language in \textit{Furcht}), “women’s language” is now imagined to mystically unify word and meaning, eliminating the arbitrary relationship between them. Whereas nineteenth-century theories of language solve the problem of arbitrariness by having the forms of language mirror the forms of human life, twentieth-century texts do not assert the structure of language to be motivated in this way. Feminine language—configured as a non-arbitrary, radical alternative to ordinary

language—thus appears first in the early 1900s perhaps because it is only in this period that the invention of such a “feminine language” is needed to serve as a kind of compensation.

Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva also all—in different ways—continue this pattern of locating the difference of feminine language within langue. However, this difference is not necessarily found in a changed relationship between signifier and signified. The feminine language of the 1970s is not constituted by the imagination of specific words or signs (such as Musil’s “Zauberworte,” Hofmannsthal’s non-mimetic gestures), but rather by an attempt to dismantle the very conditions of possibility of langue, the binary pairing of signifier/signified as the constitutive schema of language.

Irigaray, for instance, would have feminine language be based upon a principle of multiplicity rather than a binary structure of similarity and difference. In “Quand nos lèvres se parlent,” Irigaray orients the text towards a feminine reader, and implores her to enter into a different kind of language, one in which all differentiations, including even the distinction between speaker and addressee, are no longer in effect. “Ouvre tes lèvres, ne les ouvre simplement,” Irigaray writes,

Je ne les ouvre pas simplement. Tu/je ne sommes ni ouvertes ni fermées. Ne nous séparent jamais, simplement : un seul mot ne peut être prononcé. Être produit, sorti, de nos bouches. Entre tes/mes lèvres plusieurs chants, plusieurs dires, toujours se répondent. Sans que l’un, l’une, soit jamais séparable de l’autre. Tu/je : font toujours plusieurs à la fois.\(^\text{314}\)

Insofar as the structure of this new language is supposed to be multiple because the structure of the female body is “multiple” (Irigaray refers here to multiple erogonous zones, multiple “lips”), then there is a surprising continuity between Irigaray’s theory and nineteenth-century

conceptions of language, which connect linguistic forms to bodily forms. The difference, of course, is that Irigaray’s theory demands a radical undoing of the binary structure that makes meaning possible. Indeed, the demand for “meaning” itself is designated as phallocentric in Irigaray’s critique: in reference to psychoanalysis, which she characterizes as “un discours qui dit le vrai de la logique de la vérité,” Irigaray contends that it follows a phallic model and “participe des valeurs promues par la société et la culture patriarcales, valeurs inscrites dans le corpus philosophique: propriété, production, ordre, forme, unité, visibilité… érection.”315

What kind of form the writing of feminine language can take when it is, in Irigaray’s formulation, constitutionally opposed to form, is a problem that I will address in a later section. Right now I want to concentrate further on understanding where, exactly, Irigaray—along with Cixous and Kristeva—locate the difference of the “feminine” languages they describe. Irigaray is writing against Lacan here, who argues that entrance into language also means entrance into the masculine realm of the symbolic. Femininity, according to Lacan, has no place the symbolic order, and thus no place in language: femininity therefore cannot be expressed as such. “There is woman,” Lacan asserts in “God and the Jouissance of The Woman,” “only as excluded by the nature of words.”316 Elsewhere, he similarly argues about ‘woman’ that “there is a jouissance proper to her, to this ‘her’ which does not exist and which signifies nothing. There is a jouissance proper to her and of which she herself may know nothing, except that she experiences

Irigaray’s work counters Lacan’s theory of femininity as she outlines the possibility of an alternative feminine language that is not regulated by the signifier.

Importantly, this alternative feminine language is itself a *stance* within regular language.

In response to the problem of “the articulation of the female sex in discourse,” for example, Irigaray asserts that the only possible response is imitation:

> Il s’agit d’assumer, délibérément, ce rôle [qui est historiquement assigné au féminin]. Ce qui est déjà retourner en affirmation une subordination, et, de ce fait, commencer à la déjouer. Alors que récuser cette condition revient, pour le féminin, à revendiquer de parler en “sujet” (masculin), soit à postuler un rapport à l’intelligible qui maintient l’indifférence sexuelle.  

In other words, Irigaray’s objective is not to put forward a feminine equivalent to the masculine symbolic (as, she would claim, this would still be operating within masculine logic), but rather to characterize a different relationship to language—what she calls a “jamming the machinery” [enrayer la machinerie] of language—that would make language unravel, and would reveal what it represses. Instead of offering a new concept of woman or woman’s language, Irigaray identifies femininity with an “excès, dérangeant,” which, when made to inhabit its assigned role within masculine discourse, also subverts and sabotages that discourse.

Cixous’ theory of *écriture féminine* similarly attempts to articulate the feminine through a language that does not operate according to the division signifier/signified—“Amie, garde-toi du signifiant qui veut te reconduire à l’autorité d’un signifié!” warns Cixous in “Le Rire de la

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317 Ibid., 145.
319 Irigaray’s text reads: “Autrement dit, l’enjeu n’est pas d’élaborer une nouvelle théorie dont la femme serait le sujet ou l’objet, mais d’enrayer la machinerie théorique elle-même, de suspendre sa prétention à la production d’une vérité et d’un sens par trop univoques” (Ibid., 75).
In characterizing this feminine language, Cixous uses the metaphor of fluidity, as well as the idea of a feminine libidinal economy based upon giving without the expectation of return—what Cixous describes as a departure from the “masculine” economy of debt and lack. In this way, Cixous, like Irigaray, relies on an idea of multiplicity as a countermodel to the binary structure of “masculine” language:

Ecris! Et Ton texte se cherchant se connaît plus que chair et sang […] Hétérogène, oui, a son bénéfice joyeux elle est érogène, elle est l’érogénité de l’hétérogène; ce n’est pas à elle-même qu’elle tient, la nageuse aérienne, la voleuse. Dispersable, prodigue, étourdissante, désireuse et capable d’autre, de l’autre femme qu’elle sera, de l’autre femme qu’elle n’est pas, le lui, de toi.

This idea of sexual multiplicity—“erotogeneity of the heterogeneous”—supplies, like in Irigaray, the female body as a non-arbitrary model upon which to base feminine language. Also like Irigaray, Cixous attributes homogeneity and differentiation to the realm of the masculine.

Kristeva similarly describes the semiotic as a stage where differentiation has not yet come in existence. In the quotation from Kristeva with which I began this chapter, she refers to the semiotic *chora* as a “space before the sign”: before the structures that condition representation. It is only once the child enters into language, Kristeva writes in *Révolution*, that separation also enters as an operative principle:

L’apprentissage du langage peut alors être pensé comme un affrontement aigu et dramatique entre cette position-détachement du corps de la mère, le jeu *fort-da*, l’analité et l’oralité agissent comme une négativité permanente qui détruit l’imago et l’objet isolé, tout en favorisant l’articulation du réseau sémiotique est plus ou moins intégré en tant que *signifiant*.

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320 Cixous, “Rire,” 53.
322 Kristeva, *Révolution*, 44.
In the theories of Kristeva, Cixous and Irigaray, then, we may say that the difference of “feminine language” is not located in the positing of a different kind of sign, where word and meaning are imagined to be united, but rather in the rejection of the very idea of the sign, and the ordering structures that make it possible.

Because this “feminine language” is supposed to be something either prior to or beyond the signification, it cannot be expressed directly in “regular” language or cited unmediated. Indeed, the texts themselves thematize the problem of exact definitions. Cixous writes that it is “impossible de définir une pratique féminine de l’écriture.” She continues,

d’une impossibilité qui se maintiendra car on ne pourra jamais théoriser cette pratique, l’enfermer, la coder, ce qui ne signifie pas qu’elle n’existe pas. Mais elle excédera toujours le discours que régit le système phallocentrique; elle a et aura lieu ailleurs que dans les territoires subordonnés à la domination philosophique-théorique.323

Similarly, Irigaray claims that what she terms a “feminine syntax” is difficult to define:

Cela dit, ce que serait une syntaxe du féminin, ce n’est pas simple, ni aisé à dire, parce que dans cette “syntaxe” il n’y aurait plus ni sujet ni objet, le “un” n’y serait plus privilégié, il n’y aurait plus de sens propre, de nom propre, d’attributs “propres”…324

In Kristeva, too, the drives associated with the semiotic are not something that can be understood theoretically, only uncovered through the process of what she calls “semanalysis”:

Ce n’est pas dans une narration, encore moins dans une métalangue ou une dérive théorique que se déverse et s’accomplice ce procès pulsionnel. Il lui faut un text: une destruction du signe, de la représentation, et, en conséquence, du récit, de la métalangue et du sérieux dérivé. Mais pour ce faire, le texte les parcourt, ne les ignore pas, s’insinue en eux et les fait sauter dans son rythme violent, en alternant le rejet et l’imposition. […] Elle trouve sa réalisation dans des textes que notre culture accepte depuis la fin du XIX siècle. Avec Lautréamont, Mallarmé, Joyce, Artaud, lire signifie abandonner l’opération lexicale-syntaxique-sémantique du déchiffrement, et refaire le trajet de leur production.325

323 “Rire,” 45.
324 Irigaray, "Lèvres," 134.
325 Kristeva, Révolution, 98.
If “feminine language”—in the various forms that Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva imagine it—cannot be defined, then it can only practiced and experienced. In what follows, I will explore the problems that this “impossibility to define” poses, and the connection, already introduced here, between “feminine language” and text.

**Can “women’s language” be written?**

Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva draw connections between language and sexual difference perhaps more explicit than in any of the texts examined in the previous three chapters. While we have seen that these French theorists differ significantly from earlier discussions of language, sex, and gender in terms of the location of the difference of feminine language, there are nonetheless striking similarities between, for instance, Irigaray’s work and Walter Benjamin’s idea of the “Sprache der Frauen,” or between Kristeva’s contention that the (feminine) semiotic can erupt into the (masculine) symbolic and the opinion of many nineteenth-century philologists that languages can be divided into masculine and feminine components. Nonetheless, while there are apparent parallels between French feminist theory and earlier conceptualizations of women’s language, feminist theory diverges from earlier ideas of *Weibersprache* on another fundamental point: the ability of women’s language to be written and to exist as text.

In the case of the nineteenth-century discussion of *Weibersprache*, as well as in that of the early twentieth-century literary appeal to an alternative feminine medium of expression, women’s language is necessarily absent from the text that invokes it. The word “invoke” may already be misleading, as—I would argue—women’s language does not necessarily exist prior to this discussion of it, but is constructed as a phenomenon in the very moment that the text points
to its existence elsewhere. Insofar as women’s language is defined as non-textual and even potentially non-discursive, it is an Other against which the discourse that examines it—whether philological, anthropological or literary—constitutes itself. This is the paradox of the scientific as well as the Modernist literary construction of women’s language: that women’s language is at once wholly material, always tied to an (imagined) sexed body, yet also lacks any materialized form. There is no text in Weibersprache, no book in the “Sprache der Frauen.” According to the conceptions of women’s language examined in Chapters 1 and 3, women’s language cannot be written in, only written about.

In nineteenth-century theories of Weibersprache, for instance, women’s language is linked to the orality of so-called “primitive” cultures and defined in opposition to the objective language of science: it thus cannot be accommodated by the philological text. In this way, nineteenth-century theories of Weibersprache introduce a further distinction between the language at their command and the language supposedly used by women. While “men’s” language—what we may otherwise call “regular” language—can exist in spoken or written form, women’s language is always only expressible as speech. To write in Weibersprache would be a performative contradiction.

What does this mean for philology’s own self-formulation? The very premise of philology is based on the existence and availability of a written record: inscriptions of languages contemporary and ancient, and the conclusions drawn from their comparison. In the 1800s, philological discourse uses this textual evidence in order to calculate forms of languages for which no textual record exists. The inquiry into ancient languages for which there is no extant writing system, such as proto-Germanic, or even Indo-European, is one of philology’s prime
motivations, especially towards the later half of the nineteenth century. Insofar as orality is feminized in philological discourse—the Other of a “masculine,” European culture—then the original language that philology investigates is also, implicitly, linked with femininity. When texts associate *Weibersprache* with orality, therefore, they also, implicitly, draw a connection between “women’s language” and the language of an ancestral oral culture that they attempt to reconstruct, but which also remains an unreachable origin. In this way, woman’s language is again marked as fundamentally opposed to what is iterable in philological discourse.

A similar distinction between written and oral language is made in the Romantic theory of grammatical gender, which I examined in Chapter 2, although here it is not “woman” who stands in for an absent origin, but sex itself. In texts on grammatical gender, the “sex” of language is ascribed to an animistic origin that cannot be recaptured even by rigorous philological practice, but can, ultimately, only be speculated about. Our modern language has lost its original “sex,” claim Grimm and his followers, such that the grammatical categories masculine, feminine, and neuter bear only a trace of their original meaning and of the “primitive” mentality that created them. This original “sexed” language is, therefore, necessarily absent from the text that discusses it: it is what motivates the philological text, the object of its inquiry, but also what the text itself, as an adherent to a modern scientific discourse, can never speak.

In the Modernist literary configuration, on the other hand, “feminine language” may inspire the form of a text, but, because of the impossibility of its expression, it can never be the medium of literature. The texts of Benjamin, Musil and Hofmannsthal stage attempts to approximate an alternative or non-language within the confines of their respective genres. In Benjamin and Hofmannsthal, the idea of an alternative language, which they link to femininity,
is, as in philological discourse, a retrospectively-constructed origin; they locate this language in an irretrievable ancient past. Musil, as we saw in Chapter 3, locates the possibility of this alternative language in the future. In the context of Modernist literature, the distinction is not between writing and speech, but between expressible and inexpressible language—between language as such and a new, fundamentally different medium of expression. Here too, however, “feminine language” is an impossible target, irreconcilable with the text as form.

_Feminine language and the textual corpus_

In contrast to earlier theories that render women’s language incompatible with textuality, feminist theorists of the 1970s produce texts in which a “feminine language” is simultaneously the object of inquiry and the language of discourse. For the first time, feminine language becomes a written practice, rather than being the unspeaking object of a different discourse. Both Cixous and Irigaray, for example, write in manner that corresponds to their characterization of feminine language. Cixous and Kristeva furthermore assemble collections of texts that they identify as being written in a feminine mode, including works by Colette, Jean Genet, Margeurite Duras, and Stéphane Mallarmé. In this way, we might say that in the 1970s, feminine language itself gains a “body,” a textual corpus that was not possible in its earlier configurations.

If, in feminist conceptions of women’s language, the origin is not to be absent—not a myth of irrecoverable loss necessary for masculine discourse’s own self-construction, as Irigaray might put it—then it must be reoriented to a location that is both present and accessible. Hence the reliance of feminist theories of language on the (imagined) female body: a origin that they recast as universally, and temporally present.
Importantly, however, this utopian feminine body-language cannot be completely realized. According to its conception in feminist theories, feminine language can never be fully actualized because it can never become a master discourse. Instead, feminine language is that which, depending on the theorist, either sporadically erupts into or intentionally disrupts the dominant masculine language. In order to maintain its subversive capability, feminine language must also maintain its marginal position and remain in potentia. “Feminine language” can exist—as Judith Butler has argued in her critique of Kristeva—only insofar as it remains subordinate to the masculine. In this way, feminist theories seem to face a problem similar to that posed by Modernist literature: if feminine language can never be fully actualized, then it would appear to be inexpressible. But an important difference between the feminist and Modernist conceptions of language is that feminist theory configures textuality such that it is integral to the production of feminine language rather than a demarcation of its boundaries. In the theories of Cixous and Kristeva—and, to a lesser extent, Irigaray—feminine language is not a spoken language but a mode of writing, a textual practice.

In place of a language that has merged with the body (a union to which, for instance Cixous’ and Irigaray’s theories aspire, but which, as we have seen, is also impossible within its theoretical configuration), the text becomes the substitute material locus of feminine language. Textuality is therefore not incidental to these theories, but constitutive of their very understanding of feminine language. In other words, what is novel about twentieth-century feminist theories of feminine language is that they suggest that feminine language not only can

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be written, but *must* be written. The need to write feminine language is not only a matter of political intervention—women entering the public sphere and claiming social institutions as their own—but also concerns the very nature of this language: the text lends feminine language its necessary materiality. In the previous section, we saw how Irigaray, Kristeva and Cixous describe their versions of “feminine language” as impossible to define, existing only as *practice* rather than theory or idea. This, too, is a way of saying that feminine language must take a material form. It cannot exist as abstraction or concept.

“Feminine” Form: Theory and Practice

If, beginning in the 1970s, feminine language is conceived as a *practice*, rather than an *object of investigation* or a *poetic ideal*, how does this practice work? If feminine language is to take the form of a text, what kinds of texts does it create? In this section, I will focus on the question of form, both in terms of how these theories understand the relation between feminine language and form, and the forms taken by their own texts.

As we began to see in the quotations above, “feminine language” as it is configured in the work of Cixous and Irigaray is opposed to the very notion of form. Irigaray equates form with erection, and thus with what she refers to as the “masculine” obsession with order, logic, and unity. This is obviously a provocative statement, but also one that must be taken seriously. If form itself is “masculine,” as Irigaray suggests, then a text written in the true feminine language can have no form—not, importantly, such that it is form*less*, signifying the absence of form, as this would simply imply an inversion of the masculine—but rather such that form, whether present or absent, is not a meaningful principle. As Irigaray claims in “Pouvoir du Discours,”
feminine “style” “résiste à, et fait exploser, toute forme, figure, idée, concept solidement établis”; “il convient de faire en sorte aussi que la lecture linéaire ne soit plus possible.”

Cixous’ theory of *écriture féminine*, too, eschews linearity, as well as a concept of form more generally. On the one hand, it may seem that *écriture féminine* is itself a formal designation, but similarly to Irigaray, Cixous claims that its only form is that it does not adhere to form. “Voilà comment je qualifierais un corps textuel féminin,” writes Cixous in “Le sexe ou la tête?” from 1976:

> à partir d’une économie libidinale féminine, c’est-à-dire à partir d’un régime, des énergies, d’un système de dépense qui n’est pas obligatoirement pris sous la coupe de la culture. Un corps textuel féminin se reconnaît au fait que c’est toujours sans fin (f-i-n): c’est sans bout, ça ne se termine pas, c’est d’ailleurs ça qui rend le texte féminin difficile à lire, très souvent. C’est que nous avons appris à lire des livres qui, au fond, posent le mot “fin.” Eh bien ça ne finit pas, un texte féminin, ça se poursuit et à un certain moment le volume se clôt mais l’écriture continue et pour le lecteur ça signifie le lancer à l’abîme. Ce sont des textes qui travaillent sur le commencement, et non pas sur l’origine; l’origine c’est le mythe masculin [...] Le rapport à l’origine, qui est illustré par Œdipe, n’est pas un rapport qui hante un inconscient féminin. Par contre le commencement ou plutôt les commencements, la manière de commencer, non pas ponctuellement par le phallus pour refermer avec le phallus, mais de commencer de tous les côtés à la fois, ça c’est de l’inscription féminine. Un texte féminin commence de tous les côtés à la fois, ça commence vingt fois, trente fois.

La question que pose un texte de femme, c’est la question du don “qu’est-ce qu’elle donne?”, “comment elle donne?”, cette écriture. Et pour parler de cette non-origine et de ces commencements, elle “donne le départ.”

Here Cixous directly opposes *écriture féminine* to conventional modes of textual organization. Not only do feminine texts not have a single beginning or ending, Cixous claims, but they also exceed the material confines of their genres—“le volume se clôt mais l’écriture continue.”

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327 Ibid., 76; 77.
Significantly, however, Cixous does not say (as, for instance, Musil did about *Vereinigungen*) that “feminine language” should not be written as a book at all, only that the practice of “writing” continues past the closure of the genre. It is not a problem for Cixous’ theory that *écriture féminine* take a conventional physical form—here, that of the volume or tome. Yet, if *écriture féminine* is, as Cixous contends, so radically opposed to “regular” language and writing, why does it not demand a radically new genre?

One answer to this question may be found within the structure of her theory itself. Just as 1970s theories of “feminine language” do not posit the existence of a new language, a new master discourse—but rather characterize a stance within “regular” language, which works to undo the masculine—so, too, is it impossible for “feminine” textual form to exist as such. Instead, these theories must draw on pre-established forms and work within them. To put it more simply, we might say that, as a consequence of their theoretical claims about feminine language, feminist theorists of the 1970s are neither able to create new genres of their own, nor to radically innovate within pre-existing ones, as we saw with Musil, to continue with the previous example. Because “genre” is designated as masculine—at least in Cixous and Irigaray’s thought—generic innovation would itself be a masculine undertaking.

Consider, for example, the genres in which Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva write—such as the theoretical essay, question and answer, manifesto, personal narrative, drama, even detective novel, in the case of Kristeva. The three writers make use of relatively conventional textual forms and maintain their generic distinctions. Even in more experimental texts, such as in the case of Kristeva’s essay “Stabat Mater,” which offers both an analysis of the figure of Mary and a personal narrative of the experience of giving birth, the two genres are clearly demarcated.
Irigaray’s work, too, maintains a distinction between her more creative texts and those that follow a more conventional theoretical argument. The first chapter of *Ce sexe qui n’en est pas un*, for example, which is entitled “Le miroir, de l’autre côté,” begins with an epigraph from Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass* and then offers an exploratory narrative about Carroll’s character Alice. This chapter—arguably the most experimental of the book—is written entirely in italics, as if to designate its difference in style from the other sections. Even Cixous, who perhaps does the most to blend “theoretical” with “poetic” discourse within her texts, adheres to conventional generic and literary-historical distinctions, arguing for Romanticism over Realism, poetry over the novel, rather than for the creation of an entirely new literary form. The texts that Kristeva chooses to illustrate the semiotic similarly work within preestablished generic distinctions. Although she favors experimental poets, Mallarmé in particular, it is worth noting that these are historical examples, which cannot hold the same revolutionary potential in the 1970s as they perhaps did the end of the nineteenth century, when they were first created. From Kristeva’s late twentieth-century vantage point, in other words, Mallarmé and others have already been catalogued and canonized within literary history.

We have thus seen how feminine language does not create its own genres, but must work within “masculine” forms. This point can be expanded more broadly: within the work of Irigaray, Cixous, and Kristeva, the theories of feminine language themselves are not “self-sufficient” in the sense that they depend upon a references to what they are not. They work within the

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330 This chapter was first published as an article in 1973, then included in *Ce sexe*.
331 See “Rire,” 42-43.
traditions of psychoanalysis and Western philosophy in order to enact their critique. In the previous section, I demonstrated how, beginning with 1970s feminist theory, “feminine language” becomes a practice in its own right, rather than being the silent object of a different discourse. In fact, the shift between earlier accounts of Weibersprache and feminist theories of feminine language is more significant than that. It is not only that “feminine language” is now textually iterable, but also that it is constituted as a response to and commentary on something else—in particular, the work of Freud and Lacan. In short, whereas women’s language was once the unspeaking object of another’s commentary—as in nineteenth-century explications of Weibersprache—in French feminist theory, commentary and response is part of “feminine” language’s very constitution.

“Women’s Language” after the 1970s: The End of Essentialism?

I have chosen to end this study in the 1970s because I posit that this period signifies the end of essentialist thinking about language and sex. After feminist theories of the 1970s and ‘80s, the discussion of language and sexual difference goes in two directions, both of which mark the closure of essentialist notions of “women’s” or “feminine” language. These two directions are: 1.) debates about female speech patterns in popular discourse, which deflate the topic of “women’s language” of its theoretical import; and 2.) the work of Judith Butler, which undoes the very concepts of “women” and “femininity.” Specifically, Butler argues that the idea that the (sexed) body exists prior to language—an assumption that has informed, in one way or another, each theory of women’s or feminine language that I have analyzed in this dissertation—is actually an effect of the process of signification.
Before I examine Butler’s claims further, I would first like to explore the way that the subject of “women’s language” is understood in current popular discourse. Recent debates about female speech patterns can be seen as a continuation of the discussion of women’s language initiated in the 1970s, but without the same theoretical stakes. Along with the discussion of feminine language taking place in French feminist and psychoanalytic theory, the 1970s and ‘80s also witnessed an increased attention to the problem of gender and language in other discourses, including theology (such as in the work of Mary Daly)\textsuperscript{332} and linguistics (such as in the work of Robin Lakoff).\textsuperscript{333} To the extent that the discussion of “women’s language” today associates certain types of language with certain types of power, it borrows from the understanding of “feminine” language operative in both feminist linguistics and feminist psychoanalytic theory.

Yet, the objective of current investigations into women’s language is not to undo or to interrogate power, as one might argue about the theory of Irigaray or Cixous, but rather to affirm power, to make the same types of authority ostensibly available to men also available to women. “Young Women, Give up the Vocal Fry and Reclaim your Strong Female Voice” is the telling


\textsuperscript{333} Lakoff’s most influential text was published in the early ‘70s: “Language and Women’s Place,” \textit{Language in Society}, vol. 2, no. 1 (April 1973), 45-80. Here, Lakoff argues that, in terms of language, women are placed in a double bind: as girls, they are taught that “passive” and “imprecise” speech are markers of femininity that should be followed; however, when women continue this type of speech into adulthood, they are accused of “being unable to speak precisely or express herself forcefully” (47).
Indeed, the topics of “upspeak” and “vocal fry”—speech mannerisms associated primarily with women—have been reported on extensively in the past several years, by media ranging from *The Atlantic* to the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. Such articles understand so-called “female” ways of speaking not as signifiers of a radical difference between the sexes but as female linguistic tics that can and should be overcome—mainly so that women can command more authority in business settings and earn more money. Speech, these articles suggest, can be optimized like everything else; certain kinds of language allow for higher rates of success within the capitalist system and women should model their speech accordingly. Significantly, opinion pieces that wring their hands about the problems of female speech assume that these verbal tics

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334 Naomi Wolf, “Young Women, Give up the Vocal Fry and Reclaim your Strong Female Voice” *The Guardian* (July 24, 2015)

are not “natural,” but a consequence of how girls today are socialized, how they are taught to lack confidence. Denaturalizing “female” mannerisms in this way means that, because they were learned, they can also be unlearned. The language differences of men and women are thus understood to be problems of culture and education rather than the result of an unchanging “female” nature: in other words, they are posited as an effect of the construction of gender rather than the “fact” of biological sex. This stands in stark contrast to the earlier historical configurations of women’s language examined in this dissertation, all of which understood sexual difference to be a universal that exists prior to language and speech.

In a very different way, the theory of Judith Butler also disavows both sex and gender and as “natural,” universal categories. Butler contends—as I mentioned already above—that sex is not a reality that is independent of language. Instead, she argues that the idea of the externality of sex and, more broadly, of the body and of materiality, is in fact constituted by signification. “The body posited as prior to the sign,” writes Butler in *Bodies that Matter*:

> is always posited or signified as prior. This signification produces as an effect of its own procedure the very body that it nevertheless and simultaneously claims to discover as that which precedes its own action. If the body signified as prior to signification is an effect of signification, then the mimetic or representational status of language, which claims that signs follow bodies as their necessary mirrors, is not mimetic at all. On the contrary, it is productive, constitutive, one might even argue performative, inasmuch as this signifying act delimits and contours the body that it then claims to find prior to any and all signification.\(^{336}\)

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\(^{336}\) Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 6. In the following paragraph, Butler qualifies this claim—“This is not to say that the materiality of bodies is simply and only a linguistic effect which is reducible to a set of signifiers. Such a distinction overlooks materiality of the signifier itself. Such an account also fails to understand materiality as that which is bound up with signification from the start”—but also reaffirms it: “to posit by way of language a materiality outside of language is still to posit that materiality, and the materiality so posited will retain that positing as its constitutive condition” (6).
According to Butler, the materiality of sex is not an irreducible reality. Instead, sex is a “regulatory ideal” whose materialization is compelled by power, and effected through discourse.\(^{337}\) What’s more, Butler argues that the very notion that there must be some “irreducible materiality” (sex, the body) that stands outside of language is not only bound up in the production of language—as the quotation above asserts—but has also, historically, been constructed “through a problematic gendered matrix” such that “the discursive practice by which matter is rendered irreducible simultaneously ontologizes and fixes that gendered matrix.”\(^{338}\)

Butler never explicitly defines what she means by “problematic gendered matrix” here, but she does refer to the classical association of femininity with materiality, which, she argues, has operated as a means of repression and exclusion.\(^{339}\) A feminist practice, therefore, that “takes recourse to matter” by attempting to base itself in the “irreducible materiality” of the body risks reifying the same power structures that it aims to dismantle.\(^{340}\) This is because the idea of irreducible materiality that such a configuration of sex depends on has historically been constituted through, in Butler’s formulation, “an exclusion and degradation of the feminine that is profoundly problematic for feminism.”\(^{341}\)

*Bodies that Matter*, as well as Butler’s earlier work, *Gender Trouble*, include critiques of Kristeva and Irigaray and, implicitly, Cixous on these very grounds. Butler criticizes Kristeva, for instance, for what she terms her “naturalistic depictions of the female body” which assert that

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\(^{337}\) Ibid., xii.

\(^{338}\) Ibid., 5.

\(^{339}\) Ibid., 7.

\(^{340}\) Ibid., 5.

\(^{341}\) Ibid., 5.
the maternal body “[bears] a set of meanings that are prior to culture itself.” Butler’s critique of Irigaray hinges on a slightly different point—namely, that Irigaray has the feminine “monopoliz[e] the sphere of the excluded,” such that “the feminine is ‘always’ the outside, and the outside is ‘always’ the feminine.” Insofar as Irigaray establishes a link between femininity and all other forms of alterity—“idealizing and appropriating the ‘elsewhere’ as the feminine”—Butler argues that Irigaray’s theory produces the same kinds of exclusions as does the “phallogocentric” discourses she aims to subvert: “if the feminine is not the only or primary kind of being that is excluded from the economy of masculinist reason, what and who is excluded in the course of Irigaray’s analysis?” Butler similarly contends that Cixous posits écriture féminine to be a “transcultural structure.”

According to Butler, the problem with the theories put forth by Kristeva, Irigaray, and Cixous is that, even when they define it in terms of heterogeneity and multiplicity, their theories still posit “the feminine” as a kind of universal—and ground this femininity within a female body which is supposed to escape or exceed “regular” language. Butler’s critique centers on the assertion of the body as an extralinguistic referent—for, she argues, the body is not reflected in language, but produced by it.

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342 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 109. From this follows a critique of the way that Kristeva’s theory casts poetry and maternity—which are both allied with the semiotic—as “privileged practices within paternally sanctioned culture,” yet female homosexuality, according to Kristeva’s theory, “leads unequivocally to psychosis” (116-117).

343 Ibid., 109.


In this way, Butler’s work marks the end of theoretical conceptions of “women’s” or “feminine” language because it marks the end of “woman” and “the feminine” as coherent theoretical categories. In the texts on women’s language examined in this dissertation, the body, and sexual difference, were posited as prior to language, a universal truth that then affected how language was expressed (as in nineteenth-century theories of Webersprache) or even configured (as in twentieth-century theories of a radically alternative, feminine language). Even in the context of French feminist theories, “the female body” is implied to be an extralinguistic reality, from which a “feminine” writing takes its constitutive elements.

In addition to an assertion of the reality of the body, what 1970s feminist theories share with earlier conceptions of women’s language is a certain heteronormativity and allegiance to a binary understanding of the sexes. This is perhaps less true for Cixous, who argues that écriture féminine—and “woman” herself—are “bisexual.” Yet Cixous, too, like Irigaray and Kristeva, maintains a vocabulary of two sexes, masculine and feminine. Similarly, although Irigaray claims that binarism is itself a masculine concern, while the feminine exists beyond such dual distinctions, her work still reaffirms the binary masculine and feminine: the project she outlines is a matter of freeing the feminine from the masculine, rather than creating or uncovering an additional sexual category.

This is another way of saying that, in the various configurations of sex and language that I have examined here, there is little consideration—indeed, little room—for the possibility of a

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346 In “Rire” and elsewhere, Cixous describes écriture féminine as bisexual: “Bisexualité, c’est-à-dire repérage en soi, individuellement, de la présence, diversement manifeste et insistant selon chaque un ou une, des deux sexes, non-exclusion de la différence ni d’un sexe, et à partir de cette ‘permission’ que l’on se donne, multiplication des effets d’inscription du désir, sur toutes les parties de mon corps et de l’autre corps.” Cixous, “Rire,” 46.
third sex. An alternative history of sex and language could be written about the history of the non-binary—about the neuter, in particular—but, at least until the late twentieth century, this would primarily be a history of its disavowal. In nineteenth-century theories of grammatical gender, for example, the neuter is subsumed under the categories male/female; Grimm relates it to a fetus, whose sex is undeveloped, but implies that it carries within it the potential to be only one of two sexes.\textsuperscript{347} Similarly, in the early twentieth-century texts examined in Chapter 3, the possibility of exceeding binarism within literary discourse is explored through tropes of femininity—in other words, it is expressed through a reaffirmation of the binary masculine/feminine. Linking alterity to femininity in this way—whether it is the alterity of the “primitive,” as in the case of Humboldt, or the alterity of the anti-hermeneutic, as in the case of Musil, or the alterity of sound and rhythm, as in the case of Kristeva—is a way of domesticating this difference, placing it within the established binary of the sexes.

\textsuperscript{347} Grimm, \textit{Deutsche Grammatik}, 314.
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