1. Introduction

People who have been listening have heard a crescendo of statements from women in the U.S., England, and on the Continent about the problems they have trying to use standard languages and standard usage to express their ideas and experiences. Feminists doing research on gender and language have documented sexism in language structure and use, and have discussed its consequence for women's expression and women's lives. A recurrent theme in our speaking is the mismatch between our experiences and the terms we have to discuss them.

For example, poet Adrienne Rich has written: "In denying the validity of women's experience, in pretending to stand for the 'human', masculine subjectivity tries to force us to name our truths in an alien language; to dilute them: we are constantly told that the 'real' problems, the ones worth working on, are those men have defined, that the problems we need to examine are trivial, unscholarly, nonexistent." Muriel Schulz argues that it is not a mere coincidence that the English language has more positive terms for males and many more pejorative words to describe women. Julia Penelope Stanley points out that our occupational nouns are divided into two quite unequal parts. Those nouns that refer to active occupations in public life are male nouns. She explains that when women enter public activities we move into "negative semantic space", i.e., semantic space that does not exist for us, because it is occupied by the male sex. We can only become lady doctors or female surgeons or women lawyers. She argues that when these and other nouns must be marked for sex, they acquire a negative connotation - something is out of place, "not quite right", and linguistic accommodations must be made. Many other women are expressing their dissatisfaction with the language structure and the so-called normative practices associated with it; they tell (often in story form since words to succinctly express their ideas are not always available) about the ways their expressions have been muted because of the androcentrism of the English language.

Women are doing more than calling attention to the problems. Many women are in the process of building a more comfortable world/word structure for themselves. Many argue that since language systems are social constructions, they can be altered to fit women's needs more closely. This process has received much attention and criticism in the mass media, and has prompted lots of jokes about personhole covers - a coinage proposed not by feminists, but by columnists who wish for some easy target words. Even among the linguists, etymologists and other "word experts" who have accepted as serious and important the many discussions about the so-called generics such as man and he, there has been little attention paid to the more extensive language alterations suggested and affected, or to their impact on women's and men's lives.
Our own study focuses on talk at a six day Feminist Scholarship conference at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. We attended most of the 36 panels, talks, workshops and discussion groups, and we talked informally to most of the speakers. After the conference we listened to tapes of the presentations to check and expand our notes on the participants' statements about women's relationship to language and the efforts made to change language use. We hope this study will encourage more researchers to document other instances of language innovation among women. The fact that the linguistic innovations of women have not been recorded is not an indication that such innovations have not existed but rather a sign of our powerlessness and one way that powerlessness has been maintained (cf. Kramarae 1980, for discussion of this). We would also like to stimulate interest in developing our understanding of linguistic power in relation to other kinds of power. We consider it important to examine the differences in women's and men's speech in the context of the power relationships between women and men.

The more than 40 speakers, most of them white middle-class women, at the conference came from all over the U.S. (and one from England). All consider themselves scholars and feminists; they all had worked or were working within academic institutions, doing research which challenges the canons of the disciplines in those institutions; identifying with and taking seriously the interests, aspirations, understandings, and experiences of women; and working to achieve equality. Their situation is not every woman's, but many of their concerns are shared by others working inside such institutions and in other areas.

Both of the authors were on the planning committee for the conference and employed by the sponsoring university: Cheris as associate professor of Speech Communication, and Lee as assistant to the director of Women's Studies.

The topics of the conference papers and of the discussions were diverse, ranging, for example, from health care, to literature studies, to social movements and attitude change. Although their research concerns varied greatly, and although their training has been in 25 disciplines in universities across the U.S. and Europe, their work and goals as feminist scholars have led them to some shared assumptions which give them some shared perspectives on language.

These shared perspectives have important implications for their future research and language use, and for that of others who acknowledge and respect that perspective. They agree that people's beliefs and not some outside "facts" constitute what is often called "objective standards". They agree that intellectual questions are also political questions. They themselves give and they ask from others an acknowledgement of their personal interests in their research. They share a belief that the basic assumptions of the paradigms in the various disciplines reflect the culture's dominant assumptions and needs, and omit or distort women's concerns and perspectives. They agree that cross-discipline research is needed to explore the connections between scholarly work and social structure. And they agree that language structure is an index primarily of men's concepts and concerns, that the English language is an inadequate interpretative repertoire for females, and that linguistic innovation is a form of social change.