

**"Derivational Thinking,
or, Why is equality so difficult?"**

by

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In the introduction to a book regarding some aspect of feminism—which book I now forget—the author lamented that, within early feminist groups, structured to avoid hierarchy and authority, there nevertheless always emerged a hierarchy. She expressed bafflement as to why.

Many of us have been involved in activities which we believed would end some particular, agreed upon, injustice, only to find that as we eliminated one form or another, that very injustice simply mutated to express itself in other, sometimes more subtle or more sophisticated ways. This has certainly been the experience of many of the civil rights activists from the sixties. And it most certainly has been my experience in the matter of sexism within language. Some twenty or thirty years ago when I first began taking seriously the matter of reference to women in language, in spite of being a linguist, I honestly believed that it would be a relatively simple matter—for example, that using 'they' instead of 'he' would include women.

Some have argued that the beliefs are 'so deep in the culture' that they could not be eliminated by language. But as an anthropological linguist I am fully aware that all culture is mediated through language; if the belief is 'deep', then it must be 'deep' within the structure of the language.

I developed the concept of the 'linguistic postulate' in order to account for the manifestations of grammatical themes that I found realized within the grammar of the Jaqi languages of South America.¹ These categories, or postulates were realized over the whole of the grammar, not just in one place, and were also realized through the whole of the culture. These same themes also gave the people strength to resist at least part of the encroachment of the European cultures. Part of that resistance involved the continuing recognition of women as equal contributors to the well-being of the entire group. That was very impressive to a young woman from the intense sexism of post-war USA. Knowing, living with and studying the language of these women over the past 35 years has been valuable to me, both in coming to know my own and in imagining what might be.

Confronted now with the questions of our own resistance to the creation of structures of equality, I have recently turned my lens of linguistic postulates on my own language and culture. The result has been most useful.

¹ The Jaqi languages include Aymara, the native language of a third of the population of Bolivia and the major language of southern Peru and northern Chile, and two languages in Peru with very few speakers, Jaqaru and Kawki. These languages are the remnant of what was, before the Incas, the largest of the economic 'empires' of ancient Peru [Hardman 1985]. My own work among the Jaqi peoples now spans more than a quarter of a century [Hardman 1966], [Hardman 1983; Hardman et al 1975; Hardman et al 1988].

Three linguistic postulates realized in the grammatical structures of English make the construction of human equality difficult in English. These three are: number (singular/plural), sex-based gender with masculine as root, and our ranking comparative (wise, wiser, wisest). These three linguistic postulates interact together in a mutually reinforcing way to lead to the construct that I call Derivational Thinking. Derivational thinking relates not only to our construction of sex relations but, because it gives us the template for all human relations, is also the underlying mechanism which keeps us racist, that makes diversity so difficult to understand, and which leads to our imperialist behavior abroad.

Number is overtly obligatory and pervasive. Try thinking, for example, of a sentence in English with no mark of either singular or plural. Singular is unmarked and primary, plural derived.

Sex-based gender is partly overt, partly covert. The principle of English sex-based gender, which is the same as the sex-based gender of all IndoEuropean, is that the feminine is derived from the masculine. Therefore the feminine is dependent, grammatically, on the masculine, the masculine unmarked and the root.

The third structure is the comparative/absolute which means constant hierarchy. This structure may not appear to be obligatory but in interplay with the other two does indeed so function and thus forms the third partner in the construction of derivational thinking. If you doubt the pervasiveness of hierarchy, try going even an hour with no comparative or absolute.

Derivational thinking, then, results in thinking patterns that have all people (& things) ranked at all times, with only one man as primary, and that one as the unmarked. Since feminine is marked, than clearly that is not primary. Masculine singular as the top of the hierarchy 'feels' fully grammatical, fully coordinated—in incorporates the realization of all three postulates simultaneously. This manner of thinking carries the notion that there is not room 'at the top' for more than one, so that if women are elevated, then men must be demoted; if other races are given opportunity, then whites 'lose' opportunity—opportunity can only be singular, and all must be ranked.

As part of my teaching practice I require that my students observe language behavior according the the categories described in this paper. One student, a minority woman, brought an observation that is a summary of what I have been saying, all non-whites non-males structured together as dependent on and derived from the 'real' people on the top. She first reported it of one professor and then told us that a second professor had said the same thing to her only a few days later.

The professor told me that I had two strikes against me "as far as becoming a real scientist. You are a woman and a minority and that will keep you from being objective, you are too close to those people to get the right data. You just can't do it. You people need guidance to handle the data correctly and you need someone who can reach a real audience. But don't you worry. There is a place for you as an assistant. In fact women and minorities make very good assistants in the field." When I asked what he

meant by the "real" audience, he went on to say that works not done by "academics" only appeal to such specialized groups as "Black studies, Women's studies, etc." so they can't reach the "people who can recognize the real issues and can come up with real solutions to the problems: Experts who know best." [1]

Our grammar does not make it easy for us to hold diversity as different only, that is, equal and different. Indeed, the usual expression is "equal but different" as though the two expressions were mutually contradictory.

That the two expressions be understood as contradictory is not so everywhere. For example, among the Jaqi, where the simile is gramaticalized but where there is no easy way to rank², people are considered non-comparable. With the interaction of their linguistic postulates of 'data source', which specifies that one cannot have personal experience of another's internal states, and of the primacy of human over non-human, each person is considered autonomous and unique and equal. Among co-equal adults even the use of the imperative is avoided out of respect for the humanity of the other. If one does presume to compare (as I did early on in ignorance) one is chided for rudeness. Singularity is not a good nor a goal. At one point, for example, I was treated for a minor illness by invocation of a Protestant god, a few catholic saints and the divinity of the guinea pig and the river—with no sense of any contradiction on the part of anyone involved.

In one recorded speech, the mayor of a town explains that the higher authorities, all Hispanic with postulates similar to our own, have told him to order the people to do certain things. He then says that he knows he can't order anybody, but he will try to persuade. In other words, having a position of responsibility among the Jaqi gives one the right of first persuasion, but does not carry status. Prestige yes, but not status. Different and equal.

As I have shown elsewhere, these postulates are realized in the vocabulary, morphology, syntax, discourse and metaphorical structure of English [Hardman Forthcoming A; Hardman Forthcoming B]. Figure 1 is a summary of the structures identified in the overall view of English, with the basic ones and the one currently under discussion highlighted. [See Figure 1] In this paper I look specifically at the the subject/object construction of English. The discourse strategies that I discuss are identified in the work of Joanna Russ in *How to Suppress Women's Writing* [Russ, Joanna, 1983]. She does not there identify the problem with the grammar of English, but that is precisely what is being discussed³.

² It is a design feature of language—openness—that all things can be said in any language if enough context and length is allowed; one can always go through long circumlocutions or descriptions, or whatever. Languages differ in what can be said conveniently and in what must be said in order to be grammatical.

³ Donna Haraway in her book *Primate Visions* [Haraway, 1989] also uses the work of Joanna Russ, cf. p 46ff, as a frame for looking at primate studies.

Deborah Tannen recently published an article in the New York Times [Tannen, 1993] in which she discussed the perpetual markedness of women's dress. She is absolutely right. She, also, does not quite identify this cultural manifestation with the feminine in English grammar, but, again, that is exactly what is happening.

At the syntactic level in English the subject is the primary focus of the sentence. We are a noun oriented language to start with. Furthermore, we are agent oriented, focusing on 'who did it', this frequently being the first question asked of any situation. These three things come together in the focus on the subject of the sentence. Note also that the subject is again primary, which ties in with both singularity and with ranking. The kind of ranking that is involved is even reflected in linguistic theory which discusses raising the subject to object position—not unlike talk of raising women or non-whites to the white male position. Therefore, one of the results of derivational thinking is that a singular white male subject/agent would 'feel' most grammatical. Think of the way we write history and award patents, etc.

All of this is in sharp contrast with our attitude toward the object—who should get out of the way and become an agent or accept being blamed. Objects, furthermore, are considered easily interchangeable—not unlike derivations. 'Mrs John Jones', clearly a derivation as in 'man & wife', is interchangeable as to which human being it can apply to. 'John Jones' is not. The derivational suffixes such as '-ette' clearly flit from root to root.

In a term paper one student analyzed the examples in a text book on syntax [Maranzana, 1992]. I quote

"The role of the male is consistently that of agent or actor, while female figures are represented as some kind of object, recipient, instrument, or container. These roles, once assigned linguistic titles, represent grammatical relationships which are used in formal descriptions of language."

And every example reiterates, in both concrete and theoretical fashion, derivational thinking. Another textbook, the title not given me, was reported to have only one sentence in which Mary was the subject: 'Mary wrote a book about John'. As this sentence illustrates, there is more than one way, as in all grammars, for realizing the postulates so that if one way is blocked another way can be found.

Joanna Russ discusses the ways in which women's agency is denied within the literary canon. Though she does not specifically state so, what she has illustrated so richly are discourse devices for coping with the situations in which women, in spite of the grammar, are subjects/agents anyway. I have used her categories as guides to teach my students to observe in language behavior specifically what is meant by the application of derivational thinking to this agentive/subject category of grammatical/cultural behavior.

Part of derivational thinking is that anything that can go into the sentence 'Woman is _____' is necessarily bad. If applied to men it is likely to be an insult. From the sentence 'Man is _____' the implication is neutral to good. Terms from the second sentence can be applied to women and will normally be complementary, though simultaneously denying her womanhood, making her in some fashion an 'honorary' man. Thus, if a woman can be the subject/agent, then the activity does not belong in the second sentence.

My roommate Amy's group of male friends had been "proving their manhood" by jumping off a cliff—at least 80 feet I've been told—at the quarries. I'd been hearing stories about a lot of groups of guys going to the quarries. The stories about who wouldn't jump was the big thing. They were the butts of jokes and ridiculed by their "friends". So my roommate Amy, who is fearless beyond all measures went with her male friends to the quarries. She jumped. The stories and jokes changed about the guys that didn't jump—a girl jumped and they didn't. They were less than a girl, beneath a girl. Soon after, the trend among that group of guys of bringing new guys to the Quarries to jump to prove their manhood ended. The ritual died.[2]

If woman is an 80-foot cliff jumper, then it doesn't count for man to be an 80-foot cliff jumper. I argue that this is the grammatical pattern behind the problem with women in combat and gays in the military. i.e. 'Woman flies a combat jet.', therefore 'Man flies a combat jet.' is no longer a satisfying sentence. Many men go into the volunteer army in order to prove themselves 'men'. If women and gays (a derivational type of 'man') can do it, then what is it worth?

Let us look now at some of the discourse strategies used by those thinking derivationally to keep women out of the subject/agent slot, with examples from the life experiences of my students. To quote Keller [Keller, 1985:17], 'Naming nature is the special business of science.' To cope with any situation, we must first name it.

One of the most common, and one the students find easiest to illustrate, is simply to say that she didn't do it some man did it, her father, her brother, her boyfriend, her teacher, but not her. This we call Denial of Agency. The following story is from a married student with his first daughter.

I was sitting in the waiting room, playing with Jamie. One of her favorite games is to grab my fingers for stability, and muscle her way up into a stand. A woman saw us playing this game, and came over and said: "What a strong little boy you are, able to stand up on your own like that!" I answered: "She is very strong, isn't she?" The woman looked surprised, and commented: "She's so big for a little girl. And you're so cute, and letting daddy pull you up like that." [3]

Note the grammar. In the first case the little boy, subject/agent, was standing up. In the second case the only agency the little girl had was to put herself into the object position, with her father as the 'real' subject/agent. Jamie didn't do it, her father did.

On the other hand, in the Jaqi languages the subject/object not only are not ranked, they cannot even be separated. Thus, in Jaqaru, arkt^hwa is 'I speak to somebody', arktawa is 'you speak to someone', but 'I speak to you' is arkimawa, where the person suffix on the verb, -ima carries the object and the subject in a unit that cannot be separated into parts. In Jaqaru the verb 'to help' is yanhishi, composed of yanha 'companion' and -ishi 'reflexive', so that the sentence Yanhshutma 'Help me.' means literally 'You to me be a mutual companion.' The language is interaction focused, not agent focused.

If she did it, and it can't be attributed easily to some man, then one can pollute her agency. Given our hierarchy plus the connotation of derivation as 'not original' and therefore, in some sense or other 'bad', which realizes itself in 'blame the derivation', this can result in such a denigration that what she did can be utterly dismissed. The pollution also ties into another cultural construct of good and bad being opposites and absolutes. Most of the pollution is sex-related, and for my students, comes in apparently a constant barrage of insulting epithets. Crazy is the other most common pollution. We all know only too many of these instances. Just this semester a student reported that a professor had dismissed the whole body of Margaret Mead's anthropological work because she had married thrice. But here's a story brought by a young man.

When a friend of mine had finished reading one of the several Star Trek novels written by Vonda N. MacIntyre, he appeared truly satisfied with the contents of the book. "I'm impressed," my friend said "this book wasn't as bad as some of the others. It's probably because that Vonda chick is some strange lesbian who stays locked up in her house all the time except when she dresses up as Mr. Spock to pick up other women." Although he had read many other lacking novels in the same genre (written mostly by men) he never made a comment more than "That was terrible" or "that sucked." However, when it was actually a good book, written by a woman, he had to make a derogatory comment to justify the occurrence. Until now, I never would have picked up the pattern.[4]

When I was first among the Jaqi I found it most disconcerting to listen to someone denigrate someone else and then be easily working with them. It took me a long time to understand that the denigration was of behaviors, and that in the round of things, other behaviors would not be so judged. I thought that is was an amazing practice of forgiveness, but 'forgiveness' was not part of the structure. They are highly critical of each other, and there is a verb tense that I call the 'remonstrator' used almost exclusively to scold. Real understanding came when I finally realized that judgment was on an aesthetic base, that the terms used in the judgment were not, in fact, good and bad, but beautiful and human or stony, naked or ugly. Furthermore, the judgments were not antonyms—Jaqi doesn't do antonyms—nor were they ranked as absolutes and mutually exclusives. One behavior did not cancel out the other, either way.

The third Russ discourse strategy for keeping women out of the subject slot is that of 'double standard of content' which invokes the hierarchy, that the experience of the derivation is of no consequence. What is the meaning of 'goddess'? She can only be defined through the existence and characteristics of a male god? That is the point—that the examination of a woman's life has no meaning except as examined through the masculine.

I recently attended a gallery opening featuring two nature photographers who had both never shown their work to the general public before. Each artist was billed separately and equally. My friend John and I toured the gallery together. The photographs were arranged in one room in an alternating fashion so there was no division between the artist's works. The general theme of the entire show was "survival". The female artist concentrated on reproduction and birth. Most of the pictures showed all types of animals in the midst of the birthing process. I remember thinking how graphic but beautiful they were. The male artist chose to show the predatory nature of animals. Most of the scenes were violent hunt and kill shots. He too caught the beauty of it, I thought. As we came to the final photographs John said, "This guy has such a unique and raw perspective, he REALLY made this show." I asked him what he thought of the other artist and tried to point out that she really showed promise and her interpretation of survival showed pain and joy, which takes talent. "GIVE ME A BREAK!", John said, "That is exactly the point, look at the subject matter. It's a bunch of animals having babies. They belong in a nursery, not a famous gallery. Yeah, she took her chances with some wild animals, too bad it was not for something that meant SOMETHING."[5]

This double standard of content utterly baffles my Jaqi friends. One Andean man, as he watches men engaging in this behavior has often remarked 'But don't they know where they came from?', i.e. 'Don't they know they were created by woman?' The equal privileging of women's and men's life experiences is, however, heavily impacted from the central government as boys' activities are funded but girls' are not, and silly things are invented for women to do because 'developers' can't see what women actually are doing.

The fourth Russ discourse strategy for keeping women out of the subject slot is that of 'false categorizing'. Categorizing is pan-human and even essentially human. So, if you can't get rid of these subjects by other strategies, invoke hierarchy and put the work in a category further down the hierarchy scale. This example is from a Cherokee woman.

The Cherokee have a person of power in the tribe who fits the white definition of a Medicine Man, but this person is a woman. White Men had trouble dealing with this so they decided that she was really the assistant of the real Medicine Man and called her a "corn woman".[6]

This type of false categorizing keeps us from seeing what woman elsewhere in the world have created and accomplished.

The fifth Russ discourse strategy for keeping women out of the subject slot is that of 'isolation'. She only did one of whatever it was, so it doesn't count. It can be attributed to 'luck' or a 'fluke'. In a way this might look like a contradiction of the singular, but the operative word here is not 'one' or 'first', but 'only'.

My piano teacher had to choose her three top students to play for a charity recital. Four of us were equally qualified for her top students (3 males and myself). She chose the three males to play. When I inquired politely as to the selection process, she informed me that she felt they had more experience playing for an audience after their participation in a Sonatina competition recently. Since I only competed once in an "official" competition (in which I won first place over the other three), she felt I would have difficulty coping with an audience. This was exceptionally ironic considering that she was aware of my accompanying my choral department and church in front of an audience regularly. I only competed once (even though the charity recital was not a competition).[7]

In the Jaqi languages data source marking enforces a sense of history so that the notion of things appearing or people doing things with no history is not easily expressed grammatically. One specifies what one has experienced or witnessed personally, what one has learned through language, and what comes from non-personal knowledge, like myths, old history, and so on. This makes for a connected sense of behavior and personality expectations.

The sixth Russ discourse strategy for keeping women out of the subject slot is that of 'anomalousness'. For example, virtually every young woman in my classes is involved in athletics of one kind or another, yet everyone of them feels herself to be, and is regularly told by everyone else that she is, absolutely weird among women to be able to do what she does. This neatly destroys community among women and also relieves the speakers of looking about for any other subjects that might belong to this category. Categorization into anomalousness renders the agent invisible.

Driving around this afternoon, I saw a sign that read "Men at Work," on the side of the road and I commented to my girlfriend that this sign might be the last sign to ever have to be changed to "People at Work," because I had never seen a woman working on road repairs and therefore the sign still holds true. In all seriousness, I was kidding her but she quickly called my attention to a woman we had both seen and commented on the day before, who was working on drainage pipes by the roadside. Oddly enough, she quickly dismissed her own example as invalid because the woman was "weird". Indeed we had both perceived this woman to be weird the day before, this being why we had commented on and remembered her. My girlfriend had cited her as an example in our little joke and then quickly disregarded her. Immediately I explained to her that she had just used one of Joanna Russ' categories and thanked her for an example to use for this observation.[8]

One young woman, active in sports from a young age, felt that anomalousness had been the most scarring of the strategies used against her, recounting how she was told that she was too rough an influence on girls, yet if she played with the boys she might turn them into sissys—anomalous either way.[9]

When women move into new fields, that is become subjects/agents where they have not before, two things happen with the effect of maintaining the existing derivational thinking structure. First, discourse strategies are used to keep the existence of women in the subject/agent slot invisible. When that is no longer possible, then hierarchy is invoked, the sentence frame behind the 'women is 80-ft cliff jumper' comes into play and the profession itself gets downgraded. This happened to secretaries and to teachers, and in my lifetime appears to be happening to physicians, professors, and maybe even to lawyers.

Clearly what we think of as the nature of the universe is not so. Clearly there other ways of organizing human relationships, and of constructing these relationships in language. Because English is a creole language, primarily dependent on syntax, we can at least on an individual basis name some of the manifestations of derivational thinking and alter our language, which will have the effect, slowly, of altering our perceptions and those of people around us.

Two caveats:

1) All of these discourse strategies are of course available for use in any situation a speaker may desire. The nature of language is indeed its flexibility. What we have been looking at here are the patterns of use, especially those patterns of use that are not fully in the conscious awareness of the speakers but that are pervasive, those patterns that reveal underlying conceptual structures.

2) The Jaqi people include women and men as equal human beings. They are also just ordinary human beings with all the ordinary flaws that come with being human and trying to muddle through. I found their way of life refreshing and enlightening, a most valuable and empowering experience for myself. It is not utopia. I am not recommending that we abandon our own for theirs, but rather that we share together in appreciation and mutual learning the creations that we have separately managed to bring about. Different and equal—not ranked.

3) I have found the work of other scholars valuable, in particularly two linguists, Suzette Haden Elgin [Elgin, 1980-; Elgin 1 993] and Deborah Tannen [Tannen 1986; Tannen 1993]. Their grammatical insights, especially at the discourse level, have helped me. I see my work as additional analysis to theirs and to that of so many others, not as opposition. As humans we are most adept at creating elaborate superstructures as justification of underlying perceptions. That my analysis work at the grammatical base does not in any way impugn those that work with other levels.

The value of naming the grammatical patterns being used is illustrated by the following observation.

I was sitting in the corridor with another student waiting for my exercise class to begin. Another student sat across from us, with his shorts pulled up around his leg so that most of his penis showed. He appeared to be reading the paper, but he had a smile on his face. I told the instructor that we had been flashed. He said, "You get what you look for." (Pollution of Agency.) I rebutted this, so he replied that it was just the same thing as a girl wearing a short skirt. (False Categorizing) I said that it certainly was not and indicated that the flasher might have mental problems. Then he told me, "Well, you were the only one who saw it." (Isolation, anomalousness) I said that I was not, that at least one other person saw it. Then he said, "Well, I didn't see anything." (Denial of Agency) This was an awful experience. However, I was thinking as it happened, "This is just like Chapters 3, 4, 6, 7 from Russ." I'm glad that I was able to recognize what was happening.[10]

Naming is empowering. To return to my first example, the feminist groups referred to had clearly organized themselves in a rational, thoughtful, egalitarian superstructure, only to be sabotaged from within our native language as derivational thinking reasserted itself in spite of the explicitly stated intentions of the speakers. Meanwhile, the Jaqi speakers easily believe the tales that the United States is a place where all people are completely equal, that being the normal, civilized way to live .

Endnotes

- [1] Courtesy of Lisa R. Perry
- [2] Courtesy of Laura A. Boyce
- [3] Courtesy of Art Bautista-Hardman
- [4] Courtesy of ScoK LaPorta
- [5] Courtesy of Tara Schreier
- [6] Courtesy of Lisa R. Perry
- [7] Courtesy of Anna Davis
- [8] Courtesy of Carlos Martinez
- [9] Courtesy of Karen Motz
- [10] Courtesy of Joan von Dauch

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