



A FIRST LOOK AT  
COMMUNICATION THEORY

**Transcript of Em Griffin's interview with Cheri Kramarae,  
creator of Muted Group Theory**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IKkM1adp5Uo>

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Griffin: I'm in the home of Cheri Kramarae, a professor at the Center For The Study of Women in Society at the University of Oregon. Cheri was the woman who introduced Muted Group Theory to the field of communication. Cheri, what group is muted, and how did that happen?

Kramarae: Well, the Muted Group Theory posits that the language does not serve all its speakers equally. The Muted Group Theory comes from the field of anthropology; and it takes a look at what groups have the right to say what, who's developed the language, and actually talks about the function of power in our relationships and in our talk and our writing. So, it suggests that in the English language women are more constrained, that is, muted, more constrained because they haven't developed the language that they are required to use, and so it doesn't serve them equally.

Griffin: Language and the norms for its use change slowly at just a glacial pace. Does that mean women watching us talk are doomed to being muted for years to come?

Kramarae: I think that women today are more conscious perhaps of the limitations of the English language and are doing a variety of things, depending upon their circumstances, and doing a variety of things to overcome some of these problems.

Griffin: And does that consciousness in and of itself free them?

Kramarae: I think so. For example, I get e-mails from women who are exploring Muted Group Theory and talking about how this helps them explain, gives an explanation for, what's going on and why they have had some difficulties in the past. So, yes, I think so.

Griffin: Cheri, you and I have talked about the two-culture gender hypothesis suggesting that men are from Mars and women are from Venus, or that men want independence and women want connection. That's just the way it is, so goes the hypothesis; learn to live with these differences. How do you react to that two-culture hypothesis?

Kramarae: I think that some of it is of real interest. It suggests that men and women often have different socialization, and so they have different kinds of experiences, and they learn to see the

world in somewhat different ways. And, so, there are these so-called misunderstandings, miscommunications. I think it's a very comfortable position; that's the way...

Griffin: I find my class likes it.

Kramarae: It's very comfortable. Much of that seems to be based on work done with middle-class white heterosexual friends, intimates; and they're not looking at what's happening in relationships that aren't symmetrical, that are unequal. And if you take a look at that, then you have to start taking a look at things like exploitation, manipulation; you have to start taking a look at what happens with power differences, and you have to start talking about power.

Griffin: The power discrepancy between men and women, because that seems to be at the root of the constraint that you're talking about, is it decreasing? Is the discrepancy going down? Is the gap closing, or not?

Kramarae: I think we can take a look at what's happening on universities. Now it's considered a defect in a university curriculum, I think in the United States, if there's not a women's studies program or women's studies major. There are PhD programs now in women's studies.

Griffin: Would it be appropriate to have a department or an institute of men's studies?

Kramarae: Well some people would say that most universities could be called that.

Griffin: The whole university?

Kramarae: That's it. [laughter]

Griffin: You refer to yourself as a *feminist*? What does that word mean to you?

Kramarae: I find it's very interesting what words are used to define what the women called themselves in the 1850s – *strong-minded women*. The word *feminist* is actually a word that the women's movement has sort of recovered. It was used in the turn of the last century by feminists to define themselves, and then it just fell out of use. It wasn't used in media that was governed primarily by men, and the women's movement has sort of recovered it. So, I think that's an instance of real strong linguistic work on the part of women to keep that going. Whatever term is used to define – some people say, “don't use the word *feminist*, that raises red flags with some people” – whatever term that would be used to define women who are challenging some of the established practices would come to be used by some as a ridiculing term.

Griffin: Can a man be a feminist?

Kramarae: Anyone who wants to challenge some of those established practices and take a look at unequal treatment can certainly use that term.

Griffin: Recently you took on another project as an editor – an encyclopedia of women’s experience, four volumes. For purposes of illustration, talk about an entry that you were very happy to include.

Kramarae: Well, an entry that wasn’t included in the initial set of a thousand entries that we needed to cover – *witches*. The historical, we think that that’s in the past, discussion of witches – women who have been demonized. Initially that word referred to both men and women. It was a gender-neutral term that meant to shape or to bend, so someone who had powers. But once it was attached primarily to women, it started having negative connotations, and women had been punished for having powers. Many of the witches have been women who are not married, widowed, not under the control of men; and there have been ways of trying, then, to subdue their power. They’d been independent women.

Griffin: I call what we’re doing “Conversations with Communication Theorists,” and we are having an interpersonal conversation. But you and I are both aware that a lot of people are going to see this; and, so, in that sense, it’s public. It might be helpful for our viewers if you could take a look at what’s happened in our conversation and point out something that I have done, maybe unknowingly, that might be constraining to some women.

Kramarae: I think that what you have done is ask questions that are based on your understanding of what I and other feminists have said and written and are ready to ask questions and listen with some sort of sincerity, and that’s all that any speaker wants from another speaker, another listener.