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## M Current Research

Two new doctoral dissertations in English linguistics from Lund University:

**Carita Paradis.** 1997. *Degree modifiers of adjectives in spoken British English*, Lund Studies in English 92.

The thesis investigates a set of degree modifiers of adjectives common in spoken British English. It describes the use of these modifiers in authentic speech in terms of frequency, collocability and intonation. The study also explores the semantic constraints that govern the relationship between degree modifiers and adjectives and maintains that the choice of degree modifier is predictable and depends on the type of the gradability of the adjective that is modified. Further, it explores the constraints that govern the intonation of degree modifiers.

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**Jean Hudson.** 1998. *Perspectives on Fixedness*, Lund studies in English 94.

The thesis is about the process whereby orthographic words group together and congeal into fixed expressions. The discussion focuses on realization, conceptualization and discourse. That is to say, at the level of realization it explores methods of ascertaining degrees of fixedness in expressions. At the level of conceptualization it explores the relationship between salience of component parts and fixedness of the phrase. At the level of discourse, reinterpretation and reanalysis are seen as motivating processes in the evolution of expressions.

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MONICA MALM

## Union Street: Thoughts on Mothering

Pat Barker, Booker Prize winner in 1995, has written several novels about urban life in northern England. She was born in 1943 and returned north after some time in London where she studied at the London School of Economics. After having taught history and politics she began her literary career in 1982, portraying women of the working-class. Her first novel, *Union Street*, consists of seven independent stories from the same neighbourhood, each using a different woman as focalizer. A short quote from this novel will be the starting point of the following essay discussion.

A couple of unidentified mothers chat in the local hospital after having given birth to their most recent children:

'My husband's first wife only had a girl. You watch, when she finds out about [the new son] she'll be dead jealous.'

'Me Mam said if it was a girl I hadn't to bring it home. "Don't bring it round here if it's got a crack in it," she says.' (134-5)

The two women in the maternity ward casually convey their ambiguous feelings about how society values the female sex; in just a few lines the above passage displays the internal struggle that society (in this case a working-class community of northern England) forces upon women. The statement by the first mother tells us that what is of greatest importance to her is giving birth to a son. By her son's birth she can raise her own status, not simply as mother but as the *mother of a man*. Borrowing some existentialist terminology from Simone de Beauvoir, the son can, in simply being born, transcend his mother's existence; the mothers of sons are closer to having a transcendent existence than the mother's who only carry on the female immanence by having daughters. Society makes women competitors in a game where conceiving and bearing masculinity is what really matters. The children's common father seems to have nothing to do with it; conceiving boys is made an entirely female feat.

When the initial speaker says that her husband's former wife "only had a girl" she implies that this was a second-rate baby; the word "only" in this context signifies that the child is incomplete. In a wider perspective it also shows lack of respect for women in general and an absence of pride in being one. As Ullaliina Lehtinen illustrates in her explication of a text by Victoria Benedictsson: "All is shame with a woman, as she is nothing by

herself, merely a part of her sex,” Barker’s dialogue “amply exemplif[ies] how discrimination of and disdain for women, *external* contempt, lead to self-contempt, self-destructiveness, to *internalized* contempt; to shame” (40). The woman reduces both herself and her husband’s ex-wife to mere child-producers and places them in an internal hierarchy where the reproduction of men is more valuable than that of women. The conflict is apparent: how is it possible to retain one’s dignity when your own sex – one of the two equally necessary components in the act of reproduction – is valued less when transmitted on to a child?

The second woman is also a victim in the striving for male offspring, but rather than boasting about her “son-bearing,” she does not consider the preference for boys a law of nature. The fact that she at all quotes her mother shows that she recognizes the problem and in some way does not take that view for granted. Unlike the previous speaker, this woman never makes it clear whether she has had a son or a daughter, but that is not really the issue here; her own mother rejects any future granddaughters and thus implicitly also rejects her own child - now a grown woman.

The ties between women in the Union Street community are remarkably strong, yet somehow it seems as though the lack of communication with, and implicit acceptance of, the male world make women fight for male interests. In an attempt to secure a masculine, and therefore promising, future for their families, women reject themselves, their daughters and any other women who add females to the world. Thus, as Sara Ruddick states in “Maternal Thinking,”:

“Acceptability” is defined in terms of the values of the mothers social group – whatever of its values she has internalized as her own plus values of group members whom she feels she must please or is fearful of displeasing. Society demands that a mother produce an adult acceptable to the next generation. Mothers, roughly half of society, have an interest in meeting that demand. They are also governed by a more stringent form of acceptability. They want the child they produce to be a person whom they themselves, and those closest to them, can appreciate. The demand of appreciability gives an urgency – sometimes exhilarating, sometimes anguishing – to maternal practice. (220)

Ruddick’s explanation may well be the solution to the intriguing problem posed in the two women’s statements about female children. Union Street demands of a child that it be male for it to be accepted and appreciated in a society where male values dominate. For the first mother, the birth of a son was indeed exhilarating, for the second, the fear of having a daughter caused anguish.

To even consider referring to a girl’s genitalia as a “crack,” with all its negative connotations (imperfection, damage, fragility, leakage etc.), portrays a far-gone distancing from biological and sexual reality. After all, it is the “crack” that makes any natural birth possible, and both men and women are brought into the world by the assistance of it. The grandmother’s statement not only applies to the new grandchild, it also debases birth as a phenomenon and thus strengthens the man-woman hierarchy. In earlier days, lost virginity in a woman was made a cause of social disgrace, and unless girls saw to it that they were not inappropriately deflowered they would descend the social ladder and mar any future possibilities of making a good match. Similarly, in contemporary Union Street society where pregnancy and children make future chances of advancement and liberation difficult, the crack serves as a hole from which freedom and independence may depart. The grandmother’s choice of word is just an example of what patriarchal society wants the female genitalia to represent. In this way the existence of the “crack” becomes the stigma determining the baby’s value; it is what shows its caste.

Since *Union Street* is a novel about working-class women, we can assume that the anonymous dialogue quoted above takes place between mothers with very low economic and social status. At the prospect of their children growing up in poverty, the pride of son-bearing may also be mixed with relief; boys, in Barker’s novel, have slightly better chances to make an upward move on the social scale than do their sisters. The general acceptance of this fact may be of even greater importance. In another passage from *Union Street* a woman tells her grown-up daughter that the latter was lucky to have her children’s unequal intelligence so favourably distributed: “Pity Sharon’s so slow. Still you’ve got it where you need it. He’s the lad” (145). The way society is constructed, in all of its layers, life ahead for a boy is predicted to be easier than that for a girl with respect to education, career and income. The humiliating and self-denying pride in having sons rather than daughters may therefore also be influenced by the mother’s hope that their children will in fact face a life less laborious than their own.

Carol Gilligan makes a clear difference between female and male (but not necessarily women’s and men’s) morality in *In a Different Voice* and traces the starting point of this split to society’s expectations:

[I]n the transition from adolescence to adulthood, the dilemma itself is the same for both sexes, a conflict between integrity and care. But approached from different perspectives, this dilemma generates the recognition of opposite truths. These different perspectives are reflected in two different moral ideologies, since separation is justified by an ethic of rights while attachment is supported by an ethic of care. (164)

In *Union Street*, however, separation and attachment are in conflict within the mind of the individual woman. The issue of separation and attachment threatens the entire community through the preservation of male supremacy. The fact that society does not allow women to feel dignity in being who they are puts an end to what Gilligan sees as the natural transition. Although the gap between male separation and female attachment is not depicted as a threat in *Union Street* – women unconsciously strive for both separation and attachment simultaneously – it is clear that this society has created another problem: that of denying women altogether.

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## Some New Feminist Readers

A number of very useful collections of Feminist studies have been published recently, some of them completely new and others reissues of already established works. Of the latter, *The Feminist Reader*, edited by Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (Macmillan, 1997) goes into its second, successful edition. A much more comprehensive American collection, which also appears in a revised edition, is *Feminisms: an anthology of literary theory and criticism*, edited by Robyn R. Warhol & Diane Price Herndl (Macmillan, 1997).

Two new additions are to be particularly recommended however. *The Second Wave: a reader in Feminist theory*, edited by Linda Nicholson (Routledge, 1997), contains many of the major essays of Feminist theory of the past 40 years. An even more ambitious collection is *Feminisms*, edited by Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires (Oxford Readers, 1997), which covers almost every aspect of the ever-widening field of Feminist theory and practice.

SHELLEY SAGUARO

## Maria Edgeworth and the Politics of Commerce

Teaching Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent: an Hibernian Tale* (1800) on an undergraduate, predominantly eighteenth-century, literature course, I found myself increasingly intrigued with its narrative complexity and its attention to the politics of language in a colonial context. I later discovered an 'oriental tale' by Edgeworth which, although its attention to language was less obvious, seemed to be aligned in certain ways. This tale, 'Murad the Unlucky' is one of Edgeworth's so-called 'moral tales' published first in her collection of *Popular Tales*. The story is presently collected in an Oxford University Press World Classics edition of four tales by different authors entitled *Oriental Tales*. Merely four years separate these two pieces by Edgeworth (*Castle Rackrent* was published in 1800 and 'Murad the Unlucky' in 1804), reason enough perhaps to link them, but it is in their subject matter, particularly their attention to language, stereotype and colonialism which link them more significantly. Above all, it was the attention to exchange, whether linguistic, cultural or commercial which seemed overdetermined. Difference is, of course, the meaningful predication for exchange. As the writer of these tales herself came from the ranks of an Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, a colonising elite where, it has been said, not having to attend to identity and difference is its privilege, these features seemed incongruous. When colonial situations are best known for diminishing and subsuming difference and when commerce in colonial contexts is so readily synonymous with conquest, it was difficult at first glance to identify Edgeworth's own project and rationale. Making reference to these two texts, one about a colonised Ireland she knew well and the other, a fanciful Oriental tale, this article focuses on some of the ways in which Edgeworth – Anglo-Irish, liberal, Protestant, middle class and female – addresses the complexities of power at a critical time in Ireland's and her own history. This article also attempts to trace the ways in which the little-known oriental tale may elucidate and reinforce speculations concerning Edgeworth's colonial critique first suggested by the better-known and more intricate *Castle Rackrent*.

*Castle Rackrent* was published in 1800, the year that saw the ratification of the Act of Union of Ireland with Britain.<sup>1</sup> The proposed Union is an overt issue in the text; it opens and concludes with the fictional Editor,

<sup>1</sup> On March 28, 1800, the terms of the Union were agreed by the Irish parliament and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland was formed on 1 January 1801.