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OBITUARY

Deborah (Debbie) Cameron, 1958–2026

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Deborah Cameron was widely known to her friends and colleagues as Debbie. Late this past December, Debbie asked her wife, Meryl Altman, to send the devastating news to a number of us that, following a small stroke that sent her to hospital, she had been diagnosed with terminal pancreatic cancer. In her characteristically straightforward way, Debbie said, "This message is for people I think of as IRL friends, people I see in person regularly even if it isn't often and who are important to me. I'm sorry to tell you that I'm in hospital; I had a small stroke last week, and have just found out that I have advanced pancreatic cancer. I may be offered treatment and I may accept it—the doctors are still looking into various matters—but treatment is unlikely to save or greatly prolong my life. So I'm writing to let you know what's happening, and possibly to say goodby. In many ways, I've had a good life, and I feel much more fortunate than my own mother, who died of cancer when she was only forty-four. I hope you will remember me with affection". Meryl asked for messages to be sent through her as Debbie was already too weak herself to type. Debbie died on the 20th of January, 2026.

Meryl retired in 2020 from Indiana University, where she was a professor of literature, with a special emphasis on feminist writing. Debbie and Meryl had married in 2019, after decades of managing their close relationship while holding down jobs on opposite sides of the Atlantic. They met in the late 1980s while both were teaching at William and Mary College in Virginia; Meryl's retirement had let them settle down together and marriage, finally possible legally, seemed good for bureaucratic reasons. Oddly, Debbie's death has apparently sped up the progress of American Meryl's application for permanent resident status in the UK.

Debbie Cameron was born November 10, 1958, in Glasgow, the oldest of Archibald and Alice Molyneux Cameron's children. Along with Meryl, her siblings Kate and Rory survive her. Around a decade later, the family moved to Beverly in Yorkshire, and Debbie completed high school there. After leaving school, she went to work at a bank. Her supervisor, impressed by her unusual intelligence, encouraged her to continue her education. And so she began studying English and linguistics at Newcastle University as an undergraduate.

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After finishing at Newcastle, Debbie spent three years as a graduate student at Oxford. In 1983, she submitted *Feminism and Linguistic Theory* as her PhD dissertation, the text of which was published with that title by Macmillan in 1985 (2nd edn., 1992). That first book was groundbreaking and very well-received, a landmark in the development of the field of gender and language studies. In it, Cameron argued compellingly that the discipline of linguistics, especially but not only theoretical linguistics, was completely inadequate for addressing the issues feminist activists and some scholars were raising about language and gender. Cameron's Oxford doctoral committee, however, declined to allow her to proceed to the doctorate when she submitted portions of that work perhaps because they judged it somehow as not 'real linguistics'. Its clarity and ready accessibility as well as its topic may have led them to dismiss it as insufficiently 'scholarly'.

Being denied the PhD might well have deterred a lesser spirit from pursuing a career as an academic linguist. But not only did Cameron have her Oxford-rejected manuscript accepted by a highly respected commercial publisher, she also continued to pursue what became a notably successful career in academia.

There is a 'delicious irony', as Cameron's obituary in *The Guardian* (Bindel 2026) notes, in the fact that the membership of that Oxford PhD committee overlapped with that of the Oxford personnel committee that in 2004 appointed her as the inaugural Rupert Murdoch professor of language and communication at Oxford University, a highly prestigious position she held until her retirement in 2023; she was a member of Worcester College during this time. As a very dedicated feminist who was also strongly committed to helping dismantle class structures, Debbie did not share Murdoch's right-leaning political outlook. But she did appreciate his support of the Oxford position she occupied for almost two decades (now held by Professor Devyani Sharma, whose memorial tribute to Debbie, her predecessor in that position, can be found at https://www.english.ox.ac.uk/article/tribute-deborah-cameron-1958-2026-rupert-murdoch-professor-language-and-communication).

Debbie's second book, *Verbal Hygiene*, was published by Routledge in 1995 and in a revised second edition in 2012 as a Routledge Classic. It too took aim at academic linguistics with its insistence that the discipline was purely 'descriptive' rather than 'prescriptive'. But normativity, Debbie argues, is built into linguistic practice. We cannot understand linguistic variation and change without considering norms and their changes. There is certainly attention in the book to matters of language and gender—one chapter is entitled 'The new Pygmalion: Verbal hygiene for women'—but the scope of the book is much wider and her insights into linguistic normativity from classrooms to editors to 'political correctness' are refreshingly nondoctrinaire. And, like so much of her writing, the book is readily accessible to any intelligent reader with an interest in language. Although I know that many linguists have read and appreciated it, the book continues also to resonate with much wider audiences.

In 2000, Sage published Debbie's *Good to Talk? Living and Working in a Communication Culture*. This book is a very readable account of her research on call centers and the gendered stereotypes that affect their staffing as well as a more general analysis of contemporary concerns over communication. It beautifully illustrates the reach

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of Debbie's research and her continuing insistence on the agency of those whose speech and language attitudes she studied.

Her 2001 *Working with Spoken Discourse* is more specialized. It is the first of her singly-authored books that aims to help others engage successfully and responsibly in empirical research on actual speech in naturally occurring social situations. It shows Debbie's capacities as a teacher, commitment and talents to which her students attest. (She had ventured into similar territory much earlier with Talbot J. Taylor in 1987 with *Analysing Conversation: Rules and Units in the Structure of Talk*.) And in 2002, she published two co-edited books: with David Block, *Globalization and Language Teaching*, and with Thomas A. Markus, *The Words Between the Spaces: Buildings and Language*.

In 2003, Debbie co-authored with Don Kulick *Language and Sexuality*; it quickly became very influential. And in 2006, Kulick and she co-edited *The Language and Sexuality Reader* for Routledge. That same year Routledge also published her *On Language and Sexual Politics*, a selection of some of her articles on language, gender, and sexuality. These publications were fundamental in establishing language and sexuality as an important area of inquiry, sexuality having been little discussed in the earliest work on language and gender, and led directly to the creation of courses on these topics in a range of undergraduate and graduate programs.

In 2007, Debbie published two books aimed at very different audiences. *The Teacher's Guide to Grammar* was offered to help the many teachers in secondary school classrooms charged with teaching English grammar and mostly unequipped to do so in a way that recognized the variety of English and shifting norms in different contexts. *The Myth of Mars and Venus: Do Men and Women Really Speak Different Languages?*, in contrast, was written for and read eagerly by a general audience. Some of the readers of this work were certainly familiar with John Gray's *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*, which was published a few years earlier as a guide to successful heterosexual relationships. Debbie Cameron skewered Gray's empirically unsound rehashing of familiar gender stereotypes about men's directness, women's lack thereof, and the like. Sadly, of course, many continue to believe the old saws, albeit sometimes in updated forms.

In 2009, Debbie and Joan Scanlon co-edited *The Trouble and Strife Reader*; the reader became available as open access in early 2010. 'Trouble and strife' is Cockney rhyming slang for 'wife' and in 1983 a group of British radical feminists adopted the phrase for their publication, which appeared about twice a year until 2002. Over the years of its publication, Debbie contributed an average of one article or book review annually to the magazine, sometimes writing as 'Delilah Campbell'. Over the years she also regularly contributed to *Critical Quarterly*; these were somewhat informal pieces much like the occasional posts she made over the past decade or so to her very popular blog *Language: A Feminist Guide* (debuk.wordpress.com).

Verbal Hygiene, as already noted above, appeared as a Routledge Classic in 2012 and in 2014 Debbie and Ivan Panović co-authored *Working with Written Discourse*, a textbook aimed at researchers and students not only in linguistics but also in other social sciences interested in the analysis of written texts, both traditional and technology-mediated. In 2016 Debbie and Sylvia Shaw co-edited *Gender, Power and Political Speech: Women and Language in the 2015 UK General Election*. And then Debbie wrote two important books focusing on general feminist issues rather than linguistic

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matters: *Feminism: Ideas in Profile* (2018) and *Feminism: A Brief Introduction to the Ideas, Debates, and Politics of the Movement* (2019).

Debbie's penultimate book, *Language, Sexism and Misogyny*, came out in hard cover and Kindle editions at the very end of 2023, the year of her retirement. In it, she examines changes since the early 1970s in linguistic dimensions of antagonism towards women. She pays special attention to how recently emerging online discourse in the digital age has shifted forms of misogynistic linguistic practices; this shift has, she makes clear, by no means reduced the amount or severity of verbal harassment of women, just changed formats. Debbie's final book, *The Rise of Dogwhistle Politics*, appeared in November 2025. In it, she shows clearly the futility of policing language and, more generally, why censorship can never really work, given the fluidity of linguistic meaning and the central importance of context to interpretation of what is said or written. The book is a sharp rebuke to those who try to shut down anyone expressing opinions with which they disagree or even just straying from what such self-appointed judges deem 'acceptable' terminology. In recent years, Debbie herself had on occasion been targeted by such censorious voices, mostly young trans activists who thought her strong feminist commitments incompatible with their aims.

I have only mentioned the many books in Debbie's output plus a few places to which she regularly submitted relatively short pieces. Over the years she also regularly published articles in scholarly journals, many of which were never collected in books. And she wrote a sizeable number of insightful and informative book reviews, an underappreciated but important genre. Plus those wonderful blog posts and much more. When I said something to her a few years ago about being in awe of her prodigious output, she responded that words just flowed from her onto the page. But I know of few if any others for whom that flow comes out not only voluminously but well organized and cogently argued—and often spiced with sardonic wit.

I count myself among the many who not only greatly admired and respected Debbie but who also loved her and whose lives have been enormously enriched by the good fortune of knowing her IRL. It was, I think, not until around the beginning of this century that we finally connected in person. My husband, philosopher Carl Ginet, and I were spending a semester on sabbatical leave in London, and I reached out to see if Debbie might like to meet up with me. She introduced me to the Tate Modern, which had recently opened, and to the Turkish restaurant Tas on The Cut. And she invited me for lunch at her place. An excellent cook, she fed me marvelous parsnip soup and her own freshly baked bread. I quickly realized that Carl, already a fan of Debbie's writing, would also enjoy her company (and her cooking), and from then on we got together as a trio when we could and, on those fortunate occasions when Meryl was around, a quartet. Occasionally we saw one another at conferences—Debbie was my only companion when I smoked my very last cigarette in 2010 during a break of the IGALA conference in Tokyo.

Debbie had only contempt for fools or foolishness and had no patience with pretentiousness. "That's just bollocks", she often said. In early 2025 some of Debbie's friends and colleagues began planning a volume to honor her. Knowing Debbie would hate a traditional formal festschrift, they planned a collection of short contributions aimed at rooting out at some of the bollocks still infecting much public discourse about language. Miriam Meyerhoff, one of the co-editors (Heather Burnett and

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Penny Eckert are also still involved), was able to show Debbie a mocked-up version from Routledge of *Let's Stop Talking Bollocks About... Short Essays on Language, Politics and Power* shortly before she died, and Debbie was pleased and touched. Miriam and her husband Andrew Beach had become very close friends with Debbie and Meryl since Miriam accepted a position at Oxford's All Souls a few years ago. Let me close by echoing what Miriam said to me recently. I only wish Debbie could have seen the enormous outpouring of tributes to her from many different directions that came in after her death.

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