

EVALUATIVE, SELF-DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER LIMITATIONS BY WOMEN

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Despite the many achievements of society towards gender equality since the first suffragists gained voting right in the late nineteenth century, there is still a long way to walk ahead of us. When exploring attitudes towards gender issues in so called Western societies, we find that many people think we are protected from sex discrimination by our laws and, in spite of some individual threats to equality, the major trend is to advance forward and leave such threats on road margins. However, it is essential that men and women become aware of the value of their individual responsibilities to keep society moving forward on the track and without detour. In my research I explore every day talk and daily routines together with their potential to either limit or widen women's freedom in comparison to men's. Special attention will be paid in this article to the fact that women themselves use evaluative discourse that constructs gender difference and hinders gender equality. Adopting the perspectives of pragmatics and discourse analysis (henceforth DA), and, therefore, assuming that language is action and that discourse both reflects and constructs reality, I will analyse a corpus of face-to-face conversations and interaction on blogs and social networking sites (SNSs) in order to gain insight into practices that run contrary to gender equality by limiting women's potential.

Keywords: Pragmatics; Discourse analysis; Corpus studies; Social and discursive construction of gender; Evaluative language; Politeness.

1. Theoretical background and aim for the study

This study is based on the tenet that gender is socially constructed and language is a powerful tool in such construction. This idea stems from social constructionism as a theory of knowledge and from the belief that language is at the core of knowledge and hence, plays a crucial role in shaping society. As Marecek, Crawford and Popp (2004) explain, language is considered the building block of culture. It conveys meaning and creates the system of knowledge we participate in. Language has a huge influence on how we perceive reality and, as a result, is the creator of this reality. Therefore, this study fits into discursive theories of gender, which stress the creation, through language and culture, of meanings associated with gender versus more materialist theories, which would underline the structural aspects of society that are responsible for perpetuating certain gender roles, (see Alsop, Fitzsimmons and Lennon 2002: 64-93). According to social constructionism, it is not possible to draw a clear line between the self and the society. Individuals create meaning in relation to what they are exposed to in their environment and, at the same time, collaborate with other individuals to create the meanings that are available in this environment. Marecek et al. (2004) conclude therefore that the society and the individual are indissoluble and mutually constitutive.

Social constructionism and discursive theories are combined here with a pragmatic approach to language as “the study of language usage” (Levinson 1983: 5) assuming the value of context in the interpretation of text, together with DA and, therefore, exploring language as action: “In discourse analysis, as in pragmatics, we are concerned with what people using language are doing, and accounting for the linguistic features in the discourse as the means employed in what they are doing”, (Brown and Yule 1983: 26). Discourse, then, is more than the product of speakers' performance because in talking we do things (insight due to Austin's speech act theory, 1962). Therefore, analysis of discourse becomes, an “analysis of what people do” (Potter 1997: 146). This means that language is much more than a means of communication but is a way of doing things and shaping society: “Talk

creates the social world in a continuous, ongoing way; it does not simply reflect what is assumed to be already there". (Wood and Kroger, 2000: 4, drawing on Potter and Wetherell 1987 and their influential version of the discourse analytic perspective).

If discourse does not only reflect but also constructs reality, its exploration in gender studies may greatly contribute to gender equality. Hence the high productivity by discourse analysts in the field (such as Tannen, 1996, or the many well established authors in the field contributing to the volume by Holmes and Meyerhoff, 2003).

Analysis of discourse will identify the gender values which are communicated through language and suggest alternative practices when necessary, which in the end may result in a change of reality. For instance, "Father knows better" shows the importance given to father's authority versus mother's, giving proof of an assumption which may lead to perpetuation of a socio-cultural model based on patriarchal values unless we act upon this assumption. However, an alternative practice of saying "We (father and mother) will discuss and find out what is better" is bound to result in a more balanced definition of authority in the family.

It is important to note that DA does not only point to the referential value of language (how words relate to referents in real life) but to the "phenomena that are constructed discursively, (e.g., racism, abuse), that is, in terms of what people are doing with words" (Wood and Kroger 2000: 9). Feminists have invested big effort in recommending avoidance of masculine pronouns for generic reference and suggesting profession names that refer to both male and female individuals. However, the study of discursively constructed gender phenomena will show the many different ways in which gender difference is constructed. In this paper I will focus on the construction of women's limitations by the negative self-evaluation of her qualities, which may result in the perpetuation of a stronger male versus a weaker female character.

I will also draw attention here to the theory of gender performativity by post-structuralist feminist philosopher Judith Butler. In her 1990 book *Gender Trouble*, she characterizes gender as the effect of reiterated acting, which produces „true gender“, a narrative that is sustained by „the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions (...) (Butler 1990: 179). Therefore, this theory also hints at the importance of our discourse choices in gender construction.

In order to understand how individuals end up sharing common meanings I will resort to the construct of "community of practice", which originated to refer to a group of people who engage in some common endeavor as response to common interest, and play an important role in forming their members' participation in, and orientation to, the world around them (Lave and Wenger 1991). This concept has been used in gender studies (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992, García-Gómez 2010 or Sunderland 2010) as a way of theorizing language and gender "most particularly, of responsibly connecting broad categories to on-the-ground social and linguistic practice" (Eckert 2006). I would suggest that the media are building a global community of practice, with many individuals sharing a common interest in body appearance and sexual attraction and engaging in a common endeavour to use fashion, cosmetics, fitness or surgery in different degrees in order to succeed.

Appraisal theory will guide exploration of evaluative language, understood as the expression of attitude (including meanings of affect, judgment and appreciation) together with engagement and graduation resources, used "for adopting a position with respect to propositions and for scaling intensity or degree of investment respectively", (Martin and White 2005: 39). Appraisal originated as the study of the expression of evaluation within the framework of Hallidayan Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), (Halliday (2004 [1994/1985]) and continues to be used and updated as a model for research (Hunston and Thompson 2000, Martin and White 2000, 2005, Bednarek 2008, Thompson and

Alba-Juez 2014). In previous research, I have used appraisal to analyse evaluative language in computer mediated interaction (Santamaría-García 2013a, 2013b, 2014).

Appraisal will be connected to politeness theory (Brown and Levinson 1987), as discussed in previous research (Santamaría-García 2013: 460; 2014: 389). The useful description of every individual's need for negative and positive faces facilitates understanding of speakers' negotiation of face and resulting choices of communicative strategies. Negative face is defined as "the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction – i.e. to freedom of action and freedom from imposition" and positive face is "the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 61) and both are carefully negotiated in interaction. Speakers may choose to produce positive politeness strategies, "oriented toward the positive face of Hearer" or negative politeness strategies "oriented mainly toward partially satisfying (or redressing) H's negative face" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 70).

The main objective of the present article is to raise a special sensitivity towards the discursive construction of gender difference, with the end to avoid those practices that may result in the construction of the female character as weaker and subordinate to male.

2. Data and method

The data for this study contain conversations recorded from everyday interaction in Spain together with fragments of interaction retrieved from blogs and SNS (See Yus, 2011 and Santamaría-García, 2013b, for discussion on different types of interaction on SNSs). The corpus is made up of a sample of 300 utterances collected in the period 2012-2014. The methodology for processing the data borrows techniques from Corpus Linguistics (CL), and combines its typically quantitative approach with the more qualitative one by DA, as discussed in previous research (Santamaría-García 2011). Discourse categories have been marked up with UAM Corpus Tool (O'Donnell 2011), a program which has facilitated their automatic retrieval and analysis. Starting from the pragmatic and discursive conception of language as action I have analysed the speech acts in the corpus in order to gain insight into practices that run contrary to gender equality. Whenever possible, alternative practices oriented to equality are suggested.

3. Analysis of fragments of talk

In this section I will include an analysis of fragments of discourse as illustration of the ways in which women self-evaluate their physical appearance in a negative way, perpetuating practices that run contrary to gender equality. It seems that the media are succeeding in constructing tight relationships between femininity and consumption and feeling beautiful has become an essential interest for women, which makes them extremely dependant on fashion, cosmetics or even surgery. Fragment (1) was recorded before a dancing class for amateurs. It contains informal conversation between two women in their late thirties. Both women are teachers at primary and secondary schools, respectively. *Woman 1* is a teacher of physical education with a beautiful face and body. She is also the best dancer in the group.

Fragment (1)

(1) Woman 1: Ya lo he decidido. Me voy a operar del pecho.

I have taken the decision. I will have breast surgery.

(2) Woman 2: Pero si estás bien.

But you're ok.

(3) Woman 1: No maja. Me está afectando. Seguro que con una talla más me sentiré mucho mejor.

No, girl. It is affecting me. I'm sure I will feel much better with a bigger size.

In (3) we find an evaluative act of dissatisfaction caused by the woman speaker's own body. When a young woman justifies her need for breast surgery because she feels that a bigger size will boost her self-esteem, and says "I'm sure I will feel much better with a bigger size", she is echoing the widespread belief that breast size has a strong influence in self-esteem, a belief deeply rooted in a global community of practice and widely supported by a society that has been strongly medicalized with the help of the media. This woman seems to give priority to her need for positive face, (i.e. to be appreciated and admired), over her need for negative face, (i.e. independence, freedom of action and from imposition) in response to an increasing craving for unattainable beauty driven by an increasing sexualisation of gender relationships.

My next fragment illustrates that girls seem to be acquiring an awareness of the importance of breast size for men at a very early age. The speaker is a 3 year-old talking to her granddad. He said he's going to bed. It's quite early and he is going before grandma. The girl offers him one of her dolls for company:

Fragment (2)

G1: Espera, abuelo que te busco la que tiene las tetas más grandes.

Wait grandpa. I will look for the one with biggest breasts.

It seems that she has already learnt something about men's preferences.

What seems paradoxical is that nowadays, women seem to be going back to past ideologies prior to women's liberation in the 1960's that singled out beauty as a must-have quality to guarantee males' attraction. The rationale, however, is of a different nature as it used to revolve around fertility and maternity and nowadays it is oriented towards sexual attraction. In Spain, for instance, the ideology of *The Feminine Section* (the women's branch of the Spanish fascist party "Falange Española", founded in 1933) encouraged those activities, knowledge and skills that were considered intrinsically feminine so women would have "what is essential for them to be the perfect complement of men". As reported in Pérez-Samaniego and Santamaría-García (2013: 76), the founder of *The Feminine Section*, clarified what were considered the essential roles of women in one of her speeches addressing the trainers of the movement (15th, January, 1945): "And you will see how these women, trained within Christian doctrine and National Syndical style, will become useful for the family, the town and the Syndicate". A woman's role was ancillary to the man's and she had to develop those qualities that guaranteed a healthy body for pregnancy and nurturing (efficiency for reproduction) and those that may attract men such, as elegance, grace and beauty. These beliefs worked as a biological justification of the passive role of women (using the concept developed by Wolf, 1991). Due to the priority assigned to the reproductive role of women, beauty was directly related to fertility. Now, beauty seems an unattainable ideal goal responsible for women's dissatisfaction and oppression: "More women have more money and power and scope and legal recognition than we have ever had before; but in terms of how we feel about ourselves physically, we may actually be worse off than our unliberated grandmothers", Wolf (1991: 10). In the years after Wolf's work we are witnessing how an increasing number of women are undergoing surgery and suffering from eating disorders in the race to be appreciated, approved and admired. Sexual attraction comes quite often as a priority, leaving nurturing in a second place (for instance many women are choosing to bottle feed their babies for aesthetical reasons). This analysis is in line with work by Wolf (1991), who argues that an unattainable standard of beauty is resulting in social coercion and taking over the work previously done by myths about motherhood, domesticity, chastity, or passivity, all of which have as a goal to keep women powerless. Instead of aiming at the happy housewife now girls dream to be models: "the gaunt, youthful model [has] supplanted the happy housewife as the arbiter of successful womanhood."

In the following fragment, two teenage girls are talking while participating in a demonstration against the measures taken by the right wing Government to fight the economic crisis in Spain.

Fragment (3)

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Girl 1: Joder tía, ni parezco roja ni parezco hippie... ¿Cómo lo arreglo?!...

Damn, girl! I don't look like a left-winger nor like a hippie... What can I do about it?

Girl 2: <Risa>

<Laughs>

This fragment reveals the importance given by this particular girl to her physical appearance while participating in anti-government protest. This shows that even in a context of ideological nature, in which political and economic issues are expected to be a priority over physical appearance, the looks get this girl's attention. She gives a negative appreciation of her looks communicating dissatisfaction and feeling not apt for the context of the demonstration.

Our last example is a fragment from a blog meant to give advice to sugar babies. The phenomenon of sugar babies is gaining popularity. "Sugar babies" are, according to the *New York Daily News* (see website under references), "young city women who get older men to be their sugar daddies and pay the bills". This is being considered undercover prostitution by some but it is interesting to see how women practitioners justify its practice and present men as *mentors*: "I am young and I need guidance. I look for guys who are willing to mentor me and help me on my career path". According to *New York Daily News*, this is said by a 20-year-old college junior living in Chelsea, London, who is dating a 60-year-old who pays her \$4,000 part-time tuition bill and \$2,000 housing costs at FIT, and even bought her a 13-inch MacBook Pro laptop (\$1,200) for her schoolwork. As we can see in the fragment included next, this mentoring can also come in the way of "investments":

Fragment (4)

(W1) Let me tell you my story. I started my own company three years ago providing advice to individuals in need of nutritional guidance, yes I'm a Nutritionist. It was extremely difficult to get funding from banks or investors. After several months with still no funding, my business partner came across a sugar daddy site; we were instantly hooked on the concept of a "mentor" for the exchange of eye candy. We felt even if we didn't get funding from our "mentor," we would still be surrounded by successful business people, and something would come through one way or another.

So, after a few weeks I received my first offer, and yes, he was interested in our company, very interested - to the point of helping us out on a monthly "allowance". After a few months of hard work and a little "dressing up", we were able to see our dreams become a realization. Our lifestyle became something of a dream world – jewelry, clothing, fancy dinners, and that was just the beginning.

It seems that the aspirations for a wealthy happy world can lead to disastrous consequences in the way towards women liberation. Research published by *Cosmopolitan*, mentions that the dating website specifically targets university students. "If you have a university email address then you can sign up to a free premium membership". According to the online dating website, (SeekingArrangement.com) the three British universities with more female students signed up for "sugar daddy dating" are Cambridge University, London School of Economics and the University of Kent. They make it explicit that college students are a main target: "College tuition is on the rise, and more students have discovered the new way to avoid student loan debt. Through SeekingArrangement.com, college students can connect with wealthy benefactors, otherwise known as Sugar Daddies, who will help pay for tuition".

Sugar Daddies are portrayed then as mentors, benefactors or investors. If even talented women with higher education fall in their traps we may need to work harder than women in past generations and fight with higher windmills than ever before.

4. Conclusions

Discourse analysis can contribute to enlightening analysis of the way people talk and, as a result, to a change in society, by facilitating awareness of the relationship between discourse and the construction of gender equality or difference. The analysis of several fragments of interaction has illustrated how gender difference may be constructed through discourse in different areas of life. It seems essential then, that we become aware of our language choices and how they help to change or perpetuate gender-related values and roles. The alarming increase of situations in which the more vulnerable are voluntarily exposing themselves to health and social risks (surgery or new forms of prostitution) is a call of attention that every individual should take to consideration. In addition to all the legal measures that need to be adopted in order to achieve full equality between men and women, it is our individual responsibility to become aware of the different situations where gender difference is being created. Moreover, adoption of such legal measures is not always smooth nor has the desired effects to guarantee equality, as Santaemilia Ruiz and Maruenda Bataller (2013: 440-457) show with their pragmatic analysis of the discursive struggle resulting from gender-equality legislation. Therefore, education of society is a crucial factor to achieve gender equality.

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