

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Still “A Double Bind” for Women in Politics, Review of the Political Discourse Research

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Abstract:

More and more women worldwide are now part of the political arena. However, they are still faced with the double bind theory, which implies a distressful situation in which whatever decision you make, you cannot escape unpleasant results. When women politicians speak in a natural, feminine, lady-like manner, they are not taken seriously and are denied access to power because of their incapability to withstand political pressures. On the other hand, when displaying typical masculine linguistic features, such as expertise, authority and rationality, they are accused of being aggressive or insensitive (Lakoff 1975). Due to the presence of more and more women in political leadership and their ongoing linguistic struggle, many scholars have been interested in feminine discourse in politics. This paper aims at presenting a review of the research on the discourse of female politicians to trace the double bind that women politicians encounter and their linguistic choices in the political realm.

Keywords: *Women politicians, double bind, feminine rhetoric, masculine rhetoric*

1. Introduction

The end of XX century marked a significant social change, namely, the successful integration of women into the labour market, which inevitably increased their participation in leading positions. However, women faced the challenge of public speaking. When they spoke in a natural, feminine, lady-like manner, they were not taken seriously and were denied access to power because of their incapability to withstand political pressures. On the other hand, when displaying typical masculine linguistic features, such as expertise, authority and rationality, they were accused of being aggressive or insensitive (Lakoff 1975). This distressing dilemma between the two fires was labelled as the double bind theory. The double bind was interpreted as a manifestation of the struggle between the politician and the homemaker, implying that women cannot have a successful career and at the same time preserving their motherhood (Jamieson 1995). The double bind is still relevant today, especially for women in leading positions or politics (Campbell 1989). United States Senator, Barbara Boxer, once said, “If I was strong in my expression of the issues I was strident... [And] ran the risk of being too much like a man; if I expressed any emotion... I was soft” (Jamieson 1995).

Due to the presence of more and more women in political leadership and their ongoing linguistic struggle, many scholars have been interested in feminine discourse in politics. This paper aims at presenting a review of the research on the discourse of female politicians to trace the double bind of women politicians and their linguistic choices in the political realm.

2. Feminine and Masculine Speech Styles

First, let us explain what it is to speak like a man or a woman, according to sociolinguistics. Due to different evolution processes, biological features and different socialization experiences, women and men have developed distinct rhetorical styles. Sociolinguists have characterised two different masculine and feminine speech styles.

Masculine speech has been characterised by Maltz (1982) as a competitive, argumentative, antagonistic and insulting style. According to Tannen (1994) and Zimmerman (1975), men use interruptions to portray control, power and dominance. They use strong expletives to show bravery, aggression and machismo (Pilkington 1992). To show leadership, men use commands (Goodwin 1980), and exclusive pronouns (I, you, me) are a manifestation of dominance (Danaher 1986).

Women's language, on the other hand, has been characterised as emotional, pleasing, supportive and conciliatory (Jamieson 1988). According to Holmes (1984), women invite addressees into conversation by the use of hedges (you know, sort of), tag questions (isn't it?) and inclusive pronouns (we, us). They also show support and attentiveness in conversation by using minimal responses (mmhmmm) (Maltz 1982). They use suggestions (let's, why don't we?) and weaker expletives (dear me, my goodness) to maintain respect, adverbials (maybe, probably) to weaken their statements, and modal verbs (may, could) to maintain equality and receive approval (Brown 1980).

Being object to double bind, how do then women politicians actually speak, according to research carried out on the discourse of women politicians?

2.1. Use of Feminine Rhetoric

The first study (Dow & Tonn 1993) that recognized feminine rhetoric as capable of the political arena stated that women still use feminine rhetoric in contemporary discourse, while masculine communicative strategies are still more valued in the public sphere and women still face the double bind. Other studies come to the conclusion that women use feminine rhetoric to support inclusive and comprehensive policies and to give more importance to women's issues in politics (Blankenship & Robson 1995). A survey (Herrnson, Lay & Kai Stokes 2003) conducted on the voters' perception of women politicians revealed that voters are based on stereotypes of women candidates. They (women) are perceived as successful when they "wear their identity" when they appear more understandable and competent in dealing with women's issues, embodying the positive features that voters demand from them. Another study (Benze & DeClercq 1985) documents that women use feminine rhetoric twice as much as men to highlight compassion, warmth, honesty and morality, highlighting these features as their strengths, while male three times more than women use masculine rhetoric, including knowledge, leadership, experience and strength, because it highlights their political power.

2.2. Use of Masculine Rhetoric

However, according to a study on gender stereotypes and perceptions about politicians, it was argued that American voters appreciate the strength, aggressiveness and competence of their politicians. And, there have been studies, which have shown that some women politicians have used masculine rhetoric as a tool to portray these features. For example, Johnston and White (1994) recognized that women in their study stressed strength rather than warmth. According to Coates (1993: 10), the ways in which women in politics assimilate the characteristic features of men are: (1) they use deeper voice (lowering their pitch of the voice); (2) they use offensive dictionary and taboo language; (3) they adopt prosaic traits that are more typical for males (e.g., sound declination patterns than intonation elevation); (4) they adopt a more categorical style in group interaction; (5) they open up public masculine topics such as: business, politics, economy, war; (6) they have begun to use nonstandard language. The case of former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher testifies the changes in her voice altitude. As Atkinson (2004: 357) argues, a shrilling high voice during the speech "can create a negative impression". Therefore, under the guidance of a specialist from the national theatre, Thatcher took lessons to lower the pitch of her voice to seem firmer and more powerful. By lowering her pitch, Mrs. Thatcher also slowed-down her speech. This has contributed to a greater clarity of expression and to the creation of a 'statesman' (Atkinson 1984: 113). Another study (Klofstad, Anderson, Peters, 2012) has come to the same conclusion that voters prefer politicians with a low voice, as the low voice is associated with dominance and leadership. According to Campbell (1989: 10), in order to escape from the contradictory expectations, women need to adopt male characteristics in their discourse simultaneously displaying their female identity.

2.3. Combination of Masculine and Feminine Rhetorical Styles

The evidence is contradictory because masculine and feminine rhetorical styles are both useful and beneficial techniques. There are many studies that document that women politicians combine feminine and masculine techniques in their speeches, as confirmed by two studies on US women politicians Ann Richards (Dow & Tonn 1993) and Patricia Schroeder (Szpiech 1992). In a study of five Congressmen and five Congresswomen, some researchers found that 8 out of 10 used both techniques in their public addresses. Other authors describe how women in New Zealand manage large corporations by achieving a balance between work and maintaining relationships with the work team, thus maintaining a balance between masculine and feminine rhetoric (Marra, Schnurr & Holmes 2006). According to another study on political discourse of women politicians, women in politics combine feminine with masculine rhetoric styles according to the context of discourse and the purpose of the political discourse (Hima 2015).

2.4. Use of Feminine Rhetoric by Men Politicians

Recently, there have been a few studies which have analysed the use of feminine rhetoric by male politicians. According to Freed and Greenwood (1996) and Cameron (1997), in some contexts during interaction among men, there have been observed linguistic features associated with feminine rhetoric. These studies have come to the conclusion that feminine rhetoric is useful for male politicians in these cases: when communicating through television; when discussing delicate or sensitive issues; when they want to appear caring; or when they want to attract women. Jamieson (1988) suggests that feminine rhetoric is more appropriate for a politician when communicating through radio and television, as media promote close relationships with the public and create personal talks between the speaker and the public. In these contexts, the feminine, caring and trustworthy style is more favourable than the masculine combative discourse. In addition to joining the audience and creating respect, feminine rhetoric helps the speaker to claim authority, persuade and empower the public, however, in a way that shows compassion.

3. Conclusions

To sum up, scholars have defined masculine rhetoric as a useful communicative means for men to achieve biological and social goals related to their male identity, such as: aggressive attitudes, display of expertise and competition, undertaking actions, as well as obedience and these are the required qualities in policy-making. However, recent studies have shown that masculine rhetoric can also be used by women who want to meet the same goals in areas such as business or politics. Hence, masculine style is not just an expression of male identity, but a rhetorical means of achieving certain objectives.

On the other hand, feminine rhetoric has been labelled as an appropriate tool to express feelings and maintain the harmony of the group and portray the feminine and ornamental identity. This sort of rhetoric is not just an expression of women or female identity, though, but a rhetorical tool that can be used by both men and women who aim to soften, be entertaining, ensure respect and unite addressees with each other and with the speaker.

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