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Social and Linguistic Analysis of Women's Political Discourse

Anila Hima

Lecturer, Foreign Languages Department, Faculty of Humanities
Ismail Qemali University, Vlorë, Albania

Abstract:

This paper presents a qualitative study of the women's political discourse. The relationship between the political discourse and the social status and power of women is investigated based on a combination of a social and a linguistic framework. Tajfel's social identity theory (Tajfel 1974) serves as the social theoretical framework for this analysis. This theory describes three strategies through which inferior social groups reject their inferior status. First, they will adopt the values of the dominant group. Second, they will try to revalue positively the characteristics previously defined as negative by the society, and last, they will create new positive dimensions to compare with the dominant group. In terms of language, this paper investigates the political discourse of one of the most powerful women in the world, Mrs. Hillary Clinton, in four televised political debates. With reference to the three above-mentioned strategies, it attempts (a) to detect the masculine linguistic component in her political discourse, (b) to acknowledge the values of the feminine linguistic characteristics in her speech, and (c) finally, to envision her political language in accordance with the social identity theory. The results demonstrate that Mrs. Clinton gains agency and power by adopting a fine and sophisticated balance of feminine and masculine speech styles. This paper hopes to enlighten how the power of speech of women politicians is a means to establish their position in society today, and it is, as well, an indicator of this position.

Keywords: Political discourse, Feminine, Masculine, Speech style, Social status, Power.

1. Introduction

Language is a means to establish the position in society, as well as an indicator of this position. In politics, in particular, language is crucial. As Partington (2001: 116) notes, "Politics is persuasion, and persuasion is conducted predominantly through language." Despite the great changes in the 21st century, politics is still a male-dominated world and women are still struggling to gain equality. Today, worldwide, the average percentage of women in parliaments is under the quota of 30%, required by UNDP as the critical minority for women as a group to exert a meaningful influence in legislative assemblies. According to IPU (Inter-Parliamentary Union), 20%¹ of the USA Senate is women. But how do women politicians, in terms of language, manage to gain supremacy, agency and power and be in leading offices today? Do they adopt masculine strategies to be successful in this male environment? Or, are they natural and express their femininity through language? Women's language has been determined as weak, unassertive, lacking self-consciousness. The question that obviously follows is: How do the leading authoritative female politicians manage to race in such public positions today? The aim of this study is to examine objectively the relationship between women's political discourse and their social status and power, through a combination of a social and a linguistic framework.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Tajfel's theory of inter-group relations and social change

The theoretical framework this study is embedded into is a combination of a social and a linguistic one. For the social framework, we need to describe the social identity theory to see how people form social identity when, as members of certain social groups, they are compared with other groups. Henri Tajfel (1974) developed the theory of inter-group relations and social change and focused his analysis particularly on those groups whose members had a poor self-image. Women belong to a social group of this type. According to Tajfel (1974), members of the inferior social group can either accept or reject their social inferiority. If they accept it, they try to achieve self-esteem and a positive self-image in two possible strategies: "first, they can measure themselves against members of their own group, not members of the superior group; second, they can try individually to join the superior group" (Coates 1993: 8). In the past, women accepted their inferior status in society, whereas today women are more self-conscious about their unequal status with men and do not accept it and make efforts to change things as a group. The three ways women achieve this change are described in Coates (1993) as follows:

First, they will try to gain equality with and will adopt the values of the superior group; this strategy is called assimilation. Second, they will try to redefine characteristics which have previously been defined in negative terms by society; they will try to give these characteristics a positive value. Third, they will try to create new dimensions for comparison with

¹ <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm> Situation as of 1st April 2014 [accessed May 2, 2014].

the superior group, so that they are defining for themselves what has positive value, and thereby creating a positive and distinct image for themselves (Coates 1993: 8-9).

Therefore, it is interesting to find out the predictions of Tajfel's theory on women's position in society today and on women's linguistic usage, forty years later. According to Coates (1993: 10), in terms of language, *assimilation* is a strategy which is pursued from certain groups of women (in politics, for instance). Coates (1993: 10) describes the six following ways through which women have assimilated into the dominant group:

- They use deeper voices (lower in pitch);
- They swear and use taboo language;
- They adopt a more assertive style in group interaction;
- They adopt prosodic features more typical of men (e.g. falls rather than rising intonation patterns);
- They address themselves in public to traditionally male topics: business, politics, and economics;
- They are beginning to exploit the use of non-standard accents.

2.2. Lakoff's 'women's language'

For our linguistic analysis, we need to describe first what women's language is. In 1975, Robin Lakoff defined it as a set of universal characteristics of the way women speak and are expected to speak. She has categorised women as subordinate, because of their limited possibilities of using the language. In the same line, Atkinson (1984: 112) argued that women "are damned if they behave like men, and damned if they don't. Thus, if a woman acts in a tough, decisive or ruthless manner, she is likely to find her femininity being called into question. But if she is gentle, indecisive or conciliatory her male colleagues may consider her unsuitable for the job". Lakoff's linguistic features (cited in Holmes 2001: 286) which serve as distinct markers of women's speech style, are a group of phonological, lexical and syntactical features. This group includes: lexical hedges or fillers (e.g. you know, well, you see); tag questions (e.g. she's very nice, isn't she?); rising intonation on declaratives (e.g. it's really good?); 'empty' adjectives (e.g. divine, charming, cute); precise colour terms (e.g. magenta, aquamarine); minimal responses (e.g. yes, mhm, yeah); intensifiers, such as just and so (e.g. I like him so much); hypercorrect grammar (e.g. consistent use of standard verb forms); (super) polite forms (e.g. indirect requests, euphemisms); avoidance of strong swear words (e.g. fudge, my goodness); and emphatic stress (e.g. it was a BRILLIANT² performance). These gender-specific features can be categorized into two groups: "hedging devices which reduce the strength of an utterance, such as fillers, tag questions and rising intonation on declaratives; and boosting or intensifying devices used to increase the force of an utterance, such as emphatic stress and intensifiers" (Holmes 2001: 287). According to Lakoff, both hedging and boosting devices signal the speaker's uncertainty, tentativeness, unassertiveness, lack of authority and self-confidence.

3. Aim and Method

This paper aims to determine the relationship between women's political discourse and their social status and power in the 21st century. Politics today is still a male-dominated world and still difficult to enter for women. For this reason, we have chosen Mrs. Hillary Clinton, former US Secretary of State, who is one of the most powerful women politicians on earth.³ In the 2008 US presidential election, Mrs. Clinton was a leading candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination, being the only woman politician ever to have run for the presidency. The political discourse of Mrs. Clinton will be analysed through televised political debates, because that is an environment where rhetoric, confrontation, political point scoring and one-upmanship meet one another, and secondly because they are, basically, spontaneous speeches. Using the transcripts of four televised political debates,⁴ Mrs. Clinton's political discourse will be analysed to see how it fits into Tajfel's social identity theory. The three strategies described in section 2.1 for rejecting the inferior status of women in society will be examined in terms of language. Firstly, in line with the first strategy of *assimilation* into the dominant group (Coates 1993) her language will be investigated to detect the masculine linguistic component in her political discourse, to examine whether her language is assimilated into the language of the dominant group. Secondly, concerning the second strategy of the positive re-evaluation of the characteristics previously defined as negative, we will examine to what extent her language is feminine, compared with Lakoff's *women's language*, and will evaluate the values and impact of her feminine linguistic characteristics in her speech. Finally, in accordance with the third strategy of creating new dimensions for comparison with the other group, we will attempt to detect the individual specific characteristics of her speech that make her one of the most powerful women politicians. The overall aim of this study is to discover women politicians' place in Tajfel's theory and to see if Tajfel's predictions have come true forty years later.

4. Results

4.1. Masculine Linguistic Features in Mrs. Clinton's Speech

The first part of the study will focus on the masculine linguistic features in Mrs. Clinton's speech. The six ways how women assimilate into the dominant group, described by Coates (1993), will be examined here. The analysis of the lowering of pitch, the

² Author's emphasis.

³ According to Forbes <http://www.forbes.com/power-women/list/>, Mrs. Hillary Clinton is ranked #5 in the list of the most powerful women on earth. Ranks calculated in May 2013 [accessed May 10, 2014].

⁴ <http://edition.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/01/31/dem.debate.transcript/> [accessed May 5, 2014].

http://edition.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/01/21/debate.transcript/index.html?eref=rss_latest [accessed May 5, 2014].

<http://www.lasvegassun.com/news/2008/jan/15/debate-transcript/> [accessed May 5, 2014].

<http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/DemocraticDebate/story?id=4670271> [accessed May 5, 2014].

<http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0711/15/se.02.html> [accessed May 5, 2014].

non-standard accents and the intonation patterns have been left out from the present analysis, because their inclusion would have also involved a phonological framework that would go beyond the goal of this study.

To the first matter, there is scientific research that lowering of the pitch level by women politicians used to be really successful in the past. As argued by Max Atkinson (2004: 357), a high-pitched voice during a speech “might create a negative impression”. In *Our Master’s Voice*, Atkinson states that Mrs. Margaret Thatcher, under the guidance of a tutor from the National Theatre, underwent a training programme at lowering the pitch level, “which have probably contributed both to the greater clarity of her talk and to its ‘statesmanlike’ character” (Atkinson 1984: 113). Likewise, Klofstadt et al. (2012) suggest that voters prefer politicians with lower-pitched voices, as low vocal pitch is linked to dominance and leadership. To the best of our knowledge, no study so far has been devoted to Mrs. Clinton’s pitch level. Therefore, indirectly, we might presume that this is not a strategy employed by her to gain authority and the voice of a Head of State.

The use of non-standard accents cannot be documented or tested in our transcripts, as politicians care a lot about their public image in political debates as a national arena. However, from various newspaper sources⁵ we found out that, while campaigning for presidency in 2007 in a Southern US ceremony, Mrs. Clinton adopted several times the Southern American English accent. She defined her sometimes-Southern accent as a virtue and attributed it to that part of her life in the South. However, these random occurrences do not constitute evidence that she used non-standard accents on a regular basis.

As far as “swear and taboo words” are concerned, in our transcripts, there is not any single use of this category of words. There is also a lack of previous studies on Clinton’s language concerning swear and taboo words. Consequently, we may infer indirectly of the absence of such phenomenon in her speech.

The next feature of analysis, that women raise traditional male topics in public, is an issue that cannot provide or indicate any significance in politics, in the way how women assimilate into the male dominant group. We expect not to find any significant proof for raising traditional male topics in our corpus, because in political debates, as our transcripts prove in fact, the range of issues discussed is indicated by the moderator of the political debate and they range, among others, from employment, health care, economy, immigration, to war.

Concerning the adoption of an assertive style by women, Mrs. Clinton’s language results to be very persuasive and convincing. This aspect will be discussed in detail below in section 4.2.

4.2. *Feminine linguistic features in Mrs. Clinton’s speech*

The second part of the study will analyse Mrs. Clinton’s language in terms of women’s language, to see to what extent the feminine elements are present at her speech and to acknowledge their value and impact in her speech. The gender-specific features that will be investigated are: lexical hedges or fillers, (super) polite forms, ‘empty’ adjectives, intensifiers and emphatic stress.

4.2.1. Lexical hedges/fillers

Let us consider the presence of hedges in our corpus. From our analysis, this characteristic is employed abundantly, in a variety of forms and with a variety of functions and purposes. The most frequent are: I mean, I hope, I think, I (personally) believe, you know, well, actually, just, now, modal verbs (e.g. may, might, can, could), maybe, perhaps and many more. They are semantically empty phrases, which are associated with lack of confidence and uncertainty by Lakoff (1975). Contrary to Lakoff’s association, in our corpus, hedging is a communicative strategy motivated by politeness, among others. It is related to the speaker’s desire to gain the confidence of the audience; therefore, it contributes to assuring a positive interaction with the audience, which is of key relevance in order to convince them. The fact that Mrs. Clinton starts very frequently her utterance with the double hedges well and you know gives her time to carefully think about her response and also makes a more relaxed impression, rather than an authoritative tone. The following example illustrates the use of treble hedges now, I think and might:

- 1. Now⁶, I think we might be able to do that, but that’s a little heavier lift than what the president is going to propose, because what happens is we have to have a coalition.

When accused of her naivety against the former President’s policy of war, she reveals her discomfort through the use of quadruple hedges (2), but quickly becomes very assertive, giving a very natural, humanlike and convincing impression at the same time:

- 2. You know, I think that, you know, that is a good try, Wolf.
- 3. I get, you know, really frustrated when people don’t seem to understand that we can do so much more to help each other... I get very concerned about, you know, pushing further and faster than perhaps people are ready to go.

To avoid taking full responsibility for the truth of the utterance, hedges are construed as evasions and are used as a “legitimate need for protection, or for deference” (Lakoff 1975: 54), therefore, making oneself less vulnerable to attacks, (as in 4 and 5):

- 4...we’ll have nearly all the troops out by the end of the year, I hope.
- 5. And if I recall, about a week after I said that I would try to support my governor, although I didn’t agree with it personally...

In the following example, Mrs. Clinton employs three lexical hedges (you know, the fact is and I think) to deliberately lessen the impact of a conflictive statement, because of the very delicate nature of the issue in the international arena.

- 6. You know, the fact is that we face a very dangerous adversary, and to forget that or to brush it aside, I think, is a mistake.

⁵ <http://www.foxnews.com/story/2007/04/27/hillary-clinton-defends-southern-accent-on-campaign-trail/> [accessed May 2, 2014].

⁶ Hereafter, the words and expressions that we want to highlight in the extracts will appear in italics.

4.2.2. Intensifiers

The frequent use of intensifiers by women is the next feature under investigation. “Women boost the force of their utterances, because they think that otherwise they will not be heard or paid attention to, therefore expressing lack of confidence” (Lakoff 1975: 56). Contrary to Lakoff’s explanation, our analysis discovers that the intensifiers in Mrs. Clinton’s discourse are in line with Holmes’ (1995: 76) description that “Intensifiers are boosting devices which emphasise or intensify the force”. Her speech leaves a confident and trustworthy impression. Boosters, as persuasive devices are all uttered with a very strong intonation, thus, intensifying her statements. The most frequently used intensifiers in her speech are:

- very/so + adjectives:
A very exciting and humbling experience, I’m very grateful for, so important;
- so much + noun:
Illegal guns are the cause of so much death and injury in our country;
- such + noun:
We’re having such a good time;
- very much + verb:
I very much appreciate, we both very much want to convince;
- adverbs + adjectives:
Abundantly clear, absolutely indefensible, extremely well-funded, totally incompetent and insensitive;
- verb + adverb:
I have consistently and persistently been against, I believe absolutely passionately, I am passionately committed.

4.2.3. ‘Empty’ adjectives

Lakoff (1973: 12) divides adjectives into two sets: adjectives that are neutral as to sex of speaker, which means that either men or women can use them; and adjectives which are largely confined to women’s speech, like *cute*, *charming*, *divine*, *adorable*, which are explained to signal ‘uninvolved’ or ‘out of power’. Contrary to her explanation, in our corpus, ‘empty’ adjectives give a stronger emphasis to the utterance, given that they are uttered with a strong intonation. We also found numerous cases of the use of superlative degree of the adjectives (8-12).

- 7. Well, let me start by saying that this is the passionate cause of my public service.
- 8. When the House of Representatives passed the most mean-spirited provision...
- 9. And it’s been the most amazing and extraordinary year of my life.
- 10 ...it’s the most grueling political process one can imagine.
- 11. But the highest and greatest duty of the president of the United States is to defend our country.
- 12. ... that’s going to be one of our highest priorities.

4.2.4. Emphatic stress

Lakoff (1975: 56) herself acknowledges the contradictory explanation for emphatic stress, or, in Lakoff’s terms, speaking in italics. It expresses uncertainty with one’s self-expression, on the one hand, and strengthens the utterance, on the other. It is used as “attention-catching in the hope that if what you have to say won’t be perceived, at least the addressee will hear how you’re saying it; and then, since pitch and stress carry some semantic force, the speaker may hope that some of the message will percolate through by that means” (Lakoff 1975: 57). In the above-given examples of intensifiers, all the intensifiers (without exception) were uttered with strong intonation, thus strengthening the utterance. Except intonation, the use of emphatic stress can be also illustrated by the use of emphatic *do*, as the following extract shows:

- 13. We *do* have serious threats, we *do* have those who are, unfortunately and tragically, plotting against us, posing dangers to us and our friends and our allies.

4.2.5. (Super) polite forms

Let us look at the devices used for criticism and accusations. Mrs. Clinton makes extensive use of intensifiers, emphatic stress and ‘empty’ adjectives combined with lexical hedges. In (14) for instance, on the one hand, the adverb *absolutely* makes the criticism that *the priorities are wrong* stronger. On the other hand, the use of the hedging device *you know* mitigates the criticism, making the assertion more polite and less painful. Or as in the second statement (15), accusing the opponent is made through the emphatic verbs *did* and *didn’t*, but softened by the introductory *well*.

- 14. You know, the priorities and the values are absolutely wrong.
- 15. Well, John, you did vote for Yucca Mountain twice, and you didn’t respond to that part of the question.

Another form of politeness is her way of expressing criticism through indirectness (not too happy) and the use of the introductory polite phrase with all due respect as in (16).

- 16. And with all due respect, we have a president who basically ran as the CEO, MBA president, and look what we got. I am not too happy about the results.

Her polite assertions demonstrate that she is a remarked diplomat by the way she confronts verbal attacks, serious problems and criticism. Extract (17) shows how she reacts to the accusation that she is not supported by one of the most important political families in US. She starts with *well*, followed by expressions which show respect (the greatest, I’m proud) and introduces her arguments to protect herself from the criticism very politely with what I think is.

- 17. Well, I have the greatest respect for Senator Kennedy and the Kennedy family. And I'm proud to have three of Senator Robert Kennedy's children, Bobby and Kathleen and Kerry, supporting me. But what I think is...

4.3. Specific linguistic features in Mrs. Clinton's speech

4.3.1. The combination of I and we

A distinct strategy that Mrs. Clinton uses throughout her speech is the combination of I and we within the same utterance. As Wilson (1990) puts it, the choice of the first person singular pronoun 'I' is a marker of the deictic centre. Thus, the use of 'I' or phrases such as 'In my opinion', 'I think' expresses the highest "degree of personal involvement" and commitment to the matters under discussion (Wilson 1990: 48). Meanwhile, 'we' expresses an explicit reference to the collective responsibility or as a step distancing oneself from the deictic centre. In our corpus, there is an extensive use of both I and we. The following extract (18) is interesting in the way Mrs. Clinton combines both forms. She states the problem, invites the audience to take part in resolving it (by using we and let's) and concludes by asserting that she has the capacity to resolve it (by using I).

- 18. It is a serious question. We have to fix this broken system. But let's do it in a practical, realistic approach. Let's bring people together. And I think, as president, I can.

When accused of being advantaged as the former US president's wife, she reacts very forcefully, with a very confident and assertive tone to demonstrate that she is running for the presidency. She employs I with a very strong intonation as a marker of the deictic centre, expressing the highest "degree of personal involvement" and commitment to the presidency, as example (19) clearly shows:

- 19. ...of course, I'm thrilled to have my husband and my daughter... representing me and traveling around the country speaking with people, but at the end of the day, it's my name that is on the ballot, and it will be my responsibility as president and commander in chief, after consulting broadly with a lot of people who have something to contribute to difficult decisions, I will have to make the call. And I am fully prepared to do that.

4.3.2. Sense of humour

Another characteristic of her speech is her sense of humour. Look at how she answered to the challenging statement of the moderator of the debate that the previous statement was a swipe at her. Her sense of humour interwoven with irony attracted applause from the audience:

- 19. Really? ... We're having such a good time... We're having a wonderful time.

4.3.3. Cooperative style

Women's cooperative style versus men's competitive style in conversation used to be viewed negatively as unassertive, tentative, or simply weak. "Now, however, there is recognition of the value of cooperative conversational strategies in promoting wide-ranging discussion, in maintaining good social relations, and in negotiating conflict" (Coates 1993: 11). In politics, it is not expected to find any cooperating strategy between political opponents. However, it is interesting to see how Mrs. Clinton's cooperative style is expressed with the use of *let's*, as in 22-24, where she invites the audience to participate in acknowledging, criticizing and attacking opponent's position in order to demonstrate it is incorrect, irrational and doubtful:

- 22. But *let's* look at how we got here.
- 23. But *let's* talk about where we are now with bankruptcy.
- 24. *Let's* put to work the money that we should get from the oil and gas industry.

4.3.4. Contrasts

Contrasts generally involve challenging and aggressively critical assertions. They are used to effectively present one's ideas and to attack opponent's position in order to demonstrate it is incorrect, irrational and doubtful. As extract (20) shows, the contrasting is achieved by means of the list of three, with short negative sentences with the subject *we*, to criticize the negative situation and the contrasting positive sentence that is the solution of the problem, introduced again by *we*. In (21), her use of contrasts is effectively combined with two instances of hedges (*now, I personally think*), which makes the overall opinion very persuasive and confident, though not too strict or authoritative.

- 20. Yet, we don't get the best results. We don't have the longest life span. We don't have the best infant mortality rates. We could do so much better. And here are some of the ideas that I have put on the table.
- 21. Now, I personally think they had ideas but they were bad ideas, they were bad ideas for America.

5. Conclusion

In our view, Mrs. Clinton's position of a powerful woman is achieved through her powerful language. She skilfully combines masculine and feminine linguistic characteristics. The feminine nature is represented by her politeness, mitigation, evasions, diplomacy strategies (through the use of lexical hedges and polite forms) and by her intensification of the expression (through the use of intensifiers, 'empty' adjectives and emphatic stress). The masculine element is evidenced in her assertive, very persuasive and convincing style. Her political discourse embodies a combination of the highest degree of personal involvement and commitment in the matters under discussion, with collective responsibility; the use of challenging and critical assertions and criticism combined with mitigators in a cooperative style interwoven with a fine sense of humour. Her feminine linguistic features make the overall expression of her language very relaxed, though still enough confident and persuasive.

Based on women politicians' language, our analysis discovers that women politicians have passed to the third strategy, in line with Tajfel's social identity theory. Their characteristics previously defined as negative have been positively re-evaluated and the impact and values of their feminine language have been acknowledged, thus indicating their deserved place and status in society.

We are very much aware of the impossibility to make generalisations about women's political discourse based on a small-scale research. A more profound investigation in time and space, which means encompassing informants from different periods of time and of different nationalities, would ensure more representative results about the social identity of women politicians indicated by their political discourse.

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