PERPETUATING GENDER STEREOTYPES THROUGH LANGUAGE

Giulia Suciu
PhD, University of Oradea

Abstract: One of the many famous aphorisms that have been plucked out of Wittgenstein's Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus is "The limits of my language are the limits of my world". Language and discourse play a crucial part in understanding our gendered selves; we construct the reality around us through language. The present paper aims to point out how language perpetuates gender stereotypes, stereotypes that are not only descriptive, but also prescriptive, telling us how we should behave, how we should talk etc.

Keywords: gender stereotypes, gender roles, language, socialisation, sexist language, discrimination

It is a well-known fact that language and discourse play a crucial part in understanding our gendered selves; we construct the reality around us through language. We form mental representations of men and women and we articulate them through language. Language reflects the thoughts, attitudes and culture of the people who use it, but unfortunately, language is not neutral; it is not simply a vehicle that carries meanings and ideas, but a loaded weapon. (Dwight Bolinger)[1] A rich vocabulary on a given subject denotes an increased interest in that area; the presence of negative and positive connotations for the same denoted concept betrays prejudicial feelings about the subject discussed. The existence of taboos reveals people's fears and superstitions; thus language tells us a lot about the beliefs, attitudes, thoughts, fears of the people using it. Social inequalities, stereotyped representations, prejudices, all these may become visible through language, demonstrating once more that the world is what we make of it through language. Linguists agree that we use language to describe the world, but we do more than that; there is no such thing as objective language, because words have the power to influence and change the world. Therefore, we use language as much as it uses us.

Stereotypes ascribe characteristics to an individual based solely on group membership. Stereotyping involves a reductive tendency: to "stereotype someone is to interpret their behaviour, personality and so on in terms of a set of common-sense attributions which are applied to whole groups (e.g. 'Italians are excitable'; 'Black people are good at sport')".[2] They are often used in a negative or prejudicial sense and are frequently used to justify certain discriminatory behaviors. Stereotypes are like caricatures, focusing solely on some characteristics – either real, or imaginary – and exaggerating them.

Gender stereotypes are defined as sets of beliefs or opinions regarding certain characteristics of men or women, about what is considered feminine or masculine. In a nutshell, gender stereotypes are generalizations about the roles and characteristics of each gender. According to Mary Talbot[3] gender is often thought of in terms of bipolar categories, sometimes

[1] Bolinger, Dwight 1980. *The Loaded Weapon.* London: Longman Publishing Group
[2] Cameron, Deborah 1998. *Communication Skills* p.9
[3] Talbot, Mary 20013. *Gender Stereotypes: Reproduction and Challenge* p.468

BDD-A23209 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:52 UTC)

even as mutually exclusive opposites - as in "the opposite sex." The problem with such stereotypical generalizations is that they are not only descriptive – describing how men and women behave/talk/act etc. – but also prescriptive – telling us how men and women should behave/talk/act etc.

Characterising someone simply on the basis of his/her belonging to a certain group may lead to conclusions which are either too generalised, or not absolutely false but only partially true. Power is a key concept here since stereotyping tends to be directed at subordinate groups (ethnic minorities, women etc.) The ruling group attempts to structure the world according to their own world view, value system and ideology. They establish what is normal and accepted, what is abnormal and unacceptable.

Language appeared and functioned as part of a patriarchal discourse, another proof that even from a linguistic point of view women are 'the second sex'. Therefore, women's otherness is reflected and constructed linguistically too.

The earliest example of the dichotomy male/female in language is the presence of the grammatical gender: (+male) and (-male), thus the feminine being seen as deviant, as otherness. The conclusion drawn is that there is no place in language for women who do not want to be compared to men.

Early research in the field of language and gender was highly speculative and tended to reproduce existing gender stereotypes. In 1922, Otto Jespersen wrote on *Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin* including a single chapter on "The Woman. " His presentation of women as speakers is mainly based on proverbs, witticisms and the views of different authors and their fictional characters.

'*The volubility of women has been the subject of innumerable jests; it has given rise to popular proverbs in many countries; as well as to Aurora Leigh's resigned "A woman's function plainly is - to talk" and Oscar Wilde's sneer, "Women are a decorative sex. They never have anything to say, but they say it charmingly". A woman's thought is no sooner formed than uttered. Says Rosalind, "Do you not know I am a woman! When I think, I must speak" (As You Like It, III. 2. 264).*'[4]

According to Jespersen[5], women's limited vocabulary contributes to their presupposed volubility, while men's superior knowledge of words prevents them from fluent utterances. "Women move in narrower circles of the vocabulary, in which they attain to perfect mastery so that the flow of words is always natural and, above all, never needs to stop, while men know more words and always want to be more precise in choosing the exact word with which to render their idea, the consequence being often less fluency and more hesitation."

We all grow up with different preconceptions regarding what women or men talk like. We are raised to believe that women talk more, that men use swear words, that only women gossip and gossip is bad, that women interrupt and apologize more in a conversation etc. But research in this area challenges our cultural stereotypes, proving them wrong.

But stereotypes, however false, tend to persist as long as they reflect important social inequalities. As long as women are dominated by men, their language will be characterized as immature, trivial, and subservient. As long as men dominate women in mixed groups conversations, there will be false stereotypes that women talk incessantly.

'If the question "Who talks more?" came up, or the idea of labeling the two sexes as 'shouters' versus 'listeners', most of us would bet on women as shouters. Admonitions about

[4] Jespersen, Otto 1922: *Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin*. London: Allen and Unwin. p.250
[5] quoted in Baron, Dennis. (1986). *Grammar and Gender*. New York: Yale University Press p.78

BDD-A23209 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:52 UTC)

silence directed at women (which seem to date back centuries) seem to prove the stereotypical conviction that women talk more. A Scottish saying reinforces this conviction that women talk more *'Nothing is so unnatural as a talkative man and a silent woman.'* In 1533 Wilson wrote that '*What becometh a woman best, and first of all: Silence. What second: Silence. What third: Silence. What fourth: Silence. Yea if a man should ask me till, dowmes day, I would still cry, silence, silence.*'[6] Suzanne Romaine[7] presents other instances which reinforce this belief. Aristotle proclaimed silence as 'women's glory'. The Prophet Muhammad says that a woman's tongue is what keeps her from entering heaven. Silence has always been an evidence of powerlessness; that is why women are supposed to be silent. And men should be the talkative sex since doing most of the talking is in a way synonymous with dominating. Many proverbs[8] stress the importance of silence and the belief that women, instead of talking so much, should be silent.

Silence is golden.
Silence is the best ornament of the woman.
Silence is wisdom.
Many women, many words.
Foxes are all tail and women are all tongue.
The North Sea will sooner be found wanting in water than a woman at a loss for a word.
Women's tongues are like lamb's tails; they are never still.

Such stereotypes lay at the core of folklinguistics. This is a term used by linguists to refer to non-linguist beliefs and assumptions about language, as the above example.

Despite the passage of time, language continues to perpetuate the stereotype of the talkative woman. How come there are no terms for man talk that should be equivalent to *chatter, natter, prattle, nag, bitch, gossip, magpie* etc., words that are associated to female talk? The fact that women's conversations are continuously trivialized by terms such as *girl talk, bitching, bickerin*g, while the same type of talk with men is termed *shop talk* and is regarded as important/serious talk, clearly shows our society's values regarding women and men.

The first study into the language of women and their use of the language as subordinates, belongs to Robin Lakoff – *Language and Woman's Place*. She presented women as disadvantaged language users, since they are taught from early childhood to behave like a lady, not to talk rough which finally results in the fact that later on in life they will not be taken seriously exactly because of the way they speak; they will be blamed for not being able to express themselves more forcefully, exactly what they were discouraged from in their childhood. According to her, women used a language that presented them as uncertain, weak, and empty-headed. However, Lakoff's claim that women's language is weak, tentative, uncertain etc. might have been influenced by existing stereotypical expectations when it came to the way women spoke/should speak.

Dwight Bolinger, in his book 'The Loaded Weapon', argues that English is a language made by men for men in order to represent their point of view and perpetuate it. In this view of the world women are seen as deviant and deficient and made invisible.

There are several practices which exclude and subordinate women through language; I'll mention here some of them:

[6] cited in Baron, D. (1986). *Grammar and Gender*. New York: Yale Univerity Press p.5
[7] Romaine, Suzanne. (1999) *Communicating Gender*. Mahwak, NJ: Lawrence Elbraum Associates pp.151-152
[8] Millio, Mariana. (1999). *Dictionar de proverbe, maxime si zicatori*. Ellis: Bucuresti.

BDD-A23209 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:52 UTC)

- the use of generic pronouns - the use of the masculine 'he' to refer to both male and female referents - a practice that is regarded as androcentric, male-centered and sexist.
- the use of words like 'mankind', 'man-made' 'iron-age man' etc. to refer to all human beings.
- name-calling is another instance in which language contributes to social inequalities between men and women. Mr/Mrs/Miss - the woman's marital status is coded but not the man's, reflecting the expectation that a woman's identity depends on her husband.
- asymmetry between pairs of gender-differentiated terms such as spinster, sir, madam, bachelor, divorceé etc. The female terms have negative connotations while the male terms are either neutral or positive. "Discrepancies in grammatical forms reflect the tendency for men to be active subjects and women to be passive objects, or simply not mentioned at all"[9]
- the existence of positive terms related to men and a lot of negative terms related to women, which have no 'male' correspondent. This is what Schultz[10] calls the semantic derogation of women.
- "Language has helped to gender the way we think about space: men's space is public, in the workplace, whereas women's place is private and in the home" [11] This reality is encoded in expressions such as working *mother, businessman, housewife* etc. The term housewife, often used as a euphemism to refer to women, binds women irrefutably to the house, as if they weren't allowed to have a life outside home.

Linguistic representation offers a glimpse into women's place in society and is meanwhile a means of keeping women in their place. The way people use language to talk about women offers us an insight into the way women are perceived in society. If our world is given meaning through language, and language is man-made[12], then it means that everything that has been written in the field of history, philosophy, religion, linguistics etc. is nothing but men's perception and organization of the world.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- Baron, Dennis 1986. *Grammar and Gender*. New York: Yale University Press
- Bolinger, Dwight 1980. *The Loaded Weapon*. London: Longman Publishing Group
- Cameron, Deborah 1998: "Communication skills" as a gendered discourse. In Suzanne Wertheim, Ashlee C. Bailey and Monica Corston-Oliver (eds) Engendering Communication: Proceedings of the Fifth Berlxlei/ Women and Language Conference. Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Women and Language Group, University of California, pp. 105-16.
- Jespersen, Otto 1922: *Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin*. London: Allen and Unwin
- Millio, Mariana 1999. *Dictionar de proverbe, maxime si zicatori*. Ellis: Bucuresti

[9] Romaine, Suzanne.1999 *Communicating Gender*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates,p 92
[10]Schulz, Muriel (1975). 'The Semantic Derogation of Women', in Barrie Thorne and Nancy Henley (eds), *Language and Sex : Difference and Dominance*, Newburry House, Rowley, Mass
[11] Romaine, Suzanne.1999 *Communicating Gender*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates,p12
[12] Spender, Dale 1980, *Man Made Language*. London: Routledge.

BDD-A23209 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:52 UTC)

- Schulz, Muriel (1975). 'The Semantic Derogation of Women', in Barrie Thorne and Nancy Henley (eds), *Language and Sex: Difference and Dominance*, Newburry House, Rowley, Mass
- Spender, Dale 1980, Man Made Language. London: Routledge.
- Talbot, Mary. *Gender Stereotypes: Reproduction and Challenge*. In The Handbook of Language and Gender. Edited by Janet Holmes and Miriam Meyerhoff, Blackwell Publishing. 2003

BDD-A23209 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:52 UTC)