

Stereotypes about Woman Talk

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Résumé: Le présent article se donne pour but d'analyser le problème des stéréotypes créés à partir de la discrimination de genre, en visant, en particulier, le cas de la discrimination linguistique, compte tenu du fait que les différences entre les femmes et les hommes ont engendré, au cours de l'histoire, des disputes acharnées qui ont abouti à des exagérations des deux côtés adverses. Ce qui est incontestable c'est que la langue-même maintient une série de clichés, dont le rôle est de convaincre les enfants qu'il y a des différences fondamentales entre les garçons et les filles, tout en créant aux premiers le contexte de la discrimination. Il est à apprécier le rôle des politiques linguistiques qui arrivent à détruire toute une série de mythes et à imposer des alternatives correctes.

Mots-clés: politiques linguistiques, discrimination, stéréotypies d'expression

Culture ideas, symbols, norms and values play a significant role in the creation of women images and the differentiation of gender roles. We may be reluctant to believe that discrimination against individuals because of their sex, race, age, sexual orientation or health status still exists in institutions in most countries. The fact that individuals are likely to think of man when they hear a word surgeon illustrates how we all hold beliefs, attitudes, the stereotype that influence our perception of the world around us. We automatically associate women with elementary school teacher and model, and engineer with men, thus creating stereotypes.

Stereotypes refer to individuals cognitions that typically do not correspond to reality. A stereotype is an imposed picture in the head, not an accurate mirror of the real world. Our society often innocently creates and perpetuates stereotypes, but these stereotypes often lead to unfair discrimination and persecution when the stereotype is unfavourable. The worst part with unfavourable stereotypes is that when we judge people and groups based on our prejudices and stereotypes and treat them differently, we are engaging in discrimination. Discrimination is mainly a sociological term referring to treatment taken toward or against a person of a certain group that is taken into consideration based on class or category and consequently, discriminatory behaviours take many forms (i.e. race and ethnicity discrimination, sexual orientation and gender discrimination, religious discrimination, etc), but they all involve some form of exclusion or rejection. The real problem is that we cannot say for sure if the stereotype is the one creating discrimination, or discrimination is the one creating stereotypes, but the only sure fact is that people from stereotyped groups can find this very disturbing as they experience an apprehension (*stereotype threat*) of being treated unfairly.

Stereotypes occur when individuals are classified by others as having something in common because they are members of a particular group or category of people. Gender stereotypes are a psychological process which illustrates structured sets of beliefs about the personal attributes of men and women. Our interest here comes upon gender stereotypes that discriminate people, when labelling women as inferior to men on the grounds of conjectures that are, in fact, some sort of “general truths” internalized by most of the people as essence of “the universal wisdom”, whereas they are nothing but preconceived opinions that became linguistic clichés/stereotypes, turning into linguistic discrimination against women. This way, society may come to view the stereotype as a reality rather than a chosen representation, if there is enough exposure to it.

This impression that women have to be treated differently (in fact negatively) has been largely created by a rudimentary mentality that rejects the idea of sexual equality. There are numerous examples of idioms and sayings that are supposed to represent expression of “popular wisdom” that are nowadays considered obsolete and offensive because they use offensive words:

Femeia nebătută e ca moara neferecată! (An unscolded woman is like an unlocked mill) - The meaning of this statement is not achieved by identifying the semantical value of each word but by interpreting it as a whole. It is meant to induce the idea that the man is the one that should watch on his wife and “correct” her if needed. This proverb proves to be not only sexist but aggressive and inducing aggressive attitudes as well being is offensive and depreciative.

Another example that could be illustrative for linguistic discrimination through stereotypes is the fact that Romanian language uses two words to designate “wife” (of course the words having different etymologies but this is not our interest here). The first one is “soție” being used as neutral in official conversations, and the second one “nevastă” being pejorative and depicting women as objects in possession of their husbands. Normally, those two terms have been specialized for different type of discourse: the first one belonging to public discourse, and the second to the private one. The present day media discourse proves that these barriers between public and private are no longer needed so that we may find “nevastă” in official statements even if the word is quite offensive and sexist.

In his study *The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages*, Bronislaw Malinowski (1936) tried to prove that language is used to perform social functions; in other words, social relationships and interaction are geared to the use of linguistic expressions. One of such functions consists of what he called fatic communion. According to Malinowski, language is used to maintain fatic communion - a feeling of belonging to a community and thus he observed that women used different expressions from those used by men in order to maintain their social role. Women use language to create and maintain social cohesiveness and their activities are generally co-operative and non-competitive. Some vocabulary items are gender dependent as long as diminutive and interjections are more likely to be found in women’s talk rather in men’s talk. A word like "gorgeous", for example is three times as likely to be used by a female speaker as by a male (men use it only to talk about women, not for example about clothes, furniture, or food). The following ten features have been identified as "Women's Language" (based on: Lakoff 1975):

1. Hedges, e.g. sort of; kind of, I guess;
2. (Super) polite forms e.g. would you please...I'd really appreciate it if:...
3. Tag questions;
4. Speaking in italics, e.g. emphatic so and very, intonational language;
5. Empty adjectives, e.g. charming, sweet, adorable;
6. Hypercorrect grammar and pronunciation;
7. Lack of a sense of humour e.g. poor at telling jokes;
8. Direct quotations, e.g. "Hannah said that he said...";
9. Special vocabulary, e.g. specialised colour terms like 'Dove grey';
10. Question intonation in declarative contexts.

Discussing gender, we appreciate that men and women use language differently; but the real problem is that sexist language uses language as a weapon for separating men and women and most often as a means of diminishing women, not as means of creating fatic communion.

Below we present some stereotypes that do not reflect scientific studies or research, they are simply designated to make women look inferior to men.

1. Women “gossip” while men “talk shop”. There is a widespread belief that women talk more than men, yet research findings consistently contradict this.

In 2006, for instance, a popular science book called *The Female Brain* by Louann Brizendine claimed that women on average utter 20,000 words a day, while men on average utter only 7,000. This was perfect material for sound bite science - it confirmed the popular belief that women are not only the more talkative sex but three times as much - and was

reported in newspapers around the world. The claims were so variable because they were pure guesswork.

Shortly after that book, phoneticians have shown that the results were exaggerated, her statistic being hearsay. The author's statement was based on no serious study that was supposed to register and count the number of words uttered in a certain interval by a sample group of men and women.

A plausible explanation for this kind of conjecture is to be found in Deborah Cameron's book *The Myth of Mars and Venus: Do Men and Women Really Speak Different Languages?:* "If it does not reflect reality, why is the folk-belief that women talk more than men so persistent? The feminist Dale Spender once suggested an explanation: she said that people overestimate how much women talk because they think that, **ideally, women would not talk at all**. While that may be rather sweeping, it is true that belief in female loquacity is generally combined with disapproval of it. The statement "women talk more than men" tends to imply the judgment "women talk too much". (As one old proverb charmingly puts it: "Many women, many words; many geese, many turds."). The folk-belief that women talk more than men persists because it provides a justification for an ingrained social prejudice. Evolutionary psychology is open to a similar criticism: that it takes today's social prejudices and projects them back into prehistory, thus elevating them to the status of timeless truths about the human condition" (Cameron: 2007, 127).

2. "Yes means No, and No means Yes". Women are sexually harassed because they chose to respond/react to their aggressor. Men believe that women would not be the object of their harassment, unless they verbally react. Most men consider that women should just simply ignore any form of harassment because fighting back must be a sign of accepting the game. This is why most of the men tend to say that women that have been victims of sexual aggression, or even rape, must have done something to provoke that.

3. "Women's language is aggressive" For instance, studies of aggression and of how far people can throw things have shown a considerable gap between the sexes (men are more aggressive and can throw further). But in studies of verbal abilities and behaviour, the differences were slight. Public talk shows that women tend to be more argumentative than men, they are more willing to make use of proverbs and sayings in order to prove they are right, while men simply assume they are right as if they have all the answers so they do not need to justify their claims.

The real problem with public talk is that women themselves start from the premises that they are going to be discriminated so they need to have some solid bases to build their discourse on (nobody would dare contradict a mother's instincts as long as all men have a mother). This is why their discourse will be decorated with "starters" such as: "ca femeie, vă pot spune că/înțeleg că" ("as a woman I can say that/I can understand that ..."), or "ca mamă, simt că" ("as a mother I can feel that ..."), but never a man should be heard say "ca bărbat vă pot spune că" ("as a man I can say that/I can understand that ..."), or "ca tată, simt ca..." ("as a father I can feel that ..."). They simply assume that their manhood is obvious so they do not point that any more, while women need to justify their authority when claiming something. This must be the result of the prescriptive discourses that are imposed on children for them to bear in mind as adults (boys must do this, and girls must do that). Therefore women, even if they do not feel as inferior to men, need to state their position first in order to be sure that they are listened.

All of these are due to the fact that society suppresses the choices of males and females through cultural tyranny. The socialization process forces males and females into behavioural modes, personality characteristics, and occupational roles deemed appropriate by society. Most important, these constraints bring about a system that is biased in favour of males.

The idea that men and women "speak different languages" has itself become a dogma, treated not as a hypothesis to be investigated or as a claim to be adjudicated, but as an

unquestioned article of faith. Consequently, the idea that men and women differ fundamentally in the way they use language to communicate is a myth in the everyday sense: a widespread but false belief.

There are ways to fight discrimination, but the cause calls for action and even prevention. Society can seek to dispel discrimination by teaching children equality and respect for each others. Advocates of inclusive language defend it as inoffensive-language usage whose goal is multi-fold:

The rights, opportunities, and freedoms of certain people are restricted because they are reduced to stereotypes.

Stereotyping is mostly implicit, unconscious, and facilitated by the availability of pejorative labels and terms.

Rendering the labels and terms socially unacceptable, people then must consciously think about how they describe someone unlike themselves.

When labelling is a conscious activity, the described person's individual merits become apparent, rather than his or her stereotype.

With the time passing, the idea of political correctness becomes more and more vivid in the speakers mind and people become aware of the fact that living in a complex society means including, not excluding others on the basis of some particular features. In fact, political correctness is a term which denotes language, ideas, policies, and behaviour seen as seeking to minimize social and institutional offence in occupational, gender, racial, cultural, sexual orientation, disability, and age-related contexts. Thus the problem of eliminating thinking and speaking stereotypes about women is about to be solved if there are appropriate means for implementing the modern theories on political correctness and maybe the next generation would be reluctant at labelling people on the ground of conjectures.

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