

# Mass-Media Readiness to Biasing Gendered Narratives about Criminals

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**Résumé:** *Cette recherche vise à gommer les modalités selon lesquelles les médias de masse instancie les attitudes discriminatoires envers les criminels masculins et féminins. Ancré dans les études de genre qui, bien que variées, sont toujours venus à la conclusion que la masculinité est généralement favorisée, la recherche analyse contrastivement l'exposition médiatique d'un homme et une femme criminelle, tous deux impliqués dans une affaire très méditée d'assassiner, avec un accent sur les moyens linguistiques (vocabulaire, morphologie, syntaxe, sémantique), qui mettent l'accent sur le traitement de déclasserment que la femme criminelle est donnée, bien qu'elle soit tout aussi coupable que l'homme est. Il s'agit d'un cas évident d'un biais entre les sexes lors des médias de masse renforce les idées-détenus que les femmes portent plus le blâme sociale que les hommes.*

**Mots-clés:** *médias de masse, études de genre, attitudes discriminatoires .*

## *1. Media, Power and Gender*

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For some time now linguists have turned their interest to the study of mass-media messages (van Dijk 1988), (Johnson, Ensslin 2007), (Fairclough 1995) which, researchers claim, encode traditionalist, paternalistic representations of the society. Moreover, power groups dictate the orientation of media channels which are meant to permeate and inoculate social strata to a point where individual judgment vanishes into socially structured opinions. And if such socially structured opinions argue that women have a lower social status (Cameron, 1992) given their traditional household roles, their inferior training or, in some cases, their acceptance of prostitution, then mass-media structure and portray women as such. Human power of mental representation by repetition willingly builds up the intended representation of womanhood. Contrarily, the perpetuation of the male representation as social leaders, household masters, scientific authorities strengthen masculine superiority and makes the competition between sexes, if existent, a lost battle for women from the very start.

As empirical as the aforementioned information may seem, research has tried to identify the existence of solid gender differences which might solve this long-lasting dispute. First of all, sociolinguistics (Holmes, 1997: 1) has highlighted that women and men speak differently which has been explained as either given birth data (innateness) or as a specialization (Sheldon and Johnson, 1998: 79) which starts from early childhood. In the second place, Critical Discourse Analysis ((Fowler 1996), (Toolan 1995)) has evidenced that, when spoken about, women and men are unevenly presented due to a historical acknowledgement of the masculine power and of the feminine weakness. It is nevertheless worth mentioning the fact that the category of women, identified as disadvantaged, ranges among other categories such as: Afro-Americans, criminals, children, which is illustrative of women's status. Researchers of both disciplines have noticed differences, which, either internally or externally generated, stand for largely-known dissimilarities between the genders. When internally generated, biology, education, and social community (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003) seem to be the elements that blueprint gender. When externally generated, gender is literally at the hand of 'usually man-controlled power interests', which is indicative of clear distortions and inequalities in the treatment of genders. In the area of 'externally generated gender images', mass-media are core producers of cliché images of femininity and masculinity. Irrespective of their social status, CDA claims, there is a clear unbalance between the feminine and masculine media representations, with the women undergoing a process of downgradation and men being in a situation of stagnation or appraisal.

## *2. Research Questions*

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But what happens when, to a representation already downgraded (being a woman), is added another aggravating fact (that of being a murderer)? Would it count or contribute in any way to the public representation that the mass-media offer? What about being a male murderer? Are there any attributes that could contribute to their final portrayal? These research questions will help me organize my research and will provide conclusive data for interpretation.

### *3. Case Study*

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For a correct research, a special situation will be needed when a man and a woman kill somebody with an apparent equal contribution to the murdering. Consequently, I have looked for and identified a situation which referred to two murderers (a man and a woman) and I have analyzed their media representation with the evident purpose of identifying elements that might suggest a divergent presentation of the two murderers. In case such divergences exist (I don't start from the assumption that they do), I will analyze their nature by categorizing the elements and I will conclude whether the linguistic representation is downgrading (for whom?) or equal.

The case I have chosen for my analysis is a well-known murder case in which a young man and a young woman killed a gypsy leader in the students' camp in Timisoara. The case has degenerated from the very beginning, transforming the trial of the suspects into 'reality show' with clear intromissions of the murderers' and the deceased's families into the mass-media representation of the murder. Carmen Bejan and Sergiu Florea are the two student murderers whose media representations are of high interest in my study.

#### **3.1 Clarifying the situation of representation**

Definitely, the portrayal that the mass-media create is to a high degree influenced by the suspects' statements and by the strategy that their lawyers have considered appropriate for defending their clients. Yet, it is the mass-media's role to select the statements or the passages of statements that the journalists consider in accordance with the policy of the newspaper they write for. Therefore, I consider that it is the newspaper's responsibility and its own stand in relation to the case as long as it willingly publishes it.

#### **3.2 Data Interpretation**

After having analyzed a number of articles on the topic, I have identified a series of aspects that I consider worth presenting for the exemplification of my hypothesis. To begin with, mass-media builds a contrasting portrayal of the two murderers by selecting statements that either lift or downgrade the moral representation of the suspects. The male murderer is represented as somebody who feels sorrow for the murder he has committed and the fact that he has escaped a suicide attempt is seen as an opportunity that God gives him in order to reveal

the truth about the murder. The association between a murderer and God (who presumably has given him a chance) is meant to soften public judgment as it is largely known that confession and forgiveness are two Christian values that are appreciated and that may change public perception of the suspect.

*‘Sergiu perceives his salvation from the suicide attempt as an unexpected chance, as an opportunity that God has given to him in order to reveal the truth about the murder and to prove that that he is not a cold-blood murderer, but a man who has failed under the impulse and tension of the moment’* (“Cancan”, March 13<sup>th</sup>, 2010) (my translation)

Moreover, Sergiu is built a moral portrait where such features as ‘honesty’ and ‘openness’ outline the spontaneous, unplanned nature of the murder which somehow is seen as less guilty than the premeditated one: *‘especially because Sergiu was honest and cooperated with the judges during the prosecutors’ investigation and during the trial.’* (“Cancan”, May 20<sup>th</sup> 2010) (my translation)

On the other hand, the woman murderer seems to be in denial as she negates any involvement in the murdering of the gypsy leader. Deniers are less appealing to a public that, faced to a cruel murdering followed by dissection, is less inclined to show kindness and comprehension in the absence of confession: ‘I am very sorry for what happened that day and for the destroyed families. I am very sorry that the victim had deceased. I do not feel guilty for murdering, but for not having informed the authorities.’ (“Cancan”, March 5<sup>th</sup>, 2010) (my translation). Denying any involvement in the murdering, Carmen Bejan attracts public disapproval which reaches its highest when mass-media focus on the attire and cosmetic embellishment that the woman makes use of when coming to the trial. No remorse, no acceptance of her own involvement and the constant focus on her physical appearance builds up a representation that is unfavorable to the woman.

A second issue of status is speculated by media which pay attention to the current prison preoccupations of the two murderers. Yet, still suspects supposedly benefiting equal treatment, the two are represented in utterly different situations, of which one is suggestive of status and general acknowledgment and the other is illustrative of limited, freedom-devoid, prison-like activities. Besides the media responsibility for selecting and offering readers portrayals of

murderers, this special case of unbalance goes further and outlines institutional biasing towards women murderers who are denied actions that male murderers are allowed. In fact, Sergiu Florea, after some testing, has become editor for the prison's magazine and he is highly appreciated for the activity that he has been doing for the magazine. Sergiu's activity is described by using the verb 'a reușit să devină redactor' (has succeeded in becoming editor – my translation) and the noun-adjective combination 'o activitate foarte bună' (a very good activity – my translation) to outline his success in the new position that he has acquired. Moreover, Sergiu has evidenced his critic abilities 'e apreciat pentru critica literară' (he's appreciated for the literary criticism – my translation) which emphasizes the status that he enjoys in prison.

Contrarily, Carmen Bejan is denied any possibility of practicing any of her skills because, as the justification goes, 'being preventively arrested, she benefits of only some types of activities. When she is finally sentenced, an intervention personalized plan will be made for her, just as the procedures require.' ("Cancan", August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2010) (my translation). Yet, the article mentions that Carmen 'vrea' (wants) to become a teacher for the prisoners in Timisoara jail. The evident difference between 'has succeed in becoming' and 'wants' shows how mass-media understands to portray a man and a woman guilty of the same murder and moreover, it shows how biased public authorities can be in giving certain social categories equal rights.

Mass-media continues its attempt at portraying the murderers in a contrastive presentation which is meant to highlight their moral features for the readers. Thus, after having found out the sentence, Sergiu Florea seems 'peaceful', while Carmen Bejan 'starts crying' expressing her beliefs about her ended-up life. What is actually targeted at by the use of these descriptions is to show the moral mastery and control of the situation that Sergiu seems to have and the almost hysterical reaction that Carmen has when finding out the sentence. Women's crying or losing their temper is something traditionally associated to feminine behavior in the sociolinguistic literature. Moreover, in order to come to terms with the sentence, apparently, both need to talk to someone. Surprisingly or not, Sergiu Florea chooses to confess to a priest while Carmen Bejan decided to go to a therapist. The contrast is again self-speaking. The moral connotation is evident in Sergiu's case which can transmit the message that he is sorry for what he did, looking in this way for divine

forgiveness. Carmen Bejan does not seem to be interested in forgiveness, but in her own mental sanity which has anyway been doubted beforehand. The sequencing, the attentive choice of the vocabulary indicate clearly the mass-media's intention of downgrading the female murderer and of maintaining the status of the male murderer. This double-dealing with two persons that are in a similar situation is called double-standard.

Another way of demeaning the woman is by bringing into discussion her prostitute-like behavior, which claiming certainly needs clarifications. Apparently, the woman had agreed to have sexual relationships for money which was necessary for paying university examinations and for buying her boyfriend a car. The woman in this case seems to be the money provider which is a situation accepted and tolerated by her boyfriend. Yet, publicly, the woman undergoes judgment and blame. Surprisingly, the man is not held responsible for her prostitution, although he had been the mediator and beneficiary of the sexual meeting. It is thus widely considered in the sociolinguistic literature that female prostitution is blamed although it is men who actually benefit prostitution services. The ones who make women prostitute get a gentler treatment or are even invisible in the mass-media. In accordance to this theory, I have noticed that Sergiu Florea is not presented in media as a prostitution instigator nor is he considered guilty for having agreed to her prostitution. His participation to the act of prostitution which led to the murdering is inexistent which shows that the whole blame is carried by Carmen Bejan.

Another element which is highly exploited by the mass-media is surely the love affair of the two murderers. Carmen Bejan is quoted in mass-media with the statements where she openly expresses her feelings for Sergiu Florea. Such quotes as "I loved him", "I didn't tell the police because I loved him", "you know what a woman does for her first love" are meant to emphasize her weakness in love, her powerlessness in rejecting him, even when he forces her to prostitute. Contrarily, Sergiu Florea's feelings are totally absent as if they hadn't been together when they had committed the murder. This is in agreement with the sociolinguistic literature which claims that it is more natural for women to express their feeling irrespective of their nature, whereas men avoid talking about their feelings which is perceived by men as lowering their social status.

These examples are enough proofs for claiming that Romanian mass-media are readily biasing their representations of male and female murderers. It has also become obvious that mass-media are not the only institutions that manifest an unbalanced behavior towards women. Jails and jail regulations are also biasing their behavior in the sense of cutting down on women's rights and allowing men rights on the basis of being just men. In this situation, mass-media seem to be a perpetuator of some unwritten rules that already exist in the society. Yet, mass-media remarks also as an initiator of new ways and means of biasing given the traditional, paternalistic perception of the Romanian society.

### Notes

- [1] Amy, Sheldon & Diane, Johnson, *Pre-school Negotiations: Linguistic Differences in how Girls and Boys Regulate the Expression of Dissent in Same-Sex Groups*. The Sociolinguistics Reader Volume 2: Gender and Discourse.
- [2] Deborah, Cameron, *Feminism and Linguistic Theory*, Macmillan, London, 1992.
- [3] Eckert, P. & McConnell-Ginet, S. *Language and Gender*, CUP, London, 2003.
- [4] Janet, Holmes, *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*, Longman, Harlow, 1997.
- [5] Michael, Toolan, *Narrative. A Critical Linguistic Introduction*, Routledge, London, 1995.
- [6] Norman, Fairclough, *Media Discourse*, Hodder Arnold, London, 1995.
- [7] Roger, Fowler, *Linguistic Criticism*, OUP, London, 1996.
- [8] Sally, Johnson & Astrid Ensslin, *Language in the Media*, Continuum, London, 2007.
- [9] Teun, van Dijk, *News as Discourse*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, New Jersey, 1988.
- [10] www. Cancan.ro. *Criminala de la Medicină: "M-am prostituat pentru a plăti șpaga la examene"*, 5 martie, 2010.
- [11] www. Cancan.ro. *Măcelarul de la Medicină: "Dumnezeu m-a scăpat de moarte ca să spun adevărul despre crimă"*, 13 martie, 2010.
- [12] www. Cancan.ro. *Studentii ucigași de la Medicină, în depresie după sentință*, 20 mai, 2010.
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