

A Study of Female Anti-Stereotype Discourse from the Perspective of Gender Construction — Take Mrs Thatcher's Speeches as an Example

Tian Dong¹, Jiaqi Cheng^{2*}

^{1,2}Department of English, School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, Baoding, Hebei, China

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*Corresponding author: Jiaqi Cheng

Department of English, School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, Baoding, Hebei, China

Abstract

In order to reveal how female figures with power construct their social identity through discourse, this paper analyzes the discourse pattern of female anti-stereotype in Mrs. Thatcher's two speeches through data statistics from the theoretical perspective of gender construction. It is concluded that the anti-stereotype discourse pattern still reflects the social construction with male discourse as the power center, and the phenomenon of gender discrimination still exists.

Keywords: Gender construction, gender stereotype, Margaret Thatcher, sexual discrimination.

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INTRODUCTION

Gender and language have been seen as a active part in academic field recently. Many Chinese and Western scholars have put forward many theories and research methods on this issue. Among them, the gender construction is a new theoretical perspective in recent years. According to this theory, scholars had also put forward community of practice [1] and gender performativity [2]. In addition, the theory of "gender stereotype" is also very important. Chinese scholars such as Song Haiyan [3] and Qian Jin [4] have studied the characteristics and theoretical basis of gender prototype in dialogue and vocabulary. As the product of human society's inherent cognition, the research on gender prototype is very helpful in studying gender differences and gender discrimination.

By searching the keyword "gender stereotype" on the website of CNKI, we can get the overall trend analysis chart of all search results. It can be seen that as far as Chinese research is concerned, the research on "gender stereotype" has shown an increasing trend since 2010. It can be seen from the distribution of main themes that "gender stereotypes" are the most, among which "children" and "women candidates" are also distributed. Similarly, by searching the keyword "gender construction" on the CNKI, we can find that its overall trend has shown an increasing trend early after

2004. The main themes are "gender", "gender identity", "feminism" and so on.

It can be seen that in recent years, the research on gender construction theory and gender stereotype has increased respectively, indicating that scholars have paid attention continuously to the research on gender and discourse in sociolinguistics. However, there are few studies on the combination of gender construction theory and gender stereotype for corpus analysis. Therefore, this paper aims to combine the two theories and analyze the "anti-stereotype" phenomenon in the corpus through data statistics.

Gender Construction

The study of gender and language in both China and foreign countries has experienced many stages. The domestic research mainly focuses on the relationship, the research review, the development trend and the review of foreign theories [4]. The study of gender language in China has much references to foreign theories, and the localization research still needs to be strengthened.

The development of gender language in western society was influenced by the tide of feminism. At the initial stage, some scholars put forward physiological determinism [5], believing that the significant differences between men and women are

physiologically determined and innate. After that, the defect theory and dominance theory, the difference theory and the politeness theory appeared. Although these theories are not sound enough, the change tendency of them reflects that the research of gender language gradually changes from irreconcilable opposition among genders to equality and blending.

In recent years, with the influence of Post-modern Feminism [6], a new theory of gender language has emerged: the construction of gender languages, that is, gender construction. The theory of gender construction has advanced distinctly compared with the previous theories of gender and languages, which changed the traditional perspective and jumped out of the traditional binary antithesis. Gender was regarded as uncertain and changeable variables. The theory emphasized the differences between social gender and physiological gender, and incorporated gender into social behavior, believing that people construct social identities through social gender. This theory has overturned the previous view that social behavior and identity are determined by congenital gender. By the gender construction theory, Russian linguists also clearly put forward the concept of gender linguistics [6].

Gender construction regards gender as a dynamic concept and no longer pays too much attention to gender differences, which provides a theoretical basis for the integration of gender languages. It also combines social factors with gender issues more closely, avoids the simplification of research problems, and provides a new perspective for the study of gender linguistics.

The Foundation of Gender Stereotype

The concept of “stereotype” originally belongs to the field of psycholinguistics. Rosch [7] believes that a concept is composed of a set of characteristics that can fully and necessarily define the various manifestations of the concept itself. He believes that the concept is best regarded as a prototype. Prototype theory actually means that we will take a prototype as a typical example to classify things in the process of understanding things. Therefore, “prototype” or “stereotype” is regarded as the standard to divide similar things. “Gender stereotype” is the division of gender on the basis of prototype. Qian Jin [8] divided gender stereotype into male model and female model, which can also be called “strong model” and “weak model”, that is, male stereotype mostly focuses on the characteristics of responsibility, intense spirit and toughness, reflecting the “strong” side. On the contrary, female stereotype focuses on the characteristics of docility, carefulness and weakness, reflecting the obvious “weak” tendency. Song Haiyan [3] made a

statistical summary on the reflection of gender stereotypes in the verbal communication ability. A number of studies in Song Haiyan’s research have shown that female stereotype requires women to listen and be silent in verbal communication, to use less taboos and more euphemisms and modal verbs, and to not control the topics spontaneously as the behavior of controlling topics is not advocated for women. In using imperative sentences, women is more gentle than men, and will use more interrogative sentences and polite language. Generally speaking, the prominent features of female stereotype are euphemism and tone weakening.

The “anti-stereotype” discourse proposed in this paper refers to women’s rebellion against the requirements of “female stereotype” in verbal communication. Taking Song Haiyan’s research conclusion as the discourse standard, this paper aims to analyze women’s behavior inconsistent with the standard in verbal communication and the construction reasons behind it.

Corpus Analysis

This paper chooses Margaret Thatcher’s speech in the White House in 1979 and her resignation speech in 1985. There are two reasons for choosing the two speeches. One is that both of the speeches are formal speeches on formal occasions, and the purposes the author wants to achieve and the identities she wants to build are similar. The second is that the two speeches have different degrees of formality. Compared with the resignation speech, the White House speech is more casual which contains many humorous words with a similar pattern of dialogues, while the political tendency shows strongly in the resignation speech, and the degree of formality in the resignation speech is much greater than the one in White House. The two speeches have both common research value and different characteristics, which can enable us to analyze female discourse from different aspects and make the research results more scientific.

Analysis of words

Goodwin’s research shows that women tend to use modal verbs such as “should” “would” “could” to be euphemistic and to avoid being blunt^[3]. In addition to the highly positive boosters such as “must” and “can”, modal verbs play an important role to express uncertainty and euphemism. They can be classified as hedges which can act as persuasive weapons in dialogues, matching the “weak” image of female stereotype. According to the statistics, the total words counted in Mrs. Thatcher’s two speeches are 922 words in the White-House speech and 923 words in the resignation speech. This paper counts the number and proportion of modal verbs acting as hedges in these two speeches. The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

| Modal words as hedges | Numbers in the White House speech (times) | Frequency in the White House speech (%) | Numbers in the resignation speech (times) | Frequency in the resignation speech (%) |
|-----------------------|---|---|---|---|
| should | 1 | 0.11 | 1 | 0.11 |
| would | 5 | 0.54 | 1 | 0.11 |
| could | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0.11 |
| shall | 2 | 0.22 | 0 | 0 |
| may | 2 | 0.22 | 0 | 0 |
| total | 10 | 1.08 | 3 | 0.33 |
| | 13 times in total | | | |

The modal words that do not appear in two speeches, like “might”, are not counted in this table. Besides, the words that act as tense verbs rather than modal verbs, like “will”, are not counted in this table either. Through table 1, we can find that for a single kind of modal verb, the frequency of each verb does not exceed 1% in both speeches, which shows that hedges rarely appear in both speeches. In addition, through the

comparison of the two speeches, we can find that the modal verbs acting as hedges in the White House speech are higher than those in the resignation speech.

In order to achieve an obvious comparative effect, we also counts the boosters representing strong tone and speaker’s attitude, represented by “can” and “must”, and the results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

| boosters | Numbers in the White House speech (times) | Frequency in the White House speech (%) | Numbers in the resignation speech (times) | Frequency in the resignation speech (%) |
|----------|---|---|---|---|
| can | 0 | 0 | 5 | 0.54 |
| must | 1 | 0.11 | 4 | 0.43 |
| all | 2 | 0.22 | 8 | 0.87 |
| very | 6 | 0.65 | 1 | 0.11 |
| never | 2 | 0.22 | 2 | 0.22 |
| only | 0 | 0 | 4 | 0.43 |
| others | 12 | 1.30 | 9 | 0.98 |
| total | 23 | 2.49 | 33 | 3.58 |
| | 56 times in total | | | |

In the statistical process, it can be found that Mrs. Thatcher also used words with high degree of confirmation and violent tone, such as “there is no doubt that”, “really”, “inextricably”. Due to the diversity of boosters, we summarize the boosters that appear less frequently in the line of “others” in order to save space.

From Table 2, we can see that the frequency of boosters in the two speeches is generally higher than that of hedges. Among them, the total number of boosters in the White House speech is 23, accounting for 2.49%, while the number of boosters in the resignation speech is 33, accounting for 3.58%. From the comparison of the two sets of data, the boosters in the White House speech are not as frequent as in the resignation speech.

Based on the above analysis, it can be found that the different degrees of formality in the two speeches are closely relevant to the words that the speaker chooses. Since the White House speech is relatively less formal, from the perspective of social identity construction, what the speaker needs to build

on this occasion is an image with high affinity to get closer to the audience rather than a powerful image. Therefore, Mrs. Thatcher uses more hedges in the White House speech to make the speech euphemistic and make the image of the speaker amiable. On the contrary, in the resignation speech, the primary task of the speaker is to construct the power image. Therefore, we can find that in this speech, the characteristic of “female anti-stereotype” pattern can be found obviously. She uses more boosters to make the tone violent and decisive, shaping a bold and responsible social image, which is totally different with the requirements of the traditional female prototype with the characteristics of “weak” and “gentle”.

In addition, in terms of uses in taboos, Mrs. Thatcher’s speech also shows the pattern of “anti-stereotype”. In the White House speech, Mrs. Thatcher used the phrase “shut up” when describing the situation that Lord Carrington was locked up in the Lancaster palace. Mrs. Thatcher used “shut up” when there are other choices to achieve the humorous effect, and, on the other hand, to shorten the distance between the

audience and the speaker. It is actually building her own character with masculinity rather than femininity.

Analysis of Sentences

In the use of sentences, Mrs. Thatcher's choice in these two speeches also shows her rebellion against the discourse mode of "female stereotype". According to the research results of Fishman [9], women use additional interrogative sentences and general interrogative sentences three times as frequently as men (87:29). There are two functions in this kind of interrogative sentences: one is that in conversations, women actually use interrogative sentences as communication skills to promote the process of the conversation, and the other is to reduce affirmation and express euphemism and modesty.

In Mrs. Thatcher's two speeches, there are almost no interrogative sentences with the intention of the second purpose. And since the subject of the selected material is not dialogue, the interrogative sentences with the first purpose do not exist in the materials either.

In the resignation speech, interrogative sentences appear more frequently in the form of parallel sentences.

Example 1

Who is to answer the child crying for help? Who is to protect the elderly couple? Who can win back the youngster hooked on drugs?

Parallel sentence is a common sentence pattern used in speeches. Its main purpose is to emphasize the speaker's point of view and incite the audience. The sentence appeared here is actually rhetoric question without clear answers. Through these questions, the speaker not only does not weaken her tone, but makes the tone more aggressive and thought-provoking, so as to achieve the speaker's intention of building a powerful identity.

What's more, Mrs. Thatcher chooses fewer interrogative sentences but more exclamatory sentences in her speeches, which once again confirmed that she used language patterns to build her own social identity and create a confident, decisive and persuasive leader image.

Example 2

Yes!..... There are more Bobbies on the beat!

Goodwin [10] found in his research results that the boys' group is a hierarchical organization, and its leaders use imperative sentences with violent tone to present their ability of command over their subordinates, while girls' group is a organization that pays more attention to internal relationship, and all the girls have decision-making power on the basis of

equality. This "anti-stereotype" feature can also be reflected in Mrs. Thatcher's speech. As shown in example 3, Margaret Thatcher used imperative sentences in her speech.

Example 3

Come with us then towards the next decade.

Let us ensure that we'll bring them within our grasp.

The imperative sentence usually shows a stronger sense of command. Mrs. Thatcher uses imperative sentences to construct the image of leader and commander in line with her power identity. In fact, she constructs her own social identity based on the "male stereotype" to meet her power identity. This means that "male image" and "power" are still interconnected closely. If the language features in line with the "female stereotype" are used in the speech, the image of a powerful leader cannot be successfully created. Through the analysis of Mrs. Thatcher's speech, we can find that the differences between male and female discourse patterns are still obvious when come to the cases in distribution of social power, and the characteristics of female discourse are still associated with "low power status".

CONCLUSION

Through the discourse analysis of Mrs. Thatcher's two speeches, this paper analyzes the "anti-stereotype" model of Mrs. Thatcher's speeches in public with the theory of gender construction, and proves that there is still a language pattern with male discourse as the power center in today's society. When women really have the right to speak in the political arena, they also need to shape tough images, or use a discourse model similar to that of men, so as to make themselves more convincing or more in line with the identity with leadership status, which itself shows that women's language represents the opposite of leadership and sense of responsibility, which is very unfavorable to the construction of women's social identity. We can see from this "anti-stereotype" language pattern that gender discrimination still exists deeply at the social and political level, and gender equality and integration still need the efforts of all sectors of our society.

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