

# Figurative Construction of Gender through Metaphor and Metonymy

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**Abstract**—The issue of sexist language has been debated within feminist circles since the 1960s. The concern to change language which discriminated against women has been a key concern for feminist theorists and activists, trying to change the way women were represented in different Medias like TV, advertisements, newspapers and magazines, or in literature and also the way that they were named and addressed in texts and in interaction. Sexism is still a form of language use which affects conversations, one's views of other people and one's own place within society. In this article, I am concerned with the description of structures in language which seem to determine that terms associated with gender will acquire particular types of meanings in such a way that those terms associated with women will take on a range of clearly identifiable connotations. Social labeling practices offer a window on the construction of gendered identities and social relations. I will examine metaphor and metonymy as two dominant figures in construction of gender through language.

**Key Words:** Language; Gender; Metaphor; Metonymy; Sexism; Ideology; Feminism; Representation;

## 1. Introduction

Through the years we have treated the figurative construction of gender lightheartedly. In this paper I am determined to lay bare the hidden strategies in the workings of gender construction in a given patriarchal society.

In this study I do not consider language as a sole textual element but I attempt to integrate extra-textual elements into the workings of language. Not only the way sexist attitudes manifest themselves in individual language items, but also through the larger-scale systems whereby reality is organized along gendered lines.

## 2. Sexism in Language

First of all I need to clarify on the concept of sexism in language; Mary Vetterling-Braggin suggests one definition: '[a statement] is sexist if it contributes to, encourages or causes or results in the oppression of women' (Vetterling-Braggin 1981:2). She notes that this definition is limited since it restricts sexism to language about women and therefore she suggests the following definition: '[a statement] is sexist if its use constitutes, promotes or exploits an unfair or irrelevant or impertinent distinction between the sexes' (*ibid.*: 3). The practices whereby

someone foregrounds gender when it is not the most salient feature (Vetterling-Braggin, 1981).

When considering these issues, it is necessary to ask to what extent our perception and understanding of the world, and what we understand 'natural' sex roles to be, is in fact influenced and shaped by the language we speak. This last point is probably the most controversial issue regarding meaning. We need to contemplate whether language just 'reflects' the world (i.e. just 'puts names' on things and simply labels them), or whether language affects the way we perceive and know the world. The argument for the second position, linguistic determinism, was put forward by Sapir and Whorf.

The issue of sexist language has also been debated within feminist circles since the 1960s. Previous books have tended to regard sexism in language as easy to identify and have suggested solutions to solve and counter sexism. Sara Mills (2008) takes a fresh and more critical look at sexism in language, and argues that there are two forms of sexism – overt and indirect.

**Overt sexism** is clear and unambiguous, while indirect sexism can only be understood contextually in relation to the interpretation of surrounding utterances. She notes that:

Overt or direct sexism is the type of usage which can be straightforwardly identified through the use of linguistic markers, or through the analysis of presupposition, which has historically been associated with the expression of discriminatory opinions about women, which signals to hearers that women are seen as an inferior group in relation to males (11).

Sexist language is a term used to denote a wide range of elements, such as generic pronouns(he) when used to refer to both males and females; word endings such as ‘-ette’ used to refer to women, nouns referring to men and women (such as ‘landlord’ and ‘landlady’, and so on.

**Indirect sexism**, on the other hand, is however, used to categorise a set of stereotypical beliefs about women which cannot be directly related to a certain set of linguistic features.

Since the 1960s, the issue of sexist language has been keenly debated within feminist circles. The concern to change language which discriminated against women was a key concern for feminist theorists and activists, trying to change the way that women were represented in different Medias like TV, advertisements, newspapers and magazines, or in literature and also the way that they were named and addressed in texts and in interaction. Sexism is still a form of language use which affects conversations, one’s views of other people and one’s own place within society.

Cameron (1990) argues that:

‘sexist language’ cannot be regarded as simply the ‘naming’ of the world from one, masculinist perspective; it is better conceptualised as a multifaceted phenomenon occurring in a number of quite complex systems of representation, all with their places in historical traditions.(14)

Cameron (1990: 14) suggests that rather than seeing language as a reflection of society or as a determining factor in social change ‘it could be seen as a carrier of ideas and assumptions which become, through their constant re-enactment in discourse, so familiar and conventional we miss their significance’. Thus, some sexist terms may be seen as so much a part of the language that we do not even notice them as sexist (and Spender’s (1980) work was extremely important in terms of foregrounding those naturalised usages, so that we could see them as sexist).

### 3. Ideology

The notion of ideology is central to critical linguistic analysis, as Tony Trew states: ‘To the extent that the concepts in a discourse are related as a system, they are part of a theory or ideology, that is, a system of concepts and images which are a way of seeing and grasping things, and of interpreting what is seen or heard or read. All perception involves theory or ideology, and there are no “raw” uninterpreted, theory-free facts’ (Trew in Fowler *et al.* 1979:95). In this article, I attempt to uncover those ideologies which seem to be hidden within language-use and pose themselves as natural.

Human consciousness is constituted and constructed by an ideology—that is, the beliefs, values, and ways of thinking and feeling through which human beings perceive what they take to be reality. An ideology is, in complex ways, the product of the position and interests of a particular class. In any historical era, the dominant ideology embodies, and serves to legitimize and perpetuate, the interests of the dominant economic and social class.

I will analyze those elements which do not at first sight seem to have anything to do with gender; for example, metaphor and metonymy.

### 4. Feminism and Ideology

For many feminists, women are particularly subjected to the effects of ideology. In many ways, it is clear that there is a range of belief systems about women which do not ‘fit’ with the reality of women’s lives. These systems of belief are not simply imposed upon women, but women themselves actively take part in them and appropriate and reject them according to their interests. In this way, it is possible to see ideology as something which is not innate or unitary, but which is negotiated by individual agents. An ideology, in this view, is a sequence or set of statements which have certain conceptual links, but which individual subjects will negotiate, accept and/or resist. On the other hand, new feminists argue that “women’s pre-trip guide is not the benchmark set by men, but rather the removal of the rigid mask, the vigorous growth of the female ego”( Yu Qing, et al. 2012:46)

### 5. Sexism and Meaning

In this section I am concerned with the description of structures in language which seem to determine that terms associated with gender will acquire particular types of meanings, in such a way that those terms associated with women will take on a range of clearly identifiable connotations. The structures whereby this process takes place are not always apparent to us as speakers. Meaning is conventionally seen as something neutral—it is just something which is *in* a word; however, the process whereby meanings are created is much more complex than this. The question to pose is whether we simply have to accept the meanings which are available within our culture.

There are examples of sexist meanings which seem to work in a different way for males and females. It is important to ask what we can infer about our society from the meaning of certain words, and question who decides on the ‘official’ meanings of words. Language is not simply a place where meanings are imposed, but rather a site where certain meanings are negotiated over, or struggled over.

Here I begin by examining some of the ways in which sexist meanings manifest themselves by focusing on two main strategies for naming and representation of women: metonymy and metaphor.

### 6. Naming and Representation

Naming and labeling is categorizing; categorizing is stereotyping and then exerting power over them for more control. Labeling practices de-emphasize women's status as very particular individuals and robs them from their agency and identity.

There are many ways in which proper names may enter into gender practice. The two critical points for present purposes are that (1) although proper names are not fundamentally characterizing, they nonetheless have considerable significance beyond their picking out particular individuals, and (2) the significance of proper names lies in how they are bestowed and deployed in particular cultures and communities of practice. What do we call one another? How do we identify ourselves? When and how do we label ourselves and others? What is the significance of rejecting labels for ourselves or others?

Social labeling practices offer a window on the construction of gendered identities and social relations in social practice. Naming has always played a major role in feminist discussions of language. As Cameron (1990) notes:

‘[M]any strands in the feminist critique of language have specifically concerned themselves with representation. They have concluded, on the whole, that our languages are sexist; that is, they represent or “name” the world from a masculine viewpoint and in accordance with stereotypical beliefs about the sexes’ (12).

She goes on to say:

Honey	Sugar plum	Sugar cake	Flower	Kitten	Baby bear
Sweetie	Peanut	Peach	Rose	Chick	Love bug
Lover pie	Sugar	Cherry		Dove	

‘many feminists have made the claim that the names we give our world are not mere reflections of reality, nor arbitrary labels with no relation to it. Rather, names are culture’s way of fixing what will actually count as reality in a universe of overwhelming, chaotic sensations, all pregnant with a multitude of possible meanings’ (*ibid.* 12).

Some feminists even argue that language is not only shaped in the interests of men but is in fact ‘man-made’. Thus women have had to see their experience through the filter of the male view and they do not themselves play a role in the creation of new meanings (Spender 1980).

### 7. Metaphor

In this paper I argue that gendered metaphorical expressions actually reproduce the patriarchal culture. Metaphor might appear at first sight to be a phenomenon which occurs at the level of the word, but as Black states, ‘metaphors are better regarded as systems of belief than as individual things’ (Black in Ortony 1979:33). I will be following Lakoff and Johnson’s work here in their concern with metaphor as a fundamental element in the way that we structure our thoughts and words. Metaphor, in this view, is seen not as a literary form or as a deviation from some supposedly literal language, but rather as one of the building blocks of our thinking, at both the level of language acquisition and language-use (Lakoff and Johnson 1980).

Nicole is a block of ice.

Sexuality is often described at a metaphorical level in terms of heat and lack of heat. People may be said to be hot when they are perfect lovers. But it is noticeable that women who are not interested in sex or at least not interested in the particular form of sexual activity offered by men, for example are said to be cold. Thus, Nicole is like a block of ice because of this pre-existing metaphorical system of meaning.

Metaphors may influence us to think about certain scenarios in particularly stereotyped ways. People often tend to call their wife, girlfriend or partner using the following words:

Cup cake	Pancake	Cookie		Butterfly	Doll
Honey cake	Pumpkin	Fruit cake		Pet	Angel

Proper names for both men and women do not follow the metaphorical rules; I mean they are arbitrary in that there isn't any relationship between the name and the characteristics or personality of the person. Nick names, on the other hand, follow the metaphorical rules and are non-arbitrary in that there is a constructed similarity and relationship between the person and the name.

Are women really sweet? Nick names like Sugar, Pancake, Cup cake and so on indicate that women are considered as sweet food to be devoured by men; or in other categories they are considered as an aesthetic object to be enjoyed by men; or as a pet to play with by men (presupposition: women are vulnerable).

When we call women by these words actually we are doing two things: firstly we construct gender socially and secondly we deny their agency and identity. It seems to me that patriarchy is very cautious in its picking up names for its female counterparts. Let's imagine for a second that these are just some accidental nicknames used for endearment; then why all these names are devoid of agency power?

If a woman does not fulfill or satisfy men's expectation in different levels, she could be called, again in a metaphorical way, 'bitch'.

Surprisingly and interestingly, none of these nick names used for women has any power of agency. They are food, flower or some harmless and helpless animals. This is what I call metaphorizing female body.

### 8. Metonymy

Metonymy, a figure of speech that replaces the name of one thing with the name of something else closely associated with it, e.g. the bottle for alcoholic drink, skirt for woman, Shakespeare for Shakespeare plays. A well-known metonymic saying is the pen is mightier than the sword (i.e. writing is more powerful than warfare). An important kind of metonymy is synecdoche, in which the name of a part is substituted for that of a whole (e.g. hand for worker), or vice versa. Modern literary theory has often used 'metonymy' in a wider sense, to designate the process of association by which metonymies are produced and

Sugar cheeks	Sugar lips	Sweetheart	Sweet cheeks
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Women are estranged and alienated from their own bodies since the way they are represented in different signifying systems are all subject to distancing from their own bodies. Montashery (2012) in his article entitled "A Feminist Reading of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*" argues that "[T]he specificity of women's bodies is increasingly becoming important in feminist theory (129).

understood: this involves establishing relationships of contiguity between two things, whereas metaphor establishes relationships of similarity between them.

Sara Mills (1995) notes that:

The technique of fragmenting the female body in pornographic literature has been widely noted (see especially Kappeler 1986). This has two primary effects. First, the body is depersonalized, objectified, reduced to its parts. Second, since the female protagonist is not represented as a unified conscious physical being, the scene cannot be focalized from her perspective—effectively, her experience is written out of the text. Fragmentation of the female is therefore associated with male focalization—the female represented as an object, a collection of objects, for the male gaze (133).

Representations of women fragmented into anatomical elements occur far more frequently than do such representations of men—this is true not only of pornographic material, but advertising images, romances and love poetry, amongst other genres. The fragmentation of female body is also a very common motif in literature.

Visual examples of fragmentation are very common in advertisements, which often show women's legs or mouths independently of the rest of their bodies: their lips, hips, eyes, breasts or legs are foregrounded.

Thus, fragmentation seems to be an element which comes into play when women are described; this is obviously a strategy which is located at a higher level than the lexical item, but it does determine the type of language which will be used.

Metonymising and fragmenting female body: In broad terms, metonymy itself is a kind of metaphor.

Feminists are trying to emphasize and foreground this specificity and therefore celebrate feminine body.

Montashery (2012) also in "A Multidisciplinary Approach for the Construction of Subjectivity in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*" argues that "identities, far from being given in advance for individuals to step into, emerge over time through discursive and other social practices"

(300). Consequently, I argue that feminists are now becoming increasingly aware of the destructive power of patriarchal discourses on their bodies and attempting to resist those social discourses.

## 9. Conclusion

The text is permeated by discourses and ideologies, and that the distinction between textual and extra-textual cannot really be held to. That is not to say like Derrida 'Il n'y a pas d'hors texte', there is nothing but textuality—there is nothing but text—there is nothing outside the text; but rather to say almost the opposite. Texts are always under the influence of sociocultural norms, ideologies, history, gender and racial stereotyping, and so on. That is not to say that authors have no control whatsoever about what they write and think, but that authors themselves are also subject to these discursive forces. However, if we take our model of power relations from Michel Foucault, it is quite clear that 'where there is power there is resistance' (Foucault 1981:36). Thus power has implicit within it the notion of resistance. Authors and readers are not passive, but rather can take a role in actively negotiating and thus redefining the scope and nature of these larger discursive structures. Feminists have been active in bringing about change in representational practices through critique, through teaching and through developing new models of writing practice. The concept of 'écriture féminine' which attempts to inscribe feminine desire and offer them agency through feminine language is of tremendous significance in this respect.

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