

## DO LORDS THINK IN MALE? GENDER AND LANGUAGE IN PARLIAMENTARY SPEECH

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### Resumen

El creciente interés por los estudios de género por una parte y la influencia de la política en la sociedad actual por otra, nos ha llevado a abordar este análisis desde la perspectiva sociolingüística y la pragmática. Hemos basado nuestra investigación en algunos de los discursos parlamentarios llevados a cabo en el Parlamento Británico en el año 2003 para ver si, efectivamente, existe discriminación en cuanto al género en el discurso político y cómo éste nos es más que un reflejo de lo que ocurre en la estructura social, que a su vez proyecta esta discriminación en el ámbito de la política, creándose un círculo vicioso difícil de romper.

**Palabras clave:** género, lenguaje, uso, política, discurso.

### Abstract

The growing interest in the study of gender on one hand and the influence of politics in our present society on the other, has made us approach this analysis from the sociolinguistics and pragmatics perspective. We have based our research on some Parliamentary debates taking place in the British Parliament in the year 2003 to see if there is real gender discrimination in the political discourse, and in which way this can be considered as a mere reflection of what happens in the social structure which at the same time projects this type of discrimination in politics creating a vicious circle difficult to break.

**Key words:** gender, language, use, politics, discourse

### Résumé

L'intérêt croissant pour l'étude de genre d'une part et l'influence de la politique dans la société actuelle de l'autre nous a conduit à aborder cette analyse d'une perspective sociolinguistique et pragmatique. Nous avons basé notre recherche sur certains discours parlementaires réalisés dans le parlement britannique en 2003 pour voir si, en effet, il y a discrimination de genre dans le discours politique, et comment celui-ci n'est plus que le reflet de ce qui se passe dans la structure sociale qui, au même temps, projette cette forme de discrimination dans la politique, en créant un cercle vicieux difficile de casser.

**Mots-clés :** genre, langage, usage, politique, discours.

### Sumario

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## 0. Introduction

It is tantalizing to nod at the question proposed for the topic of analysis in this article. This sort of rhetorical device often elicit from the reader a stereotyped reply that shows an undisputed agreement in the answer: yes, lords definitely think in male. As we already have the answer to the issue at stake, let us find evidence to support this worldwide assumption.

But before going straight into the heart of the matter we will consider first some key issues in the studies on language and gender, which have focused their approaches on two main aspects: on one hand those that stress the differences between the way men and women talk characterizing women's distinctive features (Lakoff, 1975), and on the other hand those researching sexism in language, identifying those linguistic features that might be gender discriminatory (Tannen, 1990; Goffman, 1981; Schiffrin, 1990).

Our study follows the latter trend that defines sexism as a system in which women and men are unequal, not just different, and this inequality works to the disadvantage of women. This language behaviour, which can be conscious or unconscious, leads to the establishment of a certain type of relationships between men and women which results in frustration and lack of communication. The manifestation of sexism in language reflects the stereotypes that the system has been perpetuating in the way our society attributes certain social and cultural values to each gender. Examples of gender stereotypes are those traditionally associated with men such as reason, violence, action, authority, improvement with age, ambition and competitiveness. Those related to women are emotion, tenderness, passivity, compliance, deterioration with age, submissiveness and resignation. As a consequence of these stereotypes the roles that men and women play in society have been typecast and thus, the words and expressions that customarily pertain to the realm of men, when applied to women, carry a negative hue. Although our communities have become gradually aware of this problem (an example of this gender awareness is the publication of guides and books that promote the use of non-sexist language like the one published by Miller & Swift, 1980), still the connotations that discriminate women in language are not scant.

Discrimination was the cue that made us lead our research in the political scene of the Parliamentary debates for two distinct reasons: first we concentrated on the British Parliament because it is one of the first political institutions that has the responsibility to watch for the freedom and equality of all in the enacting of bills, and second because the British Parliament is eminently masculine as there are 541 men and 118 women occupying the seats of this institution and we thought it would be interesting to see the way in which the Members of both Houses use language in public speech, a genre traditionally assumed as masculine practice. (Christie, 2002).

The debates of the British Parliament are all available in the Hansard, the written record of all the debates arranged in dates, followed by the name of the speaker and the House in which it took place: either the House of Lords or in the House of Commons. When we started our research we went through more debates than the ones we offer here in the appendix, but for the sake of space we restricted the number of debates analyzed. The first restriction we imposed was a temporal one: we will comment on the debates of the first four months

of the year 2003 and the second was a topical restriction: sexual harassment. When applying these two constraints to our search we obtained three debates, two of them took place in the House of Lords: Equality Bill 28<sup>th</sup> of February 2003 and Water Bill 3<sup>rd</sup> of April 2003, and the last debate in the House of Commons: Army Barracks 4<sup>th</sup> of February 2003.

In our analysis the purpose of the study is to see to what extent Parliamentary speech contains *sexism in language* and *sexism through language* (Cheshire 1984). Sexism in language is referred to all the words and expressions used to refer to men or women in a generic sense. This way of referring offers an indication of the different values and attitudes attached to the stereotypes of male and female and this will also provide an insight in the way society perceives the features of each gender. According to Mills, it is the generic forms the ones that perpetuate the conception that men are the universal norm and women are a deviation of the norm, therefore, most of the expressions used as generic are masculine (Mills, 1995). In our analysis of the political debates we will examine those lexical items referred to women and we will try to verify if there is a parallelism between those items referred to women and those referred to men.

The second type of sexism, sexism through language will be considered within the context in the production and reception of the utterance. The importance of the context in Gender Studies was highlighted by the feminist model of analysis, as the context was a key issue in the interpretation of the message. Deborah Tannen has carried out several projects concerning the context and establishes that a linguistic form can be used with different and even opposed purposes and that the meaning and effect of that form can vary depending on the context (Tannen, 1996). We can consider different types of contexts in order to frame our analysis:

- a. Lexical context: which is the lexical environment of a linguistic unit.
- b. Semantical context: which embodies the situation and circumstances in the appearance of a linguistic unit. In this context it is essential to take into account the social framework in which the message is uttered because this manifests the value system of the community.

Working within the framework of these two contexts we have to bring to light the social conditions in the appearance of women in the public context. In a study carried out by Bosmajian (1977) it is shown that the language used in politics clearly discriminates women as it usually characterizes women in their roles of mothers, wives, being incompetent and childish, in sum they are described as a non-person. In the analysis of our corpus we will try to verify if these stereotypes are still maintained 30 years later.

Consequently, our analysis will be focused on two main points: in the first place, within the lexicon we will look for those words that contain the stereotypes of gender and the euphemisms used to replace some politically incorrect expressions. In the second we will be dealing with certain aspects within the framework of pragmatics, as we will analyze the forms of address among the different members of Parliament, which show a ritual formulae

used only in parliamentary debates. We consider these forms of address a key issue in determining the way of relating men and women in the political arena. For as Watts (2000) says:

...[some forms of address are] socio-culturally determined behaviour directed towards the goal of establishing and/or maintaining in a state of equilibrium the personal relationships between individuals of a social group. (Watts in Christie 2002:19).

## 1. Sexism in language

Before going into the analysis of the lexicon we would like to point out that most members of Parliament are aware of the problems concerning sexism in language and the exclusion of women in some forms of address, and we can read in the Hansard that in the Equality Bill debate of February 28<sup>th</sup> 2003, Lord Lester of Herne Hill manifested the following:

...The Latin word in the ancient Writ of Summons, which I think is *proceres*, had been mistranslated as meaning "great men", instead of "great ones". After protracted correspondence with the Lord Chancellor, the Sovereign was eventually graciously pleased to give a better translation, not as great ones but as great men and great women.

As we can observe the awareness of the use of the masculine as generic is something that some members try to avoid in order not to make women feel excluded from the expression. In the debates of our analysis the forms of address found are as shown in the following table:

MAN	RECURRENCE	WOMEN	RECURRENCE
Lord	58	Lady	18
Lords	14		
Lordship	6		
Men	4	Women	3
		Girl	1
Ministers	6	(baroness)	18

*Lord* is the lexical item of higher frequency of appearance in the text. It is usually found as a premodifier in noun groups followed by the family name of the person addressed and, occasionally, premodified by the adjective *noble*. Nevertheless, we have detected a generic use of the word *Lord* in singular to refer to both men and women:

...I understand that no amendments have been set down to this Bill and that *no noble Lord* has indicated a wish to move a manuscript amendment... (Lord Lucas, Equality Bill, February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2003).

The equivalent of *Lord* in the text is *Lady*, but this appears only 18 times, the same amount of times as the title *baroness*, which leads us to think that both items appear together. In a further analysis we verify that 16 out of 18 times both items go together with the word *baroness* preceding the word *Lady*, which is an evidence of the need to specify the title of women not only in Parliament, but also in any other circumstance of life when a woman

is addressed<sup>1</sup>. We only need to remember that while for men we only use one title of address such as *Mr.*, for women we have three, *Mrs.*, *Miss*, and the neutral *Ms.* That is why in the study carried out by Lakoff in 1975, the linguist asserts that the formula used to refer to men and women is not parallel because we need to know the marital status of women in order to evaluate them:

Since a significant part of the opinion one forms about a woman's character and social station depends on her marital status...it's obvious that the title of address should supply this information in the case of women, but not of men.(Lakoff 1975:40-1).

In the case of the Parliament the noble title of women frequently appears in collocation with the word *Lady* as appears in our study, while the noble title of men appears very rarely in collocation with the word *Lord*. Besides, one gathers that the use of *Lady*, in the other two cases in which it appears, is used as a synonym of woman, for *Lady* appears together with the words *friend* and *American* respectively, which confirms once again that there is no parallel use of both forms of address because when referred to women it is necessary to specify their noble title, while the social status of men is assumed and does not need to be made explicit.

There are other forms of address such as the use of the plural of *Lord*, *Lords* –this appears 14 times– the form *Lordship* s–6 times– and the form *Ministers* – 6 times the three terms are used as generic, including in their address both men and women, for in most cases the function of these three words is phatic, and usually they appear preceded by the possessive *my* when the members start their contribution in the Parliamentary debates of either Houses : “ *My Lords, I am grateful to the Minister...* (Lord Lester of Herne Hill; *My Lords, I suspect...*(Lord McIntosh of Haringey), *My Lords, I did not...*(Baroness Prashar)...”(Equality Bill, 28<sup>th</sup> February 2003). The case of the use of *Ministers* is of particular interest for our analysis because it shows the slow changes produced in language in order to avoid discrimination. The use of this word is generic and includes both men and women, nevertheless, the feminine counterpart of this word exists, *Ministress*, but its use is still scant and is considered a deviation of the norm.

The conclusion of this study is that there is an asymmetry in the use of forms of address in the British Parliamentary speech debates:

First, the behaviour of words addressing men and women is very different and there are more masculine words in the text than feminine.

Second, there is no parallelism in the use of the generic plural as only the masculine form, without exception, is used as inclusive of both genders in order to express the social generic.

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<sup>1</sup> The debate about the uses of *lady* and *woman* is a controversial issue that is still being discussed in linguistic circles. An example of this is the article “When is a Woman a Lady? A Change in Progress?” de A.J. Meier en *American Speech*, Vol. 74, N° 1 (Spring, 1999), 56-70.

Third, the stereotype of women as inferior to men is maintained for their values depend on the social status that needs to be made explicit in the forms of address.

For all that we can affirm that Parliamentary speech clearly shows the discriminatory tendency in the use of language and maintains one of the stereotypes most deeply-rooted in our society as is the use of the masculine as the non-marked term, and consequently the term that expresses both general and specific references, and the use of the feminine as its marked counterpart.

## 2. Sexism through language

In this section we are going to analyze the context in the production of the text, in our particular case the socio-historical circumstances of the Parliamentary debates in the British Parliament on the 28<sup>th</sup> of February 2003. As we have already mentioned in the introduction, the examination of the sexist evidence manifested through language allows us to delimit which are those gender stereotypes that are expressed and maintained in the text. For all that it is very important to examine the socio-historical context on one hand –very briefly in our case, as it concerns sociology rather than linguistics– and the lexico-semantic context on the other.

The debate under scrutiny takes place in the House of Lords on the 28<sup>th</sup> of February 2003, the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when the discriminatory stereotypes are supposed to have been overcome. But evidence shows something different as one gathers from the topic of the debate, which makes reference to the abolition of not only discriminatory laws, but most specifically, of discriminatory attitudes as Baroness Prashar states at the beginning of her speech:

My Lords, I did not say that the Government had a history of poor performance; I said that the impact of the legislation to date has been very poor. (Baroness Prashar, Equality Bill, February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2003).

Regarding the lexical context we are going to consider lexical context the whole sentence in which certain words referred to the stereotype of women appear, and the semantic context the one that will take into consideration up to 5 modifiers either preceding or following the word under analysis. In the first case we have those items that refer to women as the gender who looks after the family and who is naturally connected with the house and the family<sup>2</sup>. The sentence reads as follows: "...*He talked about the men as carers for children.*" (Lord McIntosh of Haringey, Equality Bill, February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2003). In this sentence the Lord is trying to fight for the right of men to look after their siblings. But at the same time we can consider this as an implicit reference of the stereotyped gender who had been traditionally associated with the well being of the family, women. In fact the laws do not want to change this concept and disregard the claim as something that is not the concern of laws but

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<sup>2</sup> About the different stereotyped roles of men and women in society we can refer to Fuertes Olivera, P.A. (1992), *Mujer, Lenguaje y Sociedad: Los Estereotipos de Género en Inglés y en Español*. Madrid: Ayuntamiento de Alcalá.

simply a *family problem*: "...it is partly a question of attitude in families." (Lord McIntosh of Haringey, Equality Bill, February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2003).

Another discriminatory attitude can be observed in the next issue in which the Members of the House are discussing about the discrimination of women in the work place as we can infer from the following fragment:

She raised the problem of getting equal pay without deterring employers from employing women. It is a difficult problem, but the answer is that that is why we need comprehensive legislation on employment discrimination, as well as pay discrimination. (Lord Lester of Herne Hill, Equality Bill, February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2003).

This comment appears to indicate that employers are naturally of the masculine gender and those who employ women should be rewarded somehow in order to impose the acceptance of women within the work force. Similar to this conception is the following example in which women are evaluated with different parameters to men:

To somebody who is required to conform to a dress code at work, when someone of the other sex is not required to do so, it can be as important as it would be, for example, to a young Muslim girl who is allowed to wear a headscarf. (Lord Lester of Herne Hill, Equality Bill, February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2003).

According to Lakoff (1975: 25) the use of the word *girl*, outlines the lack of maturity and responsibility of the person referred to. In this example, this immaturity is highlighted by the premodifier *young*, which makes explicit reference to a human being who is still struggling to become part of the implicitly agreed view world. This reinforces the idea that women should be accepted by those who dictate the norms, and these are mostly men, therefore, women should just adapt to what is dictated by those assumed generally accepted norms. To buttress this idea of the conventionally accepted norm –in the same context– we can read in the text the following utterance:

However, matters of dress can be extremely important- maybe not to those of us who dress conventionally, wearing baronial robes or putting horsehair on our head in court. (Lord Lester of Herne Hill, Equality Bill, February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2003).

In summary we can conclude by saying that the stereotypes are maintained in the way summarized in the following chart:

Men	Women
Connected with the world outside	Connected with home
Work	Family
Superiority	Inferiority
Owner	Subordinated
Authority	Acceptance
Norm	Deviation
Sexually active	Sexually passive

Finally, we can add some more evidence to prove the discriminatory function of language in the choice of words by mentioning some of the euphemisms used in parts of the debate. Euphemisms are generally used to express the viewpoint of the speaker in a more vague and imprecise manner so that it does not generate certain reproachable attitudes. Nevertheless, the use of certain euphemisms can indicate, indirectly, the true intentions of the speaker. In this example we are going to refer to two concrete euphemisms: the first one deals with sexual orientation and the second one with gender discrimination itself:

We see strong arguments...in favour of a civil partnership registration scheme for *same sex couples* with a package of rights and responsibilities for those who register." (Lord McIntosh of Haringey, Equality Bill, February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2003). "Ultimately, it is the judges and tribunals and they have had to do that since 1975. There is no real change, therefore. Furthermore, the limits of *positive discrimination* are matters of interpretation of the general principles. (Lord Lester of Herne Hill, Equality Bill, February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2003).

What is striking in the course of the debate is the fact that the topic lexical item, *discrimination*, is associated with *sex* and *disability*, and what the law is trying to enforce is the promotion of equal *pay* and *treatment* for those members of the community who are different from men and thus considered marginal (whether women or homosexual), and implicitly establishing a parallelism between the "marked sex", women and a personal private orientation, homosexuality. Let us see two other examples that emphasize this point:

She raised the problem of getting equal pay without deterring *employers* from employing *women*. It is a difficult problem, but the answer is that that is why we need comprehensive legislation on employment discrimination, as well as pay discrimination". (Lord Lester of Herne Hill, Equality Bill, February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2003).

In this case it is obviously assumed that *employers* are men and women are unequally treated as the employers need incentives to employ women who are thus excluded from the highest positions in the labour market. The second case stresses the idea that women are measured by men's ideas in a world dominated by men's values as the following remark highlights:

To somebody who is required to conform to a dress code at work, when someone of the other sex is not required to do so, it can be as important as it would be, for example, to a *young Muslim girl* who is not allowed to wear a headscarf". (Lord Lester of Herne Hill, Equality Bill, February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2003).

We can conclude this analysis by saying that euphemistic constructions normally express the masculine viewpoint because they are the ones using euphemisms to avoid offending –as showed in the examples above mentioned– homosexuals or women, as it is clearly evident in our illustrations.

These instances confirm our initial statement that read that lords think in male in Parliamentary debates, but they also reflect an attitude that is not exclusive to Parliamentary speech, but to our society in general. We are already aware, thanks to all the studies carried out about the differences in the use of language between men and women, that men use language to maintain their dominant position, while women try to establish equal relationships. (Mark & Borker 1982: 205-7). This is what actually derives from our analysis of the

Parliamentary debates: on one hand the different forms of address still maintain the asymmetrical constructions when referring to men and women and on the other hand that these different expressions manifest the prevalence of gender stereotypes in our society and, consequently, the discrimination of women.

What we would like to add is that all use of language is political in itself (Cameron 1994: 36) and the study of the differences between sexes is unavoidably political because the difference between men and women is a cornerstone in the organization of society. This lead us to consider the importance of the studies carried out within the political arena because, at long last, politics is what controls the organization and functioning of society.

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