GENDERED SIGNS OF AGGRESSION: A SOCIAL SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF POWER DYNAMICS IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

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Abstract: *The interrelation of gender aggression with politics is a sensitive topic, which brings to light the power disparities in society. A social semiotic perspective is taken in this article to scrutinize the signs, symbols and the multimodal communication employed to produce or maintain gendered aggression in politics. The article is based on the investigation of the encoding and decoding of gender stereotypes and biases in political discourse by means of verbal, nonverbal and paralinguistic practices such as tone, interruptions, imagery and body language. Moreover, the study takes into consideration both the cultural and ideological backgrounds which influence the perception of gendered behavior and therefore, the exportation of examples in political discussions, speeches and media manifestations is done to demonstrate that. Specific focus is given to the female politicians who tend to be viewed by the double standards and are considered to be either aggressive or oversensitive in the cases when their male counterparts are shown as strong or forceful.*

Introduction

Public perceptions and the ways in which ideas are supported or opposed to social norms coexist quite closely with the methods through which gender is communicated in politics, with language and images being the main areas where power and persuasion are fought over. Women politicians are often subjected to gendered

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assaults, being portrayed as overly emotional or scrutinized for qualities that are regarded acceptable for men but not for women. These types of aggression support the existence of the double standards and prejudices that already exist in the politics. Social semiotics provides an important framework for investigating such dynamics, since it studies how meaning is produced and interpreted in a certain social, cultural and ideological context. Traditional studies of language are likely to fall short compared to social semiotic approaches, which examines meaning negotiated through different modes in different contexts, including speech, image and body language. This allows for an in-depth understanding of the issue of how gender-based aggressions are constructed and maintained in political discourse by paying attention to the nexus between the signs making these meanings and their social context. The article studies the interrelation among gender, power and communication within political contexts, making use of examples from debates, speeches and media representations. It investigates the verbal, non-verbal and paralinguistic semiotic instruments that sustain gender aggression in the political arena: tone, body language and visual imagery, and how these instruments also mirror and reinforce the ideologies held by the greater society. By means of a social semiotic approach, the research aims to uncover how gendered meanings are negotiated and contested within political discourse while also suggesting methods to promote more equitable and respectful dialogue in the political arena.

This article offers a unique contribution by applying a social semiotic framework to the analysis of gender aggression in political discourse, a perspective that has been underexplored in existing research. While prior studies have examined gendered communication in politics, few have integrated the dynamic, multimodal and contextual dimensions of social semiotics to investigate how signs and symbols operate in perpetuating or challenging gender aggression. This research bridges the gap between gender studies, political linguistics and semiotics by concentrating on both verbal and nonverbal behaviors, as well as the interaction of cultural and ideological contexts. The article's primary objective is to study the expression, encoding and understanding of gender aggression in political discourse through the lenses of social semiotics.

Theoretical background

The examination of gender aggression in political discourse overlaps various disciplines, such as sociolinguistics, gender studies, political communication and semiotics. This section examines the theory behind the intersection of these fields, particularly, social semiotics, gender and language theories that emphasize power dynamics in political discourse.

The framework of social semiotics: Social semiotics is the study of how people create meanings through spoken and written language and other systems of signs in certain social and cultural settings. It emphasizes the role of language as a tool for social interaction and meaning-making, acknowledging that meanings are shaped by the social and cultural settings in which they occur (Halliday, 1978). According to Kress and van Leeuwen, social semiotics is the study of how different signs operate in society to construct meaning (van Leeuwen, 2005). It focuses on the mutually constitutive interaction between signs, the users of signs and the social formations that give rise to those signs, thus suggesting that meaning is never fixed but rather negotiated and firmly rooted within cultural practices (Kress, 2006). In contrast to classical semiotics, which sees signs as static and universal, social semiotics views them as dynamic entities shaped by social contexts. It examines how signs, through their negotiation of social meanings, are rendered various meanings based largely upon power dynamics affecting that negotiation of interpretation being assigned. In the case of political discourse, language, visuals, gestures and symbols are never just a way of expressing truth, they are laden with ideological implications that either strengthen or contest social hierarchies. That is why social semiotic is a fit theoretical framework for the study of gender aggression in political settings, giving due account to how verbal, visual and performative communicative forms express and maintain power inequalities.

Gender and Language Theories: Research indicates that men and women are subject to differing linguistic expectations with each gender being ascribed distinct roles and communicative norms. A defining characteristic of women's communicative behavior is their heightened sensitivity to critical expressions and their tendency to avoid confrontation. In contrast, men frequently utilize verbal strategies aimed at asserting control and establishing status, often favoring assertions over questions and prioritizing goal-oriented communication (Tannen, 1990). To assert dominance, men may interrupt, adopt abstract language, display minimal empathy and employ unconventional speech patterns to underscore their positions (Wood, 2007). In contrast, Campbell describes women's speech as rhetorical, emphasizing personal experiences, anecdotes and real-life examples to foster audience participation and establish a connection between speakers and listeners (Campbell, 1993). Lakoff argues that women employ a distinct speaking style *women's language* which is characterized by features that reinforce their subordinate position in society (Lakoff, 1975). She identifies two primary forms of discrimination: the way women are taught to use language and the manner in which language is used to describe them. Both forms contribute to maintaining women's subordinate roles in society. Among the features of women's language are *hedging*

words, adjectives, intensity modifiers, tag questions, overly polite expressions, direct quotations and speech patterns that avoid swearing (Lakoff, 1975). Lakoff regards this style as deficient, reflecting weakness, uncertainty and irrelevance, in contrast to the perceived neutrality of men's speech. She further argues that this linguistic style perpetuates women's subordinate status, while women who adopt masculine speech patterns risk being criticized for deviating from traditional femininity (Lakoff,1975).

According to A. Knyazyan, men and women, each possessing a distinct cognitive approach, depict the vast complexity and diversity of the surrounding world with their perceptions of reality being uniquely their own (Knyazyan, 2022, p. 122). The choice of linguistic devices is shaped by their impressions, experiences and underlying principles, which are accumulated both consciously and subconsciously. Male speech is often characterized by abrupt shifts between communicative strategies frequently leading to disruptions in the logical and objective depiction of external reality. This tendency may stem from a dual motivation: on the one hand, men seek to exert influence on the listener, while on the other, they express a subjective stance toward the subject matter being described (Knyazyan, 2022, p.122).

Another significant concept is *performative gender*. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity suggests that gender is not an inherent identity, but rather something constructed through repeated actions and communicative acts (Butler, 1990).

Under conditions of social equality, defined by factors, such as social and professional status, age and communicative role, men and women employ distinct strategies of speech behavior (Knyazyan, 2018, p.59). However, gender roles and norms vary significantly depending on the communicative context and the speaker's purpose. There is no strictly "male" or "female" language, rather, gender serves as a dynamic criterion that shapes an individual's communicative behavior. In this regard, it is more precise to discuss the communicative characteristics and styles of interaction influenced by gender in male and female speech, which are shaped by individual gender-related traits (Knyazyan, 2018, p. 59).

Political discourse, therefore, serves as a critical space for the performance and contestation of gender roles. In this context, women in politics may encounter double standards, where assertiveness is framed as aggression rather than strength (Butler, 1990). These theories highlight how gendered language practices affect or influence public opinion, especially in the political arena, where gender performance is a very important factor in how politicians are perceived and treated.

Power Dynamics and Gender Aggression in Political Discourse: Political discourse is power-related always, that is language and semiotic practices become tools for persuasion, dominance and resistance. As scientist have argued, gender aggression in political contexts is often aimed at destroying people according to their gender and thus maintain already existing power imbalances. One major tactic involves *interruption*, when male politicians are alleged to interrupt female opponents or dismiss their contributions in order to assert dominance. This strengthens traditional gender roles in political arenas (Holmes, 1999). Another important form of gender aggression would portray women in politics as lacking credibility or emotional stability through ***derogatory metaphors and labels***, thereby further marginalizing their political authority (Cameron, 2003). Finally, *nonverbal and paralinguistic communication* can reinforce these gender forms of power dynamics (Knyazyan, 2023). According to Kress and van Leeuwen, body language, gestures and tone of voice often amplify or reinforce stereotypes about gender roles in leadership, with women being subject to a range of nonverbal cues that undermine their authority (Kress, 2001),

Multimodal Methods in Analyzing Gender Aggression: In modern political discourse, communication includes not just spoken and written words but also visual and multimodal aspects, such as campaign posters, social media posts and televised debates. Kress and van Leeuwen suggest that multimodal analysis provides an extensive method for grasping how various forms of communication (spoken, visual or gestural) work together to express meaning (Kress, 2001). This method is especially pertinent for examining gender aggression since visual and nonverbal aspects often enhance or conflict with the messages expressed through spoken words. Kress and van Leeuwen state that merging verbal and visual components produces a more intricate and layered depiction of meaning, which can either support or contest prevailing ideologies of gender roles in political settings (Kress, 2001). The combination of gestures, facial expressions and body language in televised debates or political speeches can greatly impact the perception of gender aggression, as these nonverbal cues often serve to either support or undermine the verbal messages being conveyed.

Discussions: Gender Aggression in Political Debates and Interviews

1. Gendered Power in the 2020 U.S. Vice Presidential Debate

The 2020 U.S. Vice Presidential debate in Salt Lake City, between Democratic candidate Kamala Harris and Republican candidate Mike Pence, highlighted the different approaches in negotiation of gendered power through political

communication (Pence & Harris, 2020). Time and again, Pence interrupted Harris, and her calm yet strong retort, "*Mr. Vice President, I'm speaking*", became symbolic of the struggle of women in politically dominated male spaces for recognition and power. The utterance was more than just an interruption, it was a calculated affirmation of power. Harris's non-verbal signals were likewise very important. Her authoritative smile and eloquent gestures expressed her confidence and expectation of interruptions, thus showing her mastery of the debate dynamics. The smirk, though subtle, yet intended, could be interpreted as a semiotic device indicating both her self-assurance and knowledge of her adversary's attempt to impose his talk over hers. Meanwhile, the communication style of Pence was based on the calm repetition of the main phrases "*freedom*" and "*respect to the American people*" which helped to support his ideological platform and power. The non-verbal and paralinguistic aspects, such as tight lips, slight head nod, slow hand movements and tone of voice gave off an impression of self-control and credibility, which were all in line with traditional masculine power.

A more thorough semiotic analysis uncovered that Harris utilized micro-strategies of resistance: the vocal emphasis on "*I'm speaking*" strengthened personal authority, whereas her coded appeals to the marginalized groups were a sign of inclusivity and ethical legitimacy. The method of Pence showed macro-strategies of dominance, making use of wider appeals and managed non-verbal conduct to proclaim one's superior position in the hierarchy. These tactics combined portray the gendered negotiation of power, depicting the situation where women candidates had to adjust their assertiveness to avoid breaching the cultural norms of politeness and likability.

2. The 2022 French Presidential Debate

The 2022 French presidential debate between Emmanuel Macron of the centrist Renaissance party and Marine Le Pen of the radical Right National Rally party, in one aspect, was a clear case of aggressive speech and the complexities of political discourse (Macron vs Le Pen, 2022). The debate showed rhetorical strategies and communication style as they fought over issues ranging from socio-economic policies to international relations. Macron interrupted frequently and patronized Le Pen providing a fertile ground for a semiotic analysis of power dynamics and gendered communication. Macron's communication strategy relied heavily on a direct, assertive and authoritative tone with dismissive gestures. He would frequently manipulated discussions by raising issues that led to serious criticism of each topic in order to maintain control of the conversation. When for instance, Macron asserted, *"Votre position ne correspond pas à celle que votre parti et vos*

parlementaires défendent au Parlement européen-Your position does not correspond to the one your party and parliamentarians promote in the European Parliament", he not only affirmed his political superiority but also assigned Le Pen the role of the inexperienced and inconsistent person who was not qualified for a leadership position. Macron's eye-rolls or smirks were examples of non-verbal signals that highlighted his sense of superiority. Through semiotic analysis, these cues indicated a hidden power struggle where Le Pen was seen as vulnerable despite being assertive and strong. Macron's gestures amplified the verbal content of his arguments, affirming his patriarchal position in the debate. He used psychological tactics, such as accusation, which served as semiotic means for dominance in argument: *"C'est vous qui avez défendu un ami de Vladimir Poutine. C'est vous qui avez demandé à plusieurs reprises la levée des sanctions. Et maintenant, vous parlez de la Russie comme si vous n'aviez aucun lien avec elle-You are the one who defended a friend of Vladimir Putin. You are the one who has been repeatedly asking for sanctions to be lifted. And now, you speak of Russia as if you had no ties with them at all".* Le Pen, undergoing these disruptions, took such a tactical subtle course, where irony and rhetorical doubting proved to be the best strategy to negate aggression without going head to head. She addressed Macron as the "*Mozart of finance"* which was a semiotically powered tool to destroy the perceived elitism of Macron. Moreover, her regulated facial expression, timing gestures and tone variation were used to broadcast a feeling of calmness and assertiveness. By avoiding overt hostility and employing subtler forms of criticism, Le Pen defended her reputation and simultaneously criticized the gender norm according to which women in leadership roles should be more emotionally restrained than men. To elaborate on the verbal strategies, the repetition, accusation and authoritative framing by Macron was indicative of the knowledge of hegemonic structures of discourse, and the irony and rhetoric subtleties of Le Pen was indicative of a counter-hegemonic approach to discourse in a common communication setting. Semiotic analysis can therefore shed some light on the power relationship behind the scenes as female leaders have to face a twofold problem, i.e. they have to challenge male dominance, at the same time gain social acceptance of keeping their emotions and being polite.

3. Multimodal Aggression in Social Media

The 2016 campaign by Hillary Clinton exemplified how gendered aggression had been transferred to the digital and visual media. There were memes made online that portrayed her as untrustworthy or too ambitious and blended visual amplification with textual analysis to reinforce stereotypes about female leadership

(see Pictures 1 and 2). These memes were not only ridiculous, they were multimodal semiotic tools, which constructed the perception of the audience with visual, textual and cultural clues. A close examination of the work showed that there were several standard semiotic patterns. Her facial expressions were digitally manipulated to look fake or manipulative, her body language was overstated, and her ambition was frequently conveyed through text using the word social transgression. Such visual-textual collections were supporting the idea that women should be modest and deferential and so they were punishing actions that were against the acceptable social conduct of leaders. The case of Clinton showed a combination of gender, digital culture and political influence, and how media can contribute to aggression in the non-obvious but omnipresent way, supporting the limitations on the power of women within the society.

Correspondingly, Theresa May, while ruling as Prime Minister in the United Kingdom, was the center of attention for a plethora of memes that made fun of her leadership and character traits. The "*Strong and Stable*" meme was a great example of this, which came from May's insistence on the phrase during the 2017 general election campaign (see Picture 4). The slogan, meant to express assertiveness and dependability, became the topic of online ridicule associated with May's austere looks and captions that laughed at her being perceived as rigid and inflexible. The sayings and pictures in these memes though they exaggerated visuals and gave textual comments to make fun of her and question her worthiness as a leader, did so amidst the giving of women's leaders the expectation of being authoritative but still approachable.

On the other hand, in the case of Marine Le Pen, she encountered quite a noticeable similarity in the form of multimodal aggression during her election campaigns in France. Memes usually depicted her as excessively savage or of the emotionally unstable kind, contrary to the calm pictures of her male colleagues. A very good example can be taken of the presidential election of 2017 when a meme that had gone heavily viral showed Le Pen with a sheet of paper in her hand during a debate and captioned "*Marine Le Pen holding a paper*" (see Picture 3). This was further drawn in many variations with different funny captions, with most of them casting doubt on her and showing her as either unready or desperate. The combined uses of visuals and texts in these memes not only bolstered but also created in the first place gender stereotypes, depicting women in politics as being less capable or more emotional than their male counterparts. The above instances were a clear indication of the part played by digital media in the development of the gender-based aggression, in which the visual and the textual elements were merged

together to bolster the societal expectations and stereotypes regarding female leadership.

Pcture 1

Picture 2

Picture 3

Picture 4

4. *Barack Obama vs. Angela Merkel in Global Media*

Examination of the global media portrayals of Barack Obama and Angela Merkel revealed the ongoing presence of gender biases in the political leadership assessment. Obama, without a doubt, was the one who was very charismatic, articulate and inspiring. Media presented him as a person with a vision, a great communicator and a man with a warm personality. Moreover, his public image perpetuated the traditional views of masculine power and connected leadership to being optimistic, emotionally expressive and engaging with others. There were many photographs in which he was captured smiling, having a cheerful interaction with different groups of people and speaking with very active body language. All these factors contributed to the simultaneous perception of his being approachable and competent. These portrayals brought to the fore that male leaders could express both power and charm, mostly without their emotional conduct being closely scrutinized. On the other hand, Merkel was unfailingly characterized as pragmatic, skilled and very efficient but at the same time, emotionally very distant. The media reports often paid attention to her looks, clothes and her professional manner while downplaying her political intelligence and strategic accomplishments. She was

labeled as "*cold", "robotic"* or *"stoic",* who was lack of emotions and warmth. The interpretation was further supported by the semiotic analysis of the visual and verbal cues. The warmness of Obama's gestures, his expressive face and inclusive language not only gave him power but also made him relatable, thus creating a multidimensional public figure who was in harmony with the societal expectations for male leaders.

Merkel, in her turn, stood in a reserved position, with focused eyes and a flat intonation of voice, which communicated power and professionalism very efficiently but were taken to denote negatively by media. This comparative study highlights institutional influences on discrepancies in leadership ratings, which demonstrates the application of gendered expectations to influence the general opinion of power. Albeit both leaders had been tremendously successful in politics, media framing of Merkel reflects the extra balance, social bargaining and cultural coding women leaders must manage in order to maintain credibility. As it is evident in this case, the effectiveness of leadership is no longer evaluated based on the outcomes or competence only, but through the prism that is strongly supported by gendered norms and stereotypes, which solidify the obstacles in the path of women in politics and in the general life.

Conclusion

Gender aggression is an ongoing phenomenon in political discourse, it not merely mirrors but also aggravates social inequalities. The article has analyzed different signs such as verbal, non-verbal, paralinguistic and visual signs through a social semiotic lens for examining the encoding, communication and reinforcement of gender aggression within political contexts. The empirical evidence has been explored through political debates, interviews or media visuals, denoting the various ways in which gendered power dynamics are realized through effective communicative strategies, such as interruptions, tone, visual framing or multimodal content. The finding establishes that female politicians are confronted with challenges within the public sphere, whereby their assertiveness is called aggression and is frequently undermined by means verbal, nonverbal and paralinguistic signals. Moreover, the study describes how media and social platforms enhance gender stereotypes in society's broader perception of women in power, thereby undermining their credibility and authority. To adopt more impartial and balanced political discourse, it is vital to challenge entrenched patterns of gender aggression by raising awareness among politicians, media professionals and the audience on the gendered impact of communications, encouraging respectful debate practices and critical media literacy. The reality is

that these problems will begin to unlearn some of the gender power dynamics in which political communication is constructed into a much more inclusive political environment.

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Ա. Կևյազյան, Լ. Մարաբյան – *Գենդերային ագրեսիայի սոցիալական լեզվական նշանների վերլուծությունը քաղաքական խոսույթի դերակատարությունների համատեքստում.* – Գենդերային ագրեսիան քաղաքական խոսույթում հանդես է գալիս որպես հասարակական-քաղաքական երևույթ, որն արտացոլում է հասարակության մեջ առկա համակարգային իշխանական անհավասարությունները։ Սույն հոդվածում ուսումնասիրվում է սոցիալական նշանային համակարգերի կիրառությունը, ուշադրություն դարձնելով այն <u>փաստին</u>, թե ինչպես են նշանները և բազմամոդալ հաղորդակցական միջոցները օգտագործվում գենդերային ագրեսիայի կառուցման կամ քաղաքական համատեքստում դրա դեմ պայքարելու համար։ Հոդվածում համակողմանիորեն վերլուծվում են լեզվական, ոչ լեզվական և հարալեզվական տարրերը, մասնավորապես՝ ձայնարկությունները, ձայնի տոնայնությունը, նկարները և ժեստերը։ Ուսումնասիրությունը կենտրոնանում է այն բանի վրա, թե ինչպես են գենդերային կարծրատիպերն ու սոցիալական նախապաշարումները արտացոլվում քաղաքական լեզվի միջոցով։ Արդյունքները ցույց են տալիս, որ հեռուստատեսային բանավեճերում, քաղաքական ելույթներում և լրատվամիջոցներում մշակութային չափանիշներն ու զգացմունքահոսությունները հաճախ կին քաղաքական գործիչներին ներկայացնում են անբարենպաստ լույսի ներքո գենդերային վարքի գնահատման շրջանակում։ Ակնկալվում է, որ քաղաքականության մեջ կանայք լինեն ուժեղ և վճռական, սակայն ի տարբերություն տղամարդկանց, կանանց ագրեսիվ վարքը գնահատվում է շատ ավելի բացասական և անհանդուրժելի։

Բանալի բառեր. Բանավեճեր, գենդերային ագրեսիա, բազմամոդալ հաղորդակցություն, ոչ լեզվական տարրեր, քաղաքական խոսույթ, սոցիալական նշանագիտություն

А. Князян, Л. Марабян – *Анализ социальных знаковых признаков гендерной агрессии в контексте ролевых функций политического дискурса.* – Гендерная агрессия в политическом дискурсе выступает как социально-политическое явление, отражающее существующие в обществе системные неравенства. В настоящей статье рассматривается применение социальных знаковых систем с акцентом на то, как знаки и мультимодальные средства коммуникации используются для конструирования гендерной агрессии либо для противодействия ей в политическом контексте. Анализ охватывает вербальные, невербальные и паравербальные элементы, в частности, междометия, интонацию, визуальные образы и жесты. Исследование рассматривает, как гендерные стереотипы и социальные предубеждения отражаются в политическом дискурсе. Результаты анализа показывают, что в теледебатах, политических выступлениях и средствах массовой информации культурные нормы и идеологические установки часто представляют женщин-политиков в неблагоприятном свете при оценке гендерного поведения. От женщин в политике ожидается проявление силы и решительности, однако, в отличие от мужчин, их агрессивное поведение воспринимается негативно.

Ключевые слова: теледебаты, гендерная агрессия, мультимодальная коммуникация, невербальные элементы, политический дискурс, социальная семиотика