

**THE CONSTRUCTION OF FEMININE IDENTITY IN FORMAL
SPEECHES: AN ANALYSIS OF SPEECHES OF A FEMALE PRINCIPAL
OF A TECHNICAL COLLEGE OF EDUCATION IN GHANA**

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Abstract

Gender is an important social, cultural and psychological construct which describes the expected attitude and behavior a society associates with sex. This study conducted an in-depth investigation into how language is used to convey femininity in the construction of gendered identity. Being a useful tool for gender identity marker, language use in relation to gender was thoroughly discussed coupled with empirical and theoretical underpinnings of the study. The methodology adopted for the study was case study approach. Qualitative analysis was done in relation to the data collected from two speeches out of a corpus of 18 speeches delivered by the principal of a Technical College of Education in Ghana. Findings revealed that the principal, the only female principal of an all-male technical College of education in the country, constructed variable identities with the feminine identity being the dominant identity. This finding clearly demonstrates that irrespective of social status or achievement, the dominant identity a woman will construct is that of femininity.

Key words: *identity, Technical College, feminine, sex, gender*

INTRODUCTION

In their study, Dastgoshadeh and Jalilzadeh (2011) and Sunderland (2006) indicated that language is inextricably linked to identity. Rohana (2009) also stated that by means of language we can create, disseminate, refine, preserve, and transmit undeniable effect of civilization. Civilization in this context refers to the general social development of the human race over the millennia with steadily growing levels of knowledge and technological breakthrough. Essentially, language separates man from animals and can be instrumental in making inferences about gender, education level, age, profession and place of origin. Beyond this individual matter, language is a powerful symbol of national and ethnic identity. Spolsky (2013) stated that by means of language we indicate the social groups with which we identify, the social roles we embrace, and the sometimes conflicting values we espouse. To corroborate Spolsky's (2013) expressions, it can be said that arguably that language – both code and content – is a complicated dance between internal and external interpretations of our identity.

Several scholars and researchers have demonstrated in their works that language is used to symbolize our different social identities, and in any particular interaction, we draw on its symbolic power to construct a particular identity or identities, and to express our conformity with or rejection of mainstream norms and values (Sunderland, 2006; Van De Meiroop, 2008). In

recent times, researches on language, gender and identity are undergoing exponential increase, shifting from a predominantly essentialist paradigm which categorised speakers primarily according to their biological sex, and used mainly quantitative methods, to a period which recognized the significance of cultural categories such as gender, and socio-psychological dimensions such as feminine and masculine, when more qualitative approaches have predominated. The recent trend in identity studies facilitated a more dynamic social constructionist approach to research with the possibility of combining the benefits of ethnographic and survey approaches.

Sex, Gender identity and Gender-Role Orientation

Tyson (2006) defines gender as an important social, cultural and psychological construct which describes the expected attitude and behavior a society associates with sex. Arguably, the terms gender and sex have often been used interchangeably in social science literature (Beutler, Brown, Crothers, Booker & Seabrook, 1996; Unger, 1998; Haig, 2004). However, feminist scholars stipulate that sex refers to the biological and physical manifestations of sex-linked chromosomes, and gender refers to psychological and social characteristics associated with, but not necessarily correlating perfectly with, biological sex categories (Crawford & Unger, 2004). Studies conducted by Motta, Fominaya, Eschle and Cox (2011) and Mikkola (2016) have revealed, however, that the clear delineation provided by feminist scholars is not always easy in practice to apply them consistently. For instance, it is sometimes difficult to determine whether presumed sex-linked characteristics are due to biological influences or are merely associated with biological sex but not fully biologically determined (Habarth, 2008). Additionally, some scholars, such as LaFrance, Paluck and Brescoll (2004) see the term 'sex' as potentially socially influenced. Biological sex and its manifestations then can be as difficult to assess as gender.

Furthermore, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003) contends that sex is a biological categorization based primarily on productive potential, whereas gender is the social elaboration of biological sex. In their view, the definition of males and females and people's understands of themselves and others as male and female are ultimately social constructs. By this description, gender is not something we have but that we do (Abbas, 2010; Tyson, 2006).

Statements of Research Focus and Research Questions

Underscoring the fact that gender identity is not a stable and fixed trait but socially constructed and may vary over time for an individual, Hall (2000) referred to these as "fragmented and fractured; never singular" (p17) and De-Fina (2003) called it: "an extremely complex construct." (p15). Identifying one of the reasons gender identities are unstable and complex, Butler (1999) posits:

“...gender is performative. Feminine and masculine are not what we are, nor traits we have, but effects we produce by way of particular things we do. Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a rigid regulatory frame which congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance of a 'natural' kind of being.” (pp 225-226)

Building on this description, Alsop, Fitzsimons and Lennon (2002) insightfully stated: “Gender is part of an identity woven from a complex and specific social whole, and requiring very

specific and local readings” (p86). Thus, gender identity could be seen as part of socially situated understanding of gender. LaFrance, Paluck and Brescoll (2004) explain “gender Identity” as a term with reference to a specific function. It allows individuals to express their attitude towards and stance in relation to their current status as either women or men. Speeches are relevant to identity construction because according to Cameron (1997) speech is a “repeated stylization of the body; the masculine and feminine styles of talking congealed or ‘hardened’ because of repeated acts by social actors who are striving to constitute themselves as ‘proper’ men and women” (p15).

In line with LaFrance et al. (2004), it is prudent, therefore, to investigate and conduct local readings of gender identity in formal speeches, in which the speaker being the principal of an educational institution presents speeches on graduation and matriculation ceremonies to a formal audience of which bonafide students of the institution constitute a large section. The focus of the study was on planned data which are far less interactional in nature, namely speeches. The relevance of such planned data cannot be overemphasized because they are quite suitable for analyzing gender identity construction, moreover, the way these speeches are formulated is the result of the speaker’s preparation process, which leaves room for careful – although probably unconscious – planning of the construction of identities. Also, being the only female principal of an all-male technical College of education in Ghana, the principal may be prone towards constructing mixed gender identities; hence, her speeches could pave way for a delightful and interesting local reading of varied possibilities of gender identity construction. The main objective of the study, therefore, was to ascertain the dominant identity constructed by a female speaker during the delivery of her speeches in cognizance of leadership position in an educational institution.

Related Literature

In achieving the objective of the present study, the literature review has been thematized as follows: Theory, Concept, and Empirical . The theoretical framework discusses identity and gender while the conceptual framework dwells on dominance theory. On the other hand, the empirical review considers related studies on women in tertiary education leadership.

Identity and Gender

Identity development theory is one theoretical tool practitioners rely on to understand diverse populations. Identity refers to the sense of self that one possesses and is developed within the context of societal constructs related to ethnicity, gender, culture, social class, sexual orientation, and differing abilities (Tyson, 2006). According to McEwen (2003), several studies have been carried out in the 1980’s in connection with the experiences of women’s gender identity development which projected findings that revealed that women’s gender identity develops within the context of a society in which women, as a group, have been oppressed, and evolves from an external definition of what it means to be a woman to one that is personally constructed. Jones (1997) pointed out that during the developmental process, several situations made many individuals question traditional gender roles which cause an exploration of what it means to be a woman from the individual’s viewpoint.

In their thorough and extensive study on college student's identity development, Chickering and Reisser (1993) discovered that there are pronounced differences between men and women college students. Findings of their study revealed that women have a greater capacity for tolerance which they noted as important given the skills it provides for dealing with ambiguity, difference, diversity and discrimination. Northouse (2007) affirms that the qualities discovered by Chickering and Reisser (1993) in their study in connection with leadership qualities among women are important and relevant to leaders. These studies testify glowingly and provide a foundation that situates women within the transformational paradigm of leadership. The ability to relate to others, to be tolerant, to develop relationships with and amongst people, to incorporate diverse individuals with differing experiences and backgrounds, and to form consensus by bringing together varied perspectives, are instrumental to effective, culturally sensitive, and socially responsible leadership. As a result, it is appropriate, therefore, to investigate these leadership attributes in relation to how a principal of a tertiary institution constructs gender identities via formal speech.

Dominance Theory

Being a proponent of the 'Dominant' approach, in her book, *Language and Women's Place*, Lakoff (1975) espoused the 'Dominance' approach, which ascribes language variances between men and women to the dominance of men within society. Her work provides a traditional, negative evaluation of women's speech, which several linguists contend is a direct consequence of women's political and cultural subordination to men.

Essentially, these theories attributed women's linguistic inadequacies to societal inequalities between men and women, where men's conversational dominance appears to reflect the wider political and cultural domination of men over women (Freeman & McElhinny, 1996). Lakoff (1975) contends that women's manner of speaking which is different to men, reflects their subordinate status in society. As a result, women's language is marked by powerlessness and tentativeness, expressed through the use of mitigators and inessential qualifiers, which effectively disqualifies women from positions of power and authority. In fact, Lakoff sees women's language style as deficient, lacking in authority and assertiveness. In her observation, Lakoff intimated that women face a 'double bind' where they are criticized or scolded for not speaking like a lady, but, at the same time, speaking like a lady systematically denies the female speaker access to power and authority in view of her linguistic behaviour.

Dividing Lakoff's work into three categories, Freeman and McElhinny (1996) stated that the first section refers to the lack of resources that would enable women to express themselves strongly; the second aspect dwells on language that encourages women to talk about trivial matters and finally, language that requires women to speak tentatively. Hence, Lakoff's claims includes, 1) use of expletives while women use weaker ones, 2) women's speech is more polite than men's, 3) trivial, unimportant topics are considered to be women's domain, 4) women use empty adjectives, 5) women use tag questions more often than men, 6) Women express uncertainty through the use of the question intonation pattern, 7) women tend to speak in 'italics' (women use more intensifiers), 8) hedges are used more often by women, 9) Hyper-correct grammar is a feature of women's speech, 10) women don't tell jokes.

A critical study of Lakoff's (1975) claims by other researchers to determine its accuracy has resulted in many of the claims being rebutted. For example, West and Zimmermann (1987) argued that interruptions are used to silence others and that men tend to interrupt women more than women interrupt men. Tannen (1989) also pointed out that "to claim that a speaker interrupts another is an interpretive, not a descriptive act" (p. 268). On the use of hedges, Coates and Cameron (1989) indicated that the lower use of hedges by men is due to their choice of topics which often revolves around impersonal subjects.

A thorough study of the essence of "dominance approach" proposed by Lakoff revealed that it has its strong and weak points. Since the present study focus on gender identity with women in particular, the theory presents women as being polite and considerate though with challenges in leadership role because women are portrayed as weak, helpless victims of a patriarchy that forces them to be weak, passive, irrational or ineffective in their activities (Freeman & McElhinny, 1996, p. 236). Hence, dominance is seen to be in the same category as 'weakness', 'passivity' and 'deficiency', effectively portraying women as disempowered members of society. Jaggar (1983) contends that this can be seen as a distortion of reality, "depreciating the amount of power women have succeeded in winning and minimizes the chances of further resistance." (p115).

Women and Higher Education Leadership

To present a more related empirical view of the subject matter in recent times, the pattern of male prevalence in senior leadership positions can be seen in countries with diverse policies and legislation for gender equality. For example, Blandford, Brill, Neave and Roberts (2011) indicated that in the UK, statistics revealed that women were 44.3% of all academics. A higher proportion of staff in professional roles was more male (80.9%) than female (19.1%). Men also comprised 55.7% of academic staff in non-manager roles and 72% of academic staff in senior management. The 2012 Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) report indicated that in 2010-11 most academics were still male (67%), and female were concentrated in the senior roles. Also, in Morley's (2013) study, 70% of the 54 Commonwealth countries, all higher institutions were led by men in 2007.

Worthy of note is the complaint of ActionAid, a non-governmental organization operating in Ghana. Among other things, the organization called on the government to give equal opportunities to men and women because in recent times women are lagging behind in leadership positions and are underrepresented in Ghanaian senior leadership positions, especially in the educational sector. Davies (1996) observed that women enter adjunct roles but do not attain the most senior organizational positions. While higher education has created new middle managerial positions including quality assurance, innovation, and community engagement (Fitzgerald & Wilkinson, 2010); as such, many women find themselves in "ivory basements" (Eveline, 2004), or as Guillaume and Pochic (2009) put it "velvet ghettos" of communication, finance and human resource management. Ryan and Haslam (2007) also theorized how women are often in unpopular and precarious management areas. To this end, Morley (2013) called those areas "glass cliffs" in which men and women are differentially selected for rewarding and unrewarding organizational tasks, and leadership roles associated with an increased risk of negative consequences.

Several studies in Europe, the Americas and Africa have demonstrated that women's absence from senior leadership is a recurrent theme (Blackmore & Sachs, 2001; Adadevoh, 2001; Prah, 2002; Ohene, 2010; Elg & Jonnergård, 2010; Rab, 2010; Bagilhole & White, 2011). Though statistics and studies revealed that women are globally under-represented across all decision-making fora, including committees and boards, in recent times, according to Morley (2013), a powerful cultural ideology is emerging in higher education reform suggesting that leadership is the essential ingredient in successful organizational transformation. Northouse (2007) sees leadership in higher education as a process whereby an individual influences others to achieve a common goal, while O'Reilly and Reed (2011) described the cultural ideology of leadership as discursively constructed suggesting certain subjectivities, values, behaviour, dispositions and characteristics can strategically overcome institutional inertia, outflank resistance and recalcitrance, transform and provide direction for development. As a result, through power relations, leaders in higher education can construct identity and this can be very challenging for women due to gender roles and stereotypes.

Description of Methodology

Case studies could be quantitative or qualitative in design (Stake, 1995). Since the purpose of this study is to understand the essence of the lived experience of gender and leadership identity construction through the written speech of a Principal of a Technical College of Education, the constructivist approach through a qualitative case study in a bounded setting design was used as the study's methodology, and therefore the study followed case study data collection and analysis procedures or methods (Patton, 1990). According to Stake (1995), a case study is expected to catch the complexity of a single case. The case studied in this research is the Principal of an all-male Technical College of Education.

The study explicated how language is used to construct gender reflective of leadership role of which women are often disparaged against due to gender stereotypes and considered unfit for leadership capacity. The societal view of women and leadership informs the Principal's selection for the study. She is the first female Principal in an all-male Technical College of Education in Ghana and her workplace is a male dominated terrain, where she is required to oversee both staff and students who are mostly male.

Data

The data are selected from a corpus of 18 speeches delivered by the principal of an all-male Technical College of Education from 2006 to 2012. These speeches were given on different occasions and focused on both technical and social matters. The setting was quite formal, since she was always introduced by the Chairman, who kept track of the time during the graduation ceremony. During the speeches, she was never interrupted by the audience, who kept their comments for after the speech. So, the institutional character of the setting could be clearly seen as procedurally consequential (Schegloff, 1992). As a result, the speeches had a highly monologic character, although at some point during the delivery the audience responded to the speaker non-verbally.

After due perusal of the corpus, the study purposively selected two speeches in which gender in the context of leadership identity construction are present, as portrayed in the analyses. Both

speeches were delivered at graduation ceremonies, which focused on congratulating the graduating students, encouraging them to embrace a wonderful world of opportunities opened to them as graduates and award of diplomas. Indicating her appreciation of the collaborative efforts of the departments in producing these graduating students, the principal provided some background information of the school and the contributive efforts of various departments. She encouraged all graduating students to make the College proud by sound contribution via being hardworking, innovative, committed and ethical in their future work and roles.

The first speech delivered on Saturday, October 21, 2010 was laconic, coherent and logically developed. After due introductory remarks, the graduands (totaling 194) were encouraged and awarded diplomas. The principal also thanked all the members of staff for their unreserved contribution towards the success of the institution.

The second speech delivered on Saturday, May 26, 2012, was quite explicit, informative and highly fortifying to the graduating students. After a formal introduction, brief explanation on the process of moving to tertiary status and how members of staff need to upgrade themselves by engaging in research and publications to contribute meaningfully to academic discourse, she indicated that out of the 193 students graduating, 104 performed well while the remaining students managed a Pass. I congratulate all the graduands today and wish them well”.

Analyses and Discussion of Data

After a thorough review of the characteristic of different approaches in analyzing how people construct gendered identities, Schiffrin (1996) succinctly stated:

“The form of our speech (their textual structure), the content of our stories (what we spoke about), and our manner of speaking (how we delivered our speech) are all sensitive indices not just of our personal selves, but also of our social and cultural identities.” (p170).

Schiffrin’s detailed and illuminating analysis of the contents, linguistic structures and pragmatic meanings expressed in the two speeches she reviewed in connection with women in an interview, revealed how the selected speeches ‘display their speakers sense of who they are’ (1996, p191). Given the scope of what is being attempted in this study, the analysis below is necessarily selective and less detailed, but it has similar aim. In the following, there are excerpts from certain passages revealing feminine identity constructed by the principal in her speeches during graduation ceremonies.

Construction of Gender Identity – Feminine

1. *I am glad, once again, to be given this opportunity*
2. *I would like to thank them sincerely*
3. *I am delighted to announce that,*
4. *I want to assure you that with strong determination*
5. *I am therefore appealing to the Municipal Assembly...to give us the needed support*
6. *Permit me to mention some infrastructural development*
7. *Ladies and Gentlemen, I would like to congratulate all the students*
8. *Mr. Chairman, permit me at this point*

9. *Mr. Chairman, I appreciate the privilege given me and your audience*
10. *...to express my sincere gratitude to all our invited guests*
11. *...we are indeed most grateful*
12. *My dear ones, I want you to consciously get familiar with the vision and mission of this college*
13. *May I congratulate you for this great occasion*
14. *Mr. Chairman, at this point permit me to say a big thank you*
15. *...the college would be proud of you*
16. *Make the school proud through your contributions...*
17. *It is my fervent hope*
18. *Individuals are being asked to upgrade themselves*
19. *...it...constitute a wake-up call to practitioners in the colleges of education*
20. *Which I know will be forthcoming through the GETFund*
21. *I want to take this opportunity to say a word or two to my young men*

In the itemized excerpts above, the Principal constructed both feminine leadership identities with feminine identity dominating. The “*am glad*”, “*am delighted*”, “*am therefore appealing*”, “*my dear ones*”, “*permit me*”, “*my fervent hope*”, “*may I congratulate*”, “*appreciate the privilege*”, “*my young men*”, “*my sincere gratitude*”, “*most grateful*”, “*permit me to say a big thank you*”, and “*permit me at this point*”, are examples from the speech that could be interpreted as cordiality and affective touch to her speech.

In these passages, feminine gender identity was constructed. According to Holmes (1998, p. 463), “women tend to focus on the affective functions of an interaction more often than men do.” Hence, Coates and Cameron (1989) define an affective function for tags which are often used by women to facilitate communication and signal solidarity.

In some of the examples cited above, the expressions “*I would like to thank them sincerely*” “*I want to assure you that with strong determination*”, “*fervent hope*”, “*I appreciate the privilege*” “*We are indeed most grateful*”, “*May I congratulate*” “*I want to take this opportunity*”, and “*permit me to mention*” are indicative of hedges demonstrating politeness and an avid interest in maintaining good relationship with others which are linguistic markers of feminine gender identity construction. Authenticating this point, Voegeli (2005) included the use of more hedges while Jones (1997) and Holmes (1998) indicated women use hedges to strengthen and maintain cordial relationship with others. Additionally, the qualifier “*indeed, most, fervent*”, although it demonstrates the extent she was grateful, hopeful and determined, Lakoff (1975) considers such qualifier as inessential and indicative of constructing feminine gender identity. Also, the “*I*” focus she used was relativized by the expression *appreciate, appealing, may, am glad, would like, am delighted, want to assure*, hence, the illocutionary force of this expression is not self-importance rather an avid interest in mending and sustaining relevant relationships.

However, a closer look at some of the itemized expressions, “*...it...constitute a wake-up call to practitioners in the colleges of education*” “*which I know will be forthcoming through the GETFund* and “*make the school proud through your contributions*”, “*individuals are being asked to upgrade themselves*” indicated the speaker was doing leadership identity in view of her

position as the principal of the college. The first expression, “*which I know will be forthcoming*” is indicative of assertiveness. The personal pronoun “I” (“I” focus phrase) is indicative of self-importance, which connote the authority of her office as the principal officer of the school. The last two expressions: “*make the school proud through your contributions*” and “*individual are being asked to upgrade themselves*” does not entertain any triviality, tentativeness or subjectivity rather it was authoritative and direct, she negotiated leadership identity with emphasis on her authority as the Principal.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The present study investigated how language is used to construct gender and leadership identity. The principal of an all-male technical College of Education was the focus of the analyses. Being a woman in leadership position situates the subject of the study in a cross road as far as identity construction is concerned, because women are often disparaged against due to gender stereotypes and considered unfit for leadership capacity. The findings of the study revealed the shift from social learning to social constructionism in the construction of gendered identities corroborating. This confirms Butler’s (1993) view that “gender is performative and dynamic” (p15). The result of the study also revealed that the Principal, as depicted in the linguistic markers itemized and underscored in her speeches, constructed variable identities (leadership and feminine) with the feminine identity being the dominant identity as shown from the text analyzed. This finding lends support to Kail and Cavanaugh’s (2016) expression that irrespective of circumstances of life in the 21st century wherein both men and women occupy leadership positions, it cannot erase hundreds of thousands of years of evolutionary history: the dominant identity a girl or a woman will construct, irrespective of social status or achievement, is feminine.

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