



**Book review/ Book review on Gender, Power and Political Speech: Women and Language
in the 2015 UK General Election**

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Book review: Cameron Deborah and Shaw Sylvia. (2016) Gender, power and political speech: Women and Language in the 2015 UK General Election. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. ISBN 978-1-137-58751-0 (hbk); ISBN 978-1-137-58752-7 (ebk)140p

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1. Introduction

Gender differences in communication have been researched by many linguists, who claim that both sexes have their own way of communicating. Tannen (2000), for instance, believes that male and female types of speech are not the same: while women try to negotiate, receive and provide feedback and support, men tend to report conversation and do not provide much information in their speech; they are trying to gain and retain power through their speech technology. With regards to power and gaining the floor, men are more prone to break the

rules than women (Edelsky and Adams; 1990). Shaw (2000) similarly suggests that gender may have a greater impact in making difference than professional status with regards to taking control of the floor.

Written by Deborah Cameron and Sylvia Shaw “Gender, Power and Political Speech: Women and Language in the 2015 UK General Elections” was published in 2016. As language and gender researchers, both academics are involved and engaged in female political speech: both what it is, and what it is believed to be. While Cameron’s academic interest encompasses almost all aspects of language and gender studies, Shaw’s research covers language use, gender and their relationships in political settings. Deborah Cameron is a professor of Languages and Communication at Oxford University. As a feminist linguist, she has been actively studying the relationship between gender and language use since 1985. Sylvia Shaw is a member of the British Association for Applied Linguistics (BAAL). Having conducted various projects in several parliamentary institutions, she has extensive experience in studying political issues.

In this book, by fulfilling their objectives – revealing the differences and similarities between the speech technologies used by both genders and examining the representation of their speech by mass media, Cameron and Shaw offer an astute perspective on gendered language practices in political contexts. The authors successfully argue that the idea of a “different voice” is a remnant of sexist language ideologies and that there is no significant difference between the speech techniques of men and women in their study. While extensive background information is provided to support their arguments, the limited focus of the study to just three women is an evident lack.

2. Summary of content

The relationship between gender and language has been the subject of growing interest, especially after Robin Lakoff published her book “Language and the Place of Women” in 1975. The relationship between language, gender and political power, however, still remains rather novel in academia.

By analyzing the speech techniques of female leader who participated in television debates contested during the general election campaign in 2015 and examining articles about those politicians written in British newspapers, the book “Gender, Power and Political Speech” (Cameron and Shaw 2016) makes a study of the impact of gender on political discourse. The book discusses how gender issues and their relationship with language are covered by the mass media while taking into account the similarities and differences between genders.

Although the book has some similarities to previous research in its focus on gendered language use in institutions (e.g. Baxter 2014; Holmes 2006), it is different from other research in terms of studying multiple factors of this particular relation. The main message of this book is that the differences between gendered language use are mainly constructed by language ideologies which state that women should (and do) speak in a “different voice”.

The book consists of four chapters. Each chapter starts with an abstract and keywords, before moving onto the body of the text. In Chapter 1, the authors present the research concerns, define the key terms, introduce the notion of a “different voice” and how women use language in different ways than men, and give a theoretical overview of language ideologies. In this chapter, we can see how the relation between gender and linguistic practice depends on the institutional setting, the paradox of Venusian leadership. Chapter 2 presents empirical examples and outcomes by examining the 2015 television debates in the lead up to the general election and the language use of the party leaders, their adversarial and supportive speech strategies, and illustrating that this sample dismisses the “different voice” hypothesis. Chapter 3 examines the representations of these female leaders in UK newspapers. Key themes present in these representations are perceived differences between the genders, commentary on appearances, personal and family relationships, and of course their speech styles and public speaking abilities. Chapter 4 provides a summary of main findings with an emphasis on the articulation of speech and notions of authenticity.

3. Analysis and Evaluation

“Gender, Power and Political Speech: Women and Language in the 2015 UK General Election” offers insight into gender and language studies in a political context through describing the relationship between gender and speech technologies used by party leaders.

While a number of questions were addressed throughout the book, the authors mainly focused on answering the central questions that they pose in the first chapter. They try to show what the differences are between the genders with regards to language use, if there is any, and how these differences are represented and perceived.

The first strength of the book is that it provides a convincing analysis and draws conclusions supported by detailed analyses. Examples related to gendered language use in institutions are given, and previous research in the field is critically engaged with, to make the context clear and to help to examine the language ideology behind the situation and the current situation itself. Chapter 1 gives a theoretical overview of language ideologies and presents background information on gendered

language studies. Addressing previous research on the same topic allows the authors to make their results more convincing. Seeing multiple sides of the same problem makes it easier to understand the reasons behind the “different voice” ideology. A large sample size for the discourse analysis also increases the credibility of the work.

A further strength of the book is that it is well structured and easy to follow. Both the content itself and the structure of the book are reader friendly.

The book also has some drawbacks, however, such as having a too narrow sample of televised debates for the first part of the study. Similarly, only analyzing three female leaders may lead to findings that are not representative. A narrow sample helps the detail of the analysis, but it may lead to problematic conclusions.

Another weakness of the book is that the conclusion narrows down the sample even more, focusing on only one female participant. In this case, it looks more like a personal analysis than a study on gendered language use in general.

Overall, the authors fulfill their aim of uncovering whether women have a different voice in political contexts, and how their presence and language use are perceived. It is showing that there are more similarities than differences between the language use of men and women, and it is rather language ideologies that suggest that language use is and should be different between the genders.

4. Conclusion

This book examines the language use of female party leaders and the language ideologies concerning female speech styles. Cameron and Shaw propose additional gender aspects at both the micro- and macro-levels, with particular emphasis on productivity and presentation. Throughout the book, they answer the two main questions raised in the introduction: if there is a different voice employed by female party leader and how this ‘voice’ is presented and perceived.

The book is both well-written and organized logically, which makes it easily accessible to readers. Although the sample of televised debates for this research may be too narrow for overall judgements, the book provides transparent and detailed analysis of the sample. Displaying the all the results of the case study in figures and tables also allows readers to evaluate the sample themselves. By presenting a sufficiently general overview, the authors make it possible to assess the study for readers who are not familiar with either gender and politics or gender and language studies.

As this book covers several areas, from political discourse analysis to gender and critical mass media analysis, it is of most use to readers who have intersectional interests. Furthermore, the book can be recommended for readers who are interested in institutionalized language use as well, since it provides a succinct and general overview on language use in different workplaces.

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