

A Comparative and Critical Study of Power Features in Senegalese Female Politicians' Discourse

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Abstract

Social expectations about how a man and a woman should talk have led to many sexist stereotypes about gender differences in communication. A review of the literature on gender and politics reveals that women, unlike men, have always been associated with many discriminatory stereotypes influencing their social recognition. Some writers like Thorne and Henley (1975) or Dale Spender (1980) analyze the role of gender in politics through the theory of 'dominance,' while others like Maltz and Borker (1982) or Tannen (1990) see it in terms of 'difference.' Such gender stereotypes based on power have created a difficulty for women to establish credibility in traditionally male-dominated fields like politics where men are naturally perceived as the ones who should be the leaders. This research study aims to analyze the code behavior in communication of two Senegalese female political figures. Its purpose is to verify how features related to power can be differently or similarly reflected in female political figures' discourse. In other words, contrarily to what many stereotypes advance, how is power enacted in women's political discourse? Using a discourse analysis approach, some extracts of their speeches were selected to analyze and examine instances of gendered language features related to power.

Keywords: Code Behavior, Discourse Analysis, Female Political Discourse, Gender Stereotypes, Language and Gender, Linguistic Power Features.

Introduction

Research in language and gender has established that there are very clear differences between the forms of language typically used by women and those typically used by men. Men and women are said to employ different strategies when they communicate and this difference in word usage is socially constructed, i.e. gendered. Talbot (1995) explains that in some traditional tribal societies, men and women have a whole range of different vocabularies that they use. That is the case in Japan where Janet Shibamoto (1987) reported some cases where men and women traditionally use different lexical items to express the same meaning.

Such social expectations about how a man and a woman should talk have led to many sexist stereotypes about gender differences in terms of communication. Some stereotypes about women's language include insecurity, prestige consciousness, sensitivity to others, small vocabulary, inability to complete a sentence or less substance in it and excessive use of tags (Talbot, 1995; Johnson & Meinhof, 1997). Lakoff (1975) believes that women's language is characterized by excessive politeness, lack of confidence and eagerness to please. On the other hand, Peter Trudgill (1972), according to Talbot (1995), claims that language choices are determined by the status of women in the society; and women, conscious of that, use the standard variety of language because they are "less secure and more likely to be judged on appearances" (p. 23).

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All those stereo types about gender differences show a link between power and gendered language. Gender differences stereotypes are indeed based on power. Male dominance is actually viewed as something natural, and female dominance as a deviation from the norm because men are said to be more comfortable with power than women are. Such a view echoes that of Lakoff (2003, p. 161) who states that "it is right and natural for men to seek and hold power; for a woman to do so is strange, marking her as un-feminine and dangerous." In the same vein, Dale Spender (1980) affirms that "language is man-made."

Women have had difficulty establishing credibility in traditionally male-dominated fields because of those gendered communication differences and stereotypes about power, particularly in fields like politics where men are naturally perceived as the ones who should be the leaders. Stereotypes make the world of politics seem unwelcoming to women and according to the Inter-Parliament Union (IPU) statistics (June 2016), the world average women's participation in National Parliaments in the world is only 22.7%. It is 27.6% in the Americas, 25.6% in Europe, 22.9% in Sub-Saharan Africa, 18.8% in Asia and 16% in the Pacific.

In developing countries, even if women's participation in the political sphere is increasing considerably, they are still victims of prejudice and stereotypes. In Africa, female candidates are often perceived and described as not confident and not powerful enough to lead a country. Women have to fight hard, learn the game and the language of politics which is stereotypically seen as male, while preserving their identity as women, which is not an easy task.

There has been a fair amount of research about the link between language, gender and power but, as Lakoff (1975) explained, there is much less on the role of gender in politics, from a linguistic perspective. As a matter of fact, gender and politics is an area worthy of further study. This article, although relevant to that relationship between language, gender and politics, intends to show that gender may not be the most important factor that makes the difference. Apart from gender stereotypes, there are other variables, like the political discourse delivery, that can also influence the voters' choice.

The present research study aims to analyze the code behavior in communication of two female political figures in Senegal, West Africa. Its purpose is to verify how features related to power can be differently or similarly reflected in female political figures' discourse. In other words, contrarily to what many stereotypes advance, how is power enacted in women's political discourse? To answer that research question, a comparative study will be conducted to show the differences that can exist in the same gender by verifying the stereotypes stated about women's way of talking.

Literature Review

A review of the literature on gender and politics reveals that women, unlike men, have always been associated with many discriminatory stereotypes influencing their social recognition. Indeed, many factors like culture or religion influence and determine the way women's participation in politics is perceived. Claudia Maria Finamore and João Eduardo Coin de Carvalho (2006) in their article entitled "Women candidates: the relationships between gender, media and discourse" show how stereotypes about male dominance are transplanted in the political field. The article denounces the Brazilian macho culture that understands men as natural commanders of government and public activity. Women in politics in Brazil – like in many other countries – must conduct a balancing act between being a politician (pragmatic, malicious, individualistic) and being a woman (mother, housewife, concerned with the family).

Some writers like Thorne and Henley (1975) or Dale Spender (1980) analyze the role of gender in politics through the theory of "dominance," while others like Maltz and Borker (1982) or Tannen (1990) see it in terms of "difference." Spender (1980) believes that language sustains and reinforces male power. In mixed-sex language interactions for example, women are more likely to interrupt than men. The Difference theory states that men and women's speech styles are different and the male should be considered the standard, the norm. Tannen (1990), an advocate of that theory sees those differences in terms of: status vs support, independence vs intimacy, advice vs understanding, information vs feelings, orders vs proposals, and conflict vs compromise.

Rudyard Kipling, in his 1911 famous poem entitled *The Female of the Species* states that women should be excluded from politics because contrarily to men who are ready to compromise and discuss everything, their "contentions are their children." That complex relationship between women and power is also illustrated in Robin Lakoff's article titled "Language, gender and politics: putting 'women' and 'power' in the same sentence" in which she explains that women's implication in American politics is even referred to as the 'feminization' or 'pinking' of politics. They are called 'soccer moms' by journalists and the issues they discuss are said to be 'soft' and concerned with 'compassion;' and since women are only able to handle matters relative to the domestic field, some areas in politics are said to be 'women's specialty.' In a government for example, because women are said to be emotional and more sensitive to people's suffering than men, they are given posts related to health care or education. In the same vein, female representatives in the Parliament are said to be more interested in feminist issues like defending women's rights, reproductive health or violence against women.

According to Margareth Conway, Gertrude Steuernagel and David Ahern (1997), women have a political agenda and a way of handling the State that is clearly distinct from that which is typical of men. A good example to illustrate such stereotypes is the 2007 electoral campaign opposing Nicolas Sarkozy to Segolene Royal in France. The latter was depicted as 'soft' because her agenda was mainly on feminist issues like health care or education; while Nicolas Sarkozy mostly focused on male issues like immigration and security policies. However, it is clear that the agenda or the issues developed during an electoral campaign depend mostly on the realities of the society. In developing countries for example, where the main concern of the population is to have better access to health care, education, jobs, or how to 'help the housewife fill her shopping basket,' it is not surprising to see male politicians have those so called 'female' issues in their agenda. I therefore believe that male as well as female candidates do indeed include the same issues in their agendas. They just present them in different terms. For example, a female candidate might talk about 'filling the shopping basket' while a male might talk about 'balancing the budget.' Both are talking about the same thing, but they are just presenting it in different ways.

Methodology

To answer the research question, I conducted a case study and tried to analyze the discourse and code behavior in communication of two female political figures. I used a discourse analysis approach to compare two female Senegalese political figures who, to my mind, totally differ in their code behavior. The first one is Aissata Tall Sall, a female lawyer, mayor and member of the Senegalese Socialist Party (PS); and the second one is Marieme Wane Ly, a history and geography professor, ex senator and leader of the African Renaissance Party (PARENA), a liberal party. Marieme Wane Ly is described by journalists as a typical example of a 'female' politician who confirms all those gendered stereotypes related to power discussed earlier, while Aissata Tall Sall is considered an 'exception,' i.e. a strong woman depicted as 'male,' which is probably the main reason why she has gained more sympathy from the population than Marieme Wane Ly who mostly fails during elections and is not much appreciated.

The first tool of investigation used in this present study was direct observation via the media (television and radio). What I observed in the political arena of Senegal also helped me choose the data to collect and analyze. I also collected some extracts of speeches that I transcribed, and tried to analyze gendered features like the *frequency of interruptions, tags, attacks* and the *use of pronouns*. Thirteen extracts from television or radio debates, interviews and press conferences were used. I preferred to choose debates and conferences rather than electoral campaign speeches because the first are more likely to arouse spontaneous and natural reactions. During conferences, questions arise from everywhere and are either asked by journalists or the audience. It is the same with debates during which many issues are tackled and the politicians, even if they have an idea of the general topic they are going to discuss, may still be surprised with some questions they were not prepared to answer. Electoral campaign speeches however are most of the time written by electoral campaign directors, not the one who delivers them; and even if they are written by the political figure, they pass through a lot of editing and do not always reflect the exact thought and words of the politician. Debates and conferences are therefore more likely to reflect the natural thoughts and more importantly the gendered communicative patterns of the speakers I am looking for in this study and were therefore used to answer the research question.

As I stated earlier, a discourse analysis approach was used in choosing, analyzing and examining instances of gendered language features related to power in the selected extracts. The first extracts are from a presentation by Aissata Tall Sall during a conference held on November 22, 2009 in Paris, France. In that conference, the Senegalese mayor discusses the economic and political situation of Senegal. Her presentation was followed by an open debate during which journalists as well as the students attending were invited to ask questions. I also selected some extracts from an interview Marieme Wane Ly did after the opening ceremony of the African gender forum held in Dakar, Senegal, from 1-2 May 2010 on "Dialogue with Arab Women on Gender, Economic and Political Issues." Although the number of persons involved in the discussion differs in each case, an interview as well as a debate can both, in this specific study, provide enough information and spontaneous phrases reflecting the instances of the gendered language features I need to analyze. This study will be carried out through the analysis of the *pronouns* they use while speaking, and the *frequency of tags, attacks, and interruptions*.

Results and Analysis

As discussed above, the analysis is organized by variable, discussing how each fits or deviates from the stereotype.

Frequency of Tag Questions

An analysis of the extracts from Aissata Tall Sall's speech during the debate held in Paris on November, 22, 2009 reveals that during 48 minutes of speech and interaction, she only used one tag-question. Talking about Transparency International's report about corruption in Senegal, she addresses the audience in these terms:

- 1) *Aissata T. Sall : « La note que Transparency International nous a attribué c'est 3/10. Je pense que 3/10 en matière d'enseignement c'est faible, non? »*

Aissata T. Sall: "Our country received a grade of 30/100 from Transparency International. I think that grade reflects mediocrity, doesn't it?"

One of the interpretations of her use of tag might be that she used that tag not because she was doubting, but because it was a way for her to engage and interact with the audience; which actually happened since someone from the audience replied:

- 2) *"C'est faible."*

"It's too low."

And Aissata Tall Sall reacted to that comment saying:

- 3) *"C'est faible? C'est faible! Merci [...]."*

"It's low? It's low! Thank you [...]"

As far as Marieme Wane Ly is concerned, she did not use any tags in all her speech.

Frequency of Attacks

Based on Aissata T. Sall's speech, the answer to the question do women attack other candidates in their speech is yes. She indeed spent lot of time attacking the head of the State in her speech. In an hour discussion, she attacked him 10 times. Here are some examples:

4) *«Wade n'est peut être pas avocat, parce qu'il n'a jamais plaidé un procès encore moins gagné une affaire. C'est plutôt un mathématicien car pour lui la politique c'est des mathématiques, et il fait ses calculs.»*

5) *«Ce qu'il sait faire le mieux, c'est la politique politicienne.»*

6) *« Ce que Senghor s'interdisait par éthique et par morale, ce que Diouf s'interdisait par éthique et par morale, Wade lui se le permet par manque d'éthique et de morale. »*

"I doubt Wade is a lawyer. He has never plead a trial, neither won any. He is rather a mathematician, because he believes that politics is just like math, and is all about calculation."

"What he does better than anyone else is playing with people's mind. He is very malicious in politics."

"What Senghor did not do because of ethics and morals, what Diouf did not do because of ethics and morals, Wade is brave enough to do it because he has no ethics or morals."

Aissata T. Sall keeps talking about him in an ironic way and uses expressions like "*ses veilléités*" to refer to his age. In fact, when someone talks non sense because he is old, his talks are referred to as "*veilléités*." She also refers to him as "*le liquidateur*" to show that he put many public companies into liquidation.

Contrarily to Aissata Tall Sall, Marieme Wane Ly does not attack other candidates in her speech. On the contrary, she spends most of her time praising the work Abdoulaye Wade did and justifying why she was supporting him. The following example illustrates that very well.

7) *«J'ai soutenu Abdoulaye parce qu'il a réalisé une bonne partie de mon programme, notamment en ce qui concerne les enfants, les femmes, la formation professionnelle, l'intégration africaine entre autre projets [...] et je suis prête avec mon parti, à prolonger les activités du Président de la République.»*

"I supported Abdoulaye Wade because he was promoting most of the issues I laid out in my political agenda, especially the ones related to children, women, education and African unity [...] and as long as he keeps promoting those issues, I am ready, with my party, to help him achieve his goals."

Since Marieme Wane ly was at that time supporting President Wade, one could easily believe that's the reason why she was not attacking him in her speech. However, it's not only the President that Marieme Wane Ly does not attack. She doesn't attack any candidates in her speech, which might be due to her personality. In fact, contrarily to Aissata Tall Sall, Marieme Wane Ly is by nature very calm and does not even raise the voice when she speaks. She is a typical example of a female candidate depicted by the stereotypes. The extracts from her speech do indeed illustrate very well that the issues said to be 'women's specialty' are her concerns because she talks about motherly and sensitive affairs like 'children,' 'education,' 'women,' etc.

Frequency of Interruptions

As far as interruptions are concerned, I did not notice any in Marieme Wane Ly's speech. However, Aissata Tall Sall did sometimes interrupt the male journalist during the open debate and would not let him finish when she did not want to hear the question. For example, when the journalist asked a question about Macky Sall, the ex-parliament president who left the ruling party and joined the opposition, she interrupted him by raising and imposing her voice and did not let him finish. She did it 5 times during the debate and here is an example:

7) *Aissata Tall Sall: «Je crois que sur le principe c'est à Macky Sall de répondre à cette question.»*

8) *The journalist: « Mais vous aussi vous... »*

- 9) *Aissata Tall Sall: « parce que parce que nous de toute façon on ne peut pas nous reprocher de ne pas être constant sur la critique que nous portons sur ce fichier électoral [...] Mais, mais je dois dire [...] »*

Aissata T. Sall: "I think it is up to Macky Sall to answer that question." The journalist: "But you too you..."

Aissata T. Sall: (Still talking, and interrupting the journalist) "because, because we have always been consistent in our criticisms of the electoral file. [...] But, but I can say that [...]"

Use of Pronouns

Aissata T. Sall used three pronouns in her speech: « je », « nous » or « on » which respectively correspond to "I" and "we" in English, « on » being neutral.

- 10) *Le journaliste : « Deux anciens dignitaires de l'alternance, Macky Sall et Landing Savane sont à présent membres de votre coalition, personnellement que pensez-vous de leur présence au sein de la coalition Benno Siggil Sénégal, est-ce qu'elle peut vous fragiliser? »*

- 11) *Aissata T. Sall : « Moi j'en tire un double enseignement. Le premier enseignement c'est l'échec de Wade [...] car il n'a pas pu tenir le pays avec ses compagnons. Et je crois que politiquement, c'est un échec pour lui. Le deuxième enseignement c'est qu'effectivement cela nous élargit et nous enrichit. [...] Je vais être franche avec vous, en politique chacun vient avec sa personnalité mais chacun vient aussi avec son enseignement et son expérience. Et cela on ne peut pas s'en défaire du premier coup. Et je suis convaincue aujourd'hui que la présence de ces gens là, même si cela nous enrichit, cela aussi approfondit un peu les quelques divergences d'options, d'attitudes et de comportements. »*

The journalist: "Two former members of the government, Macky Sall and Landing Savane, have now joined your coalition, what do you think of their membership? Will that strengthen or weaken your alliance?"

Aissata T. Sall: "First of all, it denotes Wade's political failure, because he is not able to keep his allies. Secondly, being open to others can only strengthen us. [...] However, I will be honest with you, in politics every person comes with their personality but also with their experience and something new they can bring to the group. So even if I am convinced that it is beneficial to the party, I am conscious that it will also increase the differences in terms of options, attitudes and behaviors."

From this extract, one can notice that Aissata Tall Sall uses "I" when she starts answering a question (for example "I think"), but automatically switches to "we" afterwards. According to the stereotypes, not using "I" is a sign of lack of confidence. Therefore, an interpretation of her use of "we" would be that she is either hiding herself behind a more general group like her party or she doesn't maybe dare talking for herself. However, I believe that Aissata Tall Sall does not usually speak in the first person because in the French system, talking in the first person is considered egocentric and too self-confident, while using "we" when writing or speaking means being humble and is recommended. Moreover, the context and how the question was asked called for a use of 'we' to refer to the coalition as a group of people.

She also uses the neutral pronoun. However, she is a lawyer by profession and if as Bryna Bogoch (1995) explained, women lawyers' talk is role behavior rather than gendered behavior, one of the interpretations might be that her profession is a factor that determines her use of pronouns. She also uses the universal "he", which confirms her so-called 'male' attitude.

Marieme Wane Ly, after she lost the 2007 elections, decided to join and support President Wade, stating that they share the same political ideology, which is liberalism. However, since the 2012 presidential election was coming up, the journalist asked her what she thought of President Abdoulaye Wade trying to run for a third term knowing that he is not eligible to run for re-election. This is what she replied:

12) Marieme W. Ly: «*J'ai soutenu Abdoulaye parce qu'il a réalisé une bonne partie de mon programme, notamment en ce qui concerne les enfants, les femmes, la formation professionnelle, l'intégration africaine entre autre projets [...] et je suis prête avec mon parti à prolonger les activités du Président de la République.*»

Le journaliste : « Est-ce que cela veut dire que vous ne vous présenterez pas aux prochaines élections? »

Marieme W. LY : « tant que Me Wade a la force de se présenter, je le soutiendrais. Sinon, je me présenterai à l'élection présidentielle, avec mon parti, en dehors du mouvement des femmes de la Cap 21 »

Marieme Wane Ly: "I supported Abdoulaye Wade because he promoted most of the issues I laid out in my political agenda, especially the ones related to children, women, education and African unity [...] and I am ready, with my party, to help him achieve his goals."

The journalist: "Does it mean that you won't be running in the upcoming Presidential Election?" Marieme Wane Ly: "As long as Adoulaye Wade is a candidate, I will support him. If he is not, then I will run for President with my party." What is surprising concerning Marieme Wane Ly is that, contrarily to what one would believe based on how her personality is depicted by journalist, features of power are found in her speech. Marieme Wane Ly only uses « I » or « my » instead of « we » or « our », throughout her entire interview, which, according to the stereotypes, shows confidence. However, my interpretation of her use of "I" is that the context often calls for an "I" response. The journalist has asked her an individual question about her plans, which seems to prefer an "I" response. It would indeed have been odd for her to use "we." Moreover, Marieme Wane Ly is the leader of her party while Aissata Tall Sall is a member of the Socialist Party.

Discussion

After a thorough analysis of both female politician discourses, I found out that although there are differences in Aissata Tall Sall and Marieme Wane Ly's code behavior, the stereotypes about power features related to language and gender have not been confirmed. Indeed, while one would expect no power features in Marieme Wane Ly's speech because depicted as "soft", it has been revealed that she speaks in the first person showing thus, according to the stereotypes, more confidence than Aissata Tall Sall. However, she is still perceived as 'soft,' which shows that other features like the way the speech is delivered for example, are also important.

Factors like the profession and the personality have also revealed to be relevant and of much importance in this study. Indeed, although Aissata Tall Sall uses 'we' when she speaks more than she uses 'I', she imposes herself through the tone of her voice contrarily to Marieme Wane Ly who speaks softly. She also interrupts the journalists sometimes to make them listen to what she wants to say, and uses tag questions to interact with the audience, which shows the importance of personality and profession. According to Bryna Bogoch, in her article entitled "Difference and dominance in Lawyer-Client Interaction" (1995), women lawyers' talk is role behavior rather than gendered behavior, with little difference between men and women lawyers. Aissata Tall Sall being a lawyer, I suppose that her profession can sometimes influence her code behavior. Therefore, factors I didn't take into account in this study like the party ideology, the ability to convince others, the social realities and major concerns of the population at the time the discourse was delivered and/or subjective factors like physical appearance, can in fact play a great role in the way the population perceives the candidate; hence the limitations of this research study.

Conclusion

The objective of this comparative study was to show the differences that can exist in the same gender by verifying the stereotypes that have been stated about women's way of talking. Some revealed to be true, while some others did not happen at all, which shows that gender is not always the most determinant factor. Although the two figures I have chosen are both female, they differ a lot in their code behavior but also in the way they are perceived.

Talbot (1995) explains that “approaches to gender differences are not straightforward but overlap. [...] Power cannot be separated from culture.” Her view echoes Cameron’s who states that “gender is a problem, not a solution”, and “women do this, men do that” is stereotypical if it is overgeneralized without taking into account the context. This comparative and critical study of power features in two female politician discourses shows that differences can also be found between women themselves, hence the significance of this research study. The results of this discourse analysis can later on be related to how the journalists depict both political figures and how they are viewed by the society in general. Basing upon the elections’ results, a correlation can also be done to see how the way the speech is delivered can have an impact on the sympathy the population has for a female political figure.

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