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The Difference Women Make: A critique of the notion of a ‘women’s style’ of language in political contexts.

Sylvia Shaw

Middlesex University

S.K.Shaw@mdx.ac.uk

Researchers agree that there is a set of linguistic features that are routinely and stereotypically associated with feminine and masculine speech in the workplace. Holmes (2006) finds that these aptly highlight the dominant cultural expectations of gender appropriate behaviour. However, women in the workplace have been found to use the competitive features associated with male styles and men have been found to use consensual features associated with female styles (Mullany 2007). There is also some evidence to show that women are engaging in ‘double voice’ discourse and undertaking more of the conversational ‘work’ in institutions than their male counterparts (Baxter 2008). This complex set of contested and relational practices suggests that there is no straightforward relationship between gender and styles of workplace discourse.

Within political science there has also been a discussion about a feminised ‘style’ of politics. The claim for the existence of a feminised style often forms part of wider debates around the substantive representation of women (Lovenduski 2005). This notion of a ‘style’ is a fairly vague term which can relate to the way women dress, to the topics they raise and the language they use in the debating chamber. Here I am particularly interested in the elements of this notion of style which relate to communication and language. This idea of a feminised speech style contends that women bring a ‘consensual’ or non-adversarial communication style to politics. This is also a common perception of women MPs who consider that they have a feminised style of politics (Childs 2004).

It is therefore evident that the notion of a female, consensual style and a male competitive or adversarial style is *ideologically salient* to women MPs in the House of Commons, and to researchers in political science. However, there is a distinct lack of evidence showing these styles exist. As political scientists point out : ‘the dominant explanation put forward by women themselves is that they ‘do’ politics differently – but this is very difficult to test empirically’ (Cowley and Childs 2003, 365). This is a central point as the majority of these studies into the ‘women’s style’ of politics rely on interview data, or often take as a starting point observations about the feminised style as reported in the media. These methods are unlikely to illuminate the discussion about gendered styles, as interviewees and journalists are not likely to yield an accurate description of politicians’ behaviour (linguistic or otherwise). My own research into the language used by men and women MPs in the House of Commons (Shaw 2000, 2006) supports the findings from research into language and gender in the workplace (cited above) by showing that both women and men use adversarial language in the debating chamber.

Given these findings, why does this notion of a ‘women’s style’ persist in political science? Part of the reason may be that political science is dominated by methodologies that are not able to uncover the complexity of these issues. Quantitative accounts of gendered voting patterns and statistical measures of the amount of times different politicians use a ‘gender term’ do not seem very sophisticated tools for accounting for the interwoven, fractured and competing pressures experienced by MPs. There is a lack of highly contextualised, detailed studies of behaviour in these political contexts. There may also be an unwillingness to engage with theoretical ideas about the performative nature of gender and the multiplicity of speakers’ identities. This in turn might be the case because there is hard-won ground to be lost here. Women are still struggling to gain equal political representation (The House of Commons is currently only 20% women) and a ‘difference’ agenda may be seen as a way of improving this representation. Women in politics may perceive that there is an advantage to be gained from the belief that they bring a ‘civilising’ influence to historically male-dominated, adversarial forums.

However, this may be a risky strategy as there are inevitable consequences to perpetuating these stereotypical notions of male and female speech styles. Clare Walsh (2001: 6) suggests that the value placed upon co-operative discourse strategies by some feminists may ‘have contributed to the creation of a gendered split *within* the public sphere, by reinforcing the prevailing view, including among women themselves that they are naturally suited to relatively low-status roles’. It may also make it harder for professional women to perform in adversarial contexts, firstly because more pressure is put on women to perform a ‘civilising’ role and secondly because women must ‘manage their femininity carefully because if they do not ‘display the acceptable feminine style in these incredibly gendered environments, they risk being labeled as somewhat strange and grotesque’. This, in turn, means that they cannot simply ‘don the male costume and mimic the male performance’ (Puwar 2004:75). Most significantly, this emphasis on a feminine consensual style may actually exclude women from politics by making them feel that they cannot participate successfully in adversarial contexts.

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