An Ethnographic Investigation into Gender and Language in the Northern Ireland Assembly

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Abstract.
This paper investigates the extent to which the negative evaluation of one of the women Ministers in the Northern Ireland Assembly can be attributed to gender. Interviews with politicians as well as the Minister herself illuminate this discussion by identifying the 'gendered discourses' that are drawn upon when describing the Minister's communicative style in debates. Close analyses of transcripts of debates offer a description of some elements of this style, and find that while the Minister is confrontational in debates and 'stands her ground', she does not take part in illegal interventions that disrupt the debate floor and are characteristic of the Assembly as a whole. Although the construction of the Minister's unpopularity can be attributed to a complex interplay of factors, it can be concluded that it is partly the way she draws on gendered linguistic resources that leads her to be negatively judged by her peers.

Keywords: Linguistics, sociolinguistics, gender, parliament, devolution, identity, ethnography, discourse analysis, Northern Ireland Assembly

1   Introduction

The paper analyses a set of ethnographic observations made between November 2009 and June 2010 in the Northern Ireland Assembly which establish that one

particular woman politician (the Minister of Education)[1] is perceived by interviewees to be the most unpopular speaker in the debating chamber. Interview data from politicians and from the Minister is analysed to try and find out the reasons for this unpopularity. While it is clear that the Minister is unpopular with some politicians because of her policies on education and because of party and sectarian allegiances, others believe that it is partly her confrontational style in debates and the fact that she is a woman that account for her unpopularity. In describing the Minister's behaviour in debates some interviewees describe confrontational non-verbal gestures such as 'wagging her finger' in the debating chamber and the Minister herself describes her stance as 'planting both feet firmly on the floor' when speaking in debates. In an analysis of video recordings of the Minister speaking in debates I will attempt to establish the extent to which the Minister's performative 'style' in debates is of particular significance in constructing her 'unpopular' identity.

2.   The Research Project

2.1. Background

The interview and micro-analytic data presented here was collected when undertaking a research project[2] into gender and linguistic participation in the 'new' devolved parliaments[3] of the UK. The research project aimed to further an understanding of the factors affecting the political representation of women in these 'new' assemblies by examining the linguistic cultural norms and practices in debates, and to establish the extent to which they may be gendered. It has been claimed that the devolved parliaments of the UK offer women greater opportunities to participate than older, traditional parliaments because they have included women from the beginning and because they are constructed with egalitarian and inclusive aims. Previous sociolinguistic research on House of Commons debates has found that although women participate equally with men in terms of the formal or 'legal' debate rules, they do not participate equally in terms of illegal debate discourse (by contributing 'out of turn', for example) [1-2]. The reasons for this are likely to be complex, and related in part to the 'visibility' of women in a traditionally male-dominated forum [3] and the nature of traditional parliaments as a 'linguistic habitus' [4] in which 'silence or hyper-controlled language' is imposed on some people, while others are allowed the

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[1] I have chosen to refer to the Minister by her official title, rather than by name. This data is used with the permission of the Minister and in line with ethical considerations established by the ESRC research project and the School of Arts and Education Ethics Committee, Middlesex University.

[2] An Economic and Social Research Council funded project: Gender and Linguistic Participation in the Devolved Parliaments of the UK (RES 000223792).

[3] The devolved institutions of the UK are: The Scottish Parliament, the Northern Ireland Assembly and the National Assembly for Wales.

'liberties of a language that is securely established' [5]. Traditional parliaments can therefore be viewed as a 'gendered space' in which the setting and the communicative tasks together become an index of a gendered style. This project aimed to describe the 'new' devolved institutions in relation to these different aspects of participation using a detailed ethnographic and linguistic analysis. Gender is viewed as a variable and contested concept, being both a flexible category in which speakers' gender identities are constructed in their 'performance' in interaction [6], and a category which is partly fixed by the institutional arrangements based on stereotypical notions of male and female linguistic behaviour. Drawing on 'anti-essentialist' theoretical frameworks I view language as a social practice in which gender is a dynamic category that is also a site of struggle and (re)positioning. It also assumes that gender identities are constructed through language use; that other social relations and categories (apart from gender) are significant; and that gender is culturally constituted and context-dependent [7].

2.2 Methods

An original combination of research methods are used in order to assess linguistic participation and the construction of unpopularity within the assembly. Firstly, the ethnographic description of each assembly is based upon the tradition of the 'Ethnography of Speaking'[8]. This method of Linguistic Ethnography holds that the contexts for communication should be investigated rather than assumed and that the detailed analysis of linguistic data is essential to understanding its significance [9]. This informal knowledge about 'what can be said when, where, by whom, to whom, in what manner and in what particular social circumstances' [10] has been overlooked in political accounts of institutions because mainstream comparative research in this area tends to focus on formal rules [11]. This ethnographic approach, using the notion of the Community of Practice [12] rather than that of a 'speech community', is combined with Conversation Analytic techniques. Conversation Analysis aims to 'uncover the tacit reasoning procedures and sociolinguistic competencies underlying the production and interpretation of talk in organised sequences of interaction' [13]. In particular the model of turn-taking proposed by Sacks et al [14] is used in order to identify the model of interaction in each assembly. Gaining the floor has been viewed by analysts as an 'economy' in which, depending on the context, 'turns are valued, sought or avoided' [15]. This notion of a 'competitive economy' seems particularly apt for the highly regulated debate floor where turns are sought for professional and political gain. This method has been successfully used to identify a model of turn-taking in relation to the participation of MPs in debates in the House of Commons [16] and provides a useful framework for comparisons across the assemblies.

The combination of data from the researcher's observations in situ in the Northern Ireland Assembly, from detailed transcriptions of the debate floor and from the participants themselves allows a multi-perspective analysis of the norms in this Community of Practice. I also draw upon Goffman's [17]

conceptualisation of 'frontstage' and 'backstage' events, utilised by Wodak in her analysis of the construction of political identities in the European parliament [18]. The 'frontstage' is where the performance takes place, in this case on the debate floor, and it is where: 'both *belief* in one's performance and a *mask* with which to manage its public reception are necessary 'ingredients' for the staging of politics' [19]. In contrast, the 'backstage', accessed by interviews with participants, is 'where facts suppressed in the frontstage or various kinds of informal actions may appear which are not accessible to outsiders' [20], and where 'the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course' [21].

Speaking in political forums on the 'frontstage' also falls into the category of what can be described as a 'high performance event' [22] in which there is an intensity involving linguistic choices in which 'considerations of 'style' …become particularly salient' [23]. Linked to this, 'stylisation' is a subversive form of multi-voiced utterance [24], in which 'our..speech is filled with others' words, varying degrees of otherness or varying degrees of "our-own-ness" [25]. Coupland notes that stylisation in high performance events 'instigates in and with listeners, processes of social comparison and re-evaluation (aesthetic and moral), focused on the real and metaphorical identities of speakers, their strategies and goals' [26]. The combination of different types of analyses presented here seem particularly useful ways of examining these notions of stylisation and the frontstage and backstage of the political arena.

2.3. Researching Gender in Political Institutions and the Workplace.

Analyses of the linguistic participation of women in traditionally male dominated forums, such as Parliament and the Church of England has found that women's public rhetoric is likely to be fractured by competing, often contradictory norms and expectations [27]. Walsh's research included an investigation into the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC)[4] and found that the Coalition helped 'to expose the shockingly masculinist nature of politics' in Northern Ireland. Walsh also notes that media coverage of the NIWC reinforced 'women's connection with domestic sphere roles', resulting in the 'gendered division between public and private being reproduced *within* the public sphere'[28]. Overall, Walsh finds that women's tendency to shift between stereotypical features of feminine and masculine norms 'are often a means of managing socially ascribed expectations that pull in opposite directions'[29]. This finding has been confirmed in more recent research on women in leadership positions (Holmes 2006, Mullany 2007, Baxter 2010), which shows that they combine both feminine and masculine interactional strategies.

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[4] The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition was a political party in Northern Ireland from 1996-2006. Two members of this party won seats in the 1998 Assembly elections, both losing their seats in the 2003 elections.

These stereotypical expectations often incur the 'double bind' women face in professional life, particularly those in leadership positions. Holmes [30] notes that the norms for workplace interaction are predominantly masculine norms, and that leadership and authority is strongly associated with maleness [31]. This can lead to women in leadership positions facing the 'double bind' between 'professionalism and femininity':

> *If she talks like a manager she is transgressing the boundaries of femininity: if she talks like a woman she no longer represents herself as a manager'*

Recent research has found that in managing these expectations women business leaders are more likely to be castigated for using authoritative forms of discourse [32], and that women leaders are operating according to a *double-voiced* discourse where they must 'constantly pay attention to the Other's point of view, while pursuing their own agenda' [33]. Overall, women can be viewed as being at a disadvantage in comparison to their male counterparts in professional contexts as they are judged differently (more harshly) and must manage their femininity to avoid negative assessments of their behaviour based on persistent gender ideologies relating to gender differences in communicative styles.

3.   Description of the Northern Ireland Assembly

The Northern Ireland Assembly was established in December 1999 after a pre-devolution or shadow period following the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. The Assembly is situated in the Stormont Parliament Buildings in Stormont Estate in the east of Belfast. The Assembly has authority to legislate on 'transferred matters' (such as education), but not on matters that are not explicitly 'reserved' or 'excepted' by Westminster (such as defence and financial regulation). All Bills passing through the assembly have to receive 'royal assent' to become law, even though the UK monarch has no formal role within the assembly. There are 108 politicians or 'Members of the Legislative Authority' (MLAs) who are elected to the Assembly under the principle of power-sharing and the d'Hondt Method. Power-sharing aims to ensure that the two biggest political communities in Northern Ireland (Unionist and Nationalist) are both included in governing the region[5]. The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Féin are the two biggest

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[5] Power-sharing has a number of mechanisms in order to ensure that roles and decision-making powers are shared between Unionist and Nationalist parties. Firstly, each MLA must designate themselves either 'unionist', 'nationalist' or 'other' in order to account for their position in relation to power-sharing. Secondly, certain resolutions must receive support from MLAs representing the different communities (according to their designation, as mentioned above). The d'Hondt method is used to appoint Ministers to the executive, and this ensures that ministerial representation is in proportion to the number of seats a party has in the Assembly.

parties and they put forward the First Minister and Deputy First Minister respectively.

The Assembly has a Speaker or moderator, and Deputy Speakers. In many respects the proceedings resemble that of the House of Commons, in that there are similar speech events (similar types of debates and question time sessions), and that the interactional rules are comparable. For example, an MLA can intervene on another's speech if they are permitted to by another MLA 'giving way' in their speech. However, most of the speeches are controlled by time restrictions in the Assembly (unlike the House of Commons), and when interviewed MLAs agreed that the proceedings were generally less formal than at Westminster. At the time of the project, women's representation in the Assembly was at 17% (lower than the other devolved institutions with Scotland at 32% and Wales at 47%). The Assembly is therefore a numerically male-dominated institution.

Observational and interview data both suggest that the Assembly remains sharply divided along Nationalist and Unionist lines, described by one Alliance Party MLA as '*red and green issues: tribal politics*'. MLAs talk of individuals who will not stand next to their colleagues from opposing parties to have their photograph taken, and who refuse to speak to one another socially '*in the corridor*'. One MLA describes the animosity she feels coming from the party opposing her in the chamber by saying '*they hate their eyes for looking at you*'. This animosity is expressed in the chamber itself through barracking and also by Members '*laughing, smirking and talking amongst themselves*' when a political opponent is speaking. The chamber is also viewed as a context that is '*unforgiving if you get something wrong*'.

However, a number of MLAs from across the parties agreed that some elements of this animosity had '*mellowed with time*' and although it was still evident that '*they are going to be a while getting over the history*' there was some sense that '*we're getting there*'. MLAs also suggested that the debating chamber seemed to be the place where animosity was expressed, whereas in other speech events, such as committees, there tended to be '*less grandstanding*' and '*adversaries in the chamber work comfortably together in committee*'. It is also worth noting that the wider working environment of the Assembly does not reflect the animosity in the chamber and has a friendly, helpful and non-hierarchical atmosphere.

4.   Dimensions of 'Unpopularity' in the Assembly

4.1. Evidence for Unpopularity from Interviews with Politicians

Ethnographic interviews were conducted with 15 men and women MLAs from all the main political parties[6]. In relation to one of the aims of the research project

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[6] Interviews took place between March and June 2010.

relating to the debate floor, MLAs were asked if any politicians in particular were subjected to 'out of order' criticisms or interruptions in the debating chamber. Eleven of the interviewees identified the Minister of Education as being the MLA who 'got a hard time' on the floor of the Assembly, and no other MLA was identified by more than one interviewee as being subject to particular attacks in the chamber. One MLA states:

> *'The minister for Education suffers dreadfully dreadfully and some would say justified and she's never done herself any favours but the Democratic Unionist party have set themselves up as her opponents and every time she comes into the chamber whether she's making a statement on Education or answering questions on education it just degenerates into a nightmare'*

The reasons for the Minister's unpopularity can be thought of as firstly relating to her politics in that as a Sinn Fein (Nationalist) politician she is opposed by the Unionist parties. Secondly, in her role as Minster of Education she abolished the traditional system of educational selection into Northern Ireland secondary schools (at age 11)[7], which was a controversial and deeply unpopular move with Unionist parties. Finally, her unpopularity can be related to various aspects of the way in which she engages in debates. She uses Irish language in the debating chamber which is highly symbolic of Nationalist opposition and resistance to Unionism; she is accused of being 'confrontational' and aggressive in debates, and she is also charged with being intransigent and inflexible in the face of opposition or criticism, one interviewee says of her: *'It's just get the old blinkers on and until you agree 100% with me we can't do any business'*.

The interviewees that were critical of the Minister were notably direct in their criticism of her, which was unique in the interview data across the three devolved institutions. Generally when politicians criticise their colleagues this is mitigated, or accompanied by an account justifying their criticism. Typically the criticism of the Minister was accompanied by a strengthening justification, rather than a mitigating one: one interviewee says *'She gets the hardest time but I'd have to say she deserves it'* and another says *'she gets a hard time but I have to say part of that is how she approaches it (…) she just can be quite obnoxious'*. The criticisms are therefore 'aggravated', as they flout the politeness conventions of the Community of Practice, and are therefore impolite acts [34].

Gender and Unpopularity in the Interview Data. Seven of the interviewees (five women and two men MLAs) thought that the Minister's gender had a role to

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[7] The Minister supported the abolition of the eleven plus examination in Northern Ireland, but was strongly opposed by the DUP, the Socialist Democratic and Labour Party and the grammar schools in Northern Ireland. An alternative selection scheme (established by the Association of Quality Education AQE) was set up in opposition to the Minister's policy which offers a replacement examination with many grammar schools signing up to the scheme.

play in her unpopularity, the remaining four men MLAs said that they thought she would be treated the same regardless of her gender. On close examination of the interview data it is clear that 'gendered discourses' [35] play a role in the ways in which the Minister is appraised. Gendered discourses are sets of attitudes or norms that conceptualise gender in particular ways and it is clear that she is appraised in relation to stereotypical ideas about 'masculine' and 'feminine' interactional styles [36]. One interviewee who supports the Minister shows the disjunction between the Minister's behaviour and these stereotypical ideas when she states: *'She is assertive and confident and quite determined but she's an absolute lady, a lovely girl',* which implies that her strong stance in the chamber is somehow at odds with being 'ladylike'. Her interactional style is also appraised in comparison to other female Ministers and directly blamed for the criticism she receives in the chamber: *'She is quite confrontational for a Minister we have quite a number of female Ministers and they don't get the same stick as she does'.* The same interviewee also states:

> *'I was quite taken aback on one occasion when she stood up and she looked around and she had her fingers pointing at everybody and saying "yous yous yous are all against change" that's no way to speak. Her way of dealing with things needs to be softened up a bit'.*

Here the Minister is negatively appraised for her perceived non-verbal and verbal confrontation in the chamber, which is judged as inappropriate and 'no way to speak'. For this interviewee the Minister needs to adopt a less confrontational stance in order to avoid criticism. This seems at odds with the institutional norms of the Assembly in which many members describe the 'cut and thrust' of adversarial politics as an enjoyable and everyday part of the proceedings (see section 3.4. below). Her style is also perceived as *'patronising, thinks she knows it all type patronising'* and that *'she certainly doesn't have any confidence issues'.* Some of the interviewees attribute the Minister's treatment in the chamber to sexism: *'Many of the men feel that the woman's place was in the home and certainly not in the debating chamber and one that makes decisions even, horror of horrors!'*

Although none of the interviewees had exactly the same opinions about the Minister, it is clear that her interactional style contributes towards her unpopularity in the chamber. It would also appear that her perceived confrontational or aggressive behaviour is appraised in relation to her lack of conformity with stereotypical gendered interactional norms. It is possible that her lack of conformity to these gendered expectations plays a part in her unpopularity. The Minister herself is reported by an interviewee as saying "I plant one foot either side of that podium and I say 'bring it on'", hardly the facilitative, conciliatory and collaborative style stereotypically thought of as 'female' [37].

4.2 Evidence for Unpopularity from an Interview with the Minister of Education

The Minister herself partly attributed her unpopularity to the policies for which she was responsible, but also partly to '*deep-seated prejudice*' relating to a '*very different political ideology*' to that of most of her colleagues. She describes herself as being '*a feminist, I'm into languages I'm into fair trade and fairer relationships with North and South*'. She also has a similarly clear view on her use of Irish in the chamber: '*It is my right to speak a language and I don't apologise for that it's not in any way meant to offend*'. When asked directly how she felt when she was attacked in the chamber, she answered '*well I'm a strong woman and I take no nonsense*' and that '*I stand my ground I stand up for what I believe in*'. In agreement with the comments from some of her colleagues, she also perceived that some of the criticism levelled at her was sexist:

> *I think that there's some people there who just think that it is their divine right to shout at a woman (....) I can feel that there was this presumption that we'll just give her a hard time and she'll fall in and collapse or we'll get her to leave.*

The Minister did not appear to be concerned about the way she was perceived by others, and only saw her beleaguered position as resulting from the prejudices and political agendas of her opponents, rather than as a consequence of her own actions. When asked if she was ever nervous when she spoke, she replied '*No, why should I be nervous*?'. However, the Minister did show concern for the way her public role affected her private life,

> *At different points my children were attacked you know references to my children were regularly on the front page of newspapers that should have known better.*

The negative assessment of women politicians by the media was one of the most recurrent themes in the interview data from women across all the devolved assemblies. This was also seen as one of the main reasons they were deterred from entering politics. The Minister says:

> *The number of young women that said to me I wouldn't do your job for love nor money it's and I get huge support out on the ground and they just go it's horrible what they're doing.*

The Minister is therefore very clear about her position, and the nature of the attacks against her. The following section attempts to analyse how her communicative stance and her treatment by others is represented on the debating floor of the assembly.

4.3 Evidence of Unpopularity from the Debate Floor

Formal debate proceedings can be viewed as speech events in which rules are devised in order to 'permit the equalization of turns' [38]. However, this smooth transition from one permissible turn to another is an ideal, and in reality illegal interventions (by individual and collective interruptions) and the breakdown of the debate floor are common. Where this breakdown occurs 'a speech event that should allow everyone an equal chance becomes an event in which prior inequalities (e.g. gender, age and ethnicity) can be re-enacted [39]. As noted in section 2.2. above, the debate floor can be viewed as a 'competitive economy' in which powerful speakers can force their way onto the floor, disrupt a permissible turn, and make their own contribution. The act of intervening illegally can be seen as one of the most powerful and aggressive acts in parliamentary speech events, because it publically flouts debate rules and violates the speaking rights of another. Most of the MLAs saw barracking as a characteristic part of proceedings in the chamber. Some MLAs said that they enjoy the 'banter' associated with 'out of order' utterances in the chamber, and it is expected that people '*get a bit of a roasting in there*' because '*that's the confine of politics*' and '*you should be able to withstand those criticisms*'. One MLA described this banter as '*no different from a game of rugby*' in that you can '*go at it 'ding dong'* with another Member *'and then joke about it afterwards*'. One woman MLA admitted to enjoying '*winding Martin up*' (referring to Martin McGuinness, Deputy First Minister), saying that she waited to see him turning red in the face in order to '*know that you've hit home*'.

MLAs agreed that '*we all heckle, but sometimes it is personal*' and that there was a difference between general shouts of 'rubbish' and more personal attacks on individuals. One woman MLA said that she deals with barracking by trying not to take attacks personally, and by trying to see them as a function of her public role as an elected representative. The Minister of Education does not take part in these rule-breaking interventions, but rather is subject to them when she takes the floor. Transcript one (below) is taken from a 'Question Time' session in which the Minister answered questions about her Education department.

Transcript 1: Education Minister's Question Time (4th October 2010)

1 DUP: Thank you Mr Deputy Speaker um can the Minister confirm the Irish
2 Government's fifty percent of the capital funding (.) in the interests of sp<u>eed</u>
3 Mr Deputy Speaker a yes or no is fine (.)
4 The Minister: *Tá mé ag obair leis an Roinn er sa Deisceart agus tá súil agam*
5 *go mbeidh an t-airgead ag Rialtas na hÉireann agus ag mo* [*Roinn*]
6 DUP: [is that a yes] or a no
7 The Minister: the member I will explain what I said there and er I am working
8 with the Government in the South of Ireland and [I hope]
9 DUP: [is that a no]
10 The Minster: I [hope   ]
11 DUP: [is that] a no (.)
12 The Minister   no it is not a no
13 Deputy Speaker: <u>or</u>der

14 The Minister: I have said very clearly th I bel<u>ieve</u> in the importance of the
15 centre and I look forward to working with my colleagues in the South to
16 continue to expand it *Sin é* (.)
17 UUP: Are you going to leave early?

Transcription 'Key'
DUP = Democratic Unionist male politician
UUP = Ulster Unionist male politician
The Minister = the Minister of Education
(.) = micropause of less than a second
[ ] = start and end of overlap with the line above or below
<u>Underline</u> = particular emphasis on line or syllable
Italics = Irish language

The transcript starts with a male MLA of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) asking the Minister a question, which he finishes by addressing the Deputy Speaker in order to request that the Minister answer with a 'yes or no' (line 3). This request is critical of the Minister as it implies that the Minister is unlikely to answer the question in a straightforward way. The Minister replies in Irish (lines 4-5) which directly contradicts the questioner's request for brevity and a direct response, as the rules of the chamber dictate that when a response is given in Irish the verbal translation into English must be given immediately afterwards by the speaker. The DUP questioner then interrupts, breaking the debate rules to repeat 'is that a yes or a no' and also to implicitly criticise the Minister's use of Irish as being an indirect rather than direct response to his request. He thereby sustains his initial criticism of the Minister by reinforcing the impression that she does not answer questions. The Minister addresses the interrupting MLA and the debate floor is therefore further disrupted by this illegal intervention as the Minister has been forced to address the interrupting MLA (line 7) before continuing her speaking turn. She is forced to account for her use of Irish by saying *I will explain what I said there* when in fact the convention of providing an immediate translation is understood by all MLAs. After the Minister has provided an initial assurance that *she is working with the Government* (line 8) the DUP MLA interrupts again by repeating *'is that a no'* (line 9), showing that he believes her to be avoiding the question. The Minister tries to ignore his interruption (line 10) but he persists by repeating the interruption (line 11) and once more forces her to address his intervention, disrupting her speaking turn once again. The Minister is forced to make the defensive reply *no it is not a no* (line 12) and the Deputy Speaker intervenes to try to enforce the debate rules (line 13). The Minister reinforces her claim that she is responding to the question by saying '*I have said very clearly..*' (line 14) before finishing with the Irish *Sin é* (meaning 'that's it'). As soon as she has finished her turn another interrupting male MLA asks 'Are you going to leave early' (line 17), which is a disparaging comment on her attendance in the chamber.

The tone of this extract, although highly critical, is humorous. The initial question is delivered while the DUP MLA is smiling, and the Minister also smiles when

replying directly to him in line 7. The humour is at the Minister's expense however, and her attempt to collaborate with this 'subversive' humour can be seen as a defence against this. Subversive humour can be thought of as helping to enable socially risky challenges by pretending that the speaker is not being serious [40] and is a category that accounts for challenges from subordinates to superiors [41]. Holmes and Marra claim that subversive humour can challenge or subvert the power and status of individuals and question the wider 'institutional or social values of a workplace' [42]. This would appear to be an appropriate category for this instance of debate discourse, and it is interesting to note that the Minister can do little to counter its effects: to fail to collaborate with the joke would make her appear humourless; but to join in with a joke at her own expense seems to undermine and weaken her position. Humour is clearly a multi-functional device [43], and is linked to politeness in that it can be used to criticise someone in an indirect way.

In all the examples of The Minister's exchanges in the chamber, none were found of her barracking, shouting out of turn and violating another's speaking rights. It is surprising therefore that the Minister is perceived to be so aggressive in style. The Minister herself observes that '*people use as a point of attack 'oh she's too confrontational' but it is really when I stand up for myself '*, and this perception seems to be borne out in the analysis of the debate floor. The Minister quite often retaliates when attacked, and forcefully defends her position, as shown in Transcripts two and three below.

Transcript 2: Questions to the Minister for Education (28th June 2010, part 1)

1 The Minister: …. the DUP and UUP continue to block the establishment of the
2 education and skills authority (.) which has been de<u>sig</u>ned to ensure that the
3 <u>max</u>imum amount of money (.) is directed to front line services rather (.) than
4 duplicating bureaucracy (.) the education skills authority has the potential to
5 save up to twenty million pound per annum (.) with strategic (.) rather than
6 piecemeal savings (.) these schemes are a <u>clas</u>sic example of why we do <u>not</u>
7 need (.) <u>five</u> boards (.) each board is doing a different thing (.) a different thing
8 in relation to <u>time</u> and the <u>length</u> of scheme and a different in terms of transport
9 (.) **th**is is **wh**y **th**is **soc**iety **nee**ds the **ed**ucation skills authority and it is **all** very
10 well for the Chairperson of the Committee **snig**gering
11 (------shakes head----------------------------------)
12 and **lau**ghing it is **ALL VE**ry **WE**ll but if **PEO**ple are **REA**lly con**CER**ned
 13 MLA: (interruption – unclear)
14 The Minister: **REA**lly concerned
15 Deputy Speaker: <u>Or</u>der <u>Or</u>der (.) the Minister
16 has the floor others will have a question you know the procedure on this type
17 of question others will have a question the Chair will have opportunity to ask
18 questions until that point comes the Minister has the floor (.)
19 The Minister: If people are <u>gen</u>uinely concerned about our special
20 educational needs children as I am (.) if they are they will join with me and
21 parties across the board in support of the establishment of the education and

22 skills authority. (.)

In this excerpt, the Minister is answering a question about the creation of the
Education Skills Authority to replace the existing Education Boards. She
criticises the DUP and UUP parties for blocking the creation of the new authority
(line 1) and then sets out some of the positive arguments for its creation (lines 4-
8). Then she refers to the behaviour of the Chairperson of the Committee (a DUP
member), who is 'sniggering and laughing' at her across the floor of the chamber.
She criticises them by implying that they are not 'genuinely concerned' about the
issue. As she starts to criticise the DUP member she makes a tapping motion
above the desk, this is then replaced by shaking her head when she directly
criticises the DUP member for sniggering (line 8), and then she points upwards
and beats her finger in the air as she says 'if people are really concerned' (lines 9-
12). At this point she is illegally barracked from the floor (line 11), and the
Deputy Speaker intervenes to restore order (lines 13- 16). The Minister chooses
not to ignore the 'sniggering' from the sedentary opposing MLA, but rather
attempts to tackle the criticism directly by 'naming' the perpetrator so that his
behaviour is recorded in the official report of the proceedings[8]. However, it
would appear that this act further aggravates the DUP MLAs as one of them
follows this with an illegal intervention that breaks down Minister's speech so
that the Deputy Speaker has to intervene to restore the debate floor. Similarly, in
Transcript 3 below, taken from the same question time session, the Minister
makes her 'strong stance' extremely explicit by repeating that she makes 'no
apology' for her actions three times (lines 2,3, and 4).

Transcript 3. Questions to the Minister for Education (28th June 2010 part 2)

1 The Minister of Education: *Go raibh maith agat as na ceisteanna sin* thank
2 you for those questions um I make <u>no</u> apology for making the point (.) that (.)
3 we should use our resources wisely I make <u>no</u> apology for saying that instead of
4 having eleven organisations (.) we should have one (.) I make <u>no</u> apology for
5 saying that in these tight financial times we have to make <u>sure</u> (.) that the
6 money gets to the front line and that we do not <u>squan</u>der it on administration as
7 has been happening in the past (.) and it con<u>cerns</u> me (.) that the Chairperson of
8 the Education Committee doesn't actually see the link (.) <u>does</u>n't actually see
9 the link between squandering money on administration and various

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[8] Illegal interventions are often not recorded on the official written report unless
the speaking MLA addresses the MLA making the illegal intervention.

10 organisations and the pressure on front line services because we all have
11 responsibilities (.) and I am taking mine very seriously.

These statements are not mitigated, and in terms of modality, their commitment to truth is categorical which also makes them sounds authoritative. However, one of the problems with this authoritative tone is that it can sound rigid and polemical and runs the risk of goading opponents. As one interviewee says: *she'll snap back at you and if it is always an angry response you'll become almost the butt of people's bile you know'.* The analysis of the debate floor shows that the Minister is critical of opponents in the chamber and faces direct criticism herself which frequently infringes on her speaking rights. She is supported in the chamber by the Speaker and Deputy Speakers who commonly intervene to restore her turn. The Minister displays many characteristics of stereotypically male language, but this does not appear to serve her well, as this seems to increase the strength of the attacks against her.

5. Conclusions and Discussion of Findings

It is clear from the analysis of the interview, observational and debate data that the Minister of Education does not use the discourse styles that are coded as stereotypically thought of as 'feminine'. Holmes (2006) describes these styles as conciliatory, facilitative, collaborative and indirect. The Minister almost exclusively draws upon discourse styles that are coded as stereotypically 'masculine' and described as competitive, aggressive, confrontational and direct. Interviewees on the 'backstage' of political events explicitly mention particular practices on the 'frontstage' that the Minister uses, such as finger wagging, that they take to embody an aggressive style. Their assessment of the Minister draws upon the discourse of gender differentiated speech styles. These observations would clearly be strengthened by further, comparative research investigating the different discourse styles of men and women MLAs in the Northern Ireland Assembly. This may provide further evidence to show that, for example, male politicians who use confrontational styles are not evaluated in such a negative way by their peers.

The Minister herself attests to 'standing her ground' and 'planting both feet on the floor' in the chamber, but does not see herself as an aggressor. She sees her behaviour in relation to the attacks sustained from her political and ideological opponents who just want her to fall in, collapse, and leave. It may be that this perception was justified as the Minister did not retain her Ministerial office after the Assembly elections in May 2011. It is also significant that the Minister does not engage in the most violative of practices in debates by illegally intervening to disrupt another's turn, yet nevertheless it is her confrontational stance that is so negatively assessed by her peers. The Minister does not allow her opponents' jeers to pass unnoticed, she refuses to be pressured into responding to illegal interventions, and she forcefully states her opposition without mitigation.

A consistent finding of recent research shows that successful women in leadership positions shift between stereotypical masculine and feminine discursive norms as 'a means of managing socially ascribed expectations that pull in opposite directions' [45]. These expectations, often expressed as the 'double bind' facing women who cannot at once be 'feminine' and display the powerful and authoritative masculine discursive styles expected of many professional roles, are not evidenced in the Minister's style. There is also little evidence that she pays attention to or is concerned about the way she is perceived by others. She does not use the characteristics associated with 'double-voiced discourse', in which female leaders have been found to use 'a range of different strategies with which to observe, regulate, police, review and repair the way they appear to their colleagues, in order to avoid negative judgement' [46]. Her 'single-voice discourse' [47] conversely is 'free-standing, not enmeshed with or regulated by the voice of the other', and has been identified as characteristic of male conflict talk.

The negative appraisal of the Minister and her interactive style fits the description of the 'Iron Maiden' identified as a role given to female leaders in male-dominated professional environments [48] which is the most 'semantically derogated role of all' because she refuses to 'take account of wider social discourses about gender that suggest that women are not supposed to speak and behave aggressively' It is also a role that is seen as being 'suicidal in the context of an organisation' [49]. While it is clear that the Minister's unpopularity in the Northern Ireland Assembly is attributable to a complex range of factors including her policies, ideological and political stance, and her interactional style, it is clear that it is the way she draws upon gendered discursive resources significantly contributes to her unpopularity. Women in parliamentary institutions must 'manage their femininity carefully' because if they do not display the acceptable feminine style in these incredibly gendered environments, they risk being labelled as somewhat strange and grotesque' [50]. It is possible that the wider political contexts of Nationalism and the symbolic use of Irish language characteristic of this Community of Practice align the Minister more strongly with the discourse of resistance and opposition, and this makes her less inclined or able to draw upon facilitative styles. This is certainly worth further investigation, as it is notable that the Minister's linguistic style does not concur with the shifting styles found to be characteristic of women leaders in other male dominated institutions [51]. It is also important to ask why the Minister does not align herself with the overarching discourse of gender difference and the stereotypical speech styles associated with this, choosing instead to appropriate characteristics stereotypically thought of as masculine. It may be the case that the Minister's style attempts to transgress the 'highly rigid regulatory frame' [52] of the social constraints and expectations that shape the available gendered discursive resources. However, it is the Minister's deviation from these 'gender norms' that entails penalties [53] and ultimately leads to her vilification.

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