A Study of Female Anti-Stereotype Discourse from the Perspective of Gender Construction — Take Mrs Thatcher’s Speeches as an Example

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Abstract

In order to reveal how female figures with power construct their social identity through discourse, this paper analyzes the discourse pattern of female anti-stereotype in Mrs. Thatcher’s two speeches through data statistics from the theoretical perspective of gender construction. It is concluded that the anti-stereotype discourse pattern still reflects the social construction with male discourse as the power center, and the phenomenon of gender discrimination still exists.

Keywords: Gender construction, gender stereotype, Margaret Thatcher, sexual discrimination.

INTRODUCTION

Gender and language have been seen as a active part in academic field recently. Many Chinese and Western scholars have put forward many theories and research methods on this issue. Among them, the gender construction is a new theoretical perspective in recent years. According to this theory, scholars had also put forward community of practice [1] and gender performativity [2]. In addition, the theory of “gender stereotype” is also very important. Chinese scholars such as Song Haiyan [3] and Qian Jin [4] have studied the characteristics and theoretical basis of gender prototype in dialogue and vocabulary. As the product of human society’s inherent cognition, the research on gender prototype is very helpful in studying gender differences and gender discrimination.

By searching the keyword “gender stereotype” on the website of CNKI, we can get the overall trend analysis chart of all search results. It can be seen that as far as Chinese research is concerned, the research on “gender stereotype” has shown an increasing trend since 2010. It can be seen from the distribution of main themes that “gender stereotypes” are the most, among which “children” and “women candidates” are also distributed. Similarly, by searching the keyword “gender construction” on the CNKI, we can find that its overall trend has shown an increasing trend early after 2004. The main themes are “gender”, “gender identity”, “feminism” and so on.

It can be seen that in recent years, the research on gender construction theory and gender stereotype has increased respectively, indicating that scholars have paid attention continuously to the research on gender and discourse in sociolinguistics. However, there are few studies on the combination of gender construction theory and gender stereotype for corpus analysis. Therefore, this paper aims to combine the two theories and analyze the “anti-stereotype” phenomenon in the corpus through data statistics.

Gender Construction

The study of gender and language in both China and foreign countries has experienced many stages. The domestic research mainly focuses on the relationship, the research review, the development trend and the review of foreign theories [4]. The study of gender language in China has much references to foreign theories, and the localization research still needs to be strengthened.

The development of gender language in western society was influenced by the tide of feminism. At the initial stage, some scholars put forward physiological determinism [5], believing that the significant differences between men and women are...
physiologically determined and innate. After that, the
defect theory and dominance theory, the difference
theory and the politeness theory appeared. Although
these theories are not sound enough, the change
tendency of them reflects that the research of gender
language gradually changes from irreconcilable opposition among genders to equality and blending.

In recent years, with the influence of Post-
modern Feminism [6], a new theory of gender language
has emerged: the construction of gender languages, that
is, gender construction. The theory of gender
construction has advanced distinctly compared with the
previous theories of gender and languages, which
changed the traditional perspective and jumped out of
the traditional binary antithesis. Gender was regarded as
uncertain and changeable variables. The theory
emphasized the differences between social gender and
physiological gender, and incorporated gender into
social behavior, believing that people construct social
identities through social gender. This theory has
overturned the previous view that social behavior and
identity are determined by congenital gender. By the
gender construction theory, Russian linguists also
clearly put forward the concept of gender linguistics
[6].

Gender construction regards gender as a
dynamic concept and no longer pays too much attention
to gender differences, which provides a theoretical basis
for the integration of gender languages. It also combines social factors with gender issues more
closely, avoids the simplification of research problems,
and provides a new perspective for the study of gender linguistics.

The Foundation of Gender Stereotype

The concept of “stereotype” originally belongs
to the field of psycholinguistics. Rosch [7] believes that
a concept is composed of a set of characteristics that
can fully and necessarily define the various manifestations of the concept itself. He believes that the
concept is best regarded as a prototype. Prototype
theory actually means that we will take a prototype as a
typical example to classify things in the process of understanding things. Therefore, “prototype” or
“stereotype” is regarded as the standard to divide
similar things. “Gender stereotype” is the division of
gender on the basis of prototype. Qian Jin [8] divided
gender stereotype into male model and female model,
which can also be called “strong model” and “weak
model”, that is, male stereotype mostly focuses on the
characteristics of responsibility, intense spirit and
toughness, reflecting the “strong” side. On the contrary,
female stereotype focuses on the characteristics of
docility, carefulness and weakness, reflecting the
obvious “weak” tendency. Song Haiyan [3] made a

statistical summary on the reflection of gender stereotypes in the verbal communication ability. A
number of studies in Song Haiyan’s research have shown that female stereotype requires women to listen
and be silent in verbal communication, to use less tabs and more euphemisms and modal verbs, and to
not control the topics spontaneously as the behavior of controlling topics is not advocated for women. In using
imperative sentences, women is more gentle than men,
and will use more interrogative sentences and polite
language. Generally speaking, the prominent features of
female stereotype are euphemism and tone weakening.

The “anti-stereotype” discourse proposed in
this paper refers to women’s rebellion against the
requirements of “female stereotype” in verbal
communication. Taking Song Haiyan’s research
conclusion as the discourse standard, this paper aims to
analyze women’s behavior inconsistent with the
standard in verbal communication and the construction
reasons behind it.

Corpus Analysis

This paper chooses Margaret Thatcher’s
speech in the White House in 1979 and her resignation
speech in 1985. There are two reasons for choosing the
two speeches. One is that both of the speeches are
formal speeches on formal occasions, and the purposes
the author wants to achieve and the identities she wants
to build are similar. The second is that the two speeches
have different degrees of formality. Compared with the
resignation speech, the White House speech is more
casual which contains many humorous words with a
similar pattern of dialogues, while the political
tendency shows strongly in the resignation speech, and
the degree of formality in the resignation speech is
much greater than the one in White House. The two
speeches have both common research value and
different characteristics, which can enable us to analyze
female discourse from different aspects and make the
research results more scientific.

Analysis of words

Goodwin’s research shows that women tend to
use modal verbs such as “should” “would” “could” to
be euphemistic and to avoid being blunt[3]. In addition
to the highly positive boosters such as “must” and
“can”, modal verbs play an important role to express
uncertainty and euphemism. They can be classified as
hedges which can act as persuasive weapons in
dialogues, matching the “weak” image of female
stereotype. According to the statistics, the total words
counted in Mrs. Thatcher’s two speeches are 922 words
in the White-House speech and 923 words in the
resignation speech. This paper counts the number and
proportion of modal verbs acting as hedges in these two
speeches. The results are shown in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>White House</th>
<th>Resignation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>should</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>would</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>could</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>must</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>can</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The statistical analysis shows that the
frequency of modal verbs in the White House
speech is slightly higher than in the
resignation speech, indicating that
women tend to use modal verbs to
express uncertainty and euphemism.
Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modal words as hedges</th>
<th>Numbers in the White House speech (times)</th>
<th>Frequency in the White House speech (%)</th>
<th>Numbers in the resignation speech (times)</th>
<th>Frequency in the resignation speech (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>should</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>would</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>could</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shall</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>may</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>total</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

13 times in total

The modal words that do not appear in two speeches, like “might”, are not counted in this table. Besides, the words that act as tense verbs rather than modal verbs, like “will”, are not counted in this table either. Through table 1, we can find that for a single kind of modal verb, the frequency of each verb does not exceed 1% in both speeches, which shows that hedges rarely appear in both speeches. In addition, through the comparison of the two speeches, we can find that the modal verbs acting as hedges in the White House speech are higher than those in the resignation speech.

In order to achieve an obvious comparative effect, we also counts the boosters representing strong tone and speaker’s attitude, represented by “can” and “must”, and the results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>boosters</th>
<th>Numbers in the White House speech (times)</th>
<th>Frequency in the White House speech (%)</th>
<th>Numbers in the resignation speech (times)</th>
<th>Frequency in the resignation speech (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>can</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>must</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>all</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>very</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>never</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>only</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>others</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1.30</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>total</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>3.58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

56 times in total

In the statistical process, it can be found that Mrs. Thatcher also used words with high degree of confirmation and violent tone, such as “there is no doubt that”, “really”, “inextricably”. Due to the diversity of boosters, we summarizes the boosters that appear less frequently in the line of “others” in order to save space.

From Table 2, we can see that the frequency of boosters in the two speeches is generally higher than that of hedges. Among them, the total number of boosters in the White House speech is 23, accounting for 2.49%, while the number of boosters in the resignation speech is 33, accounting for 3.58%. From the comparison of the two sets of data, the boosters in the White House speech are not as frequent as in the resignation speech.

Based on the above analysis, it can be found that the different degrees of formality in the two speeches are closely relevant to the words that the speaker chooses. Since the White House speech is relatively less formal, from the perspective of social identity construction, what the speaker needs to build on this occasion is an image with high affinity to get closer to the audience rather than a powerful image. Therefore, Mrs. Thatcher uses more hedges in the White House speech to make the speech euphemistic and make the image of the speaker amiable. On the contrary, in the resignation speech, the primary task of the speaker is to construct the power image. Therefore, we can find that in this speech, the characteristic of “female anti-stereotype” pattern can be found obviously. She uses more boosters to make the tone violent and decisive, shaping a bold and responsible social image, which is totally different with the requirements of the traditional female prototype with the characteristics of “weak” and “gentle”.

In addition, in terms of uses in taboos, Mrs. Thatcher’s speech also shows the pattern of “anti-stereotype”. In the White House speech, Mrs. Thatcher used the phrase “shut up” when describing the situation that Lord Carrington was locked up in the Lancaster palace. Mrs. Thatcher used “shut up” when there are other choices to achieve the humorous effect, and, on the other hand, to shorten the distance between the
audience and the speaker. It is actually building her own character with masculinity rather than femininity.

Analysis of Sentences

In the use of sentences, Mrs. Thatcher’s choice in these two speeches also shows her rebellion against the discourse mode of “female stereotype”. According to the research results of Fishman [9], women use additional interrogative sentences and general interrogative sentences three times as frequently as men (87:29). There are two functions in this kind of interrogative sentences: one is that in conversations, women actually use interrogative sentences as communication skills to promote the process of the conversation, and the other is to reduce affirmation and express euphemism and modesty.

In Mrs. Thatcher’s two speeches, there are almost no interrogative sentences with the intention of the second purpose. And since the subject of the selected material is not dialogue, the interrogative sentences with the first purpose do not exist in the materials either.

In the resignation speech, interrogative sentences appear more frequently in the form of parallel sentences.

Example 1

Who is to answer the child crying for help? Who is to protect the elderly couple? Who can win back the youngster hooked on drugs?

Parallel sentence is a common sentence pattern used in speeches. Its main purpose is to emphasize the speaker’s point of view and incite the audience. The sentence appeared here is actually rhetoric question without clear answers. Through these questions, the speaker not only does not weaken her tone, but makes the tone more aggressive and thought-provoking, so as to achieve the speaker’s intention of building a powerful identity.

What’s more, Mrs. Thatcher chooses fewer interrogative sentences but more exclamatory sentences in her speeches, which once again confirmed that she used language patterns to build her own social identity and create a confident, decisive and persuasive leader image.

Example 2

Yes!…… There are more Bobbies on the beat!

Goodwin [10] found in his research results that the boys’ group is a hierarchical organization, and its leaders use imperative sentences with violent tone to present their ability of command over their subordinates, while girls’ group is an organization that pays more attention to internal relationship, and all the girls have decision-making power on the basis of equality. This “anti-stereotype” feature can also be reflected in Mrs. Thatcher’s speech. As shown in example 3, Margaret Thatcher used imperative sentences in her speech.

Example 3

Come with us then towards the next decade.
Let us ensure that we’ll bring them within our grasp.

The imperative sentence usually shows a stronger sense of command. Mrs. Thatcher uses imperative sentences to construct the image of leader and commander in line with her power identity. In fact, she constructs her own social identity based on the “male stereotype” to meet her power identity. This means that “male image” and “power” are still interconnected closely. If the language features in line with the “female stereotype” are used in the speech, the image of a powerful leader cannot be successfully created. Through the analysis of Mrs. Thatcher’s speech, we can find that the differences between male and female discourse patterns are still obvious when come to the cases in distribution of social power, and the characteristics of female discourse are still associated with “low power status”.

CONCLUSION

Through the discourse analysis of Mrs. Thatcher’s two speeches, this paper analyzes the “anti-stereotype” model of Mrs. Thatcher’s speeches in public with the theory of gender construction, and proves that there is still a language pattern with male discourse as the power center in today’s society. When women really have the right to speak in the political arena, they also need to shape tough images, or use a discourse model similar to that of men, so as to make themselves more convincing or more in line with the identity with leadership status, which itself shows that women’s language represents the opposite of leadership and sense of responsibility, which is very unfavorable to the construction of women’s social identity. We can see from this “anti-stereotype” language pattern that gender discrimination still exists deeply at the social and political level, and gender equality and integration still need the efforts of all sectors of our society.

REFERENCE