

Gender Differences in Congressional Speeches

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Book Review

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In this book, the author reports on her PhD thesis in an engaging and informative way. It is eminently clear that the thesis was meticulously conducted, and hence the book makes good reading for anyone with an interest in, and appreciation for, academic rigour. It presents a fascinating analysis of the way the discourse is affected by gender. The mouth speaks abundance of the heart and this book's critical analysis or meticulous examination of the 113th iteration of congress as well as clinical deconstruction reveals some clear difference between the mouth and hearts of men and women. *Gender Differences in Congressional Speeches* provides a striking revelation of how women's speeches compare and contrast with those of men. Through the analytical interpretation of cogent amounts of data that was conducted by the author, the reader is bound to acquire an accurate and current understanding of the dichotomy that exists between women and men, and come away with no doubt that the so-called glass ceiling still exists, and continues to represent an impervious impasse.

The 113th US Congress, the speeches whereof being the subject of analysis presented in this book, was composed of a record number of female participants - 103 to be exact. Yet, that was one quarter of the 450 men who participated. Remember women are approximately 50% of the population but only 19% of the representation. Clearly, there is a hinderance that manifests in the form of stifling and hampering women's representation at the highest levels of civil service. The author quotes from the first ever Australia female minister whose "misogyny speech", voted one of the country's most memorable tele-visual moments, 'the glass ceiling can be broken through, but women bear the scars and lacerations'. This book elucidates how the ceiling may be getting thinner but it also serves as to caution that a thinning of the glass is may be equally or more hazardous.

It is worth mentioning that the author's thesis sets out to take an objective (unbiased) and non-normative approach, essentially assessing 'what is' rather than 'what ought to be'. That in itself is not an easy starting point, for several logical reasons. One is that it is hard to engage in any discussion about gender differences without entering the contested territory of gender identity, evoking in itself a myriad of perspectives, not least of which invariably entails taking a position on whether or not any such differences should be regarded as desirable (as in containing the hope of emergent synergies) or should be obviated, ignored, or mitigated (in a quest to equalise or redress past inequities).

Furthermore, some of the very models being applied are themselves to some extent necessarily normative in structure. For example, when one assesses how often certain pronouns have been used in political speeches, there is an undeniable assumption that one particular pronoun, e.g. 'we', is preferable to another, e.g. 'I'. To ignore the assumption would be naive. The point is that the author does not shy away from recognising the inherent potential bias contained within respective theoretical models, yet still manages to apply them without allowing such assumptions to limit the objectivity of her commentary on the content of the speeches. In a word, she does not set out to persuade, or attempt influence the reader to adopt particular values or judgements, but simply to show how the use of

established theoretical models, when applied to the content congressional speeches, can rightly discern what the speakers' intentions were.

This work uncovers one very significant key difference between male and female discourse, i.e. the 'lack of use of inquisitives' by females. This includes a reluctance to express their feelings, so as to avoid the potential denigration that could result from using language styles that would not typically be used by their masculine counterparts. This acquired denouncement and deprecation of feminine-styled rhetoric has become endemic. Ironically, female leaders who were perceived to have strayed too far into masculine style rhetoric, such as from Angela Merkel (Germany) and Jacinta Ardern (New Zealand), were affronted for being too dispassionate and cold.

As a historically-discriminated group in society, it seems that women continue to suffer from a need to modify their image to that generally accepted in male-dominated society, even once they have broken through the glass ceiling. For instance, the supposed *fairer* sex (though not always treated *fairly*, as the book elucidates) are expected to articulate their discourse more formally and in more complex prose, otherwise deemed inapt, or as the author accurately posits, "they will be perceived as not knowledgeable enough." This, it is apparent, is the underlying reason why women highlight their own experiences more than their male counterparts. Additionally, it is shown how women have needed to establish 'certitude risk' to avoid subversion.

A common concern when making a quantitative analysis of language is often that, although the words themselves have been used to convey meaning, the actual meaning is not exclusively reliant on the words alone. This could be a problem if the significance of a word were to be deemed only the number of times it is used. No such criticism of this thesis would be justified. On the contrary, in this work, the author has been especially careful to provide sufficient context so that the quotations being addressed may be understood in context. Furthermore, when making comparisons between speeches, it is not only the words that have been analysed but, in fact, the meaning represented by them.

We would highly recommend this book to anyone having an interest in gender equality or gender differences, and especially readers who have a high propensity to fathom literary complexity and wish to further improve that capacity, as well as those who enjoy a high level of curiosity about political rhetoric in particular. Additionally, anyone with an interest in understanding the use of emotive language, self-promotion or persuasion, will benefit from this read. For us reviewers, the greatest gain has been the opportunity this work presents for self-examination, that is to say it can be read with an intention toward improving one's own use of language so as to portray what one really stands for (and who one really is), which, we might add, appears to be an ever-diminishing ideal in the 21st century world. Let this serve as a timely reality-check for those (few) among us who may yet aspire to the highest degree of authenticity.