



## Locker-room talk: an exploration of gender discourse and constructed identities in Donald Trump's presidential debate with Hillary Clinton

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### Introduction

The predominant drive of this study is to understand how and to what effect Trump conforms to and subverts postmodern gender and identity sociolinguistic theories, during his two attempts to justify his sexist remarks in the second presidential debate. The 2016 elections between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton is a particularly loaded source for an exploration of gender discourse, especially with the media's exposure, deep into the electoral campaign, of recordings from 2005 in which Trump makes sexist comments during a conversation with Billy Bush, a television and radio host. Trump's apology and dismissal of these remarks as 'locker-room talk' (Appendix 1) has abundant ramifications, regarding prevailing sociolinguistic narratives within gender discourse and identity construction. In his attempts to justify his sexist discourse he exhibits the influence of, while perpetuating, cultural perceptions of gender differences in contemporary America. His eventual victory in the election suggests his ideologies in these fields may be shared by much of the American population, and my findings may thus serve as an indirect critique of American gender and identity principles. Using this debate as a case study for investigation should expose the standards of gender discourse within the political domain, while enlightening us as to how gender is navigated in different interactions, with different audiences.

### Background

Contemporary 'postmodern' (Cameron 2005: 483) sociolinguistic theory on identity dictates that it is something mutable and performed through action and language, as opposed to simply a person's classified opinion of themselves. Bucholtz and Hall (2005) propose that identity emerges in interaction with others, with 'temporary roles and orientations' (591) for the participants to position themselves as. The means by which such identities are assumed is through the process of indexicality, a principle that denotes how 'linguistic forms are used to construct identity positions' (594). Their study observes, and advocates, a trend of contemporary research that stresses the fluidity of identity while critiquing 'totalizing master narratives characteristic of previous generations' (605). Their research is deliberately overarching and broad, however, and necessitates a divergence into more specific contexts.

Indexicality and more specifically stance – 'the display of evaluative, affective, and epistemic orientations in discourse' (Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 595) – have been applied within research on gender discourse. Kiesling (1998), for example, brings the principle of indexicality into the realm of cultural conceptions of masculinity. With the college frat house as his case in point, his results signify that masculinity can be considered a socially-constructed alignment role ('the models, positions, and stances' of discourse (1998: 70)) that can be indexed, and thus corroborates Bucholtz and Hall's theory that certain linguistic structures 'have ideological associations with specific personas' (2005: 594), which in this case is 'vernacular power' (Kiesling 1998: 84). While Kiesling draws on postmodern ideas of gender performativity, the all-male community of practice he focuses on, however, conforms to gender 'dominance and difference' (Cameron 2005: 486) approaches, which are dictated by ideologies of binary gender separation that predate the postmodern.

Deborah Tannen (1990), for instance, stresses the difference in male and female discourse due to their different upbringings, arguing that 'even if they grow up in the same neighbourhood, on the same block, or in the same house, girls and boys grow up in different worlds of words' (18). This gender separation cultivates differences between the sexes, not only biologically but also linguistically, and the frat house as a social institution appears to accentuate this gender separation. However, Tannen's

apparent overlooking of the significance of agency, and the potential for power imbalance within a conception of dual-gender culture, has been subsequently criticised by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992), for how it 'minimizes the blame for cross-cultural tensions for both the dominating and the dominated group' (467). Robyn Lakoff's writing on gender dominance (1975), meanwhile, recognises this power imbalance inherent to ideas of male and female discourse variation, hence her depiction of a "women's language". For if 'power is central to men's identities', and 'language should be intimately involved in this display' (Kiesling 1998: 70) as Kiesling suggests, then conversely, as Lakoff observes, "women's language" must be defined by its weakness and inferiority.

From the early 1990s onward, gender discourse and feminist theory have, in their focus and approach, tended to progress from theories revolving around the differences between male and female discourse, in tandem with postmodern conceptions of identity (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992). Cameron (2005) clearly identifies this development in focus, remarking that a 'pervasive feature of the "post-modern turn"... is the shift from thinking in terms of binary gender *difference* to thinking in terms of gender diversity' (487). Kiesling's continued investigation into the frat house leads to identification of common linguistic strategies shared by occupants of male environments, and assertions such as 'men strive for (and hold) powerful alignment roles because of a societal ideology *hegemonic masculinity*' (1998: 71) run the risk of generalizing male conformation to social constructions. McConnell-Ginet and Eckert (1992), on the other hand, stress the variety within the categories of male and female discourse, arguing that 'analysts all too often slide from statistical generalizations to quasi-definitional or prototypical characterizations of "women" and of "men", thus inaccurately homogenizing both categories and marginalizing those who do not match the prototypes' (470). Within Kiesling's (1998) work there is a narrow divide between the homogenizing nature of the frat house, and the theorist who generalizes male discourse through a narrow focus on such an environment.

Here a significant distinction needs to be made between prevailing narratives within sociolinguistic theory and gender practices in everyday society. Time-honoured structural norms that divide the sexes, such as frat houses, can often hinder an alignment with postmodern theories such as Eckert and McConnell-Ginet's (1992), therefore preventing unified progression, and this study proves how Trump's discourse in this mass-mediated political debate perpetuates such a divide. Sociolinguistic studies within the political realm have rarely focused on the issues of gender and identity construction (and their intertwining), although Tanya Romaniuk (2016) represents an exception. She duly notes how 'indexicality is a fundamental concept in understanding how linguistic forms come to be associated with social categories such as gender' (543), but that within the political sphere gender can become significant not only from within an interaction, but also from 'post-contextualisation' (535), wherein 'interactions are subject to multiple forms of re-presentation' (536) from third-part participants, and these levels of contextualisation will be evident in my data.

## **Methodology**

In his debate answers, Trump performs a kind of sociolinguistic analysis of his own prior discourse, and I thus compared and contrasted his own interpretation and justification of his remarks with significant studies on gender and identity. Romaniuk argues, 'mediated forms of public communication... constitute particularly valuable sites for investigating the emergence of gendered meanings' (2016: 536). As implied here, the political, mass-mediated context is a key factor that must be considered to understand why certain gender meanings arise in Trump's discourse, and so an exploration of his ideological representation of issues such as identity, gender and sexuality must therefore be precluded by investigating the dynamics of the context it appears in. A Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach was pertinent, for the way it entailed a top-down (Woods 2006: xi) structure to sociolinguistic research. My analysis is split into two discernible segments:

### *1. Analysis of the speech circumstances:*

In this stage I drew upon Charteris-Black's (2014) outline for CDA, whereby I considered both the 'situational circumstances' (87) of the debate – such as the speaker(s), the location, the occasion, and

the audience – as well as ‘cognitive circumstances’ (87), such as Trump’s and the audience’s respective, interactional beliefs and purposes. Here the situation is complicated by dual contexts, and the process of re-contextualisation that occurred between the original utterances and the debate, in the media and subsequently amongst American society. Trump’s debate answers represented my primary context, though in these answers he is confronting past statements which were in turn dictated by their own contrasting speech circumstances. I therefore considered how this situational and cognitive contrast informs, and is in fact exploited within, Trump’s present-day discourse.

## *2. Application of sociolinguistic theory*

Here Trump’s linguistic features are highlighted and analysed through comparison with sociolinguistic studies on politics, identity and gender. I sought to resolve where Trump’s ideological position lies within ‘modern’ and ‘postmodern’ feminist approaches to language and gender (Cameron 2005: 484), by investigating the small units of his speech and exploring their wider ideological ramifications. Simultaneously, I also drew from studies on the conventions of political discourse, in order to understand how and why Trump frames his ideology, and constructs an identity, in the way he does.

Within this aforementioned structure, I took an overtly political stance to uncover the wider social ramifications of Trump’s conception on gender and sexuality, typical of CDA, which is a system that seeks to ‘decode relationships between language and ideology, language and power, language and gender’ (Reyes 2011: 785). CDA is often used for investigating scenarios in which a speaker wishes to persuade, and I made sure to consider how the messages he expresses, in response to accusations of sexist behaviour, are motivated by this goal of persuasion and an underlying desire to attain political power.

Applying CDA to the Trump-Clinton presidential debate served to uncover the electable identity in construction, and revealed the prominence of role of gender within this identity. Although CDA often emphasises the context, Fairclough and Fairclough (2011) also state that ‘it is one of the hallmarks of CDA that linguistic form matters, that choices made as to how to express certain content are of crucial importance’ (251). Furthermore, seen as ‘these features become tied to styles and hence to identity’ (Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 597), an analysis of such features strengthened an understanding of the how gender within this identity is negotiated through language choices.

While using a CDA approach, I was unable to avoid bringing my own political agenda into my analysis, and so I made sure to root every point I made within established theoretical ideas, thus always giving my own potentially clouded judgements greater validity. My CDA approach was also limited due to data-restrictions, meaning I was confined to only discussing the context of the debate and Trump’s answers to the debate’s questions, rather than its back-and-forth interactional nature; therefore, issues of politeness, which could have provided further insight into Trump’s masculine identity construction (such as through analysing interruptions), are excluded from this particular study.

## **Analysis**

There are two relevant contexts within this extract of the debate, with gendered meanings shifting as discourse is translated across media-platforms. Chronologically, the first context is the conversation with Billy Bush in 2005, a private yet recorded interaction in which Trump makes remarks such as ‘I don’t even wait. And when you’re a star, they let you do it, you can do anything.... Grab them by the pussy’. Such a statement combines multiple community-determined alignment roles (Kiesling 1998: 72) for a man: Trump states that his power as a business executive and reality television-star affords him the luxury to freely gain compliance over women, and in claiming to do so he also indexes his status as a physically powerful man (Kiesling 1998: 72). When this conversation was leaked, however, the American public perceived Trump’s remarks as indirectly indexing (Ochs 1992) his sexism, and were proof of him exploiting his status as a rich, white male to sexually abuse women less powerful than him, an interpretation displayed by the interviewer, Anderson Cooper: ‘You described kissing women without consent, grabbing their genitals. That is sexual assault’ (Appendix 1). In Trump’s answer to this question

he intends to re-contextualise his prior discourse back in his favour, thus regaining control over his personal and political identity.

There are notable contrasts in the two contexts, many of which Trump exploits in an attempt to distance himself from the remarks. The conversation with Bush is in a private, personal environment while the debate is public and political, and such a distinction determines Trump's identity construction, what with political, mass-mediated discourse being intrinsically linked with intentionality and pre-planning (Reyes 2011). Therefore, the debate enables Trump to construct a new, more favourable identity, and this opportunity can be considered in conjunction with Reyes' observation that 'the contextual setting validates the authority of the politician and that power allows the politician to present his speech as truth' (2011: 784). With the debate consisting of questions from the general public, Trump can plan messages primarily for the average American viewer, and to do this he makes assumptions about who they are and what they want to hear. He therefore aligns himself with the audience's verdict of his discourse as sexist, through disassociation with the past context in phrases such as 'I'm not proud of it' and 'I hate it' (Appendix 1), while using the platform as an opportunity to display his respect for females, calling as he does one of Bill Clinton's rape victims a 'wonderful woman' (Appendix 1). Moreover, the framing of the second question – 'at age 59, were you a different man, or did that behaviour continue until just recently' (Appendix 1) – facilitates this opportunity to stress how he is no longer the person that made those remarks.

Trump uses strategies of legitimization to achieve redemption, which Reyes defines as 'a justification of a behaviour' (2011: 782) that can be motivated by a need 'to obtain or maintain power, to achieve social acceptance, to improve community relationships' and so on. His central strategy is embodied in his conception of the 'locker-room' (Appendix 1), a soundbite which simultaneously draws upon theories of identity-in-interaction, and gender difference. In light of the conversation being unearthed, the political debate gives Trump the means to stress his present self as his "true" identity, which is achieved at the debate through overtly indexical statements such as 'I am a person who has great respect for people, for my family, for the people of this country' and authenticating phrases such as 'if you want to know the truth' (Appendix 1). His prior comments, meanwhile, are denaturalized through repeatedly stressing that it was just 'talk' and 'words that (he) said 11 years ago' (Appendix 1). Through fragmenting his identity here he corroborates with post-constructionist theories that observe how, in an occurrence whereby 'an identity violates ideological expectations', such as the 2005 conversation did, speakers 'make claims to realness and artifice, respectively' (Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 601). However, Trump's conception of performance is problematic in how it confuses ideas of front-stage and back-stage behaviour (Goffman 1956), for while he argues that his sexist discourse in a personal environment was a performance, and thus front-stage, he conversely suggests that this debate is his natural self, despite the fact that it is taking place in a publicly-mediated environment, in which he seeks to gain support.

By stressing that his discourse was artificial, Trump suggests his comments were simply borne out of being in an all-male, heterosexual environment. Kiesling's (1998) analysis of the fraternity is prescient here, because it appears remarkably similar to Trump's conception of the locker-room, for they are both communities of practice that would not exist without an ideology of gender polarization, not only biologically but linguistically too, while also containing a strong heterosexist ideology (1998: 74). Considering Trump's homogenizing presentation of the locker-room alongside postmodern feminist approaches, however, exposes his ignorance as to the diversity within gender categories, and overlooks 'people's active engagement in the reproduction of or resistance to gender arrangements in their communities' (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992: 466). In emphasising that his identity and discourse are defined by the all-male context he was in, he instead aligns with sociolinguistic studies that 'emphasize access as a determining factor in the "acquisition of language"', whereby 'specific language varieties are associated with specific associations; speakers are then cast both as passive users of whatever language varieties they happen to come into contact with' (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2005: 480). Trump corresponds with a "modern" feminist approach, in which 'linguistic gender differences are explained in terms of overarching social structures' (Cameron: 2005 484), an idea Tannen (1990) also stresses: 'communication between men and women can be like cross-cultural communication, prey to

a clash of conversational styles. Instead of different dialects, it has been said they speak different genderlects.’ (18) However, the manner in which Trump exploits such theories in order to downplay agency is an example of how ‘people sometimes use differences (and beliefs about differences) strategically in constructing their social relations’ (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992: 467).

Kiesling’s theory of hegemonic masculinity is relevant here, as it seems to be a chief cause of Trump’s sexist discourse, due to the way it ‘pushes men to have a powerful identity, to construct identities that appear to dominate in some way, either actually or symbolically’ (1998: 94), and in Trump’s repeated claims that his ‘locker-room talk’ (Appendix 1) never manifested into actions, Trump suggests he was merely using language as a tool to symbolise power. Considering this, Trump’s gender-difference strategy is problematic, due to the way he suggests sexist discourse towards women is a natural by-product of gender separation, and his normalization of it as ‘one of those things’ (Appendix 1), can be viewed as legitimizing the continuation of sexist discourse in society. Hegemonic masculinity also informs his construction of identity in the debate, with assertions of physical power evident in indexical statements such as, ‘I will knock the hell out of ISIS’ (Appendix 1), an assertion that conform to the idea that ‘men’s language reflects toughness, lack of affect, competitiveness and independence’ (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992: 485). Therefore, although Trump seeks to distance himself from his sexist remarks, in constructing the identity of a strong leader it appears he still indexes himself towards hegemonic masculinity, while simultaneously suggesting that it was this role he aligned himself towards in the original comments.

## Conclusion

There are notable contrasts between the conversation with Bush and the presidential debate, in terms of Trump’s identity construction and gender discourse; the way in which Trump draws our attention to such contrasts, by conceiving of the locker-room while indexing himself as somebody very different outside this setting, shows how he conforms to – while also exploiting as a strategy of legitimization – post-constructionist theories of identity, as something formed in interaction with different people. Upon the footage being leaked, people perceived it as revealing Trump’s ‘true’, back-stage personality, and yet in this debate he attempts to reverse this judgment, by stressing the performativity of the remarks. However, Trump’s discourse in the conversation had no apparent motive other than to index power, whereas the debate is fuelled by the underlying motives of receiving forgiveness and attaining presidential status, and so the validity of Trump’s identity construction in the debate, and dismissal of his past identity, is not as straight-forward as he might have us believe.

While there are notable contrasts in the two contexts, we see in the debate the ideological roots of where the original sexist comments derived from, with the alignment role of hegemonic masculinity (Kiesling 1998) driving Trump to construct a physically powerful identity in both contexts: in the private conversation this physical power is related to Trump’s social standing, whereas in the debate it conveys his political strength. The ideals of physical power are, according to Kiesling, ‘deeply embedded in the American culture’ (1998: 95), and so Trump’s identity construction is perhaps appealing to those who prioritise such principles.

In order to combat accusations of sexism, Trump stresses his behaviour was simply power expressed symbolically, through vernacular language. Such language is, according to Trump, simply a convention of the “locker-room”, a hetero-normative community of practice, and in arguing so he implies his discourse was merely induced by the social expectations of this environment, as opposed to his own personal attitudes towards women. Furthermore, through comparing his context with an exclusively male social construct, in which female access is denied, Trump falls in line with gender-difference theories, such as Tannen’s, that stress how binary-gender separation has given rise to misconceptions between the sexes.

However, in conceiving an environment where it is conventional for men to make sexist comments about women to index physical and social strength, he runs against the current narrative of gender discourse. Rather than focusing on environments such as the locker-room, in which sex is abstracted as the defining signifier of gender, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet argue ‘we need to focus on

gender in its full complexity' (1992: 472). Trump's simplification of male discourse, and apparent ignorance towards the variety within such a category, is exposed by the fact that a male interviewer, Anderson Cooper, frames the discourse as sexist. This data can be perceived as an example of how 'men have shaped language as an instrument for their own social, political and intellectual ends' (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992: 482), for Trump's normalisation of sexist remarks, and his binary perception of gender relations, perpetuates a male-centric social hierarchy in which women are relegated to a means for them to verbally index their power.

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## Appendix 1

(2016). 'The Second Presidential Debate: Hillary Clinton And Donald Trump (Full Debate) | NBC News'.

NBC News.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FRlI2SQ0Ueg&t=730s> (Date Accessed: 13 March 2017).

- 1 Anderson Cooper: We've received a lot of questions online, Mr Trump, about the tape that was released on Friday, as you can imagine. You called what you said 'Locker-room banter'. You described kissing women without consent, grabbing their genitals. That is sexual assault.
- 5 You bragged that you sexually assaulted women. Do you understand that?
- Donald Trump: No, I didn't say that at all, I don't think you understood what was -  
- This was locker-room talk. I'm not proud of it. I apologize to my family. I apologize to the American people. Certainly, I'm not proud of it, but this is locker-room talk. You know, when we have a world where you have ISIS chopping off heads, where you have -  
- and frankly, drowning people in steel cages – where you have wars and horrible, horrible sights all over, where you have so many bad things happening, this is like medieval times. We haven't seen anything like this, the carnage all over the world. And they look and they see. Can you imagine the people that are, frankly, doing so well against us with ISIS? And they look at our country and they see what's going on. Yes I'm very embarrassed by it. I hate it. But it's locker room talk, and it's one of those things. I will knock the hell out of ISIS. We're gonna defeat ISIS. ISIS happened a number of years ago in a vacuum that was left because of bad judgement. And I tell you, I will take care of ISIS, and we should get onto much more important things, and much bigger things.
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- Martha Raddatz: ....  
This tape is generating intense interest. In just 48 hours, it's become the single most talked about story of the 2016 election on Facebook, with millions and millions of people discussing it on the social network. As we said a moment ago, we do want to bring in questions from voters around the country via social media, and our first stays on this topic. Jeff from Ohio asks on Facebook, 'Trump says the campaign has changed him. When did that happen?' So, Mr Trump, let me add to that: when you walked off that bus, at age 59, were you a different man, or did that behaviour continue until just recently? [And you have 2 minutes for this.]
- 30
- 35 Donald Trump: [That was locker-room talk, as I told you.] That was locker-room talk. I am not proud of it. I am a person who has great respect for people, for my family, for the people of this country, and certainly, I'm not proud of it, but that was something that happened. If you look at Bill Clinton – far worse. Mine are words and his was action. His was -- what he's done to woman, there's never been anybody in the history of politics, in this nation, that's been so abusive to women. So, you can say any way you
- 40

45 want to say it, but Bill Clinton was abusive to women. Hillary Clinton attacked those same women, and attacked them viciously. Four of them are here tonight. One of the women, who is a wonderful woman, at 12 years-old, was raped, at 12. Her client she represented got him off, and she's seen laughing on two separate occasions, laughing at the girl who was raped. Kathy  
50 Shelton, that young woman, is here with us tonight. So, don't tell me about words. I am absolutely -- I apologise for those words, but it is things that people say. But what President Clinton did – he was impeached, he lost his license to practice law, he had to pay an 850,000 dollar fine to one of the women: Paula Jones, who's also  
55 here tonight. And I will tell you that when Hillary brings up a point like that, and she talks about words that I said 11 years ago, I think it's disgraceful, and I think she should be ashamed of herself, if you want to know the truth.