INTERPRETATION OF GENDER IN MERITOCRATIC DISCOURSE AT ACADEMIA: UKRAINIAN CASE

Abstract. The paper aims to contribute to a better understanding of gender as a performative social construct within topical frameworks of critical discourse analysis. Our study considers meritocratic academic discourse as one which manifests itself in a multitude of ways in communicative action including the binary possibilities that we encounter in language. The communication of a gender in academia involves not just a performativity but also its reception in the meritocratic academic discourse. The study is framed by the context of the current state of the university sector and is based on linguistic and sociological studies at two universities in Ukraine.

Keywords: language; gender; critical discourse analysis; meritocratic academic discourse.

1. Introduction

Analyzing the contemporary studies on language and gender performativity in academic organisations, which provides a theoretical grounding for researching meritocratic academic discourse, we are planning to answer the following research questions: (1) What is the position of women in Ukrainian academia? (2) How meritocratic and equal the Ukrainian academia is? (3) Do female academicians have an active role in shaping science and scientific performativity? To answer these questions, the current study has been based on linguistic and sociological studies of three academic departments in three different scientific disciplines at two universities in Ukraine. The departments have been chosen because they provide good possibilities for recognizing gender equality while extreme situations have been avoided. The departments have been studied in terms of their intra-departmental co-authorship networks and their citation history. Special attention is given to different academic organisation cultures and their ‘academic success’, to ways of making sense of gender matters within these settings. Ultimately, this article goal is to contribute to a better understanding of gender as performative social construct and topical frameworks of critical discourse analysis developed within the last twenty-five years which have all influenced current thinking in language and gender research.

In the context of a highly competitive and knowledge-intensive academic life, the role of gender performativity of academics in their success has become an increasingly important issue. In this article I aim to bring together theoretical work on gender and language from sociolinguistics and feminist linguistics by applying a new theorising of gender as a performative social construct identified with the ‘individual level’, that is, the individual speaker who will display gendered identity while engaged in spoken interactions [3, 4, 14]. Individuals come together and display their gendered identity within specific organizational contexts, that is, academic institutions. These are contained within the overarching ideological level, where individuals’ linguistic behaviour may be constrained by forces operating at a wider social level. This can be investigated by the application of critical discourse analysis specifically related to meritocratic academic discourse.

2. Literature Review on Gender

Gaps between male and female participation in the academic sphere and higher education are common to both developing and industrialized countries. While they may be narrowing in some cases, persistent gender stereotyping results in women being segregated into specific areas of study, which further reinforces norms regarding appropriate social and economic roles for women that discriminate against them in gaining access to jobs on an equal basis with men. Ukraine is not an exception. Women are typically encouraged to pursue humanities, education and health sciences, whereas men are pushed toward education in mathematics and the sciences, which have a strong vocational link [19]. Thus, even where women break barriers in terms of access to tertiary education, cultural norms shaping their relationship to the wider world of economic opportunity are not necessarily left behind.

According to Judith Butler [2], gender, as a category of social difference that structures society, is not a static category but a performative one; one that by its very nature requires change and reinterpretation in order to retain its analytical and cultural utility.

This discursive model of gender analysis – where in description and reiteration of categories, standards, and ideals tend to produce their own subjects - also means that “power is not only imposed externally but works as the regulatory and normative means by which subjects are formed. Gendered discourses have the power to create categories that structure society, and often determine how people navigate a wide range of social, legal, and economic interactions.

From the feminist perspective the definition of gender also includes the body and physical appearance as well as sexuality as part of the ongoing production of gender. The notion of power is central when conceptualizing gender since patterned differences between women and men, femininity and masculinity usually involve various expressions concerning, and means to bring about, the subordination of women [1].

According to Stuart Hall [9] another way of sustaining and legitimizing gender order originates from Saussure’s theory of representation and stresses...
differences between women and men, and femininity and masculinity. In other words, to re-construct masculinity and femininity into difference. Feminine and masculine are often understood as binary oppositions in which that which is affirmed by the One is often denied by the Other. Within this theory it is the difference between the various signifiers or signs that produces meaning. Thus, the "relationship" or "meaning" in question, is not essential, rather it is constructed in relation to, or by marking the difference between signs towards other members (signs) of that signifying system.

Gender order can be challenged if the rigidity of male/female dualism is challenged and the notion of difference is nuanced and contextualised [8]. Yet symbolization of difference to gender difference has been one of the most powerful symbols for sustaining gender order. Although a view of gender as something culturally and historically constructed is gaining acceptance, the symbolic binary opposition (difference) of gender remains largely intact.

Gender as a variable of language has been examined under many paradigms, starting with dialectology studies and variationism in sociolinguistic studies [11, 18] and a polarity was found in primitive cultures in early anthropological studies. Anthropologists drew attention to the way human societies view gender as a social category and how this view created linguistic differences among the genders which, in turn, perpetuate the concepts [5].

The concept of gender and language has significantly changed since the early linguistic studies of the 1960s, as sociolinguists gave detailed descriptions of language by looking at the differences between dialects of people from different places, and between men and women. These differences came under the spotlight in the 1970s, along with the feminist movement. A well-known book by Robin Lakoff [12], *Language and Women's Place* discovers the differences in men’s and women’s language. Lakoff proposed what later became known as the deficit theory, which stated that men were in dominant positions in society, and their language practices reflected and perpetuated this superior position, whereas women were marginalized, so their language reflected and reinforced this inferior position.

Deborah Tannen popularized another dichotomous model, the difference theory which acknowledged differences in the conversational styles and conversational goals of men and women without ascribing these differences to male dominance [17].

West and Zimmerman [20] had proposed a new constructivist approach, changing the way researchers conceptualized gender. They argued that gender is something a person does, rather than has. According to West and Zimmerman “Doing gender” involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine ‘natures’ [20, c. 126]. This performative model looks at gender as an interactional achievement.

3. **Background for the research**

We follow the view that the broader concept of discourse is not limited to linguistics although the study of texts and language always form one of the bases of the studies of discourses [13, c. 26]. We consider meritocratic academic discourse to be a social practice. In this sense discourses not only determine how we can talk about certain topics, but also how they (discourses) shape social practice such as how ideas are put into practice and what consequences ensue [9, c. 44].

According to Paula Mählck [13, c. 27], from this perspective discourses operate at different levels and therefore can also be studied on different levels. At the individual level, discourse analysis focuses on how subjects *use* discourses in their everyday lives and their consequences, rather than on the interplay between discourses at a more abstract level [10]. This influences how agents act and give meaning to gender in their everyday lives [7].

In this paper our understanding of meritocratic academic discourse shares traits from discourse studies at the institutional level; here the target could be to study the discursive formations of institutions such as academia or educational institutions. It means studying how a set of discourses constructs discursive formations. Change within a discursive formation can be analyzed by studying how meritocratic academic discourse within a discursive formation relates to other discourses. This can also bring information about wider changes between different discursive formations [13, c. 27]. In other words, this means studying what can be said about gender relations in academia and how meritocratic academic discourse is produced, maintained or excluded within the everyday lives of academic researchers.

4. **Data and Analysis**

The research material consists of 50 semi-structured interviews with female academics working on short (four years or less) fixed-term contracts or on stipends. The informants are mainly contract researchers also including workers in teaching positions, with both PhD students and those holding doctorates. Special attention is given to different academic organisation cultures and their ‘academic success’, to ways of making sense of gender matters within these settings [16].

The informants were from three different university departments at two universities, which inhabit different positions in the Ukrainian academic labour market, best illustrated through a description of the differences between the fields. In the context of the current emphasis on technical applicability, research funding has been increased in the field of technical sciences, the natural sciences have also made some funding gains, and the humanities have gained the least. According to PhD-holders themselves, graduates with recently completed PhDs in technical sciences occupy the best positions in the labour market, natural scientists the second best, and humanities PhDs the worst. There is also a clear difference between men and women in the natural sciences, with men having better career prospects than women [16]. However, these differences do not make the data representative: the aim
was to hear different voices and to investigate the communication performativity they employed in their responses. The overall aim of qualitative analysis is to understand human communication strategies, for instance to find out the meanings the informants give to their actions while implying certain tactics. Giving meanings (mobilizing discourses) is important because it can be consequential: how one conceives her or his own situation directs her/his actions. The informants were categorized according to whether they consider their work to be (1) insecure, (2) quite insecure, (3) quite secure or (4) secure (Figure 1).

![Figure 1: Analysis of the interview data in relation to a feeling of security at academia](image)

For the purposes of the questions asked at the article (1. What is the position of women in Ukrainian academia?; 2. How meritocratic and individual the Ukrainian academia is?; 3. Do female academicians have an active role in shaping science and scientific performativity?) we have picked out following three themes:

1. Flexibility at academia;
2. Equality and meritocracy at academia;
3. Whether gender has any effect on the scientific performativity.

Responses to these themes were categorized and investigated to discover the most common communication tactics used to describe a career in academia; the best aspects of the work; how meritocratic and individual their universities are; how informants think that universities treat women; and how they expect gender to affect their careers in terms of their active role in shaping science and scientific performativity.

Our approach to the interview data was to treat it as the informants’ accounts and interpretations of their own experiences, and as evidence of their use of meritocratic discourse at academia. The meritocratic discourse focused on here relate to gender, university work and the ways in which that work is changing. My aim was to find out how informants experience both their own precarious positions and the university as a workplace and organizational system, and to see how meritocratic discourse in academia mould their interpretations of their experiences and expectations. The scientific performativity in the interactive process of the interview has also been taken into account [6] (Figure 2).

![Figure 2: The informants’ interview data interpretations](image)
4.1. Flexibility at academia

According to the interviews, the overall picture was that informants appreciated the temporal and spatial flexibility of their work at academia. It was often commented that this aspect compensated for insecurity and low pay. The terms ‘flexibility’, and sometimes even ‘academic flexibility’, was often used in that sense. The informants represent both the positive and negative aspects of precarious academic ‘flexibility’. Some think that fixed-term contracts are merely a form of organizing work, and that they are free and flexible to leave after their contract ends or have fewer responsibilities than those in more secure or permanent positions. A very few informants see their position as insecure, and even hope for more responsibility. However, not even those who feel secure regard their fixed-term jobs as stepping-stones to permanent jobs, as can be the case in other work environments, since permanent jobs are so scarce at university [15].

Although perceptions of security and ability to choose depend on each individual’s situation, they also clearly differ between departments according to the funding situation and harshness of competition. It seems that informants working in the technical sciences are the least insecure. The natural sciences department seems to secure funding for its workers at least until they have completed their theses, but, according to the informants, there is a push towards industry thereafter. The humanities female academicians feel the most insecure, although their extensive experience of gaining funding (even post-thesis) somewhat alleviates their anxiety. A slightly larger proportion of self-identified interviewees expressed their appreciation of this flexibility, which may have been because their work could actually be more flexible – for instance, if you are on a scholarship you do not have many other responsibilities in the work community. In several interviews a university was referred to as a good place to work if you have children. Some informants said they had chosen university over the private sector because the former offers better possibilities for combining work and family life and as a result having a flexible schedule and freedom.

4.2. Equality and meritocracy at academia

Questions on gender equality and academia have shown how excellence, merit and individual suitability are gendered. As the study shows, understanding of equality and meritocracy at academia is quite individualist. Mostly all informants confirmed that everyone began from the same starting point in terms of career and rewards, recruitments, peer review processes and then progressed in due course according to their achievements. Favouritism or discrimination was presented as the opposite of meritocracy. All interviewees claimed that they haven’t faced any straightforward discrimination or favouritism and they count their universities as meritocratic. Thus the possibility of social support – whether exclusive or inclusive – was ruled out of the picture. But somehow we have traced a light discrepancy between meritocratic and equality discourses in Ukrainian academia. First, the workplace is seen as equal and meritocratic, because everybody is measured by the same standards and everyone has the freedom to choose. However, women are then seen as naturally choosing the wrong options. Taking the meritocratic discourse further sometimes it is understood as neoliberal, women, men and parenthood can be erased, and workers treated as free subjects, simply by denying that work can be affected by any responsibilities one might have outside of it, or by treating any such effects as mere excuses. Furthermore, the significance of social support for one’s career may be denied. It is noteworthy, however, that one interviewee was able to mobilize both the equality and meritocratic discourses in response to different questions during the interview, and sometimes even in response to the same question.

4.3. Gender and the scientific performativity

Some interviewees claimed that academia most certainly can be limiting for women but at the same time some women have been able to create ‘a room of their own’ within academia, by making use of different disciplines affordances as well as what can be viewed as its constraints. It is stated by some academicians that the construction of academia in Ukraine as gender-neutral has previously been brought to the fore as tied to a fear of naming problems as related to gender, as this would create stereotypes about women’s inability to succeed in the academic disciplines and the quota of women occupied in technical sciences is still significantly lower than that in humanities. Some think there is even an area that could be called “female kingdom” – Philology. But this is only one unique example. There is gender parity in the humanities. Some interviewees believe that men dominate in mathematics and natural sciences, but there are loud female names. It was mentioned in several interviews, along with the factors typical of most countries—raising women’s level of education, gaining financial independence from men, emancipation from housekeeping—Ukraine has some additional factors not observed in highly developed countries. Ukraine, like other European states, has a deeply rooted historical tradition of equal rights and opportunities for men and women in choosing their professions. Most all interviewees support that in Ukraine women have always been an active part of the society, and the number of men and women with higher education is approximately the same here. Women in Ukrainian science are not lost on the general background.

5. Concluding Remarks

The study from which I presented data from was conducted with a diverse sample of women from two universities in Ukraine and it clearly demonstrates that Ukrainian female scientists are actively involved in academic life. The discourse of meritocracy of the Ukrainian academia seems to have been internalized. The notion of academic freedom as flexibility is attractive, as is the idea that one’s future depends on a meritocratic working environment. Equality and merit are conceived in a hegemonic, liberal way in terms of equal opportunities. We can claim that the workplace in academia is seen as equal and meritocratic, because everybody is measured by the same standards and everyone has the freedom to choose. Science and gender equality is an integral part of the achievement of
objectives for social development in Ukrainian academia.

References