

**THE PRESIDENT AND THE PEPPERPOT:
LINGUISTIC REPRESENTATION OF THE SEXES IN A MELBOURNE DAILY NEWSPAPER**

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The print media has long had a strong influence over language, from the first days of the revolutionary printing press, when spoken word became solidified into a standardised, sometimes arbitrary, spelling system. Print media has a wide-reaching influence, and it is not only the spelling system which has suffered under the inky touch of print, but so too is the very social system from within which the print media operates affected by this medium of communication. The treatment of the sexes in the print media is of particular interest, and the various sexual biases, prejudices and inequalities of the greater society are reflected in the language of the print media.

This paper aims to look at previous research conducted about sexual representation and indeed, misrepresentation, in the medium of newspapers. It will consider some key features of gendered language, where *gendered* covers all types of language that assume sexual stereotypes, impose sexual prejudices, exclude one or the other sex, perpetuate sexual inequality and so on. The key features identified from the sourced texts will then be considered in the examination of one daily newspaper, *The Herald Sun* (September 23 1998), with a mind to highlighting the instances of sexual stereotypes, semantic derogation, and general linguistic inequality of the sexes.

A significant text in the area of sexual representation in the media is Kate Clark's *The linguistics of blame* (1992). She researches specifically the representation of women in the reporting of crimes of sexual violence in the British newspaper, *The Sun*. Using a stylistics-oriented analysis, she looks at the articles dealing with male violence against females, how the blame for the violence is attributed, and how the language of the article conveys that blame. Two interesting linguistic frameworks are used in her research: the naming (both of the victim and the attacker); and transitivity, which for Clark's purposes involves a process being 'done' by an agent (the male) and affecting a goal (the female) (Clark, 1992:212). The results of Clark's naming analysis of *The Sun* revealed the strategies of classing the attacker as sub-human 'a fiend', or as a sympathetic character with a name and a personal, sometimes 'tragic' history. The victim, on the other hand, may be labelled either as an 'unavailable' female (wife, mother) if the attacker has been reported as dehumanised, or as an 'available' female (unmarried mothers, blonde women, sexually active females) if the attacker has been described more sympathetically (Clark 1992:210-11). The responsibility for a male crime of violence against a female, concludes Clark, is often deferred from the man to the woman, by insinuating that any woman not under the proprietary 'protection' of a man is therefore sexually available. Her very presence provokes the poor, tormented male, who is as much a victim of his uncontrollable desires as is the woman. The other method is to omit the male's responsibility to other humans through the use of a non-human term such as fiend, thereby suggesting that he exists outside of society and the rules by which the society lives (Clark 1992:224).

In *Blaming the perpetrator* (Lamb and Keon 1995), diffusion of responsibility in cases of male violence against women is discussed in terms of the passive voice, the use of the couple as agent, the nominalization of the act, and the obfuscation of gender. Lamb and Keon's study consists of a newspaper article rewritten into three different versions:

- (1) active voice with agent, i.e: 'He beat her'.

- (2) passive voice without agent, i.e: 'She was beaten'.
- (3) diffused responsibility of couple as agent, i.e: 'The violent couple'.

These three versions are given to male and female readers of various ages and racial groups, to ascertain what type of punishment/treatment was deemed appropriate for each version. Somewhat surprisingly, there was a general lack of differentiation between the active voice and the passive, attributed by the authors to a possible acceptance of passive as typical newspaper style. However, the couple-as-agent version led to the selection of lesser punishments for the husband, thereby showing the insidious influence of grammatical bias.

The disproportionate representation of women in newspapers is discussed in Toril Swan's *All about Eve* (1992), where she asserts that women are far less often classed as 'newsmakers' than men, with the majority of news items in the Norwegian newspapers of her study containing male actors, that is, males performing the action (Swan 1992:42). Hawes and Thomas's (1995) study of British and Malaysian newspapers also revealed a bias towards males as the makers of news. Men are seen as the norm, and there is a distinct lean towards the male as the 'doer', the active, and the female as the passive, the receiver of the act. Women receive most of their 'news-worthy' attention via descriptions of their state of being, often a de-individualising 'stock . . . ready-made description' (Hawes & Thomas 1995:9). In *On reporting reporting* (Caldas-Coulthard 1994:307), the results of one study show a vast difference between the number of men quoted and the number of women – more than five times the number of men as women. Caldas-Coulthard and Hawes & Thomas also point out the phenomenon of linguistically portraying women as equal to children: 'women (and children) scream and yell' (Caldas-Coulthard 1994:307), 'girl, used for women of 24 or 25 years of age, [and] the words cheeky and saucy are associated with childhood' (Hawes & Thomas 1995:8). Smith supports this view, saying that: 'The image of woman as intellectually inferior and emotionally less stable than the male places her on a similar level to that of the child' (Smith 1981:22).

The use of neutral generic terms is a popular area of study, as in Ehrlich and Kings discussion of the attempt to use *Ms* as a neutral female title equal to *Mr*, and the replacement of *-man* words with *-person* words, such as *spokesperson* vs *spokesman*. Their conclusion is that these so-called neutral terms have simply evolved as female-specific alternants with the traditional female descriptors, i.e: 'Margarette P. Eby, *Chairperson* of Humanities' vs 'David W. Hamilton, [. . .] *Chairman* of Anatomy' (Ehrlich & King 1994:63).

Many of the texts consulted for this study deal specifically with crimes of violence by men against women, instances of which are scarce in the September 23, 1998 edition of *The Herald Sun* being examined. These serve to illustrate the degree to which women are disempowered and subjected to baseless biases through the print media. However *The Herald Sun* (September 23, 1998), does provide some interesting examples of gendered language. Although the paper as a whole contains less overtly sexist references than one might expect from a paper that not so long ago still had a page-3 'girl', there are sufficient instances of bias and stereotype to demonstrate the ongoing linguistic derogation of women in the media.

One area of this kind of reporting is the coverage of the sexual relationship between the U.S. President, Bill Clinton, and the White House employee, Monica Lewinsky. Returning to the idea of naming that Clark outlined, I examine the terms used to refer to both Clinton and Lewinsky, taken from three full pages of reporting on the subject. Considering the sexual nature of the topic, it is not too surprising to find language that makes moral suggestions and assumptions about the players. Also un-surprising is the fact that this 'moral' language favours the male, Clinton, more than the female, Lewinsky. Of note is the fact that terms which I have deemed 'respectful' or 'neutral', such as *Ms Lewinsky*, *Monica Lewinsky* and *Lewinsky*, constitute almost eighty per cent of the references to the key female

in the report. Whilst this seems to be quite a high proportion of respectful terms, the equivalents used for the male player, Mr Clinton, The (U.S.) President ((Bill) Clinton), and (Bill) Clinton constitute over ninety per cent of the terms (See Appendices 1 & 2). The descriptors I have deemed non-respectful for Lewinsky consist of evocative references to her appearance such as 'oval office pepperpot', with 'oval office' evoking roundness of shape and 'pepperpot' reinforcing this image and further implying that Lewinsky is 'hot and spicy'. She is also referred to as a 'portly pepperpot', with 'portly' being a word that normally describes a fat man, usually older and perhaps kindly, but which in the context of referring to a young woman takes on a derogatory meaning. Another mode of referring to Lewinsky is to describe her in terms of statistics, as though she were a commodity on the market, much the same as Hawes and Thomas (1995) discuss in their data from *The Sun*. Whilst not quite as extreme as *The Sun*'s 'the 25-year-old stunner' (Hawes & Thomas, 1995:6), *The Herald Sun*'s 'the then 22-year-old intern' and 'the 25-year-old' (September 23, 1998:16) reflect the notion of woman as marketable commodity. Two other notable descriptions are 'obsessed, frustrated and emotionally unstable young woman' and 'the pining Ms Lewinsky', both of which relegate Lewinsky to the stereotypically 'female' realm of emotion (hence the pining) and emotion in excess (obsessed, frustrated, unstable).

In contrast, descriptions of Clinton do not make any references to his physical appearance, other than to describe him at one point as 'a solemn-faced Mr Clinton', which refers more to his behaviour rather than his appearance. It is also an emotive statement, but one which portrays him as in control of his emotions (as we expect of men!) unlike the 'emotional woman'. The only other instance of his description in emotional terms cites him as 'an alternately angry and remorseful Clinton'. Anger is a good, powerful emotion, 'suitable' for a man, and whilst remorse implies regret of a past action, it is quite a formal term that gives little away about Clinton's emotional state. He is once called simply 'Bill', which comes across as a fairly affectionate term, and once as 'a crippled President Clinton', which is interesting for several reasons. I have classed the 'crippled President' description as non-neutral because it is more than a straightforward title, yet there is still a striking difference to the Lewinsky descriptions. He is referred to as 'the President', which clearly acknowledges his social rank in a respectful way. However, the whole phrase is important because of where it appears within the context of the article. The article is describing how Lewinsky was 'brought to orgasm' by 'a crippled President Clinton'. Although this is followed by the information that Clinton had injured his knee at a golfing friend's house, the correlation between Lewinsky's being brought to orgasm and Clinton's crippling pain is made clearly. So, although Lewinsky is being acted upon passively, it is Clinton who is the victim, suffering at the (figurative – in this particular instance) hands of the 'demanding' woman.

Another aspect which supports the linguistic derogation of the woman in this article is the choice of verbs used to describe Lewinsky's actions as compared to those of Clinton. As in the Hong Kong magazine *Eve*, where the women are often represented as children through the use of 'child-like' verbs such as 'scream with laughter' or 'blurt it out' (Luchjenbroers 1995:39), Lewinsky is reported as having 'scribbled [words] on a scrap of paper' as she 'despaired' the end of the affair with Clinton. In 'saucy' e-mails, she 'gushed' to her friend. She also, throughout the text of the article, 'accuses', 'punishes', 'wishes', 'boasts', and 'seduces' (*The Herald Sun* September 23, 1998:16-17). All are verbs that reflect a childish lack of control, pride in excess, petulance, wistfulness or deviousness.

In addition, doubt is cast upon her moral standing, with statements like '**as many as** five other men in her life' (my emphasis), implying that six men is an excessive number of people for a young, single, independent woman to be sexually and/or emotionally involved with. Furthermore, her relationships are referred to as 'flings', a trivialising term that adds to the implication of Lewinsky's lack of morality.

The method of reporting is also important. Whilst quoting verbatim from an e-mail written by Lewinsky, the writer of the article includes a spelling error made by Lewinsky. But instead of inserting the bracketed comment *sic*, as would normally be the procedure for a quoted error, the quote is followed by 'Ms Lewinsky wrote, spelling mistakes and all'. This adds emphasis to the fact that Lewinsky erred, casting further doubt on to the validity of any testimony she might make.

One thing that becomes abundantly clear from the texts and resources I utilised, and indeed from my examination of the newspaper itself, is the wealth of socio-linguistic features contained in the written media. The instances of gendered language in all its many forms, although generally less prominent than outrageous forms such as 'the saucy stripper' cited from the British tabloid newspaper *The Sun* in Hawes and Thomas (1995:6), are still plentiful enough to warrant continued research into the phenomenon. There are so many features that each merits a comprehensive study: the differences for men and women in naming, frequency of appearance in articles, authorship of articles, editorials, letters pages, and classified advertisements; verbs preferred for each gender; agent vs object; descriptive terms, and the emotive connotations of all of these. The list may well go on and on, and the fact that only a fraction of these topics were covered in this paper is testament to the breadth and depth of the topic.

APPENDICES

Terms from *The Herald Sun*, 23 Sep 1998:15-18.

APPENDIX 1: CLINTON

Respect or Neutrality terms		Affection terms	
		1	Bill
2	President Clinton	Disrespect terms	
2	President Bill Clinton		
19	The President	1	a crippled President Clinton
1	The U.S. President		
16	Mr Clinton	1	a solemn-faced Mr Clinton
3	Clinton	1	an alternately angry and remorseful Clinton
4	Bill Clinton		
1	U.S. President Bill Clinton		

Total number of references to Clinton: 52

Respect/Neutrality terms: 92.25 %

Affection/Disrespect terms: 7.75 %

APPENDIX 2: LEWINSKY

Respect or Neutrality terms		Disrespect terms	
27	Ms Lewinsky	4	Monica
7	Lewinsky	1	oval office pepperpot
7	Monica Lewinsky	1	portly pepperpot
		1	obsessed, frustrated and emotionally unstable young woman
		1	the then 22-year-old intern
		1	the 25-year-old
		1	the pining Ms Lewinsky
		1	the former White House intern

Total number of references to Lewinsky: 52

Respect/Neutrality terms: 78.85 %

Disrespect terms: 21.15 %

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