



FEMALE LEADERSHIP: COMMUNICATIVE STRATEGIES AND FACEWORK

INTRODUCTION

The Research Project “Female leadership: communicative strategies and facework”, FEDER-US. US-1263310, was carried out from 01/02/2020 to 30/04/2022. It was co-led by Dr Fuentes Rodríguez (University of Seville) and Dr Brenes Peña (University of Cordoba), and included the participation of researchers from the University of Seville (Dr González Sanz, Dr Padilla Herrada, Dr Moreno Benítez Mr José García Pérez and Mrs Isamary Aldama Pando), the University of Cordoba (Dr Pérez Béjar, Dr Perea Siller) and University of Palermo (Dr Carla Prestigiacomo).

The **main objective** of the project has been to determine, based on the analysis of real texts, how discourse is used by those women who have achieved a socially and professionally recognised position in different spheres to project their social image and create their own identity, on both an individual and group level.

In current society, the historical, political and social changes that took place during the last century have favoured the incorporation of women into different fields of work that, up to this moment, had been traditionally occupied by men, to the extent that the expected linguistic behaviour was, precisely, that which was prototypically masculine. We refer, specifically, to the business, political, media, institutional and academic spheres. There has been a predominance within them of the employment of strategies of imposition and strict assertion on the part of executives or individuals in positions of leadership, strategies classified as being typical of men, compared to the courtesy, indirectness and empathy associated with women, applying stereotypes that have seldom been documented.

Therefore, it has been our wish to verify whether, in these communicative contexts, women resort to imposition and opt to create a discourse in which the functional asymmetry that exists with the recipient comes to the fore, to which they adopt a communicative style similar to that traditionally used by men in these situations, or whether, on the other hand, they choose argumentation strategies where features considered as feminine are used strategically, creating a collaborative social image and displaying empathy with the recipient in order to reach their communicative aims.

From a wider perspective, the study designed has permitted us to test whether the stereotypes traditionally associated with female discourse are true, and to create a theory on professional discourse in general, design a theory of the female image and/or identity for these discursive settings and obtain gender pragmatics wherein the group of argumentation strategies by virtue of role, field of application and sex of the communicator are defined.

To carry out the analysis we have followed the linguistic **methodology** of pragmatics in the formulation of Fuentes Rodríguez (2017^a[2000]), which we have already applied to political (Fuentes Rodríguez-Álvarez Benito eds. 2016) and media (Fuentes Rodríguez 2013 a, d) discourse, and which has been revealed as the most appropriate way of approaching the study of language in the communicative situations in which it is produced. We combine it with the theory of verbal courtesy and social image (Goffman 1967, Bravo 1999, 2001, 2003, 2004, Fuentes Rodríguez 2013b, 2013c, 2016), given that we deal with public discourses, in which it is necessary to create a self-identity that differentiates the woman from the men and women who work in the same profession. In these situations there is, furthermore, a functional asymmetry that implies that positions must be renegotiated, and the public dimension of social image plays an essential role; in other words, the image needs of communicators when they carry out their professional role in front of the audience.

It is, therefore, a multidisciplinary project that contributes towards achieving one of the goals of society in Andalusia proposed by the autonomous government of the region, (inclusive, innovating and reflective society): endeavour to describe professional language; make women visible; demand equality analysing real discourse without starting from any stereotype and, ultimately, progress in the field of equality.

DEVELOPMENT

The main objective of this research project has been the identification and analysis of communication strategies employed by women occupying executive posts for projecting their face and make use of their position of power. Specifically, we have analysed the discourse of those women who exercise leadership in the following spheres:

- **In the business sphere:** we have hosted a number of round tables in which executives from different companies have participated (including Ayesa Air Control, Clínicas Martín del Yerro, and the president of “Mujeres sobresalientes”, association of women entrepreneurs). These activities, together with studies carried out on the discourse of other women (Ana Botín, Fuencisla Clemares, María Carceller and María Dolores Dancausa, among others), has enabled us to identify and describe the image projection strategies employed by these women for the exercise of effective leadership, along with the verbal mechanisms used in their formulation. Moreover, we have analysed whether they separate their personal from their social image or, in contrast, they strategically manage personal communications to reinforce their position, achieve their argumentation purpose or the role they carry out; and we have analysed how they manage the balance between individual and group face.

- **In the institutional sphere:** we have organised a number of round tables that have allowed us to discover the opinions of women of reference in the institutional sphere on the influence of gender in the exercise of leadership in this area, along with the communication strategies employed. Specifically, the following took part:
 - Maria del Carmen Gallardo Cruz, Deputy Rector of Students at the University of Seville
 - Araceli López Serena, director of the University of Seville Press,
 - María Rosal Nadales, director of the Leonor de Guzmán Women's Studies Professorship at the University of Cordoba
 - Carmen Galán Rodríguez, professor at the University of Extremadura
 - Rosa Casado Mejía, director of the Equality Unit at the University of Seville
 - Ana González Pinto, coordinator of the Andalusia Women's Institute, Seville

We also included studies on the institutional discourse of other women of relevance such as Queen Letizia and Spanish university rectors. Moreover, we have analysed the employment of mechanisms of persuasion used by men (president of the government) and women (vice presidents) in the exercise of their institutional role during the State of Alarm, comparing it to employment in a parliamentary context (political function).

The results obtained in all of these studies have permitted us to discover the verbal strategies and resources strategically used for the management of institutional image, a less developed field in discourse research.

- **In the media sphere:** we have discovered first hand the opinion of professionals in this sector such as:
 - Teresa López Pavón, representative of the newspaper El Mundo in Andalusia
 - Rosa Morel, publicist and copywriter
 - Susana Guerrero Salazar, professor of the University of Malaga and specialist in discourse and the press (head of research group and projects on the topic)

The interaction with them in the round tables held, and the research carried out on the discourse of other opinion writers, the Falange press (Y magazine) and antifascist press (Spanish antifascist women) (historical and ideological perspective), television and radio interviewers and interviewees (Susana Griso, Ana Pastor, Mamen Mendizábal, Mónica López, Mara Torres, Thais Villas, among others), actors in television series and films, Disney stars, youtubers,

gamers and influencers, has allowed us to slowly discover how the image of the woman leader is built in these spheres. We have identified the strategies of argumentation and social image management employed, verbal resources used and how the roles carried out are strategically altered. On occasions strategies are employed that go against the expected or politically correct.

In all of them we have detected an active awareness of the importance of the task of building identity for their professional development.

We want to draw attention to the diversity of fields we have worked with, including film, internationally successful television series (such as *Money Heist*) and the increasingly extensive world of digital communication (YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Twitch, Tinder...)

- **In the political sphere:** we have carried out an in depth analysis of the discourse employed by political representatives (including ministers from the current government, such as Yolanda Díaz and María Jesús Montero). The conclusions drawn, disseminated in different publications, have shown us how the woman builds here image in a sphere in which they are gaining representativeness, and in which their more professional or personal role stands out depending on the objective sought. In addition, we have been able to see whether ideology has a bearing on the construction of their identity and how it is managed according to historical events.

We have, furthermore, looked at the discourse of political leaders including Inés Arrimadas and Ana Pontón, who use different image strategies on social networks. We have also compared their image management strategies when they are interviewed in relation to a hot topic, such as pardons for political prisoners, in discourses of confrontation or electoral debates or rallies.

We have looked at other stages of our history, analysing politicians including Margarita Nelken, expanding the analysis to a social-historical context very different to that of the present day. All of these studies have allowed us to draw conclusions on the use of shared strategies, sometimes only differentiated by the degree of argumentation.

- **In the sports sphere:** In the different scientific activities carried out, we have invited women of note in the sporting sphere, such as María Pry, former player and current coach of Madrid CFF, and María Teixidor Jufresa, the first woman to form part of the Barcelona CF Board of Directors.

The conversations held with them on the communication strategies employed to create female role models in this sphere, together with the studies on the discourse of sportswomen and female coaches, have shown us the mechanisms used to construct their image of leader in traditionally male dominated areas, such as

football. We have been able to identify and describe the argumentation strategies and verbal mechanisms utilised for this purpose by these women, who reflect the influence of gender in the verbalisation of our statements.

CONCLUSIONS

The objective was to analyse whether female discourse is different from the male variety and whether the hypotheses of lack of power, search for courtesy and insecurity are reflected therein. To this end we approached the study of argumentation resources employed by women. These cover all spheres of language and discourse:

- Non-verbal language
- Phonic resources
- Lexical resources
- Argumentation intensification mechanisms
- Strategic attenuation mechanisms
- Enunciation: the use of quotes from authorities or legitimising sources, or in contrast, using the words of the adversary to refute them. Support for what is said, statement reinforcement and evidentiality.
- The modality and other references to the subjectivity of the speaker
- Management of interaction with the hearer.
- Focalisation of argumentation.
- Degree of discourse planning or improvisation.

They are all used strategically by women (in their different communicative roles and situations) to achieve the projection of an image that helps them achieve the objectives they have set. Women are extremely aware, above all in the spheres of leadership we have dealt with, of the need to construct a defined and relevant self-image. To do so, they resort to strategies for differentiating themselves from stereotypes and to stand out in their discourse. We see this, for example, in the case of journalists and television presenters, who are able to draw on irony, humour and familiarity with the other through the use of resources such as exaggeration or empathy with less visible social groups.

In the case of those spheres considered more traditionally male, such as business, on occasions they consciously opt for inclusive, transformational leadership, which permits the creation of a group beyond the single imposing personality. In no way does this involve irrelevance or insecurity; rather, awareness of group effort, and reinforcement of collective identity.

In the case of women in politics and institutions, they have opted for a professional discourse wherein that which is relevant is not gender, but the type of discourse characterised by the reinforcement of the in-group and opposition to the out-group. In

institutional discourse, whether it be made by men or women, there is a predominance of collective over individual identity.

The most relevant conclusion from the entire study is leadership awareness of women in all of these spheres, together with the difficulty in achieving it and the pressure they receive to adjust to them, both now and previously in times of the Republic or the Franco dictatorship. Also important is the self-reflection as regards the need for them to construct the image they wish to show as a representative or professional of their field. The predominant factor is awareness of the group, and the power it can have. Women are leaders, but they are team players and show it. They are aware of the strategic power of the word and carry out their work in a reflexive manner, without letting themselves be influenced by stereotypes often transmitted without supporting investigation.

RESULTS

The conclusions obtained have been disseminated through monographs published by publishers of recognized prestige in the Humanities area:

- Fuentes Rodríguez, C. y Brenes Peña, E. (eds.) (2023). *Comunicación estratégica para el ejercicio del liderazgo femenino*, Londres: Routledge.
- Brenes Peña, E. Fuentes Rodríguez, C. y Prestigiaco, C. (eds) (2023). *Liderazgo Femenino: Estrategias Comunicativas y Proyección de Imagen*, Palermo: Palermo University Press
- Fuentes Rodríguez, C. y Brenes Peña, E. (e.p.). *El discurso de la mujer en el ámbito profesional y social*, Sevilla: Editorial Universidad de Sevilla.
- Brenes Peña, E., De Cesare, F., Fuentes Rodríguez, C. (eds.), *El discurso femenino y su representación, Annali-Sezione romanza. Dipartimento di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Comparati*, Nápoles, Università degli studi di Napoli "L'orientale".

We also organized several scientific events that served as a platform for debate and exchange of ideas around the topics covered:

- Jornadas Internacionales "Discurso femenino y poder: miradas multidisciplinares". Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Universidad de Córdoba, 17 y 18 de noviembre de 2020.
- Jornadas "El discurso para la igualdad de género: estrategias y visualización". Facultad de Filología, Universidad de Sevilla, 23 y 24 de noviembre de 2020.
- "Congreso Internacional: Mujer y discurso: liderazgo, imagen y sociedad". Facultad de Filología, Universidad de Sevilla, 25 al 17 de octubre de 2021
- Jornadas internacionales "Estrategias comunicativas, proyección de imagen y género", Palermo, 20-21 de abril de 2022



The nature of our study has been markedly **international**. It has allowed us to collaborate with Italian, Belgian, Portuguese, Slovenian and Chilean research teams.

SOCIAL AND SCIENTIFIC-TECHNICAL IMPACT

This research project has permitted us to obtain highly relevant conclusions. From a more general perspective, we have been able to identify and describe the different existing leadership styles (so-called transformational vs traditional egocentric and authoritarian leadership), and to verify through which communication strategies and verbal resources they take shape in discourse. These conclusions have been drawn from different spheres (business, academic, media, political, institutional) in such a way that it has been possible for us to obtain a detailed description, based on the discourse of women leaders.

In this regard, we have been able to verify how the differences of communication styles created by the gender of the communicator constitute a barrier to the professional promotion of women, whose tendency towards attenuation, affiliation and courtesy with their interlocutors can be misinterpreted as a sign of weakness or lack of professional preparation. Becoming aware of these divergences is essential for avoiding the creation of stereotypes and facilitating the achievement of true equality between the sexes.

Furthermore, we have described the strategies and resources via which women create an image differentiated from their male counterparts, and how it can be used for persuasive ends.

We have also identified the new female identities that currently exist in all of the fields analysed and, especially, in the media discourse and the new digital communications media.

Lastly, we also highlight the conclusions drawn in relation to those mechanisms and strategies susceptible to being used to create female references in spheres traditionally dominated by men, such as science and certain sports like football, and these works that have opened up future perspectives to us on the need to extend communication and gender studies to integrate realities into them that do not feel represented, such as transgender people.

As a contribution to the scientific sphere of the analysis of discourse and communication in general, this study documented in diverse corpora ratifies to us the need to know the strategic nature of discourse and its application to the different areas of our professional and social activity. Moreover, it opens up a highly interesting field of research and transfer.

In this sense, in the field of science, the development of the project has meant a considerable advancement of knowledge on female discourse and communication and image management, necessary to project the identity of the female leader appropriate for each communicative context.

The evident connection of the topic of study to one of the great objectives of modern society (the achievement of real and effective equality between men and women) affords high capacity for transfer to the results obtained from our different works.

- In the academic sphere, we have opened up new research channels, disseminated in the organised doctorate training courses, which may be a germ for the undertaking of future PhD theses.

- In the media, political, business and institutional sphere, the conclusions reached can serve as a basis for the creation of communicative recommendations for exercising more effective leadership. This has been, moreover, one of the demands that has come from the specialists from these sectors who have participated in the round tables, and which we want to concentrate on in the following months.

- In the business sphere, our results can contribute towards reducing those communicative misunderstandings created by the gender variant, and which hinder the professional promotion of women.

- From a more general perspective, we consider that our work can be disseminated to a public that is non-specialist in the material with the objective of society as a whole becoming aware of the existing differences between the communicative styles of women and men, to the extent that problems deriving from them are attenuated, the creation of disqualified and discriminatory stereotypes is avoided and we thus approach the much desired equality between sexes.

- This knowledge may also be applied to the marketing of communications companies (newspapers, digital platforms, etc.), as well as political consultancy and in the legal sphere.

- Lastly, we consider that it should be introduced to schools and the wider academic world. Strategic communication from the gender perspective should be incorporated into teaching in order to give all citizens the tools for their professional lives with guarantees of success. This will permit effective equality.