

Chapter 4

How Language Use “Translates” Women: A Cognitive Account of Women Imagery in Romanian Society

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ABSTRACT

The chapter focuses on how language use mirrors the way people think and act. An interdisciplinary perspective will be used in the attempt to cross-fertilize insights from critical discourse approach and cognitive linguistics that will hopefully contribute to a better understanding of how the language employed conveys stereotyped ideas and metaphors that pervade (many times unconsciously) people's way of talking. Proverbs, taken as language samples potentially revelatory of some cognitive bases of the way people have been thinking and talking about women throughout time, will be analyzed. The idea that gender is socially and discursively constructed will be thus reinforced. Implicit stereotyping, a concept borrowed from social psychology, will be employed to demonstrate that unconscious exposure to stereotyped knowledge influences people's judgements and relations with other social categories. It will be equated to what is called cognitive metaphor in cognitive linguistics and ideology in critical discourse studies.

There is a weird power in a spoken word. ~Joseph Conrad

INTRODUCTION

It is generally acknowledged that language is an essential resource that helps people establish and manage their social roles and relations. In addition to that, language can act as a powerful weapon when employed in creating and spreading preconceived ideas, thus carrying biased imageries and ideologies

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that many times people are not even aware of. This chapter will look into how language use has contributed to creating and maintaining gender role division, gender hierarchy and, hence, gender inequality in the Romanian society.

Women’s language has been defined in the specialized literature as both “language restricted in use to women and language descriptive of women alone” (R. Lakoff, 1973, p. 48). This chapter follows the latter strand of thought and is intended to bring new evidence to the much-discussed topic of gender division and of the differences between the social roles that are generally ascribed to men and women especially in the so-called traditional, predominantly patriarchal societies. The way people use language will be employed here as indicative of gender and social role division between men and women. The fundamental idea of this study comes from sociolinguistics, which clearly advocates that language does not exist as a thing in itself, apart from its language users. Consequently, linguistic variation and differences are reflections of social variation and differences, which, in turn, heavily influence and reinforce social distinctions. It is a vicious circle that holds, at its heart, language as an active and powerful factor that reflects, (re)creates and perpetuates social differences and inequalities. From this perspective, language is seen as a kind of not so “transparent medium through which we think” but which, at the same time “shapes our thoughts and practices” (Goatly, 2007, p. 4).

Within this broad picture, the present study is intended to bring new evidence of the strong correlation that exists between language and power. It starts from the assumption that a thorough analysis of language use can reveal the unequal relations of power between men and women, which could effectively and objectively account for explicit and implicit gender division. Since women are portrayed many times as the Other¹ in relation to men, the language analysis to be developed in this chapter will focus on the cognitive and linguistic means employed in making this distinction. Consequently, metaphors, understood here as cognitive instruments that help us interpret and understand bits of reality/experience in terms of another more familiar reality/experience, will be the key elements of this investigation. The experiential and relational meaning of words used in the identified cognitive frameworks will be employed as instruments indicative of a certain way of thinking which, in turn, results in unequal social division between men and women. The correlation between linguistic variation and social distinction is often thought to be “a universal feature of speech communities” (Coates, 1986, p. 162).

The analysis developed in the following sections is based on a corpus of 234 Romanian proverbs about women, which has been used to identify a set of metaphors illustrative of how women have been conceived of at a social and cognitive level. These metaphors are subsequently analyzed as conceptual frameworks employed consciously or unconsciously when talking about women.

The same set of metaphors are also taken as the output of a certain type of translation understood here not as the straightforward process of meaning transfer from the source language into the target language, as traditionally employed, but in a looser interpretation of rendering thinking patterns into language patterns. Differently put, the identified cognitive metaphors are held as actual *translations* of some considered common-sensical assumptions largely spread in society (in this chapter, the Romanian society) that language users, most of the times, are not even aware of. Consequently, this study may also imply an educational end due to its possible functioning as a sort of red flag meant to raise awareness of the underlying presumptions about women and their social place and duties that govern and pervade *women’s language* use.

Following the general lines above, the study will focus on the following objectives: identify a set of cognitive metaphors that legitimizes the general use of language in relation to women and their role in society; analyze and interpret those metaphors by identifying (familiar) ways of thinking about women

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