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THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER IN SOME LITERARY WORKS. A PRAGMATIC APPROACH

-summary-

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Summary

The novelty of the thesis derives from the necessity of getting to know and analyse the language speakers and, primarily, writers use. As there are no specialized studies that can focus on gender differences seen as social interaction, our paper aims at presenting the multifaceted process of constructing gender and it analyses the dichotomy between discourse and gender from a pragmatic perspective.

The reasons why we chose this research topic are connected with our desire to provide useful guidance for constructing gender in various writings and prove that it has a major role within linguistic studies. We reckon that our paper could be useful to researchers or students who want to investigate the acquisition of gender, its manifestations and linguistic consequences. Although the construction of gender is an ever-present topic in pragmatics, there are few studies dedicated to the connection between gender and literary works. In order to provide others with a clearer image of the construction of gender in various writings, it is our responsibility to focus on the main fields of study that constitute the basis of our thesis: pragmatics and sociolinguistics.

In our research we prompted out several methods of investigation such as discourse analysis, the case study approach (observation, notes, quotations, interpretation), approaches to analysing written discourse, contextualisation, cross-disciplinary research, but also some other descriptive and pragmatic methods.

Once assimilated into the twentieth century pragmatics, the idea of gender fascinates the minds of many philosophers who foresee the fruits of progress in the philosophy of language and believe in a dichotomy between male and female groups. They think that the conditions leading to the development of different cultural systems are related to conversational behaviour often connected with misunderstandings. However, gender focuses on a special situation in which the prevalence of interaction and identity can be in conflict. Social identification has always been connected with speech similarity and, consequently, philosophers of language (e.g. Robin Lakoff) have always tried to investigate the relationship between men, women and language. Numerous researchers analysed various features such as power strategies or interactional dominance, aiming to illustrate the differences between men and women. They also focused on the feedback

given in different contexts, the number of interruptions, the use of intensifiers, the way in which politeness is expressed or on the use of linguistic hedges. All these markers, together with linguistic stereotypes, contributed to our representation of a clearer image of speech as concerns social categories in pragmatics.

The process of defining pragmatics, both as a notion and as a science is an intricate one, presenting many difficulties brought forward by the very historical evolution of the concept and by its prominence throughout time. In so far as history is concerned, a precise definition of pragmatics would pose many problems because the very idea of a pragmatic approach involves a great variety of changes and influences that took place under specific historical conditions. To further reinforce this idea, Nietzsche was equally partial to the conception that "only that which has no history can be defined", thus pointing out that any attempt to clearly define pragmatics would be futile.

Despite its novelty within linguistic studies, research on pragmatics can be traced back to ancient Greece and Rome where the word 'pragmaticus' meant 'practical'. Nowadays, the current use of pragmatics is associated with the influential contribution of the American doctrine of pragmatism. Charles Morris analysed in *Foundations of the Theory of Signs* (1938) the differences in semiotics and linguistics, claiming that there is a pragmatic interpretation that lies at the root of this dichotomy. He thought that pragmatics was centred upon the relation of signs and interpreters. Later on, in 1975, Grice thought that there were two types of meaning and pragmatics was supposed to focus on the practical part of meaning, the so-called 'conversational meaning', thoroughly analysed by Levinson and Leech in 1983. Both pragmaticians aimed at explaining the way in which conversations functioned. Thus, Levinson identified the *Cooperative Principle* in 1975 and Leech formulated *the Politeness Principle* in 1983. According to Green, in 1989, the term 'pragmatics' was coined to describe the natural understanding of language.

However, from a linguistic point of view, pragmatics, a subfield of semiotics and linguistics, analyses the ways in which context is connected with meaning. Its purpose is to examine the conveyance of meaning, depicting how language users succeed in overcoming apparent ambiguity. As contrasted with semantics, which is a branch of linguistics devoted to the study of meaning, pragmatics focuses on the way in which meaning is transmitted. It has been discovered that the transfer of meaning is related both to the linguistic knowledge (vocabulary, grammar) of the auditor or lecturer, and to the background of the discourse, the speaker's intent, etc. Since both semantics and pragmatics tackle with 'meaning', the follow-up question would be related to what meaning is. In statements such as: *Life*

without love has no meaning; a *red light means stop; I did not mean to do it,* there are several meanings of the verb 'to mean' and the noun 'meaning'. Thus, pragmatics focuses on all the aspects of meaning that are not portrayed by semantics.

Pragmatics comprises not only conversational implicature, speech act theory, talk in interaction, the politeness principle, the structure of discourse in the work of Searle (1999), Grice (1991) or Austin (1962) and other approaches to language but also its connection with philosophy, linguistics or sociology. While in semantics we refer to the connotations that a sentence might involve, in pragmatics we focus on the interpretations of an assertion. The definition of any phrase is predictable if we take into consideration its grammatical features and the vocabulary used. Conversely, an in-depth analysis of any excerpt cannot be anticipated as it is actually a combination of the significance of the phrase and the study of the intentions of the speaker.

At the same time, pragmatics can also be looked on from different perspectives. It is particularly important to notice that 'meaning', the representative feature of what pragmatics is related to, is not a stable counterpart from a linguistic point of view. Meaning is generated in a dynamic way in the process of effectively using language. That means speakers are not always able to get to a pragmatic understanding of 'meaning in context' as context is not a fixed element, changing all the time.

The pragmatic stream of thought is widely spread within the frame of the twentieth century ideologies. In other words, the 20th century is widely regarded as a period where pragmatics, as a subfield of linguistics, begins to fade away while pragmatism takes its place as the major pattern of thought. Consequently, pragmatics grows and becomes most relevant in linguistic theory, where it becomes more practical and more concerned with the meaning of everyday conversations. In fact, it is with the help of these elements that the twentieth century pragmatics manages to survive.

Pragmatics manifests itself in various ways in research. One of these ways is interlanguage pragmatics, a subfield of pragmatics that tackles with how non-native speakers understand and produce speech acts in that specific language and how their pragmatic competence develops throughout time. Foreign language acquisition is an interesting process worth analysing due to the comparisons that one can make between a learner's pragmatic performance and a native's pragmatic capability. However, despite these differences, there are some pragmatic universals that teachers of foreign languages apply when teaching English as a foreign language and there are some influences that L1 exerts on the student's L2 acquisition. The distinction between teaching and learning needs

no explanation: the former is carried out by the teacher and the latter by the learner. Traditionally, the focus of attention was clearly on the activity of teaching, as if learning was merely a straightforward reflection of the teacher's actions. 'To learn' meant, above all, to react to the instructions provided by the main actor in the classroom: the teacher. It is only comparatively recently, since the 1970s, that a redefinition of the role and status of the participants in the teaching-learning process has emerged in the language-teaching circles. Some of the most influential factors that led to this change of perspective are: in almost every sphere of education there has been a growing tendency to become more 'learner-centred' as methodologists have come to realize that each person is ultimately responsible for his/her learning and needs to engage his/her personality in the educational process, there has been an increasingly awareness of the fact that individual learners are different from each other. They have their own personalities, motivations and learning styles and these characteristics affect how learners act in the classroom, the active role which the learners perform in developing their language has also been emphasized by studies of the first language acquisition. These have led to similar work in foreign and second language learning, which has shown the learner to be an active participant in the developmental process. These are only some of the factors that led to the emergence of pragmatics in relation with second-language acquisition research.

Another important element of pragmatics which can be identified in any natural language is ambiguity. Pragmatic ambiguity is the consequence of the lack of intrinsic meaning of sentences that are perceived in linguistics as abstract entities. For instance, idioms, expressions or fixed phrases are always free to various interpretations because they do not have only one meaning, they actually stray from common expressions and words. The ambiguity of language shows the limited power of words and the fact that without context, the identity of the speaker, the meaning of the utterance are difficult to be deducted. For example, the sentence "Tom saw the man with a green car" could mean that Tom noticed a man who had a green car (syntactic ambiguity). The overall meaning of the sentence is connected with the intent of the speaker and the context of the utterance. Therefore, ambiguity has both positive and negative features. The positive aspects of ambiguity are related to the effect it has on language through irony, humour, puns. The negative ones are usually a burden to communication and it would be ideal if they were avoided. From a pragmatic point of view, the positive aspects of ambiguity or 'intentional ambiguity' are a way of enriching language and making it more expressive.

Therefore, the field of pragmatics marks the analysis of the speaker's meaning, its

aim being to infer the speaker's intentions in a given context. There are also some other aspects involved in the presentation of pragmatics such as the study of implicatures (the speaker's ability to communicate certain beliefs or ideas without actually pronouncing them), the study of the intended meaning as compared to the unsaid (what is not meant to be mentioned). Pragmatism proliferates as a result of all the changes that occur at the level of language and, at the same time, as a result of the context of the utterance by means of the various scientific methods that are introduced to facilitate the functioning of language and to make it easier for speakers. Due to 'the information structure' that shows how utterances are apprehended in order to control the entities between speakers and listeners language becomes more vivid, expressive and logical for speakers. The information structure tries to answer the question: "How do we deliver a presentation or in what order do we present the information in a statement?" In English the presentation of information is inextricably linked to context and that makes information become pragmatic. There were pragmaticians who claimed that discourse should be rearranged according to specific categories such as newness and givenness. These categories play a very important role in understanding language.

In the circle of language development, three theories of great influence surface as a continuation of the principles laid down by pragmaticians. Consequently, the learning perspective claims that children are imitators of what they see and hear, learning from punishment and reinforcement. The nativist perspective offers another unique overview of learning, arguing that individuals are biologically programmed to acquire information. This perspective belongs to Noam Chomsky who believes that all human beings have a language acquisition device (LAD). This device enables children to understand the rules of any language they are interested in. Taking into consideration all the 'inherent processes of the human mind', Chomsky develops the concepts of transformational grammar (emphasising the surface and deep structures of language, the way in which inflections work, the way in which case is assigned under government, etc., the binding theory). Moreover, it is Chomsky who revolutionizes language and gives many examples of evolutionary patterns that can also be found in transformational grammar. The third theory, the interactionist theory, suggests that language development is related to both biological and social matters. Therefore, language learning is influenced by the children's wish to communicate with others, the children's brain developing slowly (according to Interactionists) and providing them with the capacity to acquire information that they share with others. The main representative of this theory is Lev Vygotsky who models the idea

of collaborative learning, illustrating how conversations with older people offer both cognitive and linguistic improvement to children.

The idea that pragmatics was the study of aspects of language that require reference to the users leads to their description in philosophy. This means that natural languages require such reference (indexical words). Numerous definitions of the term pragmatics have sprung from Morris's clash of semiotics that focused on the study of sociological and psychological phenomena (sign systems or language). The modern use of the term *pragmatics* is associated with the philosopher of language, Charles Morris. Within semiotics, he identified three branches of inquiry: syntax (the study of the relations between signs), semantics (analysing the relations between the signs and the objects to which they can be applied) and pragmatics (aiming to depict the relation of signs to the interpreters). Pragmatics' function is, thus, to predict an action or to solve a problem, all the philosophical topics having practical purposes. However, the restrictive use of pragmatics revolves around the idea that pragmatics should deal with the principles of language usage, having no relation with the description of linguistic structures. According to Chomsky, if we were to think of the dichotomy between competence and performance, we would notice that pragmatics is connected with the performance of language use.

Therefore, pragmaticians claim that a theory of pragmatics would be mostly concerned with the clarification of sentences by the context in which they are uttered. For instance, there are many words that require new interpretations of the text: *dislike, irony,* etc. It is worth mentioning that contexts do a lot more than choose between several semantic readings of sentences. While grammar is concerned with the context of the assignment of meaning to linguistic forms, pragmatics is based on the further interpretation of such forms in a given context. Unfortunately, some aspects of linguistic structures may lead to the impossibility of making a clear distinction between context independent grammar and context dependent interpretation due to the codification of certain features in a context. Thus, it can be deemed that pragmatics serves two functions: it covers both context dependent aspects of language structure and the principles of language usage. We can claim that pragmatics is mostly interested in the principles of language usage and the relations between language structures, focusing, at the same time, on the links between language in context that are worth being written in grammars.

In all its complexity pragmatics can be seen both as a textual description of the mechanisms of language, and as a 'study of the language in use' (as Verschueren puts it in his great work *Understanding Pragmatics)* which is connected with meaning and the

context in which it appears. Through its textual representations, pragmatics becomes not merely a science placed at the boundaries of semantics and linguistics, but rather an active process of the human intellect because it helps us understand the deepest mechanisms of language and the way in which gender is constructed.

Gender can be viewed as the structural core of all pragmatics, having directly descended from sociolinguistics and bringing us closer to the sense of language as a whole. Traditionally, gender follows two main directions: a sociolinguistic direction and a pragmatic one, both of them relying on conversation analysis. Very often, these conversations are seen as having a unique character, recounting various problems of language. Pragmatics expands to include a large body of propositional content of utterances, but also hedging, interjections and pragmatic markers, leading to the understanding of the cognitive use of discourse.

On the whole, gender varies according to the forms of language used by women and men. While women use a more standardized language, being more aware of the role of politeness in society, men are more relaxed and more conscious of their prestige. However, we must be aware of the fact that without these distinctions in gender, language would become insipid and some of its nuances would be lost. These distinctions appear as symbolized by variation because the use of pragmatic markers varies according to national variety, age or gender. It was proved that when women were devalued, so was their language. When they lacked in authority, women were inclined to use more tag questions in their speech, being less confident in themselves. As for men, they use language as a symbol of their dominance and power, as a source of exercising control. Insights centred on knowledge of pragmatics revealed the existence of a new approach (the deficit approach) that actually became the starting-point for gender and language studies and a key-element in the definition of the relation between gender and language. The analysis of tag questions, new forms or response expressions were used across gender and proved to be highly influential. Afterwards, the dominance approach stated men's dominance and women's subordination in speech. The gender differences regarding inequality across men's and women's language forms were illustrated by the difference approach that analysed more thoroughly the features of the dominance approach.

The totality of principles and beliefs concerning gender contain all the elements that make gender function as a whole: due to gender differences, gender inequality, gender stereotypes and gender politics, we can create the outer shell for the understanding of the concept. As concerns the linguistic gender varieties that may occur, we can admit that they

appear because the linguistic gender pattern is a way of reflecting social attitudes. Men and women are different from a social point of view as they adopt distinct social roles in society. Through the use of language, the gender pattern becomes visible and the social differences that exist are illustrated by: women's tendencies to use more correct forms than men, different behaviour patterns for both women and men, distinct male and female varieties resulting from the communities in which sex roles are much better depicted.

Treated from new angles, pragmatics is the basic 'tool' that shapes gender making it not only necessary, but also indispensable. In fact, gender, as a concept ever-present in the ideologies of the twentieth century, is nothing but a continuation of the changing patterns in the studies of language and its use. "Pragmatics is fundamentally about how the context of use contributes to meaning, both semantic meaning and speaker's meaning. The core topics of pragmatics are indexicality, presupposition, implicature, and speech acts, but in reality there is no limit to the ways in which context can influence meaning. Situations can even develop which allow words to mean things they never meant before. For example, several families are having dinner together, and two of the teenagers are, unbeknownst no anyone else, dating. They each separately make an excuse to leave the dinner to their parents, expressing a wish to go work on their chemistry assignment, and they have an enjoyable time together. After this, they start to say things like "Don't you need to work on your chemistry homework?" to indicate a desire to sneak off together – a new pragmatic meaning for sentences of that kind."[1]Scientists as well as philosophers come up with many answers and solutions to problems that language is confronted with, and introduce new sciences such as pragmatics in order to achieve greater understanding of the inner workings of discourse.

These new revelations are highly relevant for gender because they provide the background knowledge upon which new forms of gender acquisition can emerge. Generally, these "new forms" appear either as a reaction to the static, motionless nature of their past counterparts, or as a result of the process of evolution of the pragmatic thought. The issues of gender and pragmatics have often been associated with complex situations. According to Lakoff, there are numerous attitudes towards women's and men's language forms. Women use milder expletives, a lot of tag questions, adjectives (*lovely, fantastic, adorable*), very polite language, very correct grammar forms whereas men use performatives and assume the male 'norm'. These differences can be explained from both

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[1] Ralph W. Fasold, Jeff Connor-Linton, *An Introduction to Language and Linguistics*, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 163.

a psychological and cultural point of view as there are many external factors that contribute to the understanding of this clash such as cultural differences, psychological differences, the dominance model, the context of communication, etc.

Through gender roles, women and men show many differences that are actually perceived as a source of attraction. Linguists are aware of the fact that indirect strategies as concerns information should be applied for successful communication. At the same time, the use of language is related to culture and the rules of speaking depend on culture, as well. For instance, the British use indirect forms rather than direct requests to show politeness, directness being perceived in their case as face-threatening. The important issue of pragmatic development reveals that indirect language forms are used in communication in order to determine whether culture and gender are influential to the understanding of Speech Acts. We should definitely try to re-examine stereotypes and reevaluate the models of Speech Acts as indirect requests. According to pragmaticians, people belonging to different cultures would rather express their requests in an indirect way, the addressees understanding these ones correctly even if the requests are made indirectly

Therefore, gender marks the path of the pragmatic way of thinking in the twentieth century and imposes the principles of indexing, marking or constructing 'new forms of language' for masculinities and femininities which have a strong impact on the social organization and on the manner in which people perceive the language around them. Gender proliferates as a result of all the changes that occur in society and which are a consequence of the progress of mankind by means of the various linguistic methods that are introduced to facilitate the functioning of language and to make discourse easier and more interesting for its speakers.

Tracing the evolutionary path of sex and gender we understood due to linguistics the way in which these two concepts presented distinctive features, while the biological field imposed some physiological constraints between women and men. "Gender is the very process of creating a dichotomy by effacing similarity and elaborating on difference, and even where there are biological differences, these differences are exaggerated and extended in the service of constructing gender. Actual differences are always paired with enormous similarities, never dichotomizing people but putting them on a scale with many women and men occupying the same positions."[2] As Penelope Eckert believes, gender is always above sex, as gender is a more complex process that implies several fields

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[2] Penelope Eckert, *Language and Gender*, Cambridge, 2003, p. 13.

(sociology, linguistics, sociolinguistics), being biologically based.

In this respect, the connection between gender and sex wonders whether language is 'sexist' or it is only perceived in this way by its speakers. Then, it also encourages meditation upon the social roles that gender dictates to women and men who speak 'gender marked' languages and facilitates the way towards the discovery of those differences that arise from the structure of such languages.

The relationship between gender and language has always been controversial. In the society we live in nowadays, language has become, according to several linguists, more abstract than it used to be a long time ago. Consequently, language is based upon a set of rules and principles rather than upon a set of sentences, a group of words or sounds. As language is strongly connected with society, it illustrates the function of sociolinguistics: the study of the links between language and society. Thus, these links vary according to several factors such as class, religion, race, region or gender.

The study of the differences between gender and language that we are going to tackle with pose numerous problems. Firstly, we shall see the way in which gender is constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed in the English culture. In this way, we will understand that the connection between language and gender is more complicated that it seems and that the term *gender* has several acceptations. The study of gender is a problem that involves the process of linguistic differentiation as in several societies, including the English culture, the speech of men and women differs. The differences in speech that arise have several reasons: either they can be explained by the social barriers that influence the density of communication or they are due to phonetic reasons, as it was proved that in some societies, such as the American one, women tend to pronounce some sounds differently than men.

Secondly, we will focus on the acquisition of gender- differentiated language as it was proved that work on child language acquisition revealed interesting facts: several generalizations emphasized the fact that in the area of gender differences, girls seem to be superior to boys in terms of speech acquisition. Due to these differences that occur, we will concentrate on the development of gender-appropriate speech and notice the way in which language is acquired by boys and girls in terms of intonation, vocabulary, phonetics, grammar. Children acquire language due to socialization that is achieved in numerous ways: through swearing, taboo language, through imitation, through adults responding differently to boys and girls, or through the observation of the interaction between boys and girls in gender- specific subcultures. Thus, we will notice that being a male or a female

in the English society means learning to use gender-appropriated language.

At the same time, we will analyze some gender themes in writing, examine women's way of writing, compare and contrast women's and men's ways of speaking. Clearly, these issues will be applied to the everyday experience and will prove that gender is affected by the shifts in economy, politics and sociology. Due to these factors, we can also understand why there is the need for the acquisition of a second language.

In addition, we will further discuss how gender is closely related to politeness and stereotypes. To illustrate this, we will give several examples that show features of 'women's and men's language', as well as some differences that occur when the two sexes interact. Their different way of interacting can be explained by the different types of socialization that lead to miscommunication (attributed to the different expectations of each sex as related to the functions of interaction).

In the next chapters of our paper, the focus will be on the description of some aspects of language in communicative context and on the presentation of some linguistic factors affecting language choice. This study will be completed by the analysis of some gender schemas and ideologies, as well as by the presentation of a case study. The communicative competence that we will further develop will be centred on the distinctions between men and women as related to turn-taking and conversational dominance, ending by presenting a brief analysis of linguistic interaction between males and females in groups. For instance, in Britain it was proved that women talked more than men, they were more polite and that men were used to swearing more than women. These cultural stereotypes are subject to debates as several differences in folklore between women and men may be false.

The last part of this work will be dedicated to our understanding of the way in which linguistic consequences of gender differentiation in language will determine linguistic change. This type of linguistic change is assumed when there are changes in vocabulary, pronunciation or when factors that were perceived as being minor, become part of the norm. From a linguistic point of view, women, men, as well as the changing structures in society contribute to the development of linguistic change. The facilitation of linguistic evolution is strongly connected to a deeper analysis of gender differentiation from a sociolinguistic point of view. According to Jennifer Coates, "linguistic change can take place only in the context of linguistic variation, and linguistic variation reflects and maintains social variation. Societies vary in all kinds of ways, but male and female roles are distinguished in some way in all known societies. It is not surprising, then, that the

linguistic variation arising from socially constructed differences between women and men turns out to have a significant role in facilitation linguistic evolution."[3] This except illustrates the correlation that exists between linguistic change, linguistic variation and gender, issues that we are going to tackle with. Definitely, Coates believes that the societal variations explain the discrepancies between individuals and that is why we are going to present the social as opposed to linguistic consequences of linguistic differences based on gender.

In Britain, the problem of gender is highly debatable from a sociolinguistic point of view. Males and females are important categories that are distinguished in terms of gender and in terms of culture- specific ways. They are perceived as distinct members of a community, their level of integration as speakers in a community being reflected in their use of language. These aspects will be further developed and explained by some case studies.

In all its complexity, the construction of gender in the English culture is a complicated journey that can be seen both as a way of presenting the linguistic changes that occur between women and men due to numerous reasons, and as a way of obtaining gender-differentiated language. Through its distinct representations, gender becomes not merely a fundamental process placed at the boundaries of space and time, but rather an active process of the human intellect that more or less varies in every society.

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[3] Jennifer Coates, *Women, Men and Language*, Longman, London, 1993, p. 185.

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