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Literature review: Humour: As a tool for gender construction and deconstruction

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Abstract

This article adopts a social interactionist and constructionist approach to analyse humour as a tool for gender construction and deconstruction mainly about two genders, men and women. That is explained by highlighting the relationship between gender (as systems of meaning) and language, followed by over viewing three major standpoints about gender-based differences. These three standpoints are essentialist, social interactionist, and social constructionist approach. Further, I will discuss the importance of various variables like social, political and cultural backdrops in determining a “gender- based” mode of discourse. The article will conclude that socio-cultural context is very important to understand the role of feminist humour in gender construction and deconstruction. The point has been made that humour is used as a tool in the same gender and mix gender scenarios and social interactions to construct and deconstruct ‘masculine men’ (how a “Man” is supposed to behave) and ‘feminine women’ (how a “Woman” is supposed to behave). This process also mirrors the prevailing social constructions of gender.

Keywords: Essentialism, feminism, feminist humour, gender construction, gender performativity, linguistic, social interactionism, social constructionism

Introduction

Humour is a social phenomenon which can happen in all types of social interactions. Interactions are highly gendered and are a form of play, performing a number of serious social, cognitive and emotional functions (Martin, 2010). While considering social functions about humour Martin (2010) mentioned, humour can also be referred to as a mode of disclosure and a strategy for social interaction (Crawford, 2003). As power, status and material resources are important variables to determine the nature of social interactions (Magee & Galinsky, 2008; Ridgeway, 2001) in which gender inequality and hierarchy exist.

Crawford (2003) described gender (men or women) as, “a system of meanings that influences access to power, status, and material resources” (p.1413). However, gender is a social construct and varies in different societies and time period. For instance, where the cultures of the world are predominantly patriarchal a few matriarchic cultures can also be found. This difference also explains in itself the concept of gender in that culture and which gender has the upper hand on the other in terms of social power and control. Interestingly, the western feminist movement

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during the 1970s served as an impetus towards revising the social scientists understanding of gender (Crawford, 2003). While the concept of gender changed over the time period, it renovated its relationship with communication including humour as an important manner of communication. This framework argues that the humour is used as a tool in the same gender and mix gender social interactions to construct and deconstruct ‘masculine men’ and ‘feminine women’ while articulating the prevailing social constructions of gender.

This will be done by examining the relationship between gender and language first, and then reviewing three paradigms as essentialist, social interactionist and social constructionist to understand the difference in speech styles between men and women. I will then discuss the evolution feminist humour and its significance based on my literature review. Further, I will illuminate that social context is quite important to understand humour while it also encourages “feminist humour” as a powerful tool of political activism.

Relationship between gender and language

As an interdisciplinary field, the study of gender and language borrows the theories and research from the areas of Psychology, Philosophy, History, Anthropology, Communication, and Sociolinguistics. The rise of the feminist movement in Europe during the late 60s and 70s led towards an increased scholarly interest in this area (Thorne et al., 1983). There is a trendy question whether men and women have different speech styles? A huge number of research studies have been conducted to explore this realm. Meanwhile, people also got exposure to ever-increasing gossip and advice books on gender-based speech styles. But, unfortunately, there have been very few definitive answers (Freed & Greenwood, 1996; James & Drakich, 1993) about how much distinctive speech styles men and women have?

Where there is hope that the gathered scientific data might dismiss the gender-based stereotypes (Halpern, 1994; Hyde, 1994; Weatherall, 2002), and change the feminist and anti-feminist doctrines (Eagly, 1994; Shields, 2008). A few scholars even argued whether this is a question worth exploring. They explained the reason that it distracts from the real issues related to dominance, power, and superiority in language (Crawford & Marecek, 1989; Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1994). For instance, apparently, a gender-based difference might instead be a manifestation of dominance, power, and status. Interestingly, “women’s language” (Kitagawa, *International Journal for Intersectional Feminist Studies*, Volume 3, Issue 1, April 2017,

1977; Lakoff, 1973) with its characteristics of being feeble and humourless was found out to be used by both sexes lower in status or superiority (Zimmermann & West, 1996). In this way, it seems fair enough to consider the need for research on the function of language during a conversation rather than gender-based speech patterns (Kitzinger, 1991).

The essentialist approach considers that the women are different from men and classifies them into two categories. It ignores the diversity existing in one gender based unitary category such as culture, social status, class, education, age, abilities, sexuality (Crawford, 2003). This staunch stance further leads towards a mistake of ignoring the importance of situation and context on communication strategies. This approach stereotypes women as a unitary category which have underdeveloped sense of humour or value cooperative, intimacy-enhancing speech styles (Carli, 1990; Kasch, et al., 1987; Lakoff, 1973) which are quite uniform across the situations and this happens because “women are women” exhibiting similar behaviour. This approach further translates into determining gendered roles and actions (Crawford, 2003). But the question is still how and why gender is repetitively negotiated and re-enacted in conversations and other aspects of social interaction.

Social interactionist and social constructionist paradigms

The above mentioned theoretical limitations led the social science researchers towards re-conceptualizing and redefining gender and humour in a broader way with increasing focus on questions grounded in social interactionist and social constructionist paradigms. These approaches, contrary to the essentialist stance, does not take gender as a fundamental characteristic of individuals. Rather take it as a social construct which is a system of meaning organizing interactions and governing access to power and resources (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004; Crawford, 2003; Herek, 1986; Deaux & LaFrance, 1998).

According to a social interactionist perspective, gender operates at the individual, interactional and social-cultural levels as a system of meanings (Crawford, 2003; Crawford & Unger, 2000; Deaux & LaFrance, 1998). At social structural level, gender-based distinctions are made in every society, in some or the other way, allowing the person to have access to power and resources accordingly. At interactional level, it governs our decision making about appropriate gender-based behaviour in social interactions where not only we react to such differences but create

them as well as gender inequality is reinforced consistently. At the individual level, social actors internalise the cognitive schema for gender, thus making it a part of self-concept and start acting naturally like a man or a woman.

While comparing with social interactionist position, social constructionist stance takes one step further from essentialist approach and claims gender not to be a noun but a verb which is now “doing gender”. It is described as a way of making sense of social transactions to produce gender-based self-fulfilling prophecies (Zimmermann & West, 1996).

Language as an action oriented medium

Both, social interactionist and social constructionist perspectives consider “talk” as a set of strategies through which the social landscape is negotiated (Crawford, 2003). As an action-oriented medium, reality constructed through language forms the basis of social organization and gender is, of course, an important part of that. In this way, language and speech styles are vital while “doing gender”. Glass’s (1992) self-help manual is a good example of that which is basically directed towards helping heterosexual couples with communication problems. Her gendered language based itemized list serves as evidence to such hegemonic expectations. This guide helps a speaker to know how to sound and act, like a woman or a man who might vary culture to culture.

Glass’s stance implies that gendered speech styles exist independent of the speaker and can be manipulated for a communication effect in different social settings for communicative success. Hall and Bucholtz (2012) also mentioned that transgendered people prefer to consult the popular self-help Psychology books, which describe the difference between men and women speech styles, in order to perfect their transition. Linguistic gender performativity can also be observed in the context of fantasy lines (Hall, 1995) from the social constructivist position, where women’s speech style is perfected by sex workers with some creativity to get caller’s satisfaction.

About girl talk

Interestingly, femininity can be constructed and co-constructed as a natural part of social interaction without getting consciously aware of that. For instance, ‘Girl Talk’, can fulfil

different functions. It can create and sustain friendships through sharing experiences and feelings. That is also done in encouraging and supportive ways while also co-constructing and enacting their femininity facilitating how to be a real “girl” in a specific cultural backdrop (Coates, 1996).

Coates (1996) observed a discourse among 16 years old British girls when one of them applied makeup. She was complimented by her supportive friends as looking nice and also advising her to put up makeup more often. These girls were not consciously aware that they were also co-constructing a social reality that appearance matters and they should look presentable. Coates (1996) based on her long-term research on the talk of women friends, also argues that during the discourse, women also “do friends”. It includes the activities such as telling stories and jokes, teasing, laughing, asking questions. In this way, they involve others into the conversation while maintaining a collaborative floor for everyone. At the same time, these characteristics are not exclusive to women. Such as, Hay (2000) analysed the conversational humour in same and mixed-gender groups for friends in New Zealand. He found out that women and men both shared the funny personal stories to generate solidarity in same and mixed-gender groups for friends. This shows that women and men are more alike than different.

Humour as a mode of discourse

Humour as a mode of discourse has many characteristics which, while generally having a distinct discursive pattern, help in differentiating the non-humorous speech from humorous one.

As Mulkay (1988) explores this realm further, he analyses the assumptions about reality at the base of non-humorous discourse referred to as ‘the serious mode’. Here, the differences, in the interpretation of a socially perceived, single objective reality is minimized to ensure the smooth social functioning. So, there is usually less ambiguity. On the contrary, humour is a controlled and rule-bound nonsense where ambiguity and multiple interpretations of reality is a norm. Both serious and humorous modes of discourse are linguistically distinguishable. The speakers can switch in between them by signalling their intention, but the listeners might resist or support that initiated switch by utilizing some linguistic and paralinguistic strategies (Attardo, 1993). Once the switch towards humorous talk is allowed and supported by the listeners then, taboo topics, power relations and hierarchy can be discussed while taking the privilege of ambiguity. This

process not only facilitates the catharsis without any harsh consequences but also allows leaving some important questions for the audience to think about.

Feminist humour

Political and social change for any socially suppressed group such as women, in general, requires engendering a sense of group identity and solidarity as a first step, which can be seen in feminist humour. It also has emancipatory potential which Coates (1996) also mentioned. Through the playful use of humour, women as a group,

move to a new awareness of how things might be, a new understanding of the patterns we observe. In the talk of women friends, new selves are forged, and new knowledges are developed...It is the radical potential of women's friendships that makes them worthy of close investigation'. (Coates, 1996, p. 286).

Furthermore, women's resistance to social control such as sexuality and making choices has been seen and analysed in different social settings (Crawford, 2003). For instance, Green (1977) argues that women are not supposed to talk about sexuality in a bawdy way. "But they do and when they do, they speak ill of all that is sacred—men, the church, marriage, home, family, parents" (p. 33). In this way, women express their rebellion against cultural rules which control their sexuality and try to give vent to their anger towards the symbols of oppression. Women also show their pent-up anger towards men as oppressor through humour.

Green (1977) mentions that through such humour, women present alternative realities in front of females' audience and also by including the children in their audience, perform tiny acts of revenge on those men who control over their lives. Women's humour confirms conventional femininity as well as resistance to it. Barreca (2013) refers to Catherine R. Stimpson who wrote an article for *Ms* during 1987. Stimpson mentions the importance of speaking the 'F word' for women in public, as it would lead to more audacity and humour. Also because men use it frequently then why women cannot use it.

The feminist movement which brought about social and political changes during the 70s and also provided a background for a collective identity as women is also reflected in humour. As research shows, men and women both used to generally target "women" and joke about them

previously. Lampert and Ervin-Tripp (1998) analysed around 40 studies conducted during the time period of 1970 and 1996. They looked for a decline in the approval of anti-female humour and increase in the acceptance of pro-feminist or resistant humour. They discovered the trend towards the less approval of anti-female humour and a relatively increased reception of humour challenging the traditional view of gender while also targeting men.

This demonstrates that social context is very much important to understand humour while it also encouraged “feminist humour” as a powerful tool of political activism (Crawford, 2003). Here, the received wisdom about gender roles was challenged and a collective group identity was created which helped that group to mobilize for social change. Barreca (2013) mentioned in an interview with a cartoonist Nicole Hollander when she said as:

Men are frightened by women’s humor because they think that when women are alone they’re making fun of men. This is perfectly true, but they think we’re making fun of their equipment when in fact there are so many more interesting things to make fun of—such as their value systems’: (quote from Barreca ,2013, p. 198).

The question is what kinds of values are generally exhibited by such feminist humour? To find the answer, White (1988) asked some self-identified feminists to keep their humour diaries for around eight weeks. Later on, the analysis revealed that generally the values expressed were positive evaluation of women, celebration of women’s experiences, assertion of women’s strengths, capabilities and autonomy and self-definition. White (1988) is also of the view that this feminist culture creates a feminist community comprising of the self-identified feminists enacting their feminism in their social interactions which is not only limited to women as men can also be a part of that.

Conclusion

Unlike the essentialist perspective, humour has unique properties allowing it to become a valuable tool for gender construction and deconstruction during different social interactions. Meanwhile, emergence of a new kind of humour as feminist humour allows to express the resistance towards the popular stereotypical views about the gender. Many young women and some young men as well has been recently identifying as “third-wave” feminists. That calls for further research on language wise co-construction of feminist identity in pro-feminist communities of practice.

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Sabah-Al-Mushtaq, 2017

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