Language investigation: Gendered language practices in televised or online political debates

The 2015 UK General Election brought with it the participation of three female leaders in televised debates alongside four male leaders. Numerous academic studies and mainstream media articles have analysed and discussed these and other televised political debates (such as those around the 2017 UK General Election) in relation to gender, and in particular differences or similarities in performance by gender. Norris (2015), writing on the London School of Economics website, looked at how voting intention and evaluation of performance varied between female and male voters. Harmer, Savigny and Ward (2016) looked at how gender is performed, including: the construction of the debate as a masculine activity through the use of metaphors; the role of newspapers in reinforcing gendered "notions of masculinity and femininity in respect of political leadership"; the framing of female success as "the emasculation of their male rivals"; the centring of masculinity in evaluating both female and male politicians.

In one chapter of their book *Gender, Power and Political Speech: Women and Language in the 2015 UK General Election*, Cameron and Shaw (2016) look at gender and speech styles in the televised debates. They looked at two debates, one with seven participants – leaders of the Conservatives, the Green Party, Labour, the Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru, the Scottish Nationalist Party and the United Kingdom Independence Party – and one with just the challenger parties (i.e. all of the above minus the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, who were then in a coalition government). They analysed how times each speakers spoke and for how long, as well as whether they were adversarial or cooperative/supportive. They found that political and public speaking experience and status had a bigger effect on performance than gender. The study shows that sometimes gender differences are quite salient but this does not always mean they are the most important factor. In other situations they may be, and this is why research is important.

Turn-taking
A turn is the period in which a single person speaks with little to no interruption. There may be overlap between turns if two people speak at the same time, but generally a turn ends when another person starts speaking. Patterns of turn-taking can tell us a lot about the relationship between the participants of a conversation (or "interlocutors"), providing insight into the power dynamics at play as well as the respect speakers have or don't have for each other. This makes it a good focus of analysis when we want to find out how gender factors into speech, how speech reflects gendered power dynamics within a given situation, and in some cases how speech is used to reject power structures.

How to gather data about gendered language practices
Look for political debates online with people of different genders. Locate a section of free-flowing debate where debaters are allowed to interrupt and argue with each other. Using free-flowing debate allows you to see how turn-taking is managed in the moment rather than

in a pre-determined way, as would be the case in opening statements or questions where speakers are given a minute to speak uninterrupted.

Keeping track of turn-taking

You don't need to go through an entire 60-90-minute televised debate in order to start doing meaningful analysis, but to ensure your results are reliable you should gather quite a number of observations.

As a first step, you might want to record just the name of the speaker for the first 100 (more if you can!) turns, depending on how many speakers you have. Straight away this will give you a picture of who makes the most contributions.

Create a table like this and record the first 100 (or more) turns:

Turn #	Speaker
1	
2	
3	
4	

The table above won't necessarily tell you who speaks the most, since a turn could be 10 seconds long or less than a second. So next you should record more detail about each turn. You don't need to go through all of the turns, but you could aim to get a minimum of 10 turns per speaker (depending on how many speakers were on the panel, this may extend beyond the dataset beyond 100 turns) and a minimum of around 50 turns overall. It's best to avoid just taking the first 10 turns per speaker – you should take a minimum of the first ten, but take all turns (from all speakers) that precede the tenth turn of the speaker who contributes the least. This way you'll include in your analysis all data within a particular time period, rather than say the entire first five minutes and then just a selection of turns from the next five.

Add a few more columns to your table as below and record the information. Below the table are details of what to record in the rightmost three columns. Feel free to add your own columns if you can think of something else that might be of interest!

Turn #	Speaker	Turn length	How was the floor taken?	Contribution type	How does the turn end?
1					
2					
3					
4					

How was the floor taken? Record whether the speaker was invited or uninvited (i.e. they made an interruption). If invited, you might want to record who invited them and how. Were they allocated a turn by the moderator, or were they asked a question by another speaker? Cameron and Shaw found that the men were allocated more questions by the moderator and had more questions and references to/about them from other speakers (note that questions and references don't always result in a turn being taken up).

Contribution type: did the speaker provide facts about their own party's policy or stance on the current topic, or challenge or question another party or speaker?

How does the turn end? Did it finish naturally (i.e. the speaker had nothing more to say) or were they interrupted? If interrupted, was it by the moderator or another speaker?

Analysing your data

Gender and other speaker characteristics

If your data is of major political debates, the lack of openly trans(gender) and/or non-binary major politicians makes determining the gender of the speakers relatively easy, though this could easily change before long. If you're using data with lesser known individuals, it's important to be aware that people you may read as female or male may identify in other ways. Pronouns and presentation can be useful, but explicit self-declaration is the only way to be sure of an individual's gender. A trans-inclusive way of studying and writing about people whose self-identified gender is unclear is to break down what people might typically draw on to assume one (binary) gender or another – e.g. pronouns, appearance and overall presentation – and analyse speakers based on these categories. Alternatively, if you choose to make assumptions about gender for ease of categorisation and analysis, make sure to be up front about the assumptions you are making.

You might also want to record details about appearance and overall presentation not just for trans inclusivity, but also for the purpose of analysis. Say you have a debate with three women and four men. Two of the women have long hair and wear dresses, while one has short hair and wears a suit. Perhaps the short-haired woman also has a deeper/lower-pitched voice. Might there be differences in how the more masc-leaning woman is interacted with by the other speakers and the moderator? Or perhaps there are two masc-leaning women based on appearance and one more femme-leaning, but one of the masc-leaning women and the femme-leaning women have lower-pitched voices while the other masc-leaning woman has a higher-pitched voice. Which is more important in determining how they are interacted with – appearance or vocal pitch?

As per Cameron and Shaw, it may also be useful to record details about the status of speakers within their party and – if you can find out – the speakers' political and public speaking experience. This will allow you to consider which has a greater effect on performance.

Turn-taking

Now you have your turn-taking data and information about each speaker, it's time to make interpretations. Can you see any obvious patterns in the table? Some questions you might want to investigate are:
- Who has the most contributions?
- Who speaks for the longest time overall?
- Who has the longest average contributions?
- Who gets interrupted the most?
- Who interrupts the most?
- Who gets invited to speak the most? Is the same true of just moderator invitations? Does the gender of the person doing the inviting affect who gets invited? Do

differences in political status and experience overlap with differences in gender? (If so, which do you think is more important?)

- Who takes up invitations the most?
- Which speakers favour facts about their own party and which prefer to attack the policies of others?

You'll need to do some basic calculations to answer some of these questions, including working out total and average contribution length. You may also want take the rightmost three columns of the table and break them down into a few categories (e.g. invited vs uninvited) and then conduct a few counts. When looking for patterns, consider which is a more useful measure out of a basic count (e.g. number of invitations) or a percentage (e.g. number of invited turns as a percentage of the number of invitations). If you have time, it can be useful to look at both together.

Related to the last question in the list above, you could also draw out all the interruptions from your table and look at the function of those interruptions, then look for gender patterns in this area. Cameron and Shaw break interruptions down into agreement, requests to the moderator, challenges or questions, and responses to challenges or questions. This can tell you how adversarial or cooperative/supportive each speaker's debating strategies are – what might we stereotypically expect with regard to gender here? This categorisation of interruptions can also tell us how often each speaker gets to respond to a challenge or question, though you would get a clearer picture if you compared this with the number of challenges or questions each speaker receives (i.e. a percentage). For instance, Cameron and Shaw found that Green Party leader Natalie Bennett didn't respond to any challenges or questions, but she only had one question to or reference made about her anyway. Might this suggest the other speakers saw her and/or the Green Party as a lesser threat, rather than Bennett not making enough of her chances?

Finally, if you have time, you might want to look beyond the numbers and explore the data qualitatively. You might find that one speaker interrupts a lot more than others. What do their interruptions look like? Why do they interrupt? Maybe you found that men receive more invitations to speak by the moderator. Do all invitations look the same? Looking at the data qualitatively can lead to many more questions which you might then wish to explore and analyse in further quantitative work.

What do you think?

How does turn-taking work in televised political debates? Is gender important? Are other factors such as political experience and status more important? What else might be relevant? Do you think you might find similar results if you looked at televised debates in other contexts? Perhaps you could explore another example with a different context, e.g. UK vs USA election debates; student vs national party elections; party-internal vs national elections. Is context relevant?