

Genderlect Investigation In Susan Glaspell's *A Jury of Her Peers*

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Abstract

The development of stylistic analysis that focuses on the role of the linguistic codes of the text dates back to the classical period. From the classical period onwards there has been continued interest among scholars in the relation between patterns of language (linguistic descriptions) and the meaning (interpretation) in the text. Feminist stylistics, a sub-discipline of stylistic analysis, is the study and interpretation of a text from a genderized and feminist linguistic perspective. Feminist stylistics, providing an insight into aspects of feminist writing and stylistics focus on the analysis of the factors which determine the meaning of text in its social context. Feminist stylisticians highlight in a systematic manner the self conscious attempts by female writers to modify traditional modes of language use from a female perspective. For years women's writing and language were criticized of not being stylistically unique but recent feministic researches have shown that women's writings were 'écriture feminine' and language was stylistically unique, therefore modern feminists indicate that there is difference between male and female writing and language use. This paper, aims to focus on feminist stylistics by exemplifying the difference between male and female language use that is referred as genderlect in Susan Glaspell's short story *A Jury of Her Peers*.

Keywords: Linguistic codes, Susan Glaspell, "A Jury of Her Peers"

Introduction to Feminist Stylistics

Feminist stylistics is a sub-discipline of stylistic analysis that studies a text from a genderized and feminist linguistic perspective. Feminist stylistics focuses on the analysis of feminist writing, discourse and stylistics. Feminist stylistics, from a female standpoint tries to modify traditional modes of language use in a systematic manner of female writers. For years writings and language of female writers were criticized of not being stylistically unique enough but recent feministic studies have shown that female writings were stylistically unique. The issue of gendered language

has imposed as a distinct category in the field of feminist linguistic. Thus, the modern feminist stylisticians by focusing on female writing and female discourse tried to indicate that stylistically female writing and discourse is unique and different than male writing and discourse.

Feminist stylistics derives its theoretical basis from the theories and practices of feminist criticism that emphasizes the social, political and economic equality between women and men. For Mills most feminists believe that "women are treated oppressively and differently from men and that they are subject to personal and institutional discrimination"(1995;3) because society is organized by male power that oppresses women and their works and words. Feminists express that there are differences in the ways men and women are treated in the male dominated society. Feminism and feminist criticism emphasizing women's oppression and limited place in the society developed critical views about social statues, gender distinction and language usage between the sexes. Feminists through feminist stylistics and language usage that is "the very medium of literary reality, and the real world codification of social values" (Ufot, 2012; 2461) intended to change the stereotypical women image and present the difference between male and female discourse. Feminist stylistics argues that there is a male hegemony in both the treatment of women in society and their characterization in literary texts. Therefore, feminist stylistics seeks to "formulate an authentic counter-image of women through their writings" (Ufot, 2012; 2462) because they see literature as a medium for foregrounding the female experiences and destructing women stereotypes formed by male works and words. Feminist stylistics by focusing on the "aesthetic effect achieved through language" (Leech and Short, 1981; 13) intends to explore the stylistic ways in which language usage and social structure in literature express female consciousness and present the dialectical struggle between male and female characters of feminist writings. McFadden states that "feminist writing and feminist stylistics both reflect genderized perspectives in literary studies which can either perpetuate the oppression of women or help to eliminate it" (1997;14).

Feminist stylistics by identifying the dialectical features in language usage and the alternative forms of expression in female texts intend to develop a textual analysis with the feminist discourse. For Mills, Feminist stylisticians aimed to "develop an awareness of the way gender is handled in texts" (1995;1). Mill indicates that feminist stylistics does not only focus on the description of sexual discrimination in literary works but also includes a study of "the ways that point of view, agency, metaphor or transitivity are unexpectedly related to matters of gender" (1995; 2). Basically, Feminist stylistics emphasizes the ways in which female authors conceptualize their works and reflect meaning in their texts. Blaine, argues that Feminist

stylistics is "the strongest successor of critical stylistics with more specific concerns of unmasking patriarchal ideologies and denaturalizing patriarchal assumptions" (1990; 3). The goal, therefore of Feminist stylistics approach to stylistic study is the evolution of linguistic and social change that altered the usage of language which oppress, subordinate, humiliate and dehumanize women in society.

Generally, in recent years, Feminist stylistics tends to emphasize, in a variety of ways the differences between the sexes whereas in the early period its focus was on the sameness of the sexes and the sameness of the presence of simple and complex sentence structures in male and female works. Namely, the early feminist stylisticians' emphasis was on the similarities between texts produced by both men and women and it was thought that there were no significant differences in style between works written by men or women. Yet, in the modern times, emphasis has shifted and number of feminist stylisticians starting with Robin Lakoff's *Language and Woman's Place* (1975) and Dale Spender's *Man-Made Language* (1980) insisted that there is a women's writing that is different in style from men's writing. Although the roots of feminist linguistic or gendered language come from Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir, the modern feminists' works have provided new perspectives, such as; Sara Mills's works; *Discourses of Difference: Women's Travel Writing* (1991), *Feminist Stylistics* (1995), *Feminist Reading/Feminist Readings* (1996), *Gender and Politeness* (2003), *Language and Sexism* (2008), and her *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader* (2008) Mills works recommend her as one of the most important feminist stylisticians and theoreticians of gender and discourse in the last decades, together with Robin Lakoff, Deborah Cameron, Deborah Tannen. Sara Mills's *Feminist Stylistic* is a pioneering work discussing the feminist writing and discourse. According to Mills, Woolf asserted that there was a "sentence of the feminine gender" and certain "women writers created a new type of sentence which is looser and more accretive than the male sentence" (1995; 44). Woolf and modern French feminists such as Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous assert that there is a difference between men's and women's writing and their way of language use. Namely, modern feminist stylisticians insist that men and women differ in their ways of writing and linguistics. Briefly, the writing difference/*écriture* feminine and linguistic difference/*genderlect* between men and women form the important basis of feministic stylistics in the postmodern feminist era.

Genderlect Difference

The question of male-female language differences has generated a considerable amount of thought and discussions, among feminists, feminist stylisticians, linguists and socio-linguistics over the last twenty years. The

discussion whether women write different than men began with Virginia Woolf and developed with the modern feminists who insisted that men and women differ in their ways of thinking, writing and expressing reality. Virginia Woolf, in her *Women and Fiction* (1990: 47-53) or in her *The Angel in the House* (Woolf, 2004: 185-190) focus on the struggle women writers experience because they are limited by the conventions of writing that have been created by men's words. Woolf refers to unique writing style of women as the "female sentence" and Mills describes it as the "gendered sentence"(qtd in Ufot, 2012; 2463). Generally, the writing difference in the way men and women structure their sentences is defined as "écriture feminine", a term coined by Helen Cixious that emphasizes the unique "female writing", and the linguistic differences in the way men and women use language is referred as "genderlect" which is a term used by Cheri Kramer (Kramarae). In other words, the term genderlect, combining gender and dialect, has been coined to define the linguistic difference between the way men and women speak. The portmanteau word, "genderlect is a variety of a language that is tied not to geography or to family background or to a role but to the speaker's sexual gender" (Suciu, 2012; 1). According to the sexual differences the speech and conversation between men and women change. Women use "rapport talk" to establish meaningful connection with others, while men use "report talk" to gain status in relation to others (Tannen, 1990; 434). Rapport Talk is the typical conversational (dialogical) style of women, which seeks to establish connection with others. Report Talk is the typical monologic style of men, which seeks to command attention, convey information, and win arguments. Because women and men use language differently, Tannen suggests that they are speaking "different dialects, or genderlects"(1986;124). The goal of genderlect theory is to understand the language of the sexes. Early works in genderlect theory explored how gender patterns in language use often diminished, marginalized and silenced women compared to man. However, later works began to focus on how gender patterns in language use differed in women's and men's speech and writing. Therefore, recent feminist studies have focused on critical views about female language use that emerged a sub-discipline study of stylistics defined as feminist stylistics that intends to explore the ways in which literature expresses female consciousness, experiences, writing and language. McFadden states that feminist writing and feminist stylistics:

Raises questions about literature that are basic to men's struggle for autonomy. Such questions include: how does the language of literature represent women and define gender relations? ... How does one's gender alter the way in which one writes? (1977;14)

Feminist Stylistics that focuses on the difference between men's and women's language usage indicated that men and women speak differently because of belonging to different subcultures and being brought up in different sociolinguistic subcultures, cultural coding and the socialization process, including family, friends, school, games, that contribute to one's femaleness or maleness. Linguistic differences between men and women are not caused by a power imbalance but by different norms of conversational interaction. Rather than speaking differently simply because they are women and men, women and men may differ in their patterns of language use because they are engaged in different activities or are playing different conversational roles, therefore, each gender has its own weaknesses and strengths. "Culture is simply a network of habits and patterns gleaned from past experiences, and women and men have different past experiences. From the time they were born they were treated differently, talked to differently, and talk differently as a result." (Tannen 1986:125) Dennis Baron, in his book *Grammar and Gender* states:

Women's speech differs from men's is accepted in much the same way that the psychological differences between the sexes are accepted, and because language is perceived as an innate and essential part of our humanity, sex differences in language are treated as natural, genetic, only to be expected and frequently to be reinforced (2007;55).

The majority of feminists linguists regard "men's speech as forceful, efficient, authoritative and serious while women's language is viewed as a deviation from the norm, and is characterized as trivial, hesitant, super polite and euphemistic" (Suciu, 2012; 2). Not only how or what men and women talk about is different, but also the way in which they talk about the subjects differ because "women wait patiently for the other person to finish his/her turn; men interrupt, they compete for the dominance of conversation topics" (Suciu, 2012; 2). Feminist stylisticians posit that female writing and language is substantially different in terms of its formal linguistic constituents as well as thematic concerns. Tannen assumes that male and female conversational styles are equally valid: "We try to talk to each other honestly, but it seems at times that we are speaking different languages—or at least different genderlects" (1990;433). In sum, male and female are speaking two distinct cultural dialects of the same language that forms a genderlectal discourse.

Genderlect Investigation in Susan Glaspell's *A Jury of Her Peers*

Susan Glaspell, living in a community passionately concerned with socialism and feminism . . ." (BenZvi, 1995; 160), was supported by a "group of friends who were intellectuals, socialists, feminists and radicals"

(Makowsky, 1993; 24). Thus, "Glaspell found encouragement for her interest in creating female characters who desired to free themselves from the stereotypical roles into which they had been cast" (Ben-Zvi,1995; 160-161) from a social and feminist perspective. Susan Glaspell has written more than forty short stories, fourteen plays, and nine novels. Glaspell's short story *A Jury of Her Peers* (1971) is an adaptation of her best known play *Trifles*. Both the play and the story have been analyzed from feminist perspectives raising questions about women's oppression in a society dominated by men and gender differences in perception. In this paper the story is analyzed from a feminist stylistic perspective focusing on the genderlect notion. Thus, the difference between male and female investigation is referred as the genderlect investigation because men and woman investigate, talk and communicate on same events from a different gender dialects. Namely, women and men differ in language use, even though they seem to speak the same language they use different words or dialects that create conflict and misunderstanding between the two sexes.

Susan Glaspell's, *A Jury of Her Peers* (1916) is a detective story on the surface but is more of a commentary about female oppression, justice, and difference in perspective and discourse between men and women that present a genderlect investigation because both sexes solve the same murder from different perspectives. The important things for women become trivial for men and the important thing for the men seem meaningless for the women, therefore; the trifles for men become the evidence for the women in solving and understanding the reason behind the murder. Tanner suggests that it is "about pre-judging and re-judging of men and women who focus on different details as evidence and speak a different language"(1972; 8). In other words, during the genderlect investigation men and women are speaking different dialects of the same language to solve a murder from different standpoints.

A Jury of Her Peers takes place in the rural Midwest, Dickson County. Throughout the story, the men and the women display different interests, concerns, and priorities as they investigate the crime. As the men: the Sheriff, county attorney (Henderson), and Mr. Hale, and the women: Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale enter the Wright farmhouse they are divided into two separate groups and their act of perception becomes sex-coded because of their different physical, psychological and emotional reactions to the murder. Men, inside the Wright's farmhouse, take charge at once and begin their investigation to solve the crime while the women, wonder with worried eyes and express their sadness and anxiety. In other words, the men look around the house only to talk "about what had happened,"(155) while the women quietly gaze around noting "a lonesome-looking place"(155) and the untidiness in the house.

After Mrs. Hale "had her foot on the door-step, her hand on the knob she felt she could not cross the threshold" (155) because for twenty years she did not visit Minnie Wright properly. Thus, Mrs. Hale felt pity and guilt. The men went over to the stove as they entered from the kitchen door and the women stood close to by the door. "Sheriff Peters unbuttoned his outer coat, and leaned over the kitchen table in a way that seemed to mark the beginning of an official business"(155), and asked Mr. Hale to "tell just when he came here yesterday morning"(156). Mrs. Hale hoped Mr. Hale would tell the story straight and plain and would not tell anything to make things harder for Minnie Foster (Mrs. Wright). Mr. Hale told the sheriff that he had come to the Wright's house to ask John Wright if he would like to have a telephone line but Mrs. Wright was sitting on a rocking chair and looking "queer" (157). When Mr. Hale asked, Mrs. Wright, where John Wright was, pleating her apron, quietly she said "he is dead"(158). Mr. Hale was surprised and said "he didn't know what to do". He asked her "why he died" and she said "he died of a rope round his neck and continued pleating the apron"(158). Harry asked her as "someone slipped a rope around his neck and strangled you didn't wake up"?. She responded "I didn't wake up"(158). Mr. Hale expressed his disbelief that she could have slept through the murder, afterwards he went and called the attorney. Attorney got his pencil in his hand all ready for writing (159). The county attorney walked toward the stair door and looked around the kitchen and said with a little laugh "nothing here but kitchen things"(159). He saw the kitchen things as insignificant trivial objects. The initial separation between men and women started with their attitude and interpretation over the kitchen things.

The county attorney looking at the old fashioned kitchen cupboard, said "Here's a nice mess"(159) but the one of the two women looking around with sympathy, Mrs. Peters, the sheriff's wife, said "She worried about that when it turned so cold last night. She said fire would go out and her jars burst"(159). Women were humiliated and laughed at when they expressed their sadness and worry over Mrs. Wright's broken jars of jam. Sheriff Peters found the explanation of his wife tremendously humorous and said: "Well, can you beat the women! Held for murder, and worrying about her preserves!" and the attorney said: I guess before we're through she may have something more serious than preserves to worry about" (160). The men laughed at their wives' and Mrs. Hale's husband said with a good natured superiority:"women are used to worrying over trifles" (160). However, it is precisely the "trifles" (160) that hide the evidences to solve the murder. The dialogues between women and men show that men's report talk seeks to command attention, convey information, and win arguments while women's rapport talk seeks to establish connection with others, therefore women

sympathize with Minnie Wright's situation and try to re-judge the event with trifle evidences to protect her while the men judge and accuse her.

The two women moving together acting as supporter and protector decide "what is relevant under the marriage law whereas the men power of authority, acting as judge and jurors, decide what is relevant under the law" (Bryan,1997;1306). Thus, the men judge Minnie Wright and accuse her because they cannot understand her complex story and her situation. The differences of the men and the women in their investigation and comprehension of the murder reveal the differences in how they discover and decode clues of the event, therefore as men prejudicially judges, women re-judge the fate of Minnie Wright.

After the investigation in the kitchen men continue their investigation by going "upstairs first-then out to the barn and around there" (156) in their search for clues, while the women are left in the kitchen and parlor seeking for their own clues. The men cannot understand what is happening in the kitchen, therefore they try to seek for evidence upstairs and outside. The women left alone in Minnie's kitchen, moving together begin discovering their own clues about Minnie's situation in the kitchen and the parlor. Gradually, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters begin deciphering details about Minnie's life that escape the notice of their husbands. They notice Minnie's despair, loneliness, her broken furniture, the mess in the kitchen where she had to cook, and her ragged clothes.

Men humiliating the women say: they would not "know a clue if they did come upon it,"(161). The two women begin to investigate the insignificant "kitchen things" (161), the unusual, and remnants of kitchen chores left "half done"(162). Additionally, the women comprehend the implications of some "fine, even sewing gone suddenly awry, as if she didn't know what she was about!"(165). As the two women piece the clues together, Minnie's situation starts to be revealed. When they spot the crooked stitching on one of the quilts Minnie was working on, Mrs. Hale pulls out Mrs. Wright's "crazy" stitching, she says she's "just pulling out a stitch or two that's not sewed very good" (165). Yet, they both know what that stitching means, therefore they speculate that she must have been upset and confused.

The two women also find Minnie's canary strangled and carefully tucked away in a box inside her sewing basket. After discovering the canary, the two women begin talking about how Minnie, once was a sociable and cheerful women but after marrying her silent, cold husband, in years she turned into a lonely person. In other words, Mrs. Hale states that Minnie, the young and pretty girl that she once knew, has died. Mrs. Hale recognizes Mr. Wright's responsibility for what has happened to Minnie, for creating the circumstances that drove her to violence. As she says to Mrs. Peters after

they discover the body of the bird, "No, Wright wouldn't like the bird ... a thing that sang. She used to sing. He killed that too." (170). The women's perspective and understanding of Minnie Wright raised questions about the responsibility of her case. Both women also notice that a birdcage door has been broken and with few words spoken between them, they infer that John Wright might have strangled Minnie's canary, her only source of joy, much the way he killed his wife's spirit with his violent manner. The two women piece together the clues; strangled canary and the birdcage and speculate that Minnie has strangled her husband just as he had strangled her canary. Empathizing with Minnie, the women decide not to tell their husbands about the results of their own investigation by concluding; "We all go through the same things-it's all just a different kind of the same thing! If it weren't-why do you and I understand? Why do we know-what we know this minute?"(171). Thus, they repair the stitching on Minnie's quilt and hide the body of the canary. First, Mrs. Peters tries to put the box holding the strangled bird's body into her handbag but cannot fit the box into it. Seeing this, Mrs. Hale takes it from her and hides it in her large coat pocket just as the men enter the room. Thus, the way men and women solve the murder differ regarding to the way and which they use language and investigate the event which can be indicated as in the following list.

The Differences Between Male and Female Genderlect Investigation:

Male Investigation	& Language	Female Investigation	& Language
Outside	public	Inside	private
Upstairs/Bedroom & barn	general / formal	Downstairs/ kitchen& parlor	specific/ informal
Powerful	serious/ efficient	Powerless	trivial/hesitant
House	logical	Cage	emotional
Strangled man	aggressive	Strangled bird	passive
Dead body	authoritative	Dead Spirit	euphemistic
Rope	direct	Quilt	indirect
Strangling event	hostile/forceful	Stitching event	polite/detailed
Speaking	advising	Silent	sharing
Questioning critically	answering	Gossiping	therapeutical
Problem solving	proving	Speculating	hiding
Noisy communication	arguing	Silent communication	/supporting
Evidence	knowledgeable	Trifles/Hints	understanding
Searching	pre-judging /accusing	Discovering	Re-judging/defending
Reacting physically	Discussing	Reacting emotionally	Empathizing
Solving	Commenting	Knotting	sympathizing
Resulting	Judging	Conclusion	Saving

The last words of the story are Mrs. Hale's in response to a question asked by the county attorney as to how Mrs. Wright planned to finish her quilt, she replies, "We call it-knot it." (173). In the final statement of the story, Mrs. Hale indicates the bonding of the two women and the way they silently bind the clues together to knot Minnie's case and "not tell" what they know to the men . Thus, the genderlect investigation ended from a totally feminine standpoint knotting mutely against the male authority that always sees female as dealing with trivial things that actually can be significant evidences in solving and judging a serious crime.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Feminist stylistics providing the basis for the interrogation of texts from a feminine standpoint analysis the text's language from a female perspective that provides alternate possibilities in interpreting gendered patterns, discourse, character and sentence analysis. Glaspell's *A Jury of Her Peers* employs essentially a feminist stylistics standpoint in presenting a genderlect investigation of a murder on the surface but in depth a story of revenge, women's victimization, oppression, justice and women's shared experience, together with a possibility for the creation of an alternate feminist jury and justice judging from a feminized perspective. Thus, Feminist stylistics standpoint tries to state the difference in gender discourse that enables the women to become a jury of their peers experiencing feminized perspectives, and female writing/écriture feminine and female language/genderlect. Briefly, the genderlect investigation has been drawn on the Feminist stylistic standpoint of the genderlect jury who has given their verdicts with their own experiences and words.

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