# Language, Gender and Hate Speech

A Multidisciplinary Approach

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# Language, Sexism and Misogyny The Reception of Women's Political Speech

**Deborah Cameron** 

University of Oxford, UK

**Abstract** This paper examines linguistic sexism and misogyny in the light of the philosopher Kate Manne's recent proposals regarding the general definitions of these concepts and their relationship. Using the reception of female politicians' speech as an illustration, it argues that misogyny can be expressed through a range of interactional and representational practices; many of these would not amount to 'hate speech' in the legal sense, but that does not mean they are innocuous. From a feminist perspective linguistic misogyny, together with sexism, can most usefully be understood as fulfilling an important political function in patriarchal societies: policing women's public speech and undermining their claims to authority.

**Keywords** Authority. Interaction. Media. Misogyny. Political speech.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Understanding Misogyny and Sexism. – 3 The Everyday Sexism and Misogyny of Verbal Interaction. – 4 The Case of Women's Political Speech. – 5 Sexism and Misogyny in the Representation of Female Politicians. – 6 Conclusion.

# 1 Introduction

This paper was originally written for a conference on the theme of language, gender and hate speech, and I will begin by situating it in that context. In my own country, the UK, the concept of hate speech is discursively well-established, but legally it is more marginal: the only kind of speech that is clearly prohibited by law, under public order and race relations legislation, is speech that incites either violence, or racial/religious hatred. What we do have is a legal category of hate *crime*. If an offence is shown to be motivated by hatred



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of the group the victim belongs to (e.g., of black and minority ethnic people, Muslims or Jews, LGBT people or people with disabilities), that can be treated as an aggravating factor by the courts, enabling them to impose a longer sentence or a heavier fine. The concept of hate speech is relevant here because speech is one kind of evidence that can be used to establish hate as the motive for a crime. However, this provision specifically excludes offences which are committed against women because of their sex. Though women may be victims of hate crime in exactly the same way as men (that is, if they were victimized because of their race, religion, sexuality, gender identity or disability), misogyny in itself is not a legally recognized form of hate.

A number of feminist organizations in Britain have campaigned for this to change. They argue that misogynist speech and misogynist violence should be treated by the legal system in the same way as the racist or homophobic equivalents. Some local police forces have responded by introducing a policy of recording misogynist acts reported to them as 'hate incidents' (Mullany, Trickett 2018). Many incidents of this kind involve, or consist entirely of, linguistic acts such as verbal abuse or harassment. In this paper I will not address the question of whether the law should be changed to define this kind of behaviour as a criminal offence (an issue on which there is disagreement even among feminists). I will, however, suggest that misogyny works differently from racism or homophobia, and that an adequate feminist analysis of misogynist speech needs to take account of that difference.

### 2 **Understanding Misogyny and Sexism**

The US-based philosopher Kate Manne has recently called for a new understanding of misogyny. In her book Down Girl. The Logic of Misogyny (Manne 2017), she argues that misogyny should not be understood as a generalized hatred of women as a class, but rather as a system for punishing 'bad' women, those who do not keep to their allotted place in the patriarchal order. She points out that whereas ethnic or religious hatred often does involve feelings of antipathy towards the group as a whole, and a desire to avoid contact with its members (expressed, for instance, in calls for their expulsion, segregation or, at the extreme, extermination), misogyny rarely if ever takes analogous forms. Very few men would not claim to love and/or respect at least some women (their mothers, say, or their female children); and few would regard the total absence of women from their lives as a desirable state of affairs.

Manne makes an important distinction between misogyny and sexism. In her model sexism is the 'justificatory' branch of the patriarchal order, which rationalizes and justifies male dominance through beliefs, theories, stereotypes and cultural narratives that present women as naturally inferior; misogyny, on the other hand, is patriarchy's 'law enforcement' branch, which rewards 'good' women who comply with societal norms while punishing those who misbehave. At the most general level, 'good' and 'bad' behaviour are defined with reference to the norm that men are entitled to take from women, while women are obligated to give to men. Women are punished if they do not give men what men feel entitled to expect from women (for instance, love, sex, fidelity, domestic services, emotional support, attention, respect) or if they demand too much from men, or if they take something for themselves which men regard as their own by right.

Importantly, Manne does not regard misogyny as a psychological disposition of individuals, but rather as an ideology that permeates society and its institutions. Of course its effects often play out in relationships between individual men and women, but misogyny also has institutional forms which may have consequences for women as a class - for instance, when a politician raises concerns about women 'taking men's jobs', when a church leader condemns the 'selfishness' of women who choose not to have children, or when a judge expresses sympathy for men who injure or kill their unfaithful wives. These misogynist beliefs and attitudes continue to be expressed and acted on by people in positions of power because they command a high degree of consensus in society more broadly: they are culturally pervasive, among women as well as men, and are certainly not confined to a tiny minority of men whose hostility to women is so extreme as to be pathological.

In the following discussion I will ask how this account of misogyny and sexism can illuminate the relationship of women to language, considered not only as a representational medium but also, in use, as a social practice. I will suggest that sexism and misogyny, defined in the way Kate Manne defines them, are separable but often co-present influences on the use of language, and that misogyny does not just make itself felt in what we might intuitively want to call hate speech - for instance, when women who express opinions online are deluged with rape and death threats, or when women in any context are referred to with slur-terms like 'cunt' and 'whore'. The combination or interaction of sexism and misogyny shapes our verbal interactions in much more varied, and more basic, ways.

### 3 The Everyday Sexism and Misogyny of Verbal Interaction

Since the mid-1970s, researchers in a number of disciplines, using an array of methods to analyse data from a wide range of speech genres and situations, have found copious and compelling evidence that there exists, in male dominated societies, a tendency for women's contributions to interaction to receive fewer tokens of attention, acknowledgment and respect than the contributions made by men. One manifestation of this is the widely-attested pattern whereby men tend to dominate interaction in mixed-sex dyads or groups. Investigations of the gendered distribution of speech, measured either by speaking time or by the percentage of turns taken by each participant, show a general trend for women to get less than their fair share of the floor while men get more than their fair share. One particularly striking recent case is Karpowitz and Mendelberg's (2014) study of small-group deliberative discussions, where they manipulated the gender-composition of the groups they observed in their lab to see whether the numerical balance between men and women made a difference. All their groups contained five people, meaning that in an ideal 'just world' each participant would get 20% of the speaking time. They found that men always took at least 20%, whereas women only reached that threshold in groups where they were not just a majority but a supermajority, outnumbering men 4:1. These researchers found more or less the same pattern when they moved out of the lab to analyse the real-world deliberations of US school boards.

While it is often assumed that this pattern is a consequence of men's greater assertiveness and confidence - they get more speaking time because they are more aggressive than women in competing to take and then hold the floor - it is not easy for even a very assertive and confident speaker to dominate a multi-party interaction without the consent and the support of other participants. Men's interactional dominance is enabled by the willingness of both sexes to pay more attention to men, allowing them to speak without interruption and making supportive moves (e.g., asking questions or giving minimal responses and agreement tokens) which encourage them to continue speaking. In this respect talk exemplifies the general principle set out by Kate Manne, that men are entitled to take from women while women are obligated to give to men. Though in some situations there is an interaction between gender and status (i.e., some men receive support and deference from both women and other men because of their position in a professional or institutional hierarchy) the 'men dominate/interrupt and women support/defer' pattern has also been observed in cases where there is no status differential, and even where women outrank men (e.g. Fishman 1978; Snyder 2014; West, Zimmerman 1983; Woods 1988). As Karpowitz and Mendelberg note, legitimate speakership is associated with authority (the capacity to influence without using coercive means) - we attend to others' contributions to the degree we believe they have something worthwhile to communicate; and authority is conceptualized as a male or masculine quality. Hence the anecdotally familiar phenomenon of men receiving credit when they repeat a point that has already been made, without receiving acknowledgment, by a woman.

It is not only women's speaking rights which are frequently disrespected. A "respect gap" (Cameron 2020, 20) is also apparent in the differential use of address forms to men and women, whether in casual street encounters between unacquainted persons (Brooks Gardner 1980), or in formal professional settings. In the latter case, one conventional marker of respect is the use of titles like 'Dr' or 'Professor' to address and refer to individuals. But some studies have found that this courtesy is frequently withheld from professional women. In a study of the introductions made at Grand Rounds, a kind of medical conference where hospital doctors present recent cases to colleagues and students, Files et al. (2017) found that women doctors introducing their colleagues virtually always used the title 'Dr', regardless of the sex of the person being introduced. Men, however, were much more likely to use the title when introducing other men: though this was a situation in which every speaker, by definition, was entitled to be referred to as 'Dr X', men gave that appellation to 72% of male introducees and only 49% of female ones.

In Britain in 2018 there was a brief but high-profile media controversy about the use of the title 'Dr' (Evans 2018). After a newspaper announced that in future it would only use the title in reference to medical doctors, and not people with PhDs in other fields, the feminist historian Fern Riddell tweeted that she disagreed with this policy: she felt that any journalist who consulted her as an expert in her field should use her academic title. Though the point she was making had nothing to do with gender - she was demanding recognition for all holders of doctoral degrees - she was immediately attacked for being an 'immodest woman'. What followed suggested that this was not just a reaction to Riddell as an individual. Many other women academics responded by recounting similar experiences of being told that it was unseemly or churlish for them to insist on the use of their titles. The attitude underlying these responses can be seen as another instance of Manne's principle that women are expected to meet others' demands, and not to make demands themselves. Fern Riddell's critics did not dispute that she had earned a PhD, but apparently they did dispute that she was entitled to public recognition for that achievement, and saw her demand for recognition as illegitimate self-aggrandisement.

### 4 The Case of Women's Political Speech

Over the last few years, with my colleague Sylvia Shaw, I have been examining the way sexism and misogyny shape perceptions of political speech (Cameron, Shaw 2016; 2020). Politics is an obvious setting in which to pose questions about language, gender and authority, since it is a domain where authority is centrally at issue, and is

projected or negotiated to a large extent through language. In democracies, politicians must use words to persuade their peers and the voting public that they are worthy of the power they seek; and in contemporary democracies they are also very dependent on the way they and their words are represented by the media, since the relationship of most citizens to the electoral process and the people involved in it is mediated rather than direct. We might go to the polls in person to record our vote, but few of us are active in political campaigns: very few of us nowadays go to political meetings or hustings or to lobby candidates in person. In Britain, certainly, the key events of any election campaign are the TV debates where political leaders perform less for the small audience in the studio than for the mass audience watching at home. In our work on British politics, Sylvia Shaw and I have investigated the difficulties women politicians face in negotiating the demands of this kind of performance, and we have argued that this is a more complex question than many discussions of it acknowledge.

In both political science and linguistics, the question has most often been approached by focusing on women's own linguistic behaviour, asking how it differs from men's and how that might put women at a disadvantage. Maybe women's habitual speech-style is too tentative or too conciliatory to project the authority people expect from a political leader, or maybe women are less skilled users of the competitive, adversarial style of discourse that is the prevailing norm in most political assemblies. But for us that has not been the most fruitful approach. In our empirical analysis of the TV debates which were the key events of the 2015 UK general election, we found there was little difference in the behaviour of male and female politicians of comparable status and experience. The difference had less to do with production and more to do with perception.

We argue, not only in this case but in general, that it is an error to suppose that gender distinctions and hierarchies are reproduced exclusively through the actual verbal behaviour of male and female speakers; attention must also be given to the role of hearers or audiences. Hearers' perceptions are influenced by culturally pervasive ideologies of language and gender; this gives rise to gendered judgments on speakers, which are typically reproduced and amplified in media representations of their speech. The information contained in media representations may in turn be a source of feedback for the speakers concerned, on the basis of which they might choose to adjust their behaviour. If a woman (like Hillary Clinton, say) has been represented in media commentary as 'cold and unfeeling', she might make a conscious effort to project warmth and emotional expressiveness in future performances. But although individual speakers can make this kind of post-hoc adjustment, they cannot prevent or control the tendency for their speech to be perceived and judged through a gendered lens. And as we found in our case study of the 2015 election campaign, that is often a distorting lens: people's perceptions of the way women communicate are not borne out by empirical analysis of their actual behaviour. For instance, commentators on the TV election debates between party leaders often commended the three women who took part for their civility, the fact that they refrained from interrupting, challenging or insulting their opponents. In fact, our analysis showed that they did all the things they were praised for avoiding: one of the women, Nicola Sturgeon, interrupted and challenged others more frequently than all but one of the male party leaders.

The ideologies of language and gender that shape the reception of women's political speech are examples of sexism in Kate Manne's definition: they invoke beliefs, stereotypes, theories and cultural narratives about the supposed linguistic differences between men and women. And it is possible for a cultural narrative to be sexist in this sense without being negative. The judgment mentioned above, commending women for their civility towards their political rivals, is an example of a 'positive' sexist stereotype: it belongs to a set of ideas about women as political actors that Sylvia Shaw and I call the "different voice" ideology, a reference to the work of the psychologist Carol Gilligan (1982). The idea that women are more relational, more collaborative, more responsive to others' needs than men, has become part of a discourse which credits women with bringing a more humane, democratic and 'modern' approach into historically male-dominated political institutions. This is typically presented as a positive development: women, by virtue of being different from men, bring something new and valuable to the political arena.

Since the 1990s, one important thing women have repeatedly been said to bring into politics is a less adversarial, more co-operative and consensus-seeking style of speech. This style has been cited, usually approvingly, not only by political commentators in the media, but also by politicians themselves, in public statements and interviews with academic researchers. Below are some examples of these statements:

Women are more co-operative in the way they work. They're not so into scoring points, and more interested in hearing different points of view. (Julia Drown MP, Lab., Swindon South, 1997)

What [women] will do is make politics more relevant to people's lives: democracy is about consensus rather than imposing will. (Gisela Stuart MP, Lab., Edgbaston, 1997)

Women prefer a "less combative and aggressive style", with "less standing up and shouting on the floor of the House". (Childs 2004, 5-6, summarizing interviews conducted with women MPs)

Nicola Sturgeon for the SNP and Leanne Wood for Plaid Cymru changed the debate not just because of what they said, but how they said it. (Roberts 2015)

This representation of women's difference is, of course, a stereotype; even if it captures some actually-existing tendency, it offers an overgeneralized and exaggerated account of it. And the problem with stereotypes, even positive ones, is that if they are treated as normative yardsticks against which real individuals may be judged, many, perhaps even most, women will not measure up.

## 5 Sexism and Misogyny in the Representation of Female **Politicians**

Most women politicians do not conform to the 'different voice' stereotype, especially when they get into positions of significant power. Women who are or who aspire to be powerful almost invariably become targets for misogyny, the punishment meted out to women who deviate from the norms of proper feminine behaviour. This is something you see very clearly if you look at the way women politicians are represented - at the language used about them in general, and more specifically the language used to represent their speech.

One common representational strategy is to belittle women in authority while simultaneously presenting them as monstrous tyrants. Below are some examples taken from commentary on the TV election debates in the UK in 2015: the first two are about the woman who chaired one of the debates, the newsreader Julie Etchingham, and the others are about Nicola Sturgeon, who took part in the debates in her capacity as the leader of the SNP (she was also, then as now, First Minister of Scotland.)

- Our Julie was also in a white jacket that gave her the air of an imperious *dental nurse*.
- This *headmistress* was not taking any nonsense from the naughty boys and girls at the back of the class.
- But the Aussie [Green Party leader Natalie Bennett] backed the head girl Nicola [Sturgeon, SNP leader] when she took on the Prime Minister, saying: "I agree with Nicola".
- She was very much like a *primary school teacher*, bobbing her head up and down, using her hands a lot.
- She ticked off Nigel Farage like a *hospital matron* who has found something nasty in the ward.

<sup>1</sup> The source we used to compile our corpus of press commentary on the debates was Lexis UK, date range 31 March to 8 May 2015.

In these examples women in positions of authority are compared to nurses and schoolmistresses, the occupants of positions where women have historically been permitted to exercise a petty form of power over either children or incapacitated adults. For this they are either resented (on the basis that any kind of female power is illegitimate and unnatural) or ridiculed (on the basis that they are tinpot dictators who overestimate their own importance, and/or only seek power because their lack of feminine allure denies them the rewards 'normal' women prefer).

It is striking how frequently misogynist commentary focuses specifically on the speech and the vocal performance of women. During the American presidential election campaign of 2016, the supposed unpleasantness of Hillary Clinton's voice became such a prominent issue, it spawned its own genre of meta-commentary in which people argued about whether descriptions of her voice as 'shrill' and 'grating' were responding to anything real, or whether they simply demonstrated a bias against female voices (Khazan 2016). There is evidence that (in English) lower-pitched voices are typically judged more authoritative than higher-pitched ones, and that this correlation holds for both male and female voices (Klofstad, Anderson, Peters 2012). But describing a speaker as 'shrill' implies more than just high pitch, it also implies an unpleasantly piercing sound, and is associated with negatively stereotyped female behaviours like bossiness or nagging. Positive descriptions of women's voices tend to emphasize qualities associated with sexually desirable femininity, such as warmth, softness, breathiness or whisperiness. Qualities more associated with the projection of authority, like loudness, monotony and creaky voice or fry, are criticised in women speakers, though when displayed in the speech of men they tend not to be commented on at all. The criterion of being pleasing to the ear is not applied to men, just as men face less exacting judgments on their appearance and dress.

Another source of information about the way women's speech is perceived is the way their speech is reported - specifically, what verbs of speaking are used to introduce a politician's own words. Guidelines for English-speaking journalists usually recommend the generic verbs 'say' and 'tell' because they are evaluatively neutral and so less liable to draw complaints of bias. But in a study of Canadian election coverage, the researchers Elisabeth Gidengil and Joanna Everitt (2000) showed that while 'say' and 'tell' were the most frequently-used verbs used to report the speech of all the party leaders, they were used more frequently in reporting male leaders' speech. Women leaders' speech, conversely, was more frequently reported using affect-laden verbs, and these consistently implied a marked degree of aggression. While men simply 'said' things, women 'accused', 'blasted', 'hit back' and 'hammered away' at their political opponents. The researchers could not find anything in the speech itself to justify

this representation of the women as more aggressive than the men. They found that all the leaders in this campaign adopted the strategy they call 'talking tough', adopting a confrontational rather than low-key style. But since in women a confrontational style is in conflict with societal norms of gender-appropriate behaviour, it is liable to be perceived as *more* confrontational than the analogous style used by men. Representing it in markedly aggressive language ensures that media audiences who may not have heard the speech in question receive a negative impression of it. This may also be done in a mock-humorous mode, as in this example, taken from press coverage of the 2015 General Election (it recounts an exchange from the second TV debate, involving three female party leaders and one male):

"Ed Miliband is scared to be bold," scowled Ms Sturgeon. "We don't want a pretend alternative to austerity". "Exactly right!" squeaked Ms Bennett.

"Labour are letting the Tories off the hook!" snapped Ms Wood. The audience applauded.

Desperately Mr Miliband tried to steer the debate back to his absent foe. "Let's not pretend there's no difference between me and David Cameron", he said, rather pleadingly. "There's not a big enough difference!" barked Ms Sturgeon.

The choice of verbs of speaking here helps to construct a scenario in which the women are ganging up on the hapless man, scowling, snapping and barking at him in a collective display of anger and aggression, while he is given the neutral verb 'say', embellished with an adverb, 'pleadingly', that emphasises his position as a supplicant.

### 6 Conclusion

The judgments made on women's political speech exemplify a phenomenon psychologists have called the 'likeability-competence dilemma', on the basis of studies showing that if a woman is judged to display high competence in an area of expertise perceived as male, she will also be judged less likeable than either men with the same competence or women who are less competent (Rudman, Fairchild 2004; Heilman, Okimoto 2007). This is undoubtedly a real dilemma for women politicians in an age when, as polls consistently show, we expect our leaders to project both competence and likeability; we want to be able to respect their authority, while at the same time feeling we can relate to them as people. It is difficult for a woman to meet both these criteria simultaneously (Potter 2019).

Kate Manne's distinction between sexism and misogyny is helpful for our understanding of this phenomenon. Women who behave in accordance with the norms of patriarchal femininity are liable to be judged less competent than men: this is a case of sexism, the ideology that justifies women's subordinate status as a consequence of the natural differences between the sexes - for instance, in this case, the idea that women have a less assertive style of speaking and are less effective in contexts like political debate where the norms are explicitly adversarial. Women who behave in counter-stereotypic ways, however, are liable to be judged less likeable than men, and this is a case of misogyny, the ideology that punishes women for laying claim to men's rights and privileges or failing to show regard for men's feelings. At the extreme, all a woman has to do to provoke this kind of punishment is merely express an opinion in a public forum. That in itself is regarded by some men as a sufficiently serious encroachment on their privileges to justify a flood of threats couched in the violent and sexually graphic register that Emma Jane (2017) calls 'Rapeglish'.

Although this register is not currently defined as a form of hate speech in English law, there are many people who think it should be, since the kind of hatred it expresses towards women appears comparable to the kind of hatred racists or homophobes express towards their target groups. But in this paper I have tried to suggest that such a narrow definition of misogyny is not necessarily helpful for the purposes of either feminist analysis or feminist politics. Misogyny works through a wide range of interactional and representational patterns, and arguably what they have in common is not the meanings they express or indeed the offence they give, but the function they fulfil - policing women's behaviour in accordance with patriarchal norms. In the case of women's speech, the most general norm being upheld through both sexism and misogyny is that women should not assume the right to speak and be heard on the same terms as men. I believe that is a fundamental aspect of women's oppression, which must be exposed and resisted in all its forms.

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