Language and gendered politics

The ‘double bind’ in action

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Introduction

Much has been written about the under-representation of women holding elected office around the world. According to the international organisation of parliaments, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2015), women constitute just over 20 per cent of members of parliament in upper and lower houses world-wide (22.4% in single or lower houses, and 20.4% in upper houses or senates). Of 179 serving heads of government, 22 are women, only 15 of whom were elected. With women making up nearly half of the world’s population of over 7 billion, these statistics speak to an alarming and persistent gendered divide in the domain of institutional politics.\(^1\)

Despite an increasing number of women gaining entry into this domain over recent decades, feminist scholars contend that it remains a distinctively masculine culture (Edwards 2009). At least two factors contribute to the perception of politics as a gendered (i.e. masculine) environment: first, the ‘presence or even predominance’ of one gender (i.e. men) and, second, ‘cultural norms and interpretations of gender that dictate who is best suited’ for electoral office (McElhinny 1995, pp. 221). For example, we know that in US politics, the presidency remains a ‘bastion of masculinity’ (Anderson 2002, p. 105) and that any viable contender for the position of commander in chief is forced to run against the deeply entrenched cultural image of man as president (Carroll 2009). This means that even if a woman in a political leadership position, such as the presidency, employs leadership styles that are culturally understood as masculine, she is judged more negatively than a man employing these same styles (Eagly & Carli 2003). Many have written about this ‘double-bind’ situation faced by women in politics (e.g. Carroll 2003; Jamieson 1995; Ross 2014). That is, adopting so-called masculine patterns of behaviour ‘leads women politicians to be seen as strange specimens’ (Martin Rojo 2006, p. 744) in relation to the normative expectations of appropriate femininity while, at the same time, women politicians run the risk of appearing ‘weak and ineffectual’ (Martin Rojo 2006, p. 744) if they behave in accordance with these normative expectations of appropriate femininity (see also Felderer 1997; Gomard & Krogstad 2001).

Recent formulations of the relationship between language and gender, following Butler (1990), have emphasised the performative aspect of gender. Under such an account, gender
is not a stable, pre-discursive construct residing in individuals; rather it emerges in discourse and in other semiotic practices. While the theorising of gender as ‘performative’ has encouraged language and gender researchers to focus on the agency of social actors in the constitution of a wide and diverse range of gendered identities (Cameron 2005), there has been less emphasis placed on another dimension of Butler’s framework – the idea that performances of gender are always subject to regulation and constraint. That is, gendered performances are produced within what Butler (1990, p. 32) calls a ‘highly rigid regulatory frame’, which ‘operates as a condition of cultural intelligibility’ (Butler 2004, p. 52). This means that certain enactments of gender are rendered appropriate and intelligible by this ‘frame’ while others – those that depart from cultural norms – are rendered unintelligible and run the risk of sanctions or penalties. For women politicians, however, there does not seem to be any enactment of gender free of social sanctions: the ‘cultural norms and interpretations of gender that dictate who is best suited’ for electoral office render any woman’s performance of gender in this context as problematic. In what follows, we consider in more detail this ‘double bind’ encountered by many women politicians: we first briefly review research that has examined women ‘doing’ politics and how this has been represented, especially in the mainstream media. Then, we turn to a case study of Hillary Clinton and the ‘double bind’ in action. Finally, we conclude with a consideration of how women politicians fare in more egalitarian political contexts, which we suggest provides further evidence that women’s political identities are rendered culturally unintelligible no matter what they do.

Women ‘doing’ politics and their representations

As noted above, many feminist scholars have argued that politics is a ‘masculine culture’ in the sense that the characteristics associated with effective political leadership are also those associated with hegemonic masculinity (Tannen 2008, p. 127). Within the discursive realm specifically, it has been claimed that ‘masculinist discursive norms have assumed the status of gender-neutral professional norms’ (Walsh 2001, p. 1). So, how do women represent themselves as credible political leaders in a context where masculine discursive norms have become naturalised as ‘professional norms’? And, how are they represented and evaluated by others?

Some research has documented differential linguistic practices on the part of women and men in political contexts. In the British House of Commons, for example, where debate is characterised by a highly adversarial discursive style, Shaw (2000, 2006) found that, while women and men took ‘legal’ turns in debates in proportion to their overall representation in the House, male MPs were far more likely than female MPs to produce ‘illegal’ interventions, such as interrupting, jeering, heckling or filibustering. (And this meant that men dominated the debate floor.) When asked why they did not participate in these kinds of illegal interventions, some female MPs said that they consciously chose not to participate in ‘male activities’ (Shaw 2006, p. 95).

In contrast, other research has demonstrated that women politicians readily take on linguistic norms symbolically associated with masculinity. This is not surprising, given that, as many language and gender scholars have argued, phenomena such as ‘women’s language’ or ‘men’s language’ are resources available to all speakers in the enactment of various kinds of identities. Perhaps the most notable example of a female politician adopting ‘masculinist discursive norms’ is Margaret Thatcher. Not only did she receive training in order to lower the pitch of her voice, Wilson and Irwin (2015) have documented her aggressive and
adversarial style during Prime Minister’s *Question Time*. But, although Thatcher was famously described as ‘the best man in the cabinet’, Fairclough (1989 as cited by Walsh 2001, p. 72) notes that her rhetorical style was, in fact, a ‘hybrid’ one because it contained carefully-selected features of white middle-class femininity, along with authoritative features associated with male politicians. According to Fairclough, this particular combination of features allowed Thatcher to assimilate into the dominant culture of the House of Commons without posing any kind of feminist challenge or threat to its masculinist norms. Davies (2015) identifies a similar kind of ‘hybrid’ discourse in Sarah Palin’s (former Republican VP candidate in the US) tweets: Palin ‘performs’ her traditionally feminine roles as mother and wife, while at the same time deploying an informal, vernacular style associated with working-class masculinity. According to Davies, this hybrid style may resonate well with her political base: extreme conservatives/libertarians/populists who are members of the Republican Party and are mostly older, married, white men.3

The linguistic style of Hillary Clinton has also been described as inconsistent with stereotypical norms of femininity; however, in Clinton’s case, the negative reaction to it and other features of her political persona have been, arguably, more extreme than reactions to other women in the political spotlight. Indeed, the title of a widely cited article on Clinton’s rhetorical style is indicative: ‘The Discursive Performance of Femininity: Hating Hillary’ (emphasis ours). Writing about Clinton’s tenure as the First Lady of the United States when she worked to reform the US health-care system with her husband, Bill Clinton, Campbell (1998) argues that Clinton’s forceful and highly developed rhetorical skills garnered negative reactions because they did not constitute a discursive enactment of femininity.4 Interestingly, Campbell also suggests that Clinton’s ‘gender violations’ on the discursive level forced her to adopt more feminine practices in non-linguistic domains (for example, ‘softer hairdos, pastel suits and smaller “more feminine” jewelry [sic]’ (Campbell 1998, p. 14), leading to what could be construed as a further example of a ‘hybrid’ style, in Fairclough’s terms.5

So, while it seems clear that women politicians adopt a variety of leadership styles, including those associated with hegemonic masculinity, Martin Rojo (2006, p. 746) has suggested, in keeping with our argument about the double bind, that ‘the style adopted by women politicians in power in government or parliament is sometimes not as important as how these styles are perceived and represented.’7 Indeed, media discourse has been a fertile site for investigating how female political leaders are perceived and represented. Much research exists, for example, on the sexist, stereotypical or asymmetrical nature of such representations in terms of the amount, type or tone of coverage (see, e.g. Conroy et al. 2015; Lakoff 2003). Other research has demonstrated that female political leaders are subject to negative evaluations regardless of whether they attempt to conform to, or transgress, gender stereotypes (see, e.g. Appleby 2015; Carlin & Winfrey 2009).

Some of this latter research has considered how women politicians are portrayed in media when they attempt to conform to stereotypical notions of ‘femininity’. For example, Bengoechea (2011) examined the communicative identity of Spain’s first woman Minister of Defence, Carme Chacón, as interpreted by the Spanish press. Bengoechea argued that the strong association between leadership and masculinity in Spain’s government and military placed Chacón in a ‘perilous and precarious’ position (2011, p. 416). When Chacón departed from the conventional chain of command with respect to ordering the withdrawal of troops from Kosovo – adopting a more collaborative approach, long considered a symbolically ‘feminine’ leadership style – she was criticised extensively in media representations that described her as naïve, weak and incompetent. Her more cooperative (‘feminine’) style of
leadership was reported as indicating a lack of leadership, and, as a consequence, her status as a capable leader was challenged and undermined.8

Given the masculinist culture of politics, what about media representations of women who attempt to transgress gender stereotypes? In attempting to demonstrate their suitability for executive office, women who try to utilise more ‘masculine’ styles of leadership still face the problem of being seen as ‘unfeminine’ (Murray 2010). For example, in a dual case study of Tarja Halonen, former President of Finland, and Angela Merkel, Chancellor of Germany since 2005, van Zoonen (2006) argues that the popularisation of politics has created an even more unfavourable context for women politicians who eschew the expectations of normative femininity. According to van Zoonen, the hyper-femininity and personalisation associated with ‘celebrity politics’ render Halonen’s and Merkel’s ‘thoroughly political and professional’ styles and their ‘rigid’ concealment of their personal lives (2006, p. 295) as ‘other’ in relation to dominant images of femininity, at the same time that Halonen and Merkel ‘remain “others” in the political sphere’ (2006, p. 298).

An additional issue faced by both Halonen (e.g. Mäkelä, Isotalus & Ruoho 2015) and Merkel (e.g. Lünenborg & Maier 2015), that of managing ‘toughness’ versus compassion, has been regarded a longstanding problem for other female politicians (Johnson 2015). These and other women heads of state (or candidates) such as Helen Clark of New Zealand (e.g. Trimble & Treiberg 2010), Julia Gillard of Australia (e.g. Hall & Donaghue 2013) and Hillary Rodham Clinton of the United States (e.g. Ritchie 2013) have all been criticised by media for their ‘toughness’ – a trait that is viewed as admirable in male politicians, yet one that remains incompatible with dominant notions of appropriate ‘femininity’ (e.g. warmth, empathy and compassion) (Johnson 2015). Indeed, each of these powerful female politicians has been depicted as cold and ruthless, and they have frequently had the authenticity of their respective political identities called into question.9

What should be clear from this brief survey of research is that the ‘doing’ of leadership continues to be associated with masculine communicative practices and styles, and that women’s performance and behaviour within such contexts is subject to gendered (typically negative) evaluations. Like Baxter’s (2012, p. 103) characterisation of female leaders in workplace contexts, ‘the linguistic agency’ of women who run for political office is clearly ‘constrained by the social category of gender’. In what follows, we summarise research concerning Hillary Rodham Clinton’s bid for the Democratic nomination for president of the United States in 2007–2008. This case study illustrates in detail how the rigid regulatory frame may shape and constrain the electoral experiences and outcomes of women political candidates who seek public office.

Clinton and ‘the cackle’

During the Democratic primary in autumn 2007, Clinton’s laughter became the subject of much media attention following her appearance on all five Sunday morning political news programmes on the same day: ABC’s This Week, CBS’s Face the Nation, CNN’s Late Edition, FOX’s Fox News Sunday and NBC’s Meet the Press. After these interviews, several journalists, media commentators and pundits in the mainstream media adopted the term, ‘The Clinton Cackle’, as a way of characterising Clinton’s laughter, and began an extended discussion of ‘What’s behind the laugh?’ In order to understand more fully what may have motivated these responses to Clinton and her laughter, Romaniuk (2009), investigated Clinton’s laughter from a conversation analytic perspective as it occurred in the kinds of broadcast news interviews that provoked these media responses in the first place.
The analysis was based on a collection of video recordings and transcripts of 25 live interviews – televised on the ‘Big Four’ US commercial TV networks (ABC, CBS, FOX, NBC) and the national cable and satellite TV channel, CNN – that Clinton participated in during and following her bid for the Democratic nomination (September 2007–September 2009). In keeping with two fundamental assumptions of conversation analysis (Schegloff 2009), the analysis sought, first, to discover the extent to which Clinton produced laughter in orderly ways and, second, to describe the social actions her laughter seemed to accomplish within these interviews (as opposed to focusing on the exchange of propositional content). While Romaniuk (2013a) identified a range of interactional environments in which Clinton’s laughter occurred in these news interviews, the type of laughter that seemed most relevant to the media reporting just described was laughter that responded to, or occurred in the course of, serious interviewer questions.

To illustrate, we present the following example from an interview with Harry Smith on The Early Show (transcripts follow CA conventions, see Hepburn & Bolden 2013). At the time of the interview, Clinton had just received an endorsement from the Des Moines Register, a newspaper in Des Moines, Iowa. This was a significant moment for her campaign since, Barack Obama was polling increasingly well, and the Iowa Caucuses – the first major electoral event of the nominating process – were less than a month away. Prior to where excerpt (1) begins, Smith suggests that, in spite of the newspaper endorsement, many Americans still hold negative perceptions of Clinton because of her failed attempt at healthcare reform in the 1990s. After Smith unsuccessfully attempts to have Clinton address the issue of these negative perceptions, many Americans still hold negative perceptions of Clinton because of her failed attempt at healthcare reform in the 1990s. After Smith unsuccessfully attempts to have Clinton address the issue of these negative perceptions, he follows up with the prefaced question in excerpt (1):

(1) 2007Dec17-CBS_TheEarlyShow-2: Rubs
IR: Harry Smith; IE: Hillary Rodham Clinton

16 IR: Here’s the thing though. So one of the rubs about
17 your campaign: they say it (.) feels like it’s
18 focus-group driven:, that it’s too: run too tightly,
19 that [.h [people in Iowa don ’t get to see=
20 IE: [uh[eh[hih h↑ih hehheh]
21 IR: =enough of the[re::al you::,=
22 IE: [.hh [uh(h):] =Well th[at’s cert-=
23 24 IR: [>to run
25 26 IE: counter to< what you just sai[d.=
27 28 IE: [Well that’s certainly
29 IR: Right (.)
30 IE: It’s not the first time I’ve disagreed with the
31 phress=
32 IR: 3k[hhuh
33 IE: [and I fp(h)robably don’t think it’s
34 the last time[ […]

(Clinton interview on The Early Show 2007)

Smith’s question preface offers three critical perspectives of Clinton’s campaign which, in keeping with the journalistic norm of neutrality (Clayman 2012), are attributed to a third party, albeit an anonymous one. That is, Smith says that ‘they’ say that ‘it feels like it is
focus-group-driven’, ‘that it’s too run too tightly’, and ‘that people in Iowa don’t get to see enough of the re:al you,’ (lines 17–19; 21). But Clinton does not wait until the third of these assertions is produced before responding; instead, she begins to laugh once he completes the second assertion and laughs through the third criticism. Clinton’s subsequent verbal response begins with the discourse marker, ‘well’ (Schiffrin 1987), projecting a non-straightforward response (Schegloff & Lerner 2010), and then Clinton explicitly disagrees with the substance of the question preface. In this case, and others like it, Clinton displays a disaffiliative stance towards the interviewer’s talk-in-progress, not just through her laughter, but also visually (e.g. by shaking her head).

This example is illustrative of a practice Clinton engaged in systematically in the broadcast news interviews analysed by Romaniuk – laughing during, or at the completion of, serious interviewer questions. Romaniuk argued that this kind of laughter can be viewed as a public display of disaffiliation in the sense that it expresses disagreement or dissociation from critical or otherwise problematic commentary put forward by an interviewer. For a politician like Clinton, then, laughing in such contexts acts as a form of ‘damage control’; that is, the laughter treats the talk as laughable, and, in combination with other embodied stance displays, it functions to mitigate the potential damaging effects of such talk on her, or her campaign (Romaniuk 2013b).

However, was Clinton’s laughter an idiosyncratic feature of her interactional style, as media representations such as ‘The Clinton Cackle’ would have us believe? In order to examine whether and to what extent other politicians deployed this practice of laughing in response to serious interviewer questions, Romaniuk collected a second set of video recordings: 50 live interviews televised on the same networks and featuring other politicians from within the same time period. Remarkable similarities emerged between the two collections, both in terms of the overall frequency of laughter’s occurrence and the distribution of the types of laughter. The results reported in Table 34.1 indicate that Clinton and other politicians did not differ in their initiation of laughter in the interviews even though, based on the media representations described above, it might have been expected that Clinton would have volunteered laughter much more frequently than other politicians.

In considering the type of laughter that had generated media attention for Clinton (i.e. laughter that occurred in response to interviewers’ serious questions), Romaniuk also found that, although Clinton did produce laughter during interviewer questions much more frequently than other politicians (see Table 34.2), again, the difference was not significant.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 34.1 Distribution of overall occurrences of laughter, Clinton and ‘other politicians’</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Distributions compared</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Overall occurrences of laughter</td>
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<td>Overall volunteered laughter</td>
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<th>Table 34.2 Distribution of overall occurrences in relation to interviewer’s (IR’s) talk</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Overall in relation to IR talk</strong></td>
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<td>During IR question</td>
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<td>At question completion</td>
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Indeed, excerpt (2) illustrates how a male politician uses laughter in the course of an interviewer’s question in a comparable way to Clinton, as exemplified in excerpt (1). The interview features Tim Russert and then-candidate for the Republican nomination, Rudolph Giuliani. In line 1 of excerpt (2), Russert introduces a general criticism of Giuliani and then cites specific examples of Giuliani’s questionable associations.

(2) 2007Dec09-Meet The Press-Serious accusations
IR:  Tim Russert; IE: Rudolph Giuliani

01 IR: People are calling into question yer judgment,=
02   =they a:ls[ie that yer law: firm, (0.2)
03 IE: [hT°(h)im°
04 your law firm, uh did (.) w:ork for: Hugo Chavez.
05 (0.2) the head of Venezuela.=
06 IE: =[(th-)hhehh T(h)im]
07 IR: =They-the y:ve now-] they y:ve now quit that,
08   but they [did represent=
09 IE: [( )
10 IR: =CIT[GO,
11 IE: [hi hu [huh °huh°]huh° [Hahh]
12 IR: [which is ru]n by Hu [go C]ha:vez,=
13 IE: =£T(h)im th(h)at’s a st(h)re(h)ch,£ hh

(Giuliani Interview, Meet The Press 2007)

Space limitations prevent us from including a more extended excerpt (but see Romaniuk 2013b for a lengthier discussion); however, the key point here is that Giuliani laughs throughout Russert’s attempt to justify the association between Giuliani’s law firm and Chavez, thus treating it as a laughable rather than a serious matter. Giuliani’s subsequent verbal response produced with a smile, ‘Tim that’s a stretch’ (line 13), which is similar to Clinton in excerpt (1), provides the grounds for understanding his affective displays up to that point as disaffiliative.

Excerpts (1) and (2), then, are illustrative of a generic interactional practice that Romaniuk found politicians employing in the course of serious interviewer questioning. As noted above, this practice functions as a public display of disaffiliation, while still technically abiding by the constraints of the news interview format (i.e. waiting until a question is complete to provide a verbal response). Moreover, as an interactional practice that was deployed by both male and female politicians in the corpus, Romaniuk concluded that it was not an idiosyncratic feature of Clinton’s interactional style, nor was it a gendered interactional practice. And, yet, subsequent representations of Clinton’s laughter by various news media nevertheless treated it, not only as a unique character trait, but also a gendered one. What follows is a brief discussion of how a particularly negative gendered meaning became associated with Clinton’s laughter as representations of it circulated across a range of discursive contexts in the public domain.

In general, media coverage of politics constructs ‘catchy’ phrases or sound bites to characterise select portions of politicians’ talk and other conduct (Talbot, Atkinson & Atkinson 2003). While there was certainly a range of media responses to Clinton’s laughter, the characterisation that gained the status of an authoritative representation – ‘The Clinton Cackle’ – was a decontextualised one. That is, her laughter was extracted from its originating

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contexts of occurrence (i.e. news interviews) and was recontextualised in media discourse in a way that imbued it with a particularly negative, gendered meaning. But how did this meaning come about?

Since the social construction of meaning is an ongoing process that occurs across multiple contexts, indexicality is a fundamental concept in understanding how linguistic forms come to be associated with social categories such as gender. Whereas early studies of language and gender assumed a one-to-one mapping of linguistic form onto the social category of gender, Ochs’ (1992) model of indexical relations demonstrates how the relation between language and gender ‘is mediated by and constituted through a web of socially organized pragmatic meanings’ (1992, p. 341). The indexicality of gender, according to Ochs (1992), involves (at least) two semiotic processes: with respect to direct indexicality, linguistic forms ‘most immediately’ index particular social roles, activities, stances or acts, whereas in the process of indirect indexicality, these same linguistic forms become associated with particular social types and personas believed to embody those roles, to engage in those activities or to take/perform such stances and acts – types and personas that become culturally coded as gendered (Bucholtz 2009, p. 148). It is at the level of indirect indexicality, as Bucholtz (2009, p. 148) points out, where ideology comes to play a crucial role ‘since it is at this level that [the particular social roles, activities, stances or acts] acquire more enduring semiotic associations’. In media discourse, ideology can manifest itself through the use of lexical choices that convey a range of meanings beyond the strictly referential, denotational ones. So, what is the referential, denotative meaning of ‘cackle’ and how do speakers who perform the act of ‘cackling’ take on gendered meanings that move beyond the referential and denotative ones?

Dictionaries such as the Oxford English Dictionary suggest that ‘cackle’ (as a noun) refers to an expressive act (i.e. a particular kind of sound or ‘noise’ quality), characteristic of hens. This expressive act characteristic of hens can be thought of as what ‘cackle’ directly indexes. Notably, however, none of the term’s denotative meanings or the examples used to illustrate usage suggests ‘cackle’ is a negatively valenced term – one associated with a negative, gendered persona, that of witches. Despite this absence, Romaniuk (2016) illustrates how such an association is overtly recognisable and recognised both in contemporary usage (as evidenced by insights from corpus linguistics) and in media representations of Clinton’s laughter, each of which will be discussed.

Corpus linguistics is particularly valuable in investigating the role that lexical choice plays in constructing ideological representations (Cotterill 2001). To provide evidence for the negative valence of ‘cackle’ and the implicit and ideological meanings indexed by its use, Romaniuk (2016) examined the term’s semantic shape and patterns of collocation in the Corpus of Contemporary American English, the largest freely available corpus of American English, containing over 450 million words, including 20 million words each year between 1990–2012 (Davies 2008). Based on this analysis, Romaniuk (2016) found that the term’s principal active associations were narrow and restricted, and indirectly indexed the laugh of an undesirable negative persona. More specifically, ‘cackle’s’ collocational profile, and the connotations associated with it, embody what is called a negative semantic prosody; that is, the strongest collocates are overwhelmingly negative or unpleasant (Stubbs 1996). Indeed, the restricted set of meanings communicated via its use is strongly associated with an undesirable gendered persona, namely, witches.

As for the mass media representations of Clinton’s laughter, Romaniuk (2016) suggested that both the negative semantic prosody of the term ‘cackle’ and its indirect association with witches were simultaneously evoked when used in media reports. For example, numerous
representations alluded to or depicted Clinton as the Wicked Witch of the West (from *The Wizard of Oz*), a fictional character, but also a quintessential emblem of women who occupy powerful positions. This association was often made explicit in television and print news coverage. Excerpt (3), which is commentary by conservative pundit and then-host of his own TV show, Glenn Beck, stands as but one example:

(3) *Glenn Beck*, October 7, 2007
America’s starting to pay attention to the real issues that America faces, namely Clinton’s laugh. I’ve never noticed it but critics have. They’ve called it, and I’m quoting ‘less of a laugh and more of a cackle’. **Some have been a little more cruel as to even compare her laugh to the wicked witch of the West,** which is just a little unfair ((laughingly)). Here is the actual wicked witch of the Wizard of Oz. `[(Video clip of the Wicked Witch of the West is played)]`. **Okay, and here’s the wick- uh the junior Senator from New York.** `[(Plays video clip of same example of Clinton’s laughter that Hannity played an audio clip of)]`.

*(Glenn Beck 2007)*

Using satire, Beck reproduces a characterisation of Clinton’s laugh as a ‘cackle’ in a way that draws attention to this indirect association with witches while at the same time purporting not to be doing precisely that. That is, he suggests that likening Clinton’s laugh to the Wicked Witch of the West is ‘a little unfair’, but then proceeds to highlight this association anyway (note the strategic use of self-initiated repair in introducing the clip of Clinton: ‘here’s the wick- uh the junior Senator from New York’). And, in replaying a decontextualised clip of a single instance of Clinton laughing immediately after showing a clip of the Wicked Witch of the West doing so, the indirect association between Clinton and this unflattering negative persona is made explicit. Romaniuk (2016) argued that over time, as this ‘cackle’ characterisation of Clinton’s laughter travelled across discursive contexts and formed links in an intertextual series (see also Romaniuk 2014), the association between ‘cackle’ and Clinton (and not just the indirect indexical ‘witches’) became so strong that it too came to be ideologically perceived as direct (cf. Bucholtz 2009; Ochs 1992).

One piece of evidence that captures the strength of the association that developed between Clinton and ‘cackle’ is afforded by Google technology, which, according to Hill (2005), provides a powerful avenue for exploring dimensions of indexicality, and specifically, how non-linguistic semiotic elements of representations can co-occur with linguistic ones. Nearly ten years have passed since the majority of the ‘cackle’ coverage appeared, and yet, if the word ‘cackle’ is entered into Google’s search engine, the images that result illustrate not only the indirect indexical association of ‘cackle’ with witches (via pictures of ugly, fairy-tale-like witches), but also the strong semiotic association of the term with Clinton specifically (indeed, many of the images revealed are of Clinton herself, depicted in unflattering ways).

Thus, what this analysis reveals is that, in spite of Clinton’s laughter being a generic interactional practice, employed by both male and female politicians in the context of broadcast news interviews, it was ultimately perceived and evaluated in gendered, and even sexist, ways in the media and public discourse more generally. Here, we see yet another situation in which the social meanings ascribed to women’s public performances of politics – performances that may not in fact be gendered in and of themselves – are shaped and constrained by the social category of gender.
Women ‘doing’ politics in more egalitarian contexts

Although the bulk of this chapter has focused on how women’s performances in politics have been (negatively) perceived and represented in traditionally masculine domains, a remaining question concerns the status of women in political institutions that are more egalitarian in nature and where women are better represented. Following Walsh (2001), Shaw (2013) goes some way towards answering this question in her work on devolved parliaments in the United Kingdom. After the Devolved Assemblies Act of 1998, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were given considerable freedom in their creation of new political institutions, and, in contrast to the House of Commons, women have been involved in their development since their inception, and the assemblies themselves have been quite deliberately constructed in accordance with egalitarian principles. Moreover, because of different kinds of voting practices, there is a better representation of women in these institutions than in the House of Commons. For example, Shaw reports that women hold 40 per cent and 35 per cent of the seats in the National Assembly for Wales and the Scottish Parliament, respectively, with the House of Commons lagging behind with 23 per cent of seats held by women members.13

One of the questions Shaw investigated in her study of these devolved parliaments was how women members, relative to their male counterparts, participate in debates. In contrast to her findings in the House of Commons, where female and male MPs behaved differently with respect to ‘illegal’ turns in debates, in the devolved assemblies’ debates, Shaw determined that men and women participated equally (relative to their proportional representation) in both types of speaking turns – ‘legal’ and ‘illegal.’ According to Shaw (2013, pp. 85–86), the taking of illegal turns ‘was not a gendered activity: men and women spoke or shouted out of turn in proportion to their overall numbers’.

The fact that female and male members of the devolved parliaments display similarly combative behaviour in political debates is evidence, according to Shaw, that a ‘degree of equality’ has been reached in these devolved political institutions due to, among other things, the status of women as founding members and their increased numbers relative to the House of Commons. Instead of being made to feel like ‘interlopers’ (Eckert 2000), Shaw suggests that the women representatives have the status and confidence in these contexts to participate fully (i.e. also in adversarial ways). Yet, like the case study of Clinton’s laughter, Shaw’s work on devolved parliaments demonstrates that ‘the social category of gender [still] matters’ (Holmes & Meyerhoff 2003, p. 9, emphasis in original) in terms of perception and evaluation. That is, even though debate participation was not a gendered activity, the assessment of this participation was gendered. Based on interviews with assembly members, Shaw reports that barracking was viewed as ‘unladylike behaviour’ and was judged more harshly when done by women than by men: when barracking, the women’s voices were deemed ‘the more strident voices’ (2013, p. 88). Thus, while the ‘degree of equality’ that Shaw speaks of characterises well women’s participation in the discourse of devolved parliaments, it does not extend to the way that gendered norms of intelligibility construct women’s adversarial participation in negative ways – as ‘unladylike’ and ‘strident’.14

Conclusion

We began this chapter by reflecting on Butler’s notion of the ‘rigid regulatory frame’ – the idea that cultural norms specify a range of practices and behaviours that are intelligible as gendered. Identities are produced within this frame; thus, to depart from the range of norms
regarded as culturally appropriate is to run the risk of social and physical penalties and sanctions. The problem for women in institutionalised politics, however, is that there are virtually no subject positions that seem to be free of such penalties and sanctions. Whether in masculinist institutions or more egalitarian ones, women politicians are caught between cultural norms of appropriate femininity and deeply entrenched beliefs that link competence in leadership positions with masculinity. Both the Clinton case study and Shaw’s work on devolved parliaments show that women’s performances as politicians are evaluated according to a dominant, cultural script steeped in masculine hegemony – a script in which powerful women who vie for leadership positions are damned no matter what they do.15

While recent work in language, gender and leadership has moved beyond overly general and essentialist claims about gendered speech styles, demonstrating the complex and dynamic ways that women leaders discursively construct their identities, the persistence of ‘biological sex’ as a ‘powerful categorization device’ (Wodak 1997, p. 12) belies the complexity of these identities. Indeed, these practices of ‘gender polarization’ (Bem 1993) may constitute, to borrow Shaw’s (2013, p. 91) words, ‘the single main barrier to women’s entry into, and progress within, politics’. As Julia Gillard, the Australian Prime Minister between 2010–2013 said in a National Address in 2013, ‘Smashing through a glass ceiling is a dangerous pursuit. It is hard not to get lacerated on the way through.’

Notes

1 We draw a distinction between formal, institutional politics – i.e., parliamentary, legislative and government politics – and what might be called ‘everyday politics’, and in this chapter, we focus on the former.
2 Given space limitations, our review is not exhaustive; rather, we focus on research from Western contexts. However, just as this chapter was going to press, we became aware of a new book by Cameron & Shaw (2016) entitled Gender, power and political speech, an investigation of women and language in the 2015 UK general election. As a result, we have been unable to include it in this review. For recent work on women, gender and politics in global contexts, see, e.g. the edited collections by Murray (2010); Raicheva-Stover & Ibroscheva (2014); Wilson & Boxer (2015).
3 See Gibson & Heyse (2010) for a similar argument about Sarah Palin’s speech at the 2008 Republican convention.
4 See Sheldon (2015) for an analysis of Clinton’s discursive versatility in a town hall meeting where Sheldon argues Clinton is able to ‘sidestep the trap of the double-bind’.
5 In attempting to explain the hybrid or ‘fractured’ nature of women politicians’ styles, Walsh (2001, p. 201) suggests that women in leadership positions may be much more likely than their male counterparts to encounter ‘competing, and often contradictory norms and expectations’.
6 While the research described up to now focuses on women’s political performances as gendered, Wodak (2003) draws attention to the ‘multiple identities’ enacted by women politicians in the context of the European Parliament, highlighting other relevant dimensions of their identities, such as nationality or political affiliation.
7 See Holmes (2014) for a similar argument about workplace contexts.
8 For a similar case of a symbolically ‘feminine’ style of leadership being negatively evaluated by mainstream media in France, see O’Grady (2011).
9 Similarly, Clark, Clinton, Gillard, Halonen and Merkel have all had their expressed sexuality called into question, facing accusations that they were lesbians.
10 For details on both collections, see Romaniuk (2013a).
11 See Romaniuk (2014) for an elaboration of this process.
12 Both Thatcher and Gillard have also been frequently characterised according to this ‘witch’ trope (Johnson 2015).
13 Compare this with the current situation in the US: as of 1 February, 2015, the US ranks 72nd out of 190 countries in terms of the number of women in national legislatures, and women constitute approximately 20% of the country’s total political representation: 19.4% in the House, and 20% in
the Senate (IPU 2015). These percentages are but one indication that the public sphere of politics (at least in the US) remains a distinctively gendered culture.  

14 Shaw also noted that women who were non-combative were ‘seen as ineffectual’ (p. 91).  

15 Almost ten years have passed since Clinton first ran for the Democratic nomination. When we wrote this conclusion, Clinton had officially announced her Presidential bid for 2016. We believe her recent electoral loss to now President Donald J. Trump speaks to the persistence of the deeply entrenched cultural beliefs about women and politics that we have described in this chapter.

References


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