"WHATEVER WE SAY IS GENDERED"[1] OR ISN'T IT?
A STUDY IN THE PERCEPTION OF MASCULINITY AND FEMININITY IN LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

Without a doubt sex is one of the most significant categories that affect our perception of the world. The concept of gendered talk has become an intriguing research area since Lakoff's (1975) concept of *women's language* as well as Maltz and Borker's (1982) concept of male and female different conversational styles. Nowadays, scholars investigating the relationship between language and gender tend to apply the social constructionist approach, which categorizes masculinity and femininity as a continuum of experience rather than binary concepts. Yet the studies within the framework of social constructionism still tend to rely to a great extent on the cluster of features posited by Lakoff, Maltz and Borker in order to display this continuum. In these studies both language forms and the content (subject matter) of the talk are interpreted as gendered i.e. as aspects of femininity/masculinity or different femininity/masculinity (cf. Coates 1997). In this paper I would like to investigate whether the linguistic concept of gendered talk is still a legitimate symbolic resource for researchers to draw on. Does the notion of gendered talk still function as a lay concept (in the popular consciousness) or has it disappeared due to numerous significant social changes e.g. greater expansion of women in many spheres of life? The responses collected from a questionnaire based on a matched-guise technique reveal that not necessarily everything we say may be perceived as gendered i.e. typical of either a male or female style of speaking.

1. Gendered lives, gendered discourse

As Cameron (2000) claims, Lakoff (1975) started the research tradition that has ultimately produced a lay notion of *women's language*. The register proposed by Lakoff was further referred to as powerless language (O'Barr and Atkins 1980). Women's

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[1] This is a direct reference to Coates' thought expressed in the article "Competing discourses of femininity" (1997) in which the author asserts that although we have a wide range of "ways of being" all of them are gendered (p. 285). Discourse as a "system of statements which cohere around common meanings and values" (Holloway 1983: 131) allows for the expression of the "gendered self".

language or powerless language abounds in linguistic features that have traditionally been linked to the subordinate position of woman in western societies.

Language (choices) as a pivotal manifestation of one's identity clearly display this subordination. Although Lakoff's findings inspired a number of researchers, the conclusion of their studies often brought contradictory claims.[2] In general their findings can be summarized as follows: "not all women use women's language and not all women's language users are women" (Cameron 2000: 333). What is of paramount importance, however, is the fact that Lakoff's hypothesis is one of the most important concepts in the lay notion of *women's language*. This subordination, according to Lakoff, was manifested in the way women were taught to use language (cf. Foley 1999: 348-351). Although Lakoff has been criticized for her methodology (native speaker intuition as well as participant observation), her reliance on the then popular commercials and sit-coms can be very illuminating in the search for popular (lay) images of language use by men and women at that time (the 70's). She postulated that females tend to apply more precise color discrimination and deter from using "strong expletives" (Lakoff 1975: 10). So called empty or, rather, I would claim emotionally-loaded adjectives and the abundance of confirmation-seeking question tags (mitigating the assertion of the statement) also characterize women's linguistic performance. Lakoff also affirms that "the more one compounds a request, the more characteristic it is of women's speech, the less of men's" (1975: 19). The list also includes lexical hedges (fillers), intensifiers (just, so) as well as rising intonation on declaratives and emphatic stress. Lakoff's findings proposed an image of a powerless woman whose subordinate position in society is clearly reflected in her language choices.

This image, however, was firmly grounded in the popular i.e. stereotypical perception of the two sexes. Oakley (1972), for example, claims that only the every day observation of men and women is needed to prove this observation:

> Men are more aggressive and independent than women, they are braver more outgoing and extroverted, confident in their own ability to control and manipulate the external environment. Women are more sensitive and perceptive in their relationships with other people; they are dependent on their relationships. They are introverted and domesticated and emotionally labile (Oakley 1972: 49).

Lakoff's initial concept of a socially and linguistically powerless female was further moderately revised by a significant contribution of a so called cross-cultural approach (Maltz and Borker 1982). The cross cultural approach with its different but equal slant provided some more features to the linguistically condescending image of a woman. The focus of the approach resides in the divergent conversational styles of men and women ultimately leading to miscommunication and has been based on

Gumperz's (1982) approach developed for the study of difficulties in cross-ethnic communication. Within this approach boys and girls from their very childhood appear to be members of different cultures. The participation in the activities of these two opposing cultures leads to what psychologists Brooks-Gunn and Matthews (1979) labeled as the consolidation of sex roles i.e. learning gender-specific cultures. The consolidation of sex roles is reinforced continuously till adulthood when females and males tend to apply distinctive rules for a friendly conversation. Consequently any attempt at communication in a cross-sex setting is bound to result in miscommunication. Maltz and Borker (1982: 429-430) found six areas in which women and men possess divergent conversational rules. These include:

– different interpretation of minimal responses
– different meaning of questions
– two conventions for beginning an utterance and linking it to the preceding utterance
– different interpretations of displays of verbal aggressiveness
– two understandings of topic flow and topic shift
– two different attitudes toward problem sharing and advice giving

The concept of different communicative styles of women and men and the ensuing miscommunication seem to have reflected long-established folk beliefs about the communicative skills of these two genders. Yet at the same time the premises of the approach have been widely promoted yet popularly distorted via pop psychology self-help books (cf. *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* by John Gray 1982). Again the cross-cultural approach to gender differentiation in language has invoked and reinforced some common beliefs about the linguistic performance of females. This time, however, positive (yet different) aspects of this performance have been highlighted i.e. women as more cooperative conversationalists, more attentive to the face-wants of an interlocutor. Both approaches (deficit and cross-cultural) provide powerful, often normative, symbolic resources of the salient linguistic features of gendered i.e. feminine or masculine talk. Both approaches underline, though, that the gendered discourse is nothing but a reflection of the different life experience of females and males i.e. their gendered lives.

In the following discussion I will seek to show how the concepts of binary linguistic femininity and masculinity (gendered talk) are influenced, reinforced and ultimately perpetuated by gender stereotypes. These gender stereotypes constitute another important aspect in the concept of gendered talk.

2. The power of stereotypes

Stereotypes constitute the second crucial link to the concept of gendered talk. As discussed above, Lakoff (1975) claimed that features of women's language are applied differently both quantitatively and qualitatively by males and females. Yet

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[2] For a short review of the somewhat contradictory data see Newcombe and Arnkoff (1979: 1294-1296).

those features do not only contribute to the reinforcement of sex stereotypes but also the concept of gendered talk (be it feminine or masculine) is to a great extent the effect of such stereotypes. Stereotypes not only passively reflect the old popular beliefs about females' linguistic deficiency and male dominance in an interaction but they actively perpetuate the binarity in the cross-gender interaction regardless of the actual power relations. The stereotypes are part of our social heritage. Allen (1998: 438) maintains that "stereotypes come from a combination of prototypes and extreme values". The stereotypes provide then a sense of applying extreme values to an average situation. The argument, for instance, that men are more competitive about conflict than women derives from exposure to extremely competitive persons (Allen 1998: 439). As a result the stereotype has unquestionably a basis in fact and possibly experience but it also has unwarranted application to the typical or average person. The "unwarranted application" Allen refers to has been wrongly taken advantage of by researchers striving to confirm Lakoff's findings on females linguistic performance. As it turned out the power of the stereotype pushed some researchers to modify their data in order to support Lakoff's hypothesis. The stereotype indicates that the extreme value of the variable fits the entire group. Yet the assumption that a stereotype is applicable to the individual constitutes a statistical fallacy (Allen 1998: 439). As stated above gender stereotypes are especially widespread through their ubiquitous existence in many fields of human activity. The stereotypes tend not to become outdated or in the worst case they undergo a slight modification. Aries (1996), for example, claims stability of stereotypes over time maintaining that gender stereotypes in particular have changed little over the last twenty years. This idea may appear to lack validity if we take into account considerable changes that have occurred in the status of women in society. Yet Aries' claim remains reasonable once we analyze how stereotypes work in interactions. What are then some of the gender stereotypes?

The findings on gender-linked stereotypes point to broad general agreement across individuals about traits presumed to be typical of men and women. One of the lists of stereotypes, so called male and female-valued traits, was compiled by Rosenkrantz et al. (1968). Their study is now considered a classic in the field of sex role stereotypes. The original list comprises 27 male-valued traits and 11 (!) female-valued traits. Here are some of the collected features referring somehow to language competency:

MALE-VALUED TRAITS	FEMALE-VALUED TRAITS
independent	talkative
unemotional	tactful
dominant	aware of feelings of others
competitive	does not use harsh language
direct	quiet
never cries	
self-confident	
able to separate feelings from ideas	

This 1968 list testifies to the common findings reported in language and gender research. Women emerge as cooperative speakers focusing on emotional labor while men tend to pursue dominance through competition. Bem (1974) developed measures of masculinity and femininity based upon American cultural definitions of appropriate and inappropriate behavior for the sexes. The Bem Sex Role Inventory comprises twenty desirable traits for women and twenty for men. The index was constructed in the 70s indicating again that there exists some kind of widespread yet common understanding of what features constitute "model" masculinity and femininity. It also highlighted the binarity of feminine and masculine experience. Yet the Inventory introduced one innovative concept.

Although Bem claimed that many individuals do play gender-typed roles, their role repertoire may be conceptualized more meaningfully as feminine, masculine or ANDROGYNOUS. Conversely to the gender-typed person, the androgynous person is much less sensitive to the cultural definitions of femininity and masculinity and is freed from the need to conform to them. The concept of the androgynous individual seems to have heralded the modern social constructionist concept of different/alternative femininity and masculinity (cf. Coates 1997). The gender-linked stereotypes people hold also describe the features of linguistic behavior that women and men ought to conform to. As a result stereotypes do not merely have a passive descriptive quality but they also possess a prescriptive power – dictating how females and males should act verbally (Aries 1996: 187). Gender stereotypes tend to activate in interactions as we recognize the sex of the interlocutors based on discernable visual cues. As Aries (1996) maintains, the stereotyped beliefs about men and women lead us to different expectations about how people will behave based on their sex. What is more the sex of the interlocutor can cause us to perceive gender differences even when they are not present. The stereotypes of male and female speech play an important role in determining how the linguistic behavior of men and women is represented in the mass media. This representation, then, strengthens the pervasiveness

and stability of stereotypes (Kramer 1977). An excellent example of the application of the popular stereotypes of "how men and women talk differently" is an advertisement of British Telecom beginning with the not surprising words "Men and women communicate differently. Have you noticed?"[3]

3. Gender stereotypes and self-fulfilling prophecy

Two theories have been put forward in order to account for gender differences in interactions. Both theories, though, stress out the significance of stereotypes in shaping differences (Aries 1996). The so called *expectation states theory* (Eagly 1987) is based on the assumption that when one lacks information about the relative competency of group members, he/she will rely on external status to form expectations. As Aries claims, higher expectations will be formed for men due to their higher status in society and consequently these expectations will become self-fulfilling prophecies for behavior (1996: 77). *Social role theory* (Eagly 1987), on the other hand, assigns women and men to different roles in work and in the family. As a result both sexes will be expected to possess different characteristics in order to fit their convergent social roles. Men will be predicted to be more agentic and task-oriented, while women communal and emotionally expressive. These expectations prescribe then how males and females should behave in a manner consistent with their roles. Both theories evince that gender stereotypes have the power to become self-fulfilling prophecies for behavior. Consequently, gender stereotypes seem to dictate to a certain extent what we notice in an interaction. I would claim that the real power relations in an interaction may be substantially distorted by the sex-role expectations through which the data are filtered:

DATA filtered through SEX ROLE EXPECTATIONS become SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY

Numerous studies unequivocally confirm the impact of stereotypes on the conversational behavior of men and women (for a full review see Aries 1996).

Aries (1996) states that if actual speech fails to conform to stereotypes, listeners may hear what is not present or reinterpret features that were not expected. As a result the same linguistic performance may be interpreted differently depending on whether it is attributed to a male or female interlocutor. What is interesting, however, is the fact that when women tend to avail themselves of the language characteristics stereotypically linked to men, they may be evaluated more negatively than men using the same features. As the research suggests, the perception and evaluation of an interaction is substantially guided by expectations.

The studies on the gender stereotypes i.e. their perception and evaluation, clearly demonstrate that, regardless of methodology, speakers using features linked to women's language (Lakoff 1975) are perceived as less competent and powerful than speakers who do not use these features. Mulac and Lundell (1986) discussed, for instance, a pattern of evaluation called "gender-linked language effect". In this pattern the sex of the speaker largely dictates how his or her linguistic performance is interpreted. They found that the linguistic productions of males were rated by listeners higher in dynamism but lower in aesthetic quality than female production. Consequently it may be claimed that the "gender-linked language effect" substantially distorts the actual power relations and dynamics of an interaction. In the search for the symbolic power of gendered discourse, stereotypes, socially constructed beliefs and expectations (Strand 1997) play a crucial role as they provide us with the socially desirable linguistic images of femininity and masculinity valid for a specific community. In my analysis I hope to investigate whether the concepts of the linguistic femininity and masculinity (or alternative femininity/masculinity), commonly applied in social constructionist approaches to gender differentiation in language, concurrently function in the popular consciousness as binary concepts. In other words, the application of linguistic femininity and masculinity in social constructionist research on gender can only be justified and verified if there are still descriptive folklinguistic concepts of "how men and women (should) talk". Finally, I would like to try to answer the question whether gendered talk is a legitimate symbolic resource to draw on in the twenty – first century.

4. Data and methodology

Socio-psychological research has found that as more personal information about an individual becomes available, there is less reliance on stereotypes. I provided my respondents with no information on the individual they were evaluating. The use of written materials made it possible to isolate the effects of the speaker's gender. Consequently, the comments/responses provided to the questionnaire were to reveal whether discourse is still perceived "through the lenses of gender" (Bem 1993) and whether gender-linked stereotypes about language use affect this perception.

4.1. Background

For the data to be evaluated by twelve American females, all of Michigan residence, I chose eleven utterances from my 1998/1999 fieldwork in Ypsilanti, Michigan (Pawelczyk 2000). All of the eleven statements were part of the discourse produced by an African American female. The position of a committee chair imposed on her outgroup linguistic performance. In her case the language performance (the choice of discursive strategies and her conversational style in this particular community of

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[3] The British Telecom advertisement (Carter et al. 2001) provides an excellent example of how long established folklinguistics is reinforced as popular advertising slogans. This particular advertisement should be interpreted in the "equal but different approach" as it glorifies the female tendency to talk as a way of maintaining relationships.

practice[4]) resembled the discursive strategies of a white man (for a full discussion see Pawelczyk 2002). The analysis pointed out two important issues in the study on the relationship between language and gender. First, that gender is still very much linked to power and, second, that in order to account for gendered performance of an individual we still need to draw on some symbolic resources (be it Lakoff's hypothesis or Maltz and Borker's different conversational styles). Yet the study also strongly indicated that the fact of using stereotypically masculine features by a female does not equal "doing" masculine gender (cf. West and Zimmermann 1987), rather it highlighted the continuum of experience and thus a continuum of linguistic performance.

In the study under discussion the female respondents[5] were to comment on two aspects after reading each of the eleven statements:

1. In your opinion, were the highlighted statements rather said by a man or a woman? Please explain.
2. Do these highlighted statements sound
   more like assertive?
   more like tentative?

All of the female respondents are Americans currently (2002) residing in Ann Arbor (Michigan). The first question was to make a respondent look for features that she traditionally links with women or men. The second was to test whether the indication of a female author would then be linked to the potential tentativeness of an utterance where a male author would produce only assertive statements. Guided by stereotypes the respondents should "ideally" associate women with tentativeness (W-T) and men with assertiveness (M-A). The analysis of the data will be based on the qualitative method, for two very important reasons. The first one is the relatively small number of respondents (12), who decided to fill out the questionnaire. Consequently, quantitative analysis would produce statistically insignificant conclusions.

The second motivation is that the respondents have specifically been asked to comment/explain (on) the provided sentences. Those comments are invaluable in presenting the specific linguistic features pinpointed by the subjects as ways of "doing" gendered discourse. This method is also irreplaceable because the small amount of data examined qualitatively turned out to generate very illuminating insights as to the changing perception of gendered discourse.[6]

4.2. Discussion

A close analysis of the responses and explanations provided by the respondents to the stimulus material allowed for the division of subjects into two distinct groups. The most significant social variable that produced the division was age – which seemed to motivate the respondents' answers and comments.

Group 1
The first group of respondents is made up by females within the age range of 38-55. Their exact age and social status looks as follows:

AGE	SOCIAL STATUS/PROFESSION
55	Secretary
49	Secretary
49	Librarian
38	Policy advocate
54	Research associate
45	Social worker
54	Counselor

The group comprises seven women. Their overall comments and explanations to the selected utterances clearly point to their perception of discourse as gender-oriented since out of all the possible answers received in this group (77 answers, 100%), only 14 responses (about 18.5%) allow for both a female and a male to produce the given statement. 63 answers, on the other hand (about 81.5%), clearly identified the sex of the author based merely on the stimulus material. It can be concluded then that women in this group tend to associate certain speech characteristics and discourse markers as prevailing either in male or female linguistic performance (cf. social meaning and social significance, Milroy 1992 after Lavandera 1981).

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[4] The concept of a community of practice has been introduced by Eckert and McConnel-Ginet (1992). The community of practice focuses on a community defined by the social engagement that language serves "not the place and not the people as a collection of individuals" (1992: 95). It is an aggregate of people who come together around the mutual engagement in some common tasks. Individuals participate in multiple communities of practice, and individual identity is based in the multiplicity of this participation. Gender is produced (and often reproduced) in differential membership in the communities of practice. Within communities of practice women and men do not negate their earlier gendered sociolinguistic identities, but rather they transform them, change and expand their forms of femininity, masculinity and gender relations.

[5] Initially, I planned on asking the male respondents as well. However, the questionnaire was conducted with the great help of Susan Kost of Women Center for Education at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, who managed to find female respondents. I would like to express my gratitude to Susan at this point and emphasize at the same time that the same questionnaire carried out among male respondents should be compared against the female data. This could bring some insights into the stable/unstable nature of gender stereotypes among women and men of different age.

[6] For the application of qualitative method see Coates (1987, 1996).

Group 2

The second group of respondents, whose answers and comments consistently diverge from the insights provided by the females from group one, comprises five female students:

AGE	SOCIAL STATUS/PROFESSION
19	Student
22	Student
20	Student
21	Student
25	College graduate

As the table clearly suggests the women placed in the second group significantly differ from the group one respondents as far as their age is concerned. As it has already been suggested the variable of age seems to be the pivotal factor guiding the women's interpretations of (gendered) discourse. The females in group 2 gave 55 answers (100%). 31 of the provided responses (56.5%) indicate both a man and a woman as probable authors of the statements while 24 responses clearly defined the sex of the speaker (43.5%). The "younger" females appear to rely much less (to a lesser degree) on gendered markers in language.

4.2.1. The perception of gendered discourse by the two groups.

In this part I would like to discuss in detail the answers and comments provided by the respondents in groups 1 and 2 to the same questions, as they aptly illustrate the changing image of gendered discourse as perceived by two generations of women. Six questions and comments to them will be presented and discussed as they were either interpreted substantially differently by the two groups, or on the contrary they appeared to bear a striking resemblance. The highlighted parts in the provided tasks were to be commented upon.

Task 1

"When you see your postcard, it's from X, she does it... I asked her and she does it."

All the women from group two unanimously pointed at a male producing the statement. This is one of only two questions in the questionnaire where the respondents acted in such unison. The explanations emphasize the stereotypical characteristics of masculine discourse. According to women from group 1 the statement "sounds demanding and authoritative". At the same time they considered it to be "very prideful" and the man who produced it is "in control". What is also important, all seven females in this group regarded this utterance as very assertive. Consequently, masculinity is linked to assertiveness.

For the females in group 2 the statement could be produced either by a female or a male (four out of five answers). Yet, what is very important for the changing image of gendered discourse is that they also considered the utterance assertive. We may conclude that the respondents in this group think that a female may also produce assertive speech and thus the sex of a person does not determine the social meaning of an utterance. Unfortunately, the women were very skimpy in their comments.

Task 2

"I need to design the form and I need to start working on it right now" =
= **"So you're the head person over there so you need to meet with X and Y, so write down those names."**

A very interesting pattern emerged in the interpretation of question two. All of the females in group one believed that this statement "sounds very assertive". Yet what is surprising, two of them pointed at the female author of the statement. The adjective "encouraging" was used in both comments. Encouragement is the quality that is strongly associated with the female conversational style (cf. Maltz and Borker 1982). Five women thought it was a man who had produced the utterance. In support they considered the man to be "bossy, forceful, telling other people what to do". For them "being bossy" is perceived as a masculine feature.

Women in the 2nd group also regarded the statement to be assertive and similarly to group one they were divided in their opinions as to the actual author. They pointed to a male (two persons) since the person "sounds demanding", female (one person) as the person "possesses a quality of being responsible" that "only a woman has", and either gender (two persons). What is highly noticeable in those comments is the fact that the same utterance, depending on its attribution either to female or a male, produced different effects ("demanding" versus "responsible"). Yet this is the only question in which the females from group 2 displayed such a divergence in their comments. These comments, however, proved that the same utterance may be interpreted differently depending on the sex of the person.

Task 3

"Can you write these down so we can give these to Z?"

This is the only question that received the same assessment from the respondents in both groups. All of the women considered this statement to be produced by a female speaker. Furthermore, they ascribed tentativeness to it.

How did they justify their choice? The first group respondents stressed the fact that the person used a question rather than simply a flat statement that would "sound more demanding". They also perceived it as an "asking for permission" question.

Females in the 2nd group believed that it was "a very gentle statement" and thus "more feminine". Again the indicated female gender of the author lighted up a series of stereotypical association linked to femininity.

Task 4

"Now, maybe we should have a list of our phone numbers?"
"But I thought everybody had! You don't have this?"

The responses provided to task 4 indicate a substantial difference in the interpretation of gendered discourse. Group 1 respondents unanimously agreed on the assertive tone of the statement. Only two women in this group attributed this statement to a female speaker at the same time underlining that "she must be dealing with some clerical details". Yet four women believed that the statement sounded like masculine and assertive. Explaining the choice of a male author they referred to "the direct accusation typical of men" as well as the "judgmental tone" of the utterance. What is very important is that all the females in group one clearly indicated the sex of the speaker. This was not the case with the responses in group 2. All of the women in this group except for one considered either a man or a woman to produce the statement with the prevailing assertiveness ascribed to it. Yet one respondent in this group stressed that "it must have been said by a woman" as females are "frantic and emotional" and so the statement sounded. Consequently, a very marked disparity emerges in the interpretation of task 4 provided by the two groups. Females in group 1 seem to be relying on stereotypical divisions i.e. binary gender oppositions, since the accusatory statement is linked to masculinity. The group 2 respondents reject the binarity in their perception of discourse and ascribe equal status (either feminine or masculine) to it.

Task 5

"So it will be 12 o'clock" =
= **"Yeah, and you didn't have a complete list of everybody who's chairing what."**
"I have it, I have it."

All the women in group 1 agreed upon the statement being very assertive. Yet most of them (five persons) believed it is a man who produced it. The explanation runs along the stereotypical masculine features. First of all "it sounds fault-finding and judgmental". "Men also tend to be more open as far as accusation is concerned", commented one female and "this statement is pure accusation". The "accusatory" remark appeared to be a reoccurring explanation in ascribing the utterance to a man. Yet two females in this group stated that a woman produced the utterance without accounting for their choice.

Respondents in group 2 provided very different responses from group 1. First of all they pointed at a woman author in three cases, underlining the assertiveness of the utterance. Yet the only comment was that the statement sounded "pushy" and "complaining" and so are women. Two females in group two regarded a woman as the author of the utterance and claimed it "sounds assertive".

Task 6

"but you know, not even take over from anything that you and x have already discussed, it might even be kind of crucial now because we're already in May and I'm thinking for myself per se that summer coming up and many people may be vacationing, it might even be important if we meet once more this and possibly trying to meet once or twice in June"

//   "I don't have a date"

"Ok., ok."
"We did discuss that"
"Ok., ok. and the reason I'm saying" =
= **"And we know we need but we don't have a date."**

Task 6 was the longest statement to be evaluated by the respondents. Females classified in group one appeared to be quite unanimous in their comments and impressions. All of them pointed at a man producing the highlighted parts in task 6. What is more, all but one regarded these utterances as assertive. They seem to be clearly associating masculine discourse with assertiveness. How did they justify the masculinity and assertiveness ascribed to it? They believed that men produce short abrupt sentences without much of explanation. Also, the women in group one emphasized in their comments that men tend to "cut in the conversations", trying to "dismiss" them. They also "correct on the spot without any mitigation". It was also claimed that women can't have produced the highlighted statements in task 6 since "women are not aggressive". The females in group two, on the other hand, did not display such uniformity in their choices. Two of them pointed at a male speaker, two at a female one and one person claimed that the statements could have been given by either one. The justification of masculinity lies in the fact that "men are stubborn" while femininity is linked to the fact that "women worry about dates". The responses provided to question eleven by the two groups clearly manifest that binary of discourse (masculine vs. feminine) i.e. the perception of language as gender-linked, is more prevailing for the older women than for the younger and better educated females.

5. Conclusion

This study has attempted to answer the question posed in the title of the article, that is, whether discourse is still perceived as gendered, i.e. linked to feminine or masculine discourse choices. In other words, is language still interpreted in terms of binary gender oppositions in which long-established folk beliefs distort the actual power relations in an interaction. As it has been demonstrated, the symbolic notion of "gendered talk" is a mixture of long-established folk beliefs, aspects of Lakoff's hypothesis as well as reworked stereotypes disseminated via popular psychology (Cameron 2000). Although the questionnaire discussed in this paper was only taken up by twelve females and may appear statistically insignificant, very insightful patterns have emerged in the answers and comments provided by the respondents. Qualitative analysis of the data clearly demonstrates that the older women in my sample (38-55 years) are able to evaluate discourse as either more characteristic of men or women. Rarely did they abandon binarity in their perception of the evaluated statements. What is also significant, they tend to attribute assertiveness (social meaning) to masculinity (social significance) and consequently tentativeness to femininity. In their explanations a cluster of masculine features comprises the following: stubborn, aggressive, accusatory, fault-finding, judgmental, demanding, bossy, forceful, authoritative. Women, on the other hand, are thought of as encouraging and, what has been emphasized, not aggressive. For this group of women popular beliefs about gender differences continue to have remarkable strength and persistence. The younger women's (19-25 years) perception of the provided statements did not reflect any pronounced binarity. In over 50% of their answers they "allowed" either a man or a woman to produce a statement perceived by the older females as characteristic of one gender only. Consequently, it can be claimed that reworked and powerful stereotypes do not guide their perception as much as the older women's observations. The conducted analysis proves Jennifer Coates' apt remark that "whatever we say is gendered" yet with one important reservation. There appears to be less reliance on stereotypes imposing masculine or feminine divisions on discourse for a younger generation, in this case a group of younger women. Older women still bend their perception of speech toward gender-linked stereotypes. Ehrlich (1973: 35) maintains that stereotypes are "transmitted across generations as a component of the accumulated knowledge". Although the current study should be replicated on a much greater number of subjects, Ehrlich's view may not really hold for the young generations in the twenty-first century.

TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

(based on those devised by Sacks et al. 1974)

//	–	double slashes indicate point of interruption
(( ))	–	used for descriptions not utterances
?,.	–	punctuation for intonation
noooo	–	repeated vowel for elongation
[ ]	–	simultaneous speech
x	–	something was spoken but unintelligible
=	–	"latched" speech, one speaker follows the previous one without break, no interval between the end of a prior turn and the start of the next piece of talk. There is no interval between adjacent utterances, the second being latched immediately to the first, without overlapping it, the utterances are linked together with equal signs (Schiffrin 1998: 425)
(pause)	–	pause

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