

Gender representation in language textbooks: moving on

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With feminist language teachers and linguists spurred by the impetus of the second wave of the Women's Movement, the 1970s and 1980s witnessed a plethora of studies of gender representation in foreign language textbooks. These studies uncovered a range of representational issues of concern: women and girls were portrayed less frequently than men and boys, but also women were shown in fewer, and in less prestigious occupational roles. Women and girls also tended to be portrayed as less active than and as more emotional, weaker and less brave than men and boys. Since then, I argue, language textbooks have improved in these respects, although improvements tend to be patchy within individual books or across particular series. Studies of language textbooks are now less in evidence. While these identify problems that still exist, they tend, I further argue, to be insufficiently nuanced, too limited to the texts themselves, and have not addressed the issue of sexuality, with which gender is now understood to be crucially intertwined. In this talk I propose the following considerations for future studies of foreign (and second) language textbooks and gender representation. First, the different 'sub-genres' of textbooks need to be addressed, for example, reading comprehension exercises, authentic texts, role play and dialogues. Relatedly, not only images but also multimodality is important, colourful visuals now being characteristic of the language textbook genre. Second, there needs to be consideration of how textbooks are *used* in class by the teacher, who can arguably subvert both traditional and progressive gender representations: what does the teacher say about these? Issues of 'consumption' extend to the students: what do they make of different gender representations, and do they care? Going 'beyond' the textbook extends to issues of production: what is the publisher's policy on gender representation? What sort of discussions go on between writers and illustrators? Thirdly, as regards sexuality representation, while mainstream publishers may not yet be ready to include gay characters in their textbooks, they do have the choice to include representations which are less heteronormative than is sometimes found: what proportion of characters are not part of an apparently heterosexual couple, for example? Fourthly, analysts need, I argue, to lay their own position on the line as regards the desiderata of gender representation, as this is not self-evident. For example, should language textbooks broadly reflect the 'gender roles' characteristic of a given context (e.g. if, say, 30% of doctors in context X are women), or should writers and illustrators aim for gender balance in both visibility and distribution of occupations? While both are problematic, negative critique should be supplemented by some sort of vision here.
