Research Article

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Gender, language and prejudice: Implicit sexism in the discourse of Boris Johnson

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Abstract: While linguistic prejudice is commonly understood to concern individuals or social groups because of the way they speak, we can also see it as damaging language used *about* individuals or social groups. In this article, I start by looking at the traditional sociolinguistic understanding of linguistic prejudice, then go on to look rather widely at various forms of prejudicial/sexist language about *women*. In doing so, I identify various lexical asymmetries and associated “lexical gaps”. The main part of the article takes this further by exploring how certain insults to men draw on an understood prejudice against women. I illustrate this with a “telling case”: three naturally occurring examples of prejudicial, sexist language recently used by British prime minister Boris Johnson: *big girl’s blouse*, *man up* and *girly swot*. For all three to work, they draw on what we might call a discourse of “Women as ineffectual”. I conclude with a discussion of intentionality as regards this sort of prejudicial language use, what it is intended to achieve and how it can be resisted.

Keywords: asymmetry, gender, insults, intentionality, lexical gap, political discourse, prejudice, sexist language

1 Introduction

Prejudice appears to be one of those terms scholars use but are hesitant to define, seeing it either as too complex or else as understood. In an attempt to address this, I start by being explicit about how I am using *prejudice* in this article.

Let us start, however, with three documented definitions of *prejudice*, as a noun, from non-specialist sources, and a fourth from an academic source:

- An unfair and unreasonable opinion or feeling, especially when formed without enough thought or knowledge¹
- An unreasonable dislike of a particular group of people or things, or a preference for one group of people or things over another²
- Preconceived opinion that is not based on reason or actual experience³
- Adverse prejudgement⁴

1 <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/prejudice> (accessed 20/4/2020).

2 <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/prejudice> (accessed 20/4/2020).

3 <http://google.com> [search term: prejudice] (accessed 20/4/2020).

4 Finegan and Rickford (2004: 289).

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Putting these together, we can conceptualise prejudice as (a) a pre-existing opinion or feeling, which is (b) about a social group, (c) adverse and (d) not founded on reason. For this article, however, I look at prejudice as (a), (b) and (c) – but which *may* be based on a particular (ideological) reasoning. As such, and more specifically, I am looking at prejudice as expressed in language use, which I am taking as an outward manifestation of (or evidence for) an opinion, feeling, prejudgement or dislike. This “non-cognitive”, *discourse*-oriented understanding of prejudice has the advantage for the analyst that language use can be observed – heard or read, contextualised, subjected to careful scrutiny and documented.

To see language as *discourse*, for example in the familiar senses of *spoken/written discourse*, *public discourse* and *political discourse*, is to see language *in use* (*parole* not *langue*), and produced in a context. But I will also be considering *discourses* (see Foucault 1978), i.e. ways of seeing the world, for example a “human rights discourse” or what in this article I am calling a discourse of “Women as ineffectual”. In the Foucauldian sense, a discourse not only reflects the world but contributes to constructing it, through shaping language users’ thoughts, ideas, opinions, language use and perhaps their associated social and political practices. It does so through the interplay of its linguistic “traces” (characteristic linguistic items) with the “traces” of other discourses, be they complementary or oppositional (see Sunderland 2004), as well as with images. Language use, then, is not “just words”, and matters because prejudicial language use can be seen as having an effect on the social world.

The *Collins Dictionary* definition (#2 above) refers to prejudice about “a particular group of people”. I would refer to these more specially as “social groups” (rather than, say, a random collection of individuals). Social groups that typically experience prejudice in many social contexts include people of colour, working-class people, LGBTQI people, members of minority ethnic groups, people from certain countries or regions, people of certain religions, people with disabilities and women (the topic of this article; see below for more on *gender* itself). Of course, prejudice, like oppression, is not simple, in that it is frequently complicated and exacerbated by its *intersectionality* (Crenshaw 1989, 1991) – for example, prejudice against women of a certain religion.

2 Language and prejudice: traditional sociolinguistic understandings

To the above list of those prejudiced against, we can add people who speak in a certain way, be that because of their accent, dialect or both – which is probably how “language and prejudice”, or “linguistic prejudice”, is most commonly understood. And indeed this is a real issue, perhaps made most famous for sociolinguistics by the Black English trial of 1979 in Ann Arbor, at which it was agreed by the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Michigan that “the Ann Arbor School District violated federal statutory law because it failed to take into account the home language of the [poor Black] children in the provision of education instruction,”⁵ in other words, that Black English speakers were prejudiced against by the system. The District was instructed to find a way to use this knowledge to help teach Black students read standard English (Flood et al. 1991). William Labov famously testified at the trial in favour of Black English as a genuine language system (see Labov 1982).

A second and more recent example of such language prejudice concerns the trial surrounding the tragic killing of the 17-year-old Black teenager Trayvon Martin in Florida. Important here was the language use of a witness for the prosecution, Rachel Jeantel, a friend of Martin’s. Jeantel “spoke in African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and her crucial testimony was dismissed as incomprehensible and not credible” (Rickford and King 2016: 948). Rickford and King continue,

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African-American_Vernacular_English_and_education (accessed 20/4/2020).

The disregard for [Jeantel's] speech in court and the media is familiar to vernacular speakers [...] following Saussure, how do we dispel such "prejudices" and "fictions"? We show that Jeantel speaks a highly systematic AAVE, with possible Caribbean influence. We also discuss [...] other factors that bedeviled her testimony, including dialect unfamiliarity and *institutionalized racism*. [emphasis mine]

Another factor – not explored – may have been her gender, but this was not touched on in the article.

To underline their claims, Rickford and King cite a non-linguist, Lisa Bloom: "Jeantel's speech patterns, because they are associated with poor African Americans, were perceived by many, including the people who mattered most, the jurors, as unintelligent, and worse, evidence that she was not credible" (Bloom 2014: 133).

This is an example of language prejudice *par excellence* – in the traditional sociolinguistic sense. However, this is to see linguistic prejudice about a member of a social group because of that member's *own* language use. In this article, rather differently, as indicated, I am looking at language prejudice about a given social group evidenced in the language used *about that group*, i.e. *discourse* – spoken or written – usually by members of *other* social groups.

3 Linguistic prejudice as evidenced in the language used *about* women and girls

The group experiencing prejudice, then, in this sense and for this article, is *women* (and girls). To fully understand this, I argue that we need to see gender not just as a polite word for someone of a particular biological sex, i.e. someone who is a member of one of "the two genders" (without even going into the arguments around whether sex as well as gender is socially constructed), but to see gender as *learned/taught behaviour*, i.e. behaviour associated with being a woman/man/girl/boy in a particular social context or community of practice. Relatedly, it is possible to see gender as an *idea*, about women, men, girls and boys, so that when women and men (or boys and girls) are talked about differently, we know that "something to do with gender is going on". In this sense, then, gender can be seen as a *set of ideas* about women and men, boys and girls, through which they are *socially constructed*, ideas which are *frequently articulated in discourse*. Because they are socially constructed, these ideas may have no *necessary* relationship to female and male biology. As Eckert and McConnell-Ginet rightly observe, "Gender builds on biological sex, but it exaggerates biological difference, and it carries biological difference into domains in which it is completely irrelevant" (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2013: 2). Hence, the absurd marketing of products such as sweets/candies and stationery items 'for girls' or 'for boys'.⁶

To return to our previous understanding of prejudice: an adverse, pre-existing opinion or feeling about a social group, which may or may not be founded on reason. As regards gender, a "rich" resource for prejudicial language is that which can variously ignore/exclude, "other"/marginalise, define, trivialise and degrade (see Cowie and Lees 1981, Cameron 1992, Litosseliti 2006, Mills 2008). In its general sense, when used in naturally occurring spoken or written language, this can be described as gendered discourse.

Let's look first at some familiar linguistic "traces" of this. Ignoring/excluding can come about through the so-called masculine "generics": whereas users of "generic he" and "generic man" may insist they are including women too, these phrases may not be thus understood. An extension of this is phrases which in effect exclude women by virtue of the fact that they are traditionally masculine, such as those including *football*.⁷

There are also many non-equivalent, asymmetrical terms for women and men in comparable roles. These include the traditional referring to a man as *Mr*, a woman as *Mrs* or *Miss* – indicating

⁶ See <https://www.buzzfeed.com/declancashin/itsaboygirlthing> (accessed July 7 2020).

⁷ Caroline Criado-Perez, for example, recommends referring to "men's football" as well as "women's football", to get around the frequent "othering" of women footballers and women's football teams. Edinburgh Book Fest@edbookfest Aug 11. [When I say, call men's **football** men's **football**, I am asking for them not to be seen as gender neutral. We are so used to male bias going unsaid. ~Criado Perez]

her marital status, but not his, which in turn suggests the greater importance of marriage for a woman than for a man. This we can see as *defining* women. Other asymmetries include “marked” female terms (*doctor* cf. *woman doctor*, *author* cf. *authoress*, *actor* cf. *actress*) – although these appear to be on the decline, when they are used, they trivialise/marginalise women, and also suggest that the female term represents some sort of “other”, a deviation from the male norm – or someone of a lesser status (consider *manager*/*manageress*).

More seriously, arguably, and most relevant to this article are the “pairs” which not only index asymmetry in terms of status or typicality but which also degrade by rendering the female referent negative (*wizard/witch*) or potentially sexual (*master/mistress*, *sir/madam*, *king/queen*) – a phenomenon referred to in a classic (1975) article by Muriel Schultz as the “semantic derogation” of women.

Degrading linguistic items are not just part of linguistic codes, evidenced in dictionaries, but are also evidenced in actual use. Consider the following tweet about Jo Swinson, the new young leader of the UK Liberal Democrat party (until she was unseated in the general election of December 12, 2019):

Carole Malone@thecarolemalone

The idea that the patronising, school-marmy@joswinson could ever be PM is more terrifying than anything that's currently happening in this country

2:01 AM – 15 Sep 2019

School-marmy, together with its equivalents (for a discussion, see Deborah Cameron's blog⁸), is a familiar representation of women politicians. This representation of Swinson may refer in part to her spoken discourse style. In doing so, it joins a whole other family of negative, degrading characterisations of women's talk (e.g. *shrill*, *strident*, *nagging*, *whiney*). *School-marmy* is then a linguistic “trace” of derogatory discourse about women. It also evidences linguistic gender asymmetry in English, an asymmetry which extends to lexical gaps.

4 Lexical gaps in English

Interestingly, there is no masculine equivalent of the derogatory term *school-marmy* (*school-mastery* clearly doesn't work). Here we have an obvious *lexical gap*, a linguistic (non)-feature which actualises the prejudicial linguistic categories of degrade/marginalise/ignore/exclude. Other lexical gaps include the non-equivalents for men of insults for women such as nouns *cow* and *hag*, notably focussing on appearance. To these, we can add the absence of male equivalents of *slut*, *prostitute* and *cougar*, sexual referents. And then we have phrases such as *hen-pecked* (*cock-pecked**) and – going beyond single linguistic items – *she wears the trousers* (*he wears the trousers**; *he wears the skirt**).⁹ An example of this phrase in actual, naturally occurring language use can be seen in the following newspaper headlines, in relation to Meghan Markle:

- Meghan Markle “wears TROUSERS” in relationship with Prince Harry, claims insider.
- MEGHAN Markle is “wearing the trousers” in her relationship with Prince Harry according to shocking new claims made by a Royal insider that she is the one with the power, it has been reported.¹⁰

⁸ <https://debuk.wordpress.com/2019/12/18/tedious-tropes-the-sexist-stereotyping-of-female-politicians/> (accessed 20/4/2020).

⁹ The asterisk * is usually used to show ungrammatical form/structure; however, it also works well to show odd or “marked” lexical items.

¹⁰ <https://www.express.co.uk/news/royal/942128/Meghan-Markle-Prince-Harry-relationship-Royal-Wedding-Royal-Family-news-latest> (6 April 2018) (accessed 20/4/2020).

While this example does not constitute robust evidence, it illustrates the point. And, I would add, the heteronormative question of who “wears the trousers” in a relationship implies that this person is normally male. More importantly, as we have seen, the phrase does not occur in isolation. [*Name of woman/she*] *wears the trousers* joins the family of descriptive, derogatory referents for women which are asymmetrical to those for men (Shultz 1975, Mills 2008).

So far, we have identified three “lexical gaps”: there is no masculine equivalent of *school-marmy*, *hen-pecked*, or *she wears the trousers*. Any lexical gap points to a viable resource for prejudice-talk through use of the linguistic correlate of the gap: the (feminine) presence cast into sharp relief by its corresponding (masculine) absence.

All these examples can be seen as linguistic prejudice in terms of language used *about* members of a particular social group. This sort of language is clearly adverse and pre-existing (in that it is recognisable, often very familiar). Its use may be unconscious, or it may be based on some kind of conscious “reason”. But although this reason may be “it’s only words”, or “it’s just tradition”, I would argue that it is not based on the thoughtful reason which should be characteristic of a modern, liberal, enlightened, progressive democracy. In terms of research, however, although prejudicial language in use about women (*parole* rather than *langue*) can frequently be seen, to my knowledge, I am not aware of systematic work on such insults when naturally occurring (i.e. not simply drawing on the writer’s experience, self-reported in an interview or questionnaire, or found in dictionaries or textbooks).

5 More complex prejudicial linguistic items: how UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson insults men by implicitly insulting women

Many degrading words for women insult them directly (e.g. *slut*, *slag*, *bimbo*, *frigid*, *frump*) by referring to them sexually or in terms of appearance, and there are more of such terms for women than for men (Cameron 1992) – in part, because they lack masculine equivalents, as we have seen. However, let’s look again at *she wears the trousers*. This can be seen as an insult both to the woman in question (for her inappropriate, inconsiderate, unfeminine behaviour, within a discourse of tradition) *and* the man (for lacking the ability to “wear the trousers” himself and to place limits on his female partner in this respect). If the greater insult is supposed to be to the man, we have a case of insulting (degrading) a man *by* insulting (degrading) a woman.

The phrase *she wears the trousers* is still, nevertheless, directly referencing the *she* in question. The research question for this article, however, is, “Can woman be insulted/degraded indirectly, through language ostensibly addressed to a man?” This question was prompted by a recent, naturally occurring, public use of the phrase *big girl’s blouse* (see below), for which the male “equivalent” simply doesn’t obtain (*big boy’s shirt**) but also by a concern to find naturally occurring examples. A bit of thought yields *son-of-a-bitch* (you insult a man by insulting his mother) and *bastard* (ditto, though this could be aimed at a woman also). These examples are not, however, here, naturally occurring. Epistemologically, the question was boosted by the feminist understanding that, still, sexism will out, including linguistically, if not in one way then in another – and the more subtle, the more insidious.

The remainder of this article thus consists of analysis and discussion of the use of three complex prejudicial linguistic items, their very complexity and subtlety rendering them relatively pernicious and less obviously amenable to feminist linguistic intervention. The three items were all recently articulated in the spoken, public, political discourse of the current (at the time of writing) UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, prior to the general election of 12 December 2019. As Prime Minister, Johnson is in no sense “representative” of language users or even of White male native speakers of English. As he is in a particular

position of power and influence, however, he and his gendered language use can be seen as a “telling case” (Mitchell 1983). Mitchell writes,

There is [...] a strategic advantage in choosing particular sets of events for study or for exposition. It frequently occurs that the way in which general explanatory principles may be used in practice is most clearly demonstrated in those instances where the concatenation of events is so idiosyncratic as to throw into sharp relief the principles underlying them. (p. 204)

This “idiosyncratic concatenation” is precisely what may be happening here.

Johnson’s use of the phrase *big girl’s blouse* occurred at the end of a diatribe during a parliamentary sitting, about his main electoral rival, Jeremy Corbyn, the (then) leader of the oppositional Labour Party. Johnson’s actual words were *you great big girl’s blouse* (4 September 2019). These words were spoken very quietly, or even mouthed, but vociferously – and were picked up by cameras and lip-readers, as readers can attest for themselves in the relevant YouTube clip.¹¹ While the phrase *big girl’s blouse* may not be an active part of the vocabulary of most fluent English speakers, many, I suggest, will recognise it (see Cameron 2019) – and as something derogatory.

Johnson was using the phrase *great big girl’s blouse* to insult a man, Jeremy Corbyn, the then Leader of the UK’s Labour Party. But while the phrase is not on the surface sexist, it is clearly gendered. The first and most obvious linguistic trace of this is the choice of *blouse* – feminine attire – not *shirt*. Deborah Cameron (2019) goes further: “Something is being made here of what’s inside a ‘big girl’s blouse’ when its owner wears it. A ‘big girl’s blouse’ is a man who’s soft when he should be hard: metaphorically he has breasts instead of balls.” She continues, “Its force depends on a sexist presupposition. It follows the rule [...] that one reliable way to insult a man (of any sexuality) is to attribute female or feminine qualities to him.”

Here, *pussy* as an insult for a man comes to mind. Also comparable is when the label *girl* is used to insult a boy (something which doesn’t work the other way round; see Sunderland (1995) for discussion of a case in which girls in a classroom were actually happy to “be” *boys* – in response to the teacher’s request for boys to perform a dialogue, they said “*We’re boys, miss!*” – and which was treated as unremarkable, but two boys from the class said that if two boys had said that, *everybody laughed their heads off*). All three examples demonstrate and exploit, in Cameron’s (2019) words, “the tacit understanding that gender isn’t just a difference, it’s a hierarchy”.¹² In the main example, Johnson is being sexist in that he is using a reference to women instrumentally to insult Corbyn, representing Corbyn as weak, “feminine” and hence ineffectual.

The question was then: would Johnson use still other phrasings to insult men by insulting woman, as part of his idiolect? And indeed he did. The second example from Boris Johnson’s spoken idiolect is the phrase *man-up* (25 October 2019). Again this was in reference to Jeremy Corbyn, in an interview with a journalist – this time in connection with getting Corbyn to agree to a general election (in order to settle the Brexit question, since any party with a clear majority in the government would have a mandate to do this). After claiming that the Labour Party was ideologically split, Johnson says,

time for Corbyn (.) man up (.) let’s have an election on December the twelfth¹³

There is not an absolute lexical gap here, in that the phrase *woman up* is the title of a 2016 song (by Meghan Trainor), and *woman up* receives a definition in the online *Urban Dictionary*.¹⁴ However, *woman up* is, I argue, a derivative of and much less familiar than *man up* – and linguistically very marked. There is obviously a relationship between *big girl’s blouse* and *man up*. Both are pre-existing, adverse phrasings, used to insult men, and both do so by implying that the man in question (Jeremy Corbyn) is insufficiently masculine for the

¹¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U_J3Yc9N63s (accessed 20/4/2020).

¹² Comparable in some ways, although the referent can be female or male, is the particularly misogynistic language item used to insult, *cunt* – asymmetrical as its masculine equivalents (*prick*, *dickhead*) do not carry the same negative, often taboo weight.

¹³ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aml6g2_by3m (accessed 20/4/2020).

¹⁴ (1) Be a courageous and strong mature woman by appropriately taking action and responsibility. (2) Don’t inappropriately play the victim card by cowardly passing off your faults on others. Work to fix what you messed up. <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=woman%20up> (accessed 20/4/2020).

task, i.e. by not being (a real) man, not enough of a man, or verging towards being feminine. Being like a(n ineffectual) woman here clearly indicates an undesirable state, someone subordinate in the gender hierarchy. Both utterances can also be seen as implicitly homophobic, given that any sort of “femininity” in a man is often associated with homosexuality.

The third example of Johnson’s gender-prejudicial language use is his articulation of the term *girly swot* – to describe not Jeremy Corbyn, but the Conservative prime minister David Cameron (who preceded Theresa May, who in turn preceded Johnson). Now this is rather different from *big girl’s blouse* and *man up*: *girly swot* is adverse but relatively unknown. The *Cambridge Online Dictionary* provides a definition, with the note “UK informal disapproving”, i.e. “someone who always does their homework or prepares for something”, and the example: *I was always a bit of a girlie swot at school*,¹⁵ and it is not impossible that for Johnson the phrase pre-existed. For most people, I suggest, it did not – and indeed all the media reports of the exchange adopt the spelling *girly* rather than *girlie*. In any case, when it comes to prejudice, whether or not the associated language is pre-existing, the prejudice itself is.

Methodologically, Johnson’s use of *girly swot* is less satisfactory as data than our other two examples, as it is not naturally occurring, but rather *reported*. Dominic Grieve, recently a Conservative MP but no fan of Johnson’s, on 9 September 2019, pointed out in Parliament an error of Johnson’s: that Johnson had mistakenly attributed the decision to have a September sitting of Parliament to David Cameron, and not, as was actually the case, to previous Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair. Grieve then continued,

It is also rather noteworthy that when we found what was under the redaction, it turned out he condemned Mr David Cameron’s belief in having a September sitting as being a “girly swot”.¹⁶

Aside from Johnson’s surprising and worrying apparent dismissal of extra-parliamentary sitting time (in September), given the importance of this UK institution and the UK on the verge of Brexit, the word *swot* is interesting: while one may say one is *swotting* for an exam, most people, I suggest, would not call themselves or like to be called *a swot*, or even *a bit of a swot*. It suggests individual, sedentary, “nerdy” activity, contrasting unfavourably with being a person of action. Johnson was already being derogatory here. But is it a gendered word or gender-neutral? What are its connotations? If it contrasts with being a person of action, might this be particularly with being a *man* of action, interacting with like-minded (and like-bodied) others? This may be the key, i.e. that *swot* is particularly unfavourable when used of a man or boy. (Think of Hermione Granger in the *Harry Potter* series compared with the far less “swotty” Harry and Ron Weasley – would Harry and Ron have been loved as much if they had been like Hermione?) And the addition of *girly*? By doing this, Johnson appears to be making *swot* more derogatory by giving it an explicitly feminine attribution – something the previous two examples have shown carry a negative, subordinate connotation.

Considering *girly* itself (as opposed to *girl*) – if we discount *girly magazines*, i.e. soft porn – this is often derogatory: someone’s choice of a car, film, novel or sporting activity may be dismissed as *a bit girly*, for example. And although someone could use *boy-y* in response and a similarly derogatory way, and indeed be understood, it would be distinctly marked.

The three examples of gender-prejudicial language in Johnson’s discourse – *big girl’s blouse*, *man-up* and *girly swot*, which all draw on the same “Women as ineffectual” discourse – together follow the same pattern of semantically being used, insultingly, of men, but do so through insulting women. Linguistically, the first and third have no “other gender” equivalent: *big boy’s shirt** and *manly/boyish swot** simply don’t work.

Such critical response may simply be rejected on the grounds that Johnson’s three phrases are not sexist or prejudiced at all – just “part of the English language”. However, often these sorts of phrases do not go unchallenged, and indeed invite and warrant creative, linguistic and non-linguistic responses. Dominic Grieve’s own response to Johnson’s reported use of *girly swot* to insult David Cameron is notable. After citing *girly swot*, Grieve continued, “Which I suppose was meant to be contrasted, Mr Speaker, with

¹⁵ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/girlie-swot> (accessed 20/4/2020).

¹⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hon3nAHVqjs> (accessed 20/4/2020).

Figure 1: “Girly swot” reclaimed: T-shirts.

Figure 2: “Girly swot” reclaimed: jewellery.

his manly idleness”. At this there was much laughter in the House along with cries of *bravo* – presumably in appreciation of Grieve’s wit, perhaps also the expense of Johnson.

The point is that new or very unfamiliar prejudicial formulations can be responded to in critical ways. Language users are not passive dupes of what they hear and read, and language is above all a resource for creativity. All, then, is not lost, in that sexist formulations are amenable to different forms of feminist linguistic intervention (see Sunderland 2004), as Grieve showed (although he may not have characterised his riposte as such). Grieve’s quip of *manly idleness* may also have contributed to awareness-raising, i.e. reminding language users that items like *girly swot* are stereotypical, prejudicial and of concern.

Non-linguistic responses are also available. This episode, and in particular the phrase *girly swot*, prompted the intertextual production, purchase and wearing of T-shirts *positively* featuring the phrase, as well as brooches and necklaces, designed by Sarah Day, and notably from her company called Resist,¹⁷ as shown in Figures 1 and 2 (see above).

This is to adopt the strategy of *reclaiming* (see Mills, 2008, Talbot, 2010), i.e. here, to reuse a prejudicial (conservative/traditional/sexist) phrase for progressive ends – something to which *girly swot* is highly amenable (unlike *big girl’s blouse*, see Cameron 2019).

6 Intentionality

When people (including Johnson) use the sort of language I have been exploring, is this intentional? To take one step back, are language users even *aware* of the language they are using, and that it may be

¹⁷ <https://wearandresist.com/products/girly-swot> (accessed 20/4/2020). These T-shirts benefit the Rubies charity (as chosen by Steph McGovern). See <https://www.girlyswotshop.co.uk/>.

considered prejudiced? – clearly a precondition for intentionality. This is to an extent a matter of generation – very elderly speakers, for example, may not have caught up with the various items now seen as racist, sexist or otherwise socially exclusive, and use them without this awareness. But Boris Johnson is only (at the time of writing) 55 and cannot have missed the concerns and impact of the Western women’s movement throughout his lifetime, and the sensitivity to language use more generally. Further, the public surely has a right to expect a level of awareness of current social and political sensibilities from elected politicians in Parliament, when it comes to referring to, describing and addressing members of a range of different social groups.

Of course, perhaps because of his privileged background, Johnson may have a rather *low* level of awareness of what constitutes socially divisive and exclusive, or simply offensive, language: he is frequently reminded of and critiqued for previous comments referring to *picaninnies*, *water-melon smiles*, *tank-topped bum boys*, and describing Muslim women in burqas as *looking like letterboxes* (albeit in an article advocating freedom of dress).¹⁸ But it is equally possible (many would say probable) that Johnson is well aware of what constitutes divisive and exclusive language but downgrades the perceived importance of this or even uses such language intentionally and cynically. If this is so, then we would be looking at a manifestation of prejudice which is based on (some sort of) reason.

If prejudicial language is used intentionally, and even “rationally”, why? Of course, the speaker/writer may adhere to the associated values – may be sexist, racist, or whatever, and happy or even proud to be so. Empirically, this is difficult to establish, however – as we have no direct access to someone’s attitudes, values, thoughts or beliefs. So let us put this possibility aside, and look non-cognitively at the *intentionality* in the use of prejudicial language itself.

Anyone who knowingly uses language in a particular way (regardless of their actual beliefs) is arguably *constructing themselves* as a certain sort of person, for the benefit of a particular audience. Just as one frequently constructs others in certain ways, e.g. “None of my friends is really honest with me” (which may or may not be true), one can also practice self-construction (again, regardless of truth).

Most obviously, perhaps, people can and do construct themselves directly and explicitly through phrases such as “Speaking as a feminist/socialist/life-long Tory [...]”. However, self-construction can also be done indirectly. For example, a mother who says “I spent ages helping Tim with his homework last night” is arguably – because implicitly only – constructing herself as a good mother/parent, in particular one who supports her child’s education and learning. (She may be doing other things too, of course, such as complaining that she has to do this – rather than the child’s father, the school or Tim himself.)

To return to Boris Johnson, if his prejudicial language use is conscious, intentional, “rational” self-construction, the question is: what is he constructing himself as? Broadly, I argue, as a “man of the people”. This insight – not a new one – is, I suggest, not explicit in his words: he doesn’t say “Speaking as a man of the people [...]” but implicit. In that people also arguably implicitly self-construct as what they *are not*, and *do not* say, then, through his language use, Johnson is constructing himself as not a panderer to liberal intellectuals, “snowflakes” or the “PC brigade”. Rather, in contrast, and as a key part of being a “man of the people”, he is constructing himself as a “man of action”, a construction supported by the below image (Figure 3).¹⁹

This image, and a further one showing Johnson on a zip wire, represent practices which Johnson partakes/has partaken in willingly – cycling and a stunt (in 2012, when he was Lord Mayor of London).²⁰ These actions/practices construct him as a “man of action” – the zip wire being potentially risky, and zip wire riding probably largely seen as masculine rather than feminine. As such, he is someone who, to

¹⁸ <https://bellacaledonia.org.uk/2019/07/06/some-notes-on-boris-johnsons-racism-xenophobia-sexism-homophobia-and-lies/> (accessed 20/4/2020).

¹⁹ <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/118923246388222025/> (accessed 20/4/2020).

²⁰ See <https://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/news-photo/mayor-of-london-boris-johnson-got-stuck-on-a-zip-line-news-photo/542918126>.

Figure 3: Man of the people?

return to our earlier discussion, is effective (he “gets things done”, like Brexit), doesn’t need to *man up* and is certainly not a *girly swot* or a *big girl’s blouse*. Notably, Johnson got stuck on the zipwire – and this was where the carefully orchestrated stunt came unstuck. Where Johnson seems to have made his mark, however, is that he remained relatively unfazed, talking to and essentially entertaining the crowd until he was brought down: a man of action, and a cool one.

7 Conclusion

Linguistic prejudice can then and, I argue, should refer to adverse language used about particular social groups, as well as to adverse opinions about the accent or dialect of particular social groups. Those who wish to speak in a prejudiced way about women have a wide set of linguistic resources to draw on, including pre-existing asymmetries, lexical gaps and new combinations, forms and meanings. This means that feminist linguists and those opposed to prejudicial language in any form need to be vigilant not only to old textbook chestnuts of sexist language such as the asymmetrical “pair” *master/mistress* but to revivals of old forms (e.g. *big girl’s blouse*) and to what to many will be new phrasings (e.g. *girly swot*) as they are actually used in parole, in particular in public discourse, on TV news channels and on social media. In response to the research question for this article, this includes those phrasings that appear at first sight to be about and aimed at men: sexism will out. This “telling case” of Boris Johnson’s gender-prejudicial formulations, drawing quite possibly with intent on a “Women as ineffectual” discourse, reminds us of this need for vigilance. But responses do not have to stop there, indeed, they should not: as I have shown, a range of creative feminist responses is possible, and, fortunately, evident.

8 Online articles about Johnson’s prejudicial (sexist) language use

<https://www.libdems.org.uk/boris-johnson-sexist>

<https://www.refinery29.com/en-gb/2019/06/236014/boris-johnson-sexist>

<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/sep/04/you-great-big-girls-blouse-boris-johnson-appears-to-insult-corbyn-during-pmq>

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