**How Language Represents Gender and Agency – While Programming Our Minds**

**1 Introduction**

In one of her songs, the currently popular British singer Dua Lipa says, “see, everyone ain’t the same, we’re more than machines.” While this is obviously an uncontroversial claim in a way, one also has to wonder about whether or not our minds work like machines. Not only when we learn our mother tongue, we seem to employ frequency-sensitive learning; generally, “[h]uman beings appear to extract frequency information automatically from their environment” (Divjak & Caldwell-Harris, 2015: 53). According to Lupyan & Bergen (2015: 1), people are programmable: “available evidence suggests that facilitating or even enabling this programmability is the learning and use of language.” They identify two types of language affecting our programmability: learning language qualitatively affects our conceptual system, and language facilitates categorization. If we stretch the brain-as-a-computer metaphor a bit further, we might argue that language programs our mind in several other ways, including for instance priming effects:

The assignment of the grammatical roles in a spoken sentence and the resulting syntactic choice do not depend solely on the salience characteristics of the described event. Other factors such as prior activation of lexical and syntactic units affect the likelihood of selecting one structure over another too. One could naturally assume that the final choice of structure is a product of many interacting forces and little is known about how perceptual priming interacts with other priming parameters known to influence the speaker’s choice of syntax, including both lexical and syntactic priming. (Tomlin & Myachykov, 2015: 42–43)

Syntactic priming in particular is a very interesting topic; to give a classic example, “one factor favoring the use of a passive sentence in language production is the presence of another passive sentence in the preceding discourse” (Diessel, 2015: 306–307). In other words, if I use a passive sentence in a conversation, other interlocutors become more likely to use a passive sentence than if I had not done so; in a way, then, we constantly “program” others just by using language.

Another way of “programming” others via language, the one that is the subject of this paper, is of quite a different nature. Language has a wide range of functions; apart from those traditionally included in lists such as the one provided by Aitchison (1996: 17), we might also view language as being used for the transmission of social and institutional practices and constructs (cf. Candlin, 1997: xii), with the prime example of the social construct of gender (cf. Taylor, 2003). Discourse (defined here as language in use) “both constructs and is constructed by a set of social practices,” and it “both reproduces and constructs afresh particular social-discursive practices” (Candlin, 1997: xii). Language in use can therefore be studied to reconstruct “a reflection of the attitudes towards gender prevalent in a given society at a particular time” (Hunt, 2015: 266). The following section discusses two recent examples of how corpus-based methodology can facilitate research in this area, and the subsequent section presents a series of small-scale corpus-based studies.

**2 Corpus studies of language and gender**

When it comes to studying the relationship between language and gender, we might focus on how the speech of men differs from that of women, or how woman-directed speech differs from man-directed speech. The side of the coin that is relevant here, nevertheless, is the representation of gender in discourse. Hence, if we consider Tannen’s (1990: 18) famous claim that “[n]o one could deny that men as a class are dominant in our society, and that many individual men seek to dominate women in their lives,” we are not interested in, for instance, what strategies of talk men use to express their domination over the discourse; what we are interested in is whether or not this dominance of men can be manifested in discourse, and how this discourse constructs this dominance, thus “programming” its addressees (or “rewiring other people’s minds,” as Pagel (2011) puts it) and contributing to maintain the gender-related social imbalances.

A corpus-based methodology is employed here; the great advantage of corpus studies of these issues is their “objectivity and efficiency not possible in manual ideological analysis” (Hunt, 2015: 266). The following paragraphs discuss two examples of corpus-based perspective on the issue of language and gender, which are taken as the point of departure for the corpus-based studies described in the third section of the present paper.

Clancy (2016) ponders the fact that the personal pronouns *he* and *she* are very frequent in conversation – in part because they are prone to repetition, in part because conversational participants “show a strong tendency to relate what happened to them and/or others” (Rühlemann, 2007: 71). Using several spoken corpora, Clancy shows that of all two-word clusters (bigrams) with *he* or *she* as the first word, *he was* and *she was* tend to be the most frequent ones. Further analysis shows that while *he was* tends to be followed by background information (as in *he was in bed*; *when he was small*), additional information about someone’s behavior (as in *he was thrilled*), and physical description (as in *he was big*), the bigram *she was* tends to be followed by information about a woman’s age (as in *she was young at the time* or *she was twenty two*) or about her behavior (as in *she was all chit chat*; *she was kind of looking at me*), often with negative connotations, as in *she was going on*, *she was pure furious*, or *she was starting to get really bossy with him*. Based on that, Clancy (2016: 109) suggests that “the age of the female protagonist is more frequently provided than in the case for male protagonist” and that “female behaviour might be more often negatively evaluated than male bahaviour” in spoken intimate discourse.

Hunt (2015) focuses on children’s literature, more particularly at three books of the *Harry Potter* series, as “the study of how gender is represented in children’s literature can make a useful contribution to our understanding of how choices in language use support particular discourses” (ibid.: 266), and as the representations in children’s literature have been documented to perpetuate prevailing gendered power relations in society (cf. Thompson & Sealey, 2007). The *Harry Potter* series is a good candidate due to its massive popularity amongst readers of all ages. Hunt investigates a more subtle aspect of the discourse than Clancy, namely how women’s and men’s body parts (viz. fingers, hands, arms, shoulders, feet, heads, and faces) are talked about, and how they are put to use. Previously, it was shown that there seems to be a polarization “in that body parts semantically or conventionally associated with one gender are almost always portrayed as belonging to individuals of the same sex” (Hunt, 2015: 268), and so, to give an example, in advertisements, body parts that appear outside the body and have aesthetic value (such as hair and skin) are salient for women, while for men the focus is on the parts inside the body that have some practical value (such as muscles). Hunt (ibid.: 282) concludes that the “representation of agency is very clearly gendered” in the *Harry Potter* series:

Movement in these books is particularly connected to the legs and feet, and males are presented as showing a much greater ability to be active physically than females. Female characters are generally presented as physically deficient in comparison with males and their inability to cope with physical situations is seen as a liability in terms of plot. Communicative gestures involving the hands show a contrast between powerful and powerless characters, which correlate with gender to a large degree. Male characters hold or carry much more dangerous and important things (in terms of the plot) while the objects in females’ arms and hands are generally from the domestic sphere. […] In addition, females are often incapacitated by their fear or other emotions, rendering their bodies useless as tools of agency. (ibid.)

Crucially, Hunt points out the fact that these “iterations and reiterations of ideas about gender are typically below the level of consciousness,” and therefore it is harder for the consumers of children’s fiction to resist being “programmed.”

**3 A series of corpus-based studies of the names of body parts**

Following both Clancy (2016) and Hunt (2015), I conducted a series of small-scale corpus-based studies focusing on various body parts, and on the bigrams *he was* and *she was*. First (3.2), since Hunt examines only three of the seven *Harry Potter* (hereafter *HP*) books, I attempted to either verify or falsify her conclusions, having compiled a small corpus consisting of the four remaining *Harry Potter* books. Second (3.3), inspired by Clancy (2016), I examined what types of information follows after the bigrams *he was* and *she was*.

**3.1 Corpus**

For the following studies (3.2, 3.3), I compiled an approximately 722,000-word corpus comprising the four *Harry Potter* novels not included in Hunt’s (2015) corpus, viz. *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (87,980 words), *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (196,263 words), *Harry Potter and the Order of Phoenix* (264,311 words), and *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (174,017 words). I worked with this corpus through the Czech National Corpus project’s web corpus manager (available at <http://korpus.cz/>.

**3.2 Body parts in the four HP books**

Similarly to Hunt (2015), I searched for all instances of *his* or *her* followed by a word form of the lemma *finger*, *hand*, *arm*, *shoulder*, *foot*, *head*, or *face*, in the HP corpus, which resulted in a 2,058-concordance sample. The following table summarizes the basic distribution of the results; for instance, *her head* appeared 88 times in the sample, which accounts for 18.1 % of all occurrences of the pronoun *her* followed by one of the body part names. It should be noted that the higher number of the occurrences of *his* is not to be overinterpreted; it is attributable simply to the fact that Harry Potter, the eponymous protagonist of the series, is male.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **lemmas** | *head* | *hand* | *face* | *foot* | *arm* | *shoulder* | *finger* | **total** |
| *her* | 88 | 121 | 130 | 52 | 40 | 28 | 26 | 485 |
|  | 18.1 % | 24.9 % | 26.8 % | 10.7 % | 8.2 % | 5.8 % | 5.4 % | 100 % |
| *his* | 373 | 328 | 304 | 247 | 128 | 123 | 70 | 1,573 |
|  | 23.7 % | 20.9 % | 19.3 % | 15.7 % | 8.1 % | 7.8 % | 4.5 % | 100 % |
| *his*/*her* ratio[[1]](#footnote-1) | 0.0961 | 0.0256 | 0.0784 | 0.2209 | 0.0001 | 0.1156 | 0.0278 |  |
| **total** | **2,058** |

**Table 1**: The basic distribution of the results

Not a single one of the differences between the feminine and the masculine pronoun combinations is statistically significant, but it still somehow worth pointing out that especially for *foot*, *shoulder*, and *head*, there are some notable differences, as judged by the *his*/*her* ratio, and so I focus primarily on these body parts. I found interesting patterns with the other body parts as well, but since they generally more or less confirm what Hunt (2015) suggests in her conclusion quoted above, I will give only one example, that of fingers. While the use of *her finger* or *her fingers* often shows a woman being preoccupied with her appearance (as in (1)), being unable to act (as in (2)), and pressing her finger to her lips to silence someone (as in (3)), the use of *his finger* or *his fingers* is primarily associated with a male character being active, doing things, clutching at important objects (as in (4)), or even objects that might be central to the narrative (as in (5)), or pointing at something (as in (6)). On the other hand, a male character’s fingers are occasionally the only indicators of his emotional state, as in (7):

(1) *She slowly raised a hand and ran* ***her******fingers*** *through her hair.*

(2) *Hermione was having a lot of difficulty managing her knife and fork,* ***her fingers*** *were so*

*stiff and swollen.*

(3) *“Shh!” Hermione whispered suddenly, pressing* ***her finger*** *to her lips and pointing toward*

*the compartment next to theirs.*

(4) *‘Yes, I can,’ said Harry,* ***his******fingers*** *clenched tightly around his wand.*

(5) *‘Someone made a prophecy about Voldemort and me?’ he said quietly, gazing at Lucius*

*Malfoy,* ***his******fingers*** *tightening over the warm glass sphere in his hand.*

(6) *“Caught in the act!” Ernie yelled, his face stark white, pointing* ***his******finger*** *dramatically at*

*Harry.*

(7) *But Wormtail, who had finished conjuring the ropes, did not reply; he was busy checking*

*the tightness of the cords,* ***his******fingers*** *trembling uncontrollably, fumbling over the knots.*

**3.2.1 Foot**

Hunt (2015: 274), when inspecting constructions such as *X got* / *struggled* / *was helped to his* / *her feet* (these constructions account for the vast majority of the instances of *her feet* and *his feet*), found out that “female characters are four times more likely to require assistance to standing up than male characters,” with the helper always being male. However, in the HP books that Hunt did not analyze, female characters tend to get on their feet without any help (as in examples (8) to (14)), with an occasional exception, as in (15) and (16), for which it holds true, nevertheless, that the helper is always male:

(8) *Instead of trying to pretend she had not noticed Hermione she got to* ***her feet*** *and walked*

*around the front row of desks until they were face to face…*

(9) *Mrs Weasley threw a very nasty look at Sirius before getting to* ***her******feet*** *and going to fetch*

*a large rhubarb crumble for pudding.*

(10) *Hermione jumped to* ***her feet*** *and stormed off across the dance floor…*

(11) *Every single Hufflepuff had jumped to his or* ***her feet****, screaming and stamping, as Cedric*

*made his way past them…*

(12) *Hermione watched Katie leap to* ***her******feet*** *and start throwing things at Peeves…*

(13) *Professor McGonagall had risen to* ***her feet*** *and the mournful hum in the Hall died away*

 *at once.*

(14) *Cho sprang to* ***her feet****.*

(15) *Ginny wept as Harry helped her awkwardly to* ***her feet****.*

(16) *Harry hurried forwards and helped Professor Trelawney to* ***her feet****.*

Men also frequently rise to their feet (as in (17)), occasionally with the help of other men (as in (18)). In one instance, given here as example (19), a male character is helped by a woman, but only because he has *allowed* her to do so.

(17) *‘Defend himself against what, man?’ said Ogden, clambering back to* ***his feet****.*

(18) *As Dumbledore pulled him back to* ***his feet****, Harry saw the tiny gold statues of the house‑elf*

*and the goblin, leading a stunned-looking Cornelius Fudge forward.*

(19) *‘Course I am,’ said Harry grimly, taking her hand and allowing her to pull him to* ***his feet****.*

Nevertheless, unlike with female characters, male characters’ feet are also often described as hitting the ground, as in the following examples:

(20) *he felt as though he had done a slow-motion somersault, suddenly landing flat on* ***his feet***

(21) *Seconds later,* ***his******feet*** *hit firm ground, he opened his eyes and found that he and*

*Dumbledore were standing in a bustling, old-fashioned London street.*

This might indicate, as Hunt (2015: 275) suggests, that “male characters are able to move vigorously and with agility, while the females are not very mobile in comparison.” This claim might be supported by the juxtaposition of the 15 most frequent collocates of *his feet* and *her feet*, as shown in the parallel tables following overleaf (which include the absolute frequency and the MI-score chosen as a measure of collocability).

It is clear that the collocates of *his feet* include much more verbs of movement, and, by and large, lexical words with a stronger collocability. To conclude, the examination of *her feet* and *his feet* suggests that male characters are depicted as more active, and men are usually the ones helping others (both male and female characters) get to their feet.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| ***his feet*** |  | ***her feet*** |
|  | **word** | **freq** | **MI-score** |  |  | **word** | **freq** | **MI-score** |
| 1 | *gotten* | 3 | 17.217 |  | 1 | *stamping* | 4 | 19.657 |
| 2 | *scrambled* | 7 | 16.854 |  | 2 | *leapt* | 6 | 17.590 |
| 3 | *balls* | 4 | 16.573 |  | 3 | *getting* | 5 | 15.960 |
| 4 | *jumped* | 11 | 16.184 |  | 4 | *slowly* | 3 | 15.161 |
| 5 | *struggled* | 4 | 16.088 |  | 5 | *got* | 10 | 14.394 |
| 6 | *jumping* | 3 | 15.848 |  | 6 | *She* | 6 | 14.242 |
| 7 | *rubbing* | 3 | 15.757 |  | 7 | *McGonagall* | 3 | 14.230 |
| 8 | *staggered* | 3 | 15.714 |  | 8 | *Professor* | 5 | 13.389 |
| 9 | *leapt* | 7 | 15.565 |  | 9 | *she* | 10 | 13.386 |
| 10 | *getting* | 18 | 15.560 |  | 10 | *off* | 3 | 12.890 |
| 11 | *slammed* | 4 | 15.544 |  | 11 | *Hermione* | 8 | 12.828 |
| 12 | *ground* | 15 | 15.211 |  | 12 | *her* | 8 | 12.610 |
| 13 | *pull* | 3 | 15.158 |  | 13 | *to* | 35 | 12.495 |
| 14 | *got* | 52 | 14.525 |  | 14 | *on* | 8 | 12.282 |
| 15 | *rose* | 3 | 14.263 |  | 15 | *and* | 26 | 12.184 |

**Tables 2 and 3**: The collocates of *his feet* and *her feet*

**3.2.2 Shoulder**

With women’s shoulders, quite a clear pattern emerges; several of the 28 occurrences of *her shoulder* or *her shoulders* show a woman looking over her shoulder, often anxiously or fearfully, as in (22), or showing emotional support to another woman, as in (23) and (24):

(22) *Several times he passed her in the corridors – in itself a very unusual occurrence as she*

*generally remained in her tower room – muttering wildly to herself, wringing her hands*

*and shooting terrified glances over* ***her shoulder****, and all the while giving off a powerful*

*smell of cooking sherry.*

(23) *Leanne shook with renewed sobs. Hermione patted* ***her shoulder*** *gently.*

(24) *‘Don’t cry, Mum,’ said Ginny, patting her on the back as Mrs Weasley sobbed into* ***her***

***shoulder****.*

The use of *his shoulder* can also be associated with showing emotional support, but the support here is always shown to women (as in (25) and (26); the support can be physical as well, as in (27). Men also seem to look over their shoulder; unlike women, men do not look over their shoulders because they feel threatened, but because they want to communicate something (as in (28)). Men also look over their shoulders when attacking or cursing someone (as in (29)); men’s shoulders are generally often mentioned when there is a fight, as in (30):

(25) *‘I see them d-d – dead all the time!’ Mrs Weasley moaned into* ***his shoulder****.*

(26) *he had liked Cho for ages, but whenever he had imagined a scene involving the two of them*

*it had always featured a Cho who was enjoying herself, as opposed to a Cho who was*

*sobbing uncontrollably into* ***his******shoulder****.*

(27) *Scowling, Harry readjusted Dudley on* ***his******shoulder*** *and made his slow, painful way up*

*number four’s garden path.*

(28) *‘Don’t get used to it, it’s only because of Harry,’ said Mr Weasley over* ***his shoulder****.*

(29) *“Impedimenta!” he bellowed, pointing his wand wildly over* ***his******shoulder*** *at the Death*

*Eaters running at him.*

(30) *Sirius had hurtled out of nowhere, rammed Dolohov with* ***his shoulder*** *and sent him flying*

*out of the way.*

**3.2.3 Head**

Both male and female characters often use their heads to communicate something, especially when they are described as shaking their heads, as in (31) and (32), and characters of both genders use their heads to point at something, as in (33) and (34):

(31) *“Oh Ron,” said Hermione, shaking* ***her******head*** *skeptically, “we thought Snape was trying to*

*kill Harry before, and it turned out he was saving Harry’s life, remember?”*

(32) *“You – you cannot be serious!” Fudge gasped, shaking* ***his******head*** *and retreating further*

*from Dumbledore.*

(33) *“I told you not to hang around with riffraff like this!” He jerked* ***his head*** *at Ron and*

*Hermione.*

(34) *she jerked* ***her head*** *in the direction of the two beds at the end of the ward*

However, the use of *his head*, unlike *her head*, is often associated with male characters being active, as in the following example:

(35) *He put* ***his******head*** *down and sprinted forwards, narrowly avoiding a blast that erupted over*

*his head, showering them all in bits of wall.*

Moreover, the use of *her head*, as opposed to *his head*, is sometimes associated with a female character’s negative characteristics, as in the following example:

(36) *“I just walked past there and Umbridge is shrieking* ***her head*** *off – by the sound of it, it*

*tried to take a chunk out of her leg…”*

**3.3 The bigrams *he was* and *she was* in the four HP books**

The following table presents the relative frequencies of the words that most often follow the bigram *she was* (which appears 413 times in the corpus) and *he was* (which appears 1,689 in the corpus):

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | *she was* (total 413 hits) | *he was* (total 1.689 hits) |
| 1 | *not* | 7.0 % | *not* | 6.9 % |
| 2 | *a* | 3.6 % | *going* | 3.6 % |
| 3 | *wearing* | 3.1 % | *still* | 3.0 % |
| 4 | *looking* | 2.9 % | *a* | 2.5 % |
| 5 | *sitting* | 2.2 % | *in* | 2.2 % |
| 6 | *still* | 2.2 % | *wearing* | 1.8 % |
| 7 | *going* | 1.9 % | *sure* | 1.7 % |
| 8 | *carrying* | 1.9 % | *looking* | 1.7 % |
| 9 | *quite* | 1.7 % | *doing* | 1.7 % |
| 10 | *watching* | 1.7 % | *the* | 1.6 % |
| 11 | *now* | 1.7 % | *very* | 1.2 % |
| 12 | *holding* | 1.7 % | *trying* | 1.1 % |
| 13 | *the* | 1.7 % | *so* | 1.1 % |
| 14 | *standing* | 1.5 % | *about* | 1.0 % |
| 15 | *doing* | 1.5 % | *being* | 1.0 % |
| 16 | *talking* | 1.5 % | *supposed* | 1.0 % |
| 17 | *about* | 1.5 % | *standing* | 1.0 % |

**Table 4**: The relative frequencies of the word following the bigrams *he was* / *she was*

At first sight, there do not seem to be significant differences. While it might be tempting to jump to conclusions and state that women are more often said to be wearing something than men (3.1 % of all the instances of *she was* are followed by *wearing*, while only 1.8 % of all the instances of *he was* are followed by *wearing*), it is important to bear in mind that this difference is not a statistically significant one. Further analysis shows that Clancy’s conclusions cannot be supported by the HP data. For instance, what follows the trigrams *she was a* and *he was a* does not confirm Clancy’s conclusions. While Clancy’s claims suggest that women tend to be described negatively more often than men, this tendency is not confirmed in the HP data, as illustrated by the following examples, both positive and negative in connotation, and both evaluative and descriptive:

*I thought* ***he was a*** *bit of an idiot.*

*He really trusts Snape, even though he knows* ***he was a*** *Death Eater?*

***He was a*** *tall and burly sixth year...*

*Shame -* ***he was a*** *talented boy.*

*Well, anyway,* ***he was a*** *big pal of your father's...*

***He was a*** *skinny, black-haired, bespectacled boy...*

***She was a*** *quite extraordinary witch...*

***She was a*** *lot bigger than he was.*

*because* ***she was a*** *house-elf*

*Personally, I thought,* ***she was a*** *bit full of herself*

***She was a*** *great witch.*

*According to Ron,* ***she was a*** *great cat lover.*

To conclude, neither the quantitative nor the qualitative examination of the bigrams in the HP corpus proved fruitful, showing no significant differences.

**4 Conclusion**

Discourse as language in use is, among other things, used to transmit our social and institutional practices and constructs, including the construct of gender. Discourse can thus be studied for us to unearth the reflection of the attitudes towards gender prevalent in our society. Some studies have clearly demonstrated that the representations of gender in children’s literature perpetuate prevailing gendered power relations, and thus children’s literature is a suitable source to study when examining the representation of gender in discourse. Moreover, the corpus-based, and hence objective methodology based on scrutinizing something as subtle as the way in which body parts are talked about can arrive at surprisingly convincing results, perhaps with clear implications. These results are somewhat pressing and perhaps unsettling in that the uncovered representation of gender is below the level of both the author’s and the reader’s consciousness.

The present paper compared Hunt’s (2015) results based on three of the *Harry Potter* books with the results of quantitative as well as qualitative studies of the remaining four *Harry Potter* books. Some of Hunt’s conclusions have been confirmed: men do seem to be portrayed as more active than women, and male characters do seem to often hold objects that are central to the plot (on the other hand, Hunt’s claim that female characters often hold objects from the domestic sphere has not been confirmed). Some of Hunt’s theses do not seem to hold true for the data presented here: while Hunt concluded that female characters are four times more likely to need assistance when getting up to their feet than male characters, the majority of female characters in the data presented here tend to get up on their own; Hunt’s claim that the helper is always a man, however, has been confirmed. The inspection of body parts that Hunt did not comment on, e.g. shoulders, has shown interesting patterns, with females looking over their shoulders when feeling anxious, and with males sending curses over their shoulders and using their shoulders to attack someone. The present paper also employed Clancy’s (2016) methodology of examining the bigrams *he was* and *she was*, but this has not proved very fruitful.

Finally, these results are not supposed to suggest that the author of the *Harry Potter* series, J. K. Rowling, is a bit of a misogynist, or the like. In fact, J. K. Rowling is a well-known feminist, and one of the three protagonists of the series, Hermione Granger, has been dubbed “a feminist icon.” However, the series' representation of gender – below the level of consciousness – still reflects some real‑world gender-related social imbalances, “programming” the reader’s mind, and thus helping to perpetuate these very imbalances.

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1. The his/her ratio was arrived at by dividing the relativized frequencies, subtracting one, and squaring the result. For example, for *head*, that means [(23.7/18.1) – 1]2 = 0.0961. The higher this ratio, the more significant is the difference between how often the author talks about the male body part and the female body part. Note for instance the very low ratio for *arm*, as opposed to the very high ratio of *foot*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)