The darker side of gender and sexuality: Re-casting language and violence

PANEL ABSTRACT

In their recent book, Alastair Pennycook and Sinfree Makoni encourage scholars who are interested in the role of language and social processes to explore the *darker side* of our discipline, investigating *inter alia* "the exocitization of differences that reinforces the construction of racialized and ethnicized Others; the normative assumptions about gendered and sexual relations that obscure the politics of sexuality." (Pennycook and Makoni 2020: 18). And it is precisely the politics of gender and sexuality that is under scrutiny in this panel. By politics we do not only refer to acts of politicians but also more broadly to the totality of claims to power and authority made by a variety of social actors in different discursive spaces such as political institutions, media platforms, courts of law, academic journals, etc. Put differently, the main assumption underpinning this panel is that gender and sexuality are crucial epistemological windows into understanding contemporary negotiations of power. For this purpose, we want to re-cast an old but no-less-topical concern of language, gender and sexuality research, namely violence. Here gender and sexual violence should be understood both in terms of physical force intended to hurt another body but also as capillary discursive network that consistently represents some gendered and sexual bodies as unwanted and less-than-human. The contributions to this panel range from an interactional analysis of a courtroom trial about sexual violence in Australia to investigations of anti-gender political campaigns in Switzerland, from a critical discourse analysis of anti-trans initiatives to a media analysis of white supremacist online discourses. Their differences notwithstanding, the papers illustrate how gender and sexuality are mobilized politically, creating differential patterns of vulnerability, and ultimately defining "who counts as the human, and the related question of whose lives count as lives" (Butler 2009: 3).

1. **Sexual violence and intersections of gender, language and migration: A case study**

Susan Ehrlich

Following Piller's and Takahashi's (2010) work on the intersections of gender, language and migration, in this presentation I am interested in how the linguistic and communicative inequalities produced by transnational migration can have particular consequences for migrant women within the context of sexual violence. My example comes from a recent Australian sexual assault case (The Queen v. James Ronald Lennox, 2018) in which the complainant's expressions of non-consent were at issue. During the trial, the complainant, a Hong Kong national working in Australia as a nanny, testified that she had repeatedly said to the accused 'I don't want' in response to his many sexual acts of aggression. The jury, however, had a question about the meaning of 'I don't want'—during its deliberations, it sent a note to the judge, asking, 'Does 'I don't want' equal no by law?' and the judge responded by saying 'I cannot tell you that certain words equal lack of consent, because it all depends on the circumstances.' Here, the judge seems to be invoking a contextualized view of meaning, but in a circumstance where the utterance's ('I don't want') decontextualized meaning seems unequivocal.

Based on an analysis of the trial transcripts, including interactions between the judge and jury, I demonstrate the various ways that monolingual ideologies (Angermeyer 2008) and raciolinguistic ideologies (Rosa and Flores 2017) were discursively activated in the trial and how they worked to construct the complainant's language as an impediment to her communication with the accused. In turn, I suggest that the generating of such ideologies had an impact on how the jury understood a crucial aspect of this sexual assault/rape case—whether or not the complainant freely and voluntarily consented to the sexual acts under investigation.

I conclude the presentation by considering in a more general way how intersections of gender with race/ethnicity, language, and migration create understandings of what constitutes a culturally intelligible/unintelligible victim of sexual violence, and, following Crenshaw (1991), produce certain gendered bodies as incapable of being raped.

2. **Weaponizing 'fairness': Anti-trans linguistic violence in liberal defenses of 'women's spaces'**

Scott Burnett

Debates over which speech acts count as 'violence' continue to rage both in academic circles and in the public sphere. The question of whether slurs, microaggressions, and other forms of discriminatory language constitute hate speech, which is in turn often delimited to "incitement to violence", has been answered differently in different sociohistorical, sociological, and legal contexts. Through a sociolinguistic engagement with philosophical discussions of symbolic and linguistic violence, I propose a context-sensitive approach to the analysis of violence in speech acts based on Du Bois's stance triangle and Bucholtz and Hall's tactics of intersubjectivity. I then apply this model to a corpus of op-eds and transcribed podcasts published on the website of the South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR) where transgender and other gender-nonconforming people and their place in society are thematized. The SAIRR is a liberal Johannesburg thinktank associated with promoting capital-friendly policy solutions to national problems, and is the leading local exponent of 'anti-woke' ideology. I argue that analyzing these texts offers important insights into the global circulation of (so-called) 'gender-critical feminism', and its commensurability with neoliberal and far-right discourses. Through analysis of how the liberal concern for formal (as opposed to substantive) equality is mobilized by the ideologues of the SAIRR, I show how the concern for 'fairness' to women is turned into a weapon that violently shortens and devalues of the lives of transgender and nonbinary people.

3. Revolt against the modern world: Gender, sex and violence in traditionalist YouTube videos

Catherine Tebaldi

Traditionalism is said to be a search for the eternal, transcendent truth at the heart of all religion. Based on Julius Evola it frames the defense of racist, misogynist, even monarchist social hierarchy as a quest for meaning in soulless, materialist, modernity. Despite the discourses of the mythopoetic, Traditionalism is a major force supporting far-right movements (Teitelbaum 2020) and violent white supremacist violence (Upchurch 2021), as it argues for the futility of political action and celebrates violence as a spiritual and sexual force.

This paper offers a semiotic analysis (Gal & Irvine 2019) of the channel of PhilosophiCat, a Traditionalist and white nationalist linked to neo-Nazi skinheads, the processes differentiation through which Traditionalist discourses reshape racism as a quest for the rebirth of a transcendent order of manhood, and the processes of circulation (Gal 2018) which link this mythology and its violence to the mainstream self-help author Jordan Peterson. In looking at aspect of "the communicability of evil "(Milani 2020), how racism is made into "spiritual warfare" or a heroic quest which naturalizes male violence as "vitality" and "virility", it explores what we might call the "desirability" of evil.

4. Gender, national publics, and the discursive construction of fear

Erez Levon

Politics is a struggle for discursive authority, an attempt to define the moral logic that reflexively constitutes a sense of public collectivity (Gal & Woolard 2001; Warner 2002; Cody 2011). In this talk, I consider how a logic of fear, and specifically a fear of "gender", has come to dominate national(ist) politics in Europe (Paternotte & Kuhar 2018). I examine how this logic of fear is semiotically assembled, identifying the specific rhetorical mechanisms that have enabled anti-gender messaging to migrate from the populist far-right to the European mainstream, such that gender inclusivity has become the "constitutive outside" (Butler 1997) of contemporary European imaginings of the nation (Paternotte 2023).

As a case study, I focus on the campaign for the federal parliamentary elections in Switzerland in October 2023. Specifically, I consider messaging by the *Schweizerische Volkspartei* (SVP), a populist far-right party that holds the largest number of seats in the Swiss Parliament and that in its 2023 electoral programme included a chapter entitled "Gender Terror and Woke Madness". I build on prior sociolinguistic research on anti-gender movements (Gal 2019; Borba 2022) to first describe how the SVP semiotically structures its anti-gender messaging so as to embed a presuppositional structure in which gender inclusivity and belonging in Switzerland are antithetical to one another. I then trace the ways in which these messages travel beyond the political far-right, focusing on the uptake they receive in mainstream broadcast and social media, where they undergird acts of epistemic (and, at times, physical) violence against gender non-normative individuals.

Ultimately, my goal is to show how the SVP works to authoritatively entextualize (Park & Bucholtz 2009) Swiss identity via fear of a gendered other. In so doing, I aim to unpick the semiotic inner workings of anti-gender movements more generally.