

New politics? Gender and Language in the Devolved Political Assemblies

Abstract

The devolution of powers from Westminster to the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales led to much speculation about the creation of a new political era that would herald new ways of 'doing politics'. It was thought that the new institutions would provide a more inclusive, less combative culture that aimed to include a greater proportion of women members. With the 'new' institutions now over ten years old, linguistic research into the participation of men and women on the debate floor shows that they participate equally and that improvements have been made in relation to the extent that women feel included. However, the devolved institutions retain some of the adversarial features associated with Westminster, and women are still subject to the burden of gendered stereotypical judgements and expectations that may affect their performance and inclusion within them.

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Introduction

Women's under-representation in political institutions continues to be a problem that does not diminish significantly over time. Some gains have been made, notably in the 'new' devolved institutions of the UK. The National Assembly for Wales boasts forty per cent of women, and in the Scottish Parliament women hold thirty-five per cent of the seats. However, the representation of women in the Northern Ireland Assembly, and the House of Commons still lags behind at nineteen and twenty-three per cent respectively. Furthermore, there is now a general acknowledgement amongst political scientists that the achievement of a greater numerical representation of women (or any other minority group) in an institution, commonly referred to as critical mass, is not enough on its own to improve the position of the group. The progress and influence of a minority group is also thought to be dependent upon the 'critical actors' in those groups and their ability to perform 'critical acts'. Therefore, the ability of a minority group to become influential members of an institution requires them to participate in a way that enables them to perform these critical acts. Here I investigate some of the ways in which a focus on political language in debates both at Westminster and in these 'new' institutions can give insights into the ways in which women and men politicians participate in political discourse. This seeks to contribute to a discussion of the necessary conditions, procedures and conventions that lead to more egalitarian political institutions and encourage the equal participation of its members.

Background: Gender, Language and Politics

The House of Commons at Westminster is often described as the archetypal parliament, used as a blueprint for the proceedings and in some cases the physical layout of parliaments in different parts of the world, with even more legislatures adopting some aspects of the 'Westminster System'. It is perhaps surprising that in the blank canvas offered to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland for the construction of new institutions after the devolution Acts in 1998, they too chose to emulate Westminster in most key respects. All the new devolved institutions took the Westminster Standing Orders as a starting point and retained most of the Westminster speech events, such as Prime Minister's Question Time and modified them to incorporate what were viewed as more egalitarian measures, such as timed speeches for members in debates.

The influence and status of the Westminster parliament make it a starting point and inevitable comparator when it comes to describing the 'new' devolved institutions. It is also an interesting starting point for an investigation into gender, language and interaction in political institutions as it is typically described as a 'masculine', adversarial forum in which women find it hard to participate. Although many linguistic studies of political language investigate the rhetoric of political speeches and the content of speeches, it is also possible to investigate the ways in which politicians take, hold and yield speaking turns on the debate floor. The ability to take up the discursive space in a political arena can be viewed as one of the ways in which politicians can gain power in an institution and perform critical acts. Although strict debate rules exist to permit the fair turn-taking mechanism of the debate floor, this can be seen as an ideal. Actually, this ideal is rarely achieved as sets of informal and 'illegal' practices are an integral part of the institutional communicative norms. Illegal contributions, such as speaking out of turn from a sedentary position and 'barracking' other members are practices that have, over time, become a feature of House of Commons debates. The Speaker may intervene to enforce the rules on some occasions, but there is some degree of acceptance of the illegal turns, to the extent that the rowdy jeering, cheering and verbal jousting associated with Prime Minister's Question Time popularly characterises the House of Commons.

Linguistic analyses of the debate floor of the House of Commons have shown that gender is salient in relation to these legal and illegal turns. Men and women politicians participate legally in relation to their overall representation, or in other words: they take proportionally the same amount of legal speeches and give way interventions. However, when it comes to illegal turns and barracking there is a different pattern. Illegal turns are taken more by men than by women¹. That is not to say that women *never* shout out of turn (in the sample of events two very senior women MPs intervened illegally), but that proportionally it is not undertaken by women as much as men. This difference also extends to other rule-breaking practices, such as filibustering. With the exception of Margaret Thatcher, this highly ironic rule-breaking practice (which for example emphasises the 'importance' of the minutiae of a clause or sub-clause of a Bill simply to waste time in debates), has been practice exclusively undertaken by men.

¹ This data is based on two different studies. One was undertaken in 2000, and showed that women take up one per cent of illegal interventions. The more recent study in 2010 also showed women taking one per cent of illegal turns, which falls short of their representation of 20 per cent at that time.

It is in some ways unsurprising that this highly formal institution which has only admitted women in significant numbers over the last fifty years is one that inhibits or restricts their behaviour. These gendered linguistic practices appear to construct women as peripheral members of the institution because rule-breaking activities, such as speaking out of turn are fundamental linguistic practices in this context. One possible explanation for these differences could be that women consciously choose to behave differently by rejecting the male, elitist, old-fashioned traditions of the Commons. An alternative explanation is that the different behaviour of men and women MPs is a result of coercive forces within the institution which mean that women are made to feel like 'interlopers' in the community, subject to negative sanctions such as sexist barracking and negative stereotyping. It is likely that both these explanations play a part in explaining men and women MPs' differential linguistic practices and be related in part to the 'visibility' of women in a traditionally male-dominated forum and the nature of traditional parliaments as a 'linguistic habitus' in which 'silence or hyper-controlled language' is imposed on some people, while others are allowed the 'liberties of a language that is securely established'² Traditional parliaments can therefore be viewed as a 'gendered space' in which the setting and the communicative tasks together become an index of a gendered style. Gendered spaces are therefore contexts in which activities and practices become symbolically gendered over time as they are regularly and consistently associated with men or women. Similarly, In another such gendered space and a historically male-dominated institution, the Church of England, Clare Walsh's analysis of the marginal position of women priests finds that their marginalised position is partly the effect of their own belief in women's 'civilizing difference' and the resulting avoidance of conflict, and partly the effect of sexist reactions to them by male priests and by the media. Walsh finds that 'what *is* clear is that their language and behaviour is more likely than those of male colleagues to be fractured by competing, and often contradictory norms and expectations'³.

New parliaments, new politics?

In contrast to the House of Commons, the new devolved political institutions of the UK have claimed to give women an unprecedented voice and place. This is because there are some key differences between them and the House of Commons. Firstly, women have been involved in the creation of the institutions from the beginning; secondly, the assemblies have been constructed with egalitarian ideals as a priority; and finally, it is possible for them to achieve a better representation of female members because of different forms of voting systems and shortlists. In Scotland and Wales the new politics was embodied in the new Scottish Parliament building at Holyrood, Edinburgh and the National Assembly for Wales in Cardiff Bay. These buildings both symbolically and physically reflect the egalitarian ideals of consensus and openness, with the chambers laid out in a circular formation to avoid the confrontational 'opposition' of the Westminster benches, and with public galleries and viewing points a priority in their design. The new institutions are also much smaller than the House of Commons with just sixty Assembly members (AMs) in Wales, 108 Members of the

² Bourdieu, P.: Language and Symbolic Power. Polity and Blackwell, Cambridge (1991)

³ Walsh, C.: Gender and Discourse: Language and Power in Politics, the Church and Organisations. Longman, London p217 (2001)

Legislative Authority (MLAs) in Northern Ireland and 129 Members of the Scottish Parliament (MPS), compared with 650 MPs in the House of Commons.

In aiming for a new consensual style of debate, a distinction can be drawn between a less aggressive, combative manner in debates and the wider meaning of the term 'consensus politics'. While a consensual style can settle deep political divisions in an amicable manner, wider political consensus implies general political agreement that may be reached, for example, in the case of a coalition government. Similarly, as has been often noted in the discipline of philosophy, the term 'adversarial' can be used to refer to aggressive argumentation that can include 'name-calling, put-downs, or quips such as 'that's a ridiculous''⁴ or it can refer more positively to the perfectly orderly conduct of oppositional arguments for the purpose of progressing a debate. The discussion here is about the aim of 'new' institutions for a non-combative style that is less intimidating and more inclusive for its members, not for a wider politics of agreement or a style that does not encourage oppositional views to be articulated.

A research project conducted between 2009 and 2011⁵ aimed to describe the three institutions by providing ethnographic descriptions of their linguistic institutional norms and practices by interviewing politicians, and observing and analysing the interaction of debate discourse. Taking the salience of gender in House of Commons debates as a starting point, the project aimed to investigate whether the new parliaments had similar practices in terms of 'legal' and 'illegal' debate discourse, whether particular interactional changes to the debate proceedings had led to a new culture in debates, and to try to establish whether this equality was manifested in the speaking turns between women and men. As with the House of Commons research, an initial quantitative assessment of the proportion of turns taken in each assembly was undertaken, using a sample of debates representing thirteen days of debate discourse in each institution. This showed that, unlike the House of Commons, women and men participated equally (in proportion to their numbers overall⁶) in all types of speaking turns, including illegally speaking out of turn. Out of all three institutions, the Northern Ireland Assembly (NIA) most closely resembled the House of Commons in terms of the amount of illegal speaking turns taken overall (in both institutions approximately six percent of all turns were illegal, whereas in Wales and Scotland one and three per cent of all turn were illegal respectively). However, unlike the House of Commons, this was not a gendered activity, with men and women speaking or shouting out of turn in proportion to their numbers overall. As the example below shows, a woman SDLP Member of the legislative Authority (MLA), Dolores Kelly, first asks Martin McGuinness a question, and then interrupts him multiple times (only a few of the many examples are shown here).

⁴ Rooney, Phyllis. 'Philosophy, Adversarial Argumentation and Embattled Reason' *Informal Logic* 2010: 30 (3) 203-234.

⁵ ESRC funded project: Gender and Linguistic Participation in the Devolved Parliaments of the UK (RES 000223792)

⁶ In the period between October 2009 and May 2011, women's representation was at seventeen per cent in the Northern Ireland Assembly, thirty-two per cent in the Scottish Parliament, forty-seven per cent in the National Assembly for Wales and twenty per cent in the House of Commons.

Example: Sustained Illegal interventions in the Northern Ireland Assembly Joint Statement by the First Minister and Deputy First Minister on the Hillsborough Castle Agreement on the devolution of Police and Justice (Form the Official Report 10/02/10 at 4pm).

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Minister also confirm that the parades working group is a set-up, and that the Ashdown proposals are the only ones on the table?

The Deputy First Minister: I can certainly confirm that if Sinn Féin had accepted the SDLP position in relation to how we deal with this issue, policing and justice powers would reside in the hands of British Government direct rule Ministers for the remaining term of this Assembly.

Mrs D Kelly: No nationalist need apply.

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Deputy First Minister: That is the reality. The contention that has been made is absolutely without any foundation whatsoever. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Deputy First Minister: The confusion that is clearly evident in the SDLP's mind —

Mrs D Kelly: There is no confusion.

The Deputy First Minister: Well, we certainly had confusion when the former leader of the SDLP said that he wanted to see d'Hondt being run again, which would have meant the collapsing of a Department and absolute certainty that the justice Department and its responsibilities would have been taken by a unionist Minister. To then have — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I must insist that the deputy First Minister be allowed to answer the question. I remind Members not to try and speak from a seated position.

The Deputy First Minister: The SDLP is obviously afraid to hear, or does not want to hear, the answer (speech continues for 1 minute) If the Member is not interested in going, that is a matter for her. However, I am reliably informed that all parties in this Assembly will receive an invitation from the working party.

Mrs D Kelly: Very inclusive.

Mr Speaker: Order.

In this example, Dolores Kelly not only speaks out of turn, challenging the Deputy First Minister, but also challenges the authority of the chair by refusing to comply with his directions. Although this is a particularly incendiary discussion in the context of power sharing and the devolution of Police and Justice, similar exchanges can also be found in less contentious debates in all three devolved institutions. The fact that women politicians engage in this type of activity as much as men in the new institutions suggests that it is unlikely that women are positioned as 'interlopers' in the same way as in the House of Commons. However, the frequency of these highly adversarial exchanges in all the new institutions shows that the 'new' politics of consensus and cooperation in debate discourse perhaps have not been achieved. Furthermore, the involvement of women in these adversarial exchanges challenges the long-held assumption that women will make a civilising difference by bringing a consensual style to political forums. It is perhaps this assumption that needs to be questioned as much as the tendency of the institutions towards adversarial exchanges. The latter can be partially explained by the inclusion of speech events (such as First Minister's Question Time) that have imported the cultural norms of confrontation, public verbal jousting and aggression along with the Standing Orders from Westminster. Yet the essentialist assumption that women are somehow intrinsically consensual seems to fly in the face of theoretical ideas about the flexible and ongoing construction of identity in interaction, as well as the empirical evidence that it is not just men, but women politicians that engage in the most adversarial exchanges.

In interviews some women and men politicians from all the assemblies admitted to 'barracking' or speaking out of turn. Many had contradictory attitudes towards this, saying they did not approve of the practice but nevertheless took part in barracking. In Scotland some MSPs felt that barracking was justified when a Minister was failing to respond to a question or not giving a 'straight answer', but not when making personal attacks on other members (thought to be a rare occurrence). Some MSPs felt that the Presiding Officers should control barracking more because certain 'repeat offenders' are responsible for most of these interventions and they should be stopped. One or two MSPs admitted using barracking in an adversarial way 'to go in for the kill', although this was uncommon. It was also noted that it is easier to barrack from the back of the chamber, and that young or inexperienced MSPs tend to be barracked the most 'because they haven't got a clue'. Some MSPs described this behaviour as 'bullying' because it was aimed at inexperienced MSPs and intended to put them off. This can take different forms, including the 'constant muttering of back-chat' and saying 'rubbish' when an individual is making a speech as a tactic in order to 'undermine their confidence and put them off their stride'. This is also borne out by MSPs who said that they had been targets of barracking when they were new members, but that they have tended to receive less as their experience has grown, and have developed strategies for ignoring it. One female MSP said that she used part of her speaking turn to respond to an MSP who was barracking her, and that this was described by her colleagues as 'her finest hour'. Although women and men MSPs take part in barracking, some MSPs viewed this as a male practice. One female MSP described it as 'unladylike behaviour', and claimed that she judged women who barracked more harshly than men. When asked if female voices were characteristic of barracking in the chamber, one MSP answered that women's voices can be heard, but judged this negatively, saying these tended to be the more 'strident voices'.

In the Northern Ireland Assembly MLAs noted that this male-dominated space can be intimidating for women and that *'people here think it is their divine right to shout at a woman'* and that women were particularly targeted because *'they think we'll just give her a hard time and she'll fall in and collapse'*. A woman MLA said that she had been surprised by the masculine 'performance' aspect of the chamber which involved *'back-slapping and insincere comments passed across the chamber for political gain'*. Women MLAs also agreed that barracking was characteristic of proceedings, one MLA saying that *'it is important to shout out'* and join in because *'you have to find your voice in these male-dominated assemblies'*. MLAs suggested that the debating chamber seemed to be the place where animosity was expressed, whereas in other speech events, such as committees, there tended to be *'less grandstanding'* and *'adversaries in the chamber work comfortably together in committee'*. It is also worth noting that the wider working environment of the Assembly does not reflect the animosity in the chamber and has a friendly, helpful and non-hierarchical atmosphere.

AMs agreed that barracking was characteristic of the Welsh Assembly, although it tended not to be personal in tone, and most commonly occurred as muttering or single word interjections such as *'rubbish'* or *'shameful'*. One AM pointed out that the small size of the Assembly meant that *'you can't detach yourself from the person you are attacking'* and the more *'human scale'* of the assembly meant that there would be interpersonal consequences if someone was verbally attacked in the chamber. A range of tactical behaviours related to

barracking were noted by AMs and these included '*flouncing out*' of the Assembly to express opposition, or making comments in a '*stage whisper*' to a neighbour in order to '*put someone off*'.

In spite of these adversarial exchanges and tactics, there has been some success in the new institutions in terms of achieving a more consensual, egalitarian culture. In Wales, Assembly Members (AMs) in interviews generally agreed that the small, circular chamber had a relaxed atmosphere which led to a non-threatening environment for speakers. Similarly, most MSPs interviewed from the Scottish Parliament liked the horseshoe 'spread out' nature of the debating chamber, describing it as 'non-confrontational' and 'less intimidating'. Observational and interview data from the Northern Ireland Assembly suggest that the Assembly remains sharply divided along Nationalist and Unionist lines, described by one Alliance Party MLA as '*red and green issues: tribal politics*'. However, a number of MLAs from across the parties agreed that some elements of this animosity had '*mellowed with time*' and although it was still evident that '*they are going to be a while getting over the history*' there was some sense that '*we're getting there*'. The Speaker of the Assembly was universally liked and respected by the MLAs who were interviewed. He was praised for '*not overdoing it*' in relation to enforcing the rules, but was seen as someone who would '*tell off a Member without fear or favour*'.

These opinions and observations suggest that the two characteristics of *informality* and *flexibility* seem to be important features of the new institutions that contributed to a less regulatory and more inclusive atmosphere in debates. The clearest example of this is in relation to parliamentary language and the relaxation of the formal address forms in the new assemblies. In the House of Commons MPs must address each other as 'The (Right) Honourable Lady/Gentleman, or by their constituency title. In the Northern Ireland Assembly, MLAs can use the constituency title, as in the House of Commons, but mainly refer to each other as 'the Member', although there is much more variability in the use of address terms and both first name only, and first name and surname are used. Interviews with MLAs showed how this flexibility reflects the diverse opinions in relation to formality in the Assembly. Some MLAs found the formal conventions restrictive and 'old fashioned' and described them as '*stuffy*' and '*over Westminsterised*'. However, for others the traditional, formal rules of the parliament '*served a purpose*' to give the proceedings sufficient formality and gravitas. Flexibility in the enforcement of the rules allows these opposing stances to be accommodated.

The National Assembly for Wales is the least formal of the institutions, and AMs were mostly in agreement that they preferred the use of informal address terms. In the Scottish Parliament, full first name and surname or an address title (Mr, Mrs, Sir etc.) and surname are commonly used. However, it is also common to hear the less formal first name only as a form of address. MSPs commented that the regulation of these interactional rules governing forms of address have become more strict over time, and that at the beginning of the parliament it was much more common to use a MSP's first name. The Presiding Officers now tend to correct this informal use and insist on the more formal forms of address. The impression that the Scottish Parliament is becoming more like Westminster over time is also an observation that has been noted in relation to an increasing adversariality of the proceedings. This in turn has been linked associated with a perceived increase in the

severity of the whipping system and increasing constraints on MSPs associated with party divisions and allegiances.

New Politics, New Progress?

The prevalence of adversarial exchanges in the devolved institutions is at odds with the aim of a more consensual, less combative style of politics that it was hoped would characterise the new political institutions. One of the problems with the development of a 'new', less combative politics is the sheer lack of options in relation to the speech events themselves. If not a version of Prime Minister's Question Time, then what other event would be non-adversarial (or non-combative) but still achieve the necessary plenary functions of scrutiny and accountability offered by an adversarial forum, whilst at the same time offering media-friendly sound bites? It seems there are currently very few alternative models available. Although committees seem to offer promising opportunities for cross-party collaboration and decision-making, many politicians feel that the success of the committee is over dependent on an individual chairperson and that partisan politics were still pursued in committees to the detriment of their function.

Interviews with politicians highlighted another major constraint to the progress of women in politics, and indeed in professional life more generally. That is the persistence of gendered stereotypes that constrain their behaviour. For example, the expectation that women politicians will bring consensual styles to political life actually helps to strengthen the effects of what many take to be the 'double bind' of women in politics. That is, that if they behave adversarially they are seen as unfeminine, yet if they are not combative they are seen as ineffectual. Although women's 'civilising difference' is often presented by political campaigners as a reason for the inclusion of women in politics it can actually become an additional burden for women, who evidently vary greatly from one another in relation to their interactional styles. These expectations also contribute to the fact that women still suffer from the high visibility of their public roles in ways that their male counterparts do not. In each institution women cited the harsh judgements of their appearance and behaviour, especially by the media, as the single main barrier to women's entry into and progress within politics.

Women's progress in politics is often measured by the success of the mechanisms for the election of women; by women's numerical representation in institutions; and by the extent to which 'women's issues' such as domestic violence, childcare and social justice have been promoted by women MPs. By all these measures women have made progress in the new devolved institutions. The analysis of the interactional details of the debate floor offers an additional, specific lens with which to view women's representation in political institutions. The finding that women participate in illegal exchanges in the devolved political institutions perhaps shows that a degree of equality has been reached: it appears to be easier for women to participate in all different types of speaking turns in the new parliaments than it does in the House of Commons. The smaller size of the institutions and increasing numbers of women also play a part in making women's presence an integral, rather than peripheral

membership. The informality and flexibility of the debate proceedings give all members fewer formal barriers to participation than the constraints of parliamentary language and proceedings associated with Westminster. However, above all it is the status and confidence afforded to women as founding members that gives them a greater sense of belonging and ownership than ever before in UK political institutions.