The changing language of women on *The Big Bang Theory*

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Abstract

This study focuses on how linguistic markers are utilized by women in media to highlight stereotypes and reinforce systems of oppression. Using data from the popular television program *The Big Bang Theory*, the speech patterns of the three main female characters, Penny, Amy, and Bernadette, were analyzed. It was found that changes in the speed and pitch of the dialog delivered by these characters correlated with the characters enacting certain female stereotypes that are not at the forefront of their personalities. The stereotypes of the traditionally feminine woman, overly aggressive woman, and ditzy blond are key in maintaining the inferior status of women. The stereotype of the traditionally feminine woman serves as an example of how women are supposed to act out their female identity, the overly aggressive stereotype is a warning against utilizing emotions outside of a traditional feminine community of practice, and the ditzy blond stereotype is used to provide proof of the inferiority of women and justify the continued subjugation of them.

Keywords Dichotomous oppositional difference · Style shifting · Othering · Gender · Communities of practice

Introduction

Gender is complex and has significant consequences for how an individual interacts with society. Gender is generally viewed within the framework of dichotomous oppositional difference, which involves categorizing people into two groups, with one group being subordinated to the other. In this case, men are situated above all other forms of gender. With this structuring of gender, those in power (men) determine which identities are marked as other (Collins 1986; West and Fenstermaker 1995; Jensen 2011; Bucholtz and Hall 2004). Understanding this othering process is complex due to the interlocking nature of oppression, which emphasizes that different aspects of an individual's identity, including race/ethnicity, gender, class, sexual

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orientation etc., are experienced simultaneously (Collins 1986; West and Fenstermaker 1995; Jensen 2011).

Role of gender identity in systems of oppression

Gender does not happen in a vacuum, it is dependent upon interactions with social groups and social structures. When an individual enters under the socializing influences of different groups they belong to, they naturally enter into the experiences of the group and adopt their attitudes. These groups are known as communities of practice, each containing their own rules and expected set of behaviors. Adopting a community of practice's attitudes leads to the performance of social habits or practices, and it is this performance that indicates belonging to a community of practice (Mead 1936; Cote 1996; Bucholtz and Hall 2004). The ability to be accepted into different communities of practice is a sign of identity capital. Identity capital is the use of identity to take advantage of social/occupation situations through investing in certain identities (Cote 1996). The more identity capital a person has, the easier it is for them to navigate various communities of practice, leading to greater access to opportunities and success.

Communities of practice, however, cannot be understood without an analysis of power. Identity emerges under conditions of contrast, creating dichotomous relations between the self and the other. These dichotomies, however, are not equal, with one group having power over the other (Bucholtz and Hall 2004; Collins 1986; Jensen 2011). This dichotomous oppositional difference is also a central component of systems of domination. This is known as othering, which Jensen (2011) describes as a:

Discursive process by which powerful groups, who may or may not make up a numerical majority, define subordinate groups into existence in a reductionist way which ascribe problematic and/or inferior characteristics to these subordinate groups. Such discursive processes affirm the legitimacy and superiority of the powerful and condition identity formation among the subordinate. (p. 65)

The categorization of people in terms of their difference from one another allows for the assignment of inferior status to certain groups, which are then used as proof of their inferiority (Collins 1986). Hierarchical structuring of difference is dependent on establishing which identities remain unmarked. In the U.S., unmarked identities tend to be those associated with whiteness, masculinity, heterosexuality etc. This marked difference, or the inability to ascribe to the norm, is used as a justification for social inequality (Bucholtz and Hall 2004).

Through an examination of gender it becomes clear how dichotomous oppositional differences are formed. As previously established, identities are social and situated within and conditioned by specific social contexts, and the power to construct identity lies with the powerful. In gender identity, men are regarded as the norm and women as the other. Society is based in and built on the male social universe, and through the othering process, women come to exist and understand themselves from the basis of what men have established; they interpret their world through a masculine lens (Smith 2007; Collins 1986; Inglis and Thorpe 2012; West and

Fenstermaker 1995; Jensen 2011). Gender is accomplished through interacting with others, and interaction involves being held accountable for the correct performance of an activity as either a woman or a man (West and Fenstermaker 1995; Bucholtz 1999).

Stereotypical representation of women in television

In turning specifically to media, various media's all experience different gendered constructions. This gendered construction then links media to and reaffirms existing broader power structures around gender (Cote 2020). One of the observable links between media and power structures around gender is the stereotypical representation of women. There is a wealth of research documenting this stereotyping in which women are portrayed as emotional and sensitive (Thompson and Zerbinos 1995), deferent and frail (Sternglanz and Servin 1974; Thompson and Zerbinos 1995), hold either no identifiable occupation (Thompson and Zerbinos 1995; Curtin 1999) or are secretaries or teachers (Levinson 1975), dependent on men (Alexander 1999), overtly sexualized (Nathanson et al. 2002; Lynch et al. 2016; Alexander 1999), and are outnumbered by men (Davis 1990; Signorielli 1989; Thompson and Zerbinos 1995). Despite the complexities of identity and gender, television tends to limit the role of women to traditional gender roles.

This stereotypical representation of women in television has been shown to reify the specific gender roles associated with women, solidifying their assigned place in society. The effects of this can be best observed in children. Through television, children are constantly exposed to gender stereotypes, making it more likely that they will interpret and view the social world using stereotypes about gender roles (Knobloch et al. 2006). More specifically, television can influence children's association of gender with specific occupations (Beuf 1974; Kimball 1986; O'Bryant and Corder-Bolz 1978), traits and behaviors (Davidson et al. 1979; McGhee and Frueh 1980), and endorsement of gender stereotypes (Herrett-Skjellum and Allen 1996; Morgan 1987). These consequences make clear the importance of understanding the stereotypical representation of women in television, the connections and influence it has on existing gender power structures, and the impact the exposure to these stereotypical representations can have on socialization and people's understanding of gender, especially for children.

While the stereotypical representation of women has been well established in television, most research focuses on television as a whole. Focusing on television as a whole allows for trends, like the portrayal of women, to be identified, but it misses the differences that occur across genres, channels, programs, or even between different characters within the same show. It assumes that television conveys one experience that is interpreted the same by the audience; however, television is not monolithic. It offers diverse perspectives on representation from reinforcing to undermining traditional gender roles, which in turn can either positively or negatively affect opinions about women (Holbert et al. 2003; Alexander 1999). For example, Holbert et al. (2003) studied the differences in representation of women and the effects these differences have on opinions about women's rights between progressive

dramas, traditional dramas, and situation comedies. They found that progressive dramas and situation comedies tend to have more progressive representation of women which correlated with more support for women's rights, and traditional dramas tend to have a more conservative representation of women which correlated with less support for women's rights. In focusing on specific aspects of television there can be a better understanding of how women are being portrayed and the effects of these portrayals.

Looking more specifically at certain aspects of television has become even more important in recent years as television has become more diverse. The diversification of television has led to a shift away from the strict portrayal of women in traditional roles (Holbert et al. 2003; Curtin 1999; Alexander 1999). While there has been a decrease in portraying women within strict gender roles, this does not necessarily mean that the representation of women is no longer stereotyped. Instead, certain stereotypes underline the more nuanced female characters that are in television. Messages about accepted ways of being for women are still being sent through these characters, though they are more subtle as opposed to the more traditional overt presentation of women in traditional gender roles. By identifying the underlying stereotypes the influence of gender power structures can still be seen, demonstrating the continued gender construction in television.

Language and gender

Analysis of language can be a unique tool in unearthing underlying female stereotypes in female characters. Initial research into the use of language by women put forth the idea of separate women's and men's language (O'Barr and Atkins 1980; Bucholtz and Hall 2004). While there is no longer any strong evidence for this, language use is still key in the enactment of gender identity in communities of practice (Bucholtz 1999; Eckert 1996; Hancock et al. 2015; Holmes and Schnurr 2006; McDowell 2015). Differences in speech patterns between men and women often relate to power differences between them and to the various gender roles that they are performing (Jackson 2012; Goldshmidt and Weller 2000; Holmes and Schnurr 2006). Going beyond this, gender neutral style shifting (a speaker shifting from one linguistic style or register to another) can draw attention to gender differences. Though these style shiftings are not specifically linked to a gender, they still provide a marker for a shift in gender performance. This can be an especially useful tool in analyzing gender performance of characters who are not necessarily engaging in gendered speech patterns.

Purpose of the present study

For this study, I am interested in how style shifting utilized by female characters in television sitcoms emphasizes specific stereotypes associated with women, thus reinforcing systems of oppression. As previously mentioned, in order to better understand the continued stereotypical representation of women in more nuanced characters, it is important to step away from looking at television as a whole. In this

case it was decided that looking specifically at the female characters in the show *The Big Bang Theory* would provide the best way to utilize the analysis of language to understand the underlying stereotypes of female characters.

The Big Bang Theory was selected to be the focus of this study for the following main reasons. First, it is a situational comedy, which, as Holbert et al. (2003) demonstrated, tends to have a more positive representation of women. The female characters in *The Big Bang Theory* break the trend of portraying women in traditional gender roles with Bernadette and Amy being scientists, and Penny exhibiting various masculine traits and even sometimes assuming traditionally male gender roles. Throughout the show the identities of all the characters grow and become more complex, making the use of more traditional ways of understanding the coding of female characters more difficult. Second, the absence of specific gendered markers, which serve to make the stereotypical presentation of female characters obvious, necessitates a different form of analysis to identify the stereotypes that are still present. Lastly, the presence of gender neutral style shifting provides a point of analysis to identify and understand the underlying stereotypes for each character. Analyzing gender neutral style shifting can reveal patterns of emphasis on specific gender stereotypes that send clear messages on how women should exist in the world and maintain structures of oppression. This is not to say that other sitcoms do not exhibit these same characteristics. Sitcoms that aired around the same time and shortly after (*The Office*, *How I Met Your Mother*, *Modern Family*, *Parks and Recreation*, etc.) all resemble *The Big Bang Theory* in their move toward a greater representation of complex and nuanced female characters. *The Big Bang Theory* is offered as a starting point, a way to understand this new approach to breaking down female representation that can be easily applied to other sitcoms due to their commonalities.

Methodology

In this study I analyzed nine episodes of *The Big Bang Theory*, looking for changes in speed and pitch in the speech of the three female characters; Penny, Amy, and Bernadette. I watched season five episodes eight, twelve, and nineteen, season six episodes thirteen, sixteen, and eighteen, and season seven episodes three, five, and fifteen. I chose these three seasons because they consistently have all three female characters involved in the episodes. In choosing the episodes, I avoided picking season openers and season enders, and episodes that were a continuation of a previous storyline, in order to avoid missing events from previous episodes that would influence the study. I also made sure that I did not choose the same number episode in a different season to ensure that I would watch a variety of episodes at different points in each season.

In each episode I took note of every conversation in which at least one of the female characters was involved. For each of these conversations I recorded which characters were involved in the conversation. During the conversation, if one of the female characters increased the speed of her speech or the pitch of her tone, I recorded it and made a note as to what the conversation was about. If, in the

conversation there were no instances of linguistic change for any of the female characters involved, I made a note that no change occurred in the conversation.

In order to analyze the data I utilized an index score. I added up the total number of conversations in which there was no linguistic change, and the total number of conversations for which a linguistic change occurred for each character. For no change I assigned a value of 0 and for linguistic change I assigned a value of 1. Then I calculated the index score for each character in order to determine which character utilized linguistic change the most and the situations in which the linguistic shift occurred. An index score was chosen to quantify the linguistic shift over other more quantitative methods because the focus of this paper is on the characters' behavioral shifts that are linked to these linguistic shifts. Future studies can build off of this base and offer a more quantitative analysis of the linguistic shifts themselves, further breaking down the differences in pitch and speed, to offer a better understanding of how characters' linguistic shifts are tied to different behavioral markers.

Results

Index scores

Each female character in *The Big Bang Theory* is complex and nuanced, with identity growth continually occurring throughout the show. Amy is the most intelligent of the group, and while she maintains a certain level of emotional detachment, she grows throughout the course of the show becoming more than just an emotionally detached female scientist. Bernadette is a scientist, and for a time was also a waitress. She starts off as a quiet character, and like Amy, develops throughout the course of the show, becoming more complex. Penny is confident in her femininity and yet is often relied upon for more masculine tasks and grew up doing farm work that is often associated with men. Penny is the least intelligent of the group, though this becomes less of a defining character trait as her character develops. Underlying these complex characters, however, are different stereotypes associated with women that are revealed through analyzing their use of style shifting.

Amy utilized style shifting the most with an index score of 0.37, exhibiting change in pitch/speed 15 times and no change 26 times. The next highest is Bernadette, with an index score of 0.34, exhibiting change in pitch/speed 11 times and no change 21 times. Penny utilized style shifting the least with an index score of 0.26, exhibiting change in pitch/speed 9 times and no change 26 times.

Analysis

While all of the female characters utilized changes in speed and pitch evenly, the difference between the characters comes from how often they utilize style shifting and how the style shifting is tied to different stereotypes. In addition, the frequency of use is also tied to the relationship between the stereotype and the identity of the character. Amy utilized style shifting the most and increased the speed and pitch of

her speech to connect with behavioral shifts that were overtly feminine. Amy is portrayed as the least feminine of the group and so this stereotype runs counter to her overall identity, which necessitates an increased usage of style shifting. Bernadette had the second highest use of style shifting, and increased the speed and pitch of her speech to connect with behavioral shifts that were overly aggressive. Bernadette is generally the most quiet in the group, and, like Amy, this disconnect encourages the use of style shifting. Penny utilized style shifting the least, and increased the speed and pitch of her speech to connect with behavioral shifts that highlighted her lack of intelligence. Penny is the least intelligent of the group, and it is this lack of disconnect between the stereotype and Penny's overall identity that results in her utilizing style shifting significantly less than the other characters.

To better understand the use of style shifting in *The Big Bang Theory* it is helpful to take a closer look at Amy's character. Amy is the most emotionally detached of the three women, epitomizing the idea of a female intellect. This mirrors what happens in American society, where women feel the need to suppress the more feminine aspects of their identity in order to attain respect and success, especially in a masculine community of practice, as could be seen in the varying practices of women at work when they were in a feminine versus a masculine community of practice (Holmes and Schnurr 2006). Academia, the community of practice that Amy engages with the most, is a male dominated space. When women enter into academia, and other masculine communities of practice, they do not enter and occupy it on the same terms as men. In order to participate, women have to "suspend [their] sex, and suspend [their] knowledge of who [they] are" (Smith 2007, p. 10). In this sense, Amy's gender identity formation is based in alienating herself from a feminine gendered identity. So, when Amy increases the speed and pitch of her voice, she is doing so in order to emphasize and draw attention to the more feminine desires of her character, which are usually suppressed.

There are two main examples of how Amy utilizes style shifting to emphasize the suppressed aspects of her feminine gender identity. The first occurs in season five episode eight. In this episode the three women are making plans for Bernadette's wedding, and Amy feels left out when Penny and Bernadette go dress shopping without her. As a part of their apology to Amy, Bernadette offers to make Amy her maid of honor. For the rest of the conversation, as Amy talks about the dresses and her involvement with the wedding, her speed and pitch significantly increases. Amy utilizes these style shifts in order to draw attention to the change in her character, going from detached scientist to giddy bridesmaid in mere seconds. This portrayal of this giddiness is largely informed by an increase in both the speed and pitch of Amy's speech. Interestingly, in this episode Penny and Bernadette experience very little style shifting, even though most of their conversations revolve around the wedding and dresses. This is due to the fact that neither of their stereotypes are enacted in this situation, and so no style shifting is needed.

The second instance of style shifting for Amy is in season five episode 12. In this episode Amy and her boyfriend, Sheldon, are fighting, and Sheldon tries to find a gift for her in order to end the fight. When Sheldon invites Amy over, and informs her that he has a gift for her, being the detached intellectual, she claims that getting her a gift will not make things better between them. Sheldon then takes out a tiara,

and Amy has the most drastic style shift out of all the shifts recorded. Her speech drastically increases in both speed and pitch, as she excitedly exclaims that she is a princess. The use of this style shift once again draws attention to the switch from her character as a detached scientist to an excitable feminine woman.

It is important to note that even though the female characters have started to play a more important role in the show, ultimately the characters in *The Big Bang Theory* are working within a masculine community of practice, meaning that the show still revolves around the male characters. While there were instances where the female characters were able to engage in practices often associated with a feminine community of practice, the majority of the time they were working within the stories established by the male characters, where acting from a frame established by a feminine community of practice would distort the story. This can be seen from the fact that Amy, who experienced the most style shifting, really only utilized the style shifts when there were none or very few of the male characters present in the scene. In the examples listed above, Amy is with the other female characters dress shopping, a very distinct feminine community of practice, and she is with Sheldon and Penny, less distinct but the female characters outnumber the male characters. The stereotype that Amy used style shifting to emphasize is also the one that would conflict most with a masculine community of practice, since it is emphasizing her feminine nature, unlike Penny and Bernadette who are emphasizing characteristics that can also be commonly found in males.

Discussion

The utilization of style shifting in the interactions of the female characters in the *Big Bang Theory* reveals the stereotyping that still occurs despite the complexity of their characters. The utilization of stereotypes is tied closely to the establishment of hierarchies and systems of oppressions. As previously discussed, gender is based in dichotomous oppositional difference, with those in power determining which gender identities remain unmarked and which are marked and ultimately subjugated. When it comes to gender identity, men have the power, resulting in the establishment of structures and systems that treat women as inferior.

Stereotypes are a common method for the exploitation of women, and other subjugated groups, because they act to dehumanize the subject which justifies the treatment of women as inferior (Collins 1986; Jensen 2011). Stereotyping functions through both positive and negative images, with the ultimate function of both being control of dominated groups. Resisting stereotypes is viewed as a threat to the status quo and results in more externally defined negative images. Stereotypes act as a tool of those in power to define how subjugated groups should act, distort renderings of behavior that are most threatening to those in power, and assign inferior status which is then used as proof as a group's inferiority (Collins 1986; Jensen 2011).

In analyzing the qualitative results of this study, it becomes clear how the use of style shifting to draw attention to the three different stereotypes assigned to the three different female characters supports the use of stereotyping in the dehumanization of women and maintenance of their inferiority status. In the case of Amy, her

style shifting emphasizes stereotypes often associated with femininity. Because her character defies traditional female gender identity, she utilizes style shifting the most in order to highlight stereotypes that define how women should act. The realm of men is that of reason, and thus men are expected to separate themselves from their bodies and emotions. The result of this is the creation of the female identity that is centered around caring for the physical needs of men (Smith 2007). This creates a situation in which women are expected to be more connected to their emotions and bodies, but only within the domestic sphere or other feminine communities of practice. As can be seen in Amy's character, in order to achieve success outside of traditionally feminine spaces women must adopt the emotionless, reason focused attitude of men. However, women were never intended to enter these spaces and this reveals the power that Amy's style shifting holds. By emphasizing traditionally feminine stereotypes in connection with emotions and the body, Amy's style shifting is drawing attention to how the female gender identity has been defined, and when these aspects of the female gender identity are adopted it restricts women to domains and communities of practice that have been defined by men as the realm of women.

In Bernadette's case, her use of style shifting emphasizes the stereotype of women as being over-aggressive, utilizing stereotypes to distort renderings of behavior that are most threatening to those in power. The construction of the female gender identity is based on connecting women with emotions. This connection with emotions also allows for the dialog around women who challenge the status quo to be based in the irrationality of women because of their connection to their emotions. This strategy is utilized to discredit women who are a threat to the patriarchy. The systems and structures that women are challenging are maintained as objective and factual, while the challenges from these women are ignored in favor of stories about how their emotions make them unable to think and reason objectively (Collins 1986; Smith 2007; Inglis and Thorpe 2012; West and Fenstermaker 1995; Jensen 2011). In contrast to Amy's use of style shifting to draw attention to a desirable stereotype in regards to women being connected to their emotions, Bernadette's style shifting emphasizes a stereotype that is threatening to the status quo and serves as a warning against challenges to the hierarchical nature of gender identity and the oppression of women.

Lastly, because Penny's character already embodies a traditional feminine identity, she utilizes style shifting the least, but her style shifting highlights the stereotype of the ditzy blond, thus assigning her an inferior status and using this status as proof of her inferiority. While it is important to note that Penny does fulfill more manly tasks in the show and it is referenced that in her childhood she engaged in activities that are often associated with men on the farm, overall her character is rooted in the traditionally established female identity. This is why her use of style shifting is connected with a stereotype intended to maintain the inferior status of women. It has already been established that identity is formed through the lens of the powerful. This is the process of othering, whereby the powerful produce the other as subordinate, pathological and morally inferior, and keep knowledge and technology for themselves (Jensen 2011; Collins 1986; West and Fenstermaker 1995). It is this pathological inferiority and lack of access to knowledge that is emphasized in Penny's use of style shifting in connection to moments where her lack of intelligence is

highlighted. The assignment of the stereotype of women being intellectually inferior to men only serves as proof of women's overall inferiority to men and the justification of their continued subjugation.

Limitations and future research

There are limitations to this study, one being the sample size. Since the completion of this study, the *Big Bang Theory* has concluded with a total of 12 seasons. The female characters continued to evolve over the course of the rest of the series, and in order to have a complete understanding of their use of style shifting in connection with their underlying stereotypes, further analysis is necessary focusing on the later seasons and the development of the female characters. In addition, this study focuses solely on gender identity. It is important to note that each of the female characters are white, roughly middle class, cisgender, heterosexual, and non-disabled. Further analysis taking intersectionality and how gender, race/ethnicity, class etc. are experienced simultaneously is needed in order to fully understand the complexities behind these character's identity and their stereotyping. Lastly, future research also needs to take into account the increased visibility of the complexities surrounding a person's lived experience in regards to their gender. For many people, their reality does not fall within the strict gender binary that is still maintained as a societal norm. Further research can expand upon this analysis through a closer examination of how gender roles, identity, and expression operate to inform character's adherence or opposition to the gender binary.

Conclusion

The findings, while tentative because of the small sample size, offer new ways of understanding female representation in television sitcoms. Sitcoms are generally a more liberal form of television and in shows like *The Big Bang Theory* they are representing women in more complex and nuanced ways. This, however, does not mean that stereotypical representations of women have disappeared. Focusing on an analysis of language, specifically gender neutral style shifting, this study uncovers the ways in which stereotypical representations of women remained prevalent in *The Big Bang Theory*. This adds to the body of knowledge on the maintenance of stereotypical representations and the importance of continuing to criticize female characters.

In demonstrating the ways in which female characters are still being stereotypically represented, and providing a tool for uncovering these stereotypes, this study emphasizes the importance of understanding stereotypical representations of women in media and the impacts it has on society. The continued stereotyping of women in television reifies patriarchally established ways of being for women. Because of this, it is crucial to turn to new frames of analysis that can uncover the ways in which female characters are still being stereotyped in sitcoms. By offering new frames of analysis, further work can be done to combat this trend in television and offer more

nuanced characters that affirm ways of being for women rooted in their own embodied experiences.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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