

Running Head: DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Dramatis Personae:

How Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin Do Gender

(LinguistiQUIPS)

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### Introduction

It would seem that the American political landscape has long been dominated by male gender ideology, so much so that there are relatively few women who partake in American politics. In the 2008 election season, however, the American citizenry has been fortunate enough to witness two candidates with an immense presence on the national stage, former Democratic candidate for President Hillary Clinton and former Republican candidate for Vice President Sarah Palin; each of these candidates conducts gender in a different way, and both utilize different gender stereotypes to their advantage in order to get ahead in a male-dominated landscape. Interestingly, Sarah Palin uses more stereotypically-feminine language (which research would suggest is uncommon among female candidates) whereas Hillary Clinton uses that which is more traditionally masculine, and thus each candidate employs a different path to political success.

Gendered stereotypes are internal creations, the product of a societal psyche-at-large which acts as a subconscious filter in the minds of all members of any given population. As internal constructs, intuition must be used (as is more commonly done in theoretical linguistics than sociolinguistics) to discern intricacies of these stereotypes. The total number of stereotypes among any population is almost certainly

indiscernibly huge, but there are a few generalizations which may be realized using the aforementioned intuition.

For example, men are stereotypically seen as rational beings, strong of will and sure of mind, while women are stereotypically seen as less rational, less sure-footed and less strong-willed than men. While the origins of such stereotypes are unimportant for purposes here, the existence of these generalities among many or most gendered stereotypes in the United States is clear; that Clinton utilizes more stereotypically-masculine properties in constructing her persona and Palin more stereotypically-feminine ones will become clear, as well.

### **Literature Review**

Northover, Harris et al. note that politicians, both male and female, in their attempts to speak to a specific ideology in their speeches and positions, will frequently make use of linguistic structures or systems to further their own agenda (1994). The construction of a public persona is always part of a politician's agenda.

Current research suggests that women are almost automatically revered in politics, initially for nothing more than being female (Stivers, 1993). Women are also automatically associated with "the status of sex object - with being

(regardless of context) sexual beings who 'naturally evoke' sexual overtures from men" (1993, p. 20). As a result of this automatic connotation, Stivers suggests that women must make themselves appear more stereotypically masculine in order to succeed, but not so masculine as to seem threatening or take on an unwanted stereotype (1993).

It has also been noted that women may be at a disadvantage in building their personas based solely on societal prejudices. This was first noted by feminist philosophers, and is described by Bondi:

This claim is elaborated in various ways but, of central importance, is the notion that western intellectual traditions operate through interrelated dualisms, such as reason and emotion, rationality and irrationality, objectivity and subjectivity [...]  
(1997)

In all these dualisms, the former terms carry a positive connotation, while the latter terms carry a negative one. Also, women are often stereotyped as being more likely to utilize the latter in each dualism (1997), which would seem to add difficulty for female politicians who Stivers suggests will be trying to appear more stereotypically male (1993).

Also of some note is that there are many discourses politicians generally use when campaigning for office, as is evidenced by Northover, Harris et al.:

All politicians characteristically address the voting public on a number of currently contested ideological sites-such as health care, employment, unmet social needs, the economy, education, and the family-mainly through a highly mediated press and, more directly though still mediated, through political interviews on radio and television (1994).

Clearly, specific discourses will vary from politician to politician and from party to party, but it is important to realize that any given argument a politician may make is "more than an expression in favour of a position; it is also implicitly or explicitly an argument against the counter-position" (Billig, 1991, qtd. in Northover, Harris et al., 1994). This fact is important especially in a discussion of female politicians, who are (based on their relatively low numbers when compared with male politicians), in a sense, arguing against the status quo by virtue of their very sex, which is exactly the point made by Stivers when discussing women in political positions trying to make themselves appear more stereotypically masculine (1993).

As there are, and always have been, more men in American political offices, many or most of these offices may carry a masculine connotation. This is referenced by Dayhoff's idea of "linguistic sexism," in which "referring to a hypothetical candidate in a simulated newspaper article as 'lady reporter' or 'gal,' could affect the perception of a woman seeking a masculine (sheriff) or neutral (town clerk) position" (1983, qtd. in Rosenwasser, et al., 1987). This once again relates to the research of Stivers (1993) and Witt, Paget et al. (1994), and offers more reasons that a female politician might try to appear more stereotypically masculine in terms of public persona and their use of linguistic resources.

### **Methodology**

The methods used were designed to discern two things: how the candidates view themselves<sup>1</sup>, and how the mainstream media views them.

#### **Self Views:**

To see exactly how gender is done in the cases of Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin, speech transcripts were collected from both politicians and analyzed. The analysis consisted firstly of a qualitative look at the speeches: how did the candidates

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<sup>1</sup> This is actually a matter of how their campaigns want the public to view the candidates, as many politicians do not write their own speeches.

describe themselves? Which types of adjectives or nouns were used? What kinds of linguistic resources were present in the text, and how were they used? Some supralinguistic issues, such as posture and tone, were not analyzed.

Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin never ran for the same office, and indeed the two never technically ran at the same time. For this reason, finding speeches which are similar enough in purpose or content for comparison can be difficult. Two such speeches with some similarity, however, may be Sarah Palin's speech to the Republican National Convention in Minnesota, given on September 3, 2008, and Hillary Clinton's speech to the Iowa Caucuses, given in that state on January 3, 2008. These two speeches are alike in that they showcased a beginning in the campaigns of each candidate; for Clinton, it was the first time she ran for a national office (even though she was already well known as a New York Senator and former First Lady), and for Palin, it was the first time she entered the national spotlight. For two very different women, there are very few speeches with this level of similarity from the campaigns of both.

A small keyword set was determined qualitatively to build the basis of a quantitative analysis of the speeches. Clinton's set was determined based on common arguments she made in her

campaign: that she was "ready to lead on day one" ("ready"), that she has "experience," and that she can bring "change." Palin's set was determined on oft-discussed words she would commonly use: "small town", "hockey mom", and "PTA". The initial set consists of three keywords per candidate (Figure A). This set was then used as part of the quantitative analysis.

### **Media Representations:**

An article sample was taken from the New York Times<sup>2</sup>. Articles relating to similar events in the campaigns of Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin were used. This was meant to level the playing field as much as possible between subject and source, as the political world (and specifically the world of political commentary) can be heavily opinionated and / or biased to either the Liberal or Conservative side. This sort of bias is not something desirable in research on gender identity of female politicians, and as such is avoided as much as possible.

The two articles in the sample were a report on Sarah Palin being John McCain's choice for a Vice Presidential nominee and a report on Hillary Clinton announcing her candidacy, namely "McCain chooses Palin as Running Mate" from August 30, 2008, and

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<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this research, the New York times may be considered to be representative of mainstream media in general in their reporting, and the huge readership of the publication certainly contributes to that representation.

"Clinton's Announcement makes Waves in '08 Field" from January 20, 2007.

### **Findings**

#### **Speech Analysis:**

Based on the keyword set in Figure A, Hillary Clinton's Iowa Caucuses speech was searched and keyword frequencies were recorded, and the same was done for Sarah Palin's RNC speech<sup>3</sup>. Only instances in which the keywords were used in self-description were counted (Figure B).

From this analysis, a clear difference emerged between Clinton and Palin: while Clinton emphasizes her readiness, experience and yearning for change, Palin emphasizes her small town roots, membership in the PTA and her status as a "hockey mom." While Palin never used the term "ready" to describe herself, Clinton never used the terms "small town," "hockey mom" or "PTA." Interestingly, both candidates used the term "experience" only once in their speeches.

#### **Media Analysis:**

In analyzing the data from the New York Times, it became clear that large news organizations do try to remain neutral in their reporting. In the entire Sarah Palin article, for

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<sup>3</sup> One instance of "hometown" was accepted as an instance of "small town" due to its similarity in context: "hometown mayor" as opposed to "small-town mayor."

example, the only descriptions of the candidate were in the form of outside quotations. However, the Times decides which quotations to include in their articles, and thus this information is still relevant in examining how the media represents each candidate.

Quotes included in the articles featured the keyword "experience" 3 times for Clinton and 4 times for Palin; interestingly, however, with Palin the term was always describing that which Sarah Palin reportedly lacks (ie, "lack of experience"). Another keyword from Figure A mentioned in the articles is "change," with Clinton having it mentioned once as part of her platform<sup>4</sup>.

Qualitatively, an interesting word not used in the analysis of the candidates' speeches is "politician." This is used 4 times in the Clinton article, along with words like "cautious" and "rehearsed." The Palin article, however, is devoid of even one mention of the word "politician," but instead utilizes a keyword from Figure A: "hockey mom."

### **Discussion**

A look at the speeches of both Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin suggests that these women do gender in a much different

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<sup>4</sup> It was also mentioned 3 times in the Palin article, but only in reference to "Climate Change," and thus is contextually irrelevant.

way while constructing their public personae. Clinton, as Stivers (1993) and Witt, Paget et al. (1994) predict, uses more stereotypically male properties to describe herself; both "ready" (in context) and "experience" relate to the stereotypically-masculine ideology of sureness of mind.

Similarly, the New York Times mirrored this descriptive pattern, using words like "experience" to define Clinton, as well as adjectives like "rehearsed." The keyword "change" ends up being essentially a tossup; while it could be thought of as being related to the stereotypically-masculine ideology of strength of will, both candidates used it equally in their speeches, and it was essentially irrelevant in the media sample.

Sarah Palin, however, defies the predictions of Stivers (1993) and Witt, Paget et al. (1994), and uses more stereotypically-feminine language in constructing her persona. In fact, Palin is the only candidate to use a female-gendered noun to describe herself ("hockey mom"), and that description was mirrored by the New York Times. Her use of "PTA," as well, could be considered stereotypically female. Usage of "small town," although not stereotypically masculine or feminine, most likely relates to the non-gendered part of Palin's persona, namely that she is not an everyday politician. This distinction

came out in the media analysis, which found that Palin was not once referred to as a "politician" in either article.

Thus, from the results a few generalizations can be made. The first and perhaps most obvious is that while Clinton does gender as current research by Stivers (1993) and Witt, Paget et al. (1994) would suggest (attempting to appear more male by using more stereotypically-masculine language), Palin seems to do almost the opposite: she uses more stereotypically-feminine language like "hockey mom" and "PTA" to showcase her femininity as part of her candidacy. The second generalization is that in addition to each candidate trying to use the stereotypical language of a different gender, Palin also appears to be trying to appear like less of a politician and more like an everyday citizen. The third and final generalization is that the media generally mirrors the image portrayed by the candidates themselves, in this case using more stereotypically-masculine language in discussion of Clinton, and more stereotypically-feminine language in discussion of Palin.

This study could be improved by the addition of more data in the sampling, using more speech transcripts and more articles from a greater variety of sources. More female candidates could be examined, as well, to discern if others, like Sarah Palin, act against the predictions of current research.

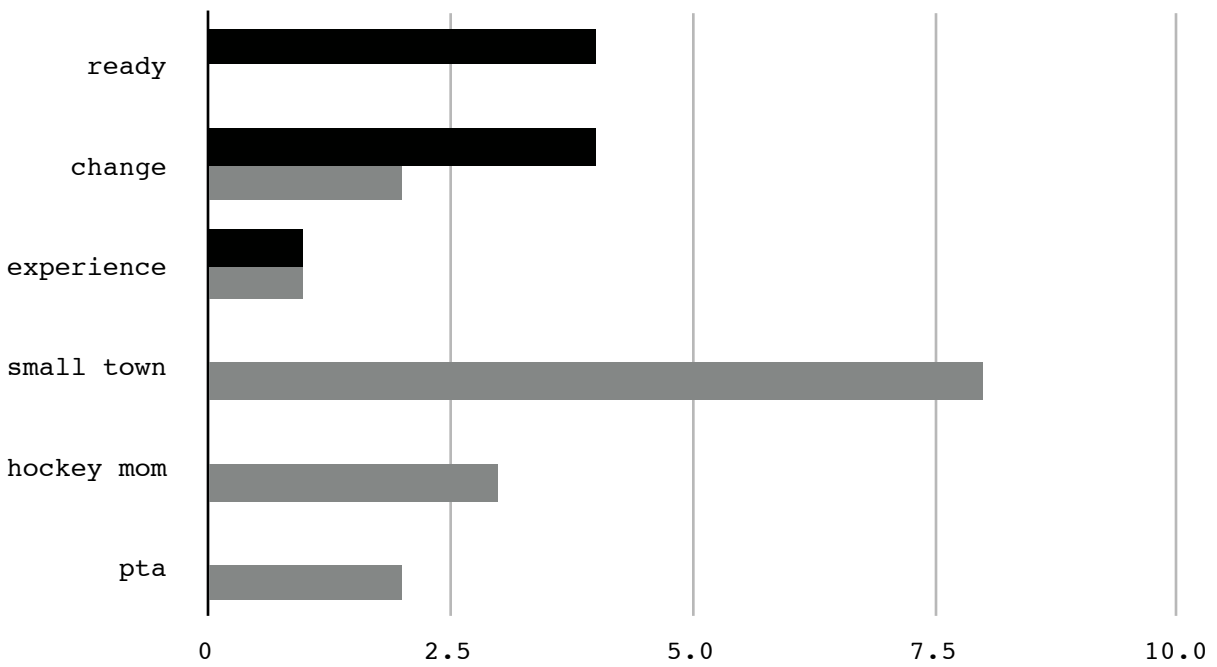
In the 2008 election season, the two candidates examined differed on more than just political ideology. One (Clinton) acted as research predicts a female politician will act and tried to appear more stereotypically masculine; the other (Palin) acted contrary to research and tried to showcase her femininity as part of her candidacy. This distinction was extant throughout both self-descriptions and media representations of the candidates.

**Figure A**

Hillary Clinton	Sarah Palin
ready change experience	small town hockey mom pta

**Figure B**

- Hillary Clinton's Iowa Caucuses Speech (Jan. 2008)
- Sarah Palin's speech to the Republican National Convention (Sep. 2008)



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