

GENDER REPERESENTATIONS IN THREE SCHOOL TEXTBOOKS: A FEMINIST CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Within the framework of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, this study is devoted to the analysis of male and female representations in three school textbooks to which children from 6 to 10 years old are exposed to, in primary schools in Algeria. The methodology adopted is to connect the linguistic features in the texts (the Micro) to the social factors (the macro). The Analysis reveals that despite the measures taken by the Algerian government, in general and the Ministry of education, in particular to provide high-quality education and promote gender equality, male and female representations are still 'problematic'. In general gender is still represented in a way that supports the status-quo. The school textbooks in Algeria contribute to the socialization of children in a very traditional and stereotypical way.

KEYWORDS: Discourse, Gender, Representation, Socialization, Textbook

INTRODUCTION

According to Sunderland (2006: 21), Feminism has inspired gender and language study since the late 1960s. What different feminisms have in common is not just an interest in women and men, girls and boys, and gender relations, but also a critical interest. This extends to social arrangements and power relations. The study of language and gender from feminist critical perspectives involves the investigation of whether certain discourses within specific contexts have been or are being gendered. The study also has to do with the production of gender stereotypes and all the other aspects of gender inequalities in discourse.

The combination of the insights of critical discourse analysis and a range of feminist studies of language gave birth to a new approach: 'feminist critical discourse analysis. The main goal is to demystify taken -for -granted or common-sensical assumptions about gender by showing that these assumptions are most of the time ideological (Lazar, 2005, Litosseliti and Sunderland, 2002, Talbot, 1995). According to Lazar (2005), the marriage of feminism with critical discourse analysis can produce a rich and powerful political critique for action.

Feminists, among others, have shown great interest in the perspectives offered by critical discourse analysis. They have exploited many of its tools to investigate gender stereotypes and gender discrimination produced and perpetuated in discourse. Walsh (2003: 208) believes that studies related to gender are still worth the effort. They can provide us with incredible accounts about power in discourse. "Gender remains highly salient, not only in terms of the public identities women and men construct for themselves, but also in terms of how they are perceived and judged by others".

Gender is a very important component in the way people perceive the world. It is also salient in the way people produce, understand and interpret texts. According to Widdowson (2007: 6) “Texts are produced to express ideas and beliefs or to make other people think in a certain way or to get other people do certain things”. This definition of text is adopted by most of the researchers working within the framework of critical discourse analysis. They believe that the study and analysis of texts can offer a huge amount of information about certain social realities. Texts can reveal how many versions of these realities are constructed by the dominant forces in a society to protect their interests. Feminist critical discourse analysis scholars aim at supporting the victims of such oppression and encourage them to resist and transform their lives. Their investigations revolve mainly around how discourse acts against women and how, in turn, discourse can be exploited to act for their benefits.

In recent years, frequent examples of investigations from the perspective of Feminist critical discourse analysis are analysis of gender representations. The focus is mainly on the identification of how such representations support or create gender discrimination. According to Bloor & Bloor (2007) such an investigation includes the way language itself is gendered -or has become gendered- and the way women and men, boys and girls are stereotypically represented in discourse.

GENDER AND DISCOURSE IN THE EDUCATIONAL SETTING

Gender is deeply embedded in every aspect of our life, in our institutions, in the family, the school. Ideas about gender are everywhere, in our actions, our beliefs, in songs, fairy tales, films, advertisements and so on. What is of interest for the researchers is the fact that over the years these ideas are so firmly implemented within institutions and they are so common place that they are taken for granted that they are true. Gender is in discourse as well, in the words we write and say to tell who we are and what we think the others are.

Discourse is the locus of gender ideologies and it is a mechanism of power. According to Widdowson (2007) discourse may be ideologically loaded and may act against people especially if it has been established within powerful institutions. According to Fairclough (1995b) the emancipatory goals cannot be reached unless we focus on social institutions as they own the means of imposing ideological and discursive constraints on people.

A very powerful institution is school. According to Gramsci (1994) “The problematic aspect of the school as an institution is that it serves as an agent of the dissemination of hegemonic ideologies such as gender and patriarchy, which are embodied in the curricula in both the formal and hidden forms” (Gramsci, 1994 cited in Mutekwe & Modiba, 2012: 366-67)

In schooling, textbooks can be one of the major sources that influence people’s values and attitudes “what the students learn from other contexts will be “reinforced and/or transformed with what is conveyed in textbooks” (Luk, 2004: 3). Textbooks play a major role in the construction of children’s gender identities. As McCabe et al (2011: 200) argue, “A consistently unequal pattern of males and females in children’s books thus contributes to and reinforces children’s gender schemas and identities”.

According to Maluwa-Banda (2004), education is generally viewed as an effective way to deal with gender issues in a society. Indeed, education empowers women by enhancing their competencies and preparing them to participate actively in social or economic activities and in order to achieve such emancipatory goals, educational materials such as

textbooks should be selected and used carefully and ethically. It is, therefore, necessary “that textbooks need to be reviewed with the gender perspective in mind in order to provide a balance and gender-sensitive education to all children.”(Cited in Mutekwe & Modiba, 1012: 365) Recommendations as to the design of schools textbooks and course have been suggested by various experts and various guidebooks have been published at national and international levels.

The focus in this study is on the school textbooks used in the primary schools. “Along with parents, teachers, and peers, books contribute to how children understand what is expected of women and men and shape how they think of their place in the social structure” (McCabe et al, 2011: 199). As children continue to grow, the development of their gender identities and understandings of the expectations associated with it, continue. “Books are one piece of a socialization and identity formation process that is coloured by children’s prior understandings of gender, or gender schemas. Because schemas are broad cognitive structures that organize and guide perception, they are often reinforced and difficult to change. It takes consistent effort to combat dominant cultural messages (Bem 1983), including those sent by the majority of books” (McCabe et al, *ibid*).

According to Zinec-Anima (2002) “Textbooks have a major socialization role in the development of children. They convey important messages to the young on how relations in society are to be organized and which value system they should adopt.”(Cited in Mutekwe & Modiba, 2012: 366)

ANALYSIS

My aim is to investigate gender representations in the school textbook in the primary school in Algeria. The aim is to see whether these representations are motivated by existing stereotypical assumptions about gender.

The project covers the study of three textbooks (grades 1, 3 and 5), all of which are still in use in the Algerian primary schools. The books selected are in the subject matter of ‘The Arabic Language’. The main research methodology used is content analysis of texts.

Textbook Analysis Criteria

Textbook analysis was done using the following set of criteria:

- The presence of males and females
- Number of men and women as producers of texts
- The activities, professions and roles associated to males and females
- The traits and behaviours associated to males and females
- Linguistic features associated to males and females

We have chosen to analyse Arabic language book for two main reasons: Firstly, Arabic is the learners’ native language and part of their identity.

Secondly, the subject forms an important part of the curriculum in Algeria; Pupils have to spend more than 10 hours on Arabic lessons every week.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Textbook 1 (Grade 1)

Title: The Arabic Language: Student's Book. Edited in 2004 and revisited in 2008.

Authors: Three inspectors of education and two teachers (all male).

The preface of the book is, in general, an overview of the reforms that have been carried out in the education sector. 'The contents were presented and organized in a way that would meet the pupils' intellectual, psychological and emotional capacities'

'The focus was on the knowledge which would serve the learner's cognitive demands'

The authors of the textbook make their intentions clear right from the beginning by declaring that they are not going to introduce changes that would affect existing realities, but on the contrary, the contents that have been selected will sustain the learner's schemata. 'The present textbook takes the existing reality into account'. In this case the representation of gender in the textbook is likely to be motivated by the same intentions.

Looking at the presence of male and female characters, the main character in the whole textbook is a boy 'Reda' who starts school. This character is present in almost all the texts. The same name appears for 40 times in the first fifty pages and is used in 12 titles.

The first title is 'Reda Introduces Himself'. The text is an account of what a typical Algerian family looks like "My name is Reda. I am six years old. I like pets and riding bicycles. My father is an engineer and my mother is a teacher. I have one sister. Her name is Mouna" (P. 8). This short description, on the part of a child of six, is ideologically loaded and oriented. Being an engineer and getting married to a teacher and having a boy and a girl, is in fact, an old cliché about Algeria of the 70s, perpetuated in the movies and the songs of the 70s. Regrettably, the same old dream still persists and it is still perpetuated.

Most of the reading comprehension texts, the exercises and the examples provided to explain grammatical structures are about Reda: 'The family of Reda' (P. 1), 'Reda's House' (P. 18), 'Reda at the Library'(P. 89), 'Reda Loves his Country' (P. 143). The book contains 21 reading comprehension texts, 98% of the text revolve round Reda; from talking about him, his family, friends, and classmates to mentioning the things he likes doing, the foods he likes eating and the places he likes visiting. Most of the time he is outdoors, either riding his bicycle, surfing on the net, in the cyber space or watching his friend playing football. It is Reda who suggests ideas and makes plans. In the 'Cleaning the Neighbourhood' reading comprehension text, it is Reda who takes the initiative 'Reda met some of his friends and suggested to clean up the neighbourhood, his friends welcomed his suggestions and started to work in groups" (P. 101).

Most of the pages from 8 to 172 are, in fact, in the honour of 'REDA'. The girls are, regrettably, excluded from the very first pages of the textbook. When Mouna, the little sister, is mentioned, she is depicted as childish and fragile; she plays with dolls and loves candy. 'Mouna preceded us and opened the big door then she came back frightened. My uncle said to her 'Do not be afraid, Toto is a domestic dog, he does not harm anyone' (P. 72). While some of the reading comprehension texts include both Reda and his father or Reda and his friend zakaria, his mother is backgrounded.

As regard the female representation, The mother and her girl 'Mouna' are represented in every negative way. The mother and the girl are either invisible, or passive. McCabe et al (2011: 200) argue that "Not showing a particular group or showing them less frequently than their proportion in the population conveys that the group is not socially valued". The mother is never given a proper name; in this case, she is supposed to represent the category of all Algerian mothers. They all share the same properties; Reda's mother is a teacher, his teacher is female, his friend's teacher is female. They are all passive and silent. They are never given proper names. They are so devoted to their families. The same expressions, used to describe the members of the category are repeated over and over again. They are mainly depicted working in the home, engaged in household chores or in traditional activities.

According to Sarangi & Candlin (2003: 118) such categorization produces "social and moral consequences". Bhatia (2007: 281) goes further to say that "Conventional metaphorical categories are unchanging ...the longer they have been implemented the more they are taken literally". In the textbook, categorization is clearly illustrated by the mother's reply 'The pink colour suits girls and the blue is for boys.'(P. 162).

The father in the textbook is not given a proper name. The members of the father category are all bread winners 'Everybody was waiting for the father who was shopping at a grocery store' (P. 23); they are intellectually dominant, they own all the answers,; whenever Reda asks a question, it is the father who answers even if the mother, a teacher, is around. The fathers love reading newspapers and participating in 'active' pursuits outside the home, especially in the workplace. As regard the interactions in the textbook, 99% of the dialogues in the book are between Reda and his father. The mother and the girl are outside the male's circle. In fact they are portrayed as strangers.

The grandparents in the textbook are backgrounded. They are depicted, frequently, as passive and lazy. 'Mouna was playing with her grandparents when Reda entered with his parents' (P. 13). The only positive image of the grandfather is represented in a short interaction (grandfather – grandson) as, suddenly and ironically, the role of the grandfather shifts from representing laziness and idleness to representing wisdom "Beware of extravagance, it is a waste of money', he says to his grandson (P. 106).

The last reading text (P. 167) 'The graduation party' is about achievements. Two characters are involved: the secondary character is a girl and the main character is Reda. Selma's role is to introduce the programme of the party where as Reda 'the hero' is offered a gift by the school male headmaster (not his devoted female teacher). What a deception for the girls!

Textbook 2 (Grade 3)

Title: My Book of The Arabic Language. Edited in 2005.

Authors: Two female teachers and two male teachers.

The equal representation of gender in the authors committee, in terms of number, may play a very important role as to the representation of gender in the textbook. In the introduction, the authors speak about the reforms introduced in the sector of education.' It is a book that came in response to the reform measures taken by the ministry of education. It came according to the official curriculum based competency approach and textual approach'.

As regard the representation of gender, at many levels, this textbook is completely different. This time, it is the girl ' Soundouss' who has the honour to speak about her first day of school after two months of holiday. But unlike Reda,

Soundouss disappears after a few pages. She is replaced by her male classmate Tarek. Surprisingly, in most of the reading comprehension passages and exercises, males and females are represented equally. When a letter is written to the father another one is written to the mother. When a text speaks about the illness of the boy Amine (P. 64) another one is about the illness of Mouna. Even the same jobs are given to men and women, with the exception of three jobs: teacher, stewardess and salesgirl, which are in the textbook, deliberately related to women.

The most interesting reading comprehension text is about Mouna and her brother Mounir (P. 32). In this text of nearly 100 words, the whole universe seems to toggle, a male character is depicted participating in domestic work. The norm is challenged rather than sustained.

Mounir willingly and happily engages in domestic chores with his sister Mouna.

“Mounir put the chairs in a corner and started to clean up the kitchen. She said to her brother ‘I am going to wash the clothes “and Mounir replied “I will hang them out”. All the grammar and writing exercises that follow focus equally on Mouna and Mounir.

Looking at the presence of male and female characters, this textbook is different from other textbooks we analysed; 50% are male and 50% are female. There are a few cases of stereotypical representation of females. The reading text ‘Afaf, the Little Mother’ (P. 36) shows a girl playing the role of the mother with her doll. Another text shows the girl Mouna trying to make a cake for her friends (P. 76).

What seems problematic is the representation of the mother in this textbook. Women are stuck in their traditional activities. In ‘Ali’s Trousers’ the mother helps her son by resizing his trousers (P. 176). Is it so difficult to drag women out of their archaic and traditional roles? Mattu & Hussain (2003: 93) point out “Motherhood continues to be seen as the central and all-encompassing role of a woman.....motherhood is presented as a woman’s only, ultimate, and legitimate goal”.

The father is depicted with the same vision. In the reading text ‘when Mouna got Sick’ it is the father who buys the medications. ‘The father bought the medications and the mothers helped her take them” (P. 72).

When the children (khaled, Leila and walid) want to take swimming lessons they ask their father to register them (P. 176). In this textbook, the grandparents are almost invisible.

Textbook 3 (Grade 5)

Title: The Exercise Book of the Arabic Language.

Authors: Two women teachers and one women inspector (All female).

The fifth year in the primary school is the last. It is a turning point in the life of children in Algeria. The transition from primary education to basic education represents a ‘huge’ move to another stage of childhood. ‘You are no longer a kid!’ is what the child will hear from this moment on.

In our analysis we focus on the writing exercises. In the end of each unit the pupils are asked to write a composition of 10 to 15 lines about the topic discussed earlier by using the suitable grammatical structures. The pupils are provided with some clues and guidelines.

'You have attended a wedding in the countryside, write a paragraph of 8 to 10 lines in which you describe the wedding atmosphere focusing on the appearance of the bride. Describe your feelings after the wedding' (P. 45). In this exercise, the message transmitted, either implicitly or explicitly, is that the physical appearance of women is more important than anything else.

The Father is still portrayed as 'strong, intelligent, and dominant'. In this textbook, he is everywhere and can do everything; he can negotiate "You were in the car with your father, suddenly the policeman stopped him. Write the dialogue" (P. 25); he can convince "Your brother has received notification to join the army, write a paragraph to show how your father succeeded to convince him" (P. 27); he can buy beautiful things 'While walking, the sight of a beautiful fish attracted you, write a paragraph about how you succeeded to convince your father to buy you one and how you took care of it' (P. 41); he can even realize dreams: 'Arts are the food of the soul, and you like music and you wish to join a musical band. Write a paragraph in which you speak about your wishes and how you convinced your father to register you' (P. 49). In most of the texts, women are almost invisible.

The distribution of the jobs in the textbook shows the extent to which women are under-represented. Indeed, 20 jobs are for male characters: doctor, driver, guard, referee, gardener, soldier, tradesman, judge, farmer, and craftsman and so on. A majority of the occupations mentioned are held by men. The female characters are described either without an occupation or with a stereotypical one. In the textbook only 5 jobs are for women: teacher, nurse, dressmaker, tourist guide, and journalist. The problem is that learners might get the idea that some occupations are only appropriate for men and some only for women.

Mattu & Hussain (2003: 97) argue that women "could be seen in other roles—as doctors, engineers, lawyers, etc. This would not only redress gender bias but also present society more realistically." According to Mutekwe & Modiba, (2012: 367) "The school curriculum orients students to specific careers".

CONCLUSIONS

In most of the analysed textbooks, gender roles reflect traditional, stereotypical and binary male/female division. Patriarchal assumptions about gender are still deeply rooted.

Most of the books look as if made in the 1970s. The texts selected are clearly shaped by the authors own schemas about what is to be a female and what is to be a male in Algeria. As McCabe et al (2011: 200) argue "We interpret stories through the filter of our prior knowledge about other stories and everyday experiences; in other words, schemas shape our interpretations".

In most of the texts females and males are shown stuck in their traditional role models. The girl is shown as an extension of her mother, she is never shown playing outdoor games.

The mother is never shown having an autonomous life. She is rather passive and invisible. The father is the bread winner. He is depicted as the most dominant of all. Unlike the girl, the boy is very adventurous and clever as well. According to Levorato (2007: 115) 'Identity chains' are maintained grammatically and lexically. Indeed, the same grammatical structures and devices refer to the same characters. In this image of what a typical Algerian family should look like. Is this the reality of most of the people living in Algeria in 21st century?

The producers of such texts do not seem to recognize the impact of negative and stereotypical representations on the learners' gender development.

Changing the image of women and men represented in textbooks is a challenge indeed and "the textbook has the potential to be a very effective agent of change" (Hutchinson & Torres 2009: 322).

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