

The Representation of the Feminine in the Portuguese Press: A Content Analysis of the *Diário de Notícias* Newspaper¹

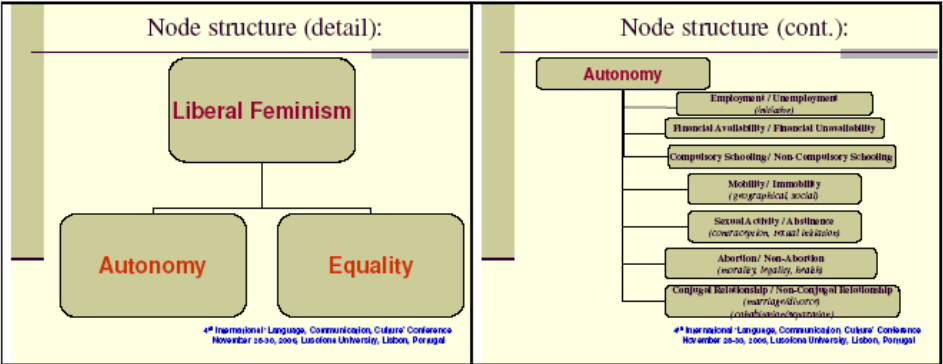
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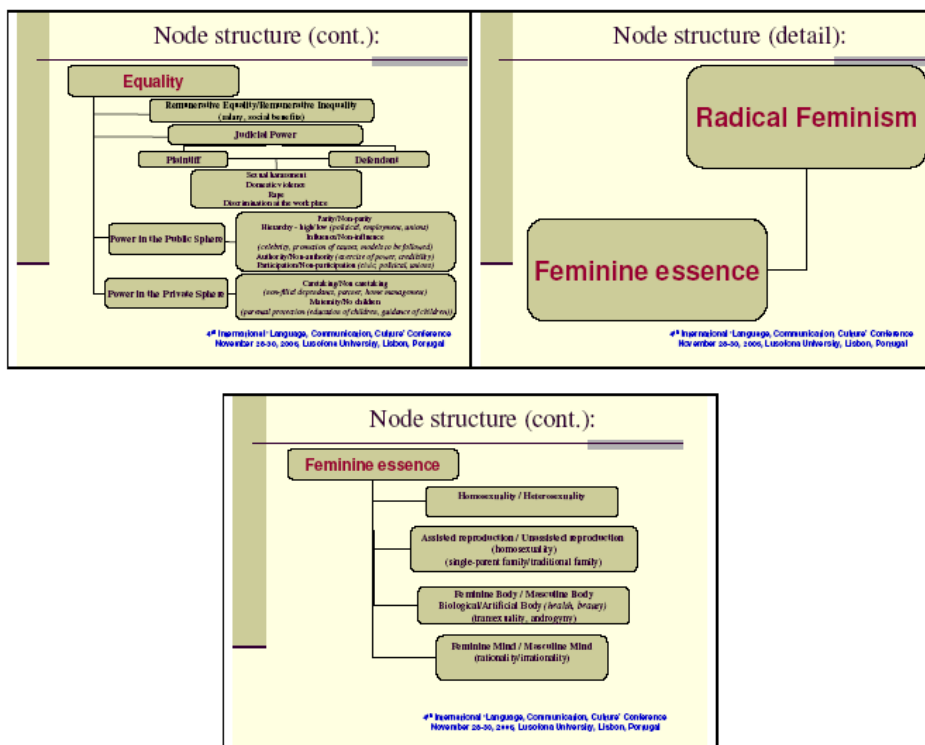
I. Introduction

This is a brief report of a research project, coordinated by me and funded by the Portuguese Government. It studies ‘The Representation of the Feminine in the Portuguese Press’ (POCI/COM 55780/2004), and works on the content analysis of discourse on the feminine in various Portuguese newspapers, covering the time span of February 1st till April 30th 2006. The paper is divided into two parts: in the first part, I will briefly discuss the typology used to code the text units of selected articles; in the second part, I will explore the most expressive percentages of the first two weeks of February for the content analysis of the *Diário de Notícias* newspaper. These percentages were obtained with the NVivo 6 qualitative data treatment software programme.

II. Summary of Typology

Central to any content analysis is the elaboration of a typology of categories: one or more categories are attributed to each unit of analysis so that the researcher may quantify the frequency of those classifications. (Wodak, 2000: 58, 229, 231)





Our typology is divided into two major sections: Liberal and Radical Feminism. Liberal feminism manifests itself through values such as freedom, equality, autonomy and the struggle against discrimination both in the private and the public spheres. Radical Feminism, in turn, sets a universal feminine essence against patriarchal universalism, which emphasizes reproduction as a symbol of the feminine universe. Reproduction is invested with a double meaning, signifying both the distinction of woman vs. man as well as the patriarchal relations of subjection that are reproduced ideologically in daily life. In the Portuguese context we come across a third type of feminist current, that of Catholic feminism, which articulates itself with liberalism in a contradictory fashion: if at times a Catholic-inspired feminism converges, in its aspirations, with those of liberal feminism, it simultaneously distances itself from liberal demands regarding issues of sexuality and maternity. At a later stage we plan to relate our findings to Catholic Feminism; for now our analysis will relate only to the mega-categories of Liberal and Radical Feminism.

Methodologically, we created polar oppositions within each category so as to cover the largest number of possible alternatives as well as to define each concept clearly, bearing in mind the saussurean presupposition that concepts may only be defined negatively in opposition to each other.

III. Frequency Rate Analysis

Statistical highlights:	Statistical highlights:
Highest Ranking Categories: •Influence (celebrity, promotion of causes and models to be followed) → 9.3% •Conjugal relationships (marriage, cohabitation, divorce, separation, extra-marital affairs) → 9.2% •Homosexuality → 8.5% •High hierarchy (politics, the workplace, trade unions and other spheres) → 6.8% •Maternity → 6.5% •Judicial power → 6.1% •Female body → 5.6%	Lowest Ranking Categories: •Caretaking for non-children → 0.52% •Employment (remunerative equality and entrepreneurship) → 0.27% •Parity → 0.05%
4th International Language, Communication, Culture Conference November 28-30, 2006, Lisboa/Escola University, Lisbon, Portugal	4th International Language, Communication, Culture Conference November 28-30, 2006, Lisboa/Escola University, Lisbon, Portugal

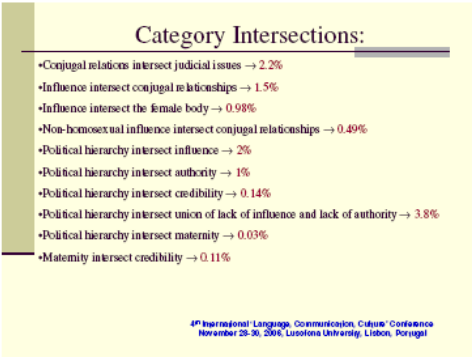
The categories that ranked highest in terms of percentages were ‘influence’ related (spanning celebrity, promotion of causes and models to be followed) ranking 9.3%; conjugal relations (including marriage, cohabitation, divorce, separation, extra-marital affairs) ranked 9.2%, homosexuality 8.5%; high hierarchy (spanning politics, the workplace, trade unions and other spheres) 6.8%, maternity 6.5%, judicial power 6.1%; and the female body 5.6%.

The categories that ranked lowest were caretaking for non-children at 0.52%, employment (inclusive of remunerative equality and entrepreneurship) at 0.27% and parity at 0.05%. Here, we ought to admit that although employment only achieves 0.27%, the category profession nevertheless obtains 5.4%.

It is interesting to note that amongst the categories that ranked highest, most of these pertain to the ‘equality’ category within liberal feminism, namely influence, high hierarchy, maternity (power in the private sphere) and judicial power. The only category achieving a high ranking within autonomy was that of conjugal relationships.

As such, one might read the latter result as indicative of a greater emphasis placed on equality than on autonomy. This reading is corroborated by the very fact that women are often depicted as engaging in relationships, geared towards alterity in order to gain a sense of self. Although the type of conjugal relationship emphasized in the *Diário de Notícias* is non-traditional in scope, despite the possibility of marriage of two lesbians, Teresa Pires and Helena Paixão, women are nevertheless represented as privileging a traditionally monogamous and stable commitment. Upon being asked why she and her partner wish to marry when the very institution of marriage is suffering a decline, Teresa answers: Marriage is marriage, a life-time commitment. I want everything it implies, and I think it should be valued. Perhaps tradition may be losing hold, but we want to keep it. (*Diário de Notícias*, February 1, p. 2)

The intersection between conjugal relations and judicial issues ranked fairly high (obtaining a frequency rate of 2.2%) in comparison with other categories.



This intersection retrieves text units concerning the lesbians’ attempt to marry and thereby change the Civil Code, in accordance with the prohibition against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation laid down in the Constitution. These text units discuss family law in the context of the 1977 reform of the Civil Code, which put an end to the connection between marriage and procreation. The underlying argument is that marriage, often associated with the idea of the ‘constitution of family’ needs to be redefined. Citing a specialist in Family Law, the *Diário de Notícias* states the following:

The root of the problem lies in the fact that the civil marriage regime imitates the regime of catholic marriage. Having gradually appropriated itself of this concept, the State has now come to gradually distance itself from it. (*Diário de Notícias*, February 1, p. 3)

In an opinion article on gay marriages, a leading social-democrat and opinion-maker, Pacheco Pereira, refers to the libertarian aversion he feels for excessive State intervention in the private sphere.

From this point of view, I am insensitive to the reivindication of gays who want to marry. I don’t understand why people who battle for diversity in life styles should basically want the State to institutionalise the diversity of those very ways of life. These two movements are contradictory. The law has protected the notion of nuclear family that has a civilisational, cultural and religious origin. This concept has been dissolved by social reality, through divorce and the alteration of the laws governing paternity and maternity. (*Diário de Notícias*, February 2, p. 11)

Pacheco Pereira goes on to compare gay marriages to polygamy, insinuating that if the State were to accept gay marriages, there would be no reason for it not to satisfy other

large sectors of its population, namely Muslims in multicultural societies such as France, or Mormons in Saltlake city in the US, who, for cultural and religious reasons, might defend the implementation of polygamous marriages.

From a critical discourse point of view, we can deconstruct this excerpt from Pacheco Pereira in the following way: although he starts off by affirming his aversion to State intervention, on the grounds of defending everyone's right to live their life as they see fit, he simultaneously develops his subsequent argument against gay marriages by drawing a parallel between homosexuality and polygamy, claiming that there is no reason for the State to satisfy one group to the detriment of the other. In fact, his line of argument runs as follows: I am not against the rights of any minority, but I am against State regulation in favour of any minority. As such, the privacy of the private sphere protects Pereira from taking a direct position against gay marriages, although this position is implicit in the excerpt presented.

The question we thought important to pose, in the context of the intersection between conjugal relationships and judicial complaints, is the following: to what extent does a media event have the capacity to change the prevailing legislation? The results of our analysis show that although the issue of gay marriages may gain media coverage and the protagonists may gain some visibility, there is no correlation between such fame and political recognition. In fact, in a context in which gay 'political correctness' was on the Portuguese media agenda, on one hand because of the possible success of 'Brokeback Mountain' at the then upcoming Oscar Ceremony, and on the other hand due to the attempt on the part of two Portuguese lesbians to defy the Civil Code and marry, only two MPs of the socialist party ended up signing a petition in favor of gay marriages. The petition was presented, February 16, to the Parliament. Despite previous indication that this very party would be receptive to that issue, the DN of Feb 3, citing a Socialist opinion-maker, states that socialists have not defined themselves regarding gay marriages.

This may contrast with the alleged indication that the two lesbians intending to marry had been spurred to take action by the *Bloco de Esquerda* Party, a left trotskyist party that roughly corresponds to the 'enfant terrible' of Portuguese party politics. We thus chose to intersect the categories media events and political events with judicial complaints, followed by the intersection of that result with the category credibility. The logic of this move was to test whether women connected to the political parties allegedly sponsoring gay marriages were considered credible or not in Portuguese politics. There was no coincidence whatsoever between these categories, which may indicate that the staging of media events, backed by political parties, lacked the support of women MPs considered to be credible by the Portuguese public.

Taking into account that the category 'influence' (inclusive of celebrity, promotion of causes and models to be followed) was the one which achieved the highest ranking within

liberal feminism, with 9.3%, we thought it pertinent to explore its intersections with other categories from our typology. Here, I should state that the findings regarding the frequency of influence are in keeping with most of the content analyses of the representation of women in newspapers, which point to women's particular visibility in the celebrity or social sections of the press. The intersection between influence and conjugal relationships achieved the highest percentage (1.5%), followed by that of influence and the female body (0.98%). The intersection between influence and conjugal relations can be interpreted in two different ways: if on one hand it can indicate that the relational definition of women extends to celebrities, it can also be interpreted as possibly inflated due to heavy focus on homosexual conjugal issues on the media agenda, having the two lesbians attained a short-lived celebrity status. As such, we attempted to carry out a second analysis, removing all homosexuality issues from the influence category. The result clearly pointed to the intersection of influence and the female body as overshadowing the relational component of the definition of femininity in the public sphere.

Within the third highest ranking category, that of high hierarchy with 6.8%, the subcategory 'political hierarchy' was that which achieved the greatest frequency (4.1%). We then thought it interesting to inquire into the extent to which authority and influence are associated with women's visibility in the political hierarchy. The frequency rates indicate that: a) women are perceived as influential agents in the political arena, and b) despite their visibility, they are regarded as having some difficulty in exercising authority, namely, in being able to implement decisions taken (political hierarchy intersect authority=1.0%), as well as in being recognized as competent or reliable agents (political hierarchy intersect credibility=0.14%). Here, however, we ought to admit that the latter situation may be linked to a lack of credibility of politicians in general and not of women politicians in particular.

The fact that, within the category 'authority' corresponding to a frequency rate of 1.7%, 1% intersects with political hierarchy points to an issue, dear to liberal feminism, concerning the connection between the exercise of power and the promotion of equal rights. The idea of authority is itself framed within a masculine conceptualization of power that relates production to a masculine public sphere.

Because the category 'maternity' achieves the relatively high frequency of 6.5%, we thought it reasonable to presuppose that the representation of women as mother is to be found in the domain of the public sphere. The intersections maternity and political hierarchy (0.03%) on one hand and maternity and credibility (0.11%) on the other hand retrieved the same relevant text unit, in which a leading social-democrat figure, Manuela Ferreira Leite, is metaphorically alluded to as the respectable matriarch of the party.

She is the orange matriarch, carefully choosing, more so than anyone else (perhaps only like Cavaco), her words and silences, which always have internal and external impact.

Having disagreed with Marques Mendes on the vote against the State Budget for 2006, she profoundly shook the party structure. For many, she is the natural candidate for 2009. (*Diário de Notícias*, February 1, p. 64)

This quote is interesting from a critical discourse point of view, for it compares Manuela Ferreira Leite to the Supreme head of State, President Cavaco Silva. In other words, the orange matriarch represents the patriarchal authority of the lacanian ‘law of the father’. Authority is described as the capacity to influence internal and external affairs, through a careful negotiation of words and silences. This capacity to negotiate the said and the unsaid connotes a propensity for rational thought, a rationality that may be linked to manipulation, control and careful planning. Ferreira Leite, is, moreover, depicted as an autonomous thinker, capable of defying the leader of the social-democrat party, Marques Mendes, and of thereby provoking a political crisis. In this excerpt we see that Leite’s credibility and authority are linked to Enlightenment values of autonomy and rationality, values that are celebrated by Liberal Feminism but which simultaneously represent masculinity.

However interesting this quote may be from a critical discourse analysis perspective, we cannot forget that, from a content analysis viewpoint, the intersection of the categories maternity and political hierarchy that it represents has a very low frequency rate (0.03%). Before coding the text units, we had presupposed that the category ‘maternity’ would be important in the public sphere, due to the association of the powerful mother being possibly imbued with patriarchal hues. In other words, we thought that the exercise of authority on the part of a woman in the public sphere would best be understood if she were rhetorically compared to a mother who exercises authority in the best interest of her children. The low frequency in the intersection of the categories maternity and political hierarchy is disappointing with regard to our original hypothesis.

Conclusion

Despite being often critiqued for placing too much emphasis on the denotative aspects of texts, I want to argue that feminist content analyses remain valuable due to drawing attention to gender construction through the study of the representation of the feminine in media or literary texts. According to Shulamit Reinharz, cultural products are the result of an intertwining of individual activity and social organisation, the study of which can point to patterns whereby femininity and masculinity are constituted. (1992: 147) It comes as no surprise, then, that content analyses, focussing on cultural products, should have been privileged by feminist intellectuals throughout the seventies, with the aim of exposing structures of power that underlie gender representation in modern society. Aware that the representation of gender identities is imbued with social and political power, these theorists pointed to gender as interpellating readers through media texts. In this context, press articles became popular documents allowing for empirical analyses of gender constructions and

their impact on daily life.

In this paper, I sought to base myself on these aspirations. However, I have also attempted to engage in critical discourse analysis at particular moments, so as to point to the ideology subjacent to the text units coded. The results indicate that, in the *Diário de Notícias* newspaper, a predominance is given to issues stemming from the Liberal Feminist tradition, namely that of equality to the detriment of autonomy. Relationships are represented as being an area of concern for the ordinary woman. However, discourse on female celebrities engages more with issues related to the body pertinent to radical feminism than with relationships. The representation of the feminine in the political public arena, in turn, is infused with undertones of lack of authority and lack of credibility, despite giving wide visibility to women. We may thus conclude that women are visible in the Portuguese press and perceived as influential; however, this visibility serves in many ways to reinforce and consolidate existing stereotypes.

Notes

¹ This paper was presented at the 'Private Lives, Public Faces' session of the '4th International Language, Communication, Culture Conference', held at Lusofona University, November 28-30 2007.

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