



Advocacy for Women's Rights in American Caucuses: A Feminist Stylistic Study

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Abstract

From a feminist stylistic perspective, this paper linguistically explores the stylistic features that are employed in the process of advocacy for women's rights within American caucuses. Drawing on the framework developed by Sara Mills (1995) and supported by Jeffries (2010), this paper examines selected speeches from both women-led and mixed-gender caucuses to uncover how language functions as a tool for advocacy. It is hypothesized that in the discourse of caucuses, the choice of words, syntax patterns, and use of rhetorical techniques encodes and constructs gendered identities and therefore gender roles are reinforced and reflected through power dynamics via the deliberate use of these linguistic features. The findings highlight the crucial role that stylistic choices play in influencing public opinion and policy by revealing ways in which language is used to challenge patriarchal conventions, promote gender equality, and motivate support for women's issues. Moreover, it is demonstrated the importance of feminist stylistics as a critical tool when scrutinizing how advocacy is crafted, interpreted, and performed linguistically.

Keywords: Feminist, Stylistics, Advocacy, Caucuses, Gender, Power

1. Introduction

Advocacy for women's rights has become more important in American politics, and for this purpose, caucuses serve as essential venues for negotiation, representation, and working toward gender equality. This is especially true for women's caucuses. Members of these groups develop collaboration spaces that allow them to advocate for issues that may be neglected in politics. Here, language serves as a means of both advocacy and identity construction. It can perpetuate dominant systems of power, but it can also be used to dismantle them in a meaningful, transformative way.

Despite extensive research on the political and policy impacts of women's caucuses, there is a relative scarcity of work on the discourse advocacy linguistics and its political style. For example, the political caucus discourse stems from and has limited analysis through a feminist lens, especially concerning style, including, for instance, word choice and arrangement, sentence structure, and the use of rhetorical devices. Therefore, it is important to conduct research on feminist stylistics in this area to map discourse on advocacy for women's rights, construction of gendered identities, and power negotiation. This study, therefore, aims to analyze American caucus advocacy through the lens of feminist stylistics. More precisely, it seeks to:

1. Identify the linguistic and stylistic features used in caucus speeches to promote women's rights.
2. Find out how the features' function to construct gendered identities and reinforce or challenge patriarchal structures.

It is hypothesized that the discourse of caucuses reveals deliberate linguistic and stylistic choices that encode and construct gendered identities. These choices, expressed through vocabulary, syntax, and rhetorical strategies, both reflect and contest patriarchal structures, thereby functioning as powerful tools of advocacy in shaping public opinion and influencing policy.

2. Language and Style

Language and style are essential components in communication, as they enhance a writer's or speaker's effectiveness in communicating with his/her audience. They not only help convey ideas clearly and readably, but also enable the communicator to access and present information in a way that is relevant and meaningful to the audience's needs (Ndimele, 2003: p. 402). Language is defined by various scholars as a system of systems, Hockett (1958) defines it as, '**a system of systems**' and '**a complex system of habits**' while Wardhaugh (1972) has defined language as '**a system of arbitrary vocal symbols used for human communication**'.



Communication involves speaking, writing, and signing, with writing serving to express thoughts and emotions clearly and effectively. The quality of writing depends on the style adopted, which measures the strength of the argument. Style is the manner in which language is used to convey meaning to the reader, involving a link between form and meaning. It involves choices that signal distinction in meaning, including lexical items, grammatical structures, graphological signs, and figures of speech. Thus, style, which is the sum of linguistic features peculiar to a writer and the voice that comes across to the reader. It is the determinant that sets one writer apart from another and is the science that studies style and the science that studies style is referred to as **Stylistics** (Hamawand, 2024, P.2).

2.1 Stylistics

Stylistics examines how language is incorporated in various forms of communication, both spoken and written. It pays attention to what language and structural choices authors make and how these choices interact to produce what is known as a style (Leech and Short 2007: 1). It examines stylistic attribution in language. It studies and incorporates genre, context as well as other frameworks, such as the historical period and the author. It examines style systematically and employs various linguistic models and methodologies to understand style in its broadest form (Leech: 2008, p.54).

Moreover, stylistics describes the use of language in a communication context. It examines the situational context, and the writer's purpose to explain the communication effect. It describes how authors make conscious and precise linguistic choices to communicate their thoughts and feelings, and how they help the reader (Hamawand, 2024, P.6). Stylistics emerged in the mid-20th century as it addressed vague and impressionistic literary criticism, striking a balance between personal interpretation and language reference (Giovannelli, Mason, & Clayton, 2018, p. 3).

In the same vein, Paul Simpson (2014, p. 4) notes that there are three fundamental principles on which stylistics is built: rigorous, retrievable, and replicable. The demands of retrievable analysis focus on the explicit framework and terms of analysis, while rigid analysis is the result of a set of criteria which is widely accepted within the field of stylistics.

There are various **approaches to stylistics which** refer to the different theoretical and methodological frameworks used to analyze style in texts. Each approach emphasizes specific elements such as language structure, meaning, reader response, or social context depending on the purpose of the analysis.

1. Functionalist Stylistics – M. A. K. Halliday
2. Formalist Stylistics – Roman Jakobson
3. Affective Stylistics – Stanley E. Fish & Michael Toolan
4. Pedagogical Stylistics – H. G. Widwson
5. Pragmatic Stylistics – Mich Short, Mary Loise Pratt & Peter Verdonk
6. Feminist Stylistics – Deirdre Burton & Sara Mills
7. Cognitive Stylistics – Donald C. Freeman, Dan Sperber & Deirdre Burton
8. Critical Stylistics - Roger Fowler & David Birch

This paper is limited to the feminist stylistics Approach.

2.2 Feminism

Feminism is both a theory and a movement that seeks the social, political, and economic equality of men and women. Its main concern is addressing women's inferior position in society and combating sexism, exploitation, and oppression (Freedman, 2001:1; Hocks, 2000:1). Feminism is not anti-male; rather, it is a movement aims at ending sexist practices and ensuring justice for women. The history of feminist thought is often divided into three waves:-

The focus of the first wave of feminism, which spanned the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, was on gaining equal rights for women through legal and educational reforms, the abolition of slavery, and especially the attainment of the vote, while also initiating discussions on the rights of women regarding sexuality, reproduction, and the access to birth control (Hammer & Kellner, 2009:3).

The second wave, which began in the late 1960s and continued through the 1970s, attempted to bridge the gaps between women of differing class, race and sexuality, while also in particular celebrating a female aesthetic in literature (Plain & Sellers: 2007:283). This period was characterized by two opposing positions; sameness feminists, who contended that women were equal to men in the intellectual and moral sphere and therefore deserved the same rights and opportunities, and



difference feminists, who argued that women had unique and valuable ways of knowing and being and therefore should not be measured against men. From the mid-1980s, the focus of feminism shifted to include women of marginalized and oppressed groups, particularly women of color, the poor, and the uneducated (Tong, 2009: 201-202).

The third wave of feminism, which began in the 1980s and continues to the present day, focuses on broadening feminism to include issues such as immigration, globalization, multiculturalism, coalition social movements, environmental issues, and human rights activism. This wave also integrates queer theory, which questions rigid sexual identities, critiques the dominance of heterosexuality as the norm, and proposes extreme views on gender and sexuality (Hammer & Kellner, 2009:7-8).

2.3 Feminist Stylistics

Feminist stylistics is a sub-branch of stylistics that examines how gender is encoded in texts. It uses established stylistic frameworks to examine how language constructs, reflects, and challenges gendered identities. This approach is rooted in the interdisciplinary and multimethodological ethos of stylistics, focusing on grammatical, lexical, discursive, and even multimodal features that contribute to the representation of gender in both literary and non-literary texts (Burke, 2017, pp. 347–349).

Moreover, feminist stylistics is a theory and a method introduced by Mills (1995) who has provided a foundation for the examination of texts from a feminist perspective. She highlights such issues as sexism, the way that women are represented or described and the representation of gender relations. Feminist stylistics is defined as “a form of politically motivated stylistics whose aim is to develop an awareness of the way gender is handled in texts.” It is designed as a toolkit; that enables the reader to understand the underlying messages of the text (ibid.:2). It is further concerned with the reasons why authors choose certain ways to express themselves rather than others, and how certain effects are achieved through language (Mills, 1995:2-4).

Furthermore, feminist stylistics can serve to analyse the writer's ideology. Davies and Elder (2004: p. 332), state that feminist stylistics is :

“an approach to the explorations of authority, power, and inequality feature as part of the stylistic analysis, which pays attention to the formal features of the text and its reception within a reading community in relation to ideology”

To operationalize feminist stylistics in textual analysis, Mills (1995) introduces a tripartite model that examines linguistic features at the word, clause, and discourse levels, thereby providing a structured approach to revealing patterns of sexism and gendered representation.

2.4 Sara Mills' (1995) Model

Sara Mills' (1995) feminist stylistics model of analysis consists of three levels: the word level, the clause level, and the discourse level. Each level focuses on a different aspect of language in order to uncover how gender is represented and how sexism may be embedded within linguistic practices.

3. Level of the Word

The word, defined as “a unit of expression which has a universal intuitive recognition by native speakers” (Crystal, 2003), has some important gender-related considerations, and it brings into the spotlight some instances of sexism in the language. Bragging (1981, as cited in Mills, 1995) argues that sexist expressions make unjust distinctions between the sexes and put thriving pressures on the oppression of the female sex. Feminist linguists argue that generic nouns and pronouns like “he” or “man” represent male perspectives and in that sense marginalize women. A basic example- in the phrase “When the student has finished his exam”, interpreting the phrase excludes women from the context, and with simple interpretations, the woman here is rendered invisible (Mills, 2008). On the contrary, generic terms such as “mankind” maintain male-centered connotations even when they are meant to refer to all humankind. It is recommended that terms such as “person” and “firefighter” be used instead to counteract gender bias (Mills, 1995). Sexism is realized in affixation; diminutive forms such as “mistress” or “actress” reduce the importance of the female role (Mills, 2008). Stylistic distinctions in usages also show clear markedness for the disfavored. Women are often called by their first names while men undergo identification by their last names, e.g., “Virginia” for Virginia Woolf versus “Dickens” for Charles Dickens (Mills, 1995). Titles denote imbalance in gender relations better. The terms “Miss” and “Mrs.” denote the woman's status in marriage, but “Mr.” does not, and although “Ms.” was introduced to circumvent this, it sometimes carries negative connotations (Mills, 2008).



4. Level of the Clause

At the clause level, Mills scrutinizes ready-made phrases, transitivity options, metaphors, and presuppositions that bear unconsciously sexist meanings. For instance, expressions include "a woman's work is never done"; it was also "battle of the sexes" to metaphorically set gender relations as one of antagonism. Cosmetic surgery adverts also contain presuppositions making it seem natural to believe that women ought to be unhappy about their looks and thus contemplate surgery. Transitivity analysis—the base being Halliday's systemic functional grammar—is concerned with agency in clauses: who does what with whom or what. Fowler (1991) posited that the transitivity represents ideological viewpoints. Halliday (1985) spoke of six process types; they are: material, mental, relational, behavioral, verbal, and existential. Mills' use of the framework shows how linguistic choices can depict women as being passive or dependent entities while men tend to be portrayed as active agents.

5. Level of Discourse

Lastly, these observations are made by Mills (1995) at the discourse level—for instance, how male and female characters are described. Female characters are usually described in terms of their emotional and physical being—romantic, attractive, slender, or not young—whoever male characters may be—descriptions that fix on strength and power, trustworthiness, or intellect. Women may be identified in terms of their relations to others (e.g., wife, mother of three), while men seldom have their identities classified in terms of relational roles. Regarding professions, stereotypical gender roles prevail: women work mostly as secretaries, nurses, or housewives, whereas men act as pilots, directors, or businessmen (Mills, 1995, pp. 128-129).

Another discourse feature is fragmentation, which identifies sexualized descriptions according to women's bodies being described in terms of 'legs,' 'hair,' or 'figure' as opposed to describing a person as a whole (Mills, 1995, p. 166). According to these descriptions, female characters are here being assigned more than male, thereby upholding and reinforcing linguistic sexism.

5.1 Advocacy

The term, advocacy, comes from Latin *advocare*, meaning the process of purposely acting to influence a decision-maker, stakeholder, or audience to take actions that support or diminish the realization of human rights (Bysaha, 2023, p. 1). The delivery of evidence-based recommendations to decision makers, stakeholders, and agents influencing these individuals is part of an advocacy process (Bochenek, 2019). Advocacy attempts to shape governance, social attitudes, power, social relations, and institutional functions. At times the advocacy arises to challenge imbalances, discrimination, injustices, or to meet the standards of a healthy environment, social justice, or democracy by strengthening actors with children and women participating (McKenzie, Lohman, Park, Phillips, & Prestholdt, 2011, p. 92). Advocacy may be considered a coordinated series of actions geared toward changing a public policy, social attitude, or political process through related and interlinked actions that seek change at different levels. These include but are not limited to raising awareness among the community, whereby the community directly puts pressure on the State to respond more effectively to prevent and punish infringements of human rights, and to influence law and policy development. It is an active process of several interlinked arrangements that seek to influence decision-making and the process of change (Sharma, 1995, p. 12).

5.1.1 Types of Advocacy

Advocacy can be classified into three types: individual, adjacent, and structural.

1. **Individual advocacy** involves clinicians advocating for changes to meet a patient's unmet needs, affecting the patient and their loved ones.
2. **Adjacent advocacy**, on the other hand, alters the patient's environment without necessarily changing policies. It often involves activating others to act on behalf of individuals or groups with specific needs, but falls short of a durable, structural change.
3. **Structural advocacy** permanently alters policies, rules, and resources, reducing the likelihood of unjust or inequitable health outcomes occurring again in the future. Examples of structural advocacy include physicians pushing for a ballot initiative raising tobacco prices in Colorado, a Canadian neurosurgeon changing building codes to prevent children from falling from windows,



and changing access to dialysis for the undocumented or changing water supply to prevent lead poisoning.

Earnest, Wong, Federico, and Cervantes (2022, p. 208)

5.1.2 The Functions of Advocacy

Advocacy has many functions as follows:-

- I. Advocacy plays a crucial role in empowering individuals, protecting rights, influencing policy, promoting social justice, and fostering transparency and accountability.
- II. It empowers marginalized individuals by allowing them to express their needs and experiences, participating in decisions about their care, treatment, or social circumstances.
- III. Advocates ensure individuals' rights are recognized and upheld, preventing abuse, neglect, or discrimination.
- IV. They also influence policy and systemic change by shaping policies, laws, and institutional practices, bringing attention to issues, mobilizing support, and pushing for reforms that benefit individuals and communities.
- V. Advocacy aims to create more inclusive and equitable societies by validating personal experiences and narratives, especially for marginalized groups.

(Newbigging & Ridley, 2018, p. 38)

5.2. The Model

The study uses Sara Mills' (1995) feminist stylistics framework as its principal model for analysis. Mills' tripartite framework involves looking at linguistic features at the word, clause, and discourse levels and offers a systematic way to examine the texts for traces of sexism and entrenched gender ideologies. This study modifies and adjusts this model to the setting of political advocacy among American caucuses by incorporating insight from Jeffries' (2010) Critical Stylistics, which highlights the ideological functions of linguistic choices. The composite model thus looks not only at gendered representations via Mills but also at uncovering ideological meanings via Jeffries' analysis, thereby affording a more holistic analysis of caucus speeches. By combining these two models, therefore, the analysis of this study will consist in the following steps:

1. Word-Level Analysis:

This step identifies lexical items signaling gender bias: gendered nouns, pronouns, titles, and naming practices; analyzes affixation or modifiers trivializing or belittling women's roles (e.g., actress, usherette); and considers inclusive versus exclusive concepts (e.g., mankind vs. humanity).

2. Clause-Level Analysis:

This entails analyzing transitivity constructs as to agency (i.e., who acts and who is acted upon); metaphors, idioms, and presuppositions molding gender roles (e.g., battle of the sexes); and syntactic choices situating women in passive, emotional, or dependent terms.

3. Discourse-Level Analysis:

The analysis focuses on how women and men are discursively represented across different attributes, such as physical, emotional, relational, and professional, to reveal gender asymmetries in political language. Attention will be placed on patterns of fragmentation, such as the frequent depiction of women in terms of body parts rather than as whole persons, which impairs their subjectivity and solidifies their objectification. Furthermore, the study investigates rhetorical strategies employed as weapons for advocacy: repetition, parallelism, and appeals to solidarity, which enhance persuasive force and consolidate collective identity. At a more abstract level, the analysis will frame and contextualize the ideological positioning of the discourses concerned, looking into how language either counters or upholds patriarchal conventions, and thus reshapes the very terrain upon which women's rights advocacy is laid out in the political arena. With the joint operation of these levels, the model captures both micro-linguistic features (words, syntax) and macro-discursive strategies (representation, power relations, ideology) of caucus speeches.

This hybrid method safeguards the analysis' feminist objectives of exposing sexism and traces broader ideological ramifications springing forth in political discourse.

6. Data Analysis

Extract 1



“Childcare is essential for economic growth, gender equity, and child development. The lack of a national childcare infrastructure is a significant barrier that exacerbates racial, gender, and economic inequality, perpetuating cycles of poverty

At the word level, terms such as **“essential,” “barrier,”** and **“inequality”** emphasize urgency and systemic failure, while the inclusion of **“gender equity”** explicitly places the issue within feminist discourse. At the clause level, the construction **“lack of a national childcare infrastructure is a significant barrier”** shifts agency from individual mothers to the absence of systemic support, while the progressive aspect in **“perpetuating cycles of poverty”** stresses the continuity of oppression. At the discourse level, this extract integrates childcare into **economic and political discourse**, disrupting patriarchal narratives that confine it to the private sphere. Ideologically, it repositions caregiving as central to national growth, not marginal “women’s work.”

Extract 2

“Research indicates that women, particularly mothers, disproportionately bear unpaid care responsibilities at home.”

In the claim *“Research indicates that women, particularly mothers, disproportionately bear unpaid care responsibilities at home,”* language encodes gendered expectations. At the **word level**, the adverb *“disproportionately”* highlights inequality and critiques the imbalance of care work, while *“responsibilities”* softens the emotional and physical weight implied by such labor. At the **clause level**, women and mothers are the grammatical subjects who *“bear responsibilities,”* constructing them as active but constrained agents. The passive tone of “bear” naturalizes caregiving as an obligatory role rather than a socially constructed expectation. At the **discourse level**, this representation reinforces the stereotype of women as primary caregivers but simultaneously problematizes it through the qualifier *“disproportionately,”* thereby politicizing domestic labor as an arena of gendered inequality.

Extract 3

“The average annual cost of center-based care per child was \$13,128 in 2024, rising roughly 29% higher than inflation since 2020. These costs represent about 10% of a married couple’s median household income, and 35% for single-parent households.”

At the **word level**, economic terminology such as *“annual cost,” “inflation,”* and *“median household income”* conveys authority and objectivity, while figures such as “10%” versus “35%” dramatize disparity. At the **clause level**, costs themselves become grammatical agents—*“These costs represent...”*—as though they act upon families, thereby erasing parental agency. At the **discourse level**, the contrast between “married couple” and “single-parent households” encodes an implicit gender assumption that single-parent households are predominantly female-led, thereby reinforcing the feminization of poverty. The statistical rhetoric thus positions childcare affordability as a public policy issue rather than a private family matter.

Extract 4

“U.S. unpaid care is valued at over \$1 trillion annually, primarily driven by women’s labor. Childcare-related workforce disruptions, particularly among mothers, are dragging down economic growth and labor force participation”

This extract reframes invisible labor into measurable economic terms. At the **word level**, *“valued”* attaches financial weight to unpaid domestic work, while the phrase *“driven by women’s labor”* foregrounds gender but simultaneously reduces women to their productive capacity. At the **clause level**, the first sentence portrays women as economic contributors, but the second clause—*“disruptions... are dragging down growth”*—ties mothers to negative economic outcomes, implicitly shifting blame toward them rather than systemic deficiencies. At the **discourse level**, this dual framing reflects an ideological tension: women are constructed both as the backbone of unpaid care and as a source of economic disruption. Such contradictory representation demonstrates the complexity of feminist advocacy, where women’s work is both acknowledged and problematically instrumentalized.

Extract 5

“Build a National Childcare Infrastructure... Increase Workforce Compensation... Ensure Affordability for Families... Support Informal Care Providers...”



At the **word level**, the repeated use of imperative verbs (*“Build,” “Increase,” “Ensure,” “Support,” “Promote”*) encodes urgency and positions the proposals as non-negotiable demands rather than suggestions. At the **clause level**, each statement is structured as a directive, clearly designating policymakers as responsible agents of change while employing parallel syntax that enhances rhythm and cohesion. At the **discourse level**, the sequence culminates with *“Promote Gender Equity,”* which situates childcare not merely as an economic issue but as part of a broader feminist struggle for justice. The parallel and imperative structures collectively construct advocacy as a form of collective insistence, amplifying its rhetorical force within the political arena.

7. Results and Discussions

The selected speeches from American caucuses were analyzed under the feminist stylistic framework of Sara Mills (1995) to expose some key trends of linguistic and stylistic construction of advocacy for women’s rights. The findings are presented at the word, clause, and discourse levels to show both micro- and macro-level strategies.

At the word level, words used in the speeches mirror feminist concerns and highlight the urgency of matters dealt with in the speeches: words emphasizing urgency include essential, barrier, inequality, and disproportionately. Directional verbs like Build, Increase, Ensure, Support, and Promote stress the fact that action is needed whereas gendered terms emphasize female participation and contribution, e.g., women’s labor. The speeches also use forms such as humanity instead of mankind as an attempt to challenge the patriarchal norms embedded in language.

At the clause level, the analysis shows that syntactic constructions are located strategically in allocating agency to either systemic forces or policy actors, thus freely denying it to individuals. Thus, in the statement “lack of a national childcare infrastructure is a significant barrier,” the syntactic agent is the absence of childcare infrastructure, which is not good news for the mothers. Transitivity less that women are active but limited participants in social processes, especially in realizing caregiving activities in metaphor and presupposition, which are instances of a sophisticated rhetorical strategy, such as “disproportionately bear unpaid care responsibilities,” both recognize women’s agency yet shame social injustice. Coordinating parallel syntactic constructions in directives like “Build... Increase... Ensure...” builds cohesion, rhythm, and a sense of collective insistence.

On the discourse level, the analysis shows how the gendered constructions are deployed in political advocacy. Women are usually, if not always, recognized as actors in production and reproduction of economic and social systems, yet problematic instrumentalization appears, for instance in the extract linking mothers to “workforce disruptions... dragging down economic growth.” Such a double-edged acknowledgment presents a deeply ingrained ideological tension: pushing forward on behalf of women’s labor while negotiating the social perception that places them as indispensable yet impotent in economic productivity. Fragmentation techniques that refer to women in terms of roles or relational identities appear less frequently in caucus speeches than in more traditional texts, signaling a deliberate avoidance of objectification in formal political advocacy.

8. Conclusion

The study looks at how, against a feminist-style backdrop, the language and style devices in American caucus speeches are used to promote the cause of women’s rights. Using Sara Mills’ (1995) three-level model at the word, clause, and discourse levels, the analysis reveals that:

1. Lexemes convey feminist values, making systemic inequities salient, and in the foreground, emphasizing urgency and action.
2. Syntactic and transitivity structures assign subject hood strategically to place policymakers responsible for change while acknowledging active yet constrained roles played by women.
3. At the discourse level, rhetorical devices and ideological framing respond to patriarchal norms and garner support in favor of gender equity measures.

The study demonstrates that language used for political advocacy is never neutral: it constructs gendered identities, mediates power relations, and shapes how the public and institutions view the role of women. Feminist stylistics then becomes necessary as a tool to unearth these processes, demonstrating how the craft of linguistics can be used both to reproduce and counteract social inequalities



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