Sexism in the discourse roles of textbook dialogues

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INTRODUCTION

During the last two decades much has been written about gender issues in foreign language textbooks (e.g. Bruce 1986; Gupta and Yin 1990; Hartman and Judd 1978). Most studies concern the textbook language itself (i.e. features of vocabulary and grammar which discriminate against one of the sexes) and the textbook content (i.e. portrayal of the two sexes with respect to their visibility, jobs, personality, relations and roles they play). Research has indicated that in the majority of textbooks, women are portrayed in a disadvantageous position as compared to men.

This study is divided into two parts. The first part attempts to examine differences in the discourse roles of men and women in dialogues of textbooks for teaching Greek as a foreign language to adults. The second part discusses if and how such sexist differences can affect negatively the pedagogical value and goals of textbook dialogues.

"Can you phone the garage for me, please?"

TEXTBOOK ANALYSIS

Research questions

The following textbook analysis will examine differences in the discourse roles of women and men in the dialogues used as data in the present study. The term 'discourse roles' is borrowed from Thomas's definition (1986:92) denoting 'the relationship between the interactant and the message'. In particular, it is of interest to the present study to observe the degree to which the interactants or, in other words, the dialogue participants of the textbooks are assigned the roles of producer (speaker) and receiver (hearer) of messages as well as the kind of messages they produce.

The particular research questions posed in this study are whether there are gender differences in mixed-sex dialogues in:

1. Amount of speech (number of utterances and number of words).
2. Number of initiating utterances and final utterances.
3. Language functions.[1]

Language functions were classified into four categories according to Leech (1974). The first category was *informational* which is language expressing factual information (e.g. 'It costs 650 drachmas'[2]). The second category was *phatic* which is language aiming to develop and maintain good social relations or just keep a conversation open. The utterances counted as phatic were greetings, expressions of thanking and their acknowledgements, standardised expressions required for maintaining social relations (e.g. 'Welcome'), language that accompanies and describes an act without carrying any information (e.g. 'Let me show you some photographs') and finally, expressions complying to or rejecting directives (e.g. 'Yes, madam'). The third was *directive* that is, language trying to influence another person's behaviour and/or attitude (e.g. 'Can you phone the garage for me, please?'). The last category was *expressive*, relating to one's own feelings and/or attitudes (e.g. 'Excellent'). In addition, detailed divisions of the informational and directive functions were made. The informational function was divided into two sub-categories. One category was *asking for information* (e.g. 'I want information about the cruises to the islands') and the other was *giving information* (e.g. 'I come from England'). The directive function was classified into four sub-categories on the basis of Lyons (1977, 745–768) who has dealt with the types of directives and the grammatical forms through which they might be expressed. The first consisted of utterances performing the directives of *ordering/commanding/instructing* which have the greatest degree of imposition upon interactants (e.g. 'Your ticket and passport, please'). The second sub-category consisted of directive utterances performing the functions of *advising/recommending/suggesting*

which give the option to the addressee to follow the addressor's opinion or idea (e.g. 'In that case I think you must take it to a garage'). The third concerned the functions of *offering/inviting* which exercise even less authority than the previous ones (e.g. 'Will you drink some ouzo?'). Last was the sub-category of *requesting* which manifests a powerless position on the part of speaker (e.g. 'I would like to make an urgent telephone call to London').

Methodology

The data used for the investigation of the research questions were mixed-sex dialogues of two textbooks for teaching Greek as a foreign language. The first was *Greek Dialogues* edited by the Lancashire College for Adult Education, and the other was *How to Speak Conversational Greek* edited by Hugo's Language Books Ltd. Sixteen and eleven dialogues were selected and investigated in the first and second textbooks respectively. Neither book had a particular storyline and there were different participants in each dialogue.

The research questions were approached from both a quantitative and a qualitative angle. The quantitative component dealt with the occurrences of each category of the research questions per sex (as seen in Table 1) and was ascertained by simply counting the number of male/female words, utterances, initiating and final utterances as well as utterances performing each category of language functions. In the present study the term 'utterance' has been used as in Gupta and Yin (1990), i.e. every turn of speech of the dialogue participants preceded and/or followed by other utterances. An utterance can be a single word, sentence or a sequence of sentences.

The third research question posed a problem that emerged from the counting of the occurrences of the various language functions: many utterances performed more than one function. These utterances were separated into components, each having a different function from the previous and/or following one(s). For instance, the utterance: 'Wonderful! Is there a car park?' is made up of two components. One is 'Wonderful!' which was counted as *expressive* and the other is 'Is there a car park?' which was counted as *informational*. Another difficulty was to identify the language functions of utterances or components of utterances because of their multi-functionality. As some researchers have shown (Allan 1986; Levinson 1983; Lyons 1977; Palmer 1981), one utterance can have several possible functions and one function can be realised by many possible utterances.[3] In determining the categories of functions I took account of the context of utterances and dialogues and tried to identify the primary function in cases where I recognised more than one.

The qualitative analysis was an attempt to discuss and interpret the quantitative results by taking into consideration the balance of male/female speakers in

every dialogue (as seen in Table 2) and the social roles of speakers (as seen in Table 3). In dealing with the social roles a distinction was made between speakers exhibiting an occupational role (hotelier, baker etc.) and speakers having only a personal relationship role (mother, husband etc.). In order to identify the two groups of speakers the terms 'experts' and 'non-experts' were used, respectively.

Summary of findings

Amount of speech

The quantitative analysis indicated that in the book *Greek Dialogues* (GD) women produced fewer utterances and fewer words than men. The total number of female utterances was 126 and of female words 675, whereas the total number of male utterances was 155 and of male words 759.[4]

In the second book, *How to Speak Conversational Greek* (HSCG), men produced a few more utterances than women (118 versus 110), while women uttered more words than men (1534 versus 1480).

The results of the qualitative analysis demonstrated that most dialogues of GD had an equal distribution of male and female speakers (as seen in Table 2); so, the larger number of male utterances was not due to the larger number of male speakers. There were only two dialogues with one female and two male speakers in which the male participants had thirteen more utterances than females. In HSCG the distribution of female/male utterances seemed to be more related to the distribution of female/male speakers. This was explained by the fact that dialogues with an equal distribution of male and female speakers had, also, an equal distribution of utterances between the two sexes. In two out of three dialogues with three speakers, the greater number of utterances was uttered by the sex with the most speakers.

Table 1 Total numbers for each category of investigation per sex in each book

Categories of investigation	Book: GD		Book: HSCG	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
No of utterances	155	126	118	110
No. of words	759	675	1480	1534
No. of initiating utterances	29	17	6	8
No. of final utterances	30	16	7	8
No. of informational utter./comp.	105	86	77	71
No. of utter./comp. asking for information	48	41	27	20
No. of utter./comp. giving information	57	46	48	51
No. of phatic utter./comp.	57	43	53	43
No. of directive utter./comp.	20	26	43	36
No. of utter./comp. ordering/commanding/instructing	7	9	5	7
No. of utter./comp. advising/recommending/suggesting	2	1	17	5
No. of utter./comp. offering/inviting	4	3	11	4
No. of utter./comp. requesting	8	13	10	20
No. of expressive utter./comp.	5	3	7	28

Table 2 Distribution of male/female speakers in the dialogues of each book

	Book: GD	Book: HSCG
No. of dialogues with 1 male, 1 female speakers	12	7
No. of dialogues with 2 male, 2 female speakers	2	1
No. of dialogues with 1 female, 2 male speakers	2	2
No. of dialogues with 1 male, 2 female speakers	0	1

Table 3 Number of 'experts' of female/male speakers in each book

Book	Female 'experts'	Male 'experts'
Greek Dialogues	Clerk x 3 Airport clerk x 1 Hotel receptionist x 1 Bank clerk x 3 Shop assistant x 1 Travel agent x 1 Clerk (hiring cars) x 1	Waiter x 1 Airport clerk x 2 Greengrocer x 1 Baker x 1 Shop assistant x 2
How to Speak Conversational Greek	Hotelier x 1 Clerk x 1 Kiosk owner x 1 Manageress x 1	Baker x 1 Shopkeeper x 1 Waiter x 1 Mechanic x 1 Petrol station clerk x 1

As regards the social roles of speakers in terms of expertise/non-expertise, in GD there was no systematic correspondence between these and the amount of speech. Although there were more female than male experts (11 versus seven as seen in Table 3) men dominated in either number or length of utterances. However, in the various dialogues all possible combinations were noticed, the first being the most common: (a) male dominance + female expert, (b) male dominance + male expert, (c) female dominance + male expert, (d) female dominance + female expert. In most dialogues between non-experts men produced more utterances and many more words than women. In HSCG, in dialogues between expert and non-expert speakers the first ones tended to dominate in the amount of speech irrespective of sex. In dialogues between non-experts men were the dominant speakers.

Generalising about both books, they had imbalances in the amount of speech of men/women. In HSCG this was in many cases related to an imbalance in the number of male/female speakers and to male/female expertise. In GD, though, there was not such correlation.

> "men tended to give information more than ask for it"

Initiation/Completion of dialogues

In this category extended sex differences were found in GD in which men produced far more initiating utterances (29 versus 17) and final utterances (30 versus 16) than women. In HSCG men produced slightly less initiating utterances (six versus eight) and final utterances (seven versus eight) than women.

Language functions

In GD as regards *informational* utterances or components of utterances (e.g. 'What time do you serve breakfast?') men had the greater number of them (105) as compared to that of women who had 86. As regards *phatic* utterances/components (e.g. 'Hello, Mary'), men also performed a greater number of them (57) than did women (43). On the other hand, concerning *directive* utterances/components (e.g. 'I want to try this blouse on') women scored a little better than men (26 versus 20). The use of *expressive* language was very limited in this book.

In HSCG men uttered a little more *informational* (77), *phatic* (53) and *directive* (43) utterances/components than women did (71, 44, 36) respectively. As regards the *expressive function* (e.g. 'Oh, that's good') women exhibited the majority (28) as compared to men (seven).

When it came to the distinction between *asking for* and *giving information*, it was found that in GD the male occurrences for either sub-category were more than those of females (48 and 57 versus 41 and 46 respectively). In HSCG there were more male utterances/components *asking for information* (27) than female (20), while the gender difference in *giving information* was very small: 51 female, 48 male.

In the case of the first three sub-categories of directive utterances/components found in GD (*ordering/commanding/instructing*; *advising/recommending/suggesting; offering/inviting*) the occurrences for the two sexes were almost the same in number (seven, two, four male; nine, one, three female for each sub-category respectively). In the same book *requesting* had a slightly greater number of occurrences for women (13) than men (eight). Regarding HSCG the first sub-category did not exhibit any big gender differences (five male, seven female utterances/components), whereas the following two sub-categories demonstrated more occurrences for men (17 and 11 respectively) than for women (five and four respectively). Lastly, the total number of female requests was twice that for male ones (20:10).

The qualitative analysis of each dialogue in relation to the social roles of speakers was particularly revealing. In most dialogues with an expert the tendency was for the non-expert to ask for information, which the expert gave. However, it was found in both books that in the dialogues without an expert, men tended to give information more than ask for it, while women did the opposite. As far as the various types of directives were concerned, in both books, most utterances belonging to the first three sub-categories i.e. *ordering/commanding/instructing; advising/recommending/suggesting; offering/inviting* were explained by the context of the conversation (e.g. a customer ordering a waiter, an airport clerk instructing a traveller). In cases where no expert was involved, most directives were uttered by men. Concerning the utterances belong-

ing to the sub-category of *requesting,* the majority were performed by a non-expert towards an expert. However, when all participants were non-experts, *requesting* was most usually performed by women.

To conclude this section, it has to be asserted that both books had manifestations of sexism against women. One manifestation was the great amount of expressive language uttered by women in HSCG. Another manifestation was that in both books where the participants had a personal relationship role (non-experts), women tended to ask for information and make requests, whereas men tended to give information and perform all the other types of directives. These findings can be offensive to women learners, reflecting a stereotypical view about them as being emotional, weak, less intellectual and less well-informed than men. Expressive language suggests a preoccupation with feelings and the fact that women tended to make requests for information and service to men when both were non-experts, assigns to each of the sexes the image of dependence and self-sufficiency respectively.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

This section focuses on the influence that sexism in textbook dialogues may have on the achievement of a classroom's goals. As the existing literature indicates, textbook dialogues play a three-fold role. They provide knowledge about the form of language (Hedge 1985; Dobson 1975), the pragmatic aspects of language (Morrow and Schocker 1987; Rivers 1981) and form a basis for further communicative activities in class (Cunningsworth 1984; Grant 1987).

Hence a question can be posed at this point: can the above functions of textbook dialogues be accomplished for all learners regardless of their sex if the discourse roles of dialogues are not equally distributed between the two sexes? In my view they cannot; this view is justified by two arguments developed below.

Sexist bias as an obstacle to knowledge of the pragmatic aspects of language

Dialogues reflect the pragmatic – interactional aspects of language or, in other words, language usage within a context. Richards (1983, 115–116) explains that 'communication is appropriate' which requires students to learn 'different communicative strategies or communicative styles according to the situation, the task and the roles of the participants'. The same view about stylistic variation is also expressed by Cunningsworth (1984, 18–19; 1987, 47). In light of this, when textbook dialogues do not exhibit the same language functions for the two sexes in the same contexts, they run the risk of giving incomplete information to students. For example, in the textbook analysis of the present study it

was found that when the speakers' social roles were equal, women, in most cases, performed requests whereas men tended to produce the other three types of directives. This means that learners did not get enough information about the forms of requests which are and can be used by men and those of the other directives which are and can be used by women in the context of a non-expert relationship. An argument that might be raised here is that students will still learn various types of directives in one speech context and that it does not make any difference if they are performed by women or men.

However, a study carried out by Myers Scotton and Bernsten (1988) suggests that in real life dialogues the various language functions are expressed in different forms according to the context of the speech event and, most importantly, it shows that there may be some gender differences in the choices of forms. For instance, the authors found that the function of requesting was realised by the subjects in various forms (e.g. 'can I', 'I need'), some of which were most commonly used in particular settings. They called these common choices 'unmarked' and they noticed that in some exchange types these varied·between the two sexes. These findings might suggest that dialogues should not simply exemplify structures in which functions are realised irrespective of gender but reflect the preferred structural choices of women and men in as many language functions and contexts as possible. In my view, gender differences in structural choices in expressing a function should be reflected in textbooks under certain conditions. The first condition is that research into such differences should be reliable and well-established. The second condition is that gender differences reflected in textbooks are significant and necessary for students to communicate properly, so as not to sound awkward or unnatural. However, the burden of choice lies on students whether they want to adopt such sex-differentiated structural patterns in order to perform language functions, but having the chance to choose presupposes that they are informed about and discuss the differences.

Sexist bias as an obstacle to equal opportunities for practice in classroom activities

The teaching and learning of dialogues can involve a variety of activities, some of which are: reading, memorisation, acting out of dialogues' roles, role-play and simulation (Dobson 1975; Cunningsworth 1987; Byrne 1986; Morrow and Schocker 1987; Littlewood 1992). In cases of sexist dialogues the above activities are unlikely to have the same pedagogic results for all students, since they may offer a different kind and amount of practice. For example, if a teacher tends to divide a class into male and female students to read the parts of male and female

participants respectively, each person will most likely practise his/her sex's part. Consequently, if the two sexes in the dialogues do not perform the same language functions in similar contexts, as is the case in the textbooks analysed here, students will possibly be familiar only with those functions and styles they come across while reading. Furthermore, due to the disproportionate amount of speech allocated to the two sexes (as in GD where women speak less than men), women may have less speaking practice opportunities than men in playing the roles of dialogue participants. Similarly, as Sunderland (1994, 63) has observed, if men usually initiate and/or finish mixed-sex dialogues (which was the case in GD), male students get more practice in initiating and/or finishing conversations.

This imbalance in the kind and amount of practice gets even worse when students have to memorise their parts from a dialogue in order to present it in class. As far as simulation and role-play are concerned, they involve more or less a free adaptation of a dialogue to deal with another situation for conversational practice (Byrne 1986, 123–127). However, the sexist elements of the original dialogue can be transferred to the new performance. This may happen because the original dialogue is, in Bygate's (1987, 81) term, the 'linguistic input', or in other words, the model that students get information from in order to use the appropriate items to communicate. A final point is that discourse patterns of dialogues tend to be repeated often through the various learning activities. However, this repetition of sexist patterns may result on the part of female students either in their acceptance and regular use or in their negative evaluation of the textbook and demotivation, since it may be perceived as offensive, biased, less stimulating and generally inadequate.

"women may have less speaking practice opportunities than men"

SUBVERSION OF SEXISM IN TEXTBOOK DIALOGUES

Certain uses of activities related to dialogues can be a means of subverting sexist discourse. To be more specific, teachers could reverse sex roles that are sex biased by asking female students to act out male roles. Moreover, in role-play and simulation teacher and students could collaborate to imagine situations and roles that are more empowering than those in the textbook. In addition, students can rewrite sexist dialogues with a view to distributing equally the amount and kind of speech between female and male characters. The new dialogues might be used as a basis for other activities (reading/ speaking) instead of the existing dialogues.

This sort of subversion of sexism presupposes a certain awareness on the part of teachers and/or students, and also the existence of a critical approach to the issue of sexism, mainly in terms of its potentially serious pedagogical implications.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of discourse roles in Greek textbook dialogues in terms of gender differences revealed that such materials may be sexist in various ways. Imbalances were noticed in all three main categories of investigation, namely amount of speech, initiation/completion of dialogues and language functions. Furthermore, this analysis was not carried out for linguistic purposes alone but in order to see whether sexist discourse roles in textbooks can be a negative factor in the achievement of the pedagogic purposes of dialogues, some of which provide knowledge about the form and use of language in a particular context. The view was expressed that sexism can be a negative factor in many respects which should alert all agents concerned with language teaching to address the problem of sexism in their work. It is surely worth making an attempt to ensure a decent representation of the two sexes and not to allow language learners to be disadvantaged by discrepancies in the verbal behaviour between female and male textbook characters.

NOTES

1. Functions are purposes for which language is used, e.g. to inform, to promise (Leech 1974; Lyons 1977).
2. All the examples were taken from the textbook dialogues used as data in the study. The ones from HSCG come from the translations of the dialogues in English included in the textbook. The ones from GD are my translations.
3. For instance, the utterance 'I need help' can perform the functions of requesting and/or giving information. Conversely, the function of requesting can be expressed by the utterances: 'Could you help me please?': 'Will you help me?'; 'I need help' etc.
4. I should indicate that in the analysis of my findings I did not carry out statistical tests of significance because most numbers I dealt with were small. The results are thus in terms of numbers.

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