

Thesis Title:

Empty adjectives and excessive intensifiers, or savvy discourse moves? A Feminist Critical Discourse Study of Gender-based differences in the discourse of businesspeople on LinkedIn

Dedication:

This thesis is dedicated to Frances Garber Pepper, in celebration of a lifetime of work in the cause of women's rights, and for inspiring me to speak up, stand up and step up.

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1. Abstract

This Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) examines the use of ‘empty’ adjectives and the equative intensifier *so* in discourse on LinkedIn, a social network service (SNS) for businesspeople and professionals. These linguistic features soften the impact of what is said in ways that can conform with politeness norms that one should not impose a point of view but can also be negatively construed as weak, uncertain and unclear. The North American sociolinguist, Robin Tolmach Lakoff (1973, 1975, 2004), first associated these linguistic markers with a feminine register in her seminal work, *Language and Women’s Place*, arguing that there is a social expectation that women *talk like a lady* and follow politeness conventions, while the speech of men is not similarly constrained. That women are socially conditioned to speak in ways that can undermine their clarity and assertiveness would present a particular dilemma in the business context, where clear, direct and confident communication is valued. This corpus-based study explores the dilemma in the context of LinkedIn where the linguistic behaviour of cisgender women indeed showed evidence of their struggle between conflicting impulses to *talk like a lady* and a desire to be taken seriously as businesspeople. While the examined features mainly appeared in the discourse of women, it was interesting to note men making use of ‘empty’ adjectives and *so* in communication contexts where the goal appeared to be relationship-building. As notions of business leadership are evolving to value organisational leadership more, this suggests that linguistic devices that have traditionally been associated more with the communal conversation of the stereotypical ‘woman’ appear to be gaining wider acceptance and relevance, although in domains orientated towards the “soft skill” of building relationships, rather than the “hard work” of business. While the value *talking like a lady* may be shifting, language that is the opposite of *talking like a lady* seems to remain the language of serious talk, and the kind of gender-based linguistic discrimination first theorised by Lakoff seems thus to persist, also in the sphere of business discourse.

2. Keywords

corpus linguistics; Critical Discourse Analysis; empty adjectives; intensifiers; women’s language

3. Introduction

This corpus-based study is located within the field of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) and examines the use of ‘empty’ adjectives like charming, lovely and cute, and the equative intensifier *so* in discourse on the newsfeed of LinkedIn, a social network service (SNS) for businesspeople and professionals. These linguistic markers were associated with a feminine register in pioneering theory developed half a century ago by the influential American linguist and feminist, Robin Tolmach Lakoff (1975, 2004), who argued that their use in the discourse of women is the product of social conditioning and may have the effect of undermining the assertiveness, clarity and impact of what they say. Investigating the contemporary relevance of this theory of “linguistic discrimination” (Lakoff 2004:39) as it relates to the discourse of businesspeople is the focus of this Feminist Critical Discourse study.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is concerned with the role language plays in asymmetries in sociocultural, economic, and political power (Fairclough 2015). FCDA – which intersects with the border field of Language and Gender Studies (LGS) – has emerged as a sub-field of CDA that specifically undertakes to expose and take issue with discourses which “sustain a gendered social order in which some people, by virtue of being ‘men’, are accorded privileges systematically, and others, by virtue of being ‘women’ are routinely disadvantaged” (Lazar 2017:184). As the scare quotes suggest, what it means to be identified as ‘men’ as opposed to ‘women’ is itself contentious. These words are social constructs. Taking a poststructuralist view of meaning as discursively produced and socially manufactured, meaning is plural, unstable and shifting, differing across space, place and time. The words ‘men’ and ‘women’, therefore, do not name essential truths: they are figments of social imagination, but fitting – or not fitting – these social labels can have concrete consequences for the individual. In cases falling within the realm of ‘men’, the consequence tends to be systematic privilege, and this privilege comes at the expense of ‘women’. As powerfully theorised by Crenshaw (1989), other dimensions, such as race, class, age, sexual orientation and disability, can intersect with the relative advantage associated with ‘men’ and disadvantage associated with ‘women’ to strengthen or weaken the respective position in a layering of social biases. However, given the location of this study within Europe and a focus on businesspeople who fall comfortably within the middle class, the relevance of other intersectionalities is greatly reduced.

The people whose discourse was captured in the analysed corpus are overwhelmingly white, aged 30-50 and did not include any who identify as transgender or non-binary. This was not by design but naturally limits the scope of intersectionalities to enable a simple focus on cisgender women and men.

The theories of Lakoff have been highly influential in shaping thinking about the gender politics of language; in fact, her theory of “Language and Women’s Place” (first published in 1973) is considered the founding text of Language and Gender Studies (Bucholtz 2004:3) and half a century later, continues to have “relevance – indeed centrality – to the field” (2004:3). Lakoff theorised in *LWP* that “women experience negative linguistic discrimination in two ways: in the way they are taught to use language, and in the way general language use treats them” (Lakoff 2004:39). She proposed that there exists a social construct of what it means to “[talk] like a lady” (2004:43) that is associated with dominant social norms of what it means to *be* and *do* being a woman in a given society. According to Lakoff, “talking like a lady” (2004:43) is primarily marked by a heightened expectation that the discourse of women is polite, that they avoid rough language (2004:40) and couch their utterances in ways that are ingratiating and do not give the impression that they are imposing their ideas on others (2004:43). Men are not constrained in the same way. In fact, their unrestrained manner of communicating their ideas and opinions is generally encouraged as appropriate to male confidence and forcefulness (2004:41).

This was not Lakoff claiming ‘women say this’ and ‘men say that’ as her work has been misread – or not read at all – by some critics, notably Meyerhoff (2015) and Baro (2023), but rather the notion that there are particular social expectations of how women should talk, that are not imposed on the talk of men, and that there exists a set of linguistic behaviours that seems to be exclusively available to women and would be highly marked in their use by males (2004:47). The specifics of this register would reflect their social context in the same way that Lakoff’s theorisation of them arguably reflected her context as an English-speaking, white, middle-class cisgender female academic in North America of the early 1970s. Nevertheless, it is remarkable to note that the fundamentals of her theory have resonated across the Global North (for example, see Livia 2004 for UK, Ide 2004 and Matsumoto 2004 for Japan, Greco 2014 for France and Continental Europe) and also the Global

South (for example, see Pan 2011 for China; Amir, Abidin, Darus & Ismail 2012 for Malaysia and Prebrianti 2013 for Indonesia).

Lakoff identified ten markers of so-called *women's language* (see pages 34-35) which have the effect of making the discourse of women sound frivolous or unclear and uncertain. This corpus-based discourse analysis examines two of these markers, namely, the use of empty adjectives and the intensifier *so* in user-generated content sourced from the newsfeed of LinkedIn, the world's largest social network service (SNS) for businesspeople and professionals (van Dijck 2013:207). Following Lakoff (2004), the use of empty adjectives and the intensifier *so* have been widely associated with the feminine register (Pan 2011:1016, Amir, Abidin, Darus & Ismail 2012:106, Cameron, McAlinden & O'Leary 1988:75), but have drawn considerably less scholarly attention than the other lexical markers that Lakoff associated with women's language (Svendsen 2018; Holmes 1990, 1987; Cameron, McAlinden & O'Leary 1988). Academic research – especially in the field of Linguistics – that focuses on LinkedIn is also relatively limited and compared to Facebook, substantially so (Zide 2014:584). This study thus intends to contribute something towards addressing these knowledge gaps but is primarily motivated by a feminist concern with exposing and examining gender inequality encoded in the discourse of LinkedIn, both from a perspective of critically engaging with Lakoff's theory of a disempowered feminine register and critically analysing gendered discourse in an important sphere of business-related communication.

LinkedIn is the world's biggest professional networking site (LinkedIn 2022) and the website most used by recruiters to identify and research potential candidates for employment (Tifferet & Vilnai-Yavetz 2017:34; Zide Elman & Shahani-Denning 2014:583; van Dijck 2013:207). According to LinkedIn (2022), the site has over 875 million users (up from 810 million 6 months ago) across more than 200 countries globally. Eight people are hired every minute via LinkedIn job postings (LinkedIn 2022). Among surveyed users

...[the] main reasons reported for using LinkedIn include researching people and companies (77%), reconnecting with past colleagues (71%), uncovering potential job opportunities (41%), networking (39%), and increasing marketing presence (39%).

(Breitbarth 2016, cited in Tifferet & Vilnai-Yavetz 2017:34)

Although LinkedIn is primarily for personal use, it is interesting to note that over 58 million LinkedIn accounts are run by companies and over 129,000 by educational institutions (LinkedIn 2022). This is testimony to the commercial value of the LinkedIn community not only as a talent pool, but also as an influential and lucrative target market to whom companies and academic institutions are eager to promote their brands.

LinkedIn is characterised as “Facebook in a suit” (Appleby 2012:79) – an online space for businesspeople and professionals to connect and communicate. It has also been described as “the largest professional matchmaker site in the world” (van Dijck 2013:207), referring to the specific role of this SNS in connecting prospective candidates to job opportunities. In fact, LinkedIn is the world’s most popular website for recruitment (Zide 2014:583). This significantly raises the stakes for communication on this social network: it is a platform where making mistakes could potentially jeopardise one’s career and job opportunities.

Referring to LinkedIn as a matchmaker *for professionals* (van Dijck 2013:207) blurs a contentious line between “businesspeople” and “professionals”, as LinkedIn is used by both. There is long-standing debate as to whether business management should be recognised as a profession, and businesspeople as professionals (Barker 2010). The prevailing view is that business is not a profession. While businesspeople may be formally trained, the certified acquisition of specific knowledge is not a prerequisite to do business, whereas it is essential/necessary to practise a profession (Hall 1927; Bowen 1955; Khurana, Nohria & Penrice 2005; Trank & Rynes 2003). Further, professions are associated with altruistic aims and orienting codes of ethics (Bowen 1955:116; Khurana, Nohria & Penrice 2005:2) that are enforced by regulatory bodies, in addition to professionals being subject to the laws of the land. Despite calls for more professionalism in business, commercial activity is not as strictly regulated (Bowen 1955:117) and is subject only to the *lex terrae*. Hence, business is not a profession, and businesspeople are not professionals. As this critical discourse study focuses on people engaged in commercial occupations in the private sector, they will therefore be denoted as “businesspeople”.

As mentioned earlier and elaborated in the Theoretical Framework (see page 21), context plays a central role in Critical Discourse Studies. It is essentially addressed at two levels: the micro context

of the discourse; namely the specifics of the interaction; and the macro context which places the analysis of the discourse in the broader social context. In terms of the micro context of the discourse analysed in this Critical Discourse Study, it comprises user-generated content that appears on the newsfeed of LinkedIn. The macro-context is business, and the inherent gender inequality that characterises business. It is important to note that, although these users are identifiably businesspeople, their discourse is not produced in a classic business context, but rather in the context of a social network service. LinkedIn may be an SNS specifically marketed as a tool for businesspeople, but discourse appearing on the site would not be expected to comply fully with ideological notions of a business management formation. This is a second hypothesis that will be indirectly examined in this research study, as it evaluates the extent to which selected markers of women's language appear within the discourse on LinkedIn's newsfeed, and to what evident effect in respect of complying with the dominant characteristics of the business management ideological discursive formation (see page 53).

3.1. Research questions

The specific questions that this research will seek to address are:

- 1) Does the discourse of women in the context of LinkedIn differ significantly from that of men, in terms of the selected lexical markers (empty adjectives and the intensifier *so*) which Lakoff associates with women's language?
 - a) Are the selected lexical markers used more frequently by women than men on LinkedIn's newsfeed?
 - b) Are there similarities or differences in the way that women use the selected lexical markers on LinkedIn, compared to men?
 - c) How does the gendered use of the selected lexical markers of LinkedIn's newsfeed compare to benchmark corpora, representing (i) common discourse and (ii) the specialised discourse of science?
- 2) To what degree is Lakoff's theorisation of women's language still relevant today, and to the context of LinkedIn's newsfeed specifically?
- 3) How might differences between the language used by women and that used by men on the LinkedIn newsfeed affect the way that women are perceived in business?

4. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is composed of four interrelated parts:

- 1) The framing theory of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and, within this, the sub-discipline of Feminist CDA which specifically grapples with discourse from a feminist point of view
- 2) The theory of women's language developed by Lakoff (1973, 1975, 2004)
- 3) Inequality faced by women in business as the "critical issue" at stake in this study
- 4) The social network service, LinkedIn, as the immediate context of the discourse examined in this study, within the broader context of social media as an area of critical engagement for CDA practitioners.

4.1. An overview of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), as applied in this study

This study is situated in the field of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA is less a defined discipline than an alliance of researchers united by a common desire to effect social change through "*critical social analysis*" (Fairclough 2018:13). It is "discourse analysis 'with an attitude'" (van Dijk 2011:96) because it goes beyond analysis of discourse to "[explain] how discourse figures in existing social reality as a basis for *action* to change reality" (Fairclough 2018:13). To do so, critical discourse practitioners assume a clear position on social issues and pursue "a committed, emancipatory agenda" (Baxter 2008:244). This has drawn criticisms of partiality, notably from Widdowson (1998, 2004), but critical discourse practitioners are unapologetically political in their aims: for instance, CDA is described by van Dijk as "dissident research" (2001a:363).

As my research is concerned with gender inequality, it has a natural fit with the aim of CDA to examine and expose instances of inequality. The intent to produce knowledge that will drive *action* to effect social change, further aligns with the CDA agenda. That the social issue under examination is gender inequality, arguably situates it within that sub-field of CDA staked out at the intersection of CDA and Gender Studies: Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (Lazar 2017, 2018). Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis is nothing more – *or less* – than CDA concerned with gendered power

asymmetries (Lazar 2017:182), viewed through a feminist lens. Consistent with the expectation that critical discourse practitioners are explicit in making their personal position and values clear (van Leeuwen 2006:293), feminism is the author's critical stance, and this research takes the form of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis.

The problem inherent in declaring this work to be "Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis" is that it does not actually say much about the *form* the research should take, only that it is concerned with gender inequality and aligned with the aims of "feminism" (as if that too were a homogeneous concept, which it is not). The essential issue is that Critical Discourse Analysis is not a method *per se* (Blommart & Bulcaen 2000:450), but more "a state of mind, an attitude, a way of dissenting" (van Dijk 2013, cited in Wodak & Meyer 2016:3) making Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis a *feminist* way of dissenting.

As a problem-oriented research programme, it is social issues and a desire to drive social change that are foregrounded in CDA, rather than the specifics of how to go about the analysis. Led by their "critical" research questions, critical discourse practitioners are relatively free to select whatever methods they deem suitable to answer their research questions (van Dijk 2013, cited in Wodak & Meyer 2016:3). This apparent lack of methodological rigour and consistency has attracted sustained criticism from Widdowson (1998, 2004) and others (see Breeze 2011 for a comprehensive overview) who "accuse CDA of operating somewhat randomly, moved by personal whim rather than well-grounded scholarly principle" (Breeze 2011:498). The approach is defended – perhaps somewhat disingenuously – by CDA proponents as necessary freedom of praxis to respond to the complexity of the CDA task and is also justified by the rapid and innovative growth of the field. Further, the framing theory of CDA is concerned more with laying out the purpose, intent, and values of the approach than with providing a comprehensive theoretical framework within which analysis may be conducted. Critics consequently decry CDA as somewhat "half-baked" (Toolan 1997; Widdowson 1998, 2004) forcing critical discourse practitioners to reach outside their discipline to close the theoretical gaps. This is strenuously rejected by adherents to CDA who defend a multidisciplinary approach as both intentional and necessary to draw in theories that enable them to understand and explain the complex social phenomena they strive to uncover and interpret in discourse (Wodak & Meyer 2016:2). This rather eclectic approach has raised concerns that

critical discourse practitioners may leverage arguments from other disciplines without the full depth of understanding or quality of development that would satisfy specialists in the source fields (Breeze 2011:501).

The dominant criticisms of CDA explored so far, can be summarised as follows:

- 1) CDA is not objective – the analyst assumes an explicit position (Blommart & Bulcaen 2000:455)
- 2) CDA theory is eclectic and “impressionistic” (Breeze 2011:503)
- 3) CDA lacks consistent and rigorous methodology (Blommart & Bulcaen 2000:450).

The criticism levelled at CDA is thus significant, both in the gravity of the accusations and sheer scale of criticism it attracts as a socially conscious movement within Linguistics. Nevertheless, Toolan makes the provocative point that “[the] premises upon which CDA are based are...irrefutable. If it did not exist, we would have to invent it... CDA, as an idea, makes sense.” (1997:101). In a world where social inequality and injustice are rife, dissident research remains not just relevant, but essential. However, the inherent “messiness” of social protest does not absolve scholars from academic rigour. Critical discourse practitioners must be cognisant of the criticism directed at their field and endeavour to mitigate these limitations in their work, conducting their studies in a “spirit of self-reflexive critique” (Breeze 2011:499).

The most important criticisms of CDA align with three defining characteristics of the field:

- 1) CDA is political (Breeze 2011:52)
- 2) CDA is multidisciplinary (Wodak & Meyer 2016:2)
- 3) CDA is multi-methodological (Wodak & Meyer 2016:2).

In this research, the inherent risks in these characteristics are addressed as follows:

- 1) The author will state her critical position and underpinning political ideology.
- 2) The author will lay out the theoretical framework of her research, as it relates to the framing tenets of Critical Discourse Analysis, and theories drawn on from elsewhere.
- 3) The author will specify the methodological approach and demonstrate the necessary academic rigour in ensuring it is “systematic, objective and disciplined” (2011:507).

To the first obligation, the author identifies as a feminist, but “feminism” is far from a monogenous term and “Feminism” is far from a homogenous political movement. Rather than trying to locate myself within the diverse, fragmented and bitterly contested space that is “Feminism”, I will declare my position as a cisgender woman who has come to consciousness during the so-called “third wave” of feminism and has experienced the rise of the #MeToo movement together with an alarming resurgence of sustained popular and systemic attacks on the rights of women everywhere. As an essentially “third wave” feminist, I have enjoyed more rights, power, opportunities, and choice than my mother’s generation, which has allowed me the freedom to embrace my femininity, be a wife and a mother, while also pursuing a serious career in international business. However, my personal experiences of benevolent and hostile sexism, especially at work, and a growing frustration with the challenges I have faced in reaching higher levels in the business management hierarchy, have made me realise that while I am privileged, I am certainly not living in a “postfeminist” era (Lazar 2017:181): we all still have a long way to go. My shock at the recent overturning of Roe vs. Wade, amid a palpable escalation in the culture war against women everywhere, has contributed to my realisation that it is not enough to be a feminist in name only – I must take action. It is this motivation that brings me to Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis.

Declaring my position and using the personal pronoun to show my face in my work feels starkly at odds with the formal conventions of academic discourse, and yet more *honest*. All research is “socio-politically situated, whether we like it or not” (van Dijk 2001a:352; Wodak & Meyer 2016:7), produced as it is by human beings who, no matter how rigorously they may strive for academic equanimity and objectivity, are nevertheless still subject to those subtle biases that are an unavoidable product of one’s unique location in time, place, and social experience. Critical linguists are particularly sensitive to the fact that language can rarely – if ever – be neutral, so to step out from behind the text and declare myself, feels like a refreshingly ethical thing to do.

That said, declaring a stance is not a *mea culpa* for biased research. When the researcher shows her face and acknowledges the presence of political bias, this naturally raises a concern that she may project these biases and prejudices on to her data, selecting and analysing it accordingly (Blommart & Bulcaen 2000:455-456), in “a kind of naïve linguistic determinism” (Breeze 2011:508). The question of objectivity must therefore be handled with similar transparency with the onus on the

practitioner to design her research in a way that rigorously controls for bias and ensures that the work is balanced, representative and replicable, consistent with the accepted standards of academic research, and that all these steps are meticulously documented so that the methods, findings, and discussion will stand up to scrutiny.

Coming to the second obligation, “the inherent fuzziness of [CDA] concepts and definitions” (Wodak 2013:xxxiv) and tendency to reach outside the discipline for relevant perspectives and theories makes it necessary for me to explicitly identify and unpack how “Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis” is understood and applied in this work, and which other theories and research have been drawn upon to understand and explain the social phenomena under examination. I will start by outlining the Critical Discourse Analysis theoretical framework as it is applied in this study.

4.1.1. Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis is composed of three parts (critical, discourse and analysis) which must be unpacked and clarified as they will be applied in this context:

- 1) Critical: The notion of taking a “critical” approach to discourse analysis is, as has been argued earlier, the defining characteristic of CDA: it is different from other forms of discourse analysis in that it is *critical*. As a term, “critical” is used across disciplines essentially to denote the challenging of a status quo. Being critical may thus imply a healthy degree of scepticism and refusal to take things at face value, but it is generally more emotionally charged, with taking a critical stance in the social sciences being particularly associated with a commitment to exposing social injustices as a basis to motivate for change (Breeze 2011:499). Take away “critical” from Critical Discourse Analysis, and we are left with “discourse analysis” which Stubbs (1983:4) describes as “the study of language above the sentence or above the clause”. Critical Discourse Analysis *is* discourse analysis but goes a step further to interpret findings as they relate to complex social phenomena of inequality and injustice (van Dijk 2001a:354). CDA is not concerned with evaluating “linguistic competence” (Chomsky 1965:19) or observing discursive practices *per se* (Fairclough 1992:12), but rather with what linguistic performance reveals about individuals and the social structures which they inhabit, particularly as these relate to inequality and injustice

(Fairclough 2010, Wodak & Meyer 2016, van Dijk 2011, Baxter 2010). Teun van Dijk – with characteristic force – declares that “critical discourse practitioners take an explicit position and thus want to understand, expose, and ultimately resist social inequality” (van Dijk 2001a:354) and it is this overt commitment to social justice agenda that distinguishes *Critical Discourse Analysis* from *Discourse Analysis*. This is not to say that *Discourse Analysis* is therefore *un-critical* (Toolan 1997:88), but less politically charged. *Critical Discourse Analysis* is essentially *political* (Breeze 2011:250) and this is conveyed in the notion of being *critical* in the strongest sense.

- 2) Discourse: “Discourse” is another term that has been liberally applied within the social sciences (Wodak & Meyer 2016:3) and used to mean slightly different things in different contexts, even interchangeably with “ideology” and “culture” (Trowler 2001:186). But in Linguistics generally, and CDA specifically, discourse is taken to refer to *language in use*, either in spoken or written form (Fairclough 1992:3). It is “language beyond the sentence” (Yule 2020:168). Discourse is thus distinct from ideology, with ideologies being normative ideas or belief systems held by social groups (van Dijk 2001b:12). Fairclough (2010:75) also draws a distinction between discourse, genre, and style, which he clarifies as “ways of representing” as opposed to “ways of acting” (genre) and “ways of being” (style).
- 3) Analysis: Given the inherently multidisciplinary (Fairclough 2010:3) and multi-methodological nature of CDA and the fact that it is “a state of mind, an attitude, a way of dissenting” (van Dijk 2013, cited in Wodak & Meyer 2016:3), it has been argued that calling the research programme “Critical Discourse *Analysis*”, is misleading: it would be more accurate to call it “Critical Discourse *Studies*” (van Dijk 2013, cited in Wodak & Meyer 2016:3). Although certain methodological approaches have come to be loosely associated with it over time, CDA “does not provide a ready-made, how-to-do approach to social analysis” (2011:99). The name “Critical Discourse Analysis” was coined by the founding author, Norman Fairclough, in his ground-breaking work, *Language and Power*, first published in 1989. To be fair, Fairclough did posit specific ideas about a method for CDA, but as more researchers engaged in the space, there has been such proliferation of theories, methods and types of analysis done by critical discourse practitioners that the term no longer seems to fit and “studies” seems more appropriate. In fact, use of the term “Critical Discourse Studies” is gaining traction in the work of contemporary critical discourse

practitioners, notably Ruth Wodak, Teun van Dijk, Norman Fairclough and Theo van Leeuwen (Wodak & Meyer 2016:4; Hart & Cap 2014), although the well-established tradition of referring to the discipline as CDA means that the term persists, with the result that the terms CDA and CDS co-exist. Irrespective of this debate, both “analysis” and “study” point to an essential commitment to detailed examination, in this case, of discourse. Analysis is – following the tradition of Bernstein’s Code Theory (2001) – a process of recontextualising (Fairclough 2015:9) in which discourse is brought under the microscope.

CDA approaches language, and thereby discourse, as a form of “social practice” (Fairclough 2015:55) performed within sociocultural, economic, political, and other forms of ideological contexts (Fairclough 1992:66). As a social process, discourse does not simply “reflect or represent social entities and relations” (Fairclough 1992:3), but is at once a product of a society, while concurrently playing a role in shaping and defining that society. Discourse is both socially constituted and socially constituting (Fairclough 2015:55-56).

Language is viewed within CDA as operating at the microlevel – or local context – of the specific social interaction (van Dijk 2011:13), while at the same time reproducing – often in an opaque way (Wodak 1997:173) – the ideologies of power, hegemony and social inequality that belong to the global context and domain of macrolevel analysis (van Dijk 2001a:354). It is thus the role of CDA to uncover the macro in the micro, moving from fine-grained critical analysis of discourse that uncovers traces of hegemonic ideology, to bigger themes of social injustice that will in turn inform and enable action to bring about redress of these inequalities (Fairclough 2018:13; Blommart & Bulcaen 2000:453). The focus is on “*social problems* and political issues, rather than current paradigms and fashions” (van Dijk 2001a:353) with critical discourse practitioners intentionally moving beyond observation and description of linguistic items, to interpret and explain these in terms of “properties of social interaction and especially social structure” (van Dijk 2001a:353).

In seeking to understand and explain the social phenomena of inequality and injustice reflected in discourse, CDA practitioners typically need to look beyond their immediate academic context as linguists to draw on relevant insights from adjacent fields. Lakoff (1975:75) well understood this

need to take a multidisciplinary approach to put discourse analysis in the context of macro social themes:

The linguist must involve himself, professionally, with sociology...because if he does not examine the society of the speakers of the language along with the so-called purely linguistic data, he will be unable to make relevant generalizations, will be unable to understand why the language works the way it does. He will, in short, be unable to do linguistics.

It is somewhat ironic that Lakoff formulates this observation using masculine pronouns (he/himself/his), bowing to the convention that the masculine is conflated with the universal – a tendency she herself spoke out about later in her career (see Lakoff 2004:18). Separately, although Lakoff identified herself as a sociolinguist and was aware of, but never aligned with the Critical Discourse Analysis “group” (Lakoff 2003:166), it is interesting to note that her research approach suits the aims of CDA very well. As the central reference point for this study, her work on women’s language fits the admittedly loose CDA theoretical framework seamlessly and consequently does not feel like a “foreign body” within the work.

In terms of this study, the “micro context” is the specific interactions on the LinkedIn newsfeed. When this discourse is extracted and recontextualised as analysis, it can also be put in the relevant “macro context” to enable the observations to be interpreted and understood. In this case, the relevant macro context would be the struggle for gender equality in the workplace, specifically as it applies to women progressing to the highest levels in business. Given the social nature of this lens, I will be drawing on both the disciplines of Sociology and Psychology to explore and unpack the phenomena identified in the discourse as it relates to hegemonic gender ideology. Gender ideology may be described as hegemonic in that it empowers men and disempowers women and is particularly pernicious because it can operate in subtle, barely noticeable ways, which even if recognised, are generally accepted as the natural order of things (Lazar 2017:186).

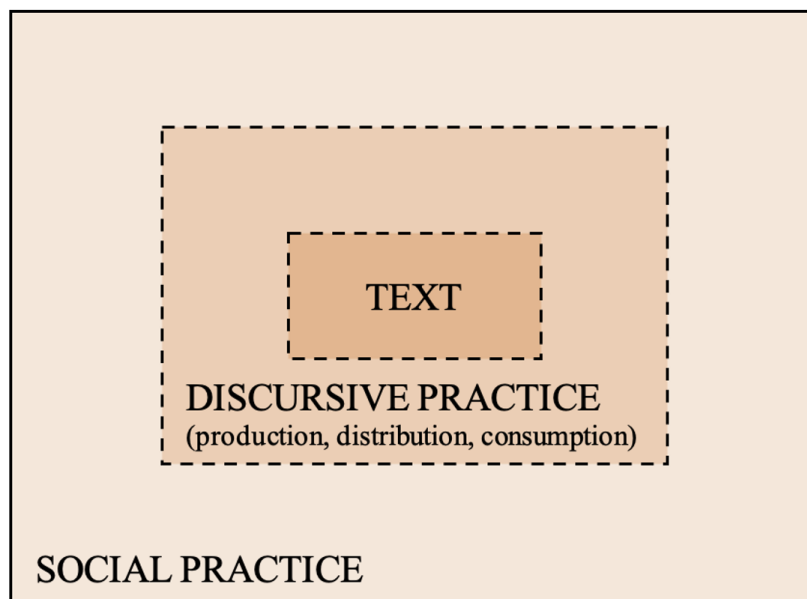
Power is the central concept with which CDA engages (Wodak 2013:xxvii). Fairclough stipulates that the concern is with “the power *behind* discourse rather than just the power in discourse” (Fairclough 1989/2015:3), evoking the presence of unseen hegemonic forces at play in discourse which the critical discourse analyst works to expose and challenge. In his touchstone text

“Language and Power” (1989/2015), Fairclough differentiates between the generally positive “power to [get things done]”, and the inherently problematic “power over [other people]” (Fairclough 1989/2015:26) which implies the hegemonic dominion of one individual or social group. Power can be present overtly, typically reflected in conflict where the will of one (group) wins over another; or covertly, in controlling what gets decided, or not (Wodak & Meyer 2016:10). In the context of business, “power” is hard currency and exercised overtly. It is the power to decide – the all-important “decision authority” enshrined/embedded? In the financial frameworks of corporations – which triggers all actions as they relate to the business. In the context of LinkedIn, the power dynamics are opaque. Users do have power to operate on the site, but this must be exercised within the (covert) guidelines and templates defined by LinkedIn. LinkedIn is not a nebulous “shareware” platform created by activist software designers, but very clearly a business founded by some of the same tech start-up entrepreneurs who founded PayPal and owned since 2016 by the “Big Tech” giant, Microsoft (LinkedIn 2015). Within this wide context of the “power” of Big Tech, there are the power relations between users that in many ways reflect the “offline” relations of business hierarchy, of customers and clients, of competitors and partners, and – in the specific context of recruitment – of potential employees, employers, hiring managers and recruiters. There are also the social power dynamics of gender that transcend the business context, that are the specific aspect investigated by this study.

Approaching discourse in context primarily to uncover overt and covert evidence of power struggle is the driving force behind CDA. Fairclough has extensively theorised these levels of discourse in context in a framework that owes a clear debt to Halliday’s theorisation of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Breeze 2011:495,502; van Dijk 2001b:19; Blommart & Bulcaen 2000:454), and the Model of Context, in particular. As illustrated in Figure 1, Fairclough (2021:73-96) theorises a three-level model with discourse as the central focus, to explore the complex, and often opaque, relations between “discursive and social change” (1992/2021:8). The inner core is the ‘text’ which constitutes the specific tract of discourse as it exists in its original context, although recontextualised for the purpose of ‘fine-grain’ analysis (Fairclough 2015:9). The ‘text’ can also encompass recontextualizations of other texts (Fairclough 2010:181), such as when LinkedIn users post leverages or reference information from a different source in their own text, or include a hyperlink, hashtag, visual, video, or other embedded media. The ‘text’ is embedded in the context of discursive

practice as it corresponds to how and where the text was produced, distributed, and consumed, and by whom, as well as who “controlled” the process. Here the focus is on interpreting the relations between the people engaged in the discourse exchange, whether these be participants in a spoken exchange, or an author and their readers in the case of written discourse, with the aim of unpacking the power dynamics in the interaction, but also behind the discourse. The final layer of the model places the discourse in the wider social context; what van Dijk refers to as the “macro context” in his relatively simpler model of discourse analysis, linking the micro context to the macro social context (van Dijk 2001a:354). The outer layer of the model thus deals with social practice which provides the theoretical frame for the interpretation of ideologies and hegemony at work in the text (Fairclough 2001:86). I have modified Fairclough’s model in one small respect; namely, replacing the solid lines between text and discursive practice and discursive practice and social practice, with a broken line to indicate that these boundaries are not rigid at all. As Fairclough himself acknowledged, there is significant overlap between text and discursive practice (2001:73). As for social practice, it is the very fact that social practice frames, shapes, and seeps into discursive practice that makes it worthy of critical examination to expose these traces and framing ideologies.

Figure 1: Three-dimensional conception of discourse (Fairclough 1992/2021:73) (Note: author’s change from solid to broken line to reflect interplay between levels)



‘Ideology’ has been discussed earlier, but is so central to CDA, that it requires further expansion. The theorisation that Fairclough leveraged in his foundational work was drawn from Althusser (1971), and rests on three tenets:

First, the claim that it has material existence in the practice of institutions... Second, the claim that ideology ‘interpellates subjects’... Third, the claim that ‘ideological state apparatuses’ (institutions such as education or the media) are both sites of and stakes in class struggle, which points to struggle in and over discourse as a focus for an ideologically oriented discourse analysis.

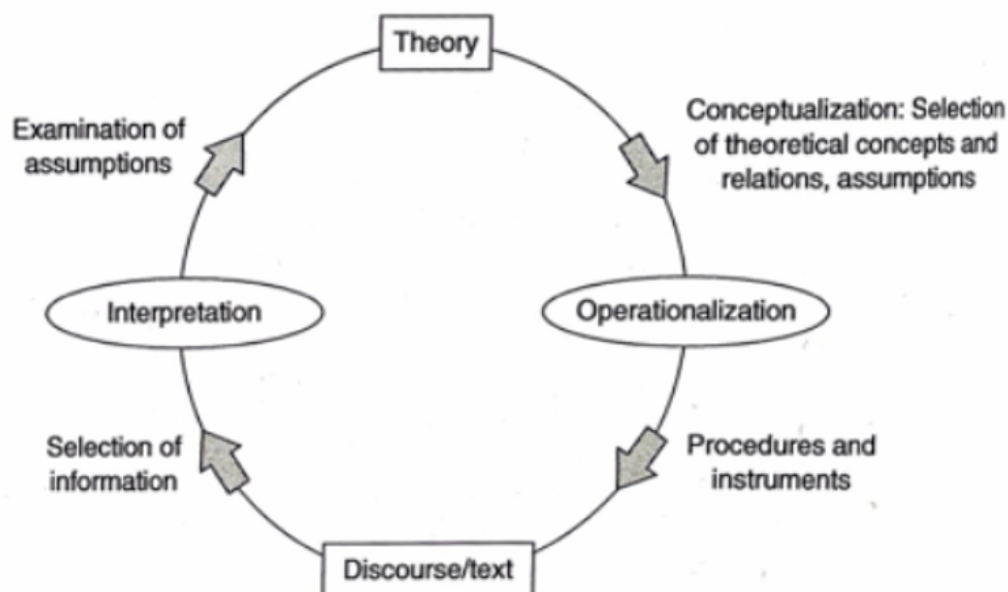
(Fairclough 2021:86-87)

The first and second claims are, in my view, relatively straightforward and uncontroversial: it is the nature of ideology to shape institutions and their operation, as ideology also shapes individual identity and ways of being. The third claim raises more interesting issues: discourse is viewed as a site of social struggle, and class struggle specifically. In this, text is positioned as a microcosm of the struggles that characterise society, exemplifying the interplay of micro and macro context that forms the overarching theory of Critical Discourse Analysis. The only aspect of the above quotation I would modify is the specification of “ideological state apparatuses”. In this study, it is not a state apparatus, but a social network service in the private sector – an avowedly commercial undertaking. The same ideologies may be at play but must always be specifically interrogated in this context.

In addition to ‘ideology’, critical discourse analysts are concerned with ‘hegemony’. Here again, the foundational orienting approach that I will work with is drawn from Fairclough, who based his approach on the theories of the Marxist philosopher, Gramsci (1971). ‘Hegemony’ is theorised as dominance over the cultural, socio-political, economic, and ideological domains of society (Fairclough 1992/2021:92). In popular culture, it carries distinctly negative connotations, although it is not inherently “good” or “bad” – it needs first to be examined, to be judged. For this reason, some researchers prefer to define it as “leadership”, rather than “dominance”, and indeed Fairclough references both terms in his definition (Fairclough 1992/2021:92). An important aspect of hegemony, as originally theorised by Gramsci, is that it is an “unstable equilibrium” (Fairclough 1992/2021:92), holding sway only partially, and for a limited period, since it is associated with constant social struggle and shifting alliances and relations (Fairclough 1992/2021:92). In this respect, hegemony can be considered distinct from ideology, which is more stable.

A final aspect of Critical Discourse Analysis to highlight as it is applied in this study concerns the practical approach to analysis. This has been theorised by Wodak and Meyer (2016:14) as a cyclical process, as illustrated in Figure 2. Unlike other discourse analysis approaches, CDA/CDS is not associated with a rigid, linear approach: rather, it is exploratory. It does start with the research question(s); however, these are not necessarily fixed, only a point of departure. Data collection is specifically divided into pilot data collection and initial analysis, which enables the questions, theories, and methods to be refined, shaping the next round of critical analysis, with further fine-tuning, as deemed necessary (Wodak & Meyer 2015:21). An important step is the intentional sourcing and selection of theories that will inform the research. As Critical Discourse Studies are inherently multidisciplinary, this is an essential – and time-consuming – process that requires research across relevant disciplines to identify, thoroughly understand and draw upon any theoretical concepts, related knowledge and context that will ensure that the concepts are accurately and robustly applied. In a CDA approach, “theory formation, description, problem formulation and applications are closely intertwined and mutually inspiring” (van Dijk 2011:3).

Figure 2: Critical discourse studies as a circular process (Wodak & Meyer 2016:14)



4.1.2. Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA)

As emphasised throughout, it is a shared commitment to social justice that unites critical discourse analysts – their discourse analysis is *critical* because their intention is to expose instances of injustice encoded – often very subtly – in discourse. It is not passive analysis – it is charged with a bias to socio-political *action*. Within this loose collective of “dissident” (van Dijk 2001a:363) researchers, are those who identify themselves as feminists doing *Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis*. This has a natural fit with CDA since “feminist work... explicitly deals with social inequality and domination” (van Dijk 2001a:359). It is also true that feminist studies have informed the development of CDA through the 1980’s (Lazar 372). So clear is the fit of FCDA with the aims of CDA, and so relevant are gender ideology and hegemony as areas of CDA focus and work, one wonders why this needs to be declared a specific sub-discipline at all. The FCDA founding author, Michelle M. Lazar (2017, 2019), explains the need to call out the feminist movement within CDA to highlight the contribution of feminist thought to CDA overall, and the rather vague need to address “disciplinary hybridity” (Lazar 2019:372). My own reasoning for the imperative of calling out “Feminism” as a distinct movement, is firstly to draw a connection with feminist studies as they cut across disciplines, uniting like-minded scholars in their common commitment to gender equality and associated social redress. This also warrants specific focus because it is one of the most pernicious and far-reaching forms of social injustice across society – in sheer scale, it demands recognition. Despite the ongoing claims that feminism is passé (Lazar 2017:181); that “reading gender into every situation” (Lazar 2017:181) has gone too far; that feminist conception of gender as essentially about women, is no longer relevant (Lazar 2017:181); as well as the long-held condemnation of feminists as unfeminine and unnatural (Becker 2010:454) and their mission as “impossible” (Lakoff 2004:21); women remain the “‘out of power’ group par excellence” (Lakoff 1975:47). The sheer weight of the need for social justice for women justifies the widespread application of CDS in the service of feminism.

The distinction between FCDA and CDA, is “only” that the analyst adopts an explicitly *feminist* position. Like all CDA, FCDA “does not pretend to adopt a neutral stance but makes its political stance part of its argument” (Lazar 2017:185). However, the difference is that feminist critical

discourse analysis is not concerned with generic notions of power, ideology, and hegemony, but with how these sustain gender inequalities across society whereby men are systematically privileged, essentially on the basis of having male sex organs, while women are disadvantaged because they do not (Lazar 2017:184).

This study thus takes the form of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, as a sub-discipline of Critical Discourse Analysis. As already alluded to, “feminism” and “feminist” as terms defy simple definition. As a political movement, it is arguably the world’s largest grouping, but it is also fragmented. A desire to reduce it to something along the lines of wanting equality between the sexes, is woefully simplistic and contentious, raising the question: “What does equality mean – equality of what and how and when and for whom?” and “Is it about biological sex, or gender in all its complexity?” There is no simple answer. The manifesto penned by the Australian feminist; Joyce Stevens (1975) seems to sum up the position of women in a satisfying way:

Because women's work is never done and is underpaid or unpaid or boring or
repetitious
and we're the first to get the sack
and what we look like is more important than what we do
and if we get raped, it's our fault
and if we get bashed, we must have provoked it
and if we raise our voices, we're nagging bitches
and if we enjoy sex, we're nymphos
and if we don't, we're frigid
and if we love women, it's because we can't get a 'real' man
and if we ask our doctor too many questions, we're neurotic and/or pushy
and if we expect community care for children, we're selfish
and if we stand up for our rights, we're aggressive and 'unfeminine'
and if we don't, we're typical weak females
and if we want to get married, we're out to trap a man
and if we don't, we're unnatural
and because we still can't get an adequate safe contraceptive, but men can walk on
the moon

and if we can't cope or don't want a pregnancy, we're made to feel guilty about abortion
and... for lots and lots of other reasons, we are part of the women's liberation movement.

4.2. Women's language (Lakoff 1973, 1975, 2004)

1973 stands out in Western popular culture as the year American troops were withdrawn from Vietnam and the ruling in “Roe vs. Wade” that led to the overturning of abortion bans across all states in the United States of America. It was also the year that the American feminist and linguist, Robin Tolmach Lakoff, first published her theorisation of “Language and Woman's Place” (1973). This political and socio-historical context, which Lakoff characterises as “a revolutionary moment, in both linguistics and women's history (not to mention American history)” (2004:15), framed Lakoff's undertaking to investigate the female register that she posited as having “as a foundation the attitude that women are marginal to the serious concerns of life, which are pre-empted by men” (1973:45). She does this by considering – based somewhat controversially on a process of introspection, rather than empirical investigation (2004:24) – the ways in which women *are spoken about*, and the way women *speak themselves*.

Lakoff focuses on markers, which she characterises as “personal markers” that convey the feelings of the speaker but are also intended to influence the interlocutor (Lakoff 2004:83). Further, these markers are primarily associated with informal spoken discourse – part of the repertoire of “person-to-person friendly speech” (Lakoff 2004:83).

Lakoff's theorisation of “Talking about Women” intuitively taps into what was later comprehensively theorised as the influential “Ambivalent Sexism” theory (Glick & Fiske 2001). This advances the thesis that women are routinely stereotyped at the level of subtypes. As earlier, these social tropes are grounded in normative ideas and beliefs about gender roles and sexist stereotypes of “traditional” (conventional) and “non-traditional” (unconventional) women (Becker 2010). The ambivalence comes through in a tendency to channel women towards – and encourage their compliance with – conventional ideas about femininity, while regarding those women who

contravene these expectations, with anything from mild scepticism to blatant gender-based violence (Glick & Fiske 2001:113). The Ambivalence Theory is used to explain so-called ‘benevolent sexism’ which can be seen as “rewarding” normative gender behaviour and expressing subtle, but pernicious, gender bias, whereas ‘hostile sexism’ attacks women who challenge these norms. The sexism that Lakoff outlines in her work would thus fall under ‘benevolent sexism’, expressing as it does the micro-aggression encoded in such binaries as an unmarried woman being a “spinster”, which suggests that she is not marriageable because she is somehow deficient, and even more deficient because she is unmarried, whereas the equivalent – but not equal – term for an unmarried man is “bachelor”, which carries distinctly positive associations. This is demonstrated in the unmarked/marked example of combining with “eligible”, which as an adjective applied to a person, denotes that they would be a desirable marriage partner:

- (a) Mary hopes to meet an eligible bachelor.
- (b) *Fred hopes to meet an eligible spinster.

(Lakoff 2004:61)

The “eligible spinster” is not a collocation one comes across in popular culture, indicating that the sub-type “spinster” is a decidedly negative one for women. Lakoff expands on this trend by demonstrating multiple examples whereby women are stereotyped according to gender, invariably in ways that disempower them in contrast to men. Her theorisation is neither definitive, nor grounded in empirical evidence beyond her own intuition, and yet it resonates with me as an English-speaking woman and has been borne out by subsequent research (Glick & Fiske 2001).

The other half of Lakoff’s theorisation of “Language and Woman’s Place” concerns the way that women are themselves socialised to speak, which she characterises as “talking like a lady” (Lakoff 2004:43). One example from her discussion of how women are talked *about*, is also relevant to this part of her theory, namely an examination of the term “lady” as it compares to “woman”, and possible masculine equivalents. In Lakoff’s view, “lady” is marked firstly for having no full masculine equivalent (2004:52). The term “gentleman” (and “gent”) may be the “official” antonym but, Lakoff argues, it is not used frequently enough to be considered interchangeable with “man”, whereas the frequency with which one hears – and, I would add in 2022, *still* hears – “lady”, indicates that it is a popular euphemism. Lakoff relates this implied need for euphemism as an

indicator of a certain *ambivalence* towards the term “woman”. She draws an analogy in the popular use of “African American” as a marked case when compared to the relatively rare use of “Caucasian Americans” to denote “white Americans”, or even just “Americans”, who as the overwhelmingly dominant group, do not need alternative designations. The same applies to men, Lakoff argues (2004:52-53). The term “lady”, while superficially being charged with positive approval, has connotations of frivolity, of being *less serious* than “woman” and by extension, “man” (2004:54). The ambivalence in this term exemplifies benevolent sexism which appears to be complimentary but is actually demeaning, diminishing the standing of the woman addressed as a “lady”, relative to a male counterpart.

The notion of “talking like a lady” then, is inherently charged with benevolent sexism. Titling her theorisation of feminine register thus, was clearly intentional on Lakoff’s part to draw a connection between this discourse and women’s inequality with men and constructed powerlessness (Bucholtz 2004:11). As Lakoff’s ideas have entered popular culture, however, the feminine register she described has come to be known commonly as “women’s language” (not “woman’s language”, as one would expect from the singular in “Language and *Woman’s Place*”) rather than “talking like a lady”, which as a verb phrase does not lend itself to adoption as the name of a discourse. However, the popularisation of women’s language is not without contention. Whereas Lakoff was specific that her theory identified “discourse restricted in use to women” (Lakoff 1975:42), it has subsequently been argued that the theory is more “an index of powerlessness” (Bucholtz 2004:11) and not exclusive to women. Indeed, Lakoff herself, in apparent self-contradiction, acknowledges specific – and intriguing – cases where the discourse of men may incorporate linguistic markers typically associated with women’s language (2004:46-47). Consequently, some researchers working with Lakoff’s ideas have advanced the use of “female register” to clarify that it is not “used exclusively by women but rather that it embodies the female role in society” (Crosby & Nyquist 1977:312). Others have argued against blurring the category lines because it erodes the focus on the specific disempowerment of women which was Lakoff’s primary concern (Kiesling 2004:230). This study is conducted from an explicitly feminist point of view but, where appropriate, the categorisation is opened up to a more general notion of “feminine register” to allow for the real possibility that the discourse of men may at times include the same lexical markers that Lakoff

associates with “talking like a lady”. What is significant though, is that these cases are considered *marked* and therefore require closer *critical* examination.

The framing argument to Lakoff’s theorisation of “talking like a lady” is that girls are socialised to use language differently from boys (Lakoff 2004:41). Language use is a dimension of gender performance and as such, is shaped by socially normative notions of what constitutes appropriate feminine, as opposed to masculine, use. These norms are firmly rooted in traditional gender roles, whereby boys are rewarded for agentic behaviour that exemplifies the attributes of strength and courage normatively associated with the masculine (as illustrated earlier, in Figure 1.1), and are even permitted to be aggressive. Girls, however, are expected to display the polite, accommodating, and nurturing behaviour that is normatively associated with the maternal and communal, expected of them by virtue of their role in the reproduction of the species. Girls should be “demure” – in itself an interesting word encoding reservedness, to which the Oxford dictionary definition, significantly, adds “typically used of a woman” (Oxford University Press 2022). Reserved, modest behaviour proscribes the kind of confidence that is normatively associated with leadership in society.

An important value attached to traditional notions of femininity is that women should *be polite*, and by extension, that “women are supposed to speak more politely than men” (Lakoff 2004:94-102). Lakoff specifically identifies the use of “superpolite forms” and “hypercorrect grammar” – primarily defined as not “[talking] rough” (2004:80) – as markers of women’s language (2004:80). But this expectation manifests in the expected discourse of women in other – arguably more significant – ways too; namely, the conditioning of young girls to speak in ways that encode a degree of uncertainty in their utterances. The context to this behaviour is that it is generally considered impolite to impose one’s point of view on an interlocutor. Such behaviour could be viewed as face-threatening, and therefore potentially seen as aggressive, so in women it would draw censure. However, since men are normatively *expected* to tend to aggression, such behaviour would be considered “normal” and consequently tolerated, and even encouraged. This has important implications for how women are consequently socialised to use language as it proscribes the use of formulations that would enable them to articulate their points with clarity and force. Instead, Lakoff identifies a tendency for women to use linguistic formulations that undermine the strength of their

statements, such as the use of tag questions (2004:48-49) and a rising intonation (2004:49) on declaratives, which both serve to undercut their statements as lacking in conviction, and submissive seeking of confirmation and approval from their interlocutor. Similarly, a tendency to hedge erodes both certainty and clarity. This is a marker of women's language touched on by Lakoff (2004:79) but developed more fully – following Lakoff – by Holmes (1987, 1990). The cumulative effect of all these factors is that women's language is not assertive.

Lakoff also examines the tendency of women to use so-called “meaningless” particles (Lakoff 2004:44), such as “oh dear”, “dear me” and “oh, fudge”, but rejects the view that they are “meaningless”: “they define the social context of an utterance, indicate the relationship the speaker feels between himself and his addressee, between himself and what he is talking about” (2004:43-44). Certainly, the use of such expressions is strongly associated with the discourse of women and reflects women complying with politeness expectations by avoiding the use of expletives, in favour of euphemism. This is particularly marked in a case where a near homonym is used, such that “Oh shit” becomes a seemingly innocuous “Oh shoot”. But this quaint turn of phrase has distinct overtones of the nursery (“*Don't swear in front of the children*”) that consequently infantilises her speech, and by extension, herself. Lakoff notes that euphemism is not used in “serious discussion” (2004:56). These somewhat inane turns of phrase are also echoed in a tendency by women to use what Lakoff terms ‘empty’ adjectives (2004:45-46) and the emphatic intensifier “so” (2004:48), which are the lexical items under investigation in this study and add to the perception of women's language as excessively effusive, and a bit silly.

Another very particular linguistic marker of women's language that marks a women's speech as somewhat trivial and frivolous is a tendency to use very precise terms when naming colours, such that, for example, “purple” is not “purple”: it's ‘mauve’ or ‘lilac’ or maybe a shade of lavender (2004:43). Lakoff contends that this is not something that men typically do because they consider it “trivial, irrelevant to the real world” (2004:43). Such minor details belong to the non-essential sorts of concerns and decisions that are relegated to women, while men, in their tendency not to engage in such things, focus on matters of more serious concern (2004:43). This echoes the Ambivalence theory (Glick & Fiske 2001) that compliance with the socially constructed normative

roles for women may be met with approbation, but they also encode a distinctly disparaging undertone in that such roles are subordinate and submissive to men.

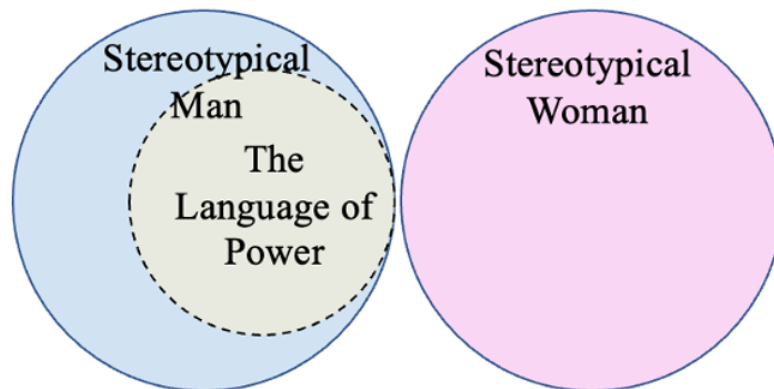
The cumulative effect of these linguistic markers that Lakoff identifies as defining “talking like a lady”, is that women's language can come across as not only lacking in assertiveness, but also as distinctly frivolous, inconsequential, and immature. Although Lakoff does not explicitly advance a theory of “men’s language” this is implicit in her theorisation of women’s language as it is defined *against* the normative behaviour of men (Bucholtz 2004:11). The one is thus the opposite of the other, such that:

Men’s language, according to Lakoff’s thesis, is assertive, adult, and direct. Women’s language is immature, hyperformal or hyper polite, and non-assertive...female speech is typically indirect, repetitious, and unclear while male speech is typically direct, clear, and precise.

(Crosby & Nyquist 1977:313-314)

As visualised in Figure 3, “talking like a lady” stands in stark contrast to socially normative ideas about the communication style of power (“language of power”) being clear, convincing, forceful and exuding authority, in ways that are unmistakably masculine (Lazar 2017:184). But following the Lakoff hypothesis, this mode of communicating is proscribed for women: if they communicate this way, they will be accused of being unfeminine, possibly arrogant, aggressive or – a put-down “just” for women – “bossy”. If women do not communicate with force, and instead comply with the expectations of “talking like a lady”, they may be personally more acceptable to their interlocutor, but their utterances may be discounted as insubstantial.

Figure 3: Representational Venn diagram illustrating overlap between the “language of power” with the discourse of men, but not women's language



Lakoff uses the analogy of bilingualism (2004:41) to illustrate the challenge of a woman effectively trying to master two different dialects – the “language of power” and women's language – and ultimately failing to master either. One might argue that the most important point here is not that a woman can never truly excel at both dialects but that it is impossible to speak what are effectively two different languages *at the same time*, and that the effect of one automatically undermines the other. She cannot be simultaneously submissive and authoritative. Lakoff summarises the dilemma thus:

So a girl is damned if she does, damned if she doesn't. If she refuses to talk like a lady, she is ridiculed and subjected to criticism as unfeminine; if she does learn, she is ridiculed as unable to think clearly, unable to take part in serious discussion; in some sense, as less than fully human.

(Lakoff 1975:25)

The ten linguistic markers of “talking like a lady” are summarised in Table 1 and can be grouped together as five lexical, and five syntactic markers. Lakoff latterly explained that it was intentional on her part to move on from the generative grammar (Chomsky 1965) that was the dominant paradigm in Linguistics at the time that she was developing her theories of women's language, to “generative semantics” (Lakoff 2004:18). To be “taken seriously”, Lakoff felt compelled to take this as a point of departure, while at the same time rebelling against Chomsky's focus on “linguistic competence” (1965:19) as replicating a status quo characterised by inequality (Lakoff 2004:18). In

this, Lakoff viewed her work as embodying a protest “against the assumption of the unmarked and ‘normal’ as unquestionable” (2004:18).

Table 1: Linguistic markers of women's language (Lakoff 2004:78-81).

Lexical	Precise naming of colours like <i>mauve instead of purple</i> (2004:43)
	Avoidance of (strong) expletives (2004:44)
	“Empty” adjectives like <i>adorable, sweet, lovely, divine</i> (2004:78)
	Lexical hedges/fillers like <i>you know, sort/kind of, well, I guess/think</i> (2004:79)
	Intensifiers like <i>very, so, really</i> and mitigators like <i>just, only</i> (2004:48)
Syntactic	Tag questions (2004: 57-49)
	Rising intonation on declaratives (2004:50)
	Emphatic stress and “[speaking] in italics” (2004:79-81)
	Hypercorrect grammar (2004:80)
	Superpolite forms (2004:80)

Possibly one of the most controversial aspects of Lakoff’s theory of “Language and Woman’s Place” is that it was arrived at via a process of introspection (Lakoff 2004:24) and “many hours of mind-stretching and insightful discussion and argument with many people” (2004:37), rather than an explicit and replicable methodology. It was also never intended to be definitive on the matter of sexism in language, but rather a catalyst to further research (Lakoff 1975:40). In this, Lakoff certainly more than met her objective, as her work has inspired generations of scholars within linguistics and beyond. It is a vindication of her approach (Bucholtz 2004:5) that the “Lakoff hypothesis” has endured as a touchstone of ‘women’s language’ (Cameron, McAlinden & O’Leary

1988:74) with much engagement, but no substantial changes to the fundamental thesis or the list of linguistic markers (Table 1.1).

Nevertheless, it is worth considering the key criticisms that have been levelled at Lakoff's theorisation of "Language and Woman's Place" (LWP). Firstly, there is Lakoff's reliance on her own intuition rather than developing an empirical base for her claims (Greco 2014:17). As mentioned, there has been significant subsequent work (see Svendsen 2018) to engage empirically with Lakoff's claims, which has consistently reinforced her position. Lakoff's approach also seems less revolutionary viewed from the present perspective than it would have done when she was developing her theories. At the time, Chomsky's rigid notions of generative grammar still held sway (Lakoff 2004:16) and the notion of generative semantics seemed "impossible" (Lakoff 2004:16). In retrospect, Lakoff reflects:

I wish I had appreciated the controversial nature of what I was trying to do, in bringing asterisks and paradigms into sociolinguistic examination. But I thought language was language: if a method of analysis yielded interesting results, it was justified. If a method worked in one area, perhaps it would work in another.

(Lakoff 2004:24)

LWP has also drawn criticism for an essentialising tendency to women and men (Svendsen 2018:8; Greco 2014:7). This criticism has two dimensions to which it is necessary to attend:

1. Criticism of how Lakoff approaches the feminist cause of women: This criticism when directed at Lakoff's work is more a reflection on the progress that has been made in feminist approaches since Lakoff's time, rather criticism of her specific approach. Lakoff freely acknowledges and celebrates the significant progress within LGS and related fields (Lakoff 2004:20; Kaniklidou 2021:144-146), personal correspondence from Lakoff, dated 26 May 2023), and reflects that, with the knowledge available now, were she to be writing *LWP* now, she would adjust her approach (Lakoff 2004:20), particularly with regard to being seen to essentialise gender (Kaniklidou 2021:145). The tendency to approach the cause of women as if all women belong to one homogenous nation was a characteristic of the women's liberation movement that emerged in the 1960s (Gianoulis 2015:1), but this shifted through the late 1980s with growing sensitivity to the need to recognise and grapple with diversity and expand the scope of feminism

to consider the impacts of other intersectionalities (Crenshaw 1991:1296). The feminist poet and philosopher Riley articulated a realisation that “both the concentration on and a refusal of the identity of ‘women’ are essential to feminism” (1988:1).

2. Criticism of her theory of “women’s language”: As touched on earlier (see page 7), Lakoff theorised a register that seemed to be a linguistic resource used by women, rather than men. It was not a theory of *how (all) women speak* but rather a set of linguistic markers that might appear in the speech of some women under certain circumstances. Lakoff candidly declared that her theory was derived from “introspection [and examining] on [her] own speech and that of [her] acquaintances” (2004:40), clearly locating the work in her own personal context. She does not spell this out to be white, middle-class cisgender female academic in North America, but this is implicit, and her theories should thus be read as relevant first and foremost to this context. Interestingly, the theories Lakoff proposed in *LWP* have more than delivered on her wish that they be “a goad to further research” (Lakoff 2004:40), also with respect to considering their relevance to the speech ‘women’ of different races (Morgan 2004) and ethnicities (Livia 2004; Ide 2004; Matsumoto 2004; Greco 2014; Pan 2011; Amir, Abidin, Darus & Ismail 2012 for Malaysia and Prebrianti 2013).

Another gender-related criticism of *LWP* is that it collapses women’s behaviour and femininity (Kiesling 2004:230) by taking a dual approach of investigating both how women tend to speak, and how women tend to be spoken *about*, in one and the same text. The contention is that this blurs what are essentially two fundamentally different questions, and the logical distinction between how women are socialised to use language, and actually *do* use language (Kiesling 2004:230). If the criticism is directed at ensuring clear distinctions between concepts, I think the same criticism could be levelled at the critique itself. To pull it apart then, on socialisation vs. actual behaviour, the foundational argument is sufficiently consistent and relevant to carry both: girls are socialised to be “little ladies”, but boys are unrestrained; and in practice, girls may comply with these expectations, or, at their peril, may not. In terms of integrating the notion of how women are talked about, this does indeed veer off in a different theoretical direction, but it draws on the same underlying rationale of traditional gender norms shaping sexist attitudes to “woman’s place” in society.

It seems somewhat ingenuous to move from the criticism that Lakoff may have put too much into LWP, to a criticism that she ought to have put *more* into it, but indeed it has been argued that more attention might have been paid to “men’s language”, as well as to the consideration that men may display the same lexical markers of powerlessness that are associated with women’s language (Crosby & Nyquist 1977:321). To the first point, the assertion that “men’s language” also needs examination is correct in principle; however, “the time was not right in 1973...when it was necessary to expose and refute the assumption that female behaviour was somehow deficient or deviant from the male norm” (Kiesling 2004:229). To the second point that the lexical markers of powerlessness are not exclusive to women, this is true and referenced directly in the introduction to this study (see page 6) where it is explained that some contemporary scholars consequently prefer the more inclusive term “feminine register” or even “powerless language” (O’Barr & Atkins 1980, cited in Cameron, McAlinden & O’Leary 1988:78) to denote that, while essentially associated with the feminine, it is a register that may also be used by other groups. But again, the political imperative of Lakoff’s feminist stance, spoke for a strong – and unwavering – focus on women and the systematic sexism that they face.

Finally, there is the question of the extent to which the linguistic features that Lakoff identified as marking women's language are “a consequence of being female, or being subordinate, or some mixture of the two” (Cameron, McAlinden & O’Leary 1988:78). Superficially this appears to be a provocative challenge, but on reflection, Lakoff’s point really is that the issue is “some mixture of the two”, precisely because women are subordinate because they are women, and this is the position to which society continues normatively to relegate them. It is precisely this injustice that drives Lakoff’s entire thesis and is the thrust/ impetus behind this study.

4.2.1. Empty adjectives and the intensifier *so*

This study focuses on just two of the ten lexical markers that Lakoff associates with “talking like a lady”: empty adjectives (2004:45-46) and the intensifier “so” (2004:48). These markers were selected not simply because they are the most under-examined, but because preliminary analysis indicated that they appear with surprising frequency in the dataset. As the corpus is composed of discourse drawn from LinkedIn – a “serious” social network – it was expected that the

communication style would tend to be formal; however, the tone of these particular lexical items can, depending on context, be strikingly informal. Further, these are linguistic features that Lakoff (1973, 1975, 2004) has associated with women's language, although comparisons between the corpora of women's and men's discourse have reflected men making liberal use of these words too. This appears to contradict Lakoff's theory and raises the question as to why, and what it might reveal about the power dynamics between the men and women active on the LinkedIn newsfeed. In Critical Discourse Analysis, it is also appropriate to approach discourse selectively, focusing on "those structures for closer analysis that are relevant for the study of a social issue" (van Dijk 2011:5).

Empty adjectives are adjectives that have a literal (deontic) meaning but can also be used figuratively (phatic) to express personal feelings about something. The phatic use is primarily concerned with the interpersonal, in that it is used primarily for the social and emotive effect, rather than to transmit specific information, as in the deontic case. Among these empty adjectives, Lakoff argues that some are neutral and used by both women and men, but others are predominantly used by women (2004:45). She offers the following examples of gendering in empty adjectives, later adding "cute" (2004:78) as another "women only" empty adjective:

<i>neutral</i>	<i>women only</i>
great	adorable
terrific	charming
cool	sweet
neat	lovely
	divine

(Lakoff 1975:45)

Lakoff describes her list as "representative" (Lakoff 2004:45), without providing a basis for this claim. It is a selection of potentially *all* adjectives, but Lakoff provides neither a method for identifying empty adjectives nor distinguishing between what is neutral or "women only" other than her own intuition, which we are invited to follow with our own. This presents the challenge of devising a robust logic for a more methodical approach to classifying empty adjectives, and potentially developing a continuum of "emptiness". According to this author such a classification

method has not yet been fully developed. In a study of gender-based differences in user-generated content of teen bloggers (Amir et al. 2012), empty adjectives were included in the research scope, but given minimal attention and apparently selected at random – at least, no systematic process is identified in the methodology, or alluded to in the discussion.

Lakoff characterises “women only” empty adjectives as “devoid of all but a vague positive emotive sense” (Lakoff 2004:142). The assertion that the adjectives are only “[vaguely] positive” is somewhat misleading; rather, they are emphatic, and their effusiveness could be construed as rather silly, even infantile. According to Lakoff, a man using such adjectives “is apt to be damaging to his reputation” (2004:45), as the “women only” adjectives are not appropriate to serious talk. Interestingly, Lakoff explores an illustrative scenario where a “women only” empty adjective might even be inappropriate for a woman:

1. (a) What a terrific idea!
(b) What a divine idea!

(Lakoff 2004:46)

The first scenario is a female advertising executive speaking in a creative review. In this “serious” business context, it is suggested that (a) would be appropriate, but not the “women only” alternative (b). Based on professional experience, the assessment of “terrific” as more acceptable than “divine” is expected; however, the acceptability of “terrific” within itself remains problematic. This may be neutral in American English, but somewhat over-enthusiastic for a business context on the other side of the Atlantic. One might imagine an American colleague saying this, but certainly “divine” is not something one would expect anyone to say in a serious discussion. This point is reinforced by Lakoff with a second scenario of (b) being said by a woman reacting to her friend’s idea to “dye her French poodles to match her cigarette lighter” (2004:46). It is an absurd response to a truly absurd scenario. So absurd, in fact, that it probably overshoots the mark, which somewhat undermines the seriousness of Lakoff’s own argument, although the point is well made that “women only” empty adjectives apply to things that are irrelevant to “the real world of (male) influence and power” (2004:46).

In a search for male equivalents, Lakoff explores a scenario where “terrific”, “lovely” and “groovy” are used by a male to describe a steel mill – a prototypically masculine industrial entity: loud, dirty, and impressive. “Terrific” is again neutral in the American-English application of the word, “lovely” is patently absurd, but “groovy” might indeed be acceptable...for a hippie (2004:46). This is interesting as it suggests a subset of men who, by virtue of rejecting conventional values, might intentionally use language that is normatively inappropriate to drive home their rejection of the status quo. This leads to two further cases where Lakoff suggests that men might use “women only” empty adjectives: upper-class British men and men in academia. In the first case, Lakoff proposes that men may use these empty adjectives that are marked as not being part of the “serious” discourse of the real, working world, because they can thereby signify that they are “[gentlemen] of leisure” (2004:47). The second worked example of men in academia potentially indulging in “women only” turns of phrase, is less compelling. Here Lakoff postulates a dominant perception that academics “don’t really work, they are supported in their frivolous pursuits by others, what they do doesn’t really count in the real world” (2004:47). It’s a staggering statement for an evidently hard-working academic to make, but I say it is also fundamentally flawed. Unlike the case of “upper-class British men” who may be oblivious to marking their discourse as outside the working world, or may intentionally do so, it is not convincing that a “serious” academic would do the same. Even if their work is poorly understood and under-valued in the “real world”, this does not automatically mean that they would comply with this disparaging perception by using a less powerful register. That said, the discourse of academics has been proven to have a similarity to women's language in that it is similarly marked by the use of hedges (Schmauss & Kilian 2022), but this has a different purpose: to comply with the academic convention of hedging to open dialogic space for the discussion and debate and is definitely not a signal of powerlessness.

One area where Lakoff proposes women – and academic men – tend to hedge is in the use of the intensifier *so* (2004:47-48; 79-80). Lakoff hedges her own exploration of the phenomenon by noting “the facts are controversial, and I do not understand them fully” (2004:47-48), treating the case of *so* as a footnote in her exploration of “talking like a lady”, but later includes it with equal standing among all the other linguistic items that she has explored in more depth, in her summary of what make up the markers of women's language (2004:78-81). Whereas empty adjectives can

serve to ‘hype up’ a statement, and intensifiers – notably absolute superlatives – such as “very”, “really” and “extremely” are generally used to do this, Lakoff suggests that the use of the intensive *so* – typically stressed – functions as a hedge as women signal “I feel strongly about this – but I dare not make it clear *how* strong” (2004:80). Instead of a woman saying, “I like him *very* much” she might blur the intensity of her feeling by stating “I like him *so* much” and blur it further by adding stress on *so* that serves to infuse emphatic force back into the construction. As a linguistic move, it is a mixed signal. Lakoff characterises women’s marked use of *so* as appearing in cases “where purists would insist upon an absolute superlative” (2004:48), with the following examples:

2. (a). I feel so unhappy!

(b) The movie made me so sick!

(Lakoff 2004:48)

These are hypothetical examples of women’s language that men would be expected to avoid, and are contrasted with cases argued as neutral in that both women *and men* could be expected to use them, without appearing to push up against any normative barriers on gendered language use:

3. (a). The sunset is so beautiful!

(b) Fred is so dumb!

(Lakoff 2004:48)

The key difference between the two pairs of hypothetical sentences is that 2 (a) and (b) reflect instances where the speaker is articulating *her own* feelings, but the subjects of 3 (a) and (b) are external to the speaker – he is talking about “the sunset” and “Fred”, not himself (2004:48). The case of *so* in respect of women’s language thus seems to apply specifically to the hedging of women’s feelings, although the combined effect of the lexical choice – *so* instead of an absolute superlative – and the added stress, has a somewhat muddled effect. This apparent ambivalence suggests that the women using *so* does in fact feel strongly about the emotion that she is expressing but feels it necessary to artificially put a brake on this, consistent with one of the defining characteristics of women’s language; that she “[avoids] making any strong statement” (2004:48). The case of *so* in women’s language does indeed appear to be a provocative one, but it has not yet been fully developed. This suggests a need for closer examination that is consistent with Lakoff’s intent that her work be a “goad to further research” (Lakoff 1975:40). It also highlights

again the importance of context: the function of *so* can only be understood in the context of the sentence.

The effect of frivolous, “women only” empty adjectives and the ambiguity encoded in the “women only” use of the intensifier *so*, serves to undermine the impact of what is being said; to mark it as less clear and less important. This exemplifies the pernicious impact of the way girls and women are socialised to use language:

“...the behaviour a woman learns as “correct” prevents her from being taken seriously as an individual, and further is considered “correct” and necessary for a woman precisely because society does not consider her seriously as an individual.”

(Lakoff 2004:45)

4.2.2. Identifying “women only” empty adjectives

Although Lakoff does not posit a conclusive definition of empty adjectives, as explored above, a few features are theorised (2004:45-47) that could be used to formulate a more objective approach to identifying and evaluating empty adjectives in the corpora. The first feature is that empty adjectives have two meanings: a literal meaning, and a phatic meaning to “[indicate] a speaker’s approbation or admiration for something” (Lakoff 2004:45). It is important to note that Lakoff specifically calls out the relevant adjectives as expressing an overtly *positive* feeling – these adjectives are *enthusiastic*. However, extremely negative feelings can also be encoded in empty adjectives, so I would argue for expanding the definition to any hyperbolic emotional reaction, whether positive or negative. The second feature of empty adjectives in Lakoff’s theorisation is that some may be neutral, used equally by women and men, whereas others tend to be used exclusively by women (2004:45). It is this latter group that Lakoff sees as falling within the bounds of women’s language.

Following Lakoff’s logic, I propose a more systematic, corpus-based approach to identifying “women only” empty adjectives in two steps:

- 1) Conduct a semantic analysis to identify adjectives in the sample that, in addition to their deontic meaning, express “approbation or admiration for something” (2004:45), or

hyperbolic negative sentiment. A semantic tagger (Abdou et al. 2018; Abzianidze & Bos 2017) is useful, although current software does not enable tagging for more than one meaning (see Methodology, pages 67-69).

- 2) Within this sub-set of adjectives, assess the frequency with which they are used by women and men respectively, and tag those used more frequently by women as likely to be “women only” empty adjectives.

The approach outlined above would identify “women only” empty adjectives according to Lakoff’s theorisation but would not account for differences in discursive and social practices (Fairclough 1992/2021:73), or for the possibility of men using such empty adjectives more or less than may be expected. This is where benchmark corpora are helpful to identify any marked differences that would then deserve closer examination, probably at a more subjective level, following the same approach that Lakoff (1973, 1975, 2004) uses with paired contrasting sentences.

Given the emphasis that Lakoff places on the feelings encoded in the “women only” empty adjectives as being somewhat excessive and hyperbolic, it is necessary to employ a more granular framework to understand how feelings may be lexically conveyed with different degrees of force. The framework of Appraisal, as theorised by Martin and White (2005), is a useful tool for this.

Appraisal has been theorised within the paradigm of Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistics (2014) and is specifically concerned with what Halliday termed the interpersonal metafunction – that aspect of language that reflects how writers/speakers interact with their readers/interlocutors, and how relations are established and maintained (Halliday 2014:83). Appraisal specifically develops notions of “how writers/speakers approve and disapprove, enthuse or abhor, applaud and criticise” (Martin & White 2005:1) within the concept of “Attitude”, which is an ideal resource for this study, given the concern with the linguistic act of “enthusing” encoded in “women only” empty adjectives.

Attitude is concerned with human feelings, explored in three dimensions: Affect, Judgement and Appreciation (Martin & White 2005:35). Affect is concerned with emotional response – “with registering positive and negative feelings” (Martin & White 2005:42), whereas Judgement and

Appreciation are evaluative, based less on intuitive reaction and more on normative ideas about behaviour (Judgement) and aesthetics (Appreciation), that make these “institutionalised feelings” (2005:45), whereas Affect is more personal. The discourse semantic systems of Affect, Judgement and Appreciation have been developed in detail, and it is worthwhile briefly reviewing these refinements to highlight the aspects that are relevant to this analysis.

Affect: Affect deals with personal feelings that are encoded as either a “behavioural surge” or “mental process/state [or] disposition” (Martin & White 2005:47,48). Affect has been theorised as four variables:

- 1) dis/inclination: The variable of dis/inclination refers to the emotive mental process involved in intention “rather than reaction” (2005:48).
- 2) un/happiness: This variable deals with “affairs of the heart” (2005:49), such as feelings of happiness, sadness, love, and hate.
- 3) in/security: The variable of in/security covers feelings about “social well-being” (2005:49), such as trust or scepticism, confidence, or anxiety.
- 4) dis/satisfaction: This variable is concerned with the pursuit of goals and “feelings of achievement and frustration in relation to the activities in which we are engaged” (2005:50)

Judgement: Judgement expresses attitudes towards the behaviour of others and draws upon socially construed notions of ethics and morality (2005:45). This discourse semantic system is composed of two sub-systems and associated variables, with some helpful diagnostic questions included by Martin and White (2005) to guide categorisation:

- 1) Social esteem: The judgements of social esteem are concerned with normative ideas of “normality” (how unusual or special?), “capacity” (how capable?) and “tenacity” (how reliable and dependable?), all directed at judging other people (2005:52-53).
- 2) Social sanction: The judgements of social sanction are concerned with “veracity” (truth) and propriety (ethics) that respectively judge how honest someone may be, and how far beyond reproach (2005:52-53).

Appreciation: The discourse semantic system of appreciation deals with “our evaluations of ‘things’, especially things we make and performances that we give, but also including natural phenomena” (2005:56). Here the system is composed of three variables:

- 1) Reaction: According to Martin and White, reaction appraises “impact” (did it grab me?) and “quality” (did I like it?) (2005:56).
- 2) Composition: This variable relates primarily to human perceptions of order in a compositional sense: “balance” (did it hang together?) and “complexity” (was it hard to follow?) (2005:56).
- 3) Valuation: Noted as a variable that is “especially sensitive to field” (2005:57), valuation appraises the value of something (was it worthwhile?) (2005:56) and is a subjective appraisal that is heavily dependent on context.

Within the system network of Appraisal, the relevant aspect for this critical discourse study is the system of Attitude, and within this, all three discourse semantic sub-systems: Affect, Judgement and Appreciation. These systems provide a helpful framework for categorisation of descriptive adjectives. In addition to identifying normative use of language, the framework can also help to identify where adjectives are used in a marked way, as characterises “women only” empty adjectives. For example, in an example mentioned earlier (see page 38), Lakoff explores the case of “terrific” and “divine” when appraising an idea:

1. (a) What a terrific idea!
(b) What a divine idea!

(Lakoff 2004:46)

Within the system of Appraisal, this would be a case of Appreciation as it is an abstract concept (idea) that is appraised, not a person. The adjective “terrific” has a literal meaning of great size or impact, that is derived from an archaic meaning of inspiring terror, that over time has shifted towards awe and gained more positive connotations. In contemporary English, and American-English especially, “terrific” has the overwhelmingly positive phatic meaning of being unusually good – remarkably good. The adjective “divine” however, has a literal meaning of being like – or associated with – God or other godly being. This divine association imbues the word with positive, desirable attributes of god-like perfection, which inform the phatic meaning of the adjective to

express delight. At face value, “divine” would be a Judgement of propriety, so applying it to express Appreciation (in the Appraisal uncommon-sense) to an idea is stretching the point – it feels inappropriate. According to Lakoff’s modelling of “women only” empty adjectives, there is a sense of context appropriacy to adjective use, or rather, *inappropriacy* of these adjectives in any context outside women’s language – a conclusion arrived at by subjective assessment of markedness. The resources of Appraisal however, can help to bring more objectivity to this approach by more precisely categorising the role of the adjective in creating meaning, and the normative way this would be expressed.

4.3. Women and business leadership

Lakoff contends that “women are the “uninvolved”, “out of power” group *par excellence*” (1975:47), but this study is not dealing with inequality faced by *all* women, but rather that subset of women who work in the private sector in commercial business enterprises. The very concept of being a “working woman” is associated with gender discrimination, as they are seen as deviant from social norms that are grounded in traditional gender roles. Women are generally perceived as falling into three subtypes:

Traditional women (e.g. housewives), non-traditional women (e.g. career women, feminists) and a sexual subtype...[which] can be further subdivided into a stereotypically traditional (e.g. chaste women) and non-traditional (e.g. temptresses, promiscuous women) subtype.

(Becker 2010:454)

There is implicit judgement in what are effectively binaries of “good” (traditional) and “bad” (non-traditional) women, with women who work consequently viewed as deviating from their traditional roles of “mother” and “housewife”. A “working woman” is already dividing herself between what are viewed as her “natural” domestic responsibilities by virtue of her dominant role in reproduction of the species (Pan 2011:1018), and the assumed economic imperative of needing to work. A “career woman” is arguably worse in the eyes of society at large as the notion of having a career goes beyond economic imperative to suggest that a woman is not working because she *needs* to,

but because she *chooses* to – she is a woman with *ambition*. Whereas an “ambitious man” may be regarded with respect, an “ambitious woman” tends to draw suspicion and negative associations of ruthlessness, that likely relate back to the normative idea that she is compromising her traditional responsibilities in pursuing a career, and must therefore be hard, selfish, unmaternal, and naturally uncaring. Engaging in the same kind of intuitive speculation that characterises Lakoff’s theorising about how women are *talked about* (2004:51-69), these notions certainly seem to be loaded with social censure. This is exemplified in the word “Rabenmutter” which directly translates from the original German as a “raven mother”. It is a term used to describe a mother who neglects her children and is applied in contemporary language exclusively to *working* mothers. There is no lexical equivalent for working fathers. Lakoff engages in an extensive – but far from exhaustive – investigation of how women are spoken *about* (2004:51-69), which makes the strong point that references to women are loaded with sexist social beliefs about the role and purpose of women that define “woman’s place” (1973, 1975, 2004) and how she should – and should not – behave, including the language that she should use, and how.

Besides the social prejudice that working women face, their participation in the workforce is marked by stark inequality at all levels. Just 50% of women are recorded as having employment, compared to 80% of men (The World Bank 2022). The number of women in the workforce has also stagnated in recent years, and even declined in most recent data, possibly related to impacts of the global pandemic (World Economic Forum 2022:32). Working women are more likely to hold lower-paid jobs than men, work part-time, and are still disproportionately responsible for housework, taking care of children and the elderly, and other domestic responsibilities (Lazar 2017:180). Women are also less likely than men to be promoted at work or be appointed to leadership positions (Verniers & Vala 2018:1; Lazar 2017:180). A comprehensive review of existing research by Eagly and Karau (2002) strongly reflects discrimination against women in the workplace based on actual wages and actual promotions, with women lagging men significantly on both, though the gaps are narrowing slowly over time (2002:585). Research has also shown that more men enter managerial positions than women, even when controlling for factors such as hours worked per year and education (LaPierre & Zimmerman 2012:102). According to the World Economic Fund (2022:36), 31% of managers (in the broadest sense) are women. When one considers that among the 500 largest corporations in the United States of America – the so-called “Fortune 500” – only 8.2% have a

woman as the Chief Executive Officer (Hinchliffe 2022), it puts the 31% into sharp perspective and gives credence to the observation that “the single most uncontroversial, incontrovertible statement to make about women in management is that there are very few of them” (Adler 1993:289). This statement becomes more valid the higher up in the business hierarchy one goes, where the dearth of women – fewer than one in ten CEOs – is striking. The under-representation of women in business points to a clear case of gender inequality that makes one wonder what is holding women back in their careers.

The metaphor of a “glass ceiling” was coined by Marilyn Loden in 1978 (Banu 2022:60) to describe invisible – or at least, unidentified – barriers to the advancement of apparently competent and capable women in business (LaPierre & Zimmerman 2012:101). The term has occasionally been applied to other marginalised groups but has primarily entered popular culture to denote the unique challenges women face in “breaking through” to senior management positions. As an image it evokes the dilemma of a woman bumping up against a ceiling to her ambition that can only be shattered with concerted force, which carries the risk of her being injured by falling glass. The transparency of the glass also suggests the fact that the reasons for the barrier being there are neither clearly seen nor understood. Although the problem of explaining and dismantling the “glass ceiling” has drawn – and continues to attract – considerable engagement, there are no definitive answers. The informed consensus seems to be that it is mainly systemic discrimination that keeps it in place (Zahidi 2022), but there are also powerful “soft” factors bound up with systemic discrimination that reinforce gender-based asymmetries and hold women back. The dominant popular belief is that the key factor restraining women from reaching senior positions in business is their struggle to reconcile work and family obligations (La Pierre & Zimmerman 2012; Avolio, Chávez & Vélchez-Román 2019; Roberts 2019; World Economic Forum 2021). This echoes the earlier discussion of tensions between normative beliefs about the “traditional” role of women as it stems from their dominant role in reproduction of the species, and the “non-traditional” role of working women.

That these discriminatory notions of traditional gender roles are held by both men and women (Barreto & Ellemers 2005:638; Becker 2010:453), touches on the particularly insidious characteristic of gender ideology that “it often does not appear as dominance at all, but as consensual and acceptable to most in the community” (Lazar 2017:186). The grounding of

traditional gender roles in the apparently neutral fact that a female has a uterus probably goes some way to explaining this, but the consequences are dire, not least because it shapes the dominant view that raising children – and by extension – housework, caring for the elderly and other domestic responsibility, is “naturally” the lot of women. These beliefs have been theorised as ‘Motherhood Myths’ (Verniers & Vala 2017) that inform the deep-seated prejudice that women need to make a choice between career progression and having a family. Again, the underlying logic that as the one who has the baby, it is the woman who needs to make the choice, is blatantly sexist (Verniers & Vala 2013:3), both towards women and men. That these ‘Motherhood Myths’ should reach beyond immediate child-care decisions to impact the careers of women far more broadly is a further injustice. The assumption that a woman *throughout* her career – even before she has children, or if she does, even when they are older and less dependent on their parents – will be limited by her need to balance work with domestic responsibilities informs widespread discrimination against women (Verniers & Vala 2017:2; Glick & Fiske 2001:110; Barreto & Ellemers 2005:635). While a woman is thus assumed to have “natural” constraints on her capacity and focus, it goes almost without saying that her male colleagues are assumed not to face the same limitations (Lakoff 2004:21), and therefore their being given more responsibility is not only justified, but it could also even be positioned as considerate towards women and their situation.

Irrespective of the “wrongness” of this situation, it is true that – as noted earlier – women do end up carrying the bulk of domestic responsibilities (Lazar 2017:180). Lakoff offers this perspective:

...women’s difficulties in the new world are ascribed either to women’s unreasonableness and greed, or to the impossible demands of “feminism”. But could there be a third answer? Perhaps women’s lives are messy because no one gives them much help.

(Lakoff 2004:21)

Taken together then, it is undeniable that more women than men must balance their work commitments and aspirations with their – arguably unfair – burden of domestic responsibilities. It is also evident that sexist assumptions about how they should handle this dilemma informs discrimination against them and may well lead to their being passed over for more responsible roles

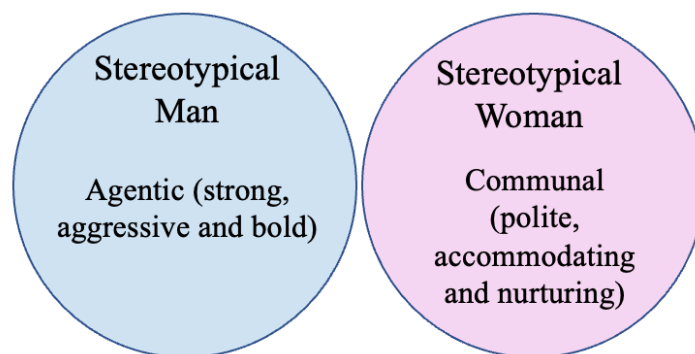
and promotions, in favour of men. But it still does not fully explain the “glass ceiling” that keeps most women out of the corner offices and off the executive floor.

Interestingly, when women who have succeeded in attaining senior positions in the corporate world are asked, they reject the “Motherhood Myths” in favour of an alternative explanation for the discrimination women face in career advancement; namely, that the leadership style associated with women is not valued as highly as that of cisgender men (Bain and Company and Chief Executive Women 2011:4). These women contend that women are not promoted into top positions because they are not regarded as possessing the capabilities deemed necessary to be successful leaders.

Leadership, as it relates to business management, refers to “a social influence process” (Nanjundeswaraswamy & Swamy, 2014) whereby one person endeavours to engage others in the pursuit of specific business goals. The concept of leadership is thereby inherently relational and discursive, but also associated with *power*. A popular theory of leadership differentiates between “transformational leadership” and “transactional leadership” (Nanjundeswaraswamy & Swamy 2014:57); that is, traditional, hierarchy-based positional leadership, and leadership through personal influence and engagement that is *less reliant* on overt power structures (Nanjundeswaraswamy & Swamy 2014:58). It is important to note that even transformational leadership styles that are not overly hierarchical, still operate on the basis of power.

The argument that women are overlooked because they are perceived as lacking the innate qualities deemed essential for successful business leadership has been formally theorised by Eagly and Karau (2002) as the so-called “Role Congruity Theory”, also known as the “Incongruity Hypothesis” (Hideg & Shen 2019). This theory contends that the agentic qualities associated with successful business leadership are normatively attributed to men, not women. This discrimination is again rooted in notions of traditional gender roles whereby women are associated with the maternal and communal, and are thus expected to be polite, accommodating and nurturing (Heilman 2012:113). Men, in contrast, are stereotypically characterised as being physically strong and psychologically robust, bold and forceful even to the point of being perceived as naturally aggressive (Heilman 2012:113). As visualised in Figure 4, these starkly contrasting stereotypes position masculine and feminine attributes as diametrically opposed.

Figure 4: Representational Venn diagram illustrating gendered character stereotypes



This stereotyping of gender character attributes also manifests as so-called “benevolent sexism” (Glick & Fiske 2001; Barreto Ellemers 2005; Becker 2010) that ostensibly celebrates feminine attributes and things that women are consequently assumed to do better than men, but which effectively restricts women to socially constructed and constricted roles and behaviours that can be limiting, disempowering and inauthentic. Women may be favoured for displaying behaviour that conforms with these normative ideas, but censored as unnatural, unfeminine, arrogant, and aggressive, when they are not (Eagly & Karau 2002:583).

The management consultancy, Bain and Company, in conjunction with Chief Executive Women, asked members of the Australian business community ($n=842$) to identify those leadership attributes that their organisation emphasises and rewards the most. “Problem-solving” and “influencing” (2011:11) emerged clearly as the most critical capabilities of effective business leadership. When the respondents – a range of junior and senior managers, with 66% identifying themselves as women, and 34% as men – were subsequently asked to associate twelve attributes of leadership with either women or men, based on which gender they see as typically having most competence in that respect, they tended to associate those attributes most valued as essential leadership capabilities, such as “making tough decisions based on facts and logic” and “speaking up in leadership meetings”, with the male gender. Those that were considered less crucial to the task of corporate leadership, such as “working effectively in a team” and “building relationships with colleagues” however, tended to be associated with women (2011:8).

These findings appear to bear out the truth that women may be passed over for promotion because they are not perceived as having leadership competency in the areas that count. This suggests discrimination in the way that the leadership style of women is perceived, based on dominant stereotypes of what women – as opposed to men – do well, and what they do not. This exemplifies the “benevolent sexism” (Glick & Fiske 2001) that has been widely recognised by researchers as powerful gender discrimination (Glick & Fiske 2001; Hildeg & Shen 2019; Becker 2010; Barrato & Ellemers 2005), that subtly but perniciously demonstrates unconscious bias that is largely unquestioned by women, and even less so by men (Barreto & Ellemers 2005:634; Becker 2010). Interestingly, younger women tend to display a higher degree of benevolent sexism in their perception of the potential of women to be effective business leaders, than older, more senior women (McKenzie 2018:7), suggesting that these ideas may evolve with experience, although fundamentally, women are more likely to be perceived as “team players” and men as born leaders, thus justifying inequality in the workplace as the natural and correct order of things.

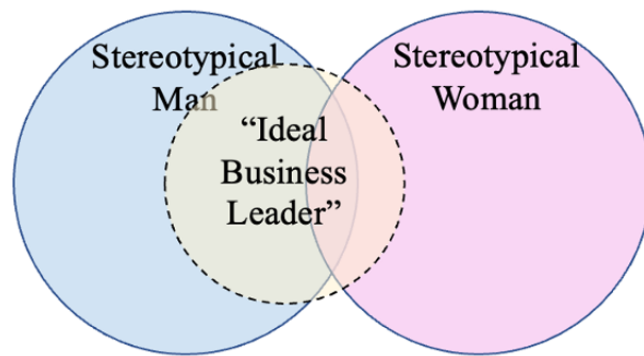
In addition to limiting ideas about women’s capabilities which assign them to areas perceived as less critical to successful business leadership, while the stereotypical attributes of “what men do better than women” align neatly with the prototypical attributes of the ideal business leader, there is another injustice: namely, that in an androcentric society, the male tends to be automatically conflated with the universal, while the female is the “other” (Butler 1990:4). This means that the key attributes of the universal ideal of the business leader would automatically be masculine, rather than feminine, and there is a conflation of “man” with “professionalism” and “authority” in both the private and public sphere (Lazar 2017:184). In the case of leadership style, this dynamic is amplified by the fact that women have historically been barred from leadership roles in business and still today remain massively under-represented at managerial and executive levels (World Economic Forum 2021:5) So this space has always been predominantly a male one and thus synonymous with normative ideas of masculinity. This dynamic is visualised in Figure 5 in which the prototype of the ideal business leader overlaps heavily with the stereotype of the ideal man, mirroring his perceived agentic masculine propensity to get things done, make tough decisions, and lead.

Figure 5: Representational Venn diagram illustrating the conflation of the masculine with the universal ideal of effective business leadership attributes



Since the concept of the ideal business leader heavily overlaps attributes stereotypically associated with men, it follows from traditional gender norms that these same attributes would be disassociated with women. This indicates a conflation of the normative attributes of male behaviour with normative ideals of a business leader, while the associations with women’s leadership style are seen as less essential to leadership success. This results in the situation visualised in Figure 6 where a woman cannot be seen to embody the characteristics of a successful business leader without compromising her femininity. In fact, research (Ridgeway 1982) has demonstrated that women seeking to offset potential censure for agentic behaviour by behaving more communally, were indeed better received by male colleagues, but at the expense of their leadership standing. This correlates with findings by Carli (1990) that “assertive female speakers were less likely to influence their male addressees than tentative female speakers” (Svendsen 2018:6), but by the very act of being tentative, the woman must necessarily cede power. The leadership role is evidently not perceived as a natural one for a woman with the result that either she is not trusted to do it well, or she is treated with suspicion because she does, and therefore is not fully a woman – “[so] a girl is damned if she does, damned if she doesn’t” (Lakoff 1975:41).

Figure 6: Representational Venn diagram representing the conflation of the male with the universal notion of an ideal business leader, and the ‘othering’ of the female

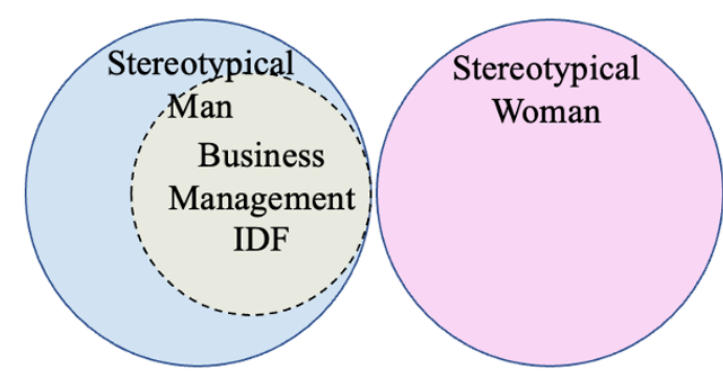


The “Role Congruity Theory” (Eagly & Karau 2002) appears to mirror the “Lakoff Hypothesis” (Cameron, McAlinden & O’Leary 1988:75) in that both suggest social pressure on women to behave in ways that work against their being taken seriously. Bringing Lakoff’s theory into the specific context of discourse by woman in business, and specifically management, this is crystallised in the observation that “[if] she talks like a manager she is transgressing the boundaries of femininity: if she talks like a woman, she no longer represents herself as a manager” (Jones 2000, cited in Lazar 2017:438).

Within the framework of Critical Discourse Studies, Fairclough theorises “social institutions as containing diverse ‘ideological-discursive formations’ (IDFs)...[that] is a sort of ‘speech community’ with its own discourse norms” (2010:31). A business enterprise represents such a social institution, and within this, leadership would – by extension – be associated with a distinct IDF informed by notions of how an ideal leader should behave to be successful in business. The IDFs would differ according to industry, division, function and so on, but the universal notion of business leadership would cut across these and influence decisions about the effective deployment of people in the pursuit of business goals. These decisions would be subject to all the social biases associated with such ideologies, including the tendency to conflate the masculine with the universal, that leads to the reality that “[the] accepted communicative style of power and authority in the public sphere is decidedly masculine” (Lazar 2017:184).

Coming back to Lakoff's theory of women's language, if this is essentially the antithesis of "men's language" and marked by *powerlessness*, a foundational hypothesis of this research would be that this feminine register, as theorised by Lakoff (2004), would lie outside the bounds of the IDF of business management, as illustrated in Figure 7, and women would thus be unable to simultaneously comply with the expectations of "talking like a lady" and "talking like an effective business manager".

Figure 7: Representational Venn diagram illustrating overlap between the Business Management IDF with the discourse of men, but not of women



As an IDF of leadership, the business management IDF is inherently associated with power and is agentic – it is about engaging others to get things done. "Men's language", as theorised by Lakoff, is "assertive, adult, and direct...clear and precise" (Crosby & Nyquist 1977:313-314), but "women's language is "immature, hyperformal or hyperpolite, and non-assertive...indirect, repetitious, and unclear" (Crosby & Nyquist 1977:313-314). These represent stark binaries: one is effective and the other weak and vacillating. Of the two, agentic men's language would be the preferred register for leadership. But the problem with appearing to be decisive and confident is that it is potentially face-threatening to an interlocutor and, certainly in western notions of politeness, imposing one's will on another is viewed as impolite. This is not equally applied: women are socialised to be excessively polite and ingratiating, but boys are allowed to develop their confidence. As the male tends to be conflated with the universal, and the business space has historically been a men-only domain and remains heavily male-dominated, it is unsurprising that agentic male qualities are not only tolerated but valued in business. The problem arises when women enter this space and need to compete with men without alienating those around them by

behaving in ways that upset dominant gender norms. Just as Lakoff contends, “a girl is damned if she does, damned if she doesn’t” (2004:41).

4.4. CDA and Social Network Services (LinkedIn)

“Social media” has become so ubiquitous it seems almost unnecessary to provide a definition, but as a reference point, I will use the definition of social media and social network sites proposed by Boyd and Ellison (2007). These sites are:

web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.

(Boyd & Ellison 2007:211)

An important addition to this list of capabilities is the ability for users to exchange information by creating their own, or re-sharing existing posts such as blogs, tweets, and comments, as well as multimedia content such as images, videos, audio files, gifs (graphic interchange format for sharing compressed images and short animations) and emoticons (emotion icon). Social media play a role in the “recontextualization of social practice” (Bouvier & Machin 2018:187) recasting experiences and social interaction from the “offline” to the “online”, digital world.

Social media are a defining feature of the Digital Age – a phase of the Information Age where the screen has come to replace the page as the essential mediating device of knowledge. It is generally accepted that the first social media platform was “Six Degrees”, a digital yearbook created in 1997 (Boyd & Ellison 2007:214), and since then, social media sites have proliferated, coming to play a central role “at the intersection of human collective communication acts and information technology” (Albert & Salam 2013:1). Given the exponential growth of the sector, it seems somewhat surprising that social media was still being characterised as late as 2013 as “an emerging frontier” (Albert & Salam 2013:1) in Critical Discourse Analysis and a comprehensive review of CDA research conducted five years later, still reflected relatively little work done in this space, with only a few “notable exceptions” (Bouvier & Machin 2018:184). As such a vast repository of human

discourse exists, literally at one's fingertips, one would expect critical discourse analysts to be extremely active in the analysis of this content, but it seems not to be the case, at least not to the extent one might anticipate. While social media – and the internet in general – offer many rich opportunities for research, they also present some inherent challenges, which have undoubtedly limited engagement.

The world wide web is effectively an infinite source of constantly evolving and growing data, available in electronic format that makes for the relatively fast and easy compilation of potentially vast corpora. This presents the first technical challenge in that “the lack of a finite sampling frame rules out the method known as probability sampling” (Mautner 2005:815). Researchers consequently need to define – and declare – other criteria to develop a robust and representative sampling method (Mautner 2005:815). In addition to the sheer scale of the web, it is in constant flux, with content being constantly added, changed, or removed (Mautner 2005:821). Content must consequently be downloaded to create a fixed reference for analysis, which is somewhat inauthentic: one can't “pause” the internet. Nevertheless, there are efforts to do just this, such as the internet archive project <https://archive.org> which attempts to create a record of information deemed important, although this raises the question of who gets to decide what to archive and when, and whether such an approach can ever be representative. The world wide web is essentially “open, unstructured, and quintessentially anarchic” (Mautner 2005:817). CDA has traditionally focused on offline texts produced by elites and powerful institutions (Bouvier & Machin 2018:178), but now, online, anyone can potentially share content (Bouvier & Machin 2018:183). There are strong power dynamics at play, and control of the internet is highly contested, both in terms of economic interests and overt political influence. Despite direct activity to attempt to regulate and even control the space, the world wide web together with the so-called “Dark Web” is essentially uncontrollable, and certainly less prejudiced in favour of elites than traditional media (Mautner 2005:816). A consequence of limited gatekeeping online, compared to traditional media, is that it lacks systematic order, structure and *standards* (Mautner 2005:821). This may make it slightly more difficult to navigate, but the fact that the internet is essentially “egalitarian” (Mautner 2005:817) opens up exciting potential for “free speech” and allows for access to an unmatched diversity of voices. However, it should be noted that the internet is still somewhat biased against the underprivileged

since it is an expensive, technology-based application (Mautner 2005:821), although smartphones have gone a long way to address this, especially in Africa (Kemp 2022a).

Analysis of discourse sourced from the web also presents the challenge of defining what discourse is in scope, and what is not? Firstly, the web is inherently multimodal (Bouvier & Machin 2018:185) which raises the question of how layout, colour, movement, visuals, and sounds should be handled. Social semiotics present rich territory for research (Wodak 2013:xxxii), but are inherently complex in that they require multidimensional analysis. However, depending on the research question(s), it may be appropriate to focus on only selected dimensions of discourse (van Dijk 2011:5). What would be important is for the selection to be declared and justified, so that the criticism of opportunistic selectivity does not apply. Similarly, the popular use of hypertext and hashtags enables the embedded cross-referencing of other content, which challenges traditional notions of discourse boundaries (Mautner 2005:821) as to when discourse begins and ends. Again, the research questions should shape the approach, which the analyst must declare and justify.

Despite all these drawbacks however, the world wide web is so thoroughly embedded in modern society, it cannot be ignored (Mautner 2005:812). Certainly, as a site of contemporary social struggle, it demands CDA attention. The internet plays a powerful role in contemporary socio-political life. It has even been credited with starting revolutions (Abdulla 2011:41), playing a pivotal role in the popular uprisings of the “Arab Spring” in 2011, notably in Egypt and Tunisia (Abdulla 2014; Aouragh Alexander 2011; Dhillon 2014). But there is also strong evidence (Bouvier & Way 2021) of how, on social media, even seemingly “mundane, every day, ‘soft’ content...is ideological and political...even the most banal comments are infused with norms and values” (Bouvier & Way 2021:345). The internet – and social media in particular – reflects the full social bandwidth from the private and personal, to the public, political and truly global.

Social media are not only relevant for research because the content is a barometer of social concern and opinion, but because the power dynamics that play out around the discourse are as revealing as the offline world, sometimes arguably even more so since a cloak of anonymity can encourage internet users to reveal themselves in a way that they would not in the “real world”. As such a powerful part of contemporary society, the world wide web is also a highly contested site of struggle

for control and influence. According to van Dijk (2001a) it is “one of the tasks of CDA to spell out [notions] of discourse access and control” (2001a:356). This is particularly apposite to the case of social media, not least because they are inherently a commercially driven (Mautner 2005:182).

This study focuses on LinkedIn, “the first of the great social networks” (Moore 2019:2), launched in December 2002 by Reid Hoffman and founding team members from PayPal and Socialnet.com – a tech start-up founded by seasoned Silicon Valley executives (LinkedIn 2015). From its inception LinkedIn is has been an overtly commercial undertaking, as emphasised by founder Hoffman declaring: “We’re here to build a business, not to create something cool” (Labay 2020). In December 2016, LinkedIn was acquired by the Microsoft Corporation (LinkedIn 2022). This context is important as the interaction that takes place on the site is fundamentally controlled, channelled, and shaped by commercial interests. The power over social network services is held by the platform owners, “but they constantly have to balance users’ demands with business interests – a struggle that reveals the deeper ideological and economic interests at stake” (van Dijck 2013:210). Platform owner control is exercised through membership terms and conditions, user “guidelines” and subtle “unwritten rules”, and the use of templates (Bouvier & Machin 2018:187) that permit certain types of interactions, but not others (Bouvier & Machin 2018:187). Content may be removed, user accounts may be suspended or permanently blocked, but most influence is exercised subtly, based on the vast data held by LinkedIn about its users that can be used to influence their behaviour to ensure that LinkedIn remains a booming business. For perspective, LinkedIn revenue surpassed \$10 billion in 2021 (Microsoft 2021) and it continues to grow year-on-year (Microsoft 2022).

The LinkedIn website provides businesspeople and professionals – and businesses and educational institutions – with an online stage for self-promotion (van Dijck 2013:199). Users are invited to display their professional qualifications, experience, and expertise in what is essentially a public curriculum vitae, and “skills, performance, professional affiliations, interests, and engagement are valued more highly than relationships” (Moore 209:2), in marked difference to other social network services, like Facebook. LinkedIn is alike to Facebook in that it enables users to interact by sharing and commenting on content on a public newsfeed, but interaction on the LinkedIn platform is markedly more formal and sophisticated (Kapareliotis & Crosbie 2014:1115). Besides a very

different content focus, research shows significantly fewer spelling and grammatical errors on LinkedIn, compared to other SNS (Zide 2014:597). This suggests something about users' level of education and that they are not only careful about *what* they communicate, but also *how* they communicate on the site, because the personal stakes are high.

As a SNS, LinkedIn offers users a platform to promote their personal “brand” (Appleby 2012:81-82; van Dijck 2013:202), in the commercial sense of advertising the selling points of something or someone. There is a difference between the version of the self that is projected on LinkedIn towards contacts, current and prospective clients, and employers: the *professional* (in the common sense of the adjective) persona and the *private*, supposedly more authentic self, projected to friends and family (van Dijck 2013:212). As theorised by Goffman (1959), self-projection is a performance of identity. On LinkedIn, recruiters and employers seek true and representative information about prospective employees that will enable them to make robust hiring decisions (van Dijck 2013:211), but users are engaged in personal branding which, like any advertising campaign, will naturally focus on – and amplify – strengths to promote the most attractive, desirable, and marketable image.

The professional persona is one facet of personal identity that is prominently “performed” (in Goffman’s sense) on LinkedIn. Another facet of personal identity performed on LinkedIn, in most cases probably inadvertently, is gender. LinkedIn does not ask users to state their gender but has a proprietary algorithm that is claimed to accurately predict gender *based on user behaviour* on their site (Altenburger et al. 2017:461). This provides intriguing proof of the concept of gender as performance and an assessment of gender representation on the site. This has informed knowledge that LinkedIn is male dominated (Moore 2019:1) and that the gender gap appears to be growing (2019:5). A review of the current user data reflects that the gap is not as wide as one may expect, with 43.6% of LinkedIn users identified as female (Kemp 2022b), which is even slightly ahead of 43.2% female representation on Facebook (Kemp 2022c). Given the global under-representation of women in business and the professions, the inequality reflected in LinkedIn’s gender split simply reflects the macro context.

Research reflects women using LinkedIn more “relationally” (Moore 2019:1) than men. Men tend to use the platform overtly to promote themselves, exercise influence and gather information

(Moore 2019:1). Unlike men, women are less likely to celebrate their personal achievements on LinkedIn (Altenburger et al. 2017:461) and tend to describe themselves – if at all – in an affectionate tone, whereas men are more assertive (Tifferet & Vilnai-Yavetz 2018:36). Studies have also shown that women tend to be generally more emotionally expressive than men on the site (Tifferet & Vilnai-Yavetz 2018:36). These are all findings that recall the foundational argument of Lakoff's women's language: that women are socialised to be polite and pleasing in ways that undermine their personal impact. Men can freely engage in the kind of behaviour that would be censured in women as socially unacceptable ambition and arrogance. Women are kept in their place, even on LinkedIn.

5. Methodology

This study takes the form of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA). As discussed in the Theoretical Framework (see pages 11-13), CDA is problem-orientated, multidisciplinary, and multi-methodological. Although certain methodological approaches have come to be loosely associated with it over time, CDA “does not provide a ready-made, how-to-do approach to social analysis” (van Dijk 2011:99) but is rather a more exploratory approach directed by the research questions (see page 10), informed by relevant theoretical concepts, and refined through pilot analysis.

The discourse analysed in this critical discourse study is user-generated content (see Figure 8 on page 64 for an example post) sourced from the newsfeed of LinkedIn, a Social Network Service (SNS), and the approach is corpus-based. It has been argued that a corpus-based approach is ideal for critical analysis of social media (Albert & Salam 2013:2) because the electronic medium lends itself to compilation of large corpora; however, analysis of discourse sourced from the world wide web is not without challenges (see pages 56-57) that must be specifically addressed in the methodology.

5.1. Scraping LinkedIn

The first consideration when accessing data from the world wide web (WWW) is copyright and the legality of sourcing – a process known as “scraping” – and storing the data. That it is legal to scrape LinkedIn has been determined conclusively in two separate rulings (Hiq Labs, Inc. v. LinkedIn Corporation, 17-16783 (9th Cir. 2019)) of the Ninth Circuit Appeals Court in the United States which has jurisdiction over LinkedIn and its parent company, Microsoft (Snowdon Smith 2022). However, scraping is discouraged by LinkedIn as an important revenue stream for the company is the sale of their user data, so when data are scraped, they lose out on potential income.

Secondly, using discourse drawn from the WWW poses ethical questions, and LinkedIn is a particularly sensitive case as users are specifically channelled to publish their Personally Identifiable Information (PPI). This PPI ranges from the minimum requirement of registering under one’s full legal name (no usernames or pseudonyms are allowed), to including their telephone number and email address, a headshot, and all the details of their education and career that effectively constitute an online curriculum vitae. For this study however, only user-generated content in the form of short posts on the publicly accessible newsfeed were in scope for the analysis, not the PPI data on user profile pages. Nevertheless, all posts are accompanied by a thumbnail headshot icon and the person’s full name, which is hyperlinked to their profile. These were scraped together with the post, as first names were used for gender tagging. Once the data had been categorised as having been created by either a woman or a man, the data were anonymised in that the names were deleted as the study is concerned with the behaviour of gender groupings, not individuals. A submission detailing all this, and the steps taken to handle the data with appropriate care (encrypted files with a retention limit of maximum five years), was submitted to the Ethical Review Board of the University of Rhodes, Makhanda, South Africa, and returned with the assessment that the study does not carry ethical risk as the data are in the public domain.

With legal and ethical concerns thus addressed, the required data could be scraped and compiled into a corpus. The data were scraped using a purpose-built Application Programme Interface (API) and web scraper internet bot (simple software executing repeat action). The API and bot software were specifically developed for the project by an independent software developer, Daniel Dimitrov, hired via Upwork (www.upwork.com). The brief for the project was to develop a bot to harvest user posts from LinkedIn newsfeed and to group posts by gender.

LinkedIn does not ask users to indicate their gender on their profiles, although there is an emerging trend to *proactively* include preferred pronouns after one's username; however, this practice is still extremely limited. Instead of stated gender identity, LinkedIn uses gendered online behaviour to predict the gender of LinkedIn users (Kokkos & Tzouramanis 2014, Altenburger et al. 2017). As noted earlier, the existence of this algorithm supports the essential theory of discourse being gendered. However, even if one could access the proprietary algorithm that LinkedIn uses to predict gender, this would not be an ideal approach. An algorithm identifying gender based on gendered behaviour on the site, would be a circular reference in an investigation of gendered language. Therefore, it was decided to base gender on the stated first name, with unisex names automatically excluded.

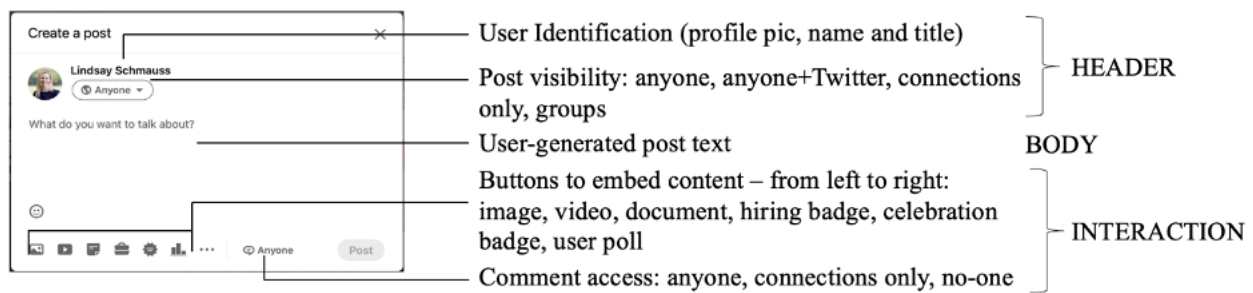
Although the newsfeed is publicly accessible for keyword-based search, according to LinkedIn algorithms, user newsfeeds are populated with content drawn from their network of personal contacts and the specific accounts they follow. The contacts in this study are my own and comprise a defined sample of 1,294 personal contacts who form my network as an active marketing executive. The sample is multi-ethnic and includes 474 (37%) women and 820 (63%) men who fall predominantly in the age range 30-50 years and mostly work in Europe and Russia, the United States of America and sub-Saharan Africa. Almost all contacts are also active in the Fast-Moving Consumer Goods and Consumer Packaged Goods Industry, and most are connected directly – or indirectly – to an industry-leading American multinational, with a consequent predominance of American business culture and American business English. Most contacts work in the fields of marketing, advertising, and sales – fields, incidentally, whose practitioners are the businesspeople most active on LinkedIn (Zide 2014:599).

Each newsfeed item, according to the LinkedIn template (see Figure 8), consists of three parts:

- 1) Header: LinkedIn automatically attaches the user's full name, title, and profile headshot, with the name hyperlinked to the user's profile page. The user can also select the visibility of their post.

- 2) Body: User-generated text, including hashtags and embedded hyperlinks to other web-based content, audio-visual content such as images or videos, documents and opinion polls, and re-posts of other users' content.
- 3) Interaction: This part of the post enables interaction with other users, who can react to a post with predetermined icons such as a thumbs up, round of applause or a heart, or add their own comments, including hashtags and hyperlinks. The user can also determine who is permitted to react to the post.

Figure 8: LinkedIn Newsfeed Post Template



For the scope of this research, the data scraped are restricted to the header and the posted material, not the interaction of other users with the post. The data were downloaded as enriched text, including emoticons, hashtags, as well as all embedded content, and stamped with the date and time of scraping. As the focus of this critical discourse study is on lexical markers used in the user-generated post, the primary analysis is text- and corpus-based, and enriched content was only used for limited qualitative analysis, as an extension of the concordance.

5.2. Compiling the corpora

The data were automatically scraped and sorted according to the first name as having been created by a woman or a man, and then saved as encrypted, password-protected Latin-1 text (.txt) files in the respective gender database. These data were then manually parsed to remove duplicate posts and posts in a language other than English. The user-generated text was then extracted and compiled as a corpus of text (file format .txt) written by women, and a separate corpus of text written by men. The programming language Python (Version 3.9.6.) was used to parse the corpora, removing all

special characters, punctuation marks and other symbols that do not translate into Latin-1 Unicode. This generated two corpora: one of discourse by women consisting of 38,514 tokens; and one by men, with 89,663 tokens (see Table 2).

Table 2: Corpus size (Tokens), and split by gender

	Women	Men	Total
Tokens	38,514	51,149	89,663
<i>Gender Split (%)</i>	<i>43</i>	<i>57</i>	<i>100</i>

5.3. Analysing the corpora

AntConc (version 3.5.9 (Macintosh OS X) 2020) was used to generate word lists, frequencies, and concordances (Key Word in Context) from the corpora. In addition, Python (Version 3.9.6.) in conjunction with the Natural Language Processing Toolkit (NLTK) was used for specific processing of the corpora. NLTK is a library of programmes written in the Python programming language that enables the processing of “natural language” (actual human language, as opposed to computer programming languages), primarily of English (Bird et al. 2009:ix).

5.3.1. Lexical feature extraction

The POS-tagger from the Natural Language Processing Toolkit was used to tag all parts of speech in each corpus. The NLTK POS-tagger is a machine-learning tagger that has been trained to parse text according to defined rules and previous experience, enabling tokens to be categorised as parts of speech based on their location in a sentence, and in relation to the categorisation of surrounding tokens (Bird et al. 2009:179). NLTK enables tagging with pre-defined tagsets. For this study, the Brown Corpus Tagset (Francis & Kusera 1979) was used, specifically “JJ” to identify adjectives, “JJR” to identify comparative adjectives and “JJS” for semantically superlative adjectives (Francis & Kusera 1979).

The POS-tagger was used to identify all adjectives (JJ, JJR and JJS) in both corpora. 1462 tokens in women’s discourse and 1917 in men’s discourse were respectively tagged as adjectives. Python code was then used to extract all tokens tagged as adjectives and combine them as a counted list of token types. These adjective lists were then manually parsed to ensure each adjective token type appeared only once. This reduced the number of token types to 735 in the women’s corpus and 881 in the men’s corpus, reflecting a 50% and 54% reduction in the number of token types respectively, correcting errors in tokenisation. Tokenisation is another NLTK tool that can be used in Python to separate strings of data into individual words and punctuation marks (Bird et al. 2009:80). Tokenisation was done before the POS-tagging, so that individual tokens could be processed and tagged. As it was the first step in the process, errors made in the tokenisation step carried over to all subsequent analysis. As shown in Table 2, there were many cases where the punctuation mark was not separated from the word, leading the word to be correctly identified by the POS-tagger as an adjective, but with an appended character. When the subsequent code was run to extract and group the adjectives according to the same token types, the word-with-punctuation-mark combinations were counted as different token types. In the manual parsing, this error was corrected with these separate lines summed up as one entry per adjective. In the example below (Table 3) of “challenging”, the adjective now appears once with a count of 6. These corrections accounted for almost 90% of the reduction in token types.

Table 3: Sample of same adjectives incorrectly tokenised

Challenging	4
challenging,	1
challenging.	1

In addition to combining the same adjectives as one token type, some special characters (see examples in Table 4), hashtags, and foreign words that had been missed in previous parsing of the databases, were eliminated. Special characters accounted for less than 6% of eliminated token types, and hashtags and foreign words for 2% respectively. It is worth emphasising that the issues here

concerned the quality of the parsing and tokenising of the input data and not the effectiveness of the NLTK POS-tagger which correctly identified adjectives, despite the special characters, though as different token types. Finally, given the focus of the study on descriptive adjectives, possessive and demonstrative adjectives were eliminated. These accounted for 2% of token types in the original extraction.

Table 4: Sample of special characters and associated tokens, and hashtags cleaned from adjective list

:-)	1
:-).	1
:)	1
??	2
????	1
?????,	1
????Don't	1
#brandpurpose	1
#development	1
#ESG	1
#GreenFashionRevolution.	1
#JohnOliver-	1

5.3.2. Semantic tagging

Although the NLTK POS-tagger using the Brown tagset (Francis & Kusera 1979) distinguishes between comparative, superlative and all other adjectives, these are quite broad categories when the area of enquiry outlined for this study is specifically restricted to adjectives that express “approbation or admiration for something” (Lakoff 2004:45), or a hyperbolic negative reaction. Semantic taggers go beyond identifying the part of speech to assess lexical semantics, enabling more granular categorisation (Adbou et al. 2018:4881; Abzianidze & Bos 2017:1).

There is not yet a semantic tagger specifically developed for Appraisal analysis (O’Donnell 2012), nor are automated taggers available for Appraisal analysis; however, text annotation software, notably Universidad Autónoma de Madrid (UAM) Corpus Tool can be used for marking up texts (O’Donnell 2012:116). UAM Corpus Tool was designed specifically for use with emerging theoretical frameworks like Appraisal for analysing attitude in discourse (O’Donnell 2012:115); however, the system relies on the manual – and subjective – assessment of the researcher, rather than algorithm-driven automatic tagging. This makes UAM CorpusTools ill-suited to corpus-based analysis when large amounts of discourse need to be marked up.

In the absence of an Appraisal-based automatic tagger, an existing semantic tagger was used to add more granularity to the NLTK POS-tagging already done. The semantic tagger used in this study is the UCREL (Unit for Computer Research on the English Language) Semantic Analysis System (USAS), selected because it identifies “emotional actions, states and process” (Rayson et al. 2004:9) and “positive or negative position on a semantic scale” (Archer et al. 2002:1). USAS identifies many semantic and syntactic features which can be roughly aligned with the Appraisal (Martin & White 2005) discourse semantic systems to operationalise analysis using this framework, although USAS and Appraisal are two fully independent approaches. The author is not aware of any prior attempt to connect the two systems, so the approach is mapped in detail in Table 6. This exercise was approximate and not all Appraisal discourse semantics aligned fully with the USAS semantic categories (semtags). WMatrix5 tags according to the USAS system and does not have a limit on the length of text that can be parsed so is ideal for tagging large corpora; however, it requires user

registration to access. A freely accessible web-based version of the USAS tagger is available online at <http://ucrel-api.lancaster.ac.uk/usas/tagger.html>, although there is a 100,000 token limit.

Table 6: Aligning Appraisal discourse semantic systems with USAS

Appraisal	USAS Semantic Categories (semtags)
Affect – dis/inclination	E2 Liking E3 Calm/Violent/Angry
Affect – un/happiness	E4.1 Happy/sad: Happy
Affect – in/security	E5 Fear/bravery/shock E6 Worry/concern/confident
Affect – dis/satisfaction	E4.1 Happy/sad: Contentment
Judgement – Social esteem – normality	A6.2 Comparing: Usual/unusual A11.2 Importance: Noticeability
Judgement – Social esteem – capacity	A12 Easy/difficult
Judgement – Social esteem – tenacity	E5 Bravery
Judgement – Social sanction – veracity	A5.2 Evaluation: True/False
Judgement – Social esteem – propriety	A5.1 Evaluation: Good/Bad
Appreciation – reaction	A5.1 Evaluation: Good/Bad A11.1 Importance: Important
Appreciation – composition	A5.3 Evaluation: Accuracy

Appreciation – valuation	A5.4 Evaluation: Authenticity
	A13.2 Degree: Maximizers A13.3 Degree: Boosters A13.6 Degree: Diminishers A13.7 Degree: Minimizers

(After Martin & White 2005 and Archer et al. 2002)

In addition to helping with Appraisal analysis related to empty adjectives, the USAS Semantic Tagger is particularly relevant to the case of *so*, where the semtag “A13.3 - Degree: Boosters - Intensifiers that amplify to a high degree (but not the upper extreme)” is used to identify all instances where *so* is used as an intensifying (equative) adverb, and thus excludes cases where it is used as a conjunction.

5.3.3. Normalisation

As the corpora used in this study differ massively in size, ranging from 38,514 tokens in the LinkedIn Women corpora to over 1 billion tokens in the Corpus of Contemporary American English, all data appearing in this study have been normalised to enable comparison. Normalisation followed the process of so-called “scaling to range” (also “feature scaling”), whereby the data values are scaled to a mean of zero (0) and standard deviation of one (+/-1.0), using the following formula:

$$\text{Normalised value} = \frac{x - \bar{x}}{\sigma}$$

x = data value

\bar{x} = mean of dataset

σ = standard deviation

The calculation was automated in Microsoft Excel Version 16.66.1 (22101101), using the “STANDARDIZE” function.

A note on standard deviation is that this indicates the degree of variation within a data set. When data is normalised by scaling to range, ~70% of values will fall within one standard deviation, that

is +/- 1.0 of the mean (zero) and ~95% within two standard deviations (+/- 2.0). This means that any variable with a difference of more than one standard deviation to another is marked, while a difference of two standard deviations is as one may get to declaring a significant difference between two variables, without being able to do a Student's T-test (see following discussion).

5.3.4. Significance testing

All numerical data were subjected to Chi Square (χ^2) significance testing. This method was selected because it enables the statistical measurement of the observed and expected outcome of two categorical variables, determining whether the observed frequencies are as expected, so the relationship between the variables *is not significant* (null hypothesis), or the observed frequencies differ from the expected frequencies, and it can therefore be assumed that the relationship between the variables *is significant* (alternate hypothesis). This is useful to assess whether the total dataset is significant but does not allow one to differentiate between the numerical significance of individual data points. A T-test is not relevant in this case because the data have been collapsed into two corpora aggregated at the level of gender, and thus cannot be distinguished as utterances attributable to individual members of the sample population. However, Yule's Q could be used to assess the specific significance of data pairs. To note, no equivalent corpus studies could be found where significance testing was used; generally, the significance of frequency data is not explicitly evaluated, beyond the log-likelihood (Subtirelu & Baker 2018:113).

Although the significance tests used are non-parametric, all data reported in the presentation of findings were normalised ($n=1,000$), for easier comparison between corpora, due to significant differences in sample size.

5.4. Benchmark corpora

Two benchmark corpora were used for this study: the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) and a corpus of specialised discourse taken from transcripts of meetings held by the Bioethics Commission – a commission advising Barack Obama on bioethical matters during his tenure as President of the United States of America. These corpora were used as comparable corpora

(Kenning 2010:487) to enable features observed in the LinkedIn corpora which are the focus of this study, to be contrasted with “common language” (represented by COCA) and the specialised discourse of the sciences to understand whether the features are unique to the context of LinkedIn or not.

5.4.1. Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)

The Corpus of Contemporary American English (<https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/>) which comprises 1 billion tokens across all dominant genres (newspapers, magazines, spoken, academic, blog, fiction, TV and web) is used as a benchmark corpus for common American English. The corpus does not differentiate between genders, but rather groups discourse by genre. This corpus is publicly available for download, against a small fee. The files are in .txt format.

5.4.2. Corpus of the USA Bioethics Commission (2009-2017)

The second benchmark corpus comprises meeting transcripts from the Presidential Commission for the Study of Bioethical Issues, active in the United States of America from 2009-2017 to advise then President, Barack Obama, on bioethical matters. All transcripts are publicly available at <https://bioethicsarchive.georgetown.edu/pcsbi/index.html>. This corpus was compiled by Schmauss and Killian (2021) and captures the spoken discourse of commission members, excluding invited guests, media representatives and members of the public. The commission members are all recognised experts in fields related to bioethics, and trained academics, with nine of the twelve members holding the title of Doctor of Philosophy, and the remaining three, Doctor of Medicine. The corpus may consequently be considered a specialised corpus of scientific discourse. The corpus comprises 646,413 tokens in total but consists of two sub-corpora grouping all utterances by those commission members who identify as women in one, and those by men in the other. This enables the corpora to be used comparatively with the LinkedIn corpus built for this study not only to compare the discourse of businesspeople with that of experts working in the fields of bioethics, but also to compare the utterances at the level of gender.

6. Critical Discourse Analysis and Discussion

Before focusing on the specific use of empty adjectives and the intensifier *so* in the corpora, it is worth contextualising the data in the light of some more general observations. The LinkedIn corpora compiled for this critical discourse study comprise almost 90,000 tokens, of which 38,514 (43%) were written by women, as detailed in Table 7. Although women’s share of voice is under-represented relative to men, this is not surprising: the global gender split of LinkedIn users is reported to be 43% women to 57% men (Statista 2022) which reflects the broader gender inequality of the workplace. This inequality is even more pronounced in the gender composition of the network of contacts whose activity on the LinkedIn newsfeed was captured during the data collection phase of this study. Within the total network of 1294 contacts, 474 (37%) of the network are women, which is strikingly lower than the global gender split of LinkedIn users. This inequality is most probably magnified by the fact that the sample network is dominated by experienced businesspeople, and the under-representation of women in business increases with seniority – the higher one goes in the organisation, the fewer women there are, until one arrives at the paltry figure of 8% of Fortune-500 companies which have a woman as CEO (Hinchliffe 2022).

In the context of a 37% representation of women within the sample network of contacts, it is remarkable that women nevertheless account for 43% of the tokens in the corpus (see Table 7). While women account for 474 (37%) of the network of 1294, among those 736 contacts who made at least one post on the newsfeed during the scraping time frame, 321 (44%) were women. 68% of the women in the network of contacts posted, compared to only 51% of the men. This indicates that although women are relatively under-represented on LinkedIn, proportionally more women than men are active on the platform.

Table 7: Number of contacts posting on the LinkedIn Newsfeed, split by gender

	Women	Men	Total
Contacts	474	820	1294

<i>Gender Split (%)</i>	37	63	100
Contacts Posting	321	415	736
<i>Gender Split (%)</i>	44	56	100
<i>% of contacts posting</i>	68	51	-

The 321 women who posted on the LinkedIn newsfeed during the scraping time frame created 507 posts, accounting for 43% of all posts, as reflected in Table 8. This translates to an average of 1,58 posts per woman. Interestingly, this is almost exactly in line with the 415 men who created an average of 1,62 posts per man, to generate a total of 672 posts. This suggests that, although more women are active on the newsfeed than men, they generate posts at a similar rate – there is no significant gender difference in how frequently they post.

Table 8: Average posts per person, split by gender

	Women	Men	Total
People posting	321	415	736
<i>Gender split (%)</i>	44	56	100
Number of posts	507	672	1179
<i>Gender split (%)</i>	43	57	100
Avg. posts per person	1,58	1,62	1,60
Avg. tokens per post	75,96	76,11	76,05

The LinkedIn corpora of almost 90,000 tokens are composed of 1179 individual posts, which translates to an average post length of 76 tokens. When this is examined at the level of gender, there is again no significant difference: the average length of posts by women and men were both almost exactly in line at 75,96 and 76,11 tokens respectively.

When the specific words of the posts are examined, as in Table 9, the 38,514 tokens written by women are revealed to be composed of 6,024 unduplicated “token types”. Using the type-token ratio (Chotlos 1944:85), this translates into a lexical diversity of 0.16. The 51,149 tokens and 7,324 token types written by men translate to a lexical diversity of 0.14, which is slightly lower than the women. It should be noted that as a ratio applied to such large datasets as these corpora, the relative difference between the results obtained is highly compressed (Hess, Haug & Landry 1989:536) such that an apparently marginal difference of 0.02, as found in this data, can be significant. It at least directionally suggests a slightly wider range of vocabulary being used by women relative to men on the LinkedIn newsfeed. In a context of business communication, the use of precise terms and even business jargon can suggest greater mastery and understanding of matters that would reflect well on the authors, so a slightly higher lexical diversity could be assumed to be to their advantage. However, if the words used do not comply with normative ideas about appropriate business vocabulary, the opposite could be true.

Table 9: Overall lexical diversity, split by gender

	Women	Men	Total
Tokens	38,514	51,149	89,663
%	<i>43</i>	<i>57</i>	<i>100</i>
Token types	6,024	7,324	13,348
%	<i>45</i>	<i>55</i>	<i>100</i>

Lexical diversity	0.16	0.14	0.15
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6.1. Empty adjectives

As noted in the Theoretical Framework (see pages 36-37), Lakoff’s theorisation of empty adjectives is somewhat impressionistic, but two key features stand out:

- 1) Empty adjectives have a literal and a phatic meaning, and the latter tends to express “approbation or admiration for something” (Lakoff 2004:45) but could also express hyperbolic shock or disgust.
- 2) Empty adjectives may be neutral and used equally by women and men or tend to be used exclusively by women (2004:45). Lakoff terms the latter “Women only” empty adjectives and identifies them as a lexical feature of women's language.

“Women only” empty adjectives constitute a small sub-set of adjectives which are the focus of this study; however, the general use of adjectives by women and men will be examined first.

6.1.1. Overall use of adjectives, by gender

Of the almost 90,000 tokens captured in the LinkedIn corpora, 6,314 (7%) of these were tagged as adjectives, as reflected in Table 10. Adjectives accounted for 7.2% of all tokens written by women and 6.9% written by men, suggesting a slight tendency by women to use more adjectives than men. The share of adjectives used by women is almost in line with their overall share of all tokens, with women accounting for 38,514 (43%) of all tokens, and 2778 (44%) of all adjectives. This reflects that the women’s use of adjectives was not markedly greater than that of the men. This finding was different from the preconceived expectation that women would tend to use far more adjectives than men, in line with the notions of women's language tending to sound enthusiastic with exaggerated emotions and reactions. This could suggest that women rein in these tendencies when they are posting on the LinkedIn newsfeed, but it could also indicate that men posting on the LinkedIn newsfeed are more prone to using adjectives than they would in common language.

Table 10: Adjectives as a percentage of total tokens, split by gender

	Women	Men	Total
Tokens	38,514	51,149	89,663
<i>Gender split (%)</i>	<i>43</i>	<i>57</i>	<i>100</i>
Adjectives	2,778	3,536	1,294
<i>Gender split (%)</i>	<i>44</i>	<i>56</i>	<i>100</i>

While women used adjectives with an only slightly greater frequency than men, an examination of the unduplicated adjective (token) types (see Table 11) reflects very similar lexical diversity too. Using 735 unduplicated adjective types, the type-token lexical diversity of women’s adjective use is 0.26, compared to 0.25 for men. As noted earlier, use of a ratio mathematically compresses differences, so it is worth noting the slightly higher – but not markedly different – lexical diversity of the women.

Table 11: Adjective lexical diversity, split by gender

	Women	Men	Total
Adjectives	2,778	3,536	6,314
<i>%</i>	<i>44</i>	<i>56</i>	<i>100</i>
Adjective types	735	880	1,615
<i>%</i>	<i>46</i>	<i>54</i>	<i>100</i>
Lexical diversity	0.26	0.25	0.26

In terms of the type-token lexical diversity, examining this within the discourse subset of adjectives only (see Table 10) reflects a higher lexical diversity than overall (see Table 8). Of the 89,663 tokens in the combined corpus of discourse by men and women, 13,348 token types were counted, reflecting a lexical diversity of 0.15. Within the subset of 6,314 adjectives, 1,615 unique adjectives were used, translating into a lexical diversity of 0.26, which is almost double the overall lexical diversity. However, calculation of the lexical diversity within a subset of tokens that have the same lexical function – in this case, adjectives – would be expected to yield a higher ratio than overall lexical diversity which takes all parts of speech into account and therefore will always be lower. Further, it should also be noted that one of the criticisms of the type-token approach to assessing lexical diversity is that the larger the database, the more likely that tokens are used repeatedly, resulting in relatively low lexical diversity for larger texts (Hess, Haug & Landry 1989:536) – an effect that would be amplified when using a corpus of the dimensions used in this study, with both ratios consequently appearing to be quite low.

Another perspective on lexical diversity is to consider how frequently different adjective types are used. As reflected in Table 12, 52% of the adjective types used by women were used only once, whereas, among men, this proportion was much higher, at 65%. If lexical diversity is displayed in the breadth of vocabulary, using precise terms in specific contexts, then men are slightly ahead of women. However, at the other end of the scale, just 7% of adjective types used by men accounted for 73% of all the adjective tokens they used, reflecting a small proportion of vocabulary in high use. The use of adjectives by women was more balanced, with 23% of adjective types accounting for 71% of tokens.

Table 12: Comparison of adjective types and frequency of use, split by gender

	Adjective Types		Adjective Tokens	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Used 1x	52%	65%	14%	13%

Used 2x	17%	18%	9%	8%
Used 3x	8%	10%	6%	6%
Used >3x	23%	7%	71%	73%

The adjective most frequently used in the LinkedIn corpus was “new” (see Table 13), with a normalised (feature scaling) frequency of 19.15 for women and a normalised frequency of 17.07 for men. This reflects women using “new” with a frequency higher than men by two standard deviations ($SD = 1.0$), in a dataset that was tested for significance using the Chi Square test, returning a p-value of 0.01. This striking propensity of women to use the term “new” is also reflected in their use of “more”. “More” was the adjective that women used with the second greatest frequency, using it with a normalised frequency of 13.09, (+1.67) compared to men. The adjective men used with the second highest frequency was “great” with a normalised frequency of 13.10. Women also made frequent use of “great”, but at a rate of almost two standard deviations (-1.89) less than men. “More” is a literal adjective, whereas “great” also has a phatic meaning. In a literal sense, it is an adjective describing magnitude, indicating bigger than average, but it can also be used to appraise quality and capability. The extensive use of “great” by both women and men suggests that it is what Lakoff classed as a neutral – as in gender-neutral, or rather, unisex – adjective, and indeed, “great” is one of the examples Lakoff provides of such adjectives (2004:45).

Table 13: Ten adjectives most frequently used by women (normalised by scaling to the range, $SD = 1.0$)

Adjectives	Women	Men	Difference
New	19.15	17.07	2.08
More	13.09	11.42	1.67
Great	11.21	13.10	-1.89

Many	7.89	8.90	-1.00
First	5.73	5.65	0.07
Happy	5.58	3.25	2.33
Last	5.58	5.53	0.05
Other	5.44	5.89	-0.45
Next	4.43	5.65	-1.22
Amazing	4.14	4.09	0.05

X^2 (df = 29, n = 6,314) = 46.635, p = 0.01

Ranked fourth in frequency of use by women is the determiner “many”; however, with a normalised frequency of 7.89, women used it less frequently than men. The difference of one standard deviation between the 7.89 frequency of use by women and 8.90 by men, is potentially interesting in relation to “more”. Both women and men used “more” more frequently than “many”; however, “more” was used more often by women than it was by men, and the opposite was true in the case of “many”. These two adjectives are similar, with the difference being that “many” is used with countable nouns, and “more” is comparative, but as both are determiners used only in a deontic sense, they are not empty adjectives and therefore not relevant to this analysis.

Among the rest of the ten adjectives used most frequently by women in the analysed discourse, “first”, “last”, “other” and “next” all have only a deontic sense and are thus do not qualify as empty adjectives. This leaves two potentially interesting cases: that of “happy” and “amazing”. “Amazing” recalls the case of “great” in that it has a literal meaning; namely, to inspire awe and amazement, as well as a phatic application to express that one is impressed and/or appraises something as excellent. The adjective could be construed as somewhat “empty” in this latter use, but it is nevertheless used with equal frequency by women and men, indicating that it too, is neutral. “Happy” presents a somewhat different case. It was used with a normalised frequency of 5.58 by

women, compared to only 3.25 by men – a difference of (+2.33), or more than two standard deviations (SD=1.0), making it the most polarising adjective among the Top Ten. “Happy” is not an “empty adjective” – it has only one, literal meaning – however men tend to use it markedly less frequently, suggesting that talking about emotions fits more comfortably within the feminine register than in the discourse of men.

The preceding discussion of the Top Ten adjectives most frequently used by women points to some themes around adjective use, including emotive language and empty adjectives. There were two variables at play. Firstly, the difference between the normalised frequency with which adjectives were used by women in comparison to men. The second variable has to do with the function of the adjective – does it have two meanings, and if so, is the phatic meaning at risk of being construed as hyperbole? To the first variable, this can be investigated by examining which adjectives are markedly used more frequently by men, and the second is where the semantic tagger (see page 68-70 in Methodology) is employed to measure the phatic nature/degree of the adjective.

6.1.2. Adjectives used more frequently by women

All adjectives used in the LinkedIn corpora were ranked according to which adjectives women use proportionally more than men. As reflected in Table 14, in only 15 cases did the normalised frequency of women using a certain adjective exceed that of the men by more than one standard deviation (SD=1.0). To note, all values were subjected to the Chi Square test, returning an extremely robust p-value of 0.005 (in the Social Sciences, a p-value of 0.05 is considered significant). Importantly, this invalidates the Null Hypothesis of no relationship between the variables, to indicate that there is a *significant* relationship between gender and adjective use.

Table 14: Adjectives used more frequently (+1.0 Standard Deviation) by women than men (normalised by scaling to the range, SD = 1.0)

Adjectives	Women	Men	Difference
Incredible	3.56	1.09	2.47
Happy	5.58	3.25	2.33

New	19.15	17.07	2.08
Long	3.42	1.57	1.85
Special	2.70	0.97	1.73
Grateful	2.55	0.85	1.71
More	13.09	11.42	1.67
Corporate	1.83	0.49	1.34
Open	1.83	0.49	1.34
Meaningful	1.25	0.13	1.13
Female	0.97	-0.11	1.08
Least	1.40	0.37	1.03
Confident	0.68	-0.35	1.03
Retail	0.68	-0.35	1.03
Professional	1.98	0.97	1.01

X^2 (df = 14, n = 6,314) = 36.451, p = 0.005

Of the 15 adjectives women used most frequently in the analysed corpus, only two have both a literal and phatic meaning, namely “incredible” and “special”, as explored in Table 15 below. Neither “incredible” nor “special” are examined by Lakoff in her work on women’s language (1973, 1975, 2004); however, as she herself emphasises, her work is exploratory (2004:40) and the list of empty adjectives that she presents is “representative” (2004:45) but not definitive. This clearly leaves the door open for future researchers to re-examine the adjectives she proposes as representative, and to add further examples, with justification.

Table 15: Empty adjectives among those adjectives used more frequently (+1.0 Standard Deviation) by women than men (normalised by scaling to the range, SD = 1.0)

Adjectives	Literal	Phatic
incredible	Impossible to believe	Extraordinary
special	Unique	Exceptional

(After Oxford University Press 2022)

6.1.3. The case of *incredible*

The greatest difference in an adjective being used more by women than men, was *incredible*. This adjective was used with a normalised frequency of 3.56 by women, but only 1.09 by men, reflecting a difference of 2.47. The adjective “incredible” has a literal meaning of something being not credible or beyond belief. This literal meaning is negative; however, it is complemented by a positive phatic meaning of something being so amazing, it is impossible to believe. Following the logic of Lakoff then, “incredible” is an empty adjective that belongs more to the feminine than the masculine register.

When the concordance of all instances of *incredible* used by women and men in the analysed corpora is generated and put through semantic tagging, “incredible” is consistently tagged “A6.2” which in the USAS Semantic Tagset identifies “Comparing: usual/unusual” in a categorisation that is not particularly helpful, especially given that “incredible” can have a literal and phatic meaning. Within the semantic discourse system of Appraisal, the “Comparing: usual/unusual” semtag would translate to Judgement – Social Esteem – normality – “how special?” However, the literal root sense of what is credible or not credible (i.e. incredible), could, depending on the context, also express Judgement – Social Sanction – veracity – “how honest?” If phatic meanings are considered, “incredible” could also express Judgement – Social Esteem – Capacity, or Appreciation-reaction or Valuation. This suggests that while the USAS semtags do provide a more refined categorisation of adjectives than the NLTK POS-Tagger, this system is not sufficiently granular to assist in this

case. As various semantic tagging systems continue to be developed further (Abzianide & Bos 2017), perhaps this capability will become available in the future.

In the absence of a software-based solution, a manual mark-up of *incredible* in the context of surrounding text (concordance) was done, using the system of Appraisal. The results are summarised in Table 16 for all cases where “incredible” was used by women, and in Table 17, for men. The results are discussed below the tables.

Table 16: Women’s discourse: Appraisal classification of *incredible* in context (concordance)

1.	WNBA playoffs ... the strength, athleticism and grit is	<u>incredible!</u>	
	<i>Judgement – Social Esteem - capacity & tenacity (+)</i>		
2.	the best possible partner in crime, an	<u>incredible</u>	Dream Team
	<i>Judgement – Social Esteem - capacity (+)</i>		
3.	what an	<u>incredible</u>	gift to provide the world
	<i>Appreciation - reaction (+)</i>		
4.	I look forward to hearing about all your	<u>incredible</u>	experiences.
	<i>Appreciation - reaction (+)</i>		
5.	...to my boyfriend who was such an	<u>incredible</u>	help on all the long weekends

	<i>Judgement – Social Esteem - capacity (+)</i>		
6.	What an	<u>INCREDIBLE</u>	honor and surprise to be on the cover
	<i>Appreciation - reaction (+)</i>		
7.	And thanks to the	<u>incredible</u>	illustration by X and my story written by Frances...
	<i>Appreciation - reaction (+)</i>		
8.	...getting to know the	<u>Incredible</u>	LA organization.
	<i>Judgement – Social Esteem – capacity (+)</i>		
9.	Today, my thoughts turn to the	<u>incredible</u>	leaders I had over those 10 years
	<i>Judgement – Social Esteem – capacity (+)</i>		
10.	Specially for being an	<u>incredible</u>	mentor and guide during the whole journey.
	<i>Judgement – Social Esteem – capacity (+)</i>		
11.	And thank you to my	<u>INCREDIBLE</u>	Ms. Medicine team.
	<i>Judgement – Social Esteem – capacity (+)</i>		
12.	What an	<u>incredible</u>	opportunity to take part in the Investec Navigate

	<i>Appreciation - valuation (+)</i>		
13.	had the pleasure of working with many	<u>incredible</u>	people, and made many friends for life.
	<i>Judgement – Social Esteem – capacity (+)</i>		
14.	Yesterday, with a thank you email to the	<u>incredible</u>	people I worked with, I ended an amazing...
	<i>Judgement – Social Esteem – capacity (+)</i>		
15.	I've worked with 20	<u>incredible</u>	professionals- people who have trusted me to...
	<i>Judgement – Social Esteem – capacity (+)</i>		
16.	a chance to breath out and reflect on	<u>incredible</u>	results of for Ukraine Emergency Relief team's...
	<i>Appreciation - valuation (+)</i>		
17.	#thisismylastdance It has been an	<u>incredible</u>	ride and I have been extremely fortunate
	<i>Appreciation - valuation (+)</i>		
18.		<u>Incredible</u>	work by Aysel K.
	<i>Appreciation - reaction (+)</i>		

19.	presents the luminescence of flowers through	<u>incredible</u>	shots by photographer Craig Burrows
	<i>Appreciation - reaction (+)</i>		
20.	I can't thank the (very long list of)	<u>incredible!</u>	team members enough for the passion, patience and
	<i>Judgement – Social Esteem – capacity (+)</i>		
21.	for the skills talent and commitment of an	<u>incredible</u>	team. Thank you! ! !
	<i>Judgement – Social Esteem – capacity (+)</i>		
22.	to support an amazing woman and company, doing	<u>incredible</u>	things.
	<i>Appreciation - valuation (+)</i>		
23.	...and will continue to kick ass and build	<u>incredible</u>	things. I will do anything to support you.
	<i>Appreciation - valuation (+)</i>		
24.	3 days infused us with such moments!! Having an	<u>incredible</u>	week at IMTS - International Manufacturing Technology Show
	<i>Appreciation - valuation (+)</i>		
25.	Discover this	<u>incredible</u>	work of @Cindy-e-morris

	<i>Appreciation - valuation</i>		
26.	It has been an	<u>incredible</u>	10.75 year ride, filled with so many memories
	<i>Appreciation - valuation (+)</i>		
27.	After ten	<u>incredible</u>	years as a programme assistant and In-Company...
	<i>Appreciation - valuation (+)</i>		
28.	Yesterday was my last day at Nestle after 8	<u>incredible</u>	years.
	<i>Appreciation - valuation (+)</i>		
29.	At this pace, it will take another	<u>incredible</u>	132 years to close the global gender gap.
	<i>Appreciation - reaction (-)</i>		

Table 17: Men’s discourse: Appraisal classification of *incredible* in context (concordance)

1.	It has been an	<u>incredible</u>	and fulfilling experience
	<i>Appreciation - valuation (+)</i>		
2.	...the beginning of my new job at Bacardi than seeing the	<u>incredible</u>	1862 Cocktail Bar at our HQ

	<i>Appreciation - reaction (+)</i>		
3.	...our board of directors, and an	<u>incredible</u>	group of investors.
	<i>Judgement – Social Esteem - capacity (+)</i>		
4.	...Sister Accord Foundation for this	<u>incredible</u>	honor.
	<i>Appreciation - reaction (+)</i>		
5.	Just	<u>Incredible!</u>	How business should be done.
	<i>Appreciation - valuation (+)</i>		
6.	Our new	<u>incredible</u>	INEOS Hand Wash innovation...
	<i>Appreciation - valuation (+)</i>		
7.	...continue to build national distribution thanks to	<u>incredible</u>	instore work done by the team.
	<i>Appreciation – valuation (+)</i>		
8.	...to share this journey with such inspiring and	<u>incredible</u>	people as my fellow SIMmies.
	<i>Judgement – Social Esteem – capacity (+)</i>		
9.		<u>Incredible</u>	opportunity to join the Senior Leadership team...

	<i>Appreciation – valuation (+)</i>		
10.	I am lucky to have met	<u>incredible</u>	people who have not only supported me...
	<i>Judgement – Social Esteem – capacity (+)</i>		
11.	Special shout out to the	<u>incredible</u>	team and our partners...
	<i>Judgement – Social Esteem – capacity</i>		
12.	A huge thanks to the	<u>incredible</u>	team who worked on this...
	<i>Judgement – Social Esteem – capacity (+)</i>		
13.	Humbled and honored to lead the	<u>incredible</u>	teams of 4 markets...
	<i>Judgement – Social Esteem – capacity (+)</i>		
14.	I mean, who does that! It's	<u>incredible!</u>	
	<i>Judgement – Social Esteem – normality (+)</i>		
15.	It's	<u>incredible</u>	to be seeing this level of growth.
	<i>Appreciation - reaction (+)</i>		
16.	Here is an additional list of	<u>incredible</u>	websites that are helping us...
	<i>Appreciation - reaction (+)</i>		

The adjective *incredible* appears 43 times in the LinkedIn corpora. In every instance, it was used in a positive, phatic sense, with one notable exception where *incredible* expresses disbelief at how long it is projected to take for the gender pay gap to close, at the current rate of development (see Line 29 in Table 15). The adjective was used most frequently by women and men as a Judgement of Social Esteem – Capacity (see Table 18 below). According to the Appraisal discourse semantic system, Judgement expresses an appraisal of people, and the way they behave (Martin & White 2005:52). In the case of Capacity, within the Judgement sub-system of Social Esteem, what is appraised is how capable, smart, strong, healthy, and so on people are perceived to be. In half of these cases, it was the writer’s team that was being appraised, and praised. Women used “incredible” in this way with a normalised frequency of 0.90, +0.24, more frequently than men, who used it with a normalised frequency of 0.66. Men were just as likely to use *incredible* to judge a person, as they were to appreciate the value of a ‘thing’. Men used Appreciation – Valuation with a normalised frequency of 0.66, compared to 0.52 by women. The discourse semantic system of Appreciation is oriented towards “evaluations of ‘things’ – especially things we make and performances that we give. This is something that men did proportionally more frequently than women on the LinkedIn newsfeed.

In addition to appreciating the value of things more frequently than women, men expressed reactions of Appreciation with a normalised frequency of 0.13, compared to -0.05 by women. This suggests that men are more oriented towards the appraising of ‘things’, while women are more focused on harnessing their discourse to praise other people. This subtle pattern in the data suggests women following social expectations that, as women, they prioritise the communal and well-being of others, whereas men are more oriented towards the affairs of the world, appraising an experience, a bar, a group of investors, business, innovation, (instore) work, an opportunity, (business) growth and websites. This is not to say that men do not positively appraise people; they do, but less frequently than women do. This suggests that, while communal behaviour is still primarily “women work”, men are increasingly wise to the need to build rapport by praising others and are also engaging in this kind of linguistic behaviour, as evidenced by the frequency of Appreciation expressed by men. Similarly, discoursing about ‘things’ in the world of business is still done more by men than by women. While women judged the capacity of other people with a normalised frequency of 0.90, they appreciated the value of ‘things’ with a normalised frequency of 0.52, 40%

less than the rate at which they praise people. However, at a normalised frequency of 0.52, this rate of Appreciation – Valuation was only -0.14 behind the normalised frequency among men, suggesting that women are also working hard to display these behaviours. Just as men seem to be adopting some of the linguistic practices traditionally associated with the feminine on LinkedIn to build relationships, so too women seem to be consciously engaging in behaviours more associated with the masculine. While maintaining their normatively feminine instinct to be communal by judging the capacity of other people, women are also clearly giving attention to the ‘things’ of the world.

Table 18: Appraisal classification of *incredible* by women and men (normalized by scaling to the range, SD = 1.0)

Attitude System	Sub-system	Type	Women	Men	Difference
Judgement	Social Esteem	Capacity	0.90	0.66	+0.24
Judgement	Social Esteem	Normality	-1.38	-1.45	+0.07
Appreciation		Reaction	-0.05	0.13	-0.18
Appreciation		Valuation	0.52	0.66	-0.14

As *incredible* seems to have been used by both genders, it suggests that – following Lakoff’s logic (1973, 1975, 2004) – the adjective may be neutral. However, the fact that it is so much more strongly associated with the discourse of women and used almost exclusively in a positive phatic sense that comes across as emphatic and effusive, suggests that it may indeed be a “women only” empty adjective that has become more acceptable. It introduces a somewhat informal tone that is appropriate in the context of a social network newsfeed, even one with a more serious orientation such as LinkedIn, because the primary purpose is networking – connecting with and engaging other

people. In this context, women's language (Lakoff 1973, 1975, 2004), which is intended to engage and build community, would arguably be more appropriate, and even advantageous.

In line with Fairclough's three-layer model of discourse (2021:73), the immediate context to a text, as well as the context of discursive practice, is key to unpacking meaning and social significance (see pages 19-21). In the case of LinkedIn, it is important to consider that while users are engaged in communicating their skills, achievements and capabilities, the Social Network System context makes the act of connecting and building online rapport with other people, at least as important (van Dijck 2013:201). However, given that LinkedIn is a SNS designed specifically for supporting one's career and business networking, the relationship-building on the site is intentional as "conscious acts of self-staging" (2013:202). These moves follow rapidly growing user awareness and understanding of how the LinkedIn site functions, and what kind of behaviour seems to be rewarded with the kind of attention that they seek (2013:202). In the case of businesspeople on LinkedIn, this brings in the imperative to form human connections, but to do so in an informed way that does not compromise their self-branding, but rather enhances it. As women are prototypically communal and socially conditioned towards building and maintaining relationships through their communication, women's language has evolved to serve this by being engaging, non-threatening and likable. This is evidenced in the marked use of some empty adjectives in the analysed corpora by women to enthuse and positively appraise (in the sense of Martin & White 2005), infusing discourse with positive energy that ingratiate the speaker/writer with her interlocutor. The use of women's language on LinkedIn thus makes an interesting case because it does not seem to have an outright negative impact here. Lakoff characterises the effect of women's language as "[submerging] a woman's personal identity, by denying her the means of expressing herself strongly, on the one hand, and encouraging expressions that suggest triviality in subject matter and uncertainty about it" (1004:42). This is a damning assessment; however, the specific case of empty adjectives on LinkedIn suggests that there can be contexts – even contexts in the so-called "man's world" of business – where aspects of women's language might actually be appropriate and constructive in helping to build relationships. Rather than trivialising, it can introduce a degree of levity, informality, even familiarity, that can "oil the phatic wheels" (Hyland 1996:433) of discourse. Possibly the most compelling indication of the value of empty adjectives, especially

those traditionally associated more with the feminine, in the discourse of the LinkedIn newsfeed, is that men seem to be using some of them too.

In her theory of women's language, Lakoff notes that women are increasingly adopting “men’s language” as it is the register associated with power (2004:44). Talking like a man enables women to participate in contexts where power is still disproportionately concentrated in the hands of cisgender men: “The language of the favoured group, the group that holds the power, along with its non-linguistic behaviour, is generally adopted by the other group, *not vice versa*” (2004:44, emphasis is author’s own). This is evidenced in the discourse of women sometimes displaying similarities with that of men in the analysed corpora; however, it does raise the question why men also seem to be displaying some of the linguistic behaviour – namely their use of emphatic empty adjectives – that is traditionally associated with the feminine on the LinkedIn newsfeed.

This may well be due to men’s growing awareness of the importance of relationship-building and maintenance as the foundational purpose of LinkedIn. As a Social Network Service, it is primarily about connecting people. As a business SNS, there are those users who are powerful, in most cases due to the actual power they wield in the offline “real world”, that makes them desirable contacts, and there are the other users – most users – of lesser power and influence, looking to boost themselves by making useful contacts. For the latter users, it is necessary to present themselves online to other LinkedIn users as desirable contacts, which requires careful self-branding to present a positive impression of skills, knowledge and personal influence, and the avoidance of behaviour which could be off-putting to others, while enhancing behaviours that increase the likelihood of forming a connection. One important dimension of this latter effort to ingratiate, is the use of those interpersonal linguistic resources which help people to connect. This is where the resources of women’s language can come in, as linguistic tools from women’s traditionally communal role of building community connections and cohesion, to help achieve similar aims through the LinkedIn newsfeed.

There is another aspect to LinkedIn’s newsfeed that likely makes it a more appropriate context for women’s language, and that is the relative informality of the social media channel, and the newsfeed in particular. Social media are designed for “social acts of self-expression” (Van Dijck 2013:202),

with the newsfeed as the primary space where this happens. The conventions of a social media newsfeed allow for the sharing of personal feelings, reactions and evaluations of people and ‘things’. LinkedIn as a social media channel therefore has some of this openness to linguistic behaviour that would be wholly inappropriate in other business contexts, but it is still “Facebook *in a suit*” (Appleby 2012:79, emphasis author’s own), not Facebook. The unbridled emotive expression of Facebook would still be out of place on LinkedIn, but a degree of informality is acceptable. This is maybe most visibly evidenced in the prolific use of emotion icons (so-called ‘emoticons’ or ‘emojis’) on the LinkedIn newsfeed, but also in the use of empty adjectives as emotive language is generally more associated with less formal contexts. For example, praising a team with empty adjectives (“incredible” and “Dream”) as an “incredible Dream Team” (see Table 15, Line 2), may sound effusive out of context, but on the LinkedIn newsfeed, such enthusiasm serves to celebrate the team appropriately. It also cleverly bathes the author in reflected glory as the effective team's leader under whose strategic leadership such strong results were delivered. The act of encouraging the team also serves to position the author as a transformational leader (see page 49), who leads by engaging and encouraging her people. These are all smart moves in terms of staging leadership competency, and the emptiness of the adjectives used become instrumental in signalling enthusiasm done specifically to inspire, and therefore comes across not only as acceptable but savvy in the context. Consequently, it is no longer only women who engage in such behaviour, but also men.

Engaging in enthusiastic discourse and leveraging empty adjectives can thus be advantageous on LinkedIn; however, there may be a risk in overdoing things. The use of *incredible* by women on the LinkedIn newsfeed, showed a striking bias towards positive Judgement – Social Esteem – Capacity, that is, evaluations directed at other people, specially praising their capabilities. As noted in Table 16, women engaged in these linguistic acts with a normalised frequency of 0.90, compared to a normalised frequency of 0.66 by men. This indicates that women were appraising the “incredible” capability of other people (Judgement – Social Esteem – Capacity) +36% more frequently than men. The evidence suggests that women may be overly focused on the achievements of others, which may be helpful given the importance of building community on LinkedIn but could run the risk of reinforcing the sexist view that women are more “team players”, delivering results *with* others, rather than through agentic personal leadership.

6.1.4. The case of *special*

The only empty adjective, other than *incredible*, that women used with a higher normalised frequency of one standard deviation or more, than men, is “special”. In a literal sense, *special* denotes that someone or something is quite unique, and, like “incredible”, can also be used phatically to enthuse about someone or something being outstanding and/or extraordinary. However, given the socially accepted belief that anything rare has special significance and value, simply due to its scarcity, even the deontic use of *special* can be infused with positive appraisal that makes it almost phatic. It is thus somewhat difficult to distinguish between deontic and phatic instances of the use of “special”. Unlike *incredible*, which was almost exclusively used in the phatic sense, *special* was primarily used deontically (see Tables 19 and 20) with slight phatic emphasis: only 6 out of 34 examples showed the adjective being used in a purely phatic way.

While *special* is overwhelmingly positive in association, it can be used to negatively appraise, but in a way that comes across as ironic. For example:

- (a) This hat is really special – it belonged to my grandmother.
- (c) *He is wearing a very special hat – he looks ridiculous.

Instance (a) positively appraises the uniqueness as having special significance and value, whereas (b) implies a negative appraisal, with *special* used ironically or euphemistically, as a marked formulation. When *special* is used in the way of example (b), extra emphasis may even be placed on the adjective to highlight that *special* is used in an atypical sense; as in strange, odd or eccentric. Such use of *special* is informal and rather “gossipy”. It would be used in spoken, rather than written, discourse, and indeed no such case appears within the LinkedIn corpora.

Table 19: Women’s discourse: Appraisal classification of *special* in context (concordance)

1.	This	<u>special</u>	edition, packaged in a bee hotel that attracts...
<i>Appreciation - Valuation (Deontic)</i>			

2.	but this should be a	<u>special</u>	event in Cincy...#leadership
<i>Appreciation - Valuation (Deontic)</i>			
3.	Such a	<u>special</u>	experience to support an amazing woman and company
<i>Appreciation - Valuation (Phatic)</i>			
4.	...fewer - but bigger and better ones- that create	<u>special</u>	experiences with brands, products, services
<i>Appreciation - Valuation (Phatic)</i>			
5.	This year Manuel Koelman made a	<u>special</u>	female founders Ticket and here is your chance
<i>Appreciation - Valuation (Deontic)</i>			
6.	copies are available for order for a	<u>special</u>	launch price of R220.
<i>Appreciation - Valuation (Deontic)</i>			
7.	Linkedin insiders, I'll give you the	<u>special</u>	link to order
<i>Appreciation - Valuation (Deontic)</i>			
8.	...cigarettes and alcoholic beverages and has created	<u>special</u>	organizations for parents who, in collaboration with...

	<i>Appreciation - Valuation (Deontic)</i>		
9.	I have a	<u>special</u>	place in my heart for MindNation clients
	<i>Appreciation - Valuation (Deontic)</i>		
10.	...a brand rooted in respect for the	<u>special</u>	resources of their home in Stillbaai.
	<i>Appreciation - Valuation (Deontic)</i>		
11.	A	<u>special</u>	shout out to X - had a great conversation with
	<i>Appreciation - Valuation (Deontic)</i>		
12.	A	<u>special</u>	shoutout to my Understanding Consumer Behaviour Professors
	<i>Appreciation - Valuation (Deontic)</i>		
13.	There is a really	<u>special</u>	surprise coming this weekend to celebrate
	<i>Appreciation - Valuation (Deontic)</i>		
14.		<u>Special</u>	thank you to for enabling a smooth transaction
	<i>Appreciation - Valuation (Deontic)</i>		

15.	...and want to say	<u>special</u>	thanks to all I have learned from X
	<i>Appreciation - Valuation (Deontic)</i>		
16.		<u>Special</u>	thanks to and for our inter BU cooperation
	<i>Appreciation - Valuation (Deontic)</i>		
17.		<u>Special</u>	thanks to X, and Petals Group
	<i>Appreciation - Valuation (Deontic)</i>		
18.	I would like to give a	<u>special</u>	thanks to X and for making experiences such as...
	<i>Appreciation - Valuation (Deontic)</i>		
19.		<u>Special</u>	thanks to X, Y and Z for their insightful comments
	<i>Appreciation - Valuation (Deontic)</i>		
20.		<u>Special</u>	thanks to Dr X who visited us yesterday
	<i>Appreciation - Valuation (Deontic)</i>		
21.	This month has been really	<u>special</u>	to me. I became a US citizen!
	<i>Appreciation - Valuation (Phatic)</i>		

22.	to congratulate all the achievers and send a	<u>special</u>	well done to X who won...
<i>Appreciation - Valuation (Deontic)</i>			

Table 20: Men's discourse: Appraisal classification of *special* in context (concordance)

1.	There's something very	<u>special</u>	about joining a family-owned company with 160 years...
<i>Appreciation - Valuation (Deontic)</i>			
2.	And we'll give everyone a	<u>special</u>	code.
<i>Appreciation - Valuation (Deontic)</i>			
3.	...on the board of directors, I thought something	<u>special</u>	had happened to me.
<i>Appreciation - Valuation (Deontic)</i>			
4.		<u>Special</u>	mention to X, co-author of the case...
<i>Appreciation - Valuation (Deontic)</i>			
5.	entrepreneurial ecosystem and the University has a	<u>special</u>	role to play in developing it.
<i>Appreciation - Valuation (Deontic)</i>			

6.	PUMPED for TNF to debut on Amazon today!	<u>Special</u>	shout out to the incredible team...
<i>Appreciation - Valuation (Deontic)</i>			
7.		<u>Special</u>	thanks to X & Y for the support.
<i>Appreciation - Valuation (Deontic)</i>			
8.		<u>Special</u>	thanks to for guiding us all the way
<i>Appreciation - Valuation (Deontic)</i>			
9.	the learnings obtained during my career in FHH.	<u>Special</u>	thanks to Mr X.
<i>Appreciation - Valuation (Deontic)</i>			
10.	...performance, this is really what makes this device	<u>special</u>	to me.
<i>Appreciation - Valuation (Phatic)</i>			
11.	...went on as a team, resulting in something	<u>special.</u>	The pictures say it all...
<i>Appreciation - Valuation (Phatic)</i>			
12.	...Masterclass at Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park in this	<u>special</u>	year on the 10th Anniversary of the 2012 Games.

	<i>Appreciation - Valuation (Phatic)</i>
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In every case that *special* was used, whether by women or men, it was applied to ‘things’ and expressions, rather than directly to people. Within the Appraisal framework, the adjectives were thus used as Appreciations, which appraises all that is not human. Within the discourse semantic system of Appreciation, all instances where “special” appear in the corpora also fall within the sub-system of Valuation which appraise the value of something. The notion of *special*, as explored earlier, expresses value as an assessment of how scarce something is or the way it stands out from the rest as being different, and – in a phatic sense – serves to attach positive value to this rareness. There is a dimension of the variable “normality” in this meaning which is found within the discourse semantic system of Judgement – Social Esteem. Indeed, the founding Appraisal authors include the question “how special?” as a diagnostic of Judgement – Social Esteem – normality. However, judgements are directed at people, not ‘things’, and there is no equivalent to this variable in the discourse semantic system of Appreciation which appraises things. This is possibly a gap in the Appraisal system worthy of further investigation as the “specialness” of things can only be expressed in implied value, and thus marked up as Appreciation – Valuation, rather than specifically evaluated as rare, unique, and outstanding as “Judgement – Social Esteem – normality” enables analysts to mark up such cases where the subject is a thing, not a person.

As reflected in Table 21, women used *special* with a normalised frequency of 2.70, whereas men used it with a normalised frequency of 0.97. As all occurrences were coded as Appreciation - Valuation, this produces a single pair of values as an outcome that cannot be tested for significance individually, thus the Chi Square value is adopted from the overall significance testing of adjectives used most frequently by women relative to men (see Table 14, page 81). Within the context of these values, the pair of frequencies that reflect the frequency with which “special” was used by women and men are also significant (alternate hypothesis). This is important as women used “special” (+1.73) at a normalised frequency that is almost two standard deviations more frequent than men, suggesting that, like “incredible”, it might not be a “women only” empty adjective, but reflect a more regular association with the feminine than the masculine to be considered entirely neutral.

Table 21: Appraisal classification of *special* in discourse by women and men (normalised by scaling to the range, SD = 1.0)

Attitude System	Sub-system	Women	Men	Difference
Appreciation	Valuation	2.70	0.97	+1.73

X^2 (df = 14, n = 6,314) = 36.451, p = 0.005

Looking at how women and men used *special* in their discourse (see Table 22), 9 out of 22 (41%) of the occurrences in the discourse of women were combined with “thank you”, “thanks” or a “shout out” to express gratitude, compared to 4 instances of expressing gratitude out of 12 (33%) in the discourse of men. A woman also recognised others by according them “a special place in [her] heart” (Table 19, line 9), and another expressed a “special well done” (Table 19, line 22). Adding “special” to expressions of gratitude and praise serves to intensify the effect – it’s not just “thanks”, it’s “*special* thanks”. It is a linguistic move that elevates the recognition of someone else, both to bond with the one being praised, and – in the context of LinkedIn as a conscious stage for business identity performance – to demonstrate that the author is a transformational leader, comfortable with celebrating the achievements of others. With the rise of the concept of the transformational leader (Nanjundeswaraswamy & Swamy 2014:57), recognising others has become part of the modern notion of leadership that has replaced the traditional hierarchical leader that exemplifies the alpha-male. This has created space for men to also engage in the enthusiastic celebration of others; however, the fact that it is done more by women than men in business, suggests that emphatic gratitude still primarily aligns with the feminine. For women in business this could raise the question of how much is too much: if women are so focused on celebrating others, is this an advantage, or might it eclipse their own achievements and once again reinforce the stereotype that women are more team players, whereas men are primarily agentic leaders who occasionally praise others to show that they are also in touch.

Table 22: Concordance of *special* - raw count

special...	Women	Men

+ thank you/thanks	7	3
+ shout out	2	1
+ mention	0	1
+ place (in my heart)	1	0
+ well done	1	0
+ event/experience(s)/surprise	4	0
+ ticket/price/link/ resources/code/device/edition	5	2
+ organisations	1	0
+ month/year	1	1
+ something	0	3
+ role	0	1
Total	22	12

The three instances of a “special shout out” (Table 19, lines 11&12, and Table 20, line 6) – twice used by women, once by a man – are also striking in that “shout out” is an informal expression of gratitude borrowed from hip-hop and dance culture (Oxford University Press 2022). Using street terminology may seem surprising in the context of “Facebook in a suit” (Appleby 2012:79), but this serves as an indicator of the role the LinkedIn newsfeed can play in bonding; borrowing even from street culture to build community and signal the author as a “hip”, in-touch leader. In the same way that women's language of relationship-building may be becoming more acceptable for men on

the newsfeed, this suggests that even street culture discourse can be acceptable in certain instances in the context of the LinkedIn newsfeed.

6.1.5. “Women only” empty adjectives in the LinkedIn corpus

As explored to this point, only two empty adjectives appear among those adjectives used most frequently (defined as a positive difference in normalised frequency of more than one standard deviation) by women. In a targeted search for those “women only” empty adjectives that Lakoff (1975:45) proposed in her theorisation of women’s language, namely “adorable”, “charming”, “sweet”, “lovely” and “divine”, they are striking by their almost complete absence from all discourse on the LinkedIn newsfeed. As summarised in Table 23, these adjectives were hardly used at all, with the notable exceptions of “lovely” which was used seven times by women, two occurrences of “cute” and one instance each of “charming” and “sweet”. “Sweet” can be excluded as it is used in the sense of a “sweet spot” which is an informal expression drawn from the world of sports to describe the optimum point of contact between a ball and a bat, racquet, or golf club (Oxford University Press 2022), and that has been adopted into business jargon to describe an ideal combination of factors. Business jargon may arguably be empty, but not in the Lakoffian sense that is the focus of this Feminist Critical Discourse analysis. “Charming” was used by a woman in the deontic sense to describe the public figure “Emilio Butragueno, football legend and charming ambassador”. The adjective “cute” was used once by a woman and once by a man. The woman uses “cute” somewhat self-consciously in defending her post with “Felt cute, might delete later”. This suggests that the woman believes that posting “cute” things on LinkedIn is not appropriate. The man mocks with “So you were on Shark Tank. That cute.” The formulation “that cute” comes from American street culture to dismiss a statement as “completely irrelevant and stupid” (txtdude12 2014). That “cute” has been appropriated into street culture as an insult to discount something as irrelevant and frivolous, exemplifies the “powerlessness” of this “woman only” empty adjective. Taken together, a woman's nervousness about doing something “cute” and a man using “cute” effectively as a slur, fully supports Lakoff’s characterisation of this as a word of the marginalised and repressed.

Table 23: Raw count of “Women only” empty adjectives (Lakoff 2004) occurrence in the LinkedIn corpora

	Women	Men
Adorable	0	0
Charming	1	0
Sweet	0	1
Lovely	7	0
Divine	0	0
Cute	1	1

6.1.6. The case of lovely

The adjective *lovely* has the deontic meaning of expressing beauty (Oxford University Press 2022), and the phatic meaning of generally expressing enthusiasm and praise. As Lakoff notes, it is “devoid of all but a vague positive emotive sense” (2004:142). Women used the adjective *lovely* with a normalised frequency of 0.53, putting it within the top 100 (of 735) adjective token types used by women in the LinkedIn corpus. If *lovely* is a prototypical “women only” empty adjective, the fact that it was never used by a man in this corpus supports this. Further, an examination of the concordance (see Table 24) makes for somewhat uncomfortable reading at times. Firstly, a woman describes her gratitude to her “lovely clients” (Table 24, line 1). Within the system of Appraisal, this falls within Affect, expressing inclination towards the people appraised. The adjective *lovely*, derived as it is from notions of someone or something being beautiful and attractive, and thus expressing endearment, has the effect of rather trivialising the client relationship. Certainly, it seems more appropriate when applied to “my lovely friend” (line 2) and also “my lovely husband” (line 4), although, in the latter case, one could also question the appropriateness of mentioning one’s

husband in a business context, something the author seems to acknowledge herself by placing this note in brackets and adding an exclamation mark to flag this as a “fun fact”. If “lovely” sounds like a somewhat frivolous way to talk about business clients, inline 6, *lovely* has a more balanced effect in combination with “smart” to describe “a lovely, smart bunch of people”, suggesting that the subjects are both capable and likable. This reading echoes normative ideas that in business, what counts is being competent in the serious matters, while the relationship “soft stuff” is a “nice-to-have”.

Table 24: Concordance of “lovely” in the LinkedIn newsfeed discourse of women

1.	Thank you to all of my	<u>lovely</u>	clients.
	<i>Affect - inclination (Phatic)</i>		
2.	...being on the panel with my	<u>lovely</u>	friend X.
	<i>Affect - inclination (Phatic)</i>		
3.	To all the interns, it's been so	<u>lovely</u>	getting to know all of you.
	<i>Affect - inclination (Phatic)</i>		
4.	and met some wonderful people (including my	<u>lovely</u>	husband!).
	<i>Affect - inclination (Phatic)</i>		
5.	Edelman will soon get a	<u>lovely</u>	new office.

	<i>Appreciation - reaction (Phatic)</i>		
6.	...growing this product alongside such a	<u>lovely</u> ,	smart bunch of people.
	<i>Affect - inclination (Phatic)</i>		
7.	Wishing you all a	<u>lovely</u>	weekend.
	<i>Appreciation - reaction (Phatic)</i>		

Lovely was used in most cases to appraise people, with two exceptions: “a lovely new office” (line 5) and “a lovely weekend” (line 7). Of these, “a lovely weekend” is not a marked use, but “a lovely new office” arguably is. Applied to a physical space, *lovely* evokes more the association of decorating a private home, than an office space, thus carrying strong overtones of women’s language which is more associated with more trivial, domestic matters.

6.1.7. “Women only” empty adjectives in the benchmark the corpora

The LinkedIn newsfeed corpus presents a somewhat hybrid perspective on business communication as it is a social media platform, although one primarily directed at businesspeople, making the “Facebook in a suit” (Appleby 2012:79) metaphor an apposite one. This positions it somewhere between the corporate office and popular culture; between specialised, formal discourse and common discourse. To understand LinkedIn communication in relation to common discourse, a benchmark corpus can be used, in this case, the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). American English is an appropriate benchmark as the network from which the data are sourced is heavily skewed towards employment in American multinational companies, with American English as the dominant lingua franca. COCA is a corpus of over 1 billion tokens (see pages 72 in the Methodology for further information) but cannot be split by the gender of the speaker/writer.

When Lakoff’s examples of “women only” empty adjectives, together with *incredible* and *special*, are compared in the LinkedIn corpora? to COCA (see Table 25), only one adjective is shown to occur more frequently in the LinkedIn newsfeed, than in common discourse (COCA); namely *incredible*. “Incredible” occurred with a normalised frequency of 0.76 in discourse on LinkedIn, compared to -0.46 in common discourse – a difference of +1.22, that is, more than one standard deviation. This suggests that *incredible* is an adjective that has gained particular acceptance in business as a way of enthusiastically expressing approbation. This is an interesting case as it indicates that the use of *incredible* is marked on LinkedIn. It was also an empty adjective marked by being relatively popular among men (see Table 14, page 82) who used it with a normalised frequency of 1.09, but much more so by women (+2.47, or more than two standard deviations). The fact that *incredible* has acceptance among men may suggest that it is actually what Lakoff would classify as a neutral empty adjective, that is, one used by both men and women. Further, the disproportionate use by women suggests that they are exploiting the fact that this empty adjective seems to be acceptable within a business context, to substitute it for adjectives that would be less acceptable according to the norms of business communication. This enables women to achieve the fine balance between normative expectations that as women, their discourse should exude “charming” enthusiasm, while not devolving into the use of more extreme, frivolous, empty adjectives that would undermine the credibility of what they write and say.

Table 25: Selected empty adjectives on LinkedIn newsfeed vs. COCA (normalised by scaling to the range, SD = 1.0)

	LinkedIn	COCA	Difference
adorable	-0.68	-0.68	-0.01
charming	-0.65	-0.62	-0.03
cute	-0.62	-0.47	-0.14
divine	-0.68	-0.60	-0.08

incredible	0.76	-0.46	+1,22
special	-0.60	0.84	-0.24
sweet	-0.65	-0.13	-0.52
lovely	-0.46	-0.43	-0.04

X^2 (df = 7) = 182,07, p = 0.005

The comparison of the LinkedIn corpora to COCA in Table 25 indicates similar avoidance of *adorable* (-0.01), *charming* (-0.03), *lovely* (-0.4) and *divine* (-0.08), suggesting that these are the most polarising of the “women only” adjectives, even in common discourse. The fact that COCA cannot be investigated with the variable of gender, means that one cannot verify whether the few occurrences of these empty adjectives in COCA were indeed attributable to women, but the very low use of the adjectives overall suggests very niche use.

Although analysis through the lens of gender is not possible with the COCA data, the other benchmark corpus capturing the discourse of the Presidential Commission for the Study of Bioethical Issues, active in the United States of America from 2009-2017 (see page 71 in the Methodology for details), can be used for this purpose. This corpus captures the public spoken discourse of experts in the field of bioethics and includes two sub-corpora: one consisting of the discourse of commission members identifiable as women, and the other, as men. The corpora capture specialised scientific discourse; however, as? they are composed of spoken discourse in the form of transcripts of public meetings, and, in the case of commission members, engagement in discussions, question-and-answer sessions and dialogue around meeting proceedings. The commission communication is therefore less formal than would be expected in written scientific texts (Schmauss & Kilian 2021), but still imbued with the gravitas of a high-profile public forum, informed by the conventions of scientific discourse and acting under the auspices of the then-president of the United States of America. The discourse can therefore be used as a benchmark of quite formal professional communication. This presents an interesting counterpoint to the LinkedIn

newsfeed corpora, where businesspeople are engaged in communication on social media and therefore, a version of business discourse that is less rigid and formal than the boardroom and, as business is not a profession, would be expected to be less formal than the communication of professionals.

When the corpora of the Bioethics Commission are compared to those of discourse from the LinkedIn newsfeed, there are a few surprises in terms of the use of the selected empty adjectives that are the focus of this study. Firstly, women used all the selected empty adjectives except *incredible* less frequently on the LinkedIn newsfeed than the women of the Bioethics Commission. Amongst men, the comparison is almost diametrically opposed: men on the LinkedIn newsfeed used all the selected adjectives more frequently than men in the context of commission proceedings, with the exception of *special* which the Bioethics Commission men used with a normalised frequency of 0.95, compared to 0.17 by men on LinkedIn. The original hypothesis was that “women only” empty adjectives would be strongly avoided, particularly in the context of the quite formal proceedings of a Presidential Commission by esteemed academics. Further, as the commission was chaired by a woman – the esteemed Dr. Amy Gutmann, at the time, also President of Pennsylvania State University – it was expected that this would be a particularly inclusive context for women. However, the data suggest instead that the commission women were *more likely* to comply with the sexist norms of women’s language than businesswomen on LinkedIn, and commission men were *less likely* to use these markers traditionally associated with women’s language than businessmen on LinkedIn. This suggests that the women of the commission were more conscious of the need to ingratiate themselves through socially normative behaviour despite being prominent experts in their fields, while the commission men were very conscious of avoiding these linguistic formulations that might undermine their authority. In this, the commission discourse is arguably more formal than expected in the sense of being more traditional, reflecting the hegemonic norms of society whereby women seek to demonstrate a compliant attitude to their interlocutor, while men are free to communicate more bluntly.

This overt gender inequality among objectively “powerful” people could be a consequence of generational differences. Since the commission members are all extremely experienced seniors (over 50 already ten years ago) in their field, coming from generations where women who did not

confirm to sexist norms were viewed with even stronger suspicion, it is to be expected that they would face a tougher challenge when trying to balance these social norms with their professional achievement, than younger women (current under 50's) in business today. Another probable factor is that women are even more under-represented in scientific fields (McNally 2020) than in business, and more so in the commission members' generation. The women of the Bioethics Commission were therefore more likely to engage in normative behaviour because they are a minority and so felt more obligated to conform, something even the visible leadership of the commission by Dr Amy Gutmann, a powerful woman, could not offset. This is testimony to the pernicious persistence of sexism in language, but it also raises the intriguing question of why the discourse of men and women on LinkedIn should be so strikingly different to the hegemonic patterns that emerge in the discourse of the Bioethics Commission. It suggests that there is less sexism on the newsfeed of LinkedIn: women feel less obligated to conform with the norms of women's language; indeed, they may even be actively avoiding it, while men evidently feel less restricted from engaging in behaviour traditionally more closely associated with the feminine register and therefore socially proscribed for men. This reflects an interesting narrowing of the gap between women's language and men's language within the context of LinkedIn discourse.

Table 26: Selected empty adjectives on LinkedIn newsfeed vs. Bioethics Commission members, split by gender (normalised by scaling to the range, SD = 1.0)

	LinkedIn		Bioethics		Difference	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Adorable	-1.09	-1.00	-0.78	-1.05	-0.31	+0.05
Charming	-1.04	-1.00	-0.78	-1.05	-0.27	+0.05
Cute	-1.04	-0.93	-0.71	-1.05	-0.33	+0.13
Divine	-1.09	-1.00	-0.78	-1.05	-0.31	+0.05

Incredible	0.35	0.17	-0.61	-1.00	+0.96	+1.17
Special	0.11	0.17	1.26	0.95	-1.15	-0.78
Sweet	-1.09	-0.93	-0.75	-1.05	-0.35	+0.13
Lovely	-1.09	-0.49	-0.75	-1.00	-0.35	+0.51

X^2 (df = 7) = 182,07; p = 0.005

6.2. Use of the intensifier *so*

Lakoff (193, 1975, 2004) engages in a relatively limited theorisation of the lexical item *so* as a marker of women’s language; in fact, in a very candid statement, she points out that she “[refrained] from discussing [*so*] in the body of [her] text because the facts are controversial and [she does] not understand them fully” (2004:48). In Lakoff’s seed theorisation, the heavily stressed use of the equative *so* “where purists would insist upon an absolute superlative” (2004:48) is a feature of *women’s language*. This has the effect of slightly hedging the statement when the following examples are considered:

- a) “...to unwind, relax and make memories together is very important”
- b) “...to unwind, relax and make memories together is *so* important”

Sentence (b) was written by a woman on the LinkedIn newsfeed, and contrasts with sentence (a) in the use of the equative intensifier *so*, as opposed to “very” (“really”, “utterly” and other absolute superlatives). The effect of *so* serves to emphasise that these things that the author lists are important, but in a way that is somewhat vague and indefinite when compared to the emphatic “very”. This is exemplified in the USAS semantic tagging of *so* in such instances as “Degree: Boosters – Intensifiers that amplify to a high degree (*but not the upper extreme*)” (Archer et al. 2002:8, emphasis author’s own).

6.2.1. Use of *so* in the LinkedIn corpus

So appears 241 times in the LinkedIn corpus; however, only 98 (41%) of these occurrences are intensifying equative adverbs (semtag A13.3) and thus relevant to this study. It is interesting to note that, of the raw count of occurrences of *so* in the corpora, 48% of the instances where *so* was used by a woman (see Table 27), it functioned as an intensifying adverb; however, this proportion was slightly lower (39%) among the newsfeed postings by men. This suggests a slight preference among women for using *so* in the function of an intensifying adverb, when compared to men. This is the first indication from the data that Lakoff had detected something important when she sensed that the use of *so* in this way is more characteristic of the feminine register.

Table 27: Use of *so* on LinkedIn (raw count)

	Women		Men	
Total occurrences	112	100%	129	100%
Adverbs only	48	43%	50	39%

As reflected in Table 28, women used *so* as an intensifying adverb on LinkedIn with a normalised frequency of 0.98, whereas men used it with a frequency of 0.27. The (+0.71) difference between these frequencies further supports an apparent preference for this formulation among women.

Table 28: Use of *so* as an intensifier on LinkedIn, split by gender (normalised by scaling to the range, SD = 1.0)

	Women	Men	Difference
“so” (ADV)	0.98	0.27	+0.71

When the collocations with *so* as an intensifying adverb were examined (see Table 29), the combination occurring most frequently in the discourse of women was “so many” (so many... doors/ great reunions/ inspirational women/ memories/ moments/ new, motivated, and passionate personalities/ people/ professional women/ reasons/ things/ women). *So* occurred together with “many” with a normalised frequency of 6.13 in the discourse of women on the LinkedIn newsfeed, compared to only 0.96 in the discourse of men. This reflects a massive difference of (+5.17), or over five standard deviations. Women also made extensive use of *so* in conjunction with “much” (so much... detail; effort; thanks, excitement, and inspiration; fun and growth). Women used “so much” with a normalised frequency of 4.87, which makes it the second most frequently occurring concordance in the dataset, although the frequency with which they used it was nevertheless more than one standard deviation (-1.40) less than men. A preference for “many” has already been noted among men (see page 79). The difference between “many” and “much” is that “many” is used with countable nouns whereas “much” is applied to non-count nouns. Importantly, emotions and emotional states are non-count nouns, so *much* happiness, joy, sadness, frustration etc. This points to women tending to share emotions more than men on the LinkedIn newsfeed. In fact, feelings generally dominate in the most frequent concordances of *so* that occur in the discourse of women on LinkedIn when compared to men: women feel “so proud” (normalised frequency +1.50 vs. men), “so excited” (+0.87); “so happy” (+1.37); “so grateful” (+0.24); “so delighted” (+0.74), and “so thankful” (+0.74).

Table 29: Collocations with *so*, split by gender (normalised by scaling to the range, SD= 1.0)

	Women	Men	Difference	MI Score
Many	6.13	0.96	+5.17	568
Much	4.87	6.27	-1.40	725
Proud	1.71	0.21	+1.50	563
Long	1.71	-0.05	+1.75	534

Excited	1.07	0.21	+0.87	463
Important	1.07	-0.05	+1.12	519
Happy	1.07	-0.30	+1.37	378
Grateful	0.44	0.21	+0.24	577
Delighted	0.44	-0.30	+0.74	508
Thankful	0.44	-0.30	+0.74	608

X^2 (df = 11) = 20,92; p = 0.05

The evident preference among women for using *so* as an intensifying adverb supports Lakoff's theory that use of this construction appears to characterise women's language, but its role is somewhat opaque: *so* is an equivocation – it is an intensifier, but as an equative, is vague on the degree such that the effect is to hedge what follows. This is an intriguing linguistic move which does raise the question of why women do this, especially in relation to expressing emotions. As Lakoff notes: “it is somewhat odd to hedge in describing one's own mental or emotional state: who, after all, is qualified to contradict one on this?” (2004:48). In the context of the LinkedIn newsfeed, it is possible that women do this to soften the impact of statements that they do not feel entirely comfortable making. In the case of expressing emotions, women are most likely aware that work is not the place to talk about emotions and doing so may draw censure for being “too emotional” or being dismissed as an “emotional woman”. Such sexist perceptions would associate this emotionalism with instability which is not only inappropriate in business but could even be a liability. In this context then, women would be sensitive to the need to avoid such associations, so where they do feel compelled to talk about their emotions, they use the equative *so* rather than an absolute superlative which may make them appear overly emotive.

6.2.2. Use of *so* in the benchmark corpora

Overall, *so* was used as an equative intensifier with a normalised frequency of 1.1 (see Table 30) in discourse on the LinkedIn newsfeed, and a normalised frequency of 0.8 in common discourse (COCA). The negligible difference (+0.2) suggests that the use of this linguistic item on LinkedIn vs. common discourse is not marked. However, communication on the LinkedIn newsfeed falls within the genre of online newsfeed communication, and the Corpus of Contemporary American English is composed of representative discourse across a range of genres, grouped as eight separate corpora: academic texts; blogs; fiction; magazines; newspapers; spoken discourse; TV media and web content.

Table 30: Comparing occurrence of *so* in the LinkedIn newsfeed to COCA (normalised, n=1,000)

	LinkedIn	COCA	Difference
<i>So</i> (A13.3)	1.1	0.8	+0.2

As the USAS Semantic Tagger enables the specific tagging of instances where *so* is used as an equative intensifier (A13.3 Degree: Boosters), it is therefore possible to investigate the use of *so* across all COCA corpora, and by genre. To note, these data were normalised by converting to a common sample size (n=1,000) – scaling to the range was not used as there is only one common variable (*so*). *So* appeared in the COCA corpora a total 26,467 times, of which 7,959 cases (30%) were intensifying (equative) adverbs (A13.3). As reflected in Table 31, *so* occurred with varying frequencies across different genres: it occurred as an equative intensifier most frequently in TV media (1.50) and fiction (1.47), followed by spoken discourse (1.21). TV media and fiction both include a significant amount of dialogue and – especially in the case of TV – monologue. As Lakoff notes: “television mirrors the speech of the television-watching community” (2004:40). So too fiction is a mirror to popular culture. Both TV media and fiction are also contexts for storytelling, and, like spoken discourse, are generally less formal than other written texts. Thus, the

dominance of *so* in TV media, fiction and spoken discourse suggests that it is a construction which is used frequently in discourse that is interactional and narrative. This does not necessarily undermine Lakoff’s theory of women’s language: Lakoff points out that women’s language is not proscribed in all cases; there are domains and contexts where even the most extreme cases of “women’s language” may be wholly appropriate (2004:46). The point with women’s language though is that it is not appropriate in all contexts; it is restricted in use. Thus, women’s language would be socially acceptable on a television daytime serial drama, or a blog about beauty, home decorating or other topics normatively viewed as women’s domains, but “not relevant to the real world of (male) influence and power” (2004:46). Navigating the domains of “women’s language”, as Lakoff points out, “requires special awareness to the nuances of social situations, special alertness to possible disapproval” (2004:41) that burdens – and probably distracts – women with additional stress in high stake contexts, like communicating on the LinkedIn newsfeed.

Table 31: Occurrence of *so* in the LinkedIn newsfeed compared to COCA sub-corpora (normalised n=1,000)

	<i>So</i> (A13.3) Frequency
LinkedIn	1.09
Academic Texts	0.31
Blogs	1.04
Fiction	1.47
Magazines	0.63
Newspapers	0.55
Spoken Discourse	1.21

TV Media	1.50
Web Content	0.10

After TV media, fiction and spoken discourse, *so* is used with similar frequency on the LinkedIn newsfeed (1.09) as it appears within the COCA sub-corpus of blogs. Blogs are web pages where people share their thoughts and commentaries, typically written in an engaging, conversational style. This description fits LinkedIn newsfeed posts too. Indeed, the difference between blogs and social media posts is that blogs tend to be long-form content, while social media posts are much shorter. While LinkedIn posts tend to be concise (76 tokens; see Table 8, pages 73-74), the data suggest that the style of writing may be similar to a blog. This makes sense as LinkedIn is a platform that enables users to share commentaries that showcase their knowledge, experience, interests, and perspectives on their newsfeeds which therefore function like mini blogs.

Considering that the incidence of *so* as an equative intensifier on the LinkedIn newsfeed was like that of blogs, it is therefore surprising that the lowest normalised frequency (0.10) of *so* was web content. Understanding this requires an explanation of what sub-genres are covered by “web content”. These are academic, argument, fiction, information, instruction, legal, news, personal, promotion and review web pages. The interactional narrative discourse is thus a relatively marginal part of this corpus and a scroll through the corpus confirms that it is largely technical.

So occurs with the next lowest frequency (0.31) in the COCA corpus of academic discourse. It must be noted that these are written academic texts, and thus not directly comparable with the second benchmark corpus used in this study, namely that of the Bioethics Commission. When the corpora of the Bioethics Commission are examined for use of *so* as an equative intensifier (see Table 32), it is evident that it was used less frequently by members of the commission than it was by users posting on LinkedIn, although more frequently than it appears in academic texts in COCA. Most striking is that the women of the commission used this lexical item the least of all groups, with a normalised frequency of just 0.69. This is still +0.38 more than the frequency with which

the lexical item appeared in academic texts (see Table 31) but is remarkably less frequent than expected.

Table 32: Occurrence of *so* in the LinkedIn newsfeed compared to the Bioethics Commission corpora, split by gender (normalised n=1,000)

	LinkedIn Newsfeed		Bioethics Commission	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
<i>So</i> (A13.3)	1.25	0.98	0.69	0.89

Before further exploration of the use of *so* by women, it is interesting to note the similarity of normalised frequency of use by men posting on LinkedIn (0.98) and the spoken discourse of the commission men (0.89); a difference of just (+0.8). This would suggest a similar attitude to *so*, maybe slightly more positively disposed in the more informal context of the LinkedIn newsfeed. It is the women who are poles apart. This recalls the investigation of “women only” empty adjectives (see pages 105-106) where the inverse was the case: women on the LinkedIn newsfeed made *less* use of these lexical items, than women in the context of the Bioethics Commission proceedings. The difference between phatic empty adjectives and *so* used as an equative intensifier is that the former expresses strong feelings and emotions, and the latter prevaricates on emotion; *so* intensifies *but not to the upper extreme*. Taken together, this suggests that women are wary of expressing emotion on the LinkedIn newsfeed, finding it necessary to hedge their emotions with *so*, whereas the women of the Bioethics Commission did not feel similarly constrained.

6.3. Relevance of Lakoff’s theory of “women’s language” today

Lakoff’s theory of “women’s language” essentially breaks down into two parts: linguistic markers of women’s discourse that (i) make her sound frivolous; and (ii) make a woman sound tentative. In this Feminist Critical Discourse study, a lexical item from each category is examined: “women only” empty adjectives suggest ideas that are “essentially frivolous, trivial, or unimportant to the

world at large” (2004:46), while *so* is used as an equative intensifier that boosts the following word but does not amplify to the degree that an absolute superlative would, thereby having a hedging effect. In terms of how these two linguistic dynamics play out in the LinkedIn corpora, empty adjectives expressed phatic emotion (see page 37), while *so* primarily functioned to rein in emotion (see page 39). Taken together, these suggest some ambivalence on the part of women towards expressing emotion, which is unsurprising, given the negative normative association of emotion with instability and unreliable decision-making in business contexts. While they show emotion in selective use of empty adjectives, they also dance around their emotions with their use of *so*: empty adjectives express emotions, and *so* puts a brake on them. In the masculine space that is the world of business, especially at executive levels, cool-headed, rational decision-making is ostensibly most valued; decisions should be data-based and strategic, rather than “swayed by emotion” (a phrase infused with negative connotations). Women recognise this as the dominant ideology in business today, and evidently seek to mitigate for this in their discourse by treading warily around emotion, explicitly expressed in one post by a woman that something “[felt] cute, might delete later”. This proves that “cuteness” is not something women feel they can be associated with in the ‘serious’ (male dominated) space that is business.

The case of women in business communicating on the LinkedIn newsfeed contrasts with the communication of women who are esteemed academics and experts in the Bioethic Commission corpora (Schmauss & Killian 2022). These are senior women (in position and age) engaged in public specialised discourse, and their language carries striking traces of empty adjectives and a remarkably low frequency of *so* used as an equative intensifier. This reflects women, coming from a similar generation of female American academics as Lakoff herself, visibly following the conventions of women’s language in expressing phatic emotion to such a degree that they do not even use *so* to hedge such occasions. These are also senior women working in the field of Bioethics, which falls within the broader context of STEM disciplines where women are extremely under-represented, making these women a conspicuous minority. In this disadvantaged position, women need to work hard, both within their positions and linguistically, to be integrated. This recalls evidence that women in mixed-gender work groups gain more acceptance, especially by men, when they conform with norms that women behave in ways that are ingratiating, whereas such behaviour, or the absence of it, had no discernible impact on the status of men within the group (Ridgeway

1982). Similarly, the women of the Bioethics Commission needed to balance their need for credibility and professionalism with the need to not draw censure and rejection for being seen as “unfeminine”. This is not to say that women posting on the LinkedIn newsfeed were not similarly challenged, but in a different discourse context, they were using different strategies. Women on LinkedIn were selective in which empty adjectives they used for phatic expression, avoiding all the “women only” adjectives on Lakoff’s list (see page 33-34), except for *lovely*, and making heavy use of *incredible* and *special* (see Table 15). Although the latter two adjectives were not classified by Lakoff in her list of empty adjectives, her list was only advanced as “representative”, leaving room for expansion by in subsequent research. However, they were also used by men, suggesting a more likely case that *incredible* and *special* lie somewhere between what Lakoff terms “neutral” (or empty adjectives used by both women and men) and “women only” (2004:45). Based on the data, women seem to intuitively find them sufficiently phatic and sufficiently neutral, to make extensive use of them, instead of more polarising alternatives, such as “divine”.

This investigation of “women’s language” in the discourse of LinkedIn’s newsfeed also revealed some interesting insights into “men’s language”; namely, evidence of men using empty adjectives much more frequently on LinkedIn than men in the benchmark corpus of specialised discourse (Bioethics Commission corpus). These instances of men using phatic constructions in posts celebrating achievements, things and also people, indicate men putting focus on the interpersonal, demonstrating enthusiasm that connects with their audience and showing the kind of “emotional quotient” that is associated with transformational leadership. The linguistic behaviour of these men suggests a marked shift in the business landscape away from purely agentic behaviour, to integrate some of the communal behaviours more traditionally associated with women. The effect of this change is two-fold: it shifts business towards the high-engagement environment that is the goal of transformational leadership and helps to make normative feminine behaviour more relevant and acceptable within the business context. However, it is important to state that this is only a small shift in the right direction. The marked differences between the communication of women and men on the LinkedIn newsfeed indicates that despite some positive change, gender ideology persists in making this an unequal space.

This Feminist Critical Discourse study thus demonstrates the relevance of Lakoff's theory of "women's language" as a paradigm for identifying, unpacking, and understanding gender inequality reflected in the discourse of women and men. This reflects the underlying gender ideology that framed Lakoff's work as deep-rooted and essentially enduring, even if it manifests in society as a dynamic that shifts significantly by context and over time. It is also a testimony to the lasting impact and relevance of Lakoff's work:

The fact that it persists as the single most influential work in language and gender indicates that its foundational role in the field is substantive rather than symbolic.

(Bucholtz 2004:4)

That said, Lakoff herself recognised her theory as a starting point for further research (2004:40), and in 2004, reflected how much had changed since she first published the original essay in 1975, and "how much remains essentially the same" (2004:150). This is both an assessment of the mixed progress of the women's liberation movement as well as developments within the field of linguistics. In the latter case, Corpus Linguistics is a specific area that has seen rapid development in recent decades. Together with the rise of the internet which has revolutionised the way that human beings interact with new modes of communication, including SNS like LinkedIn, it is indeed a very different world now to the one in which Lakoff published "Language and Women's Place". But even in this context, women's discourse still carries traces of socially normative feminine linguistic behaviour and reflects women's ambivalence in navigating these disempowering social expectations while simultaneously demonstrating the kind of agentic confidence that is traditionally associated with normative ideas of the successful business leader, still synonymous with prototypically masculine behaviour.

Lakoff's theory is therefore still extremely relevant now; however, following her invitation to future researchers to take her ideas further, and given expected differences over time and across contexts, the theory is neither monolithic nor static. In this study, the persistent relevance of "women only" empty adjectives has been demonstrated both through their use, notably by the women of the Bioethics Commission, and their marked avoidance in the discourse of women on LinkedIn. In addition, the finding that women seem to have particular preference for using *incredible* and *special* as phatic alternatives to the more extreme "women only" empty adjectives, suggests that these two

adjectives may have a hybrid status, somewhere between the binary categorisation posited by Lakoff of “neutral”, used by both men and women, and “women only”. Certainly, the marked use of *incredible* and *special* suggest that they are definitely not “neutral”, so it is proposed to include them in Lakoff’s original “representative” list as hybrid empty adjectives that are used by men, but much more frequently by women (see Table 33).

Table 33: Empty adjectives as theorised by Lakoff, with new additions (*)

Neutral	*Hybrid	Women only
Great	*incredible	adorable
Terrific	*special	charming
Cool		sweet
neat		lovely
		divine

6.4. Possible consequences of “women’s language” on LinkedIn newsfeed for gender equality in business

Lakoff likens the dilemma of women navigating language outside the socially acceptable (and unimportant) domains of woman’s language, to needing to speak two different languages and “[like] many bilinguals, [women] may never really be a master of either language” (2004:41). Women cannot ‘talk like a lady’, or they will not be taken seriously, nor can they afford not to, as they will be penalised for being unfeminine. So, women need to codeswitch back and forth in a process whose best outcome will probably be that they appear as neither too communal nor too agentic – palatable, not promotable. This is probably the most pernicious outcome of what is essentially expressed in the Role Congruity Theory (Eagly & Karau 2002): women are either censured for being too feminine or not feminine enough or fall between these two stools. They are

damned if they do, damned if they don't (Lakoff 2004:41). In addition, having to navigate the line between talking like ladies and talking like business leaders causes considerable stress. Lakoff notes "the extra energy that must be (subconsciously or otherwise) expended in this game is energy sapped from more creative work, and hinders women from expressing themselves as well, as fully, or as freely as they might otherwise" (2004:42). In fact, it has been documented (see review of empirical data in Karalaia Guillen 2012) that navigating the duality of being a woman in business can undermine motivation and is also associated with psychological stress factors.

While it is still evident that women in business continue to struggle with the consequences of persistent gender inequality in the workplace, it is also evident in the study that there is some progress in the right direction, certainly within the context of the SNS, LinkedIn, with discourse becoming more inclusive of some characteristics of the feminine register and more communal linguistic behaviour. As noted earlier, this can have the positive impact of making business spaces more inclusive of the feminine style, and – more broadly – reflects a shift away from hierarchical business leadership to the kind of transformational leadership that is associated with better business and organisational outcomes.

7. Conclusion

In drawing this study together, Lakoff's prefix to her original essay on "Language and Woman's Place" seems as relevant as ever: this work is presented "less as the final word of the subject of sexism in language – anything but that! – than as a goad for further research" (2004:40). Lakoff's theory has stimulated subsequent research, and that includes this Feminist Critical Discourse study of women's language on the LinkedIn newsfeed. However, this too is not intended as a "final word", but rather a contribution to continued research around "women's language" and its manifestation in contemporary life, as well as contributing to research at the intersection between gender and business management studies, as the imperative to find effective solutions for the successful integration of women in the workplace gains in political and economic importance. Regarding Lakoff's theorisation of "women's language", only two aspects have been examined in this study; namely, "women only" empty adjectives and use of the equative intensifier *so*, but both have been demonstrated to be relevant markers of women's language both in their use – and avoidance – by

women in the discourse of business. The evident ambivalence of women towards using these linguistic items in their discourse on the LinkedIn newsfeed – a highly visible space where LinkedIn users are expected to demonstrate their value as prospective employees, clients and/or contacts – suggests something of their struggle to reconcile their identities as women with the identity they consciously work to project as active members of the business community. This reflects the wider context of gender inequality that works against the ambition of women by keeping the glass ceiling more or less in place, but also suggests a dynamic of progress and positive change as women collectively forge strategies to cope in a context that seems to be shifting slowly but surely towards greater integration and inclusiveness. At long last it seems that the business community is becoming a space which, if not yet more welcoming to women, at least is becoming more acceptant.

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