

RESEARCH PAPER

Gendered Roles and Power Dynamics in Spousal Communication: A Genderlect Analysis of *An American Language* by Tayari Jones

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the communication between spouses in Tayari Jones' *An American Marriage* (2018). It investigates how gendered speech practices, power relations, and identities in marriage are transformed as a result of wrongful incarceration. The study uses a qualitative, text-based approach that entails an in-depth analysis of important dialogues and passages. The researchers have drawn on the Genderlect Theory of Deborah Tannen to examine the shifts between Rapport and Reporting talk. Also, the concept of gender performativity is used as an analytical tool to show how identities are performed and transformed through linguistic usage. The findings reveal that speech patterns of Roy and Celestial gradually demonstrate the struggle between emotional dependence and self-preservation, which result in different communicative patterns in their marriage life. The analysis demonstrates that the traditional gendered communication is disrupted by the long term separation and other institutional constraints, which causes the change of emotional vulnerability, power, and rational control between the male and female voices. The gendered-based distinctive of language are also made more complicated by the shifting narrative of the novel offers both males and females to express introspection, vulnerability, and restraint of their emotions. This study, using close textual and narrative alertness, examines the topic of marital discourse in literature around the aspects of the reshaping of power, intimacy and identity within the institution of external pressures. It also highlights the necessity of further investigation concerning gender, identity and sociolinguistic tendencies in literary narratives.

Keywords: Emotional Vulnerability, Gendered roles, Gender Performativity, Spousal Communication

Introduction

Language is an effective tool by which marital relationships are built, sustained and in many cases oppressed. In marriage, communication does not only exist as sharing information, but it also signifies the expectations of emotions, social role, and power of the couple. According to sociolinguistic scholars, the interaction between spouses is characterized by culturally sustained norms of gender, authority, and intimacy, and therefore a marital discourse is the place where identity and power are always negotiated. Speech styles, conversational patterns and expression of feelings may either promote relationship or aggravate conflict. Such differences are very obvious when marriage is put at test by external forces like separation, social inequality, or institutional injustice, a situation, which forces partners to renegotiate not only their relationship but also their communicative practices. A powerful theory of analyzing such differences is the Genderlect Theory by Deborah Tannen, which attempts to explain men and women communication as part of the culture as opposed to their biologically inherited ways to speak. The most critical aspect of this theory is the difference between *Report Talk* and *Rapport Talk*. According to Tannen, men are usually conditioned to talk *Report Talk*, which is a mode of communication

that is limited to simple deliverance of information, status assertion, and personal independence, as well as domination. Women on the other hand, tend to use *Rapport Talk* which focuses on ensuring emotional bonding and empathy, collaboration, and preservation of relationship more easily. Such divergent communicative aims often cause misunderstanding during intimate relations, as both of the communicating partners could interpret the words of the other according to their communicative expectations. Notably, Tannen suggests that both forms are equal and miscommunication occurs because of the inability to identify these differences. The Genderlect Theory also makes it possible that these patterns are fluid and contextually-dependent. Increasingly imbalanced power relations when altered under social, racial or institutional pressure can lead to a blurring, overlapping or even reversing of traditional Report and Rapport Talk that would expose the constraints of strictly gender-based communication paradigms. *An American Marriage* by Tayari Jones offers a strong literary background where these theoretical issues can be analyzed. The novel is based on the lives of Roy and Celestial, a young African American pair whose marriage is shaken by the false imprisonment of Roy. The text prefigures spousal communication as one of the key arenas of emotional negotiation and struggle of power through dialogues, letters, and varying perspectives on telling the story. The more emotional distance is created by physical separation, the more Roy uses language characteristic of Report Talk like assertions of marital entitlement and marital identity, and the more Celestial uses language characteristic of Rapport Talk including emotional autonomy and redefinition of relationships. The novel however complicates these patterns as it places marital talking in the context of overlapping structures of race, class and incarceration; something that brings about instances of failure of gendered ways of communication to withstand institutional power. This study uses the Genderlect Theory of Deborah Tannen, specifically the Report and Rapport Talk, to understand how communication between spouses in the novel, *An American Marriage*, signifies conflicts between independence and interdependence, how power relations reinvented gender talk, and how narrative voices relying on the binary (male and female) communication forms. By doing that, the study illustrates how literary discourse can sociolinguistically critically deal with and develop sociolinguistic theories of gender and communication.

Literature Review

Gendered language use has also been studied through interactional analysis empirically. Holmes (2006) examines the verbal discourse to illustrate how linguistic preferences depend on situational context and relationships of power. This work portrays that female speakers employ different communicative patterns, assertiveness and cooperation, based on their relational position, not on the gender. Holmes further emphasizes intimate communication among individuals or more precisely, marriage that offers dynamic nature where the speakers keep on negotiating the issue of power and unity in terms of language. Her results point out that gendered communicative entails cannot be condensed to a fixed set of behaviors because orators are often inclined to alter their language actions in accordance with relational norms. This view upholds the stance that the discourse of spouses should be explored in its own particular social and emotional context.

The gender communication has been theorized as a socially constructed linguistic system that is influenced by cultural norms and interactional practices. Tannen (2007) presents Genderlect Theory to describe how men and women are socialized to think differently in communication. Her work recognizes patterned distinction like, Report Talk and Rapport Talk that surpass the opposition in negotiating autonomy, connection to emotions, and power during intimate associations. Tannen claims that marital conversation can be a location of miscommunication when couples construct and interpret language based on incompatible communicative anticipations.

Interpersonal communication studies have also been used to examine marital communication across distances. Stafford and Merolla (2007) investigate the reorganization

of geographically separated marital communication by depending more on mediated discourse. They find that distance enhances misunderstanding and emotional expression, and thus written communication is one of the configuring locations of power, attachment, and emotional distance negotiation. This type of research has strong relevance to literary patterns of marriage broken by separation and institutional constraint.

The Marital communication Power relations have been discussed as dynamic processes through which everyday linguistic interaction is performed. Zimmerman (2009) examine how turn-taking, interruption, and topic control as conversational practices are a part of power negotiation mechanisms between spouses. This work shows that gendered power is frequently subtle in action as opposed to expedient dominance and therefore that everyday talk is a prospective center of relational authority.

Wildeman (2009) explores that imprisonment transforms marriage paths and undermines married relationships by restricting access to continual communication and shared emotion within African American communities. The study highlights that incarceration plays an equal role in reconstituting intimate relationships and not a sanction of the law. In a broad sense, the interaction of gender and race with structural inequality has been the focus of social and cultural theory in modern times. Collins (2009) explores the way lived experience is determined by intersecting systems of race, gender and class, especially among African American communities. Her theory of intersectionality describes how power works across various social sites at the same time, shaping both identity and relations and modes of struggle. Collins emphasizes that intimate relationships are deeply affected by these overlapping structures, as individuals negotiate both personal and institutional constraints.

Power and language are explored as two much related key concepts in discourse analysis, especially with regard to the ways of exercising authority and power in everyday conversations. van Dijk (2009) discusses discourse as a social practice that produces and reproduces power relations by focusing on the aspect of how speakers with more institutional or social power influence interactional patterns by determining the choice of topic and turn taking. His work shows that the language has a propensity of creating power though there is not a clear display of power.

African American marital relationships have been studied under the demographic and sociological studies, especially concerning structural limitations. Sweeney (2010) discusses the pattern of African American marriage and believes that institutional pressures and economic inequality influence the redesign of marital expectations and relationship stability to a great importance. Her study clarifies that marriage is being forged more on an uncertain basis, which contributes to emotional dedication and communicative exchange between couples.

Critical approaches to the use of language have also addressed power in discourse. Fairclough (2010) discusses language preference as a reflective and perpetuating of unequal social relationship and argues that the normalization of dominance relies in part on everyday communication as a normalizing process. His work notes that discourse has played the focal point of negotiation of social identities and power hierarchy. Fairclough framework can be notably applied to interpersonal relationships wherein power plays out through the shape of the conversational control, silence, and ideological positioning.

The relationship studies have explored communication in the context of physical separation as a key element that determines intimacy and stability during relationship. Stafford (2010) evaluates long-distance romantic relationships and says that mediated communication, such as letter and written messages, can play a central role in maintaining emotional contact in the absence of face-to-face communication. Her analysis emphasizes

the fact that written communication may be particularly emotionally charged, with couples using only words to be able to agree on commitment, reassurance, and relationship identity.

Sociolinguistic studies have empirically analyzed gender variations in communication styles through the study of how men and women differ in their speech behaviors. Khaldi (2020) studies report talk and rapport talk in an online discourse corpus study and observes the difference in how men and women use hedging strategies, report/rapport feature based on the patterns of conversational style people associate with gender stereotypes in a conversation situation.

Giyoto et al. (2020) offer another empirical method of defining the influence of gender and social roles in the analysis of conversational behavior by exploring how gender and social status affect conversational moves in formal speech acts. Their result suggests that female speakers have assertive and responsive styles that advance interactional cohesion, but male speakers display patterns that focus on directive conversational behavior.

According to Fivush and Grysman (2022), narratives and gender as systems of meaning making are culturally mediated and argue that narrative processes play a part in the construction of gender identity, as gender norms play a part in influencing the story telling and coherence of telling the story. Their research predicts the notion that narration in itself has been a gendered practice that presupposes social relations and demands embedded in culture.

Zahoor et al. (2024) discuss the role of language in constructing gender roles and displaying power dynamics in literary works by speech acts, conversational dominance, and stereotypes. It demonstrates that linguistic characteristics like interruptions, topic control, assertive strategy or cooperative strategy indicate social hierarchies and determine the authority and agency of characters. It emphasizes the way in which literary language reflects, as well as challenges gendered power relations.

Livingston and Ryu (2020) examine the role of gender in the negotiation in spousal relationships, focusing on the negotiation strategies that are affected by the cultural norms and individual relations. It discusses how different communicative styles can be taken by men and women, including assertiveness, compromise and accommodation, depending on gendered expectations and power structures. It demonstrate that successful negotiation in marriage implies that it is necessary to manage not only personal likes and dislikes but also the cultural beliefs regarding the roles and power between genders.

Ali et al., (2022) explore the role of spousal role expectations in influencing the marital conflict patterns in both male and female perspectives. The research finds that conventional gender expectations and roles, including men as providers and decision-makers and women as emotional supporters, may lead to misunderstanding, tension, and conflict in relationships. This research indicates that communication failures and conflicts are more probable to take place when the expectations of partners are not met or they do not align with the changing social roles.

Rudman et al., (2021) represent an in-depth analysis of the role of social psychology in shaping gender, emphasizing the interaction of power and intimacy in gender interactions. They describe the role the societal norms, stereotypes, and institutional structures play in determining how men and women should act in interpersonal and social situations. It emphasizes that gender roles are not predetermined but are negotiated in the daily interactions where power relations are reflected and strengthened. They also address the way, in which intimacy, patterns of communication, and expectations of relationships are shaped through gendered assumptions, which sheds light on how power shapes personal relationships and the overall social organization.

Stephens (2024) uses the novel *An American Marriage* by Tayari Jones to demonstrate how the novel criticizes the damaging impact of imprisonment and structural racism on individuals, families, and intimate relationships. This work holds the view that the story shows not just the individual destruction that false imprisonment can cause but also how institutional injustice interferes with emotional attachment and ordinary living.

Despite the extensive use of Genderlect Theory in the study of ordinary male and female speech, the theory has not been explicitly employed to examine spousal communication in *An American Marriage*. Additionally, racial and injustice have taken center stage in critical readings of *An American Marriage*, with no one taking the time to examine how dialogue, silence, and epistolary communication deepen or transform patriarchal and gendered roles in the marriage that occurs between Roy and Celestial. The disorientation of the traditional approaches to gender dialect by the alternating narrative viewpoints of the novel is also not properly explored. This research addresses this gap by providing a genderlect-oriented linguistic examination of spousal dialog providing a foregrounding of power, race, and narrative structure.

Material and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine spousal communication in *An American Marriage* through the lens of Deborah Tannen's Genderlect Theory. A qualitative approach is considered appropriate because the research focuses on interpreting language use, meaning-making, and power relations within a literary text rather than measuring variables quantitatively. The study is grounded in textual and discourse analysis, enabling a close examination of dialogue, letters, silence, and narrative voice as sites of gendered communication and power negotiation.

The primary source of data includes chosen conversations, letters, and passages of narrations between Roy and Celestial. Such passages are intentionally chosen since they prefigure the scenes of spousal dialogue, emotional conflict, and movement in relationships. The excerpts representing various periods of the story, preceding and following incarceration of Roy and in between, are examined to identify the communicative behavior and marital dynamics changes across time. The analysis is contextualized and supported using secondary sources, such as peer-reviewed journal articles on communication gendering, discourse, and marital interaction.

Genderlect Theory is used as the first step in the analysis, and its particular focus is on Report Talk and Rapport Talk. Report Talk is reviewed in terms of authority, independence, entitlement, and control, whereas Rapport Talk is discussed through language highlighting emotional attachment, reassurance, empathy, and maintenance of relations. These communicative strategies are determined by the spousal discourse to investigate the role of gendered speech patterns in the state of emotional stress, physical distance and institutional restraint. Specific focus is focused on the emergence of miscommunication when the language of the spouses is interpreted under the condition of different communicative expectations.

The study also uses the Gender Performativity Theory of Judith Butler (1990), to elaborate the analysis of communicative practices that are identified in Genderlect analysis. The theory of Butler is applied to study the performance of gender based on the repetition of language acts instead of indicated as an established identity.

Spousal communication is approached in the research as a performative space where Roy and Celestial are recruiting, opposing, or renegotiating the socially prescript masculine and feminine roles. This view is employed especially when destabilizing the patterns of traditional gender speech, when there is silence, emotional withdrawal, vulnerability or opposition.

Results and Discussion

In *An American Marriage*, marriage communication is often a place where the two opposing desires of emotional independence and relationship duty are communicated via language. Situations of tension between Roy and Celestial demonstrate how marital discourse changes focus between preserving a relationship to establishing autonomy in circumstances of emotional and institutional pressure. This change is illustrated through the utterance made by Roy, where language serves to reassess role lines of relationships and oppose intimacies that seem to subvert the marital privilege.

*"Don't come here talking about you're here to be my friend.
I don't need friends" (Roy, p. 69)*

This scene reveals the development of spousal communication in the novel as a conflict between autonomy and bonding. The refusal to show respect by using harsh words only to promote independence to Roy eventually undermines the sense of cooperation with emotional effort and feelings, and it serves as a reminder of how incarceration distorts marital communication and unbalances intimacy. The implication of Roy refusing friendship should be seen through the prism of his incarceration and the emotional barrier it has brought into his marriage. Friendship in the world of the novel implies emotional detachment, whereas Roy interprets marriage as a bond that must be highly emotionally dependent and faithful. His declining of friendship is thus an attempt to safeguard the severity of marriage and to oppose being degraded emotionally.

Roy speaks in a strong and closed manner, which indicates his desire to present strength and self-sufficiency. Since imprisonment has been used to destroy his physical capacity and freedom, the sole means by which he can proclaim authority is language. Roy also does not use an emotional tone, instead adopting a direct and dismissive one. This is an expression of masculinity in the novel which is frequently depicted through domination and lack of expression. Roy demonstrates independence by speaking, despite his emotionally vulnerable state of affairs. His language enables him to be dignified, self-respecting, yet restrictive to emotional attachment.

Where Roy attempts to preserve the institution of marriage by rejecting changes, Celestial attempts to preserve the connection by embracing change. Her words show that emotional honesty and boundary-setting may co-exist in circumstances of severe relational tension.

"I am not abandoning you. I will never abandon you. My uncle will continue to file appeals. I'll continue to keep your commissary up to date and I'll visit you every month. I can come as your friend, as your ally. You're a part of my family Roy, and you will always be. But I can't be your wife" (Celestial, P. 74)

The wording of the statement by Celestial comes at a time when she is trying to reshape the marriage using realistic context through the imprisonment of Roy and her own emotional survival. Celestial, unlike Roy, does not disown connection, but instead, she draws a careful distinction between various types of commitment. Her speech is concerned with emotional accountability but not withdrawal. She mentions the particular efforts, as appeals, financial help, visits, to demonstrate that her devotion is realistic and long term. Such close terminology is an indication of concern and diligence and not indifference. But Celestial also draws a very distinct line and says she cannot be Roy wife any longer. Her suggestion to stay there as a friend or an ally is an indication of moving towards emotional

independence though still being connected with her relationally. Her communication style is more focused on emotional clarity and honesty even when the message is painful. She never tries to manipulate the relationship in words but describes the boundaries of the relationship.

The words of Celestial also show how gender roles are played out in stress situations differently. She takes responsibility, organization, emotional work and claims her right to recreate a new identity out of marriage. The refusal to stay a wife is not defined as betrayal but it is a life-saving gesture. This demonstrates that independence is created, not by creating emotional distance but by negotiating boundaries very attentively.

Roy's statement,

"I don't give a damn about you and your feelings, (Roy, p.186)"

It is a point of spousal communication breakdown. At this point, language ceases to be used in explaining the emotions, safeguarding the relationship, and dealing with the disagreement. The sentence rejects the feelings of Celestial directly, indicating a denial of even emotional recognition. This statement is about emotional draining as opposed to dominance. Roy now no longer attempts to justify himself or his stand. Rather, he prefers emotional rejection as a means of avoiding additional suffering. He denies his emotional responsibility by not acknowledging the feelings of Celestial. At this stage the marriage is being emotionally deserted with words.

Roy exposes discomfort with changing gender roles within the marriage.

"But now you do what you have to do. Be an empowered woman or whatever they taught you in college. Leave a brother when he's down." (Roy, p. 69)

It shows how resentment, insecurity, and changing power relations renders spousal communication in An American Marriage after his imprisonment. At this stage in the novel, Roy is reacting to increasing independence and emotional detachment of Celestial. A feeling of being betrayed is evident in his words, though he does not decide to reveal his hurt, rather he begins to describe choices Celestial made as ideological and selfish. Roy undermines the personal and emotional choices of Celestial by deriding the notion of being an "empowered woman" and implying that her ability to make decisions on her own or to behave independently is not inherent to her, but rather learned and forced.

This scene reveals the change of spousal communication to a moral judgment rather than a negotiating one. The words of Roy are not aimed at understanding or a compromise; they reinforce emotional polarities. Through this, this statement shows how language can escalate the conflict through the conversion of emotional strain into blame.

Celestial writes in letter;

"You slump in your chair, admitting that you can't give me what I need. But now you act like you're confused. For more than three years, I've been there in body and in spirit. But I've got to change the way I'm doing things, or I won't have any spirit left." (Celestial, p.70)

Celestial expresses an emotional clarity where she identifies the imbalance that has grown in the marriage during the imprisonment of Roy. She is stressing on long-term emotional commitment and not temporary loyalty. This statement prefigures the emotional

work she has been performing solo by indicating that being upright does not merely mean physical but psychological and emotional work as well. In so doing, Celestial also redefines commitment as perseverance as opposed to obligation. Celestial makes her choice to be a survival requirement, rather than selfishness. Her words carefully try to evaluate the difference between responsibility and sacrifice, which notes that love does not entail the total erasure of oneself. Unlike the strict language used by Roy in the previous explanations, the speech by Celestial is complex: where care and withdrawal can coexist.

The language of Celestial is not aimed at healing the marriage or putting someone in the wrong, she wants to guard her inner world. The text demonstrates that interdependence may be harmful, prolonged, and not mutual. The separation being depicted by Celestial as preservation and not betrayal turns the concept of emotional exhaustion in a new way and conveys the theme that communication will be the mechanism of redefining care when the traditional marital roles are untenable.

*"Before I met you, I was not lonely, but now I'm so lonely
I talk to the walls and sing to the ceiling." (Roy, p.34)*

The statement underlines how emotional communication in the novel has not been determined by gender but by circumstances. Early willingness of Roy to communicate loneliness demonstrates that emotional openness is shown when the relationship is going downwards. His language changes over time with the changing condition. This contradiction is useful in understanding subsequent outbreak of conflict, the individual who expected emotional bonding learns to avoid attachments and the partner who previously provided solace gets to defend herself.

Report Talk is typically linked with the sense of control, independence, and power, where language is employed to take a position and not to share feelings, and Rapport talk revolves around sharing emotions, connection, and dependence. Roy in *An American Marriage* first holds a closer position to Report Talk where he is seen to be confident and self-contained. Roy is not demanding authority and he openly states his feelings of loneliness and emotional necessity. His words are creative and descriptive, indicating the transition to Rapport Talk. This transformation is particularly significant about imprisonment, when Roy loses physical power and autonomy. The diminishing of his external control and the increasing emotional dependence are manifested in language. Roy is no longer addressing with emotion power, but vulnerability, as he addresses with words to obtain assurance and a sense of belonging, not control. This reversal contradicts conventional views about gendered communication, in which men are commonly completed in terms of emotional repression. The line thus expresses a turning point in the communication of Roy where authority is replaced with emotional dependence and Report Talk is pervasively substituted with Rapport Talk in the anxiety of exclusion.

The changing narrative point of view is one of the key structural techniques by which gendered communication is encoded and re-organized. It enables Roy and Celestial to express their inner conditions, emotional logic and self-representations without a dialogic exchange. This expressive structure challenges the traditional Genderlect differences, by creating a distance between communicative style and gendered expectation normally understood as spoken interaction. Narrative voice, emotional vulnerability, rational deliberation, authority, and self-reflection is not associated with a particular gender, but is distributed across both male and female viewpoints. This change of view of narrative therefore crosses over the obstacles between male and female voices, encouraging a reconsideration of the Genderlect Theory into a literary context where voice, identity, and communication are not as strongly guided by gender as by perspective.

*"I've been playing the part of a wife for so long,
I forgot what it feels like to be a woman first". (Celestial, p. 211)*

The reflection of Celestial in this line is profound since it comes out due to the changing narrative viewpoint of the novel thus she gives direct access to her inner voice. In this scene of the novel, gendered communication is made complex by the process of dividing social roles and personal identity. Celestial does not define herself in connection to Roy but to herself, which takes the traditional genderlect expectations that are associated with marriage roles.

It represents that being a wife has entailed constant acting as opposed to acting in a natural manner. Such framing goes against predetermined concepts of feminine communication related to emotional offering and self-sacrifice. The tone of Celestial is not compelling or accommodating in this verse but reflective and self-delimiting. The narrative viewpoint helps her to present a conflict that cannot be readily conveyed by verbal means: the fatigue of maintaining a gendered role in the course of time. Through this, the novel disrupts the male and female forms of communicating. A female narrative voice shows emotional reflection, autonomy, and self-prioritization, which is commonly attributed to masculine-coded independence.

This narrative change proves that gendered communication in *An American Marriage* is dynamic and context-specific. The novel therefore demonstrates that with a shift of perspective, the male and female speech categories are not the same as before, and gender becomes constructed, contested and re-composed through voice instead of determined in communication form.

Conclusion

This study provides a useful contribution to the dynamics of gendered communication and the balance of power shifts in marital relationships. It explores how language and power, as well as identities, are negotiated in the circumstances of emotional anxiety and false imprisonment. It demonstrates that the constant tension between independence and interdependence defines the communication in marriage in the novel. The shift in Roy communication pattern takes place in terms of emotional openness to control, dismissal and eventual breakdown of communication because the imprisonment and loss of agency has a psychological effect on Roy. The researchers also found that gendered communication styles are not immutable; they are collapsing and colliding with the pressure of race, classes and institutional disparity. The narrative voice of the novel questions classical theory of Genderlect by revealing the way of vulnerability, power and rationality that moves among female and male voices. This flow creates challenge to the assumptions on which gendered speech patterns rest. This study, by the forecasting of narrative voice and dialogue among couples helps to understand better how literary works can develop and confront sociolinguistic theory. In terms of future research, the present study offers the prospect of comparative studies on gendered communication in other modern novels that discuss incarceration, race, or long-distance relationships. The implications of the narrative viewpoint on the reader identification with gendered voices or the analysis of the elements of intersection between gender speech, silence and trauma in different cultural backgrounds can also be discussed in future research. Overall, the study focuses on the importance of analyzing language as a dynamic process, which not only characterizes intimate relations but also changes them, particularly, in socially constrained contexts.

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