

**OTHERING GENDER EQUALITY IN THE STRUGGLE FOR
A NEW NATIONAL IDENTITY: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE
ANALYSIS OF THE MEDIA REPRESENTATION OF
GENDER EQUALITY LEGISLATION DEBATE IN ESTONIA**

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1. INTRODUCTION

Gender equality emerged as one of the central controversies in the Estonian public discourse of the late 1990s in an unexpectedly vehement mode, especially considering the fact that gender equality was an important item in the negotiation process towards European accession, a goal that had been central to Estonian foreign policy since the country regained its independence. However, the very political weight associated with the Gender Equality Act, as a symbolic milestone in movement towards Europe, may have been the reason for the revival of discourses of national survival in a unifying continental culture. The present paper connects the representation of the debate in the public discourse, through a Critical Discourse Analysis of the mental models created in news texts in the *Postimees*, one of the leading Estonian daily quality newspapers, to a renegotiation of cultural values. That is, it seeks to elucidate what the emerging foci of the debate say about the dominant values and ideologies in the country, in other words, to trace how the position of the *other* is assigned to gender equality in the ongoing struggle for the redefinition of Estonian identity in a European context. As such, it is inspired by the work of Wodak *et alii* (1999), but on a smaller scale and in a context where the contestation of identity is an implicit presence, not an explicitly articulated quest.

The work is placed within the methodological framework of CDA as it sets out to deal not just with language but with social problems and critically analyses the powerful in order to empower the disempowered (van Dijk, 1986: 4). In the words of Fairclough (2003: 2), CDA is “based upon the assumption that language is an irreducible part of social life, dialectically interconnected with other elements of social life, so that social analysis and research always has to take account of language”. Thus, by looking into the linguistic constructions of gender equality, the study will gain insight into the underlying constructs of national selfhood.

In the present case a gender-related political debate revealed a deep-seated ideological conflict between different social actors, with the powerful in politics and the media aligned against gender equality, although not necessarily expressing the position outright. The article claims that we can reveal ideological preferences expressed through verbalised statements but also significant absences. Following Blommaert (2005: 173), it is posited that ideologies may operate as “polycentric and stratified systems” in which different ideologies interact “in different levels and in different ways”. In this case, a dominant ideology emerges, joining the seemingly contradictory notions of nationalism and neoliberalism to form a hegemonic consensus in opposition to feminism, a common *threat*. Similar processes have been observed in previous studies of right-wing discourse on women (e.g. Seidel, 1988). The present study seeks to unscramble the different ideological strands by resorting to the linguistic tools suggested by CDA to direct attention to how ideology works and create a potential for resistance. To cite Wodak (2001: 2), CDA “aims to investigate critically social inequality as its is expressed, signalled, constituted, legitimised and so on by language use”, requiring attention to social processes from which texts emerge and the social structures within which people interact with the texts.

Previous research has demonstrated the pervasiveness of explicit and implicit sexism and anti-feminism in the Estonian media (see, for example, Põldsaar, 2000, 2001). The ethos hostile to gender equality is in a direct correlation with the transition from a nationalist to a neoliberal consensus in the Estonian public discourse. Thus the paper is greatly indebted to Fairclough & Chouliariki (1999) who demonstrate the usefulness of CDA in revealing the discursive nature of contemporary social and cultural change, especially with regard to the rise of new capitalism, a process that is especially noticeable in the transition societies of Eastern Europe.

Here the notion of discourse is understood, proceeding from the definition by van Leeuwen (1993: 193), in two distinct ways: 1) discourse as social practice, a form of action, something people do –in this case, the specific media texts– and 2) discourse as a way of representing social practices, as a form of knowledge, the things people say about social practices –in this case, the preferred way(s) in which gender equality is defined in Estonia. The study seeks to find out how the media texts on gender equality construct a reality which excludes gender equality as a potential feature of a national consensus, filtering out the ‘undesired’ meanings and attendant social practices.

2. HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

Gender equality legislation became topical in Estonia as a part of the EU accession talks. As a reluctant member of the Soviet Union, Estonia had an official gender equality ideology for forty years. However, the rhetoric and the reality often did not coincide in the Soviet era and Estonian women's experience with state-mandated gender equality was relatively negative –not only was it forced on them but it also did not guarantee more equitable treatment. After the collapse of the Soviet regime Estonia made a brief detour into a nationalist-romantic discourse that focussed on the themes of national regeneration through a conservative gender ideology of polarised gender norms. However, the detour was brief as Estonia soon adopted a neoliberal political orientation, alongside with an American-style cult of achievement compulsory for both genders. Equality, especially when imposed by law, is treated with suspicion, stigmatised by its associations with Soviet past and the suggestion of government regulation, especially in matters pertaining to the private sphere. Thus it is not surprising that Estonia had not focussed on gender equality policies prior to EU accession talks.

The passage of the Gender Equality Act was a precondition for EU accession, a central aim of all political parties, and should not have aroused much political debate. However, the Act went through three versions and four readings in the years 2002 to 2004 and was passed only a few weeks before formal accession process was finalised. Gender equality was one of the few topics that marred the otherwise spotless Estonian accession portfolio, a source of repeated international reminders. Already this discrepancy with the usual practice in Estonian politics which has prided itself on the swiftness of reforms and exhibited a great sensitivity to international criticism invites investigation into what made gender such a thorny issue.

3. MEDIA CONTEXT

The paper studies the representation of the debate in the print media, a primary source of information on politics for the electorate. Although draft acts and transcripts of parliamentary debates are electronically available, most people access the most traditional sources, print media or television. Also, news texts, because of their seeming objectivity, are among the most effective means of covertly forging a public consensus. The newspaper analysed, the *Postimees*, is the Estonian quality daily paper with widest circulation and also one trusted by its readership as a reliable source of information and thus especially fitting for the present study.

4. DESCRIPTION OF THE CORPUS

The corpus includes news texts either directly or indirectly associated with gender equality legislation printed in the *Postimees* between 13 March 2002 and 21 April 2004, covering the period when different versions of the Gender Equality Acts were discussed. The total number of texts in the corpus is 40 (24 short anonymous news items, 1 editorial, 7 articles with identified authors, 8 texts by individuals involved in the discussion). The majority of the texts are very short, from 3 to 12 sentences, with a few exceptions of up to 20 sentences. None of the texts was featured on the front page; most appeared on the domestic news section. Only two stories were illustrated by a photo. This testifies to the relative marginalisation or even silencing of the texts in the newspaper, in contrast to the discussion they generated.

The present paper, because of the limitation of space and the difficulty of presenting an intricate analysis of non-English data, will primarily look at the global meanings produced by the headings and the underlying ideological stance of the texts. The analysis will loosely follow the framework of levels of CDA proposed by van Dijk (2001) and will look into topics/semantic macrostructures, local meanings (e.g., polarisation produced by word choices) and the mental models they create. The resulting mental models will be given a social interpretation in an attempt to explain how the texts reflect the existing social consensus and help to reproduce it.

5. TOPICS/SEMANTIC MACROSTRUCTURES

According to van Dijk (2001: 102), topics or semantic macrostructures are the “global meanings that language users constitute in discourse production and comprehension”. They are the core information which is remembered, even if not directly expressed in words. The topics in the present corpus are full of contradictions. What is revealed consistently at a closer analysis is that the ideologically loaded debate over gender equality legislation is also about cultural values and, indirectly, national identity.

The news texts studied are frequently constructed on the basis of official press releases and thus the perspective of the authors of the Gender Equality Act forms one of the textual macrostructures. Its emphasis is on gender equality as a sign of an *advanced* Western nation and the potential stigmatisation of Estonia as *un-Western*, should it fail to pass the law. The other pro-gender-equality stance stresses that both men and women would benefit from the Act. However, these positions are marginal and tend to be relegated to the shortest news items. As a rule, the longer the text, the more *othering* is the wording. That is, more authoritative opinion-leaders do not take up this semantic macrostructure.

In most texts a number of contradictory macrostructures appear. The first and most noticeable feature is the question of the need (or, more frequently, lack of need) for the act. It is defined as something that comes from outside and has to be tolerated, at best, as a means of attaining a higher end –EU membership. The topic intersects with the question of Estonian national identity in the future EU, a topic that became more alarmist in public discourse in general as accession neared. That is, gender equality is represented as something alien, produced by external pressure rather than internal need, and in connection with a process potentially dangerous to national selfhood. In a process of further *othering*, gender equality is frequently defined as a niche interest of women or feminists, not a common good.

Second, discrimination, gender or other, is construed as something that is *natural*, inevitable and, indeed, beneficial since anti-discrimination measures may end up restricting the *fit* and rewarding the *unfit*, thereby hindering progress, a statement that is in harmony with the neoliberal consensus dominant in the Estonian public discourse. This question also reveals an obsession with entrepreneurial freedom as a supreme good and the fear of possible government intervention in the affairs of businesses and private individuals.

The third cluster centres on the question of equality and difference. The two are placed in a false opposition where it is demagogically claimed that equality would mean the erasure of difference. The representations imply that the attempts of the state to alter the *natural* order of things are bound to end in a disaster.

In general, it can be said that the macropositions reflect two stances that do not enter into a dialogue in the news texts: the position that supports gender equality as a sign of an advanced Western nation and one that is opposed to equality. However, the corpus cannot be divided into two clear-cut sets since a closer linguistic analysis reveals considerable discursive ambivalence and overlapping.

6. LOCAL MEANINGS

The text headings are all worded in a seemingly neutral language that is stylistically unimaginative. However, there are suggestive word choices. The predominant noun in the titles is *gender equality* and it does not have significant collocations in the headings. However, in the texts the notion is associated with control and restriction (e.g., concepts such as communism, authoritarianism, thought control, violation of presumption of innocence), placing it outside the social consensus. It is notable that the headings mention

women 6 times (“women demand a law against unequal treatment”, “women’s roundtable waits for the Gender Equality Act”)¹, but men twice, in both cases using irony or even shaming to gain support to the act (“male politicians fear women” and “to manly Estonian men”). Men and women appear together twice. This re-instates the view that gender equality legislation serves only women. Yet, the headings keep away from direct demonisation and maintain a seeming air of neutrality –there is only one association with “bluestockings and combine drivers”, that is, caricatures of unfeminine women as the supposed only supporters of the law.

Similar preferences are revealed in syntax. Gender equality is demanded by women, gender equality activists or the EU (“women demand a law against unequal treatment”, “EU demands that Estonia quickly pass three laws”). In all cases the verbs stress shrillness, impatience and aggressiveness, implying that the requests are unjustified. The parliament and politicians appear in agentive but less forceful constructions where they do things but signal no commitment to the act: they “send the law to the parliament”, “start to debate the law”, “present the bill” and, finally “pass the bill”. The most frequent agent in the titles is the Gender Equality Act itself which, in one case, “alleviates problems” but, mostly, is associated with conflict: “will bring along an avalanche of court cases”, “allows preferential treatment on the basis of gender”, “forces the defendant to prove his/her innocence” or “will convict before the trial”. Predominantly, the syntactic choices frame the act negatively, as an authoritarian imposition.

Most headings are hesitant or subtly hostile to the act. The pro-Act texts use indirect passive constructions (“gender equality is needed”, “balance is needed”), possibly to deflect criticism but thereby contributing to the silencing on the matter. There are several questions (“how should we understand gender equality?”, “do we need a separate law for gender equality?”) that seek to elucidate matters but allow for an indirect questioning of the Act. The lack of enthusiasm is the clearest in the headings that predict the failure of the act (“Gender Equality Act will probably not find support”, “Gender Equality Act getting tangled once again”).

One of the most ideologically biased discourses, as pointed out by van Dijk (2001: 103), is the polarisation of in-groups and out-groups. This is a noticeable feature in the present corpus as well, especially in the body texts. The dominant oppositions are between men and women, gender equality activists and *regular* people, Estonia and the EU. Although the pairs shift from text to text, it is nevertheless firmly established that the debate’s in-group is associated with men, *regular* people and Estonia and the out-group

¹ The translations of all Estonian examples are by the author of the article.

with women, activists and foreign authority. That is, gender equality is firmly established in the group of *others* in the dominant discourse and opposed to a populist discourse of nationhood built on the fear of the *alien*.

7. CONTEXT MODELS

The topics and word choices become meaningful only when placed into a certain context. This section applies van Dijk's (2001: 108) definition that sees contexts in cognitive terms, as "a form of mental model of a communicative situation" or as an "interface between mental information about an event and actual meanings being constructed in discourse" (van Dijk, 2001: 110). The mental models thus are the sum of local meanings used to convey schematic representations of both the pragmatic and semantic dimensions of events. According to van Dijk, it is usually the models that we remember, not the exact discourses and, as such, the models interface between discourses and society (van Dijk, 2001: 112). The mental models of contexts and events are subjective and individual but they are inevitably influenced by the social world around them, including its prevalent attitudes and ideologies.

In the present study, what is defined as the socially shared representations are expressed covertly, through the use of mental models or different types of frames. The concept of frame here follows the definitions suggested by Goffman (1979: 1) who defines them as formalised, simplified and stereotyped behaviours that "provide evidence of the actors' alignment in a gathering, the position he [*sic*] seems prepared to take up in what is about to happen in the social situation". The recurring patterns of selection, emphasis and interpretation communicate the preferred alignment of the persons in the situation to ensure social acceptance.

The analysis shows that some frames are favoured over others, i.e., they are supposed to be better representatives of the shared values of the culture than others and their messages are given more space and more favourable treatment so that all competent members of the culture could align themselves accordingly, in a belief that the presented group knowledge is a cultural one rather than representative of a narrow interest group.

In the present context, the news items clearly construct preferred mental models of gender equality bills as well as gender equality as an issue. The overall frame of social discord is the most prominent. That is, gender equality is associated with instability, disruption of social order and intervention in what is defined as *common* sense and *natural*. Its traces can be seen in most of the mental models conjured up. The most noticeable of the framings concerns the question of Estonian identity. Gender equality is presented as

threatening it in more ways than one. First, it is presented as a sign of outside pressure, in this case that of the EU, something that a small nation the existence of which has always been precarious is paranoid about and the fears about which were resurrected in the EU accession talks. Second, the assumed government interference that the legislation suggests conflicts with individualism that Estonia has celebrated for the past ten years. Both women and men are affected by individualist achievement discourse and women might shun both the idea of prerogatives provided by the Gender Equality Act as something that the success-oriented society shirks from. Third, the regulations concerning gender equality are portrayed as potentially restricting business freedom and profits – a sacrilege in one of the most market-liberal countries in the world.

It is rather telling that the in-group is defined not through a national frame but through business success and professionalism, both of which are seen as threatened by the Gender Equality Act. This indicates the influence of neoliberal ideology and achievement orientation in which Estonian national self-identity is defined through the new capitalist tenets, rather than the conservative gendered discourses of motherhood and reproduction, like in the early days of independence. The *othering* of gender equality is thus achieved polycentrically – it borrows the fear of the foreign from a national-romantic discourse but yokes it to the notion of equality as a threat to Estonia's continued success in the global marketplace. The confluence of the otherwise conflicting discourses of nationalism and global capitalism are thus united to confront an *alien invader*, without addressing the inherent contradiction of the stance. It is unclear what a new Estonian identity is supposed to include – but it is clear what it should exclude.

The competing mental model of gender equality as a human right and a sign of a *developed nation* fails to overcome the suspicion, especially since the other model forges strong links with it as an enterprise of a foreign feminist clique, that is, as something that does not concern men or the majority of women. The attempts to include men in the discourses seem to have failed to resonate, possibly because the mental model of a twofold cultural threat is stronger. What more, the efforts by the authors of the law to use discourse strategically may have helped in producing the negative image of the Gender Equality Act. They repeatedly emphasised the fact that adopting the Act would signal our readiness for Europe and show our social advancement. That is, they banked on the positive meaning of the mental model of European integration but inadvertently fed the already powerful cultural suspicion of gender and equality as something foreign.

The problem of the mental models is not their existence but the fact that they offer ready-made definitions and conclusions. An individual can always

resist –but one has to be conscious of a position being imposed on one to do so. Also, it is easier to align oneself with the culturally preferred frame of perception than to resist it. The present study reveals the alignment of two powerful notions –nationhood and global economic success– in opposition to gender equality, thus making resistance difficult. Even the texts that attempt to give a positive view of gender equality tap into the pre-existing repertoire of mental models that frame gender equality as an enemy of the nation in more than one way –reluctantly accepted as a criterion for entry to the EU but not embraced as a feature central to a new (trans)national identity. Thus, although the Gender Equality Act was finally passed in Estonia, gender equality as a concept has remained *othered* in Estonian public discourse, not an integral part of new European or Estonian identity but an alien presence foreign to both the old and new visions of the nation.

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