Sex generalisations and stereotypes

As early as 1847, women were described in terms of appearance rather than character traits or achievements, and this can be seen in Mr. Rochester's description of Blanche Ingram in ' Jane Eyre' (1847); " a strapper, a real strapper, Jane: big, brown, and buxom." This is a frequently used stereotypical view of women, and in my project I aim to discover whether this aspect of representation is still prevalent in the media of today. This subject appealed to me, especially the research by Jennifer Coates and Angela Goddard, which, although based on speech, provided some explanation for the widespread inference that women are subordinate to men.

For example, it was found by Beiley and Time in 1976 that women use expletives far less in conversation than men, with the connotation that this trend is a result of women being gentler, and less aggressive than men, and therefore less powerful. However, this research was completed by Coates in 1982 and, since then, there have been few extensive studies of gender representation in the media. However, at present there is pressure on most aspects of society to be politically correct and non-sexist, and sexual equality is a standard expectation. Women are constantly discussed in a variety of media, including tabloid and broadsheet newspapers, and also ' teen magazines,' such as ' Mizz,' and ' J17,' aimed at girls from the age of 11 and onwards.

Iconic women are often discussed in a variety of media, with examples ranging from Princess Diana to Madonna, although the way in which these figures are represented differs dramatically. This is also dependent on each publication's style, content and readership, and these are aspects that I

intend to explore in my investigation. I will also be analysing the theories of existing research, such as Miller and Swift's observations of non-parallel treatment of men and women; for instance, women are frequently described in terms of their relationship to men, but not the other way round. I aim to examine whether this research, conducted in 1981, is still applicable to modern newspapers and magazines. My expectations of this assignment include finding some development towards sexual equality in the media, but also a continued bias against women, shown by language traits such as marked terms, emotive language, and sexist generalisations.

English Language Coursework InvestigationMethodologyTo complete this investigation, I needed to collect data to analyse, which would be representative of the current portrayal of women in the media. In order to do this, I gathered a variety of newspapers and magazines, with different purposes and target audiences. These ranged from broadsheet newspapers, such as The Guardian, which are generally classified as having middle-class, educated readers, to tabloids such as The Sun, which are aimed at a working-class audience. I also looked at " teen magazines," with a younger, predominantly female readership, although I decided not to analyse these in depth as part of my investigation, as their language is simplistic, and so the depth they could be analysed in is usually limited.

I collected articles based on women, and these were usually celebrities, such as the Spice Girl, Mel B, and Michael Barrymore's wife and manager, Cheryl, who were both featured in tabloid stories. I also looked at journalism focusing in " female issues," such as the lesbianism and single-motherhood, as the content and opinions given in these articles is reflected by their

linguistic styles. As stated in my introduction, there is little existing current research on my chosen subject, and although in the past there have been several extensive studies of gender variation in language, these focus primarily on speech, such as Trudgill's analysis of linguistic differences between men and women (1972), and also Lakoff's controversial study of 1975, which suggested that " women use language to collude in their own subordination." Other research more relevant to my project includes the examination of sex-specification in language by Trager in 1931, which observed that the only impersonal pronoun in English is " one," which in Britain is regarded as typifying aristocratic or formal speech, and is therefore only used in a narrow context. This differs significantly from the informal usage of the French pronoun " on." Further research was executed on this aspect by Titcomb (1955), which looked specifically at the use of pronouns in the popular press, and also Archer in 1975.

Further studies on gender differences relating to language are Hole and Levine's 1971 article, " The Politics of Language," and also Gornick and Moran's " Women in Sexist Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness," of the same year, which discussed language as a means of attaining or designating power, a feature often utilised in media representation. This summary of existing research shows that language and gender is an interesting yet complex topic, and is indicative of my reasons for selecting the aspect of media representation of women as the focus of my project. However, this investigation into existing material was useful and informative, and of great value to my project. Another part of my research involved using the Internet, including a feminist web site with a detailed overview of

existing work on language and gender variation. Again, the majority of these were based on speech, although they remained interesting and informative.

Also, Angela Goddard, who has completed extensive studies on this aspect of language, recently published a book, ' Language and Gender,' (2000), examining written language, such as that used by newspapers and magazines. I found this invaluable as a research tool and a source of background information, but although there were some references to gender bias in the media, these were general rather than detailed observations, so I decided to investigate whether they could be specifically applied to the aspect of media representation of women. Analysing the data I collected for this investigation, it can be seen that marked terms are frequently used in newspapers, with various inferences and purposes. For example, when referring to women, the suffixes ' ess,' and ' ette,' are usually used, such as in ' actress,' or ' usherette.

' Although these are socially accepted in English, the unmarked forms, such as ' usher,' are applied to males, and so adding suffixes to the female versions implies deviation from the male ' default,' form. This suggests that the female forms of these terms have lower status. The suffix ' ette,' in particular implies diminution or imitation, such as ' suedette,' to describe false suede, and applying these to the female forms of descriptive terms infers diminished status of women, or that they are imitations of the male ' default,' form, without the elevated status of their referents. Further examples of such lexical asymmetry found in my data include the noun " heroine," a departure from the male term " hero. This could also be seen as inferring subordination of women, since the term " heroine," is usually only

used in a limited context, such as in descriptions of romance novels or televison dramas.

" Hero," however, can be applied to men in a wide variety of contexts, perhaps reflecting power held by men in patriarchal society. The label " seductress," a departure from " seducer," which is now rarely used, with more colloquial phrases such as " ladies man" being applied to men. This sex-specification in language was investigated in the early 20th century by Dike (1937), and Withington 1937), and it is a feature which is still in use today. However, a sign of changing attitudes may be that some of these terms, such as " authoress," are now almost obsolete, although marked terms such as " female novelist," from my data, are still applied to women, showing the prevalent assumption that high-status positions are usually held by men.

Correspondingly, marked terms such as " gay women," and " teenage mother," both of which can be found in my data, are used to infer that the label departs from an unstated typical or expected situation. For instance, " lone mother," implies that the ideal is marriage or a long-term relationship, and connotes disapproval. The Guardian's article, ' Mother Care,' from my data uses this language feature extensively, and its purpose in this context is to infer the author's disapproval of " unmarried mothers," without explicitly articulating sexist, stereotypical views, which could be seen as outdated or offensive. Further examples include " successful female artist," " female pop star," and " female celebrity," with this employment of marked terms implying deviation from traditional ' female' roles, and imitation of the male '

default' form. Although they have no obvious negative connotations, this sex-specification is indicative of gender bias evidenced through language.

These subtle but effective uses of marked terms are common throughout the media, and are therefore significant when examining the representation of women. Emotive language Gender-biased emotive language is an important factor in the analysis of the current representation of women. For example, terms of description with emotive connotations, which can be found in my data, include; " wildcat," " desperate," " sex slave," and " wealthy widow." These descriptions all have connotative meanings, which are conveyed to the reader, and this is a language feature which has been widely analysed, such as the investigation by Strodtbeck and Mann in 1956, which examined the way in which language influences our perception of people, and also later articles by Ackerman (1962) who discussed the connotative difference between a " lady" and a " woman.

" Lakoff was also interested in this aspect of language (1973). Description such as " desperate," and " sobbing," both of which are applied to Cheryl Barrymore in The Sun's article, are emotive and have connotations of weakness and emotional instability, implying subordination of women. By using language such as this, the stereotype of women as weak or helpless is presented as salient, and therefore strengthened. These terms of description may be employed in order to conform to the reader's pragmatic awareness of social roles, and as a form of commentary on the typical characteristics and functions of each gender.

Similarly, other emotive language is used to display women as predatory or sexually aggressive. For example, the Sunday People's article describes Mel B as a " horny devil," " kinky," and " money-grabbing. " All of these descriptive terms have negative connotations, as do the verbs " dragged," betrayed," and also " lured," which is usually used in the specific field of hunting. Its use to describe Mel's actions, with its predatory connotations, therefore implies sexual aggression. The term, " wildcat," and the verb " snarled," which are applied to Mylene in the News of the World's article, also imply fierceness or irrational, " wild" behaviour, and this lends credibility to the stereotype of women as voracious, as does The Sun's labelling of Britney as " forward and aggressive.

". These labels are employed to mask a range of implicit descriptions, and their connotations are revealing of current views. Another purpose of emotive language is to persuasively convey the authors' opinions in order to encourage the reader to share their views. For example, in ' Mother Care,' the author describes " the journey from sin to support," and this is an explicit description of teenage pregnancy and sexual activity as sinful. The noun " sin" suggests evil, or a crime, and has biblical connotations, perhaps with the inference that women should adhere to the outdated female roles, which are often portrayed in religious documents.

In the same article, one woman is described as " a teenage pregnancy statistic at 17," and this implies disapproval. The term " statistic" connotes anonymity, and this depersonalises and downgrades the individual, conveying moral judgement on the part of the author. The statement " many grandmothers are too busy with full-time jobs to offer the back-up once

expected of them," could also be seen as undermining the role of women. The connotations of " grandmother," and the adjective " busy," differ vastly, and the juxtaposition of these terms provides a jarring contrast, which could be viewed as a negative slant on working women. The adjective " expected" also denotes an outdated representation of the social roles of women. From close examination of my data, the only similar example of this feature applied to a man was the News of the World's reference to " former choirboy Noel," with the term " choirboy" having connotations of innocence and vulnerability, in order to provoke audience empathy towards him, especially when this description in the context of the articles, which explains an argument between the group.

Emotive language is extensively applied to women for a variety of purposes, throughout the media, and its use significantly influences the representation of women. Description of women in terms of appearance A popular language feature, which is often applied to the representation of women, is description in terms of appearance. This is the most common feature found in my data, and is used widely throughout a variety of media. Men, however, are usually described in terms of achievement, and/or career, such as " Full Monty star," in The Mirror, and " snooker ace," in the Sunday People. This non-parallel treatment was investigated by Miller and Swift in 1981, and despite changing attitudes towards gender roles; its use is still prevalent today. Examples of descriptions in terms of appearance that can be found in my data include The Mirror's reference to Sarah Parish, who " looks in fantastic shape, dressed in tight, black trousers and a tailored white shirt which show off her svelte figure.

" While the article is ostensibly about Sarah's break-up with Hugo Speer, as well as her acting career, a large proportion of it is unnecessary physical description, and this shows that, in the media, women are still objectified and defined in terms of appearance. The inference of this is that women are less dynamic and career-orientated than men, and that they have a more decorative role in society. Similar descriptions can be found of Victoria Beckham in The Guardian's article; " She's wearing a tight white top with a little matching cardie, pink jeans, open-toed shoes and a lot of make-up," and also The News of the World's references to Jodie Marsh's " pink mini-skirt and tight gold corset," and " beautiful boobs. These descriptions achieve a similar purpose, as the author's description of her physical appearance detracts the audience's attention from the careers (pop star and actress respectively) and personalities of the women in question. By describing them primarily in terms of appearance, the women's other achievements are downgraded and largely ignored, and this lends credibility to the ' beauty myth,' of modern society; that women are required to attain a certain beauty ideal in order to gain attention and interest.

The clipping of " cardigan" to " cardie," gives a colloquial lexis, and could be seen as indicative of women not being given serious consideration within the media; rather, they are mainly represented in articles dealing with gossip and fashion. In this way, the description of female appearances could be viewed as simple descriptions for readers interested in such fashion details, although the representation of women in these roles is a reinforcement of popular stereotypes, and objectification in itself. Other examples are; " luscious Rachel Sterling," " bleach-blonde Meg Ryan," " blonde Gwen," and "

sexy babe," which all objectify the women represented by these descriptions. In the contexts where women's careers are given, these are almost always in conjunction with descriptions of physical description, which are unnecessary to the main theme of the article.

A key example of this the News of The World's article concerning Cheryl Barrymore, in which Cheryl's friend is first described as " blonde Tracey," and then later, " Beautician Tracey. The first description the reader is given is completely superfluous considering the article's subject, and the order in which these descriptions are given is indicative of the priority and importance that the media place upon physical appearance when representing women. In this context, even the denotation of Tracey's career has negative connotations, and emphasises stereotypes. A similar example is the Metro's article about film stars, in which the women represented are first labelled " the most beautiful women," and then later, " A-list actresses," with the female suffix " ess," further implying diminution. Exceptions: indicative of changing times, although most careers mentioned have connotations of beauty] An exception to this is the Sunday People's reference to " blond hunk Fjolnir Thorgeirsson," who is later described as a " snooker ace. " However, the context of the article explains this application of this language feature, which is usually employed to describe females.

The article portrays him in terms of his sexual relationship with Mel B, and so he is objectified by his sexuality and appearance, which conform to a stereotypical ideal of male beauty. This is employed by the author to highlight his attractiveness, which contrasts with the description of " money-grabbing," Mel B, who " betrayed him," and this conflict maintains audience

interest. Similarly, Johnny Knoxville is described as " gorgeous," and as wearing " an ice-blue suit and pink tie," although this may be explained by his current status as a popular, fashionable media figure, who has captured public interest. However, this objectification of the men in these articles highlights that the state of media representation of both genders is changing, and may be becoming more equal, with descriptions such as " arm-candy," or " himbo," a colloquial male equivalent of " bimbo," being applied to men in magazines and newspapers. A similar feature to description of physical appearance that is also often applied to women is that of including each woman's age as part of the description.

Examples include " Mel, 27," and " Cheryl, 52. Men, however, are rarely described in terms of age, unless it is conveyed with positive connotations of youth or success. This may be because women are stereotypically seen to attain to defy the aging process, and are expected to conform to a ' beauty ideal' of looking youthful. Denoting their age shows media judgement of whether they are ' living up' to this ideal or not. This feature is usually only applied to men in a similar context, such as Pierce Brosnan, who is often praised by the media as " looking good for his age.

" Description in terms of relationship to men Another popular feature often utilised in media representation is description of women in terms of their relationship to men, implying the role of women within society is subordinate to men. This is another aspect of the non-parallel treatment investigated by Miller and Swift in 1981, as this feature is often applied to women, but rarely to men. For example, Jennifer Aniston, a successful actress, is described as " Brad's missus," and Cheryl Barrymore is referred to as " Barrymore's wife.

Correspondingly, Jodie Marsh, of the News of the World's article, is described as the " daughter of a millionaire scaffolding contractor," and by descrobing her in terms of this relationship, she is elevated to the " millionaire" status of her father. This implies that she is otherwise inferior, with diminished status compared to her male referent. Similar examples include descriptions of " Drew Barrymore, who was with boyfriend Fabrizio Moretti from The Strokes," and " Danni [Minogue], whose exes include former Bros bassist Craig Logan and Formula One star Jacques Villeneuve.

Although these women are successful individuals with celebrity status, they are still defined in terms of their relationship to men, further emphaszing an outdated view of the roles of women within society. Non-parallel treatment is clearly evidenced here, since the women are described only in terms of their relationship to men, whereas the males are described in terms of career and acheivements, and this illustartes that this language feature is a significant factor in the media representation of women.