

“From la Malinche and Menchú to Modern-Day ‘Mayas’: Women Forging Paths through the Maze of Higher Education”

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Abstract

“Beneath the rule of men entirely great, the pen is mightier than the sword.” Bulwer-Lytton recognized this strength years ago, and its truth continues to ring true in the works of authors: Tzvetan Todorov, Octavio Paz, Carlos Fuentes, Rigoberta Menchú, and Deborah Tannen. Language is a centuries-old weapon wielded in the struggle against misogynistic societies due to its ability to empower traditionally marginalized women; such as, la Malinche and Rigoberta Menchú. Although these inspirational women made tremendous impacts on their worlds, the battle goes on, as gender differences in conversational styles continue to play a role in women’s ability to “break the glass ceiling” in the new millennium. This paper follows some of the paths carved by these women pioneers, whose knowledge and use of language, paved the way in providing a voice for women in higher education today, as well as, explores the persistent inequality that results from gender miscommunication.

Introduction

The Power of Language

Physical strength, money, and weapons of mass destruction are traditionally related to power; however, in the 1800s the Victorian novelist, Baron Edward George Earle Bulwer-Lytton recognized the power of words when he wrote, “Beneath the rule of men entirely great, the pen is mightier than the sword”. Bulwer-Lytton was not alone in crediting the power of words as can be seen in Tzvetan Todorov’s (1992) book, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* (New York: Harper Perennial). In his chapter, *Cortes and Signs*, Todorov argues how Hernán Cortés conquered the Aztecs and established Spanish occupation in what is modern-day Mexico with the indispensable help of one woman, the native Aztec, Doña Marina or Malintzin. Immortally known as la Malinche, this controversial woman advantageously wielded language as a sword as an interpreter for Cortés. Even though she is still despised by many five-hundred years later, Todorov paints a favorable picture of la Malinche as a survivor.

Following her mother’s remarriage after her father’s death and the subsequent birth of a son, Doña Marina or La Malinche was given or sold as a slave by her own mother for protection of the firstborn son’s inheritance (Valenzuela, 2003). La Malinche’s native language was Nahuatl and she quickly extended her linguistic abilities during her captivity by learning Mayan. Empowering herself with a second language made her worth her weight in gold for Cortés and his men. “When Cortés reached the Nahuatl-speaking areas farther west along the Gulf coast, she would interpret between Nahuatl and Maya for Aguilar, who could interpret between Maya and Spanish” (Valenzuela, 2003). Eventually La Malinche became competent in the language of the conquistadors, Spanish, which made her even more of a treasured commodity. With three

languages empowering her, La Malinche was promoted from secretary, to mistress, to mother of Cortés' son. "Cortés was often offered other women, but he always refused them, demonstrating his respect and affection for Marina. He wrote in a letter, 'After God we owe this conquest of New Spain to Doña Marina'" (Valenzuela, 2003).



La Malinche as interpreter and mediator.

Perhaps non-coincidentally, Todorov concludes the chapter with a quote from Antonio de Nebrija, "Language has always been the companion of empire" (p. 123).

La Malinche- Mexico

La Malinche was one of women's pioneers in using her wiles and language ability. La Malinche takes a predominant role in veteran author and former Mexican ambassador, Octavio Paz's novel (1959) *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica), Paz included a chapter "Los hijos de la Malinche" which refers to the children of la Malinche. In this chapter, La Malinche is described as a national figure of the traitor for all Mexicans who are victims of the raped motherland as a consequence of the betrayal of the fatherland by la Malinche. According to Valenzuela, 2003, "Some view her as the betrayer of the Aztecs, while others consider her to be a scapegoat for Moctezuma's failure to defend his kingdom successfully." Malinche's influence continues to reverberate throughout Mexico more than 5 centuries later and perpetuates the male myth, to the outcry of feminists, that Mexican women deceived their own people with the Spaniards' conquest of their country.

Centuries after la Malinche accepted the life and the customs of the Spaniards and approximately ten years after the discourse of Paz about la Malinche, another Mexican author

and diplomat, Carlos Fuentes wrote about the continued presence of the consequences of la Malinche's actions when he included a tribute to "la Chingada" in his novel *The Death of Artemio Cruz* (Mexico: D.R. Aguilar, Altea, Taurus, Alfaguara, S.S. de C.V., 1962). In his description of a powerful, unabashed landowner, Artemio Cruz, Fuente sewed an ethnic thread that ran through the blood of Artemio to la Malinche and Hernán Cortes. There is an unforgettable and unforgiveable resentment toward la Malinche who committed treason against her own people and furthermore, assimilated to the culture of the invading tyrants and destroyers. Nevertheless, Fuentes eventually arrives at the point of pondering the possibility of how Mexico might have evolved if la Malinche had not been duplicitous and consequently, what if the Spaniards had not been able to conquer and destroy the native peoples. What would have been the future of Mexico without this one woman's influence?



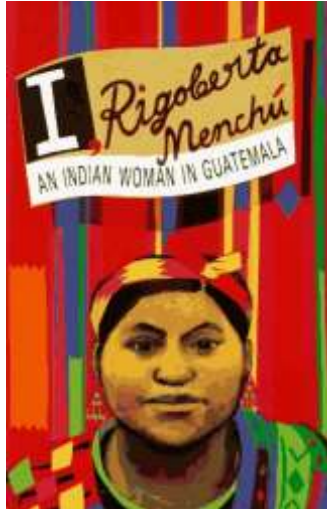
La Malinche

Rosario Marquardt, 1992

Rigoberta Menchú- Guatemala

An additional paradigm of a woman who recognized the power of language is seen in another speaker of Mayan. Some twenty years after Fuentes' novel, in a country south of Mexico, a Maya-Quiche woman, Rigoberta Menchú-Tum (1983), was struggling to unite the marginalized indigenous groups in her native Guatemala in an effort to better fight against repression and discrimination by those in power; in other words, those of the Spanish-speaking ruling class. In Menchú's battle for human rights, similarly to la Malinche, her words were her weapons. Menchú learned the language of her oppressors to give a voice to the mistreatment of the Mayans. Armed with her new weapon, she was able to attract worldwide attention to their plight and was responsible for ending the 36-year civil war in Guatemala for which ultimately she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992.

Menchu documents her struggle in her 1983 biography, *Me Llamo Rigoberta Menchú y Así Me Nació La Conciencia*, (*I Call Myself Rigoberta Menchu and thus my Conscience Was Born*) (Barcelona: Editorial Argos Vergara, S. A.). Unfortunately, Menchú's story is recounted through a series of interviews which has generated doubts about its accuracy.



Me Llamo Rigoberta Menchú y Así Me Nació La Conciencia (1983)

A personal example of its controversy occurred during a visit to Guatemala about ten years ago. When I expressed an interest in buying Menchú's book, the Guatemalan family with whom I was staying immediately responded with surprise and inquired why I would want her book. They then proceeded to inform explain that they were not supporters of Menchú and believed her work was all about self-promotion. Maybe the questions regarding the authenticity of Menchú's biography stem more from the desire of some who want to put the blame of defeat or insufficiencies of themselves on a woman who survived obstacles and injustices.

Learn the language of the “oppressors”

Menchú influenced and changed not only her own country, but also the world. Similarly, to la Malinche these two women continue to receive the criticism of many, especially from men who can't seem to submit to their domination as a result of these women using their intelligence. Both fought non-violently armed with words instead of blood-shedding weapons; to conquer without killing. In both cases of la Malinche and Menchú, these women's ability to manipulate language enabled them to survive and fight against those who oppressed them or subjected them to oppression. They are both examples of women who did not allow the injustices of life to defeat them. In la Malinche's case, her proclivity for languages gave her the respect and power to survive; to live no longer under domination, but empower herself to dominate, too. She joined herself with those who would be the winners, an admirable quality for men that would be applauded for being seen as a good judge of character. La Malinche and Rigoberta Menchú represent the double standard that has existed perhaps since the beginning of time that what is acceptable and admirable for men can be quite the opposite for women.

Feminism and the Double Standard

Modern-day “Mayas” would consider our patriarchal society as oppressors of women in general. In an attempt to call to action and unite women against male dominance the first wave of feminism began in the era before the 1960’s. In 1949, in her book, *The Second Sex*, (New York: Vintage Books), Simone de Beauvoir wrote about the differences between both sexes and assaulted men’s biological, psychological, and economic discrimination towards women. Beauvoir described how women are perceived as “the other”. “The other” was not equal to men, but inferior. Moreover, “the other” wasn’t seen as human as much as she was identified as a part of nature or the spiritual world. De Beauvoir wrote about the myths that surrounded “the other”; such as, Pandora, Athena and the Virgin, dreams, fears, and idols. There have been many fears about a woman’s body related to menstruation, virginity, and pregnancy. It was once commonly accepted that “the other” had a duplicitous deceptive face that possessed evil forces or energy of witchcraft that performed spells on men. Not surprisingly, although men have traditionally written all the rules in our historically patriarchal societies, women have always been a mystery for men.

The Second Wave

After De Beauvoir’s feminist classic breakthrough, a second wave of feminism occurred between the years 1960-1980’s. According to research by Australian feminist, Dale Spender, *Man Made Language*. (Glasgow: Harper Collins, 1980), one significant area where men and women have not been equal is in language. Language is manmade. There are differences among discourse between men and women. Men have fabricated differences in language that are partial on men’s behalf in semantics and syntax with inequalities unfavorable for women. For example, there are 220 words referring a sexually promiscuous woman yet only 20 for a man. A man is virile and potent, but a woman is a nymphomaniac. In most romance languages, the masculine is dominate over the feminine and the male form of a word is always given first; for example, son-daughter, brother-sister, guys-gals, man-wife, which has only recently been altered to husband-wife. In a group of mixed sexes, even if only one male, it is acceptable to refer to the group as “guys”, but never “gals”. Over the centuries, changes have been made in language where what was once considered masculine morphed into feminine, but not vice versa. It has been acceptable for names to change from male to female, but never female to male; for example, names such as Shirley, Leslie, Beverly, Evelyn and Sydney were once male names. Women’s history researchers have encountered roadblocks in following women’s contributions to history and society due to the replacement of women’s surnames when married. “It is an extremely useful device for eliminating women from history and for making it exceedingly difficult to perceive a continuum and develop a tradition” (Spender, 1980, p. 25).

The multitude of mixed messages surrounding women’s use of language is not limited to “women are supposed to be proficient at ‘the art of conversation’” (Fishman, 1977, in Spender, p. 44). The idea of women’s proficiency in conversation in no way encourages women to speak,

rather assigns women the role of encouraging males to speak. Women are expected to initiate conversation through topics of interest to men, and then patiently listen while the male expresses himself.

Another consequence of the patriarchal order has created gender-biases in language. Spender (1980) concluded that there are numerous words used by men that change to a negative connotation when referring to a woman, but not men; such as bachelor-spinster, master-mistress, sir-madam, and dame or queen has evolved into derogative meaning. Women's conversational style has been traditionally described as: chatter, natter, prattle, nag, bitch, whine, tattle, and gossip, but there are no such negative connotations regarding men's conversations. Men's conversational style has been described as forceful, efficient, blunt, authoritative, serious effective sparing and masterful; while women's as weak, trivial, ineffectual, tentative, hesitant, hyperpolite, euphemistic, and flowery (Spender, p.33-34).

“Language is not an insignificant dimension. To be inferior when it comes to language is frequently discounted. In a hierarchical society predicated on divisions and inequality and constructed on a concept of ‘leaders’ (and necessarily ‘followers’), it is not coincidence that the language of women is held to be lacking in authority, forcefulness, effectiveness, persuasiveness” (Spender, 1980, p.10).

Breaking the “Glass Ceiling”

Fast forward to the present and the role of women empowering themselves and others remains an ongoing battle. In an international research survey of 10 university systems (Bain & Cummings, 2000) one-third of all academics were women, but only one out of every 10 full professors were women. Between 1981 and 1991 the percentage of full-time professors increased from 3 to 6 percent a sign of progress, but alarmingly low and stagnant as in 2001 only 6 percent of women were full professors in economics even though in the past twenty years women received 25 percent of Ph.D.s in economics (Babcock & Laschever, 2003). Why the disparity? One explanation is the traditional male-dominated versus female-dominated fields; for example, engineering and education. This may explain for a portion of the discrepancy, but there are other factors to consider; such as women wielding the weapon of language on the job.

Conversational socio-linguist, Deborah Tannen in her book, *Talking from 9 to 5: Women and Men in the Workplace: Language, Sex and Power*, (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1994), explored the ongoing role of “how women's and men's conversational styles affect who gets heard, who gets credit, and what gets done at work.” The phenomenon of talented, intelligent women who seem incapable of breaking the invisible barrier of the glass ceiling and excelling as women in top management or administrative positions has been generically attributed to the persistence of sexism; however, Tannen argues that modern-day women's use of language may in fact be the culprit that is withholding women's advancement.

Differences in Interpretation

“Men and women communicate using different language, both verbal and non-verbal, have different decision making styles, and can even have different senses of humor”, states Holly Buchanan, author of *The Soccer Mom Myth* (2009). Women are more inclusive than men in their language, more commonly using “we” instead of “I” which can lead to unintentionally camouflaging achievements and decreasing opportunities of getting recognition. “Letting others know about what you have done is almost always labeled boasting by women...” (Tannen, 1994, p. 153); on the other hand, self-aggrandizing talk is perfectly acceptable and expected among men. Indeed, in this ability women are the weaker sex and inexperienced in comparison to men. This characteristic can create conflict for women in presentations. Because women are traditionally expected to not call attention to themselves, women are faced with a no-win situation when presenting because they can be seen as too feminine or the polar opposite, too challenging and abrasive; both resulting in not being listened to due to the perception of not being strong intellectually or being more strength than substance.

Another difference in language use is women more commonly than men are conciliatory in an effort to put others at ease. Coinciding with this is the trait of congeniality, which is stronger in women than men. Linda Babcock & Sara Laschever, *Women Don't Ask: Negotiation and the Gender Divide*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2003), refer to this as the “likeability” factor where a woman’s influence is in direct proportion to how much she is liked. “An assertive woman, no matter how well she presents her arguments in a negotiation, risks decreasing her likeability and therefore her ability to influence the other side to agree with her point of view” (2003, p. 87). Melissa Read Ph. D., VP of Research and Innovation at Engauge Marketing affirms, (2009) “Female communication styles are more polite than male styles. Women are more relational, gentle, indirect, and feelings-needs oriented. We give more compliments. We give and receive more apologies”.

A large corporation discovered it was easier to recruit women with a woman recruiter. “If the recruiter can convince a prospective woman that the company provides a positive work environment, it is successful in recruiting her even if she has competing offers that are more lucrative” (Tannen, 1994, p. 155). This suggests that some women have not taken on top leadership roles due to a lesser value placed on promotion and position than on a congenial work environment. Several studies confirm this strange phenomenon that overall women are satisfied earning less than their male counterparts (Babcock & Leschever, 2003).

Gender Miscommunication

One communication hindrance for women to “break the glass ceiling” is the common misconception among women that doing a good job, “speaks for itself” and will demand the notice, respect and promotion it is worthy of; however, the important factor of recognition is

missing from this recipe for success. “If it is men, or mostly men, who are making the decisions about promotions-as it usually is-they are likely to misinterpret women’s ways of talking as showing indecisiveness, inability to assume authority, and even incompetence” (Tannen, 1994, p. 136). Therefore, in a sense, women can be their own worst enemy in achieving a promotion. Women shoot themselves in the foot with their communication style because they are misinterpreted as being bossy and arrogant instead of decisive, or they are seen as incompetent when soliciting others’ opinions because it insinuates they are unqualified to lead. Babcock and Laschever in *Women Don’t Ask* support this dilemma in their research regarding women negotiating raises or lack thereof. “Instead of publicizing their accomplishments, they hope that hard work alone will earn them the recognition and rewards they deserve. Instead of expressing interest in new opportunities as they arise, they bide their time, assuming they will be invited to participate if their participation is wanted” (2003, p.18). Hence, their axiom is, “nice girls don’t ask”.

Another feminine faux pas in communication results from women not wanting to risk being labeled a shrew, so they take on a role of ritual incompetence or the weaker, less intelligent sex. This is a trait women typically continue to adopt even once they’ve achieved positions of authority. The ritual of creating an atmosphere of equality can result in women downplaying their authoritative role (Tannen, 1994). This centuries-old ritual can be used advantageously on occasion when desiring to indirectly give orders through a male, but it runs the risk of becoming fodder for fueling dated female stereotypes; furthermore, leading to the conclusion of weak leadership skills. This attitude of equality can not only extinguish the appropriate level of respect for their position, but also make women more vulnerable to challenges. According to Tannen (1994), such a difference was noted between male and female university professors in addressing students in their courses. Women did not explicitly give students orders or take credit for the expectations and requirements in their syllabi; whereas, male professors took a leading role in personalizing the expectations and requirements in their syllabi using “I” statements to let the students know who was in charge. Women attempted to suggest the requirements were those of the institution rather than their own personal professional expectations.

Women in positions of authority can generate images of mother figures or schoolmarms, who for some people are seen as powerless disciplinarians whose authority is to be challenged by some or threatened by fear of demoralization by others. Women in authority have to walk a tightrope in their communication with subordinates. If they speak the way they are traditionally expected to: include others opinions, make indirect requests, and are sensitive, they will project an image of no authority; on the other hand, women who speak their opinions boldly and are strongly assertive run the risk of being labeled as demanding and self-promoting.

According to research, women’s inability or “uncomfortableness” about asking can keep females in unhappy positions of employment and/or destine them to earn significantly less money than their male cohorts. In several studies, more than half of males negotiate their salaries while only 7 percent of females, regardless of age did so. In other words, males are seven times

more likely than females to negotiate. “In many cases, employers actually respect candidates more for pushing to get paid what they’re worth. This means women don’t merely sacrifice additionally income when they don’t push to be paid more, they may sacrifice some of their employers’ regard too” (Babcock & Laschever, 2003, p. 8).

Conclusion

Modern-Day “Mayas” in Higher Education

Despite the never-ending roadblocks in achieving success, modern-day “Mayas” continue forging paths through the obstacles along the maze to breaking the “glass ceiling”. In higher education, the new millennium has greeted several firsts in the form of female university presidents. In the eight Ivy League institutions alone, four of the eight; Harvard, Princeton, Brown, and the University of Pennsylvania are presently lead by women, beginning with Judith Rodin who became the president of the University of Pennsylvania in 1994 (Alderman, 2007). She paved the way for current president, Amy Gutmann. Most notably, in 2001, Dr. Ruth Simmons, the youngest of 12 children who grew up in a small segregated town in Texas, became not only the first female president of Brown University, but also the only African-American ever to head an Ivy League school (“She’s an Ivy Girl,” 2001). In the same year, Princeton elected Shirley M. Tilghmann as its first woman president.

A few years later, the U.S.’s oldest university, Harvard, decided to join the cause when in May 2007 Drew Gilpin Faust became the first female history in Harvard’s 371-year history (Rimer & Finder, 2007). An emeritus professor recalled, when she was a postdoctoral fellow at Harvard in 1972, she was not allowed to enter the main door of the faculty club or eat in the main dining room due to sexual discrimination. As can be expected, women faculty were euphoric over Harvard’s decision to move into the 21st century; a move many saw as long overdue especially after the previous president, Lawrence Summers, made a comment that the lack of women rising to the top in the fields of science and math was due to inferior genetic differences. Of course, there are skeptics about Faust’s abilities based on her lack of experience, but she possesses communicative competence and what she lacks in experience is overshadowed by her people skills and talent for being a consensus-builder; traits which became a more esteemed “commodity after the polarization that occurred under Summers, particularly among women on the faculty” (2007).

The influence of electing women to top positions in higher education is not confined to the walls of the Ivy League. Along with Harvard, Purdue University also chose a woman as its president, France A. Córdova, for the first time in 135 years in May 2007. (“Purdue’s First Woman President,” 2007). Córdova’s educational journey was inspired by a Purdue alumnus. “I will never forget the day Purdue alumnus Neil Armstrong walked on the moon in 1969,” Córdova said, recalling it was the same year she graduated cum laude with a degree in English from Stanford University. “It eventually drew me to the California Institute of Technology, where I began exploring the mysteries of the universe. And now I’ve come full circle – to

Purdue, the cradle of astronauts and the place that played a major role in launching my quest.” From her somewhat humble beginnings of an English degree, Córdova was empowered to know no limits in rising above and beyond her own expectations to become a NASA chief scientist and an astrophysicist.

Besides Purdue, another historically male dominated institution recently made the decision to put a woman in a position of authority. After an almost 200-year male dominated reign, including twenty-year tenure of its previous president, the historic academical village founded by Thomas Jefferson, known today as the University of Virginia, Teresa Sullivan added to its history when she was selected to be the first female president in January 2010 (de Vise, 2010).

These recent achievements and advancements are opening doors and windows and putting some cracks in the glass ceiling although they are insufficient to generate any semblance of gender parity in higher education. The blatant discrepancy in the ratio of men to women in top leadership positions remains. At the turn of the century in the U.S., 87.5 percent of the corporate officers of the 500 largest companies, 90 percent of all engineers, and 70 percent of all financial managers were men (Babcock & Leschever, 2003). Progress is being made. Microsoft Office Word documents now offer auto-correct suggestions for the words “spinster” and “schoolmarm” an indication of some change in the right direction; nonetheless, vibrant, forward-thinking, communication is essential to making a substantial difference. No, it won’t be possible for women to eradicate all of the misogynistic thinking in the minds of colleagues, but women do have role models in these female pioneers who realized the importance of language and education to empower them to overcome the obstacles along the paths. Women in positions of power will probably long be looked at through a magnifying glass and be misinterpreted and underestimated. However, as Deborah Tannen, (1994, p. 159) so eloquently stated, “If supervisors learn to perceive outstanding performance regardless of the performer’s style, it will be less necessary for individuals to learn to display their talents. On that happy day, the glass ceiling will become a looking glass through which a fair percentage of Alices will be able to step” and venture into worlds that once existed only in dreams.

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